

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 1 of 90

- [1- 3M Hiring Event](#)
- [2- SBA to Increase Lending Limit for COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loans](#)
- [3- Congratulations to Samantha Pappas](#)
- [4- STOP TALKING ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS!](#)
- [5- Obit: Harlan Heupel](#)
- [6- Groton Area ranks second in the state](#)
- [7- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [10- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [17- Social Security Disability Benefits Ad](#)
- [18- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [19- Weather Pages](#)
- [22- Daily Devotional](#)
- [23- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [24- News from the Associated Press](#)



You're Invited

Date: Saturday, March 27th

Arrive Anytime Between:
9:00am – 1:00pm

Location:

**Aberdeen Civic Arena
203 S. Washington St.**

**COVID protocols apply;
face coverings required**

**Onsite
Offers**

- ✓ Production Operators
- ✓ Maintenance Technicians
- ✓ Electrical System Technicians

3M is an equal opportunity employer



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

SBA to Increase Lending Limit for COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loans

SIOUX FALLS – The U.S. Small Business Administration is increasing the maximum amount small businesses and non-profit organizations can borrow through its COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program. Starting the week of April 6, 2021, the SBA is raising the loan limit for the COVID-19 EIDL program from 6-months of economic injury with a maximum loan amount of \$150,000 to up to 24-months of economic injury with a maximum loan amount of \$500,000.

“More than 3.7 million businesses employing more than 20 million people have found financial relief through SBA’s Economic Injury Disaster Loans, which provide low-interest emergency working capital to help save their businesses. However, the pandemic has lasted longer than expected, and they need larger loans. Many have called on SBA to remove the \$150,000 cap. We are here to help our small businesses and that is why I’m proud to more than triple the amount of funding they can access ,” said SBA Administrator Isabella Casillas Guzman.

Businesses that receive a loan subject to the current limits do not need to submit a request for an increase at this time. SBA will reach out directly via email and provide more details about how businesses can request an increase closer to the April 6 implementation date. Any new loan applications and any loans in process when the new loan limits are implemented will automatically be considered for loans covering 24 months of economic injury up to a maximum of \$500,000.

This new relief builds on SBA’s previous March 12, 2021 announcement that the agency would extend deferment periods for all disaster loans, including COVID-19 EIDLs, until 2022 to offer more time for businesses to build back. In order to shift all EIDL payments to 2022, SBA will extend the first payment due date for disaster loans made in 2020 to 24-months from the date of the note and to 18-months from the date of the note for all loans made in the calendar year 2021.

Questions about SBA COVID-19 EIDL and disaster loan payments can be emailed to DisasterCustomerService@sba.gov or directed to SBA’s Customer Service Center at 1-800-659-2955 (1-800-877-8339 for the deaf and hard of hearing).

Congratulations!

Samantha Pappas

State Debate Domestic Extemp Champion

Two time National Speech and Debate National Contest qualifier

Academic All American



Congratulations Samantha for representing Groton Area in debate, oral interp and Student Congress over the years from the following businesses and individuals.

**Mike-N-Jo's Body-N-Glass
Groton Dairy Queen
BK Custom T's and More
Ken's Food Fair
S & S Lumber
Rosewood Court
Weismantel Insurance Agency**



In the previous two years she got 3rd overall in domestic extemp, last year national Qualifier in Student Congress, and over the years she earned several superiors in interp, qualified for state interp 3 times, and 3rd overall in Lincoln-Douglas debate in her 7th grade year. Samantha, a GHS senior, is the daughter of Kelly and Valerie Pappas, Groton.

**Tyson DeHoet Trucking
Hanlon Brothers
Weber Landscaping
Lori's Pharmacy
Lori & Ron Westby
Groton Daily Independent**

STOP TALKING ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS!



Paula Jensen
Vice President of
Program Development

I recently had a big discovery – the main thing holding back our vision of thriving rural communities is the extinction of collaborative leadership. Yes, it’s true. Truly collaborative leaders are rare in our communities.

If rediscovered, collaborative leadership could aid our rural communities in creating an ecosystem that seeks out diverse opinions and empowers residents to engage in the process of implementing new ideas. Other spillover effects could be the release of innovation to build new systems and cultivating a culture of both trust and inclusivity among residents. Doesn’t this sound wonderful? (Keep reading and you will discover, it’s possible!)

I am just finishing an online course from the University of North Alabama titled, Building an Agile Economy. I learned that Agile Economies are continuously seeking new opportunities through collaborative leadership. To create those new opportunities, they are consistently focused on thinking differently about their ecosystem and having regular strategic conversations with stakeholders.

In many of our rural communities, we tend to think in terms of problems, for example, have you ever heard any of these questions: How do we fill the vacant shops on Main Street? How do we stop brain drain? How do we fill that spec building in the industrial park? Why can’t we get anyone else to see what a wonderful community we have? All of these are problem-centric conversations. They do not lead us anywhere. They drain our energy. They turn into arguments. They keep us stuck.

Rather than focus on the problems, collaborative leaders in agile economies learn to flip problems into opportunities. Instead of thinking about how to save our small businesses, they focus on questions like: “Imagine if everyone supported our local businesses. What would that look like?” or “How might we strengthen our small business networks?”

Here’s the turning point: In developing an agile economy we need to leave behind the old problem-centric mindsets and develop new collaborative behaviors focused on opportunities.

I know what you’re thinking after reading that last sentence, “But, Paula, you don’t know my community! Shifting mindsets and behaviors is an impossible task.” I know it’s not easy, but it is possible. So, I’ll break it down for you. If you want to shift your community’s mindsets and behaviors toward collaborative leadership, then focus on changing the conversations. Put problems aside. Focus on opportunities. Ask these two questions in every strategic conversation: “Where are we going?” and “How will we get there?”

Start by building your habit of being a collaborative leader. Conduct regular strategic conversations through the practice of flipping problems into opportunities with a powerful question. Your actions will lead your community toward the spontaneous recovery of collaborative leadership, rather than toward extinction.

The Community Coach. Having a passion for community leadership and development is what drives Paula Jensen’s personal and professional life. Paula resides in her hometown of Langford, South Dakota, population 318+. She serves as a Strategic Doing practitioner, grant writer and community coach with Dakota Resources based in Renner, South Dakota. Dakota Resources is a mission-driven 501c3 Community Development Financial Institution working to connect capital and capacity to empower rural communities. Contact her at paula@dakotaresources.org.

The Life of Harlan Jacob Heupel

Memorial Services for Harlan Heupel, 81, of Groton, SD will be at 2pm on Thursday, March 25th at Spitzer-Miller Funeral Home in Aberdeen with Pastor Bill Duncan officiating. Visitation will be held from 12:30pm to 2pm. Inurnment will be at Groton Union Cemetery at a later date. Harlan died on Tuesday, March 9th at Sanford Aberdeen Medical Center. Services will be live streamed, and you can watch by following the link under Harlan's picture on the online obituary at www.spitzerfuneralhome.com. Arrangements are in care of Spitzer-Miller Funeral Home, 1111 S. Main St., Aberdeen.

Harlan Jacob Heupel was born September 8, 1939 to Julius and Ida (Rohrbach) Heupel in Leola, SD. He grew up and attended school in the Hosmer area.

Harlan was united in marriage to Jarlene "Jerry" Sorenson on June 26, 1960 in Aberdeen. Over the years, they lived in Aberdeen, Rapid City and Pierpont. Then then moved to Groton, SD where they lived for 44 years.

Harlan was recognized by his peers at the Aberdeen Rural Firefighters for years of service as the Public Relations Officer from 1972-1977.

Harlan drove truck for 53 years, working for various companies until 1980, when he bought his own truck and started Heupel and Son Trucking Company. Harlan contracted with JB Hunt and Schneider Corporation during this time. He earned a 1-Million Mile Accident-Free Driving Award from Schneider Corporation. After selling his truck, Harlan continued to drive for New Deal Tire, Pro-Ag and Schmidt Construction before retiring.

Harlan loved playing cards with family and friends. He also enjoyed camping, listening to old time music and dancing. One of his favorite pastimes was playing games with his Grandchildren.

Grateful for having shared Harlan's life are his son, Robert 'Bob' (Lynn) Heupel, Aberdeen and daughter, Darlene (Russell) Sass, Groton. He is also survived by seven grandchildren: Jeremy Heupel (Taylor Jorgensen), Josh (Josie) Heupel, Spencer Heupel, Zachary Heupel, Kyra Heupel, Jacob Sass and Ethan (Sarah) Sass and two great-grandchildren Brooklyn and Shane Sass. Also, his sister Betty (Ed) Krueger, Hartford and brother Theodore 'Ted' (Marj) Heupel, Aberdeen.

Preceding Harlan in death are his parents, Julius and Ida Heupel; his wife, Jarlene 'Jerry' Heupel and his sister, Kathy and her husband, Richard Lappegard.



Groton Area ranks second in the state

The state of South Dakota has plenty of fantastic school systems within its borders. But which ones are the cream of the crop?

Recently, an in-depth study by Neighborhood Scout was done to determine the Mount Rushmore State's 10 best school systems. The main factors in deciding which areas stand above the rest were Reading/English Language Arts Tests, Math Tests, Enrollment, and Class Size.

Here is a look at the list of the top 10 best school systems in South Dakota from Neighborhood Scout:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. Brandon | 6. Selby |
| 2. Groton | 7. Platte |
| 3. Gettysburg | 8. Dell Rapids |
| 4. Ipswich | 9. Elk Point |
| 5. Valley Springs | 10. Hill City |

As you can see, the city of Brandon stands above the rest. According to the criteria Neighborhood Scout used in this study, Brandon scored higher than any other city in the entire state.

Groton Area was ranked number two while Gettysburg was third, Ipswich fourth and Selby sixth.

On another interesting note, 9 of the towns listed were East River towns, whereas only one town (Hill City) is a West River town. Although a number of West River towns came close (Buffalo, Keystone, Summerset, Murdo) to cracking the top 10.

Groton is a very small city located in the state of South Dakota. With a population of 1,475 people and just one neighborhood, Groton is the 46th largest community in South Dakota. Groton has seen a significant amount of newer housing growth in recent years. Quite often, new home construction is the result of new residents moving in who are middle class or wealthier, attracted by jobs, a healthy local economy, or other amenities as they leave nearby or far away areas for greener pastures. This seems to be the case in Groton, where the median household income is \$64,091.00.

Groton is a good choice for families with children because of several factors. Many other families with children live here, making it a place where both parents and children are more likely to develop social ties with other families. The city's good public school district and large population of college-educated adults provide an environment conducive to academic success. Many people own their own single-family homes, providing areas for children to play and stability in the community. Finally, Groton's overall crime rate ranks among the lowest in the country, making it one of the safest places to raise a family.

Story Source: Neighborhood Scout

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 7 of 90

#395 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Something's fishy with tonight's numbers. The evening update in my data source came very late—near midnight—last night instead of the usual 7:00 pm or so, which means today's totals are based on a whole lot less than 24 hours of reporting. Even though not a lot of reporting happens in the wee hours, there is generally some impact when that happens; the following day's new case and new death reports tend to run small. We had the opposite effect today: Both are considerably higher, even though there is no particular factor that would account for such an increase. New cases are a little more volatile, but deaths don't tend to take sharp increases or decreases because they're sort of baked into the new-case numbers from about three weeks prior. I can't say for sure, but I'm guessing whatever held up the updated numbers last night also prevented a full update. I'm thinking some of today's numbers are really yesterday's numbers. We'll see what happens the rest of the week, but I'm not going to panic yet; this is too abrupt for me to be comfortable seeing it as a real trend.

There were 75,100 new cases reported today; we haven't been over 70,000 in over three weeks. At any rate, this had the unhappy effect of taking us over the 30 million mark, and I'm sure that's real. On Friday, I projected we'd hit this by midweek, and here we are, right on schedule. Here's the history:

April 28 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days

I would most sincerely like this to be the last time I do that; I wonder what the chances are. We are now at 30,032,400; this is 0.3% more than yesterday. Hospitalizations were slightly up today at 39,439. And we're up to 544,994 deaths so far in this pandemic, some 0.3% more than yesterday. There were

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 8 of 90

1515 new deaths reported today.

Our seven-day average deaths has dropped below 1000 for the first time since November. Having 70 percent of the over-65 population with at least one dose of vaccine is undoubtedly playing a major role in that figure; it's the elderly who've been doing most of the dying. The CDC's new ensemble forecast is out. At this point, they are projecting up to 578,000 deaths by April 17. The last forecast projected up to 574,000 deaths by April 10. It's good to see this new number and the old one converging; it is a sign we have deaths slowing considerably—still a whole lot of dead people though.

On March 24, 2020, one year ago today, we were at 53,478 cases in the US, another large (24 percent) increase in 24 hours. New York had just under half of these with 25,665. Ten states were over 1000. In addition to New York, cases were spiking in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida, Georgia, and Indiana. A WHO spokesperson said on a call with reporters that the US has "potential" to become the next epicenter of the pandemic. Got that in one, didn't she? On the other hand, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said we should "get through" the crisis by "late May, June, something in that range." I guess he didn't say what year. We were starting to see reports of cases in infants. There had been 714 deaths in 35 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories, 178 in the last 24 hours. Among those was the US's first death of an under-18 person. This was also the day that married couple in Arizona drank the fish-tank cleaner that contained chloroquine, thinking it would protect them from the virus; the man died. Nearly half of New Orleans' emergency medical workers were under quarantine. New York residents who traveled to other parts of the country were asked to self-quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. People had started having coronavirus parties like the old-timey chicken pox parties to get infected and "get it over with." I suppose they didn't realize how many folks don't get it over with, even if they recover. Cases began showing up in ICE detention facilities. The first three cases turned up on the USS Theodore Roosevelt; that turned into a huge outbreak eventually involving 1156 cases out of the nearly 5000 personnel on the carrier.

Worldwide, there were 383,944 cases and 16,595 deaths. Italy was up to 69,176 and 6820 deaths, 743 of those in the past 24 hours. Spain was up to 39,673 cases and 2696 deaths, and an ice rink was being used as a morgue. They asked NATO for humanitarian assistance. Other countries showing spikes in cases were Iran, the UK, Brazil, Canada, and Singapore. Vatican City reported its first four cases. With just 205 cases, New Zealand was set to lock the country down on the following day. Nearly a third of the world's population was on lockdown on this day. Hubei, the Chinese province where Wuhan is, was lifting restrictions, having brought the outbreak largely under control.

Finally bowing to the inevitable, the International Olympic Committee postponed the Tokyo Olympics to the following summer. This was the first postponement in the history of the modern Olympics, although they were canceled during World War I and World War II. The Paralympic Games were also postponed. Other cancelations and closures: gatherings of more than 10 in Nevada; in-person primary voting in Nevada; some streets in New York City to give residents a place to get outdoors; elective surgeries and dental procedures at US military facilities; Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

I've seen a new study available in preprint (which means it is not yet peer-reviewed) which was conducted across the UK and included over 1000 people who were discharged from the hospital by November. The researchers found that, five months post-discharge, only 29 percent of these people were fully recovered and more than 90 percent still had at least one symptom. The most common symptoms were aching muscles, fatigue, physical slowing down, impaired sleep quality, joint pain or swelling, limb weakness, breathlessness, pain, short-term memory loss, and slowing down in thinking. 20 percent had a new disability, and 19 percent had changed working status due to their health. Additionally, evaluation showed 25 percent had "clinically significant symptoms of anxiety and depression, and 12.2 percent had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. "Failure to fully recover was associated with female sex, white ethnicity, middle age, two or more co-morbidities, and more severe acute illness." That's a depressing picture.

We've now administered 130.5 million of the 169 million delivered doses of vaccine in the US. That means 2.3 million were administered yesterday for a seven-day average of 2.5 million doses. That's up from a daily average of 1.5 million doses a month ago; the average has doubled in under two months.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 9 of 90

We're making progress. Just about 26 percent of the population—a third of adults—has received at least one dose, and 14 percent are fully vaccinated. I should also note that we now have 1.3 million educators vaccinated; that's going to substantially bolster efforts to get schools back to normal operation. Lori Tremmel Freeman, chief executive officer of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, was interviewed on CNN today and predicted that we will soon be in the place where we bump up against the vaccine-hesitant. "It will happen, I think, pretty quickly. We'll be thinking, talking, putting effort on this within the next four to six weeks." It's good to know there is a planning effort underway in anticipation of the need. Once we've vaccinated the willing, we should be already well underway in efforts to persuade the unwilling. There's no time to lose.

The vaccination effort provides the bright spot in our outlook. I still don't know which way we're headed in the short term, but these numbers are heartening—increasing numbers vaccinated and declining numbers dying. The elephant in the room is still this high new-case average, stuck above 50,000, which when you think about it, is a whole lot of new sick people, day in and day out. I still think the next two to four weeks are critical: By the end of that time, we should have a broad enough swath of the population vaccinated to really impact new cases; the question is what happens between now and then. I don't know the answer to that. This morning at the White House press briefing, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, "I'm often asked, are we turning the corner? My response is really more like we are at the corner. Whether or not we're going to be turning that corner remains to be seen." That's why I spend so much of my time encouraging people to hang in there on the mitigation for a while yet. We are so close, and we're still doing so many things wrong.

We have a couple of new studies of vaccine effectiveness—that is, real-world effectiveness, not just efficacy in a clinical trial—published yesterday in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and the news is good. I was not able to read either paper, so I am working from summaries here. A study of University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center employees found that the infection rate among the fully-vaccinated was 0.05 percent, compared to a rate of 2.61 percent in non-vaccinated employees. And another study of fully vaccinated workers at the University of California, San Diego, and the University of California, Los Angeles, found a similarly tiny positivity rate after vaccination. Dr. Anthony Fauci said today in the briefing, "Right now, as the weeks go by, we see more and more that not only are these vaccines efficacious but in the community they are extremely effective in preventing infection with SARS-CoV-2." We knew they worked, but it's good to get some confirmation of just how well they work when they're used in the population.

We have further confirmation that the antiviral drug remdesivir shortens the course of the disease in all racial groups. The research team at Johns Hopkins University, looking at 2483 patients treated in their hospital system, found that the drug "was associated with faster clinical improvement in a cohort of predominantly non-White patients." Since this drug is given only to very ill patients, these data have important implications for treatment of people of color.

A couple of nights ago, we talked about a dog who is a mayor. Tonight, I thought I'd tell you about a dog who is an ambassador of good will in his neighborhood. Oliver is a 14-year-old golden retriever who has had regular rounds for at least nine years. Through those years, he's been circulating through the neighborhood, going from house to house, spreading happiness wherever he goes; he runs on a strict schedule, showing up at each door at the same time every day. A neighbor explained that one family who had a regular 5:00 happy hour saw Oliver for that happy hour each day. And a neighbor described how he strolls in like he owns the place, fully expecting a warm welcome and joining whatever activity is going on, including family parties. He was described in recent years as a "wandering old grandpa." When his visit is over, he goes to the door and lets folks know he wants to go home.

Oliver's family says his GPS tracker helps them to feel secure with his wandering, but that he is independent and needs the freedom to roam. Oliver is old now; he has trouble seeing and hearing. Still, he makes his rounds, even though they're necessarily abbreviated nowadays. He basically just visits the next-door neighbors and comes home. He shows up at their gate every morning around 7:15 to 7:30, patiently waiting to be let in. That neighbor says he has gotten them through quarantine. "In a time when

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 10 of 90

I've lost—when my children have lost—any sense of a schedule, Oliver keeps us on schedule." Even in his old age, he serves, and this neighbor provides him with the ability to exercise his independence safely. In return, Oliver has anchored them. She says, "It's just a great gift." Indeed.

Be careful just a while longer. I'll be back.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 11 of 90

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	456	436	889	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2849	2751	6068	40	Substantial	6.9%
Bennett	386	371	1195	9	Minimal	0.0%
Bon Homme	1513	1480	2136	26	Minimal	3.3%
Brookings	3734	3594	12398	37	Substantial	2.9%
Brown	5253	5101	13086	91	Moderate	6.4%
Brule	701	686	1914	9	Minimal	13.3%
Buffalo	423	407	907	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	1006	975	3286	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	263	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1336	1266	4039	21	Substantial	8.6%
Clark	400	371	967	5	Substantial	34.5%
Clay	1846	1800	5572	15	Substantial	5.6%
Codington	4158	3968	9890	79	Substantial	14.5%
Corson	475	460	1016	12	Minimal	9.5%
Custer	777	753	2778	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	3047	2921	6751	66	Substantial	11.6%
Day	684	644	1833	29	Moderate	3.0%
Deuel	489	466	1162	8	Moderate	22.7%
Dewey	1435	1408	3899	26	Moderate	0.0%
Douglas	441	428	938	9	Minimal	8.3%
Edmunds	490	470	1090	13	Minimal	5.3%
Fall River	558	538	2697	15	Moderate	2.8%
Faulk	363	348	709	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	1003	937	2312	40	Moderate	9.4%
Gregory	569	520	1324	30	Moderate	8.8%
Haakon	260	248	550	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	738	687	1847	38	Moderate	18.5%
Hand	354	336	850	6	Moderate	4.0%
Hanson	374	365	747	4	Moderate	6.3%
Harding	92	91	189	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2352	2287	6750	36	Moderate	4.7%
Hutchinson	811	766	2452	26	Moderate	1.9%

Groton Daily Independent

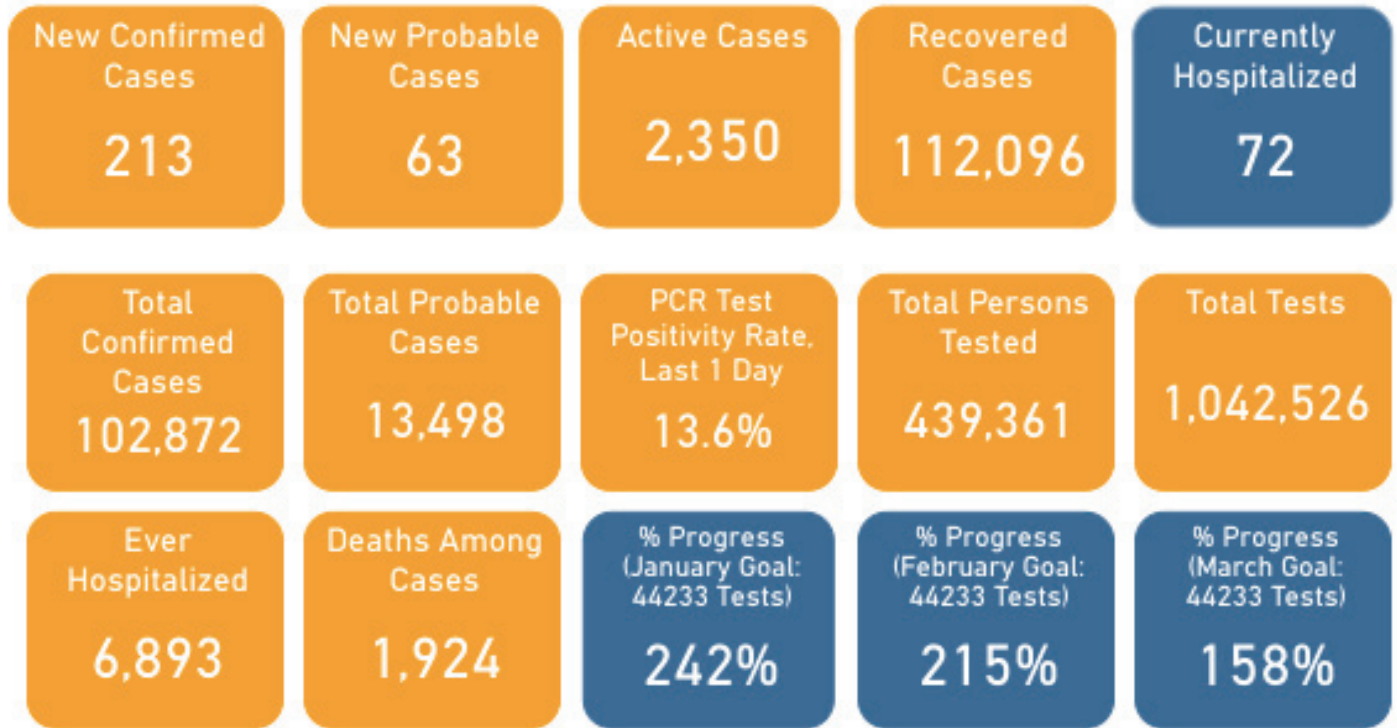
Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 12 of 90

Hyde	140	138	424	1	Minimal	10.0%
Jackson	284	268	923	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	254	569	16	None	0.0%
Jones	91	88	230	0	Minimal	28.6%
Kingsbury	681	637	1720	14	Substantial	20.8%
Lake	1275	1191	3497	18	Substantial	15.1%
Lawrence	2882	2819	8675	45	Moderate	1.5%
Lincoln	8110	7824	20877	77	Substantial	13.6%
Lyman	614	594	1909	10	Moderate	4.5%
Marshall	363	334	1247	6	Substantial	7.2%
McCook	772	730	1699	24	Substantial	11.5%
McPherson	240	234	568	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2678	2615	7910	31	Moderate	6.2%
Mellette	255	250	748	2	None	0.0%
Miner	283	263	595	9	Moderate	6.3%
Minnehaha	29224	28148	80671	340	Substantial	11.6%
Moody	623	602	1800	17	Minimal	1.7%
Oglala Lakota	2082	2015	6719	49	Moderate	4.0%
Pennington	13200	12852	40359	191	Moderate	7.5%
Perkins	352	333	837	14	Minimal	10.5%
Potter	387	380	862	4	Moderate	3.4%
Roberts	1295	1214	4263	36	Substantial	18.1%
Sanborn	336	329	706	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	819	783	2187	26	Moderate	8.7%
Stanley	340	337	961	2	Minimal	8.7%
Sully	137	134	327	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1189	4180	29	Minimal	8.3%
Tripp	731	700	1517	16	Moderate	17.1%
Turner	1127	1029	2806	53	Substantial	13.5%
Union	2092	1971	6479	40	Substantial	15.0%
Walworth	740	711	1857	15	Moderate	15.1%
Yankton	2881	2797	9566	28	Substantial	9.5%
Ziebach	337	327	878	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1921	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 13 of 90

South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	87100	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13694	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5582	5%
Hispanic	4215	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2588	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1692	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1499	1%

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

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	60539	905
Male	55831	1019

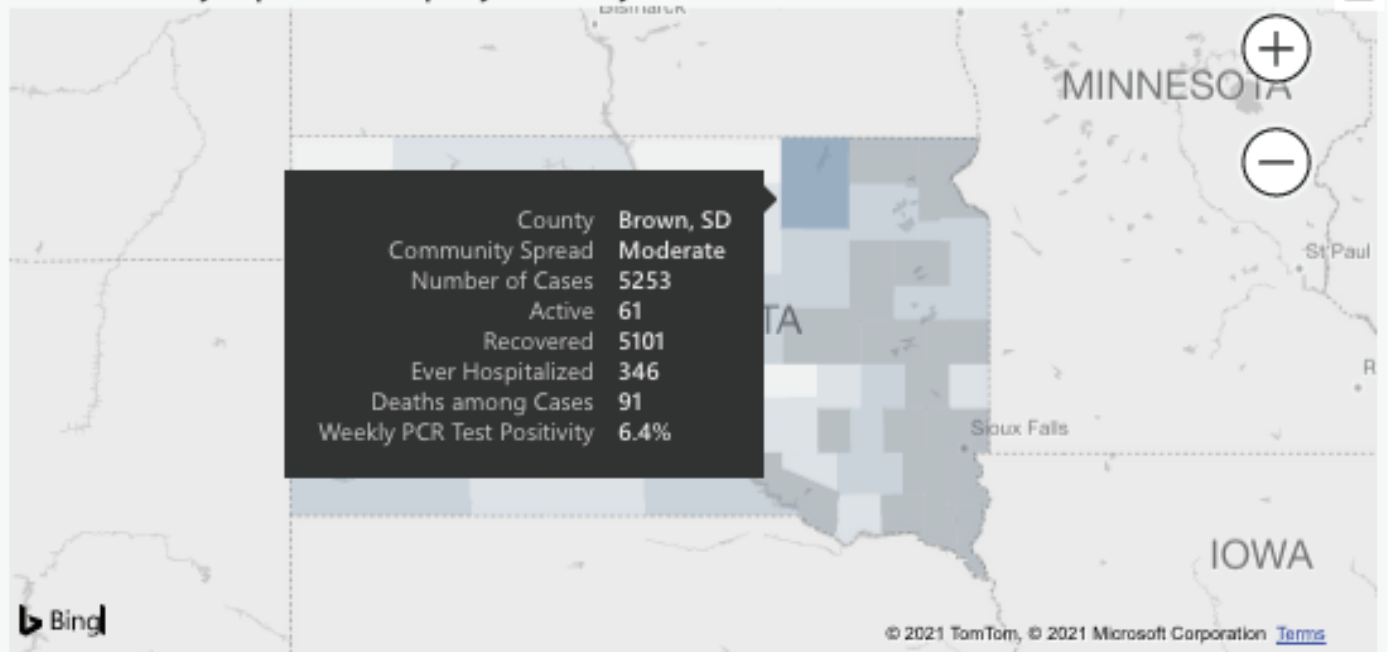
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 14 of 90

Brown County

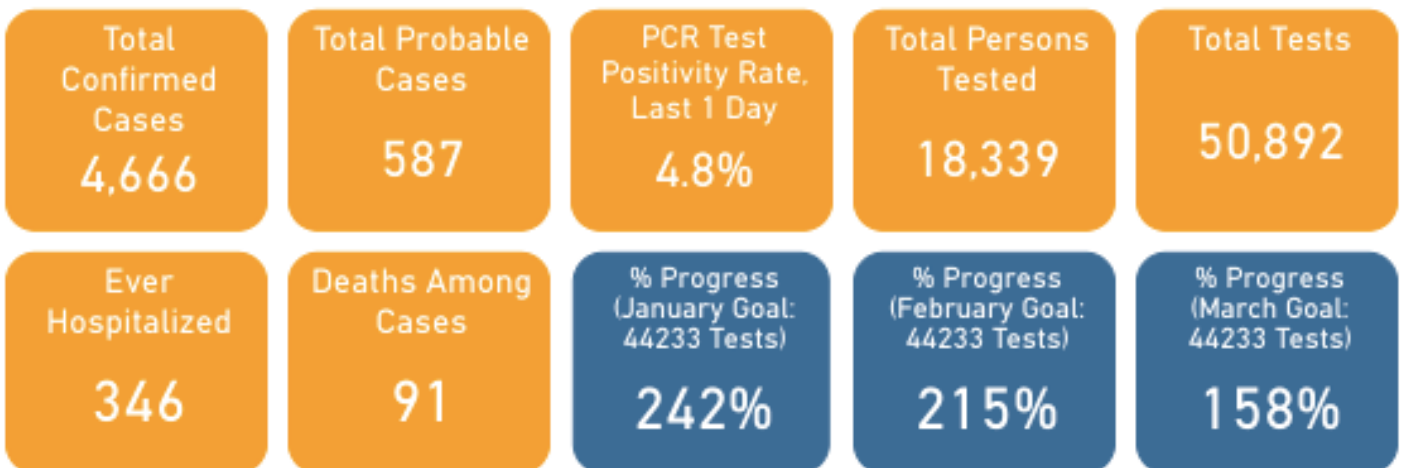


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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

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



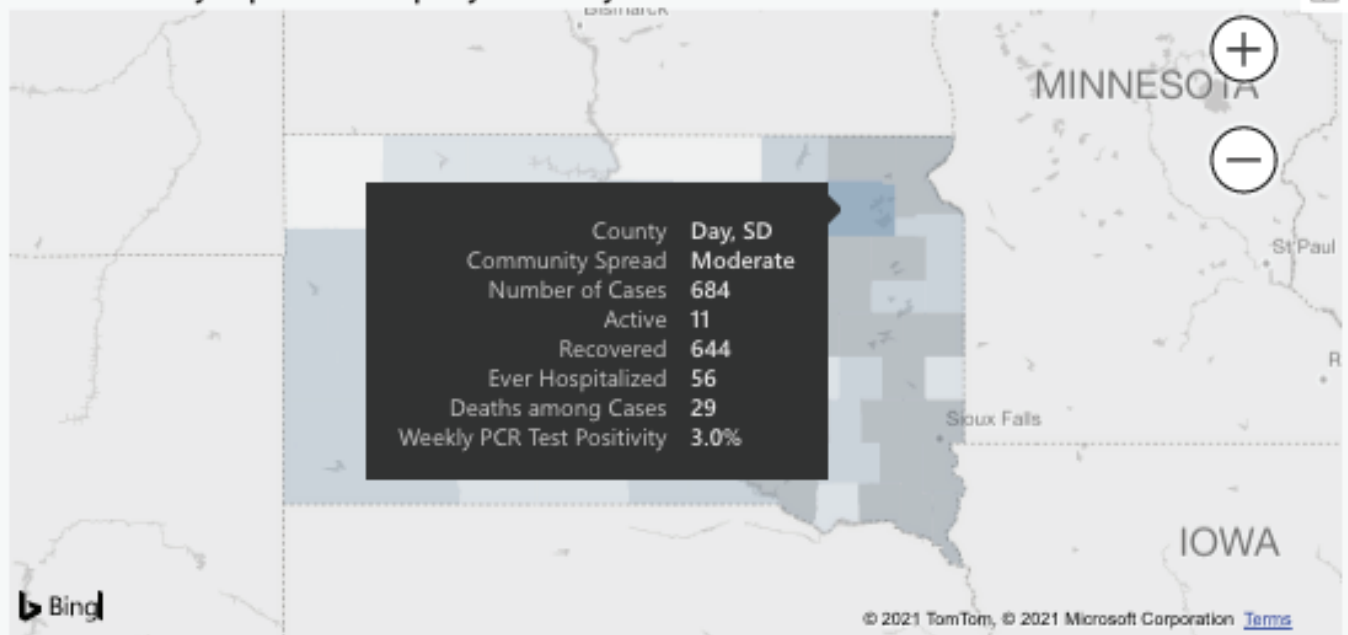
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 15 of 90

Day County

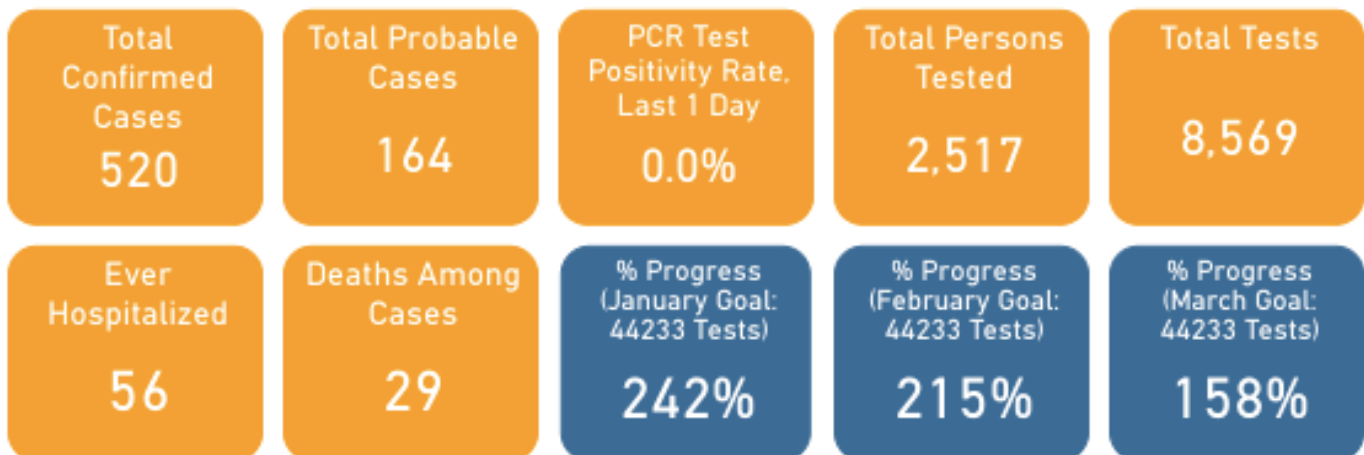


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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

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



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 16 of 90

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

357,723

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	5,238
Moderna	171,793
Pfizer	180,692

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

223,684

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	5,238
Moderna - 1 dose	44,553
Moderna - Series Complete	63,620
Pfizer - 1 dose	39,870
Pfizer - Series Complete	70,411

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

38%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	38.23%
Series Complete	24.12%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	1,068	368	350	718
Beadle	7,500	2,267	2,616	4,883
Bennett*	550	142	204	346
Bon Homme*	4,033	887	1,573	2,460
Brookings	10,921	4,311	3,305	7,616
Brown	16,627	4,265	6,181	10,446
Brule*	2,037	497	770	1,267
Buffalo*	139	81	29	110
Butte	2,535	907	814	1,721
Campbell	1,192	186	503	689
Charles Mix*	3,624	1,164	1,230	2,394
Clark	1,430	466	482	948
Clay	5,980	1,924	2,028	3,952
Codington*	11,033	2,965	4,034	6,999
Corson*	314	70	122	192
Custer*	3,228	848	1,190	2,038
Davison	8,757	2,581	3,088	5,669
Day*	2,875	863	1,006	1,869
Deuel	1,696	508	594	1,102
Dewey*	389	63	163	226
Douglas*	1,378	390	494	884
Edmunds	1,525	415	555	970
Fall River*	2,809	681	1,064	1,745
Faulk	1,185	337	424	761
Grant*	2,919	1,065	927	1,992
Gregory*	1,976	526	725	1,251
Haakon*	574	144	215	359

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 17 of 90

Hamlin	1,989	577	706	1,283
Hand	1,750	552	599	1,151
Hanson	580	204	188	392
Harding	119	51	34	85
Hughes*	8,908	2,126	3,391	5,517
Hutchinson*	3,954	1,023	1,465	2,488
Hyde*	627	151	238	389
Jackson*	440	122	159	281
Jerauld	1,018	316	351	667
Jones*	690	148	271	419
Kingsbury	2,779	963	908	1,871
Lake	4,829	1,525	1,652	3,177
Lawrence	9,588	3,250	3,169	6,419
Lincoln	28,688	5,619	11,534	17,153
Lyman*	912	276	318	594
Marshall*	2,059	663	698	1,361
McCook	2,412	602	905	1,507
McPherson	283	69	107	176
Meade*	7,234	1,866	2,684	4,550
Mellette*	52	14	19	33
Miner	984	278	353	631
Minnehaha*	90,980	19,103	35,936	55,039
Moody*	2,084	720	682	1,402
Oglala Lakota*	190	56	67	123
Pennington*	42,784	9,370	16,707	26,077
Perkins*	748	254	247	501
Potter	1,007	331	338	669
Roberts*	4,843	1,117	1,863	2,980
Sanborn	1,162	360	401	761
Spink	3,417	867	1,275	2,142
Stanley*	1,367	297	535	832
Sully	427	103	162	265
Todd*	180	42	69	111
Tripp*	2,219	473	873	1,346
Turner	3,988	812	1,588	2,400
Union	3,825	1,581	1,122	2,703
Walworth*	2,042	390	826	1,216
Yankton	11,347	2,497	4,425	6,922
Ziebach*	59	13	23	36
Other	6,865	1,951	2,457	4,408

**Need help Getting
Social Security
Disability Benefits?**

We can help!



FIGHTING FOR YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY BENEFITS FOR OVER 25 YEARS!

You Could Be Eligible To Receive:



Steady monthly income
depending on your paid
in amount



A lump sum payment
of benefits owed from
back-pay



Annual cost of living
increases

- We simplify the process & strive for quick claim approval
- Starting the process is easy and takes only minutes to complete

BILL GORDON
&
ASSOCIATES

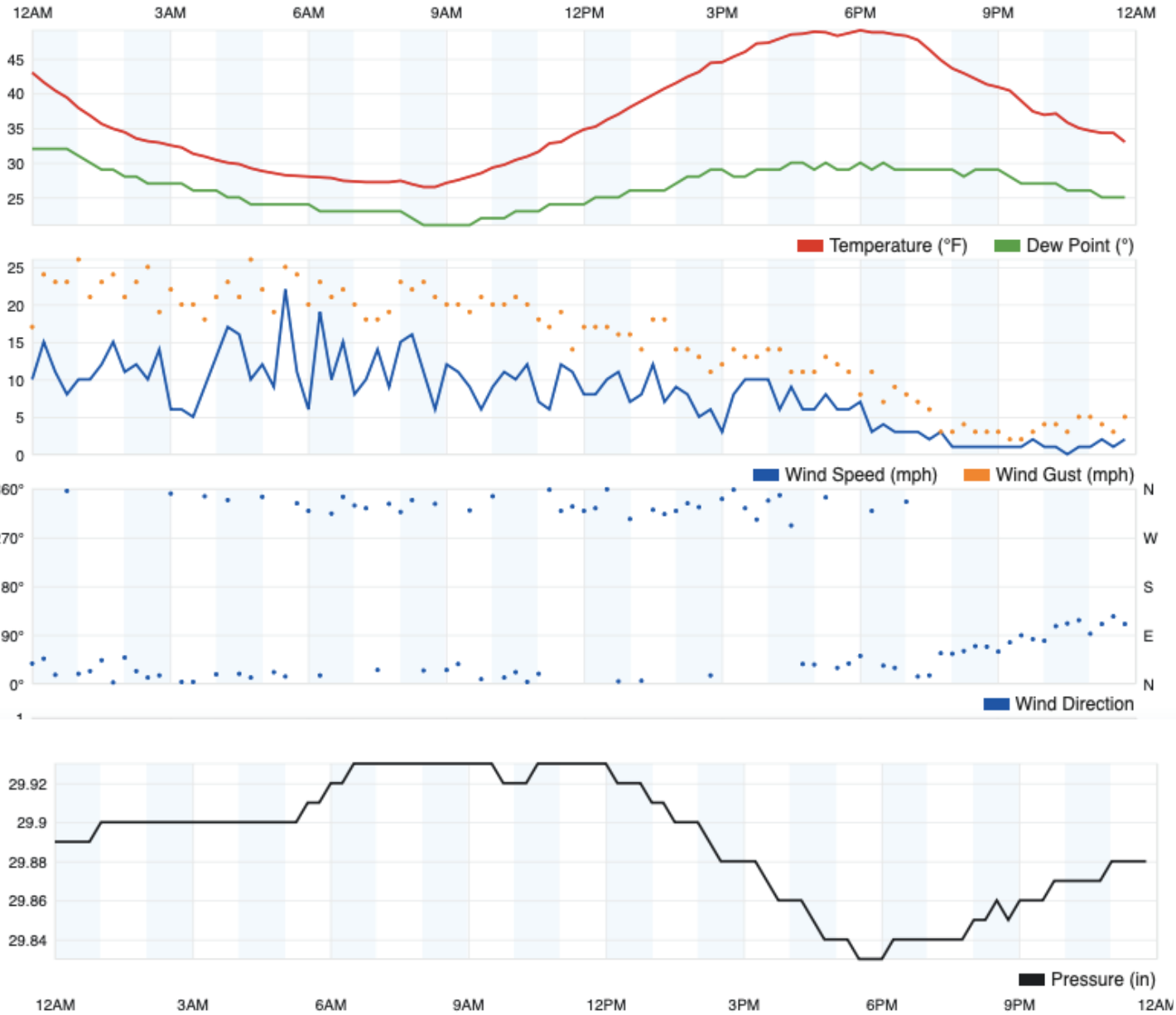
866-254-9043

Helping thousands get the benefits they deserve

Groton Daily Independent

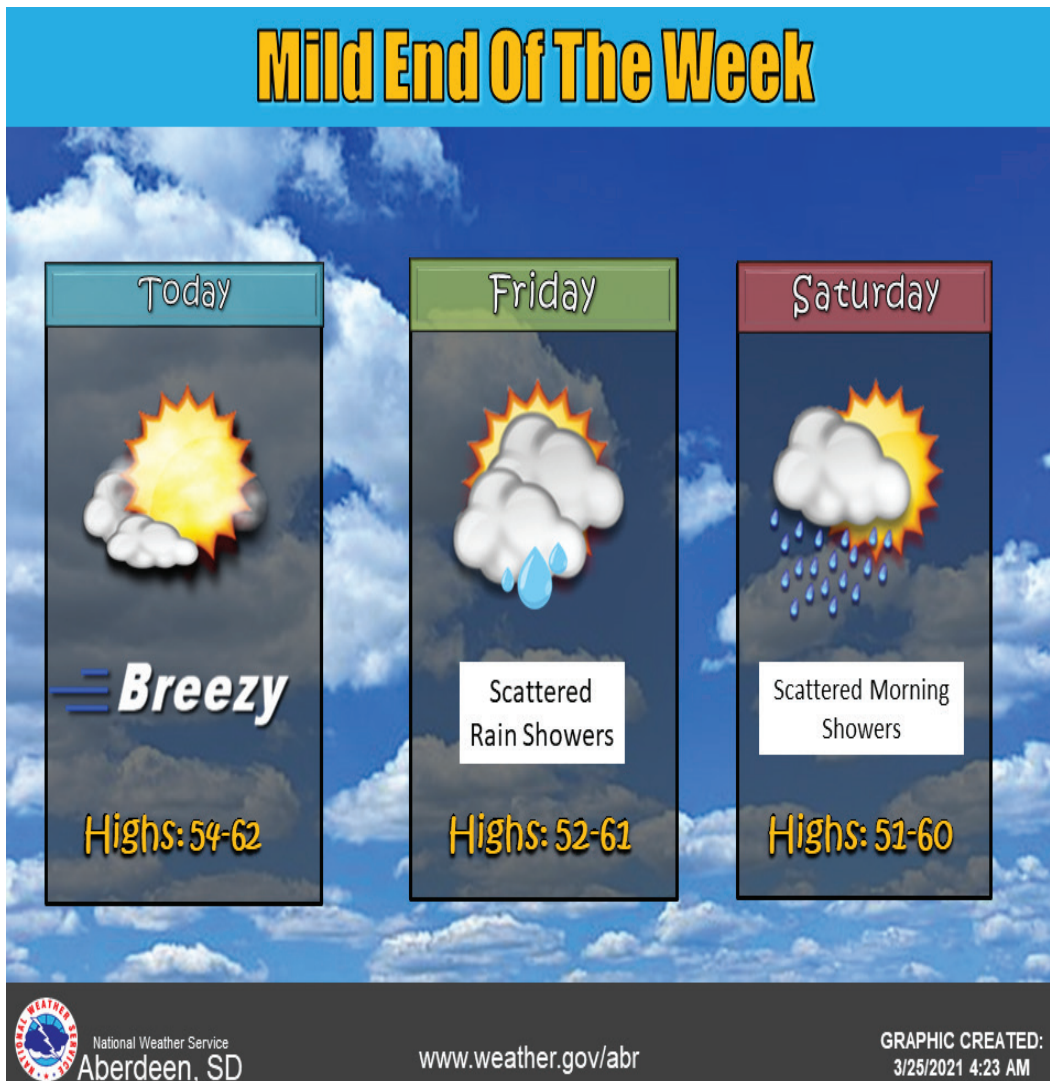
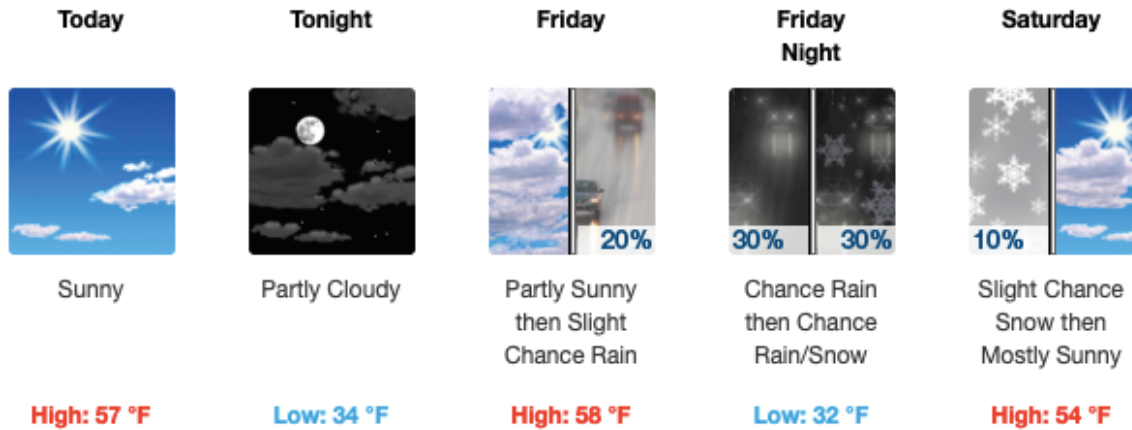
Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 19 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 20 of 90



Mild conditions can be expected leading into the weekend, with just a small chance for showers Friday afternoon through Saturday morning.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 21 of 90

Today in Weather History

March 25, 2009: Rapid snowmelt and ice jamming caused the Elm River near Westport to rise -above flood stage on March 20th. The Elm River reached an all-time record level of 22.69 feet on March 25th almost 9 feet above flood stage. The previous record was 22.11 feet set on April 10th, 1969. The flood stage for the Elm River at Westport is 14 feet. The city of Westport was evacuated with the flood waters causing damage to many homes and roads in and around Westport. Also, many other roads and agricultural and pastureland along the river were flooded. The Elm River slowly receded and fell below flood stage on March 30th. The flood waters from the Elm River flowed south and into the northern portion of Moccasin Creek. Subsequently, the Moccasin Creek rose as the water flowed south into the city of Aberdeen. Flooding became a concern for Aberdeen and areas along the creek north of Aberdeen. The Governor signed an emergency declaration which allowed the state to help with flood response efforts, including sending 50,000 sandbags to the area. Also, the National Guard was activated to move a variety of heavy equipment. Some sandbagging and a falling Elm River kept the Moccasin Creek from causing any significant flooding in and north of Aberdeen. The creek flooded some township and county roads.

1901: More than 20 people were killed by an estimated F3 tornado that moved across parts of Birmingham, Alabama. The twister cut a 15-mile path from the south side of the city to Avondale and Irondale.

1935: Suffocating dust storms frequently occurred in southeast Colorado between the 12th and the 25th of the month. Six people died, and many livestock starved or suffocated. Up to six feet of dust covered the ground. Schools were closed, and tenants deserted many rural homes.

1992: Hailstones up to four inches in diameter resulted in more than \$60 million in damage in Orlando, Florida. This storm is still the costliest Florida hailstorm on record.

1843 - A second great snowstorm hit the northeastern U.S. The storm produced snow from Maine all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Natchez MS received three inches of snow, and up to 15 inches buried eastern Tennessee. Coastal Maine received 204 inches of snow that winter. (David Ludlum)

1914 - Society Hill, SC, was buried under 18 inches of snow, establishing a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1934 - A spring storm produced 21 inches of snow at Amarillo TX in 24 hours. However, much of the snow melted as it fell, and as a result, the snow cover was never any deeper than 4.5 inches. (David Ludlum)

1948 - For the second time in less than a week airplanes were destroyed by a tornado at Tinker AFB in Oklahoma City OK. A March 20th tornado destroyed fifty planes at Tinker AFB causing more than ten million dollars damage, and the March 25th tornado destroyed another thirty-five planes causing six million dollars damage. The first tornado struck without warning, and caused more damage than any previous tornado in the state of Oklahoma. The second tornado was predicted by Fawbush and Miller of the United States Air Force, and their accurate tornado forecast ushered in the modern era of severe weather forecasting. (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data) (The National Severe Storms Forecast Center)

1975 - The town of Sandberg reported a wind gust to 101 mph, a record for the state of California. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Heavy rain left rivers and streams swollen in Kansas and Nebraska, causing considerable crop damage due to flooding of agricultural areas. The Saline River near Wilson Reservoir in central Kansas reached its highest level since 1951. March rainfall at Grand Island NE exceeded their previous record of 5.57 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - An early season heat wave prevailed in the southwestern U.S. The high of 93 degrees at Tucson, AZ, was a new record for March. Windy conditions prevailed across the central and eastern U.S. Winds gusted to 60 mph at Minneapolis MN, and reached 120 mph atop Rendezvous Peak WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A Pacific storm brought wet weather to much of the western third of the country, with heavy snow in some of the higher elevations. La Porte CA was drenched with 3.56 inches of rain in 24 hours. Up to 24 inches of snow blanketed the Sierra Nevada Range. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

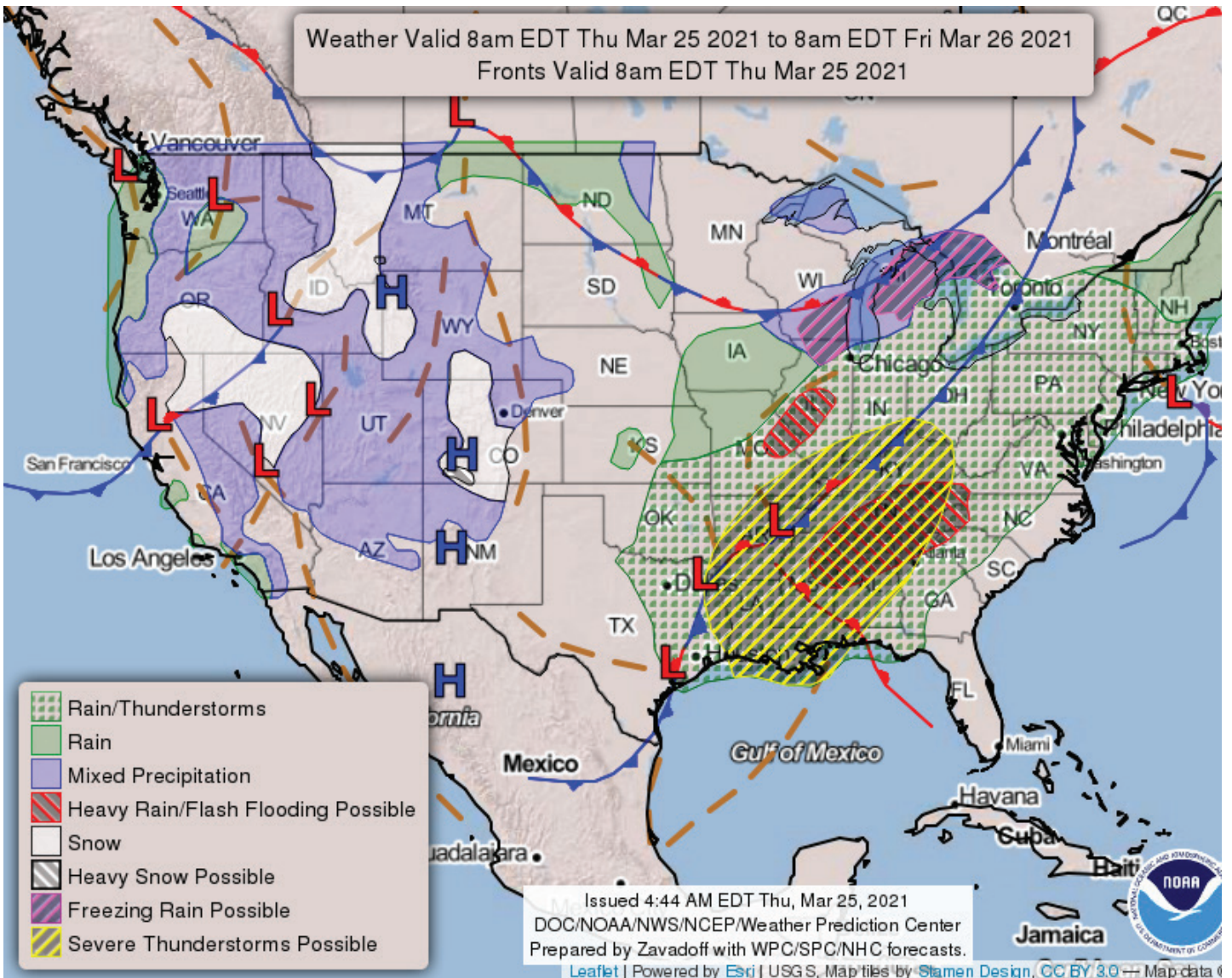
Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 22 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49.1 °F a
Low Temp: 26.5 °F
Wind: 26 mph
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 81° in 1925
Record Low: -10° in 1894
Average High: 45°F
Average Low: 24°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.84
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.86
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:53 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:25 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 23 of 90



WHEN GOD IS SILENT

The second-grade teacher stood before her noisy class, raised her voice, and shouted, "I want you to be so quiet that you can hear a pin drop!"

Silence suddenly prevailed. When Danny could no longer contain himself, he shouted, "Let 'er drop!"

It's not unusual to have an attitude like that toward God. We pray and wait. Then pray again. Then wait a little longer. Still, nothing happens. It seems as though we are waiting for God to "let 'er drop!"

Psalm 28 begins with the "silence of God." In fact, He is so silent that the Psalmist becomes impatient and shouts, "If you don't answer soon, I will be like those going down to their grave – abandoned!" Scary thought!

The subtle message from David, however, was that if God did not answer his prayer his enemies would rejoice. "They," he reminds God, "care nothing for what You have done or what Your hands have made." In other words, "God, I don't want them to embarrass you. I don't want people to ridicule You. I've laid my life and Your reputation on the line and if You are silent, if You let me down, they will believe that You are untrustworthy!"

David was not afraid to present his case to God and demand help. He did not want "unbelievers" to look at his situation and say, "I told you so. Your God is no more dependable than Baal or Dagon. He's not even listening and does not care, either!"

Not so. David looked at them and said, "I praise the Lord! For He has heard my cry for mercy." David prayed. God answered. And everyone saw God "at work."

Prayer: Father, when You seem silent may our faith never falter knowing that You will hear, help and heal. Give us the patience to wait and trust! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Praise the Lord! For he has heard my cry for mercy. Psalm 28:6

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 24 of 90

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 25 of 90

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

02-04-06-24-28

(two, four, six, twenty-four, twenty-eight)

Estimated jackpot: \$87,000

Lotto America

01-37-39-40-42, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 2

(one, thirty-seven, thirty-nine, forty, forty-two; Star Ball: two; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$4.17 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$137 million

Powerball

04-09-17-27-38, Powerball: 18, Power Play: 2

(four, nine, seventeen, twenty-seven, thirty-eight; Powerball: eighteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$220 million

Report calls for large cut in Black Hills timber production

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Scientists are calling for a 50% to 60% reduction in timber production for the Black Hills National Forest over the next several decades, according to a report released Tuesday.

The 68-page report by the USDA Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station is based on forest census data taken over a two-year time frame and evaluates harvest level sustainability. The recommendation follows the mountain pine beetle infestation that killed nearly 9 million ponderosa pine trees in the Black Hills and an increase in the extent and severity of wildfires.

"Since 2000, the Black Hills National Forest has experienced several disturbances that have reduced standing live sawtimber volume which will affect future harvest levels," the report states.

The report said the current volume of standing live sawtimber does not support a sustainable timber program at recent rates of harvest, under a wide range of scenarios considering growth and mortality rates. It will be up to forest managers to make the final decision, the Rapid City Journal reported.

One day prior to the public release of the report, Nieman Enterprises announced it will permanently close its saw mill in Hill City, eliminating 120 jobs and 12 contract crews. The company cited a reduction in timber available in the Black Hills National Forest.

Lakota activist: Mount Rushmore key in move to regain land

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — When then-President Donald Trump visited Mount Rushmore last year for a fireworks display, Lakota activist Nick Tilsen saw an opportunity to further a goal of returning to Native American tribes control of land they once held.

It would land him in jail, facing felony charges after he organized a demonstration to block a road leading to the monument, but it also made Mount Rushmore a focal point for that effort, known as the Land Back Movement.

Now Tilsen, who heads a Rapid City, South Dakota-based Indigenous advocacy organization called NDN Collective, has a plan to make dramatic changes at Mount Rushmore by turning it over to tribal control. But that plan puts him in direct conflict with top Republicans in the state like Gov. Kristi Noem, who say it

Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 26 of 90

should be preserved as a celebration of America, complete with an annual Independence Day fireworks display.

While Noem got her wishes last year when fireworks returned to the monument after a decade-long hiatus, Trump's visit also allowed Tilsen to bring attention to the symbolic importance of the monument, where 60-foot (18-meter) stone carvings of former Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln tower over the Black Hills — land that was seized illegally from Lakota tribes.

"What Mount Rushmore has always represented is a system of power and oppression and white supremacy, because they take a sacred place and carved the faces of white men who are responsible for our colonization and our demise," Tilsen said.

Noem, a close ally of Trump and potential 2024 presidential contender, has cast protecting the monument as part of a larger cultural battle over how history is told.

"Those four men are etched into Mount Rushmore are incredibly important to our history," she told Fox News this month. "We saw a movement to tear them down earlier this year. They needed to be protected."

Noem deployed the South Dakota National Guard for the July 3 event. Guard members advanced on the demonstration, leading to physical confrontations with protesters. Some were arrested, and Tilsen was charged with felonies and misdemeanors that carried a maximum punishment of nearly 17 years in prison.

Although Noem signed an agreement for another fireworks display this year, the National Parks Service has said it won't allow it, citing safety concerns and tribes' objections.

Tilsen recently reached an agreement with prosecutors that the charges would be dropped if he completes a prison diversion program. Though prosecutors say that part of the program is admitting wrongdoing and ensuring that offenses don't happen again, Tilsen told the Associated Press he is not done pressing for changes to the monument and the Black Hills.

"For Indigenous people, racial equity means returning Indigenous lands back into Indigenous hands," he said.

For the Lakota, the Black Hills are known as Paha Sapa — "the heart of everything that is" — and for Tilsen, they are central to racial justice.

But the monument is also closely tied to the state's identity. Its official nickname is "the Mount Rushmore state," and its license plates feature the stone carvings.

After one commentator called the monument a "stone idol to presidential colonizers" last month, the governor took to Twitter, writing, "The left wants to re-write our history by attacking the leaders who made America the most special country ever. It's our duty to teach our kids the truth."

But Tilsen said he wants to use the monument as a way to teach truth — in a way that uncovers the country's flawed history. He wants Mount Rushmore closed, then reopened under tribal control and with a new name — the Six Grandfathers Tribal Park, for the Lakota name of the rock formation where the monument is carved.

"What ends up happening at Mount Rushmore, we actually tell the true history of this land," he said. "We tell the history of the treaties, we tell the history of these men that are on the mountain and what their policies were like," adding that could spark conversations about how the history is connected to current issues among Native American communities, including high rates of poverty and incarceration.

Is Tilsen's vision to reimagine the monument realistic? It's not clear. But he says that between a nationwide racial reckoning and the recent appointment of the country's first Native American secretary of the interior, Deb Haaland, there is an opportunity to turn over stewardship of public lands to tribes.

"I think that we have some champions in the highest places in the government who are wanting to fight, make this happen," he said. "And movements like ours contributing to the political landscape being very different than it was on July 3rd."

Ohio officials say Noem website used photos without consent

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A website unveiled by South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to promote her cam-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 27 of 90

campaign to ban transgender women from women's sports is using photos without consent, officials from an Ohio school district said.

The website "Defend Title IX Now," which Noem says is aimed at "protecting women's sports," features images from Hudson, Ohio and other neighboring communities, according to Ohio Democratic state lawmaker Casey Weinstein. Some of the photos have been removed but others remain on the site, KELO-TV reported.

Hudson City School District officials said in an email to the station they did not give permission for anyone to display the photos and object to them being used "in a political endeavor."

Weinstein called on Noem in a tweet to "TAKE THEM DOWN" and said he is sending a formal letter to her office and "expects a prompt reply." Weinstein said the website is part of a "hateful campaign."

Noem spokesman Ian Fury said the site is not run by the state and the web developer obtained the rights to all the photographs. He said the images "reflect the very girls that Governor Noem's coalition is fighting to protect."

Noem created the campaign after receiving backlash from social conservative groups dismayed that she partially vetoed a bill to ban transgender women from women's sports.

Rapid City police say man's death investigated as a homicide

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The death of a man found in a residential garage in Rapid City is an apparent homicide, according to police.

Officers were dispatched to the property about 10:30 p.m. Tuesday for a welfare check on an unconscious male.

Officers found the man dead in the garage and saw that he had injuries consistent with a homicide, police said. Authorities have not provided details on the victim's injuries.

Officers interviewed a number of people at the residence and determined a 40-year-old Rapid City man is a person of interest in the investigation. Police have been looking for him.

The victim has not been identified.

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office is assisting in the investigation.

Two women killed in Carlton County crash

CLEAR CREEK, Minn. (AP) — Two women have died in a crash in northeastern Minnesota, according to the State Patrol.

The two died Tuesday evening in a single-vehicle crash that shut down a portion of Highway 23 in Carlton County, the patrol said.

The victims have been identified as 35-year-old Angela Severson, of Pierre, South Dakota, and 36-year-old Jennifer Bokusky, of Apple Valley.

Authorities said the women were northbound on Highway 23 near County Road 8 around 6:15 p.m. when their SUV veered onto the shoulder. The driver, Severson, overcorrected, went into the ditch, rolled, and struck a tree which crushed the roof of the passenger side.

The women were not wearing seatbelts at the time, according to the patrol.

The State Patrol doesn't know yet if alcohol was a factor.

Road conditions were said to be dry.

AstraZeneca confirms strong vaccine protection after US rift

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

AstraZeneca insists that its COVID-19 vaccine is strongly effective even after counting additional illnesses in its disputed U.S. study, the latest in an extraordinary public rift with American officials.

In a late-night news release Wednesday, the drugmaker said it had recalculated data from that study and concluded the vaccine is 76% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19, instead of the 79% it

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 28 of 90

had reported earlier in the week.

Just a day earlier, an independent panel that oversees the study had accused AstraZeneca of cherry-picking data to tout the protection offered by its vaccine. The panel, in a harsh letter to the company and to U.S. health leaders, said the company had left out some COVID-19 cases that occurred in the study, a move that could erode trust in the science.

Some experts said the new data provided by AstraZeneca was "reassuring" and that the information was likely solid enough for U.S. regulators to authorize the vaccine.

"AstraZeneca may have just been too hasty in submitting the earlier, incomplete interim analysis rather than waiting to analyze and submit the full dataset," said Julian Tang, a virologist at the University of Leicester who was not connected to the research. He said the updated details didn't look substantially different from what was published earlier this week.

Data disputes during ongoing studies typically remain confidential but in an unusual step, the National Institutes of Health publicly called on AstraZeneca to fix the discrepancy.

AstraZeneca had been counting on findings from a predominantly U.S. study of 32,000 people to help rebuild confidence in a vaccine that, despite being widely used in Britain, Europe and other countries, has had a troubled rollout. Previous studies have turned up inconsistent data about its effectiveness, and then last week a scare about blood clots had some countries temporarily pausing inoculations. Most have since restarted after the European Medicines Agency said the vaccine doesn't increase the overall incidence of blood clots. But it could not rule out a connection to some rare blood clots and issued new advice for monitoring those who get vaccinated.

Now the question is whether the company's newest calculations can end the tension. Even before the latest spat, experts had expressed concern that missteps in the vaccine's rollout could undermine confidence in the shot, which is crucial to global efforts to end the coronavirus pandemic since it is cheap, easy to store and a pillar of the COVAX initiative aimed at bringing vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.

Earlier Wednesday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, told reporters he hoped that when all the data was publicly vetted by federal regulators, it would dispel any hesitancy caused by the spat. He predicted it would "turn out to be a good vaccine."

AstraZeneca's newest calculations were based on 190 COVID-19 cases that occurred during the study, 49 more than it had included earlier in the week. The vaccine appears especially protective against the worst outcomes, with no severe illnesses or hospitalizations among vaccinated study volunteers compared to eight severe cases among those given dummy shots, the company said. It didn't provide a breakdown of the rest of the cases.

Some European authorities have questioned how protective the vaccine is in older adults. In the U.S. study, it was 85% effective in volunteers 65 and older, the company said. The study didn't turn up safety concerns.

The updated information "confirms that our COVID-19 vaccine is highly effective in adults, including those aged 65 years and over," AstraZeneca research chief Mene Pangalos said in a statement. He said the company looks forward to "the rollout of millions of doses across America."

The study hasn't ended, so additional COVID-19 cases can still accrue. AstraZeneca cautioned that 14 additional possible cases already are being examined and that could lead to further changes in the data.

The company intends to seek Food and Drug Administration clearance of the vaccine within a few weeks. The FDA will publicly debate all the evidence with its outside advisers before making a decision.

Stephen Evans, a vaccines expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said it was difficult to understand why the dispute between AstraZeneca and U.S. officials spilled into the public.

"Given the details given here, it seems an unnecessary action to have raised concerns in public," he said. "Results fluctuate as data accumulate ... what counts will be the FDA assessment and that will be done based on scrutiny of the full data and not press releases." He said any vaccine with an efficacy rate higher than 60% is useful.

He said it was unclear why there was "a breakdown in relations" between AstraZeneca and the indepen-

dent U.S. data experts monitoring the trial and worried that could undermine confidence in the vaccine. "This vaccine is so important for global health, and the disputes do not promote global health," he said. "At least in the short term, (this) will undermine confidence both in the U.S. and more importantly in the rest of the world."

Associated Press Medical Writer Maria Cheng contributed to this report from London.

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

Mass shooters exploited gun laws, loopholes before carnage

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

The suspect in the shooting at a Boulder, Colorado, supermarket was convicted of assaulting a high school classmate but still got a gun. The man accused of opening fire on three massage businesses in the Atlanta area bought his gun just hours before the attack — no waiting required.

They are just the latest suspected U.S. mass shooters to obtain guns because of limited firearms laws, background check lapses or law enforcement's failure to heed warnings of concerning behavior.

In the wake of the shootings, which together left 18 people dead, President Joe Biden renewed calls for stronger gun laws — including banning assault weapons and expanding background checks. Many Republicans oppose the measures, and the National Rifle Association blasted the discussions as a rush to "politicize this horrific situation."

A look at how suspects in recent mass shootings obtained guns, based on police accounts, court documents and contemporaneous reporting:

BOULDER, COLORADO: MARCH 22, 2021. 10 DEAD.

Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa bought a Ruger AR-556 pistol, an assault weapon with a 30-round capacity, on March 16, police said. Days earlier, a judge struck down an ordinance that banned assault rifles and high-capacity magazines in Boulder, citing a state law prohibiting local gun bans. A lawsuit challenging Boulder's ordinances had the backing of the NRA, which said the ruling gave "law-abiding gun owners something to celebrate." Alissa was prone to sudden rage and was convicted of misdemeanor assault and sentenced to probation for attacking a high school classmate, law enforcement officials and former associates said. It was not immediately known where Alissa purchased his gun or whether that incident came up on a background check. Had he been convicted of a felony, his purchase would've been barred under federal law. Alissa is charged with 10 counts of murder.

ATLANTA: MARCH 16, 2021. 8 DEAD

Robert Aaron Long purchased a 9 mm handgun just hours before going on a shooting rampage at three massage businesses in the Atlanta area, police said. A lawyer for the gun shop said it complies with federal background check laws. Georgia, like the majority of states, has no waiting period to obtain a gun. Long claimed to have a "sex addiction," police said, and he spent time at an addiction recovery facility last year. Federal law bans guns for people who are "unlawful users of or addicted to a controlled substance" or who've been court ordered to a mental health or substance abuse treatment facility, but doesn't mention treatment for other compulsions as a barrier to ownership. Long is charged with eight counts of murder.

MIDLAND, TEXAS, AUG. 31, 2019. 7 DEAD.

Seth Aaron Ator purchased an AR-style rifle through a private sale, allowing him to evade a federal background check, and fired it indiscriminately from his car into passing vehicles and shopping plazas. He also hijacked a mail truck, killing the driver. Ator had been blocked from getting a gun in 2014 after his background check was flagged because a court determined he was mentally ill, according to a law enforcement official familiar with the matter. Private sales, which account for up to 40 percent of all gun sales according to some estimates, are not subject to a federal background check and private sellers aren't required to determine if a buyer is eligible to own a gun. Ator was killed by police.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 30 of 90

DAYTON, OHIO: AUG. 4, 2019. 9 DEAD.

Connor Betts' classmates said he was suspended in high school for compiling a "hit list" and a "rape list," but authorities said there was nothing in his background that prevented him from purchasing the AR-15-style pistol used in the shooting at Ned Peppers Bar. Ohio law requires that sealed records of any juvenile crimes be expunged either after five years or once the offender turns 23. Betts, who was 24 at the time of the shooting, bought the gun online from a Texas dealer. It was then shipped to a Dayton-area firearms dealer, in accordance with federal law. Betts was killed by police.

EL PASO, TEXAS, AUG. 3, 2019. 23 DEAD.

Patrick Crusius bought an AK-47-style rifle and 1,000 rounds of hollow-point ammunition online 45 days before the Walmart attack, prosecutors said. A Crusius family lawyer said his mother raised concerns about the purchase in a call to police on June 27. Police said she asked if Crusius, who was 21 at the time, was old enough to buy a gun. Police said she was assured he was and that he'd qualify if he passed a background check. Police said she expressed concern only about his safety and said she'd seen no recent change in his behavior. Texas does not have the kind of "red flag law" that in other states allows courts to take guns from people posing immediate danger. Crusius posted a racist screed online just before the attack and appeared to target Mexicans. He's charged with capital murder in Texas and federal hate crimes and firearms offenses.

VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA: MAY 31, 2019. 12 DEAD.

Former Virginia Beach city employee DeWayne Craddock legally purchased six firearms in the three years before he opened fire on a municipal building, including the two .45-caliber pistols used in the attack. An independent review of the shooting, commissioned by the City of Virginia Beach, found that Craddock displayed no warning signs or "prohibited behaviors associated with a pathway to violence," and that he had no known history of mental health treatment. Craddock was killed by police.

THOUSAND OAKS, CALIFORNIA: NOV. 7, 2018. 12 DEAD.

Ian David Long, a former Marine machine gunner who served in Afghanistan, used a legally purchased .45-caliber pistol with an extended magazine in the shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill. California tried to outlaw high-capacity magazines, but a federal judge reversed that after a pro-gun group sued. Months before the shooting, sheriff's deputies called to Long's home found him acting irrationally, but a mental health specialist didn't feel he needed to be involuntarily committed. California has a "red flag law," but there's no indication authorities sought a court order to take away Long's guns. Long killed himself.

PITTSBURGH: OCT. 27, 2018. 11 DEAD.

Robert Gregory Bowers had a carry license and legally owned the Colt AR-15 SP1 and three Glock .357 handguns police said he used to kill worshippers at Tree of Life synagogue. Bowers spent months posting angry rants against Jews on Gab, a social media site favored by right-wing extremists. He also posted photos of his "glock family." Just before the attack, he posted a screed against a Jewish organization that resettles refugees, saying: "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." None of the rhetoric appeared to raise red flags. His case is pending.

SANTA FE, TEXAS: MAY. 18, 2018. 10 DEAD.

Dimitrios Pagourtzis, a 17-year-old student, used a shotgun and a .38-caliber handgun that his father purchased legally and stored in a closet at their home, authorities said. It wasn't clear if his father knew he'd taken the guns. Prior to the attack, Pagourtzis posted a photo on social media of a T-shirt with the phrase "Born to Kill" and had writings indicating he planned to attack his high school. A judge sent him to a mental health facility after ruling he was incompetent to stand trial.

PARKLAND, FLORIDA: FEB. 14, 2018. 17 DEAD.

Nikolas Cruz legally purchased a Smith & Wesson M&P 15 rifle in February 2017 from a licensed dealer a few miles from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, authorities said. He'd been treated at a mental health clinic but hadn't been there in more than a year. Federal law prohibits gun purchases if a court declares a person a "mental defective" or commits them to an institution, but not if the person seeks treatment voluntarily. Federal law allows people as young as 18 to buy semi-automatic weapons. Cruz was 19 at the time of the shooting. His trial has been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 31 of 90

SUTHERLAND SPRINGS, TEXAS: NOV. 5, 2017. 25 DEAD.

Devin Patrick Kelley's history of domestic abuse barred him from buying guns. He was able to because information about his crimes was never entered into a federal database used for background checks. The Air Force failed to follow rules requiring that it inform the FBI about his conduct. Kelley purchased four guns, including an AR-15-style rifle found at First Baptist Church, from licensed Texas and Colorado dealers over a four-year span. Kelley killed himself.

LAS VEGAS: OCT. 1, 2017. 58 DEAD.

Stephen Paddock purchased 33 of the 49 weapons found in his hotel room and at his homes in the year before he opened fire on a country music festival. Paddock passed all background checks. His gradual accumulation of guns went undetected because federal law doesn't require licensed gun dealers to alert the government about rifle purchases. Paddock killed himself.

ORLANDO, FLORIDA: JUNE 12, 2016. 49 DEAD.

Omar Mateen purchased an AR-15-style rifle, a Sig Sauer MCX, and a handgun from a licensed dealer on separate days about a week before the Pulse nightclub attack. He passed a background check and had a security license that allowed him to be armed while on duty. The FBI investigated Mateen in 2013 and 2014 over co-workers' concerns that he'd spoken about ties to terror groups. Neither inquiry led to charges. Even if he'd been placed on a terrorism watch list, Congress in 2015 rejected attempts to prevent people on the list from purchasing guns. Mateen was killed by police.

SAN BERNARDINO, CALIFORNIA: DEC. 2, 2015. 14 DEAD.

Syed Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, used weapons the FBI said his neighbor, Enrique Marquez, legally purchased from a licensed dealer in 2011 and 2012. Marquez pleaded guilty to charges he conspired to provide support to terrorists and made false statements to acquire a firearm. He told investigators Farook asked him to buy the weapons because he would draw less attention. Farook and Malik were killed by police.

ROSEBURG, OREGON: OCT. 1, 2015. 10 DEAD.

Christopher Harper-Mercer and his family members legally purchased the handguns and rifle used in the Umpqua Community College shooting from a licensed dealer. Investigators found six guns at the college and eight at an apartment. Neighbors said Harper-Mercer and his mother went target shooting together. Harper-Mercer killed himself after he was wounded by police.

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA: JUNE 17, 2015. 9 DEAD.

A drug arrest should've prevented Dylann Roof from purchasing the pistol he used at Emanuel AME Church, but a record-keeping error and background check delay enabled the transaction to go through. The FBI said a background check examiner never saw the arrest report because the wrong arresting agency was listed in state criminal history records. After three days, the gun dealer was legally permitted to complete the transaction. He was convicted and is on federal death row.

WASHINGTON, D.C.: SEPT. 16, 2013. 12 DEAD.

Aaron Alexis, a former reservist turned civilian contractor, passed background checks and legally purchased the shotgun used in the Washington Navy Yard shooting despite recent mental health treatment and a history of violent outbursts. He previously fired a gun in anger twice but wasn't prosecuted in either case. Alexis was killed by police.

NEWTOWN, CONNECTICUT: DEC. 14, 2012. 26 DEAD.

Adam Lanza used his mother's weapons, including a .223-caliber semi-automatic rifle, in the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Lanza's mother, whom he fatally shot before going to the school, also purchased the ammunition. Lanza killed himself.

AURORA, COLORADO: JULY 20, 2012. 12 DEAD.

James Holmes was receiving psychiatric treatment when he passed required federal background checks and legally purchased the weapons he used in his movie theater assault. As in the Parkland and Navy Yard cases, treatment alone did not prevent him from buying guns. He was convicted and sentenced to 12 life terms and thousands of years in prison.

Associated Press writer Michael Balsamo in Washington contributed to this report.

Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

1 report, 4 theories: Scientists mull clues on virus' origin

By DARIA LITVINOVA and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — A team of international and Chinese scientists is poised to report on its joint search for the origins of the coronavirus that sparked a pandemic after it was first detected in China over a year ago — with four theories being considered, and one the clear frontrunner, according to experts.

The lengthy report is being published after months of wrangling, notably between U.S. and Chinese governments, over how the outbreak emerged, while scientists try to keep their focus on a so-far fruitless search for the origin of a microbe that has killed over 2.7 million people and stifled economies worldwide.

It wasn't immediately clear when the report will be released after its publication was delayed earlier this month. By many accounts, the report could offer few concrete answers, and may raise further questions.

It will offer a first glance in writing from 10 international epidemiologists, data scientists, veterinary, lab and food safety experts who visited China and the city of Wuhan — where a market was seen as the initial epicenter — earlier this year to work with Chinese counterparts who pulled up the bulk of early data.

Critics have raised questions about the objectivity of the team, insisting that China's government had a pivotal say over its composition. Defenders of the World Health Organization, which assembled the team, say it can't simply parachute in experts to tell a country what to do — let alone one as powerful as China.

"I expect that this report will only be a first step into investigating the origins of the virus and that the WHO secretariat will probably say this," said Matthew Kavanagh, director of Georgetown University's Global Health Policy and Governance Initiative at the O'Neill Institute. "And I expect some to criticize this as insufficient."

The Wuhan trip is billed as Phase 1 in a vast undertaking to flesh out the origins of the virus.

The WHO has bristled at depictions of the mission as an "investigation" — saying that smacks of an invasive forensic probe that wasn't called for under the resolution adopted unanimously by the agency's member states in May that paved the way for the collaboration. The WHO and China later ironed out the ground rules.

Team member Vladimir Dedkov, an epidemiologist and deputy director of research at the St. Petersburg Pasteur Institute in Russia, summarized the four main leads first laid out at a marathon news conference in China last month about the suspected origins of the first infection in humans. They were, in order of likelihood: from a bat through an intermediary animal; straight from a bat; via contaminated frozen food products; from a leak from a laboratory like the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Officials in China, as well as Chinese team leader Liang Wannian, have promoted the third theory — the cold-chain one — while the U.S. administration under President Donald Trump played up the fourth one, of the lab leak. But Dedkov said those two hypothesis were far down the list of likely sources.

He suggested frozen products on which the virus was found were most likely contaminated by infected people. An infected person also likely brought and spread the virus at the Wuhan market associated with the outbreak, where some of the contaminated products were later found.

"In general, all the conditions for the spread of infection were present at this market," Dedkov said in an interview. "Therefore, most likely, there was a mass infection of people who were connected by location."

"At this point, there are no facts suggesting that there was a leak" from a lab, Dedkov said. "If suddenly scientific facts appear from somewhere, then accordingly, the priority of the version will change. But, at this particular moment, no."

Suspicious about political meddling have dogged the mission, and the international team leader — the WHO's Peter Ben Embarek — acknowledged in interviews last week that unspecified "pressures" might weigh on its members. Liang, in a Chinese newspaper interview, also bemoaned political pressure on the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 33 of 90

team.

Delays in deploying the international team to China, repeated slippage in the timing of publication of the report, and rejiggering of the plans for it — an initial summary of findings was jettisoned as an idea — have only fanned speculation that the scientists have been steered by political authorities or others.

“The last understanding we had was that it is expected to come out this week — we’ll have to see if that actually happens,” the U.S. charge d’affaires in Geneva, Mark Cassayre, said on Wednesday. “We have a clear understanding that other studies will be required.”

He said the U.S. was hopeful the report would be a “real step forward for the world understanding the origins of the virus, so that we can better prepare for future pandemics. That’s really what this is about.”

The WHO leadership, including Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, repeatedly praised the Chinese government’s early response to the outbreak, though recordings of private meetings obtained by The Associated Press exposed how top WHO officials were frustrated at China’s lack of cooperation.

The international team was wholly reliant on data collected by Chinese scientists after the outbreak surfaced, and Dedkov called the visit to Wuhan an “analytical trip, mainly for the purpose of retrospective analysis in the sense that we studied only those facts that were obtained earlier.”

“We did not collect any samples ourselves, we didn’t carry out any laboratory studies there, we just analyzed what we were being shown,” he said. If some data had not been collected, it wasn’t because the Chinese wanted to conceal something, he added.

The team’s visit was politically sensitive for China — which is concerned about any allegations it didn’t handle the initial outbreak properly. Shortly after the outbreak, the Chinese government detained some Chinese doctors who sought to raise the alarm.

The report, which Ben Embarek said last week took up about 280 pages, is set to lay out recommendations and lay the groundwork for next steps — such as whether the team, or others, get new access to China for further analysis. Ultimately, the aim is to find clues to help prevent another such pandemic in the future.

Georgetown’s Kavanagh said he hasn’t seen the report — but has suspicions about what it will say.

“Based on what we have heard so far I expect that the report will likely lend some credence to a link between wildlife farming and COVID-19, but without full evidence about exactly how the move from animals into humans might have occurred,” he said.

Dedkov said planning of “real-time research” is next, but noted there’s no guarantee future trips will find all the answers.

“But one can try,” he added. “Of course, if the source of the origin of the virus is found, it will help answer many questions and, in general, will dissipate this unnecessary political tension around the virus.”

Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

Follow AP’s pandemic coverage at:

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

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

<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

EXPLAINER: N. Korean missile tests follow same old playbook

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — New U.S. president, same old North Korean playbook.

But this time, there’s a twist.

Two months after President Joe Biden took office, North Korea is again turning to weapons tests to wrest outside concessions. But while launches in past years were big and aimed at drawing a big response, the tests welcoming Biden have, so far, been relatively small. That indicates Washington has a window of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 34 of 90

engagement before North Korea pursues bigger provocations.

This week, North Korea's neighbors reported the country fired four short-range missiles into the sea in its first missile launches in about a year. The launches, two of them Thursday banned under U.N. resolutions, come days after the North said it had rebuffed dialogue offers by the Biden administration, citing what it called U.S. hostility.

North Korea wants the United States to lift major economic sanctions on Pyongyang while tolerating it as a nuclear weapons state. Because the Biden administration is unlikely do that anytime soon, some experts say North Korea may stage bigger provocations, like a long-range missile test or a nuclear bomb detonation, in coming months.

Here's look at North Korea's recent missile launches and their motives.

ANY DIFFERENCE IN THIS NORTH KOREAN STRATEGY?

North Korea has a long history of performing major weapons tests around the time new governments take power in the United States and South Korea.

In February 2017, less than a month after President Donald Trump took office, North Korea test-launched a mid-range missile using solid fuel in what observers called an advance in weapon mobility. Later in 2017, four days after current South Korean President Moon Jae-in was inaugurated, North Korea fired what it called a newly developed, nuclear-capable intermediate-range missile.

In 2009, North Korea conducted a long-range rocket launch and a nuclear test within the first four months of President Barack Obama's first term in office.

This week's weapons tests by North Korea largely appear to follow the playbook, but experts believe the country has so far avoided too serious a provocation as the Biden administration hasn't completed its comprehensive policy review on North Korea.

The four missiles fired by North Korea this week were all short-range and don't pose a direct threat to the U.S. mainland. According to South Korea's assessment, the first two weapons launched Sunday were believed to be cruise missiles. But Japan said the two other ones fired on Thursday were ballistic missiles, more provocative weapons whose tests are banned by U.N. Security Council resolutions.

"The basic pattern isn't much different. But while North Korea in the past focused on showing off its maximum capability when a new government came in the United States, I feel the North is trying to control the level of (its provocation)," said Du Hyeogn Cha, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

WHAT DOES NORTH KOREA WANT?

In January, about 10 days before Biden took office, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said in a policy speech that he would enlarge his nuclear arsenal and beef up fighting capability to cope with a hostile U.S. policy and military threats. He also pressed South Korea to suspend regular military drills with the United States if it truly wants better ties.

Earlier in March, when U.S. and South Korean militaries pressed ahead with their springtime drills, Kim's powerful sister, Kim Yo Jong, warned the U.S. to "refrain from causing a stink" if it wants to "sleep in peace" for the next four years.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said Washington reached out to Pyongyang starting in mid-February, but Pyongyang hasn't responded. Blinken still slammed North Korea's human rights conditions and nuclear ambitions when he visited Seoul with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin last week. North Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui said her country will keep ignoring such U.S. offers because of what she called U.S. hostility.

"It's like North Korea is putting Kim Yo Jong's threats into action as she said the United States can't sleep in peace if it doesn't accept its demands," said Moon Seong Mook, an analyst for the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

While the North's latest weapons launches were seen as a response to the South Korea-U.S. drills and Blinken and Austin's trip to Seoul, Moon Seong Mook said North Korea eventually wants "the United States to lift sanctions while letting it maintain its nuclear capability."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 35 of 90

WHAT'S NEXT?

Experts say it's highly unlikely for the Biden administration to back down and make concessions in the face of North Korea's short-range missile launches. Biden, who has called Kim "a thug," also won't likely sit down for one-on-one talks with Kim unless working-level officials confirm North Korea's sincerity in denuclearization.

This could lead North Korea to launch bigger weapons tests in coming months, especially if it isn't satisfied with the Biden government's North Korea policy review expected to be publicized soon, experts say.

"Biden won't likely do a Trump-style 'reality show summit' with Kim. Kim's agony in the next four years will be subsequently deepened and his nuclear gambling cannot help continuing," said Nam Sung-wook, a professor at South Korea's Korea University.

A possible high-profile provocation by North Korea could be conducting long-range missile and nuclear tests, which Kim Jong Un suspended when he began engaging diplomatically with Washington.

After a torrid run of long-range missile and nuclear tests in 2016-17, Kim Jong Un claimed to have achieved the ability to attack the U.S. homeland with nuclear missiles. But outside experts said North Korea hasn't mastered a few remaining technologies, such as one on protecting its warheads during the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry, to have functioning intercontinental ballistic missiles.

But one unlikely possibility is U.N. Security Council sanctions becoming more punishing than the current ones. China, the North's major diplomatic ally and economic lifeline, wields veto power on the council. Given its current tensions with Washington, China may not easily agree on more sanctions even if North Korea engages in long-range or nuclear tests, Cha said.

China attacks foreign clothing, shoe brands over Xinjiang

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese state TV called Thursday for a boycott of H&M as Beijing lashed out at foreign clothing and footwear brands following Western sanctions on Chinese officials accused of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region.

The ruling Communist Party criticized H&M for saying in March 2020 it would stop buying cotton from the northwestern Chinese region. The Swedish retailer joined other brands in expressing concern about reports of forced labor there.

The party newspaper Global Times also criticized statements by Burberry, Adidas, Nike, New Balance and Zara about Xinjiang as early as two years ago.

"For enterprises that touch the bottom line of our country, the response is very clear: don't buy!" China Central Television said on its social media account. It said the H and M in the Swedish name stood for Chinese words meaning lie and falsehood.

The attacks follow Monday's decision by the 27-nation European Union, the United States, Britain and Canada to impose travel and financial sanctions on four Chinese officials blamed for abuses in Xinjiang.

More than 1 million people in Xinjiang, most of them from predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, have been confined to work camps, according to foreign researchers and governments. Beijing denies mistreating them and says it is trying to promote economic development and stamp out radicalism.

"The so-called existence of forced labor in the Xinjiang region is totally fictitious," said a Commerce Ministry spokesman, Gao Feng. He called on foreign companies to "correct wrong practices" but did not say what they were expected to do.

Celebrities including Wang Yibo, a popular singer and actor, announced they were breaking endorsement contracts with H&M and Nike.

H&M products were missing from China's most popular e-commerce platforms, Alibaba Group's Tmall and JD.com. News reports said they were removed due to public criticism over its Xinjiang statement. The companies didn't respond to requests for comment.

Beijing often attacks foreign clothing, auto, travel and other brands for actions by their governments

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 36 of 90

or to pressure companies to conform to its official positions on Taiwan, Tibet and other sensitive issues.

Companies usually apologize and change websites or advertising to maintain access to China, one of the biggest global markets. But Xinjiang is an unusually thorny issue. Western brands face pressure at home to distance themselves from possible abuses.

A loss of sales in China, the only major economy where consumer spending has rebounded to above pre-pandemic levels, can be especially painful at a time when U.S. and European demand is weak.

H&M Group "doesn't represent any political standpoint" and "respects Chinese consumers," the company said on its social media account.

The company said it deals with 350 Chinese manufacturers to make products that "comply with the principles of sustainable development." H&M said it "is committed to long-term investment and development in China."

H&M had 520 stores and \$1.4 billion in sales in China in 2019, the last year for which annual figures have been reported. China is its third-largest market after Germany and the United States.

The criticism began when the ruling party's Youth League on Wednesday called attention to last March's H&M statement on its social media account. It gave no indication why it singled out the company or an explanation for citing a year-old statement.

"Spreading lies to boycott Xinjiang while wanting to make money in China? Wishful thinking," the Youth League said.

The Global Times said Burberry, Adidas, Nike and New Balance also made "cutting remarks" about Xinjiang cotton. A separate Global Times report cited what it said was a statement by Zara that it had a "zero-tolerance approach towards forced labor."

H&M's statement last year cited a decision by the Better Cotton Initiative, an industry group that promotes environmental and labor standards, to stop licensing Xinjiang cotton because it was "increasingly difficult" to trace how it was produced. In September, H&M announced it would stop working with a Chinese manufacturer that was accused of using forced labor in a unit unrelated to the Swedish brand.

In January, Washington imposed a ban on imports of cotton from Xinjiang, a major supplier to clothing producers for Western markets.

China's official outrage has focused on Europe, possibly because relations with the EU had been amicable amid rancor with Washington over trade disputes and accusations of Chinese spying and technology theft.

Official criticism of H&M reflected that tone of grievance at being hurt by a friend.

"How can H&M eat Chinese rice and then smash China's pot?" state television said in a commentary Wednesday.

Comments on the internet cited clothing brands Uniqlo of Japan and The Gap of the United States as other possible offenders. It was unclear how many of those accounts were members of the public and how many were run by the ruling party's vast propaganda apparatus.

The pop star Wang's announcement that he was quitting as a Nike "brand ambassador" didn't mention Xinjiang. It said he "firmly resists any words and actions that pollute China."

Others including singer and actress Song Qian, a former member of Korean pop group f(x) who also is known as Victoria Song, and actor Huang Xuan, who announced they would end endorsement contracts with H&M. Actress Tang Songyun said she was breaking ties with Nike.

Chinese athletic shoe brand ANTA announced it was pulling out of BCI, the industry cotton group.

Stuck ship in Egypt's Suez Canal imperils shipping worldwide

By JON GAMBRELL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

ISMAILIA, Egypt (AP) — A skyscraper-sized cargo ship wedged across Egypt's Suez Canal further imperiled global shipping Thursday as at least 150 other vessels needing to pass through the crucial waterway idled waiting for the obstruction to clear, authorities said.

The Ever Given, a Panama-flagged ship that carries cargo between Asia and Europe, ran aground Tuesday in the narrow, man-made canal dividing continental Africa from the Sinai Peninsula. In the time since,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 37 of 90

efforts to free the ship using dredgers, digging and the aid of high tides have yet to push the container vessel aside — affecting billions of dollars' worth of cargo.

In a sign of the global turmoil the blockage has caused, the ship's Japanese owner even offered a written apology Thursday for the incident as well.

"We are determined to keep on working hard to resolve this situation as soon as possible," Shoei Kisen Kaisha Ltd. said. "We would like to apologize to all parties affected by this incident, including the ships travelling and planning to travel through Suez Canal."

Authorities began work again to free the vessel Thursday morning after halting for the night, an Egyptian canal authority official said. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn't authorized to speak to journalists, said workers hoped to avoid offloading containers from the vessel as it would be a dayslong effort to do so that could extend the closure.

So far, dredgers have tried to clear silt around the massive ship. Tug boats nudged the vessel alongside it, trying to gain momentum. From the shore, at least one backhoe dug into the canal's sandy banks, suggesting the bow of the ship had plowed into it. However, satellite photos taken Thursday by Planet Labs Inc. and analyzed by The Associated Press showed the vessel still stuck in the same location.

Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei, the head of the canal authority, said navigation through the waterway would remain halted until they refloat the vessel. A team from Boskalis, a Dutch firm specialized in salvaging, arrived at the canal on Thursday, though one of the company's top officials warned removing the vessel could take "days to weeks."

"It is, in a manner of speaking, a very heavy whale on the beach," Boskalis chairman Peter Berdowski told the Dutch current affairs program "Nieuwuur" on Wednesday night. "The ship, with the weight it now has, can't really be pulled free. You can forget it."

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, the company that manages the Ever Given, said the ship's 25-member crew are safe and accounted for. Shoei Kisen Kaisha said all the crew came from India.

The ship had two pilots from Egypt's canal authority aboard the vessel to guide it when the grounding happened around 7:45 a.m. Tuesday, Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement said.

Canal service provider Leth Agencies said at least 150 ships were waiting for the Ever Given to be cleared, including vessels near Port Said on the Mediterranean Sea, Port Suez on the Red Sea and those already stuck in the canal system on Egypt's Great Bitter Lake.

Cargo ships already behind the Ever Given in the canal will be reversed south back to Port Suez to free the channel, Leth Agencies said. Authorities hope to do the same to the Ever Given when they can free it.

Evergreen Marine Corp., a major Taiwan-based shipping company that operates the ship, said the Ever Given had been overcome by strong winds as it entered the canal, something Egyptian officials earlier said as well. High winds and a sandstorm plagued the area Tuesday, with winds gusting as much as 50 kilometers (30 miles) per hour.

An initial report suggested the ship suffered a power blackout before the incident, something Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement denied Thursday.

"Initial investigations rule out any mechanical or engine failure as a cause of the grounding," the company said.

In Japan, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told reporters Thursday that the Suez Canal is part of a crucial international sea lane, and that the Japanese government was gathering information and working with local authorities.

The closure could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Mideast, which rely on the canal to avoid sailing around Africa. The price of international benchmark Brent crude stood at over \$63 a barrel Thursday.

Overall, famed shipping journal Lloyd's List estimates each day the Suez Canal is closed disrupts over \$9 billion worth of goods that should be passing through the waterway. A quarter of all Suez Canal traffic a day comes from container ships like the Ever Given, the journal said.

"Blocking something like the Suez Canal really sets in motion a number of dominos toppling each other

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 38 of 90

over," said Lars Jensen, chief executive of Denmark-based SeaIntelligence Consulting. "The effect is not only going to be the simple, immediate one with cargo being delayed over the next few weeks, but will actually have repercussions several months down the line for the supply chain."

The Ever Given, built in 2018 with a length of nearly 400 meters (a quarter mile) and a width of 59 meters (193 feet), is among the largest cargo ships in the world. It can carry some 20,000 containers at a time. It previously had been at ports in China before heading toward Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Opened in 1869, the Suez Canal provides a crucial link for oil, natural gas and cargo. It also remains one of Egypt's top foreign currency earners. In 2015, the government of President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi completed a major expansion of the canal, allowing it to accommodate the world's largest vessels. However, the Ever Given ran aground south of that new portion of the canal.

The stranding Tuesday marks just the latest to affect mariners amid the pandemic. Hundreds of thousands have been stuck aboard vessels due to the pandemic. Meanwhile, demands on shipping have increased, adding to the pressure on tired sailors.

Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writers Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo, Isabel DeBre in Dubai and Mike Corder at The Hague, Netherlands, contributed to this report.

North Korea test-fires ballistic missiles in message to US

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Thursday test-fired its first ballistic missiles since President Joe Biden took office as it expands its military capabilities and increases pressure on Washington while nuclear negotiations remain stalled.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said North Korea's resumption of ballistic testing threatens "peace and safety in Japan and the region," and that Tokyo will closely coordinate with Washington and Seoul on the North's military activities.

South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, after meeting his Russian counterpart in Seoul, expressed "deep concern" and urged the North to uphold its commitments for peace. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called for a swift resumption of dialogue to resolve the standoff with North Korea.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the two short-range missiles were fired at 7:06 a.m. and 7:25 a.m. on the North's eastern coast and flew 450 kilometers (279 miles) on an apogee of 60 kilometers (37 miles) before landing in the sea.

A senior U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss military observations, matched the information from Tokyo and Seoul, saying that initial assessments suggest the North fired two short-range ballistic missiles.

"This activity highlights the threat that North Korea's illicit weapons program poses to its neighbors and the international community," said U.S. Indo-Pacific Command spokesperson Capt. Mike Kafka.

The launches came a day after U.S. and South Korean officials said the North fired short-range weapons presumed to be cruise missiles into its western sea over the weekend.

North Korea has a history of testing new U.S. administrations with missile launches and other provocations aimed at forcing the Americans back to the negotiating table.

Still, Thursday's launches were a measured provocation compared to the nuclear and intercontinental missile tests in 2017 that inspired war fears before the North shifted toward diplomacy with the Trump administration in 2018.

Analysts expect the North to gradually dial up its weapons displays to gain bargaining power as it angles to get back into stalled talks aimed at leveraging nuclear weapons for badly needed economic benefits.

North Korea has so far ignored the Biden administration's efforts to reach out, saying it won't engage in meaningful talks unless Washington abandons its "hostile" policies.

It's unclear how the Biden administration will respond before it completes its policy review on North Korea in coming weeks.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 39 of 90

The missile launches followed a trip by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea last week as Washington pushes to restore its alliances in Asia.

During the trip, Blinken sternly criticized North Korea's nuclear program and human rights record and pressed China to use its "tremendous influence" to convince the North to denuclearize.

North Korean state media had said Tuesday that leader Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his country's traditional alliance with China while exchanging messages with Chinese President Xi Jinping in an apparent response to Biden's efforts to coordinate action on North Korea with his allies.

The negotiations over the North's nuclear program faltered after the collapse of Kim's second summit with President Donald Trump in February 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korean demands for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

Since Trump's first meeting with Kim in 2018, the North has not conducted nuclear or long-range missile tests, although analysts believe it has pressed ahead with both programs.

The North has continued short- and medium-range missile testing during its suspension of nuclear and long-range tests, expanding its ability to strike targets in South Korea and Japan, including U.S. bases there.

Kim Dong-yub, an analyst from South Korea's Institute for Far Eastern Studies, said the flight data suggests the North possibly tested a new solid-fuel system modeled after Russia's 9K720 Iskander mobile ballistic missiles.

The low-flying missiles, which analysts see as potentially nuclear capable, are designed to be maneuverable so they have a better chance at evading missile defense systems.

The North had conducted at least 16 launches of these missiles and other new short-range systems from 2019 to 2020.

Trump had been accused of giving North Korea room to advance its weaponry by repeatedly dismissing its short-range missile tests despite the threat they posed to South Korea and Japan.

If Biden takes a different approach by imposing additional sanctions over short-range ballistic launches, the North may use it as an excuse for more provocative tests, including those involving submarine-launched missile systems, said Cheong Seong-Chang, an analyst at South Korea's Sejong Institute.

Kim Jong Un's powerful sister last week berated the United States over its latest round of combined military exercises with South Korea this month, warning Washington to "refrain from causing a stink" if it wants to "sleep in peace" for the next four years.

The North's short-range tests on Sunday were its first known missile firings since April 2020. Biden played down those launches, telling reporters, "There's no new wrinkle in what they did."

AP journalists Yuri Kageyama and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo and Amer Madhani and Lolita Baldor in Washington contributed to this report.

Amid growing challenges, Biden to hold 1st news conference

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden held off on holding his first news conference so he could use it to celebrate passage of a defining legislative achievement, his giant COVID-19 relief package. But he's sure to be pressed at Thursday's question-and-answer session about all sorts of other challenges that have cropped up along the way.

A pair of mass shootings, rising international tensions, early signs of intraparty divisions and increasing numbers of migrants crossing the southern border are all confronting a West Wing known for its message discipline.

Biden is the first chief executive in four decades to reach this point in his term without holding a formal question-and-answer session. He'll meet with reporters for the nationally televised afternoon event in the East Room of the White House.

"It's an opportunity for him to speak to the American people, obviously directly through the coverage, directly through all of you," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters aboard Air Force One

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 40 of 90

on Tuesday. "And so I think he's thinking about what he wants to say, what he wants to convey, where he can provide updates, and, you know, looking forward to the opportunity to engage with a free press."

While Biden has been on pace with his predecessors in taking questions from the press in other formats, he tends to field just one or two informal inquiries at a time, usually in a hurried setting at the end of an event or in front of a whirring helicopter.

Pressure had mounted on Biden to hold a formal session, which allows reporters to have an extended back-and-forth with the president on the issues of the day. Biden's conservative critics have pointed to the delay to suggest that Biden was being shielded by his staff.

West Wing aides have dismissed the questions about a news conference as a Washington obsession, pointing to Biden's high approval ratings while suggesting that the general public is not concerned about the event. The president himself, when asked Wednesday if he were ready for the press conference, joked, "What press conference?"

Behind the scenes, though, aides have taken the event seriously enough to hold a mock session with the president earlier this week. And there is some concern that Biden, a self-proclaimed "gaffe machine," could go off message and generate a series of unflattering news cycles.

"The press conference serves an important purpose: It presents the press an extended opportunity to hold a leader accountable for decisions," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, presidential scholar and professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania. "A question I ask: What is the public going to learn in this venue that it couldn't learn elsewhere? And why does it matter? The answer: The president speaks for the nation."

Biden will stand behind a lectern emblazoned with the presidential seal and point to a surge in vaccine distribution, encouraging signs in the economy and the benefits Americans will receive from the sweeping stimulus package. But plenty of challenges abound.

His appearance will come just a day after he appointed Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the government's response to the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, where the administration faces a growing humanitarian and political challenge that threatens to overshadow Biden's legislative agenda.

In less than a week, two mass shootings have rattled the nation and pressure has mounted on the White House to back tougher gun measures. The White House has struggled to blunt a nationwide effort by Republican legislatures to tighten election laws. A pair of Democratic senators briefly threatened to hold up the confirmation of Biden appointees due to a lack of Asian-American representation in the Cabinet. And both North Korea and Russia have unleashed provocative actions to test a new commander in chief.

In a sharp contrast with the previous administration, the Biden White House has exerted extreme message discipline, empowering staff to speak but doing so with caution. The new White House team has carefully managed the president's appearances, which serves Biden's purposes but denies the media opportunities to directly press him on major policy issues and to engage in the kind of back-and-forth that can draw out information and thoughts that go beyond curated talking points.

Having overcome a childhood stutter and famously long-winded, Biden has long enjoyed interplay with reporters and has defied aides' requests to ignore questions from the press. He has been prone to gaffes throughout his long political career and, as president, has occasionally struggled with off-the-cuff remarks.

Those are the types of distractions his aides have tried to avoid, and, in a pandemic silver lining, were largely able to dodge during the campaign because the virus kept Biden home for months and limited the potential for public mistakes.

Firmly pledging his belief in freedom of the press, Biden has rebuked his predecessor's incendiary rhetoric toward the media, including Donald Trump's references to reporters as "the enemy of the people." Biden restored the daily press briefing, which had gone extinct under Trump, opening a window into the workings of the White House. And he sat for a national interview with ABC News last week.

Biden has also delivered a series of well-received speeches, including his inaugural address, and has shown that he can effectively communicate beyond news conferences, according to Frank Sesno, former head of George Washington University's school of media.

"His strongest communication is not extemporaneous. He can ramble or stumble into a famous Biden gaffe," said Sesno in a recent interview. "But to this point, he and his team have been very disciplined with the message of the day and in hitting the words of the day."

Weaned on Hollywood endings, Americans now face a messy one

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

There will come a day — maybe even a day in the next few months — when Americans wake up, emerge from their homes, cast away their masks and resume their lives. On that day, the Great Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020-21 will be over.

Ridiculous, right? A consummation devoutly to be wished, but highly unlikely.

Here's the problem with anticipating the end of the pandemic: No one is sure just what that ending will look like or when it will arrive — or even if we'll know it when we see it.

Will it be when most of the country is vaccinated? When schools all reconvene safely? When hospitals' COVID beds are empty? When American ballparks are full for a summer baseball game? When Disneyland reopens? When wearing a mask seems weird again?

"I don't know that I see a specific ending," says Erica Rhodes, a comedian in Los Angeles who has found unique ways to perform through the pandemic. "I don't foresee a moment in time when I say, 'Oh, everything's exactly as it was.'"

The kind of finish that the coronavirus has in store for weary Americans has no distinct ending. That's a hard pill to swallow for a nation long trained — in some cases quite literally — to expect well-defined and often optimistic conclusions to tortuous sagas.

"Finding light in the darkness is a very American thing to do," President Joe Biden said this month. "In fact," he said, "it may be the most American thing we do."

Trouble is, the actual world often doesn't comply. Sure, movies are free to be like "Independence Day," where a ragged band of Americans led by Will Smith vanquishes the invading enemy. Real life? More like the conclusion of "The Sopranos," when all goes black, forever unresolved as Journey sings that "the movie never ends, it goes on and on and on and on."

THE CLARITY OF ENDINGS

The American brand of ending — borrowed from Classical Greek storytelling, made industrial-strength over four generations by Hollywood and Madison Avenue — goes something like this: A story concludes with a specific resolution, usually after some action, good-guy heroics or big-time character development, and usually at a specific, discernible moment.

Are we heading toward that with the pandemic? Almost certainly not. And the gradual nature of things is gumming up the works, because it ain't over till it's over, and even then it might not be over.

"Not having that clarity, we are not accustomed to that," says Phil Johnston, an Oscar-nominated screenwriter and director who worked on "Wreck-It Ralph" and "Zootopia."

"I suppose everyone has made their own version of this 'movie,'" he says, offering his own: "I could see a series of dissolves over a long period of time. A guy leaves his house. He takes off his mask. He sits at a restaurant. And then it's passage of time, this long montage and this guy sits and realizes, 'Oh, this is life. Life is back to normal.'"

All kinds of momentous things that today's humans are enduring lack distinct endings. Climate change. The "war on terror." Persisting racism and sexism and homophobia. Those stories ebb and flow, but since they're not considered specific "events," they're often seen differently.

Something like the pandemic, though, despite its protracted nature, falls squarely into the public's and media's bucket of "an event," and that comes with certain expectations. Among them is a discrete ending.

"We have this human tendency to structure our life events into plot points. It helps us create a world that's more interpretable and more predictable," says Kaitlin Fitzgerald, a doctoral candidate at the University at Buffalo, SUNY who studies the role emotion plays in how stories are consumed.

"But as we know in the real world, recovery is not a linear process and it doesn't have an ending that's

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 42 of 90

clearly defined," she says. "These popular media narratives, they portray it as happening over the course of minutes. That affects our expectations about how things should end. And when those expectations don't (match) reality, it's difficult."

Elaine Paravati Harrigan, Fitzgerald's research partner and a visiting assistant professor of psychology at Hamilton College, has dug into the same attitudes while teaching her "psychology in a pandemic" course this past year.

"Without some type of blueprint, we're just living life. And that can be confusing and overwhelming," she says. "If I can think there's some sort of arc, some sort of blueprint that can help me understand my journey, it helps me find meaning in my day to day."

NAVIGATING TOWARD THE END

Children have been a particular focus of this kind of attention over the past year as adults in their lives help them navigate toward a positive ending to the pandemic without offering false hope.

"Figuring out this endgame piece is really going to be a challenge for the adults in my opinion. And it's going to be a challenge not to build the kids' mindsets around it," says Chuck Herring, the director of diversity, equity and inclusion at South Fayette School District near Pittsburgh.

"People keep talking about when it ends, when it's 'going back to normal.' I tell them, it's not GOING back to normal. At least, not like a lot of people are thinking," Herring says.

Nevertheless, the notion of an ending exists for a reason: People need markers in their lives to show that they've experienced things, that they're moving from one phase to another, that there's somehow meaning in what they endure.

That's why Jennifer Talarico, who studies how people remember personally experienced events, suggests that even if there's no actual moment when the pandemic ends, finding a way to mark it is important nonetheless.

"I think of V-E Day or V-J Day. That's clearly not the end of the war; it took longer than that. But we have these days where there was big communal celebration," says Talarico, a psychology professor at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

"We build relationships based on commonality even though your story and my story are unique and might not have been shared at the time. The sharing of the story becomes the way we know one another," she says. "So, 'Where did you go for remembrance day or Pandemicpalooza or whatever?', telling that story for younger generations years later can be a communal moment."

In the end, as it were, managing expectations of a pandemic conclusion is an exercise in deferral, in coping with day-to-day life without losing sight of the big things that might get better. Remembering the lost. Anchoring yourself in the details, while not losing the larger plot. Creating meaning. A lot, one might say, like a movie.

We'll leave you, then, with two quotations, uttered a half-century years apart by two very different writers.

The first comes from the little narrator of "When the Pandemic Ends," a 2020 children's book by Iesha Mason: "I'll be so happy once we make it out of this crisis," she says.

The second comes from science-fiction writer Frank Herbert: "There is no real ending," he said. "It's just the place where you stop the story."

Which, for the purposes of our story about endings, is right here. Even as the pandemic's story rolls on.

Ted Anthony, director of digital innovation at The Associated Press, has been writing about American culture since 1990. Follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/anthonyted>

Torch relay for Tokyo Olympics kicks off its 121-day journey

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The torch relay for the postponed Tokyo Olympics began its 121-day journey across Japan on Thursday and is headed toward the opening ceremony in Tokyo on July 23.

The relay began in northeastern Fukushima prefecture, the area that was devastated by the 2011 earth-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 43 of 90

quake, tsunami and the meltdown of three nuclear reactors. About 18,000 died in the tragedy,

The first runner with the torch was Azusa Iwashimizu, a key player in the Japan team that won the Women's World Cup in 2011.

Wearing a white track suit, she carried the torch out of the J-Village indoor soccer training center and was surrounded by 14 other members of that 2011 World Cup squad and coach Norio Sasaki at the rear. They were also decked out in white track suits.

The ceremony was closed to the public because of the fear of spreading COVID-19 but was streamed live.

"The torch of Tokyo 2020 will become a bright light for hope for Japanese citizens and citizens in the world and a light at the end of the tunnel," said Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the local organizing committee and a former Olympian.

Homare Sawa, the biggest star on the 2011 team, missed the ceremony. She is being treated for a condition affecting her inner ear and had to withdraw from the event.

Fans were told to social-distance along the roadside as the torch passes, and they were to refrain from loud cheering. Organizers have said they will stop or reroute the relay if crowding becomes a problem during the four-month parade.

Spectators cooperated in Naraha Town, just down the road from where the torch started its trip. A few hundred people stood on the roadside and were safely spread out.

"At first I didn't think much of it," said 20-year-old Takumu Kimura. "But when I actually saw it, it felt like: — yes, it's the Olympics."

Setsuko Hashimoto, a 63-year-old local resident, was emotional as the torch passed.

"Ten years ago there was a nuclear accident so (seeing the torch) it felt like I could really look forward to something and live," she said. "When you become my age, this is the last Tokyo Olympics and it's here. It was very touching."

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga chimed in from Tokyo with a statement.

"The Olympic torch relay starting from today is a valuable opportunity for the people to get a real sense of the Olympics and Paralympics that are approaching," Suga told reporters.

Organizers confirmed a bit of bad luck: the flame in the torch was blown out during one leg of the relay. As has happened in other Olympics, it was re-lit by a back-up lantern that also carries the flame that was kindled in Greece more than a year ago.

Local organizers and the International Olympic Committee hope the relay will turn public opinion in Japan in favor of the Olympics. Sentiments expressed in polls in Japan so far are overwhelmingly negative with about 80% suggesting another delay or cancellation.

The relay and the Olympics both stir fear that the events could spread the virus. There is also opposition to the soaring cost of staging the Olympics, now put officially at \$15.4 billion. Several audits suggest it's twice that much and a University of Oxford study says these are the most expensive Olympics on record.

The relay is a big test for the upcoming Olympics with fear among the public that the event could spread the virus to rural and more isolated parts of the country. Vaccinations have not been rolled out yet in Japan to the general public. About 9,000 deaths in the country have been attributed to COVID-19.

About 10,000 runners are expected to take part, with the relay touching Japan's 47 prefectures.

After the postponement a year ago, there was early talk of eliminating the relay to save money. However, that idea was quickly dropped with the relay heavily sponsored by Coca-Cola and Toyota.

The relay is a prelude to the difficulties the Olympics and Paralympics will present with 15,400 athletes entering Japan, along with thousands of other officials, judges, VIPs, media, and broadcasters.

Athletes will be kept in a "bubble" like atmosphere in Tokyo and will be limited to the Athletes Village on Tokyo Bay, the competition venues and training areas. Most others will be outside the bubble and will be kept at a distance from the athletes.

Organizers announced a few days ago that fans from abroad will be banned from attending the Olympics and Paralympics. Most volunteers from abroad have also been ruled out.

Organizers are to announce the venue capacities in April. Ticket revenue for the Olympics was to be

\$800 million but will be severely reduced by the lack of fans. Japanese government entities will have to make up the shortfall.

AP video journalist Haruka Nuga contributed to this report.

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

Few Black women coaches lead Power Five basketball programs

By TERESA M. WALKER AP Sports Writer

Dawn Staley and Joni Taylor embraced before and after the Southeastern Conference Tournament championship, savoring an historic moment in women's basketball.

It took 41 years for two Black women head coaches to meet for the first time in a tournament championship of a Power Five conference. For it to happen quicker was statistically improbable with the few Black women coaching at the highest level of the college game.

And it remains a longshot to happen again in a Power Five league other than the Southeastern Conference.

In the last five years, there have been a total of 16 Black women head coaches at Power Five schools and this past season there were just 13 — with four hired last year. Of those 13, seven resided in the SEC.

"You can't dream what you can't see," said Taylor, whose Georgia squad came up short against Staley and South Carolina on March 7. "So (the SEC title game) was a chance for people to dream something that they haven't seen before."

The Big 12 was the only Power Five league on the women's side this season without a Black head coach — male or female. The Atlantic Coast Conference had three Black female head coaches, and two Black male head coaches; the Pac-12 had two Black women head coaches, and Rutgers' Hall of Famer C. Vivian Stringer was the only Black female head coach in the Big Ten.

It is clear there still is work to be done when it comes to diversity even as women held 45 of the 65 head coaching jobs at Power Five conferences this season.

Staley said her phone was swamped by text messages from other Black coaches around the country congratulating and thanking her and Taylor after the SEC game "for giving them hope that one day they can be in this position, assistant coaches as well."

The pipeline of potential candidates appears full, and hiring managers don't have to look far to find them. Of the 65 Power Five schools, 62 have at least one Black assistant on staff.

But there is disconnect somewhere in the hiring process.

"There are a lot of assistant coaches out there who have had as long a career as I have assistant coaching, Black, white, all of them. But Black women haven't got a whole lot of opportunities to be head coaches in Division I basketball," said Staley, who noted her success has come because she has worked with people who believed in her.

Promoting assistants falls on athletic directors, where there's an even greater lack of diversity. There are only five women ADs at Power Five schools, and two are in the ACC. And of the five female athletic directors, only Carla Williams at Virginia and Vanderbilt's Candice Lee are Black.

Lee became the third straight Black athletic director at Vanderbilt and the first full-time woman AD in the SEC last May. She also played basketball for the Commodores and loved watching Staley and Taylor coach in the title game because "representation matters."

But the Vanderbilt AD also noted race and gender aren't the only factors to look at when scrutinizing her peers around the country.

Lee, one of only two Black ADs in the SEC along with Auburn's Allen Greene, said clearly white ADs have hired Black coaches in women's basketball.

"Sometimes we exclude people because we use words like pedigree and pipeline when the reality is that we're not making it a priority," Lee said. "And if we believe that representation matters, and many of our women's basketball student athletes are Black and brown, then I think it would come to

bear that you would see more diversity in the coaching ranks. And I just think we've got to be intentional about rewarding opportunities."

Taylor has a suggestion of how ADs can help improve diversity when hiring new coaches.

"People who are making decisions need to make sure they're talking to different people when they're compiling their list to make sure that list is diversified," said Taylor, who led Georgia to the second round of the women's NCAA Tournament.

Kentucky AD Mitch Barnhart looked to the Wildcats' bench to replace Matthew Mitchell. He made associate head coach Kyra Elzy the interim coach, then sat down with Elzy twice to let her make her case for the job.

After a 6-0 start, Barnhart made Elzy the second Black woman's basketball coach in Kentucky history, joining Bernadette Mattox. Barnhart said Elzy is the right person for the job, and yes, race was an important factor that can't be ignored with all that has happened in recent months.

"It was important for our players to know that they were being supported on every level of playing, of personal, (the) cultural world that we're in," Barnhart said. "It was important on every level, and Kyra does that at a high level. She's an absolute professional."

A recent NCAA survey of athletes found that minority women's basketball players reported having a far more challenging overall experience compared to athletes in other sports. One response was a push for the one-time transfer rule, which California coach Charmin Smith said Black female coaches questioned as an attempt to send unhappy players elsewhere.

Smith said the survey was a reminder of the need to acknowledge shortcomings of diversity, equity and inclusion.

"It's time that we understand that that representation does matter," Smith said. "And it's extremely important in how it shapes the experience of our student-athletes. And that's who we're supposed to be catering to during this experience."

SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said they will keep raising the issue at the league's headquarters, but noted the final decisions are made by schools. The commissioner does believe change is happening, and not just in the SEC.

"That is our future ... ," Sankey said of having two Black women coaching in the SEC title game. "And it's not simply the demographics. It's important for us. And I think it's important on a national stage as well."

AP Sports Writers Pete Iacobelli, Janie McCauley, Stephen Hawkins, Anne Peterson, Steve Megargee, Eric Olson and Hank Kurz contributed to this report.

More AP women's college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball>

Colorado shooting suspect to make 1st court appearance

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — Hundreds of mourners gathered Wednesday night at a candlelight vigil to remember the 10 people gunned down at a supermarket in a Colorado college town, while the 21-year-old man suspected of carrying out the rampage prepared for his first court appearance Thursday morning.

Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa has been jailed for investigation of murder since he was arrested inside the King Soopers supermarket in Boulder on Monday and treated at a hospital for a leg wound. He was to hear the pending charges he faces and his rights as a defendant, and he would not be asked for a plea until later in the judicial process.

Alissa was last seen handcuffed and being led out of the supermarket by police. He had removed all clothing except shorts before being taken into custody. A rifle, a green tactical vest and a handgun were recovered inside the grocery store, according to an arrest affidavit.

While most Colorado court proceedings have been conducted by video during the pandemic, District Judge Thomas Francis Mulvahill ordered Alissa to appear before him in court unless Alissa waives his right

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 46 of 90

to appear in person in writing. The courtroom will be closed to the public.

More than 500 people bundled in winter jackets and wool hats attended a downtown candlelight vigil Wednesday night to mourn the victims and comfort one another. They observed a moment of silence; violins soothed the crowd; a woman sang "Ave Maria" as candle flames flickered in the crisp air. A star-shaped light usually turned on for the holidays glowed on a mountain overlooking the open square.

Michele Weiner-Davis, a Boulder family therapist, offered the community her words of wisdom.

"Whatever you're feeling, whatever you're thinking, no matter how uncomfortable, it's completely natural," Weiner-Davis said. "Be patient with yourself. Additionally, be just as compassionate with the people in your lives who might also be struggling."

In addition to Officer Eric Talley, 51, the victims are Denny Stong, 20; Neven Stanistic, 23; Rikki Olds, 25; Tralona Bartkowiak, 49; Suzanne Fountain, 59; Teri Leiker, 51; Kevin Mahoney, 61; Lynn Murray, 62; and Jodi Waters, 65. Leiker, Olds and Stong worked at the supermarket.

Earlier Wednesday, hundreds of people paid their respects during a police procession for Talley as his body was taken to a funeral home in the Denver suburb of Aurora.

Police also announced that people whose cars were left in the supermarket parking lot Monday could retrieve them.

A supermarket employee told the AP she watched as the assailant opened fire and narrowly escaped his notice while joining others in a desperate scramble to get away.

Emily Giffen, 27, was smoking outside the store Monday during a break when she heard multiple loud pops that she knew were not fireworks. She said she saw a man running across an intersection suddenly fall over and another man approach him in a crouch and fire several rounds at close range.

"I don't know how he didn't see us," she said of the suspect, who walked right by her before she ran into the supermarket and out the back.

"I just really am having a hard time understanding why me and my friends deserve to die," she said, wondering why the gunman chose to target the Boulder store specifically.

According to the arrest affidavit, the suspect bought a Ruger AR-556 pistol — which resembles an AR-15 rifle with a slightly shorter stock — on March 16, six days before the attack. Authorities have not disclosed where the gun was purchased.

According to two law enforcement officials, Alissa was born in Syria in 1999, emigrated to the U.S. as a toddler and later became a U.S. citizen. He would need to be a citizen to buy a gun. The officials were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

An AR-15-style gun was recovered inside the supermarket and was believed to have been used in the attack, said a law enforcement official briefed on the shooting who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Associated Press writers Michael Balsamo and Colleen Long in Washington, Jim Anderson in Denver, Thalia Beaty in New York and AP staff members from around the U.S. contributed to this report. Nieberg is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Border crossings strain resources in Rio Grande Valley

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and JOHN MONE The Associated Press

HARLINGEN, Texas (AP) — Elmer Maldonado spent a week in immigration custody with his 1-year-old son after crossing the Rio Grande through Texas to request asylum. One night, the Honduran father and son slept on the dirt under a bridge shivering from the cold temperatures at an intake site where large groups of migrants turn themselves in to Border Patrol officers.

His experience illustrates a cycle that is repeating itself thousands of times a week amid a dramatic rise in migrant children and families at the U.S.-Mexico border: They arrive in the middle of the night by

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 47 of 90

the dozens and are kept at outdoor intake sites, then taken to overcrowded detention facilities well past the 72-hour court-imposed limit. From there, the families are either released into the U.S. or expelled to Mexico, the lucky ones dropped off at a COVID-19 testing site with documents. Children traveling without their parents go to federal shelters that are also quickly filling up.

The process is largely out of the public eye. The Associated Press has not been allowed in any of the Border Patrol facilities. Journalists are often limited by authorities even when going the banks of the Rio Grande to witness the process and talk to immigrants.

Immigration agencies restricted Associated Press journalists from getting closer to popular crossing areas, an outdoor intake site and interdictions on multiple occasions in recent days.

On a recent afternoon, Maldonado, 40, of Olancho, Honduras, lay on the bottom couch of a bunk bed in a Harlingen, Texas, shelter where migrants stay before they take buses or flights to other U.S. destinations. His son woke up crying and coughing, and he held him against his chest rocking him back to sleep.

"He caught a cold since that night we were out," he said. "We were shivering. For a moment I thought my body was not going to heat up."

Once released, the father-son duo was able to take a shower and change into a new set of clothes. The shelter donated some diapers for his son. Once the boy got up, he grabbed a container with chicken nuggets that he tried and quickly tossed aside, preferring instead a small juice box.

The Biden administration says that it's working to address the increase in migrants coming to the border. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden tapped Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the White House efforts at the U.S. southern border and work with Central American nations to address root causes of the migration. The government also issued a statement saying it will provide a daily tally of child migrants in custody.

The government said there were nearly 5,000 children in Border Patrol custody as of Tuesday and an additional 11,551 at shelters from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Earlier this week, three groups of migrants with young children could be spotted walking dirt paths in the brush north of the river in a short helicopter ride with Texas state troopers over the Rio Grande Valley. Boys jumped up and down and waved seemingly excited to see the helicopters hovering.

"When he saw the helicopter he said 'papa, papa, papa,'" Maldonado recalled his boy saying. "He gets happy when he sees exciting new things. Sometimes he hears loud noises and it scares him, he's still little and doesn't understand much."

Victor Escalon, regional director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, says he worried the more people are smuggled across the Rio Grande, the more opportunities for criminal organizations to flourish in the area.

"As a parent, as a human being, you want to make sure (migrant children) are cared for. They are kids. They don't know any different," he said. "But the more people you bring across, the individuals who are in charge of coordinating the criminal element, the smuggling of narcotics they are going to look for opportunities."

Escalon says the busiest Texas corridor for migrants right now goes from La Joya on the east to Roma on the west, where Associated Press journalists observed apparent smugglers taking people across the river in inflatable rafts early Wednesday. Most of the migrants were women carrying babies and toddlers asleep in their arms or on their backs. Officials in other sectors are seeing increasing numbers stretching their capacity as well.

One of the migrants who recently arrived was Magdalena Banegas, of Yoro, Honduras. She was released after only a day in custody and received a small package from Border Patrol officers before she was dropped off at a coronavirus-testing facility in McAllen. One page had her name, photo and fingerprint, attesting she had been apprehended Sunday, and another one said she had received an "order of release on supervision" but no date to present herself in court.

Banegas, 23, was confused after seeing other migrant families traveling from the border to other U.S. cities had a date. She flew from McAllen to Houston with her toddler tapping and looking out the airplane window. She then caught a connection to New York, where her aunt lives.

She was not sure what would come next.

"I don't know anything about where I need to go or what to do now," Banegas said.

Bolsonaro under fire as Brazil hits 300,000 virus deaths

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and DÉBORA ÁLVARES Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Mere miles from Brazil's presidential palace, the bodies of COVID-19 victims were laid on floors of hospitals whose morgues were overflowing. Lawmakers fielded calls from panicked constituents across the country, where thousands awaited intensive care beds, and they had no effective health minister to turn to Sunday.

Meanwhile, a smiling President Jair Bolsonaro met hundreds of supporters to pass out pieces of green-and-yellow cake in celebration of his 66th birthday. The mood was jubilant even as the country approached a bleak coronavirus milestone.

Brazil was in political disarray as it surpassed 300,000 deaths from the virus Wednesday evening. Foes and allies alike are pleading with the president to change course to stem a recent surge of daily deaths accounting for almost one-third of the total worldwide.

Bolsonaro this month began shifting rhetoric on the value of vaccines but continues to refuse restrictions on activity he paints as infringement on personal freedom and still promotes unproven COVID-19 cures.

"Should I change my narrative? Should I become more malleable? Should I give in? Do what the vast majority is doing?" Bolsonaro said Monday during a ceremony at the presidential palace. "If I am convinced to do otherwise, I will. But I haven't been convinced yet. We must fight against the virus, not against the president."

Lawmakers have been seeking ways to prevail upon Bolsonaro. As hospital systems collapse and crucial supplies run dry, four lower house lawmakers told the Associated Press their constituents are calling them his "accomplices." Two are members of allied parties and spoke on condition of anonymity in order to speak freely.

"There is a lot of solidarity, but everything has its limit. Everything," the house's speaker, Bolsonaro ally Arthur Lira, said Wednesday afternoon in Congress. "Congress' political remedies are known, and they are all bitter. Some, fatal."

Opposition Sen. Alessandro Vieira, who is recovering from COVID-19 at home, said the Senate's president won't be able to hold back a congressional investigation much longer. Another prominent senator from a centrist party, who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to speak freely, anticipates the chamber opening an investigation next month. That could further damage Bolsonaro's popularity ahead of his 2022 reelection bid.

Bolsonaro has made some overtures to show he is taking the pandemic seriously -- one year after he first declared it a "little flu." Tuesday night, hours after Brazil posted a single-day record, he delivered a national address to blame variants for the virus's more aggressive spread and to defend his administration's actions to ink deals for more than 500 million vaccine doses.

"We will make 2021 the year of vaccination," said Bolsonaro, who until recently cast doubt on some vaccines' efficacy while outright rejecting offers from some producers. Most vaccines his health ministry has secured will only reach Brazilian arms in the second half of 2021. His address was met with pot-banging protests in major cities, including capital Brasilia.

Earlier the same day, the nation's fourth pandemic health minister was sworn in, a week after he was named. Marcelo Queiroga secured the spot once the original nominee, Ludhimila Hajjar, declined the job.

When interviewing for the position, Bolsonaro and one of his lawmaker sons peppered Hajjar with questions not just about contentious pandemic lockdowns, but also topics of concern to their conservative base, like abortion, according to two ministers present at the meeting, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they're not authorized to speak publicly. Avid Bolsonaro supporters also launched an aggressive defamation campaign against her, issued death threats and tried to sneak into her Brasilia hotel.

The choice of Queiroga, a Bolsonaro loyalist, convinced some lawmakers that the president still fails to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 49 of 90

On Wednesday, Bolsonaro held the first-ever meeting with leaders from all branches of the federal government to coordinate efforts. Once more, he advocated for malaria drugs that have shown no effectiveness in treating COVID-19 and didn't propose any policies to deal with the pandemic.

He also offered no update on imminent risks to oxygen supply in several states, dwindling stocks of sedatives for intubating COVID-19 patients, nor whether the federal government will resume timely reimbursements to governors for expanding hospital bed capacity. Among Brazil's 26 states and federal district, 18 are reporting at least 90% intensive care unit occupancy.

Mato Grosso state's health care system already collapsed. Dr. Maria Auxiliadora Rosa, director of the Hospital Evangélico in the small city Vila Bela, said in a video that went viral on social media that she fears there will be no oxygen for patients by the weekend.

"We need help," Rosa pleaded.

One of the few governors who attended Wednesday's meeting, Alagoas' Renan Filho, of the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement party, was nonplussed by Bolsonaro's performance.

"The president is trying to change, he is making an effort, but he still has a lot of doubts and not much conviction," Filho told journalists afterward. "This looks like survival instinct. He is trying to build some national strategy, but it isn't easy for someone who was so vocal with his narrative."

Political scientist Luciano Dias, a consultant at Brasilia-based CAC, said Bolsonaro is at his weakest since his administration began in January 2019. A poll by Datafolha published March 17 says 54% of Brazilians disapprove of his pandemic response, up six percentage points from two months earlier.

"The drop in his popularity made him review some of his behavior, such as his interest in vaccines and talking to other authorities," Dias said. "The president had to bow to reality. The continuation of this crisis raises the risk he starts losing hardcore supporters and sees his reelection chances disappear."

Opposition lawmaker Alexandre Padilha, a former health minister, highlighted another factor forcing Bolsonaro to adapt: the return of his nemesis, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The leftist leader who governed between 2003 and 2010 had his political rights restored this month by Brazil's Supreme Court and is a likely contender in next year's election.

"He will push debate forward in Brazil. He is trying to understand the problems, offer solutions," Padilha said.

Da Silva has already presented himself as a counterpoint to Bolsonaro: always donning face masks in public, backing restrictions on activity to slow the virus's spread, expressing empathy for victims' families and reaching out to foreign leaders to boost vaccine supply.

The meeting Wednesday also ostensibly sought to mend fences between Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court, which the president has often accused of undermining his authority during the pandemic by upholding governors' and mayors' jurisdiction to impose restrictions on activity.

During the court's session after the meeting with the president, Justice Luis Roberto Barroso offered a snide review.

"After one year of delay, they decided to create a commission of experts and doctors," Barroso said. "That was very good. After one year of delay and 300,000 deaths."

Alvares reported from Brasilia. AP reporter Marcelo Sousa contributed to this report from Rio de Janeiro.

Lawmakers: Require nursing homes to disclose vaccine data

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nursing homes have to publicly disclose their vaccination rates for flu and pneumonia but there's no similar mandate for COVID-19 shots, even though the steepest toll from the virus has been among residents of long-term care facilities.

Now lawmakers of both parties are urging the Biden administration to require disclosure of coronavirus vaccination rates for residents and staff, and to make it easy for family members, advocacy groups and researchers to access such potentially critical details.

"The continued absence of publicly available COVID-19 vaccination information at the facility level leaves

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 50 of 90

residents, workers, and their families in the dark, makes it impossible to fully evaluate the effect of these vaccines, and hinders efforts to ensure equitable vaccine access for communities of color," Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, write in a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra.

The request comes as consumer advocates say it remains exceedingly difficult for family members to get coronavirus information from Medicare on individual nursing homes, either through the program's COVID-19 Nursing Home Data website, or its regular Care Compare site.

"It continues to be so problematic," said Sam Brooks, project manager for Consumer Voice, a national advocacy group for improving quality in long-term care. "It's just daunting."

Brooks said he was using Medicare's nursing home COVID-19 site recently, put in a facility's name, and a popular chain restaurant came up. A joint search Wednesday with a reporter turned up an animal hospital, after entering the name of a nursing home and the community it was located in.

Nursing homes have been required since last May to regularly report cases and deaths among residents and staff to the government. While aggregate numbers are easy to find online, data on individual facilities is not.

The coronavirus pandemic hit hardest among nursing home residents. Although only about 1% of the U.S. population lives in long-term care facilities, they accounted for about one-third of COVID-19 deaths as of early March, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

Now deaths have plummeted as more than 2 million residents and 1.5 million staff have received at least one vaccine dose. Nursing homes are again allowing loved ones to visit, and hugs are included.

But there's evidence Americans have grown wary. A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research last year found that 60% percent would be very concerned if an aging friend or family member needed long-term care in a nursing home during the pandemic, and another 27% would be moderately concerned.

Wyden chairs the Senate Finance Committee, which oversees Medicare and Medicaid, and Crapo is the ranking Republican. Joining their request to the Biden administration are their counterparts on the Special Committee on Aging, Sens. Bob Casey, D-Pa., and Tim Scott, R-S.C. Medicare and Medicaid pay most of the nation's bill for nursing home care and set standards.

The main nursing home industry trade group, the American Health Care Association, says it supports disclosure of vaccination data. So does LeadingAge, an association representing nonprofit facilities. But working out the details could be tricky. It's one thing to deliver data to the government, or to tech-savvy researchers, and another thing to translate it so it's readily available to families.

"We believe that accessible, timely and credible information about operations and care practices is a must to establishing a trusting and productive relationship between nursing homes, care providers, residents and families," LeadingAge spokeswoman Lisa Sanders said in a statement.

There was no immediate response from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Wyden and Crapo said current government policy that encourages nursing homes to voluntarily report vaccination data to the government has only led to "limited participation by the industry."

The government should require nursing homes to break down vaccination data by race and ethnicity, given disparities in vaccine acceptance.

Reports that many nursing home workers have been reluctant to get vaccinated raise additional concerns, the lawmakers added. Researchers believe that one of the main routes the virus gets into facilities is through workers who unwittingly bring it in from the community. Because of high staff turnover in the low-wage industry, it's possible that vaccination rates among staff at individual facilities may actually fall with time.

"Such concerns underscore the urgency of moving forward with the collection of COVID-19 vaccine information, and publishing these data as soon as possible," wrote Wyden and Crapo.

Biden taps VP Harris to lead response to border challenges

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 51 of 90

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, NOMAAN MERCHANT, LISA MASCARO and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has tapped Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the White House effort to tackle the migration challenge at the U.S. southern border and work with Central American nations to address root causes of the problem.

Biden made the announcement as he and Harris met at the White House on Wednesday with Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandra Mayorkas and other immigration advisers to discuss the increase in migrants, including many unaccompanied minors, arriving at the border in recent weeks.

In delegating the matter to Harris, Biden is seeking to replicate a dynamic that played out when he served as President Barack Obama's vice president. Obama turned to Biden in his first term to lead the White House effort to draw down U.S. troops in Iraq and oversee implementation of stimulus in response to the Great Recession.

"When she speaks, she speaks for me," Biden said, noting her past work as California's attorney general makes her specially equipped to lead the administration's response.

Biden, who has faced stiff criticism from Republicans over the increased flow of migrants, is hoping to show Americans he's taking the situation at the border seriously. He also wants to prevent the growing humanitarian and political challenge from overshadowing his administration's ambitious legislative agenda.

But the high-profile assignment for Harris, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020 and is expected to run for the White House again in the future, could be politically fraught.

"Needless to say, the work will not be easy," Harris said. "But it is important work."

Harris is tasked with overseeing diplomatic efforts to deal with issues spurring migration in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as pressing them to strengthen enforcement on their own borders, administration officials said. She's also tasked with developing and implementing a long-term strategy that gets at the root causes of migration from those countries.

Biden suggested President Donald Trump's decision to cut \$450 million funding in 2019 to the region was partly to blame for the situation.

Among the other reasons for the current increase: the thousands of Central American migrants already stuck at the border for months and the persistent scourge of gang violence afflicting the Northern Triangle countries.

Still, the numbers of both unaccompanied minors and families encountered at the border are lower than they were at various points during the Trump administration, including in spring 2019.

For Harris, the assignment gives her the first big opportunity to step to the front of the stage on a matter of enormous consequence for the administration. As the first Black woman elected vice president, Harris arrived on the job as a trailblazer. It has remained opaque how Biden would utilize her.

The move echoes not only Obama's decision to deputize Biden but also Trump naming Vice President Mike Pence to lead his coronavirus task force and President Bill Clinton handing Vice President Al Gore environmental and technology portfolios early in his presidency.

It's been a mixed bag for vice presidents in recent history who have been made the point person on delicate matters, said Joel Goldstein, the author of "The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden."

Pence's efforts on the coronavirus were stymied by Trump's hijacking of the task force's daily briefings early in the pandemic. Dick Cheney, who had been charged with leading George W. Bush's search for a vice president only to take the spot himself, carved out what was seen by many critics as a shadow presidency in which he had an outsized influence on shaping Bush's national security policies.

And Gore faced headwinds from Republicans in Congress who were reluctant to give him a win ahead of his unsuccessful 2000 run for the White House.

"Some of the risk versus reward depends to some extent on the vice president's relationship with the president," Goldstein said. "Whether or not the president had their back. Whether the president's going to allow you to be in a position to accomplish things and be perceived to accomplish things."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 52 of 90

Biden made the announcement as a delegation of White House officials and members of Congress was traveled to the southern border on Wednesday to tour a facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas, where more than 750 migrant teenagers are being held.

The Biden administration has in recent weeks moved to open more than 10,000 new beds across the Southwest in convention centers and former oilfield camps. It notified Congress on Wednesday that it will open a new 3,000-person facility in San Antonio and a 1,400-person site at the San Diego convention center. HHS is also opening a second site in Carrizo Springs and received approval from the Defense Department Wednesday to begin housing teenagers at military bases in San Antonio and El Paso, Texas.

While acknowledging a "big problem" with the rising numbers of migrants, Rep. Norma Torres, D-Calif., one of five lawmakers to tour the facility Wednesday, credited the Biden administration with treating young migrants far more humanely than the Trump administration.

In an interview after the tour, Torres described children accommodated four to a room, and said she saw no signs of overcrowding. The young people attend school, have access to health care and are given weekly COVID-19 tests. Lawmakers were told 1 in 10 children are testing positive for the virus, but none at the facility had been hospitalized, she said.

"When I look at those kids, I see myself," said Torres, an immigrant from Guatemala who arrived in the U.S. with her family as a child.

The White House faced criticism for limiting media access to Wednesday's tour, keeping it to just one TV crew. It has still not allowed media to enter Border Patrol facilities where large numbers of children are detained or HHS sites that it rapidly opened under pressure. The Carrizo Springs facility was established in 2019 during the Trump administration and re-opened in February.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who is leading a separate delegation of GOP senators to the border later this week, decried the lack of press access as a "muzzling" of the media by the Democratic administration.

"Joe Biden doesn't want you to see," Cruz told reporters at the Capitol.

Merchant reported from Houston and Lemire from New York. Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Washington contributed to this report.

Democrats launch Senate battle for expanded voting rights

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats are renewing their efforts to muscle through the largest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, setting up a fight with Republicans that could bring partisan tensions to a climax in the evenly split Senate and become a defining issue for President Joe Biden.

Democrats and Republicans both see the legislation, which touches on nearly every aspect of the electoral process, as fundamental to their parties' political futures. The Senate bill, similar to a version passed by the House earlier this month, could shape election outcomes for years to come, striking down hurdles to voting, requiring more disclosure from political donors, restricting partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts and bolstering election security and ethics laws.

The debate over who has the right to vote, and how elections are conducted, could play out for months, if not years. Democrats newly in control of both chambers of Congress say they are trying to rebuild trust in the ballot after two tumultuous election cycles. Republicans charge the bill would strip power from the states and cement an unfair political advantage for Democrats.

With the GOP unanimously opposed, the legislation is presenting a crucial test of how hard Biden and his party are willing to fight for their priorities, as well as those of their voters. Unless they united around changing Senate rules, which now require 60 votes for most bills to advance, their chance to enshrine expansive voting protections could quickly slip away.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., making a rare appearance at a hearing, said Wednesday it took "mighty movements and decades of fraught political conflict" to achieve the basic dignities of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 53 of 90

current election laws and “any American who thinks that the fight for a full and fair democracy is over, is sadly and sorely mistaken.”

Democrats see the measure as a forceful response to voting rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump’s repeated, baseless claims of a stolen 2020 election.

Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., opened the hearing on the legislation Wednesday by invoking the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, in which hundreds of Trump’s supporters interrupted the electoral count after Trump pressured state election officials to change the results and told supporters to “fight like hell” to overturn his defeat.

“In the end, that insurrection was about an angry mob working to undermine our democracy,” Klobuchar said. “And it reminds all of us how very fragile our democracy truly is, and how it is on all of us to not just protect that democracy, but to ensure that it thrives.”

Similar to the House bill that passed on a party-line vote, the Senate legislation would create automatic voter registration nationwide, allow former felons to vote, and limit the ways states can remove registered voters from their rolls. It would expand voting by mail, promote early voting and give states money to track absentee ballots. Millions of people took advantage of those practices during the pandemic last year — and after some Republican states tried to restrict them in favor of voting in person.

The bill would increase oversight for election vendors and boost support for state voting system upgrades after Russia attempted to breach some of those systems in the 2016 election. It would overhaul federal oversight of campaign finance and encourage small donations to campaigns, while requiring more disclosure of political donations. And it would require states to adopt independent redistricting commissions to draw congressional districts and give more teeth to federal ethics enforcement.

The legislation is meant to counter the more than 250 bills that 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. Some measures would limit mail voting, cut hours at polling places and impose restrictions that Democrats argue amount to the greatest assault on voting rights since the Jim Crow era.

Testifying at the hearing, former Attorney General Eric Holder, who served under President Barack Obama, said the legislation would help fight politicians who want to maintain an “unjust status quo.”

“The events of the past few months have brought into stark focus what has been true for too long: There is a large and powerful faction in this country intent on retaining power and who will bend or break the rules of our democracy in order to do so,” Holder said.

Republicans say the new mandates would amount to a federal takeover of elections, which have traditionally been left to states.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., a longtime opponent of restrictive campaign finance laws, also made a rare hearing appearance, sitting across the dais from Schumer. He said the bill is full of “silly new mandates” that would create “an invitation to chaos” for states that would have to put them in place.

“This is clearly an effort by one party to rewrite the rules of our political system,” McConnell said.

The bill has already run into roadblocks that have become familiar since Democrats began their narrow control of the Senate two months ago. As he has on other party priorities, Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia has expressed skepticism about the legislation, threatening united Democratic support.

Lacking the 60 votes needed for passage, Democrats have discussed options like lowering the threshold to break a filibuster, or potentially breaking the bill into pieces. For now, Democrats have suggested they will start with bringing up potentially popular proposals like the voting rights measure and expanded gun background checks and let them fail, forcing Republicans to go on the record in opposition.

In an apparent effort to pressure Manchin, the only Democrat who hasn’t signed on to the voting legislation, Republicans called West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner to testify in opposition to the bill. He said the legislation would force his state and others to follow “arbitrary guidelines, most of which are impossible or unattainable under the deadlines.” He urged the senators to “leave election administration

up to the states.”

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson testified in favor of the bill.

“While states will always serve as laboratories of democracy, federal minimum standards ensure equal protection of every citizen’s right to vote and can prevent attacks on our democracy, both foreign and domestic, that take advantage of the uneven patchwork of state laws throughout our country,” Benson said.

CEO says Harry hire is a natural fit, not a publicity stunt

By TERENCE CHEA and ANDREW DALTON Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The CEO of BetterUp Inc. said Wednesday that he hired Prince Harry as an executive because of his tenacious advocacy for the kind of mental health services that his firm provides, and the publicity brought by the move is merely a perk.

Chief Executive Alexi Robichaux spoke to The Associated Press a day after the announcement that the Duke of Sussex will play the specially created role of chief impact officer at the San Francisco-based BetterUp, which sells companies employee coaching and mental health help.

“Prince Harry has been one of the the the fiercest advocates for mental wellness or mental fitness for many years,” Robichaux said, citing Harry’s work for organizations like Head Fit, a service he launched in partnership with the U.K. Ministry of Defense. “This has been a big part of his personal life’s journey and his personal life’s mission.”

It doesn’t hurt, he conceded, that Harry is among the world’s most famous men, who seems to constantly be making news along with his wife, Meghan Markle.

“It’s awesome. I mean, look, we’ll take the press, it certainly helps,” he said. But was quick to add, “that’s not the driving motivation here.”

Robichaux said the role emerged out of months of conversations he and Harry had after they were introduced by an unnamed mutual friend who rightly thought the two thought alike.

“There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm on both sides around this mission of how could we use technology, how could we use science, how could we use human experts to help people go through a personal growth and transformation journey?” Robichaux said. “And so that was the start.”

The pandemic has kept him from meeting Harry in person, however, and that might not happen soon. The company, whose work deals in helping employees via text and video conference, is naturally friendly to working remotely even under normal circumstances, and that’s what Harry will primarily do.

The Duke of Sussex will not have an office at the company’s San Francisco headquarters or have employees who report directly to him, Robichaux said.

“He will come into offices and attend company events, once that’s safe and things reopen,” Robichaux said.

He said said he’s not worried about the practicalities of having a prince roaming the halls or appearing at meetings, and that he won’t use any royal titles.

“In the workplace, he prefers to be called Harry,” the CEO said. “So we address him as Harry. He’s extremely approachable and accessible, and he certainly is very stately and dignified. But I think one of the coolest things is he likes to roll up his sleeves and be helpful and very focused on adding value.”

And he said while he’s technically Harry’s boss, he’s going to avoid that approach to the relationship.

“It’s funny, I never thought about it until this week when reporters have been asking me what it feels like,” he said. “I don’t think of it that way. I really think of him as a as a partner.”

Prince Harry got another new role Wednesday, this one on a think tank’s commission to fight disinformation.

The Washington D.C.-based Aspen Institute announced that Harry will be one of 18 members of its Commission on Information Disorder.

The Duke of Sussex said in a statement that the current “avalanche of misinformation” should be approached as “a humanitarian issue — and as such, it demands a multi-stakeholder response from advocacy voices, members of the media, academic researchers, and both government and civil society leaders.”

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 55 of 90

The new gigs for Harry are among several he and Meghan have taken on since moving to California. They have signed a deal to create content for Netflix and are creating podcasts for Spotify.

In the past year the two have been working on disentangling their lives from the British royal family, a separation that was made more stark up by a wave-making March 7 interview they gave to Oprah Winfrey.

Also Wednesday, Lifetime TV announced that it will focus on the royal couple's disillusionment and break with Buckingham Palace in its third movie about them. "Harry & Meghan: Escaping the Palace" is set to air on the U.S. cable channel in the fall of this year. It follows 2018's "Harry & Meghan" and 2019's "Harry & Meghan: Becoming Royal."

Grocery store worker narrowly escaped gunman's notice

By THALIA BEATY, PATTY NIEBERG and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — An employee of the Colorado supermarket where a gunman killed 10 people watched as the assailant opened fire and narrowly escaped his notice while joining with other bystanders in a desperate scramble to get away.

Emily Giffen, 27, was smoking outside the store Monday during a break when she heard multiple loud pops that she knew were not fireworks. She said she saw a man running across an intersection suddenly fall over and another man approach him in a crouch and fire several rounds at close range.

"I don't know how he didn't see us," she said of the attacker, who walked right by her before she ran into the King Soopers store and out the back. Newly fallen snow made people trip and slip as they tried to escape, she said, showing a large bruise on her arm that she said happened when someone stepped on her.

"I just really am having a hard time understanding why me and my friends deserve to die," she said, wondering why the gunman chose to target the Boulder store specifically. "It doesn't seem personal, so I don't quite get why we pulled that lottery ticket."

Giffen made the comments Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press as families mourned the dead and multiple law enforcement agencies pressed ahead with what they said would be a monthslong investigation. Officials hadn't released new details on that investigation by late Wednesday.

The 21-year-old suspect, Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, was in jail and scheduled to make his first court appearance Thursday on murder charges. No lawyer was listed for Alissa in court records.

More than 500 people bundled in masks and wool hats attended a downtown candlelight vigil Wednesday night to mourn the victims. They observed a moment of silence; violins soothed the crowd; and a woman sang "Ave Maria" as candle flames flickered in the crisp air.

Other community vigils were planned to honor the victims. The Boulder Police Department invited the public to show support for Officer Eric Talley, who was killed, by witnessing a police procession Wednesday as his body was taken from the coroner's office to a funeral home in the Denver suburb of Aurora.

Red and blue lights flashed along a parkway as dozens of officers from Boulder and neighboring departments stood at attention. When the hearse passed, the officers saluted as one shouted, "Attention!" One person held an American flag.

Talley, 51, was the first officer to arrive at the scene. He had seven children, ages 7 to 20.

The other victims were Denny Stong, 20; Neven Stanistic, 23; Rikki Olds, 25; Tralona Bartkowiak, 49; Suzanne Fountain, 59; Teri Leiker, 51; Kevin Mahoney, 61; Lynn Murray, 62; and Jodi Waters, 65.

Olds, Leiker and Stong worked at the supermarket.

Kim Cordova, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, which represents more than 30 store employees, said they did their best to get customers to safety.

"They grabbed everybody they could, and they brought them to the backroom or to other areas of the store to hide, or got them out through the back dock," Cordova said.

On Facebook posts and in an interview, Giffen said her friends deserved better, not to die at work while doing their jobs.

"This guy, he went hunting in a barrel full of fish. Nobody was prepared to fight back. No one was even

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 56 of 90

prepared to hide," she said. "It's just the fear like, where do you, where do I ever feel safe?"

Giffen, who said she has worked at the King Soopers for three years, described a close-knit community where she chats with customers and remembers their bagel orders from when she worked at a nearby bagel place.

On the neighborhood-based social media app Nextdoor, Giffen watched as people asked about her co-workers by name, listing them one by one to find out if they were all right.

"It was so beautiful to see all of these people who live right here with me actually acknowledge individual people's names," she said. "They don't just know us as their employees. We're a part of their community."

The attack was the nation's deadliest mass shooting since a 2019 assault on a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, where a gunman killed 22 people. It was also the seventh mass killing this year in the U.S., following the March 16 shooting that left eight people dead at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, according to a database compiled by the AP, USA Today and Northeastern University.

It follows a lull in mass killings last year during the pandemic.

The Colorado suspect bought a Ruger AR-556 pistol — which resembles an AR-15 rifle with a slightly shorter stock — on March 16, six days before the attack, according to an arrest affidavit.

Authorities have not disclosed where the gun was purchased.

According to two law enforcement officials, Alissa was born in Syria in 1999, emigrated to the U.S. as a toddler and later became a U.S. citizen. He would need to be a citizen to buy a gun. The officials were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

An AR-15-style gun was recovered inside the supermarket and was believed to have been used in the attack, said a law enforcement official briefed on the shooting who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

The law enforcement official said the suspect's family told investigators that he had delusions and that they believed he had some type of mental illness. The relatives described times when Alissa told them people were following or chasing him, which they said may have contributed to the violence, the official said.

Beaty reported from New York. Associated Press writers Michael Balsamo and Colleen Long in Washington, Jim Anderson in Denver and AP staff members from around the U.S. contributed to this report. Nieberg is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

US report: Bald eagle populations soar in lower 48 states

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of American bald eagles has quadrupled since 2009, with more than 300,000 birds soaring over the lower 48 states, government scientists said in a report Wednesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said bald eagles, the national symbol that once teetered on the brink of extinction, have flourished in recent years, growing to more than 71,400 nesting pairs and an estimated 316,700 individual birds.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, in her first public appearance since being sworn in last week, hailed the eagle's recovery and noted that the majestic, white-headed bird has always been considered sacred to Native American tribes and the United States generally.

"The strong return of this treasured bird reminds us of our nation's shared resilience and the importance of being responsible stewards of our lands and waters that bind us together," said Haaland, the first Native American Cabinet secretary.

Bald eagles reached an all-time low of 417 known nesting pairs in 1963 in the lower 48 states. But after decades of protection, including banning the pesticide DDT and placement of the eagle on the endangered species list in more than 40 states, the bald eagle population has continued to grow. The bald eagle was removed from the list of threatened or endangered species in 2007.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 57 of 90

"It is clear that the bald eagle population continues to thrive," Haaland said, calling the bird's recovery a "success story (that) is a testament to the enduring importance of the work of the Interior Department scientists and conservationists. This work could not have been done without teams of people collecting and analyzing decades' worth of science ... accurately estimating the bald eagle population here in the United States."

The celebration of the bald eagle "is also a moment to reflect on the importance of the Endangered Species Act, a vital tool in the efforts to protect America's wildlife," Haaland said, calling the landmark 1973 law crucial to preventing the extinction of species such as the bald eagle or American bison.

Reiterating a pledge by President Joe Biden, Haaland said her department will review actions by the Trump administration "to undermine key provisions" of the endangered species law. She did not offer specifics, but environmental groups and Democratic lawmakers criticized the Trump administration for a range of actions, including reducing critical habitat for the northern spotted owl and lifting protections for gray wolves.

"We will be taking a closer look at all of those revisions and considering what steps to take to ensure that all of us — states, Indian tribes, private landowners and federal agencies — have the tools we need to conserve America's natural heritage and strengthen our economy," Haaland said.

"We have an obligation to do so because future generations must also experience our beautiful outdoors, the way many of us have been blessed," she added.

Martha Williams, deputy director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, called recovery of the bald eagle "one of the most remarkable conservation success stories of all time" and said she hopes all Americans get the chance to see a bald eagle in flight.

"They're magnificent to see," she said.

To estimate the bald eagle population in the lower 48 states, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and observers conducted aerial surveys over a two-year period in 2018 and 2019. The agency also worked with the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology to acquire information on areas that were not practical to fly over as part of aerial surveys.

Brighter outlook for US as vaccinations rise and deaths fall

By JULIE WATSON and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

More than three months into the U.S. vaccination drive, many of the numbers paint an increasingly encouraging picture, with 70% of Americans 65 and older receiving at least one dose of the vaccine and COVID-19 deaths dipping below 1,000 a day on average for the first time since November.

Also, dozens of states have thrown open vaccinations to all adults or are planning to do so in a matter of weeks. And the White House said 27 million doses of both the one-shot and two-shot vaccines will be distributed next week, more than three times the number when President Joe Biden took office two months ago.

Still, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, said Wednesday he isn't ready to declare victory.

"I'm often asked, are we turning the corner?" Fauci said at a White House briefing. "My response is really more like we are at the corner. Whether or not we're going to be turning that corner still remains to be seen."

What's giving Fauci pause, he said, is that new cases remain at a stubbornly high level, at more than 50,000 per day. The U.S. on Wednesday surpassed 30 million confirmed cases, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. The number of deaths now stands at more than 545,000.

Nonetheless, the outlook in the U.S. stands in stark contrast to the deteriorating situation in places like Brazil, which reported more than 3,000 COVID-19 deaths in a single day for the first time Tuesday, and across Europe, where another wave of infections is leading to new lockdowns.

The gloom in Europe is compounded because the vaccine rollout on the continent has been slowed by production delays and questions about the safety and effectiveness of AstraZeneca's shot.

Public health experts in the U.S. are taking every opportunity to warn that relaxing social distancing and

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 58 of 90

other preventive measures could easily lead to another surge.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, sees red flags in states lifting mask mandates, air travel roaring back and spring break crowds partying out of control in Florida.

"We're getting closer to the exit ramp," Topol said. "All we're doing by having reopenings is jeopardizing our shot to get, finally, for the first time in the American pandemic, containment of the virus."

Across the country are unmistakable signs of progress.

More than 43% of Americans 65 and older — the most vulnerable age group, accounting for an outsize share of the nation's more than 540,000 coronavirus deaths — have been fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. The number of older adults showing up in emergency rooms with COVID-19 is down significantly. Vaccinations overall have ramped up to 2.5 million to 3 million shots per day.

Deaths per day in the U.S. from COVID-19 have dropped to an average of 940, down from an all-time high of over 3,400 in mid-January.

Minnesota health officials on Monday reported no new deaths from COVID-19 for the first time in nearly a year. And in New Orleans, the Touro Infirmiry hospital was not treating a single case for the first time since March 2020.

And Fauci cited two recent studies that show negligible levels of coronavirus infections among fully vaccinated health care workers in Texas and California.

"I emphasize how we need to hang in there for just a little while longer," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday. That's because "the early data are really encouraging."

Nationwide, new cases and the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 have plummeted over the past two months, though Walensky remains concerned that such progress seemed to stall in the past couple of weeks. New cases are running at more than 53,000 a day on average, down from a peak of a quarter-million in early January.

That's uncomfortably close to levels seen during the COVID-19 wave of last summer.

Biden has pushed for states to make all adults eligible to be vaccinated by May 1. At least a half-dozen states, including Texas, Arizona and Georgia, are opening up vaccinations to everyone over 16. At least 20 other states have pledged to do so in the next few weeks.

Microsoft, which employs more than 50,000 people at its global headquarters in suburban Seattle, has said it will start bringing back workers on March 29 and reopen installations that have been closed for nearly a year.

New York City's 80,000 municipal employees, who have been working remotely during the pandemic, will return to their offices starting May 3.

Still, experts see reason to worry as more Americans start traveling and socializing again.

The number of daily travelers at U.S. airports has consistently topped 1 million over the past week and a half amid spring break at many colleges.

Also, states such as Michigan and New Jersey are seeing rising cases.

National numbers are an imperfect indicator. The favorable downward trend in some states can conceal an increase in case numbers in others, particularly smaller ones, said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

And the more contagious variant that originated in Britain has now been identified in nearly every state, he said.

AP journalists Terry Tang and Suman Naishadham contributed from Phoenix. Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed from Washington.

A first: US Senate confirms transgender doctor for key post

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Voting mostly along party lines, the U.S. Senate on Wednesday confirmed former Pennsylvania Health

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 59 of 90

Secretary Rachel Levine to be the nation's assistant secretary of health. She is the first openly transgender federal official to win Senate confirmation.

The final vote was 52-48. Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine joined all Democrats in supporting Levine.

Levine had been serving as Pennsylvania's top health official since 2017, and emerged as the public face of the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic. She is expected to oversee Health and Human Services offices and programs across the U.S.

President Joe Biden cited Levine's experience when he nominated her in January.

Levine "will bring the steady leadership and essential expertise we need to get people through this pandemic — no matter their zip code, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability," Biden said.

Transgender-rights activists have hailed Levine's appointment as a historic breakthrough. Few trans people have ever held high-level offices at the federal or state level.

However, the confirmation vote came at a challenging moment for the transgender-rights movement as legislatures across the U.S. — primarily those under Republican control — are considering an unprecedented wave of bills targeting trans young people.

One type of bill, introduced in at least 25 states, seeks to ban trans girls and young women from participating in female scholastic sports.

One such measure already has been signed into law by Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, and similar measures have been sent to the governors in Tennessee, Arkansas and South Dakota.

Another variety of bill, introduced in at least 17 states, seeks to outlaw or restrict certain types of medical care for transgender youths. None of these measures has yet won final approval.

Issues related to transgender rights also are a major factor in Republican opposition to the proposed Equality Act, which would extend federal civil rights protections to LGBTQ people across the U.S. The measure has passed the Democratic-led House but likely needs some GOP votes to prevail in the Senate.

Former Houston Mayor Annise Parker, president of the LGBTQ Victory Institute, alluded to those developments as she welcomed the Senate's vote on Levine.

"At a time when hateful politicians are weaponizing trans lives for their own perceived political gain, Dr. Levine's confirmation lends focus to the contributions trans people make to our nation," said Parker, whose organization recruits and supports LGBTQ political candidates.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who voted no, had confronted Levine about medical treatments for transgender young people — include hormone treatment and puberty blockers — during her confirmation hearing Feb. 25.

"Do you believe that minors are capable of making such a life-changing decision as changing one's sex?" Paul asked.

Levine replied that transgender medicine "is a very complex and nuanced field with robust research and standards of care" and said she would welcome discussing the issues with him.

In the past, Levine has asserted that hormone therapy and puberty-blocking drugs can be valuable medical tools in sparing some transgender youth from mental distress and possible suicide risk.

The confirmation vote was assailed by the conservative Family Research Council, which contended that Levine, in addition to her stance on transgender medical care, had supported "a variety of pro-abortion and anti-religious freedom proposals" while serving as Pennsylvania's health secretary.

"Levine may be the most extreme radical ever confirmed by the Senate," said Travis Weber, the council's vice president for policy and government affairs.

A pediatrician and former Pennsylvania physician general, Levine was appointed as Pennsylvania's health secretary by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf in 2017. She won confirmation by the Republican-majority Pennsylvania Senate.

However, Sen. Pat Toomey, a Pennsylvania Republican, voted against Levine's confirmation Wednesday.

"In Pennsylvania, the pandemic struck seniors in nursing homes disproportionately hard compared to other states," Toomey said. "This was due in part to poor decisions and oversight by Dr. Levine and the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 60 of 90

Wolf administration.”

He also said an extended lockdown advocated by Levine “was excessive, arbitrary in nature, and has led to a slower recovery.”

A graduate of Harvard and of Tulane Medical School, Levine is president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. She’s written in the past on the opioid crisis, medical marijuana, adolescent medicine, eating disorders and LGBTQ medicine.

Praise for her accomplishments and her handling of the pandemic have coincided with a steady stream of vitriol directed at her on social media.

As reported Tuesday by the Associated Press, Levine was among the targets of a private Facebook group called the Pittsburgh Area Police Breakroom whose participants included many current and retired police officers.

Dozens of group members fueled days of transphobic posts about Levine for her role in statewide social-distancing mandates to stop the spread of COVID-19.

“Someone needs to shoot this thing!!” one retired officer wrote.

In January, a Pennsylvania legislator shared on Facebook an image mocking Levine’s appearance, then offered a general apology.

State Rep. Jeff Pyle, a Republican, said on Facebook that he “had no idea” the post mocking Levine “would be ... received as poorly as it was” but that “tens of thousands of heated emails assured me it was.”

Brazil becomes 2nd nation to top 300,000 COVID-19 deaths

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil topped 300,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths on Wednesday, becoming the second country to do so amid a spike in infections that has seen the South American country report record death tolls in recent days.

The United States reached the grim milestone on Dec. 14, but has a larger population than Brazil.

On Wednesday, Brazil’s health ministry reported 2,009 daily COVID-19 deaths, bringing its pandemic total to 300,685. On Tuesday, the country saw a single-day record of 3,251 deaths.

According to local media reports, the latest coronavirus figures might be affected by changes in the government’s counting system. Newly appointed Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga said in a press conference that he was going to check whether the numbers had been artificially reduced.

With daily death tolls at pandemic highs, state governors and mayors in Brazil have expressed fears that April could be as bad as March for the country’s overwhelmed hospitals.

Just in the past 75 days, Brazil has registered 100,000 confirmed coronavirus deaths, a spike health experts blame on a lack of political coordination in fighting the virus, new variants that spread more easily and a disregard for health protocols.

President Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday held a meeting with the heads of other government branches to coordinate anti-virus efforts. But he didn’t propose any policies to deal with the pandemic.

Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the severity of the pandemic, insisting the economy must be kept humming to prevent worse hardship, and he has criticized health measures imposed by local leaders.

Women’s soccer stars join Biden to promote closing pay gap

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden made the case Wednesday that the pay disparity between men and women has hurt the economy, bringing members of the U.S. women’s national soccer team to the White House to help set new goals for equality.

Wednesday marked “Equal Pay Day” — which is how far into the year women must work on average to make up the pay disparity between what men and women earned the prior year. The Census Bureau estimates that a woman working full-time would earn about 82 cents for each dollar paid to a man.

Biden and his wife, Jill, hosted a roundtable with Margaret Purce and Megan Rapinoe of the U.S. women’s

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 61 of 90

national soccer team, and other members of the squad who attended virtually. The president then signed a proclamation honoring the day.

"Doesn't matter if you're an electrician, an accountant or part of the best damn soccer team in the world," Biden said. "The pay gap is real. And this team is living proof that you can be the very best at what you do and still have to fight for equal pay."

The women's team has won the World Cup four times, most recently in 2019. But it sued the U.S. Soccer Federation that same year over wage discrimination. The suit was dismissed in May because the women had accepted a different base pay structure than the men's soccer team. The women's team plans to appeal the dismissal.

"Despite those wins. I've been devalued, I've been disrespected and dismissed because I'm a woman," Rapinoe said Wednesday with the president. "And I've been told that I don't deserve any more than less, because I am a woman."

The pay gap impacts the entire economy in ways that exacerbate other problems, including racial inequality. The National Women's Law Center found that Black women earn just 63 cents for a dollar paid to a non-Hispanic white man, while Hispanic women make only 55 cents. That difference translates into a loss of roughly \$1 million in income over a lifetime.

"These aren't simply women's issues," Cecilia Rouse, chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, said at Wednesday's press briefing. "They affect all families, the ability of our economy to recover, and our nation's competitiveness."

The Biden administration is pushing several policies to help narrow the gap. It backs the Paycheck Fairness Protection Act, which would enhance a 1963 law by improving employer's transparency on wages, require employers to show that any discrepancies are because of job qualifications and prevent employers from retaliating against workers who express concerns about pay disparities.

The administration also supports paid family leave and greater access to child care. A February research paper from the San Francisco Federal Reserve found that the pandemic caused mothers to disproportionately leave the job market, as many lacked in-class school and child care options. The paper noted that a flexible work schedule would likely make life easier for mothers with jobs.

Biden taps VP Harris to lead response to border challenges

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, NOMAAN MERCHANT, LISA MASCARO and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has tapped Vice President Kamala Harris to lead the White House effort to tackle the migration challenge at the U.S. southern border and work with Central American nations to address root causes of the problem.

Biden made the announcement as he and Harris met at the White House on Wednesday with Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandra Mayorkas and other immigration advisers to discuss the increase in migrants, including many unaccompanied minors, arriving at the border in recent weeks.

In delegating the matter to Harris, Biden is seeking to replicate a dynamic that played out when he served as President Barack Obama's vice president. Obama turned to Biden in his first term to lead the White House effort to draw down U.S. troops in Iraq and oversee implementation of stimulus in response to the Great Recession.

"When she speaks, she speaks for me," Biden said, noting her past work as California's attorney general makes her specially equipped to lead the administration's response.

Biden, who has faced stiff criticism from Republicans over the increased flow of migrants, is hoping to show Americans he's taking the situation at the border seriously. He also wants to prevent the growing humanitarian and political challenge from overshadowing his administration's ambitious legislative agenda.

But the high-profile assignment for Harris, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020 and is expected to run for the White House again in the future, could be politically fraught.

"Needless to say, the work will not be easy," Harris said. "But it is important work."

Harris is tasked with overseeing diplomatic efforts to deal with issues spurring migration in the North-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 62 of 90

ern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as pressing them to strengthen enforcement on their own borders, administration officials said. She's also tasked with developing and implementing a long-term strategy that gets at the root causes of migration from those countries.

Biden suggested President Donald Trump's decision to cut \$450 million funding in 2019 to the region was partly to blame for the situation.

Among the other reasons for the current increase: the thousands of Central American migrants already stuck at the border for months and the persistent scourge of gang violence afflicting the Northern Triangle countries.

Still, the numbers of both unaccompanied minors and families encountered at the border are lower than they were at various points during the Trump administration, including in spring 2019.

For Harris, the assignment gives her the first big opportunity to step to the front of the stage on a matter of enormous consequence for the administration. As the first Black woman elected vice president, Harris arrived on the job as a trailblazer. It has remained opaque how Biden would utilize her.

The move echoes not only Obama's decision to deputize Biden but also Trump naming Vice President Mike Pence to lead his coronavirus task force and President Bill Clinton handing Vice President Al Gore environmental and technology portfolios early in his presidency.

It's been a mixed bag for vice presidents in recent history who have been made the point person on delicate matters, said Joel Goldstein, the author of "The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden."

Pence's efforts on the coronavirus were stymied by Trump's hijacking of the task force's daily briefings early in the pandemic. Dick Cheney, who had been charged with leading George W. Bush's search for a vice president only to take the spot himself, carved out what was seen by many critics as a shadow presidency in which he had an outsized influence on shaping Bush's national security policies.

And Gore faced headwinds from Republicans in Congress who were reluctant to give him a win ahead of his unsuccessful 2000 run for the White House.

"Some of the risk versus reward depends to some extent on the vice president's relationship with the president," Goldstein said. "Whether or not the president had their back. Whether the president's going to allow you to be in a position to accomplish things and be perceived to accomplish things."

Biden made the announcement as a delegation of White House officials and members of Congress was traveled to the southern border on Wednesday to tour a facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas, where more than 750 migrant teenagers are being held.

The Biden administration has in recent weeks moved to open more than 10,000 new beds across the Southwest in convention centers and former oilfield camps. It notified Congress on Wednesday that it will open a new 3,000-person facility in San Antonio and a 1,400-person site at the San Diego convention center. HHS is also opening a second site in Carrizo Springs and received approval from the Defense Department Wednesday to begin housing teenagers at military bases in San Antonio and El Paso, Texas.

While acknowledging a "big problem" with the rising numbers of migrants, Rep. Norma Torres, D-Calif., one of five lawmakers to tour the facility Wednesday, credited the Biden administration with treating young migrants far more humanely than the Trump administration.

In an interview after the tour, Torres described children accommodated four to a room, and said she saw no signs of overcrowding. The young people attend school, have access to health care and are given weekly COVID-19 tests. Lawmakers were told 1 in 10 children are testing positive for the virus, but none at the facility had been hospitalized, she said.

"When I look at those kids, I see myself," said Torres, an immigrant from Guatemala who arrived in the U.S. with her family as a child.

The White House faced criticism for limiting media access to Wednesday's tour, keeping it to just one TV crew. It has still not allowed media to enter Border Patrol facilities where large numbers of children are detained or HHS sites that it rapidly opened under pressure. The Carrizo Springs facility was established in 2019 during the Trump administration and re-opened in February.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 63 of 90

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who is leading a separate delegation of GOP senators to the border later this week, decried the lack of press access as a “muzzling” of the media by the Democratic administration.

“Joe Biden doesn’t want you to see,” Cruz told reporters at the Capitol.

Merchant reported from Houston and Lemire from New York. Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Washington contributed to this report.

Biden’s dogs back at White House after ruff start

By JOSH BOAK The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden’s dogs — Champ and Major — are roaming the White House again, after having been sent to Delaware when Major, the younger dog, injured a Secret Service agent.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at the Wednesday briefing that the dogs met the Bidens last weekend at Camp David in Maryland and came back to Washington on Sunday.

The dogs had been in the Biden’s home state of Delaware, where Major received some additional training after having been startled by a Secret Service agent who received a minor injury from the fracas. One of the two German shepherds waited on the balcony of the White House on Tuesday evening as Marine One landed on the South Lawn, having ferried the president back from a speech in Columbus, Ohio.

“The dogs will come and go and it will not be uncommon for them to head back to Delaware on occasion as the president and first lady often do as well,” Psaki said.

No turning back: Facebook reckons with a post-2020 world

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

It’s becoming increasingly clear that for Facebook, there is no returning to its habits of the past.

Some of its most dramatic post-election changes, from algorithm tweaks to a strict crackdown on political misinformation, were supposed to be temporary — “break-glass” measures intended to prevent civil unrest as then-President Donald Trump spread false claims of a “rigged” election.

But the Jan. 6 insurrection, the rise in COVID vaccine misinformation and the persistent spread of malicious conspiracies — coupled with a new U.S. president and growing regulatory scrutiny around the world — have forced a reckoning at the social network.

“They don’t want to be the arbiters of free speech,” said Cliff Lampe, a professor studying social media platforms, moderation and misinformation at the University of Michigan. “But they have to be.”

For CEO Mark Zuckerberg, the past year has presented a series of humbling events that have picked away at his long-held assertion that Facebook is a worldwide force for good. In Facebook posts, public comments and discussions with employees, the CEO appears to be increasingly grappling with the dark side of the empire he created.

Take his approach to Trump, who until January enjoyed special treatment on Facebook and other social media platforms, despite spreading misinformation, promulgating hate and — what finally got him banned — inciting violence.

“Over the last several years, we have allowed President Trump to use our platform consistent with our own rules, at times removing content or labeling his posts when they violate our policies,” Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page on Jan. 7, explaining the company’s decision to suspend Trump. “We did this because we believe that the public has a right to the broadest possible access to political speech, even controversial speech.”

A day earlier, violent insurrectionists, egged on by Trump, descended on the U.S. Capitol in a deadly riot. While Facebook’s (and other tech companies’) move to ban a sitting president was unprecedented, many called it too little, too late.

It’s not yet clear if Facebook will banish the former president permanently, as Twitter has. The company

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 64 of 90

batted that decision over to its quasi-independent Oversight Board — sort of a Supreme Court of Facebook enforcement — which is expected to rule on the matter in April. On Thursday, Zuckerberg, along with the CEOs of Twitter and Google, will testify before Congress about extremism and misinformation on their platforms.

Companies like Facebook are “creeping along towards firmer action,” said Jennifer Grygiel, a Syracuse University communications professor and an expert on social media, while noting a Trump ban alone doesn’t undo years of inaction.

Lampe said he doesn’t doubt that Facebook would like to return to its pre-2020, hands-off approach, but public pressure to crack down on extremism will likely win over. That’s because online extremism, fueled by social media — in the U.S. and around the world — is more and more tied to real-world violence.

The company is also facing a growing internal push from increasingly vocal employees, some of whom have quit publicly, staged walkouts and protests in the past year. Last summer, meanwhile, advertisers staged a boycott of Facebook’s business. And activists are finding growing support from lawmakers on the state, federal and global level.

Jessica Gonzalez, attorney at the racial justice group Free Press, recently joined Democratic Rep. Tony Cardenas and Latino activists in calling on Facebook to crack down on hate and misinformation targeted at Latinos in the United States. She said when she and other civil rights activists met with Zuckerberg last summer during an advertising boycott of the company, she reminded him of the 2019 massacre in El Paso, when a gunman targeting Mexicans killed 23 people.

“Facebook has a choice,” she said. It can be a “vector for hate and lies that harm people of color, Latinos, immigrants and other groups,” or on the right side of history.

“So far it has done a lot of talking,” Gonzalez said.

Facebook says it’s met with the organizations and shares their goal of stopping Spanish-language misinformation on its apps.

“We are taking aggressive steps to fight misinformation in Spanish and dozens of other languages, including by removing millions of pieces of COVID-19 and vaccine content,” the company said in a statement.

Though its moves have often been halting, the social media giant has worked to address some of the criticisms lobbed at it in recent years. Besides election misinformation, it has put restrictions on anti-vaccine propaganda, banned extremist groups such as QAnon, limited recommending other problematic groups to users and tries to promote authoritative information from health agencies and trusted news organizations.

“There’s no single solution to fighting misinformation which is why we attack it from many angles,” Facebook said in a statement, pointing to its removal of fake accounts and coordinated networks, fact-checking partnerships and providing authoritative information. “We know these efforts don’t catch everything, which is why we’re always working in partnership with policymakers, academics, and other experts to adapt to the latest trends in misinformation.”

Facebook’s reluctant shift toward more self-regulation didn’t begin with the 2020 election. An earlier turning point for the company and for Zuckerberg himself, Lampe recalled, was the company’s role in inciting genocidal violence against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

In 2018, Facebook commissioned a report on the role its platform played in stoking ethnic cleansing. It found that Facebook “has become a means for those seeking to spread hate and cause harm, and posts have been linked to offline violence.”

“It was a humbling experience for company and for (Zuckerberg) personally,” Lampe said.

After Myanmar, Zuckerberg promised to do better, but its failures to stop spreading military propaganda continued. Now, with the country under a military coup, it faces yet another “emergency” situation that has no clear end in sight. The company banned the Myanmar military from its platform in March, but critics say it should have acted sooner.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election also qualified as an emergency, as did the COVID-19 pandemic, which most recently led Facebook to expand its policy on anti-vaccination falsehoods, banning claims saying vaccines aren’t effective or that they’re toxic, dangerous or cause autism — all of which have been thoroughly debunked.

Does this series of emergencies represent a meaningful shift for Facebook? Or is the company simply responding to the changing political climate, one that wants to see Big Tech regulated and dangerous speech reined in? Not everyone is convinced. The company has turned a corner.

"At the end of the day, Facebook's response to disinformation is always going to be driven by how to increase their user engagement and advertising revenue," said Alexandra Cirone, a professor at Cornell University who studies the effect of misinformation on government. Facebook denies that it places profits over cracking down on misinformation.

While tech companies are facing the prospect of stronger regulation with President Joe Biden's administration, Cirone said the company is more likely to respond to the fact that "there are conservative organizations, politicians, and donors that give Facebook a significant amount of money in ad revenue."

Regardless of who is president, "as long as Republicans or other groups are spending millions to advertise on Facebook, they will be slow to regulate," she said.

Spa witness, police reports detail carnage in Georgia

By KATE BRUMBACK and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — When he heard the first two gunshots, Marcus Lyon dove behind the bed where moments earlier the massage therapist had been rubbing his neck.

He was hiding when the third shot rang out. The woman who had been kneading the FedEx worker's sore muscles suddenly dropped to the floor. Lyon could see her, shot in the head, lying just a couple of feet from where he had taken cover.

"I'm thinking in my head, 'I'm about to die. I'm gonna die,'" he recalled. "I started thinking about my son."

Lyon waited in the room, less than a minute, he figures, until he heard the sound of bells signaling someone had opened the front door at Youngs Asian Massage. Hearing no more gunfire, he hurried back into his clothes and ran outside, grabbed a gun from his vehicle and made the first 911 call. Dispatchers took the call at 4:54 p.m.

"I wasn't scared in the moment because it was kind of too late to be scared," Lyon said in an interview. "I couldn't believe it was happening."

Lyon's eyewitness account and police reports released Tuesday reveal a closer look at the carnage of March 16. After killing four people and critically wounding another at the massage business in suburban Cherokee County, the lone gunman drove to neighboring Atlanta and opened fire inside two other spas, police say.

Eight people died altogether — seven of them women and six victims of Asian descent. All were slain within about an hour.

Security camera footage shows the young man sat in the shopping center parking lot for an hour before getting out of the SUV. His right hand in his back pocket, he walked into Youngs Asian Massage through the front door.

Police say the man captured on the security camera video was 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long. The footage shows he entered the spa more than an hour before the shooting started. Police haven't said what he was doing the rest of the time.

Rita Barron told deputies she heard screams and loud thumps coming from Youngs Asian Massage. Coats fell from the wall inside Barron's boutique next door.

She found a small, metal object on the floor, possibly a bullet. She and her husband called 911.

According to an incident report, Cherokee Sheriff's Office Cpl. Tommy Thompkins was patrolling nearby and rushed to the spa after hearing over his radio that there had been a shooting with multiple victims. He found Lyon, unharmed, holding the door open.

Other deputies arrived and swept the business, opening doors one at a time as they crept down a long hallway. Two women were lying partially in the doorways of separate rooms on the left side of the hall,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 66 of 90

both with gunshot wounds to the head but still breathing. Peering into a room on the right, officers saw a dead woman slumped against the back wall.

In a back room, deputies found a dead man who had been shot in the head.

Behind another closed door, deputies found Mario Gonzalez sitting on a bed. He looked scared and confused, but obeyed as deputies with guns drawn ordered him outside.

Detained in the back of a patrol car, Gonzalez told deputies he didn't see the shooter. He and his wife were nearing the end of hourlong massages, in separate rooms, when the shooting began. He said he didn't know what happened to her.

Gonzalez's wife, Delaina Ashley Yaun, was among those found dead.

After the shootings at Youngs, the man police have identified as Long walked briskly to his vehicle, backed out of a parking space and headed south. The killing was just beginning.

A half-hour after being called to the scene in Cherokee County, authorities had a description of the suspect from security video. The white man wore a gray and red jacket, and drove a black Hyundai SUV.

But before they could catch him, the shooting started again, this time in Atlanta, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) away.

It was 5:47 p.m. when a woman called 911 from Gold Spa, reporting what she thought was a robbery.

"Hurry," the caller urged the operator. "They have a gun."

Ten minutes later, dispatchers received another 911 call from a business across the street. The caller said a man walked into Aromatherapy Spa and fired a gun, hurting at least one person.

Officers who arrived at Gold Spa found three women dead from gunshot wounds. Officers arriving at the second spa found one woman dead from a gunshot wound.

Police were aided in their capture of the suspect by Long's parents, who called authorities offering to help after recognizing their son in still images from the security video that the Cherokee County sheriff posted to social media.

Using cellphone information provided by the parents, authorities tracked the suspect to rural Crisp County about 140 miles (225 kilometers) south of Atlanta.

State troopers and sheriff's deputies spotted his SUV on Interstate 75, and one of them forced Long to spin to a stop by bumping his vehicle.

Once stopped, Long surrendered without a fight.

Once in custody, Long told investigators that he has a sex addiction and lashed out at businesses he viewed as a temptation. But many people, particularly in the Asian American community, believe the victims were targeted because of their race. Police say they are still trying to determine a motive.

The killings tore eight people from their families.

Yong Ae Yue, 63, cooked homemade Korean dishes for her family. Suncha Kim, 69, volunteered for charities. Soon Chung Park, a former dancer, remained youthful and fit at age 74. Xiaojie "Emily" Tan, 49, was an entrepreneur who owned Youngs Asian Massage and other businesses. Daoyou Feng, 44, was one of her employees.

Delaina Yaun, 33, was a new mother. Paul Michels, 54, installed security systems. Hyun Jung Grant, 51, worked at Gold Spa to support two sons.

"She loved me and my brother enough to work for us, to dedicate her whole life," said Grant's son, 22-year-old Randy Park.

The story summary has been edited to correct a name. The correct name is Robert Aaron Long, not Robert Aaron Lyons.

___ Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia.

School survey shows 'critical gaps' for in-person learning

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

Nearly half of U.S. elementary schools were open for full-time classroom learning as of last month, but the share of students with in-person instruction has varied greatly by region and by race, with most non-white students taught entirely online, according to a Biden administration survey.

For the White House, the results of the national survey released Wednesday mark the starting line for President Joe Biden's pledge to have most K-8 schools open full time in his first 100 days in office. But they also show that he never had far to go to meet that goal.

Among schools that enroll fourth graders, 47% offered full-time classroom learning in February, while for schools that teach eighth-graders, the figure was 46%. The results suggested, however, that at least some students weren't opting in.

In total, about 76% of elementary and middle schools were open for in-person or hybrid learning, while 24% offered remote learning only, according to the survey. The percentage of students spending at least some time in the classroom has probably increased since February, when coronavirus rates were just coming down from a national surge.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said the findings, while encouraging, also showed "critical gaps" for in-person learning, especially for students of color.

The Education Department released the survey data the same day it announced it was distributing \$81 billion in school assistance from the \$1.9 trillion virus relief bill. In an interview, Cardona said the money will allow schools to start hiring additional social workers and counselors and ensure ventilation systems are safe.

"It gives districts the ability to start planning long term," Cardona said. "This is not about turning the lights on only — it's about ensuring that you can create systems that are ready to meet the needs of students, socially and emotionally."

Still, Cardona cautioned that the return to normalcy will take time. He said schools must practice social distancing and take other measures to prevent the virus from spreading. He offered no timeline for a full reopening of high schools, saying he is "fully focused" on students in pre-K-8.

The department's survey results establish a baseline data set that the administration plans to update each month to show how many U.S. schools are teaching in-person, online or through a combination. The government did not previously collect such information.

The findings are based on a survey of 3,500 public schools whose student bodies include fourth graders, along with 3,500 schools that serve eighth graders. The survey collected data on schools' teaching methods as of February, along with a range of other questions about teaching in January.

The survey casts new light on a period of bitter debate in the school reopening process. In January, officials in California, Chicago and other places were in stalemates with teachers over reopening plans. Vaccinations were often a sticking point.

Since January, the push to reopen has gained steam in many areas. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a road map to reopening in February. This month, the CDC relaxed guidelines around social distancing in schools. Under pressure from Biden, dozens of states are now focusing on giving COVID-19 vaccines to teachers and other school staff.

As more schools invite students back to the classroom, many parents are conflicted, according to a poll from The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. It found that a majority of parents are at least somewhat concerned that in-person instruction will lead to more people being infected, but a slightly larger share is at least somewhat concerned that students will face setbacks in school because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In addition to tracking what types of teaching schools were offering, the federal survey also tracks how many students enrolled in each mode.

In January, 38% of fourth graders were learning full-time in-person, compared with 28% of eighth graders, the survey found. Larger shares of students were entirely remote, with 43% of fourth graders

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 68 of 90

and 48% of eighth graders learning away from school. It was not clear what share was learning online by choice and how many students were in schools without in-person options.

There were stark differences based on where students live, reflecting the regional battles that have played out as cities debate how to reopen schools.

In the South and Midwest, where schools were the quickest to reopen, just under 40% of eighth grade students were enrolled full time in classroom instruction in January. In the West and Northeast, the figure was about 10%.

Across all regions, students in rural areas and towns were far more likely to be back in the classroom full time compared with students in cities and suburbs.

In a further illustration of the pandemic's uneven impact, the survey found striking differences based on students' race. Among fourth graders, almost half of white students were learning fully in-person, with just over one-quarter learning online. Among Black and Hispanic students, nearly 60% were learning entirely remotely.

The difference was even wider among students of Asian descent, with 68% remote and just 15% attending fully in-person.

Similar disparities have been uncovered in many cities, raising alarms among education advocates who fear the pandemic is worsening racial inequities in education. The administration has pledged to confront racial gaps in education and is urging schools to prioritize the issue as they spend the billions in recently approved relief aid.

As of January, the survey also found that students with disabilities and those who are learning English were not being brought back to the classroom at significantly higher rates than other students. Just 42% of those with disabilities and 34% learning English were enrolled in full-time classroom learning, compared with 38% of all students.

Among students learning online, the survey found, the amount of time spent with a live teacher also varied greatly. Roughly one-third of schools offered more than five hours a day of live instruction, but another third offered two hours or less. Among schools serving eighth graders, 10% were offering no live instruction at all.

Biden on Wednesday called on schools to create quality summer learning programs for all students. He said it an "essential" need for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities and others disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

The relief bill included \$1.2 billion for summer learning programs, and the Education Department on Wednesday announced a collaboration among states to help develop effective learning options this summer.

The agency's survey was created in response to an executive order from Biden. The department said it will issue updated data each month through July. The information is published on the agency's website.

Federal judge nixes Ohio's push for early redistricting data

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

A federal judge on Wednesday dismissed a lawsuit filed by the state of Ohio that tried to get the U.S. Census Bureau to provide data used for drawing congressional and legislative districts ahead of its planned release.

U.S. District Judge Thomas Rose in Dayton, Ohio, rejected the state's request for a preliminary injunction that would have forced the Census Bureau to release the redistricting data by March 31.

Ohio filed its lawsuit last month after the Census Bureau said the redistricting data wouldn't be available until September, months after the redistricting deadlines for many states. Posing the first challenge to the bureau's revised deadline on redistricting data, the lawsuit said the delay will undermine Ohio's process of redrawing districts. Alabama also has filed a lawsuit over the changed deadline.

The bureau has since said the data will be available in an older format in August.

In dismissing the lawsuit, the judge said that there was nothing that could be done to fix Ohio's redistricting quandary since it was impossible for the Census Bureau to meet the legally mandated March

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 69 of 90

31 deadline. Bureau officials said last month that they needed more time because of operational delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

In order to draw congressional districts, Ohio needs to know how many congressional seats it will get when the apportionment numbers are released and that data aren't being released until next month, Rose said.

"So even if the relief Ohio seeks (redistricting data by March 31) was granted, Ohio would be no closer to drawing congressional districts on April 1," the judge wrote.

The judge said Ohio could use other data to draw its districts. The state's claim that fights over what alternative data to use would undermine confidence in the redistricting process was "speculative," Rose said.

"Accuracy would seem to be the foundation of confidence, and Ohio's redistricting plan foresees the possibility of delays in providing numbers," the judge said. "It would seem that the remedy Ohio seeks is more likely to reduce public confidence."

Republican Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost said the state would appeal.

"We appreciate Judge Rose's careful consideration of the matter, but if the State does not have standing to challenge the Census Bureau's decision to arbitrarily ignore a statutory deadline, no one does," Yost said in a statement.

Ohio law requires a newly formed commission to finalize state legislative districts by Sept. 1 and to hold three public meetings before doing so. Ohio's General Assembly is required to adopt a map for congressional districts by Sept. 30.

The redistricting data includes counts of population by race, Hispanic origin, voting age and housing occupancy status at geographic levels as small as neighborhoods. The data are used for drawing voting districts for Congress and state legislatures. Unlike past decades when the data were released to states on a flow basis, the 2020 redistricting data will be made available to the states all at once, according to the Census Bureau.

The delay in releasing the redistricting data has sent states scrambling to come up with alternative plans. Many will not get the data until after their legal deadlines for drawing new districts, requiring them to either rewrite laws or ask the courts to allow them a free pass because of the delay. Candidates may not know yet whether they will live in the district they want to run in by the filing deadline. In some cases, if fights over new maps drag into the new year, primary elections may have to be delayed.

Associated Press writer Julie Carr Smyth contributed to this report from Columbus, Ohio.

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

Diverse jury raises activists' hopes for ex-cop's trial

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The jury that will decide the fate of a white former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death is unusually diverse by local standards, and that's boosting activists' hopes for a rare conviction.

The panel of 15 includes nine people who are white and six who are Black or multiracial, according to the court. If the court follows standard practice and the alternates are the last three chosen, the 12 who deliberate would be evenly split between whites and people of color. Opening statements are Monday.

"It's a small step in the right direction," said Trahern Crews, an organizer and spokesman for Black Lives Matter in Minnesota. African Americans bring "an institutional memory of the police" to jury rooms that whites and even other people of color don't share, he said.

It's very rare to seat such a mixed jury in Minnesota, said Mary Moriarty, a former chief public defender for Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis. That's important because they'll bring a "very different lens" to their deliberations, she said, though she said it's a mistake to think people of color all view things the same.

Court records obtained by Moriarty show Blacks are chronically underrepresented on juries in Hennepin

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 70 of 90

County, which is 74% white and 14% Black. The jury pool in 2019 — created from lists of people with driver's licenses or state ID cards, as well as voter registration lists — was 79% white and 8% Black.

People not on the lists don't get summoned.

Scholars, courts and legal groups have increasingly advocated for greater jury diversity — not just by race, but by gender and socioeconomic backgrounds. Experts say when jurors share the same background, they're less likely to question their own biases and preconceptions heading into deliberations. And they say jurors from different backgrounds may evaluate witnesses differently, including how much weight to give their testimony.

Derek Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death May 25. The Black man was declared dead after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against his neck for about nine minutes while he was handcuffed and pleading that he couldn't breathe. The widely seen video set off street protests in Minneapolis, some violent, that spread across the U.S. and the world.

It's rare for police officers to stand trial for fatal shootings. When they do, recent history suggests a more diverse jury increases the odds for conviction, although the record is mixed.

In Minnesota, the jury that acquitted suburban officer Jeronimo Yanez, a Latino, of second-degree manslaughter in 2017 in the shooting death of Philando Castile, a Black man, included 10 whites and two Blacks.

The jury that convicted Black Minneapolis officer Mohamed Noor, a Somali American, in 2019 of third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the shooting death of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, a white Australian woman, included six people of color, including two Filipino men, an Ethiopian man and a Pakistani woman.

Elsewhere, the Texas jury that convicted white Dallas police officer Amber Guyger in 2019 in the shooting death of Botham Jean, a Black man in his own home, was largely women and people of color. Observers credited the makeup of the jury as a key factor in her conviction.

Two Blacks were among the 12 jurors and two alternates picked for a Texas panel in 2019 that convicted white officer Roy D. Oliver II of murder for firing into a car packed with teenagers in suburban Dallas, killing Jordan Edwards, a Black 15-year-old.

There was just one African American on the jury that convicted white Chicago officer Jason Van Dyke of second-degree murder in 2018, in the shooting death of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald, a Black teen who was carrying a knife but was walking away when Van Dyke fired at him 16 times. Blacks make up one-third of Chicago's population, but the jury also included three Hispanics and one Asian American.

During questioning for Chauvin's jury, some people in the pool were strikingly direct about how the color of their skin affected their view of Floyd's death.

A Black man in his 30s who immigrated to America more than 14 years ago said he talked with his wife about the case. "We talked about how it could have been me, or anyone else," he said.

Another Black man in his 30s, asked about his response to a jury questionnaire on the extent of discrimination in America, said it goes "well beyond what the media can even report." And he added: "Black lives just want to be treated as equals and not killed or treated in an aggressive manner simply because they are Black," he said.

Both are on the jury.

Attorneys on both sides used questions about Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter to probe deeper attitudes on race and policing. Jurors were also asked whether the protests and violence following Floyd's death had a positive or negative effect on the community, and whether they supported defunding the Minneapolis Police Department.

One juror, a white woman in her 50s, related an anecdote that she said helped her understand white privilege: a conversation she had with a Black co-worker who described how her Black son could be in much greater danger if pulled over by police than the white juror's son would be.

Moriarty, the former public defender, pointed out that several potential jurors were suburbanites who said they had never experienced discrimination or known anyone who had. Their interactions with police had been positive.

That underscored the need to get the perspective of African Americans into the jury room, she said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 71 of 90

When the jury was complete, Floyd family attorney Ben Crump — who negotiated a \$27 million settlement with the city — issued a statement that made no comment on its racial makeup, but highlighted the polarizing issue of race in Floyd's death.

"This is not a hard case," Crump said, and added: "If George Floyd had been white, the facts would be undisputed and justice would be swift. We expect the same for George."

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

Democrats launch Senate battle for expanded voting rights

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats renewed their efforts Wednesday to muscle through the largest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, setting up a fight with Republicans that could bring partisan tensions to a climax in the evenly split Senate and become a defining issue for President Joe Biden.

Democrats and Republicans both see the legislation, which touches on nearly every aspect of the electoral process, as fundamental to their parties' political futures. The Senate bill, similar to a version passed by the House earlier this month, could shape election outcomes for years to come, striking down hurdles to voting, requiring more disclosure from political donors, restricting partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts and bolstering election security and ethics laws.

The debate over who has the right to vote, and how elections are conducted, could play out for months, if not years. Democrats newly in control of both chambers of Congress say they are trying to rebuild trust in the ballot after two tumultuous election cycles. Republicans charge the bill would strip power from the states and cement an unfair political advantage for Democrats.

With the GOP unanimously opposed, the legislation is presenting a crucial test of how hard Biden and his party are willing to fight for their priorities, as well as those of their voters. Unless they united around changing Senate rules, which now require 60 votes for most bills to advance, their chance to enshrine expansive voting protections could quickly slip away.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., making a rare appearance at a hearing, said Wednesday it took "mighty movements and decades of fraught political conflict" to achieve the basic dignities of current election laws and "any American who thinks that the fight for a full and fair democracy is over, is sadly and sorely mistaken."

Democrats see the measure as a forceful response to voting rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump's repeated, baseless claims of a stolen 2020 election.

Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., opened the hearing on the legislation Wednesday by invoking the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, in which hundreds of Trump's supporters interrupted the electoral count after Trump pressured state election officials to change the results and told supporters to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat.

"In the end, that insurrection was about an angry mob working to undermine our democracy," Klobuchar said. "And it reminds all of us how very fragile our democracy truly is, and how it is on all of us to not just protect that democracy, but to ensure that it thrives."

Similar to the House bill that passed on a party-line vote, the Senate legislation would create automatic voter registration nationwide, allow former felons to vote, and limit the ways states can remove registered voters from their rolls. It would expand voting by mail, promote early voting and give states money to track absentee ballots. Millions of people took advantage of those practices during the pandemic last year — and after some Republican states tried to restrict them in favor of voting in person.

The bill would increase oversight for election vendors and boost support for state voting system upgrades after Russia attempted to breach some of those systems in the 2016 election. It would overhaul federal oversight of campaign finance and encourage small donations to campaigns, while requiring more disclosure of political donations. And it would require states to adopt independent redistricting commissions to draw congressional districts and give more teeth to federal ethics enforcement.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 72 of 90

The legislation is meant to counter the more than 250 bills have 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. Some measures would limit mail voting, cut hours at polling places and impose restrictions that Democrats argue amount to the greatest assault on voting rights since the Jim Crow era.

Testifying at the hearing, former Attorney General Eric Holder, who served under President Barack Obama, said the legislation would help fight politicians who want to maintain an "unjust status quo."

"The events of the past few months have brought into stark focus what has been true for too long: There is a large and powerful faction in this country intent on retaining power and who will bend or break the rules of our democracy in order to do so," Holder said.

Republicans say the new mandates would amount to a federal takeover of elections, which have traditionally been left to states.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., a longtime opponent of restrictive campaign finance laws, also made a rare hearing appearance, sitting across the dais from Schumer. He said the bill is full of "silly new mandates" that would create "an invitation to chaos" for states that would have to put them in place.

"This is clearly an effort by one party to rewrite the rules of our political system," McConnell said.

The bill has already run into roadblocks that have become familiar since Democrats began their narrow control of the Senate two months ago. As he has on other party priorities, Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia has expressed skepticism about the legislation, threatening united Democratic support.

Lacking the 60 votes needed for passage, Democrats have discussed options like lowering the threshold to break a filibuster, or potentially breaking the bill into pieces. For now, Democrats have suggested they will start with bringing up potentially popular proposals like the voting rights measure and expanded gun background checks and let them fail, forcing Republicans to go on the record in opposition.

In an apparent effort to pressure Manchin, the only Democrat who hasn't signed on to the voting legislation, Republicans called West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner to testify in opposition to the bill. He said the legislation would force his state and others to follow "arbitrary guidelines, most of which are impossible or unattainable under the deadlines." He urged the senators to "leave election administration up to the states."

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson testified in favor of the bill.

"While states will always serve as laboratories of democracy, federal minimum standards ensure equal protection of every citizen's right to vote and can prevent attacks on our democracy, both foreign and domestic, that take advantage of the uneven patchwork of state laws throughout our country," Benson said.

Facebook finds Chinese hacking operation targeting Uyghurs

Associated Press undefined

Hackers in China used fake Facebook accounts and impostor websites to try to break into the computers and smartphones of Uyghur Muslims, the social network said Wednesday.

The company said the sophisticated, covert operation targeted Uyghur activists, journalists and dissidents from China's Xinjiang region, as well as individuals living in Turkey, Kazakhstan, the U.S., Syria, Australia, Canada and other nations.

The hackers attempted to gain access to the computers and phones by creating fake Facebook accounts for supposed journalists and activists, as well as fake websites and apps intended to appeal to a Uyghur audience. In some cases, the hackers created lookalike websites almost identical to legitimate news sites popular with Uyghurs.

The accounts and sites contained malicious links. If the target clicked on one, their computer or smartphone would be infected with software allowing the network to spy on the target's device.

The software could obtain information including the victim's location, keystrokes and contacts, according to FireEye, a cybersecurity firm that worked on the investigation.

In all, fewer than 500 people were targeted by the hackers in 2019 and 2020, Facebook said. The company

said it uncovered the network during its routine security work, and has deactivated the fictitious accounts and notified individuals whose devices may have been compromised. Most of the hackers' activities took place on non-Facebook sites and platforms.

"They tried to create these personas, build trust in the community, and use that as a way to trick people into clicking on these links to expose their devices," said Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of security policy.

Facebook's investigation found links between the hackers and two technology firms based in China but no direct links to the Chinese government, which has been criticized for its harsh treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. FireEye, however, said in a statement that "we believe this operation was conducted in support" of the Chinese government.

China has imprisoned more than 1 million people, including Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic groups, in a vast network of concentration camps, according to U.S. officials and human rights groups. People have been subjected to torture, sterilization and political indoctrination, in addition to forced labor, as part of an assimilation campaign in a region whose inhabitants are ethnically and culturally distinct from the Han Chinese majority.

Syria to send Lebanon emergency oxygen supply for hospitals

BEIRUT (AP) — The government of war-torn Syria said Wednesday it will send emergency oxygen supplies to neighboring Lebanon, which has experienced shortages amid a surge of coronavirus infections in both countries.

The gesture comes as the health care sectors of the neighboring countries face serious challenges compounded by the pandemic and unprecedented economic woes.

Lebanon Health Minister Hamad Hassan told Lebanon's al-Manar TV the oxygen was a "direct gift" from Syrian President Bashar Assad, who responded to Lebanon's humanitarian request for the oxygen.

Syria's health care infrastructure has been battered by a 10-year war and dependency on foreign aid as Assad's government faces growing Western sanctions.

For Lebanon, Syria's gesture comes at a time of political deadlock among rival groups who are deeply divided over Syria. Hassan is allied with the Iran-backed Hezbollah group, which has been a main backer of Assad.

Syrian Health Minister Hassan Ghabbash said his visiting Lebanese counterpart would depart Damascus with the first batch of oxygen from Syrian plants. The amount going to Lebanon, reported to be 75 tons by Syrian media, won't impact needs in Syria, he said.

Lebanon's health minister Hassan said oxygen supplies would last only through Wednesday, adding that bad weather had delayed the arrival of ships bringing in oxygen. The supplies from Syria would avert the loss of "thousands of lives," he said.

"There are currently a thousand patients in Lebanon on ventilators. The amount of oxygen we have is sufficient for today," Hassan said.

The situation in Syria is also critical. World Health Organization officials said hospital beds are at full capacity in the capital Damascus, and infection cases are at their highest amid a dearth of testing capabilities.

Syria has recorded more than 17,000 infections and 1,175 deaths. The country is in a deep economic crisis, with more than 80% of the population living in poverty.

Both countries are witnessing an unprecedented crash of their local currencies.

Lebanon has been struggling with a surge of infections since the start of 2021, and a weeks-long lockdown has only brought the numbers down slightly. WHO said intensive care-unit beds are more than 85% full in the small country of 6 million people, including over 1 million Syrian refugees.

Since last year, Lebanon has recorded nearly 445,000 infections and 5,850 deaths.

A vaccination campaign began in Lebanon last month, with over 970,000 people registered to be vaccinated and some 156,000 doses already administered.

Later on Wednesday, the first shipment of AstraZeneca vaccines arrived in Beirut. The government

had said it would delay administering them until the vaccine was cleared for use by international health regulators following concerns about possible blood clotting. The European Union's drug regulatory agency subsequently said last week the vaccine does not increase the overall incidence of blood clots and the benefits of using it outweigh the possible risks.

Lebanon had secured 2.73 million shots of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the WHO-led platform and ordered more directly through the company.

Syria said it has received some vaccines but it has yet to launch a national vaccination campaign. WHO announced Tuesday it will oversee a vaccination campaign in Syria expected to start in April with the aim of inoculating 20% of the population by the end of 2021.

Capitol riot clouds Democrats' look at contested Iowa race

By ALAN FRAM and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An Iowa Democrat's quest for Congress to overturn her state-certified defeat for a House seat is prompting awkward divisions within her party, months after its members reacted with uniform fury at Donald Trump's unfounded drive to reverse his presidential election loss.

Democrat Rita Hart, the loser by an excruciatingly tight six votes, says she's found 22 uncounted ballots that would make her the victor over Republican Mariannette Miller-Meeks, who took office in January. Hart has brought her case to the House Administration Committee, which has been collecting briefs, and both sides have lawyered up for a dispute that could smolder into summer.

The Democratic-run House could make the final decision. But with the party still seething over Trump's brazen attempt to have Congress overturn state-certified election results he didn't like, at least six Democrats have publicly expressed qualms about doing the same to Miller-Meeks.

Those dissidents are quietly supported by others, say several Democrats speaking on condition of anonymity to describe private conversations, suggesting that Hart's effort could fail.

"Legislators should be heeding states' certifications of their elections," Rep. Susan Wild, D-Pa., said in a statement. Without evidence of "rampant error," she said, "I do not believe it is the role of House members to dictate the outcome of elections."

There's still time for uneasy Democrats to change their minds, but House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., is a renowned vote counter with little tolerance for embarrassing defeats. Republicans oppose the effort, savaging it as an attempt to ignore voters — a point few GOP lawmakers raised during Trump's unjustified fight to invalidate certified votes and hang onto his presidency.

This leaves Democrats torn between seating Hart and adding a smidgen of breathing room to their precipitous 219-211 majority — with five vacancies -- or rejecting her claim and avoiding accusations of a hypocritical power play.

"For Democrats to somehow change their tune in a matter of weeks over how sacrosanct an election certificate is is the height of hypocrisy," said Illinois Rep. Rodney Davis, top Republican on the House Administration panel.

Davis and Miller-Meeks were among the minority of House Republicans who voted against Trump's groundless effort to invalidate Electoral College votes won by now-President Joe Biden. Those roll calls occurred hours after Trump supporters' tried disrupting that process with the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, which left five people dead.

Pelosi has said "there could be a scenario" in which Hart would win the seat. Democrats say Trump's allegations of widespread election fraud were fiction while their assertions about uncounted Iowa ballots for Hart, which are accompanied by voters' affidavits, are solid.

"For them to call anybody hypocritical about elections" when well over half of House Republicans "voted against accepting the presidency of Joe Biden is, well, it's just who they are," Pelosi scoffed recently on ABC News' "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

The Constitution gives each chamber of Congress the final power to judge the "elections and returns" of its members.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 75 of 90

Hart's request triggered the 1969 Federal Contested Elections Act, which gives the House wide latitude for investigating and determining which ballots can be counted, decisions that needn't follow state laws. That statute places the burden of proof on the candidate challenging the results.

Challengers face long odds. Of 107 contested elections the House considered from 1933 to 2009, the overwhelming majority were dismissed, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service has found. Its 2010 report said the House seated at least three challengers and declared at least one vacancy.

The committee has set no deadline for deciding the Iowa dispute. Hart counsel Marc Elias, who led Democrats' national legal effort to uphold Biden's presidential victory, has proposed a mid-July target.

Miller-Meeks initially won her southeastern Iowa seat, vacated by retiring Democratic Rep. Dave Loebsack, by 47 votes.

A recount demanded by Hart narrowed that advantage to six, 196,964 to 196,958, the slimmest House victory in nearly four decades. A state canvassing board of three Republicans and two Democrats unanimously certified that result Nov. 30.

Under Iowa law, Hart had until Dec. 2 to request state courts to examine the results further and rule on the winner by Dec. 8. Her campaign surprised observers when it opted to bring her case directly to the House.

Hart's campaign has said that tight deadline allowed no time to review the votes, including the 22 uncounted ones, of which they say 18 were cast for her. Miller-Meeks says Hart thinks she has a better chance of prevailing in the Democratic-run House.

"Everybody should be outraged about this," Miller-Meeks said Tuesday on Fox News, suggesting that Democrats could next target "another congressional seat in another year."

Miller-Meeks has had three Iowa attorneys working for her. House Administration panel Republicans have hired Don McGahn, Trump's former White House counsel, as an adviser.

Elias wants the committee to order a uniform hand recount of all votes, including the 22 located by the campaign. Those 22 ballots include some that were located too late to be counted, were considered improperly sealed or had other issues.

"All members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans, will want to make sure that the will of the people is followed," Elias told reporters.

Besides Wild, other Democrats to express reluctance about unseating Miller-Meeks are Reps. Lou Correa of California, Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey, Dan Kildee of Michigan, Chris Pappas of New Hampshire and Dean Phillips of Minnesota.

A six-vote loss is painful for Democrats "but overturning it in the House would be even more painful for America," Phillips tweeted this week. "Just because a majority can, does not mean a majority should."

Republicans have gone on offense. Recently, nine of the 10 House Republicans who backed January's House impeachment of Trump over the Jan. 6 insurrection wrote to Pelosi that Trump's attempt to reverse his election defeat "led to horrific violence." They said overturning Miller-Meeks' victory would be "illegitimate and further erode" trust in elections.

In 1984, Indiana Republican Richard McIntyre narrowly defeated Democratic Rep. Frank McCloskey. When McCloskey challenged the result, the House Administration Committee ordered a recount that McCloskey won by four votes.

AP reporter Ryan J. Foley reported from Iowa City, Iowa.

Myanmar junta frees hundreds held for anti-coup protests

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Hundreds of people imprisoned for demonstrating against last month's coup in Myanmar were released Wednesday, a rare conciliatory gesture by the military that appeared aimed at placating the protest movement.

Witnesses outside Insein Prison in Yangon saw busloads of mostly young people, looking happy with some flashing the three-finger gesture of defiance adopted by protesters. State-run TV said a total of 628

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 76 of 90

were freed.

Also Wednesday, Thein Zaw, a journalist for The Associated Press who was arrested last month while covering an anti-coup protest, was released.

Myanmar's security forces have cracked down violently on protests against a Feb. 1 coup that reversed a decade of progress toward democracy in the Southeast Asian country and ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners says that at least 275 people have been killed in connection with the crackdown. Thousands have also been arrested, and more than 2,000 remain in custody or have charges against them outstanding.

Wednesday's release was an unusual overture by the military, which has so far seemed impervious to both internal pressure from protests and outside pressure from sanctions. In the face of an increasingly brutal crackdown, demonstrators tried a new tactic Wednesday that they dubbed a silence strike, calling on people to stay home and businesses to close for the day.

The prisoners released appear to be the hundreds of students detained in early March. One lawyer, speaking on condition of anonymity because she fears drawing attention from the authorities, said all those released were arrested on March 3. She said only 55 people detained in connection with the protests remained in the prison, and it is likely they will all face charges under a law that carries a penalty of up to three years in prison.

The mass release came the same day that Thein Zaw was also freed. Thein Zaw told the AP that the judge in his case announced during a hearing that all charges against him were dropped because he was doing his job at the time of his arrest.

"I'm looking forward to meeting my family members," he said. "I'm sorry for some colleagues who are still in prison."

Meanwhile, messages online urged people to stay home Wednesday in protest — rather than flooding the streets as they have in the past — saying silence is "the loudest scream." The messages explained the strike's purpose was to honor the movement's fallen heroes, to allow protesters to recharge and to contradict the junta's claims that "everything is back to normal."

The extent of the strike was difficult to gauge, but social media users posted photos from cities and towns showing streets empty of activity save for an occasional stray dog. Some protesters did go out to release red balloons with leaflets attached.

The new tactic was employed after an extended onslaught of violence from security forces.

Local media reported that a 7-year-old girl in Mandalay, the country's second-biggest city, was among the latest victims on Tuesday. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners included her in its list of fatalities.

"Khin Myo Chit was shot in the abdomen by a soldier while she sat in her father's lap inside her home in Aung Pin Le ward," the online news service Myanmar Now reported, quoting her sister, Aye Chan San.

The report said the shooting took place when soldiers were raiding homes in her family's neighborhood. The sister said a soldier shot at their father when he denied that any people were hiding in their home, and hit the girl.

Aye Chan San said the soldiers then beat her 19-year-old brother with their rifle butts and took him away.

U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said the United Nations is "extremely disturbed over the killing by security forces of a 7-year-old child in her home."

"There must be accountability for all the crimes and human rights violations that continue to be perpetrated in Myanmar," he said.

Haq said the U.N. noted reports of the release of hundreds of demonstrators and remained concerned about ongoing arrests by the military, including of journalists and civil society leaders.

The U.N. called "for the release of all those arbitrarily detained, including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," Haq said.

He said U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and U.N. special envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener "will continue to mobilize international action for the restoration of democracy and human rights

in Myanmar.”

EU moves toward stricter export controls for COVID-19 shots

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union moved Wednesday toward stricter export controls for coronavirus vaccines, seeking to make sure its 27 nations have more COVID-19 shots to boost the bloc’s flagging vaccine campaign amid a surge in new infections.

The EU’s executive Commission said on the eve of a summit of the EU’s leaders that it has a plan to guarantee that more vaccines produced in the bloc are available for its 450 million citizens even if that comes at the cost of helping nations outside the bloc, most notably Britain.

EU officials said trade with the United States should not be affected and assured nations that sought to have an open, transparent relationship with the bloc that they had little to fear.

The EU move is expected to be a blow to Britain, whose speedy vaccination rollout has been eyed with envy by many EU nations, especially since it came as the U.K. formally completed its Brexit divorce from the bloc. The latest figures show that 45% of Britons have had at least one vaccine shot, compared to less than 14% for the bloc.

“I mention specifically the U.K.,” said EU Commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis. Since the end of January, “some 10 million doses have been exported from the EU to the U.K. and zero doses have been exported from U.K. to the EU.”

“So it’s clear that we also need to look at those aspects of reciprocity and proportionality,” he said.

In the post-Brexit era, both sides have been fighting over everything from diplomatic representation to border controls and red tape, but they did not want to take the same confrontational tone over live-saving vaccines, especially when the World Health Organization is raising alarms over rising new infections across Europe.

Only hours after the Commission move, both the EU and the U.K. said in a joint statement that “we are all facing the same pandemic and the third wave makes cooperation between the EU and the U.K. even more important.”

“In the end, openness and global cooperation of all countries will be key to finally overcome this pandemic and ensure better preparation for meeting future challenges,” the statement said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said global cooperation over vaccines has been the EU standard. The bloc has approved sending 41 million vaccine doses to 33 countries in the last seven weeks and believes that it stands at the forefront of international vaccine-sharing efforts. The overall total of exported vaccines is bigger still since many more were not covered by the recent export regime.

Some EU member states gearing up for Thursday’s summit were fearful, however, that too tough an export stance could amount to a de facto export ban that undermines the EU’s reputation as an open trading bloc.

Under a less stringent export control system in force so far, only one vaccine shipment in 381 has been barred. That was heading to Australia, which has a very limited coronavirus outbreak compared to the third surge of infections now facing many EU nations.

“We have secured more than enough doses for the entire population. But we have to ensure timely and sufficient vaccine deliveries to EU citizens,” von der Leyen said. “Every day counts.”

Under the new regime, EU officials would also take into account reciprocity and finding a right balance.

Canada also gets vaccines shipped from Europe and has received assurances “that these measures will not affect vaccine shipments to Canada,” a Canadian government spokesperson said.

The EU has been feuding with AstraZeneca for months over exactly how many vaccine doses would be delivered by certain dates. Several vaccine producers, including Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca, were hit by technical production delays over the winter, just as worldwide demands for coronavirus vaccines soared. AstraZeneca has been producing less than half the doses the EU was counting on.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has sought to ease the tensions over vaccines, speaking by phone in

the past few days to European leaders including von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron.

"The partnership we have with our European colleagues is very, very important and we continue to work with them," Johnson told lawmakers on Wednesday. "I don't think that blockades of either vaccines ... or ingredients for vaccines are sensible."

"I would just gently point out to anyone considering a blockade ... that companies may look at such actions and draw conclusions about whether or not it is sensible to make future investments in countries where blockades are imposed," Johnson said.

Rob Gillies contributed from Toronto, Jill Lawless from London.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at:

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

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

<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Yellen sees room for US to borrow, opens door to tax hike

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen believes the U.S. government has more room to borrow, but said higher taxes would likely be required in the long run to finance future spending increases.

Yellen appeared Wednesday before the Senate Banking Committee with the Biden administration considering up to \$3 trillion in additional spending on infrastructure, green energy, and education. That "Build Back Better" plan would follow the \$1.9 trillion economic relief package approved earlier this month.

Yellen said her views on borrowing have changed since 2017, when she expressed concerns about a federal debt that was equal to about 75% of the U.S. economy's output at the time. That ratio has since increased to slightly above 100%.

Responding to a question from Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., Yellen said the persistence of low interest rates have changed her views on federal debt. Lower rates have made it easier for the federal government to cover the interest costs on the debt, she said. In fact, the government's interest payments as a proportion of the economy are unchanged since 2007, when the debt was equal to just 35% of output, Yellen said.

"I think that's a more meaningful metric of the burden of the debt on society and on the federal finances," she said. "And so I do believe we have more fiscal space, but it certainly doesn't mean that anything goes."

Yellen said that she supports borrowing to finance the \$1.9 trillion aid package because it is temporary spending in response to a crisis.

"But longer run, we do have to raise revenue to support permanent spending," she said.

The Biden administration is considering a bump in the corporate tax rate to 28%, up from the current 21%, after the Trump administration cut it from 35%. Tax increases on higher-income Americans are also being considered.

Yellen and Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell testified for a second day before a congressional panel Wednesday, as part of congressional oversight of last year's \$2 trillion emergency aid package.

Powell reiterated that the recent jump in the yield on the 10-year Treasury, which soared from less than 1% at the beginning of the year to 1.6% Wednesday, was mostly a sign of confidence among investors that the economy is improving.

"That has been an orderly process," he said. "I would be concerned if it were not an orderly process" or if rates went high enough to limit borrowing and spending and slow the economy.

Under questioning from Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., Yellen said Congress should allot more money to the IRS so the tax collection agency could reduce tax evasion. The amount of uncollected taxes is referred to as the "tax gap" and the issue received more attention this week after the release of research showing that the richest 1% of Americans may be sheltering up to 20% of their income from taxation.

"The tax gap is huge," Yellen said, "and I think we would have a fairer tax system and collect more tax

revenue without the need to raise (tax) rates if we resourced the IRS properly.”

Pope, citing pandemic effect, cuts pay for cardinals, others

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Trying to save jobs as the pandemic pummels Vatican revenues, Pope Francis has ordered pay cuts for cardinals and other clerics, as well as nuns, who work at the Holy See.

In a decree published online Wednesday by the Vatican's official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, Francis said that starting in April cardinals' salaries will be reduced 10%. Superiors of the Holy See's various departments, who, with few exceptions, are clerics, will be hit by 8% cuts while lower-ranking priests and nuns will see 3% vanish from their paychecks.

In the decree he signed on Tuesday, the pope noted that the Holy See's finances have been marked by several years of deficit. Worsening those financial woes, the pope wrote, was the COVID-19 pandemic, "which has impacted negatively on all the sources of revenue of the Holy See and Vatican City State."

The belt-tightening "has the aim of saving current job positions," Francis wrote.

Lower-ranking lay-workers at the Vatican aren't affected by the salary reductions, but their pay raises, due every two years, are being temporarily frozen under the austerity measures. The lowest-paid lay workers will still get raise, though.

Bans on tourism by many countries and other pandemic restrictions have severely reduced revenues at the Vatican Museums, which, with its Sistine Chapel, is a perennial money-maker for the Vatican,

The Museums opened for some weeks during the pandemic when the situation in Italy improved. But with tourists from the United States and some other countries banned from entering Italy, the museums' cavernous rooms were eerily uncrowded in the pandemic.

The Museums are currently closed and will stay closed at least through the upcoming Holy Week, which normally is one of Rome's heaviest periods for tourism.

Earlier this month, the Vatican said it has nearly used up its financial reserves from past donations to cover budget deficits over recent years. It has predicted a 50-million-euro (\$60 million) deficit for this year.

Pandemic safety measures have seen many churches shuttered or limiting the number of faithful — many of whom leave monetary donations during services — who can enter.

The Vatican's economy minister has said that the dwindled Museums revenue, as well as a drop in what Catholics donate, would contribute to a projected 30% reduction in revenue this year.

The pay cuts also apply to several Vatican basilicas in Rome as well as to the Vicariate, or diocese of Rome, which is under the pope's direction.

Cardinals, other clerics and well as nuns in Rome generally don't have expenses most lay people have, like market-value rents or mortgages, utility and heating bills, since many reside in housing owned by the Vatican or religious orders.

Some cardinals have spacious, well-appointed apartments in historic palazzi in Rome. A cardinal on the Vatican staff could earn close to 5,000 euros ((\$6,000) monthly, according to those familiar with Holy See hierarchy.

In any case, Francis noted, the salary reductions won't apply to anyone who can document that the cuts will make it "impossible to meet fixed expenses related to their health conditions" or those of close relatives.

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

Homeschooling doubled from pandemic's start to last fall

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The rate of households homeschooling their children doubled from the start of the pandemic last spring to the start of the new school year last September, according to a new U.S. Census

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 80 of 90

Bureau report released this week.

Last spring, about 5.4% of all U.S. households with school-aged children were homeschooling them, but that figure rose to 11% by last fall, according to the bureau's Household Pulse Survey.

The survey purposefully asked the question in a way to clarify that it was inquiring about genuine homeschooling and not virtual learning through a public or private school, the Census Bureau said.

Before the pandemic, household homeschooling rates had remained steady at around 3.3% through the past several years.

"It's clear that in an unprecedented environment, families are seeking solutions that will reliably meet their health and safety needs, their childcare needs and the learning and socio-emotional needs of their children," the report said.

Nearly half of the nation's elementary schools were open for full-time classroom learning as of last month, but the share of students learning in-person has varied greatly by region and by race, with most nonwhite students learning entirely online, according to results released Wednesday from a national survey conducted by the Biden administration.

Like the school openings, homeschooling differed by race and region, with the report attributing variations to local rates of coronavirus infections and local decisions about how school was being conducted during the pandemic.

Black households saw the largest jump in rates of homeschooling, going from 3.3% in the spring to 16.1% in the fall. The rate for Hispanic households of any race went from 6.2% to 12.1%. It went from 4.9% to 8.8% for Asian households, and from 5.7% to 9.7% for non-Hispanic white households.

Some states saw bigger jumps than others. Alaska went from 9.6% of households to 27.5% of households. In Florida, the rate jumped from 5% to 18.1%, and it grew in Vermont from 4.1% to 16.9%.

Even Massachusetts, which has some of the nation's best public schools, went from 1.5% of households to 12.1% of households with school-aged children homeschooling.

Among the nation's largest metro areas, Detroit, Phoenix and Boston had the largest increases.

The Household Pulse Survey was created by the Census Bureau last year to provide real-time data on the effect of the new coronavirus on the lives of U.S. households.

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

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

New virus variant detected in India; experts urge caution

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — A new and potentially troublesome variant of the coronavirus has been detected in India, as have variants first detected in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil, health officials said Wednesday.

Health Ministry officials and experts, however, cautioned against linking the variants with an ongoing surge in new infections in India.

Cases in India had been plummeting since September and life was returning to normal. But cases began spiking last month and more than 47,000 new infections were detected in the past 24 hours, along with 275 deaths — the highest one-day death toll in more than four months.

The virus has been mutating throughout the pandemic. Most mutations are trivial, but scientists have been investigating which ones might make the virus spread more easily or make people sicker.

The three variants first detected in South Africa, Britain and Brazil are considered the most worrisome and have been designated "variants of concern." The three variants were found in 7% of the nearly 11,000 samples that India sequenced since Dec. 30. The most widespread of these was the more contagious variant that was detected in the U.K. last year.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 81 of 90

The new variant found in India has two mutations in the spiky protein that the virus uses to fasten itself to cells, said Dr. Rakesh Mishra, the director of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, one of the 10 research institutes sequencing the virus.

He added that these genetic tweaks could be of concern since they might help the virus spread more easily and escape the immune system, but he cautioned against linking it to the surge.

The Health Ministry said in a statement that the variant was found in 15%-20% of the samples sequenced from Maharashtra state. The state, which is home to India's financial capital, has been worst hit by the recent surge and accounts for over 60% of all active cases in India.

In Maharashtra's Nagpur city, the infections caused by this new variant were in those parts of the city that had, so far, been least affected, said Dr. Sujeet Singh, the chief of the National Centre for Disease Control in New Delhi.

"The susceptible pool of population ... was substantially large," Singh added.

Meanwhile health officials admitted that they were worried about upcoming festivals, many of which mark the advent of the spring. India's government has written to states to consider imposing restrictions, but many celebrants have defied distancing and virus protocols.

That laxity and the sluggish vaccine rollout are the most worrisome, said Dr. Vineeta Bal, of India's National Institute of Immunology. She said that, unlike last year, the virus was spreading through richer neighborhoods, infecting families who had managed to stay protected in their homes earlier. Now, people are less fearful and letting their guard down. Masks are being worn, "but the masks are protecting people's beards, rather than their noses," she said.

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

Central Europe's hospitals slammed, can't treat all in need

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland recorded its highest daily number of new coronavirus infections Wednesday as hospitals buckle under a new surge. Hungary has the highest per capita death rate in the world. And Romanian doctors are working around the clock and having to decide who does — and doesn't — get a bed in an intensive care unit.

The coronavirus pandemic is unleashing enormous suffering as infection rates rise across central Europe even as the Czech Republic and Slovakia — recently among the worst-hit areas in the world — are finally seeing some improvements following tight lockdowns.

In Poland, officials say this "third wave" of the pandemic is driven by the highly contagious virus variant first detected in Britain, which now makes up most of the new cases. The country's vaccine rollout is happening far too slowly to hold back this powerful wave of illness and deaths.

With 38 million people, Poland announced 575 new deaths on Wednesday and nearly 30,000 new infections — surpassing a record for new cases set in November.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, warning that the worst is yet to come, said the country will have even stricter restrictions for a two-week period before and after Easter. This comes with the country already in a nationwide lockdown that has closed nonessential shops and sent all school children into remote learning.

Poland's health care system is under greater pressure now than at any time in the pandemic. Polish media this week have reported on hospitals so overwhelmed that they are forced to put extra beds in corridors. Maternity wards have been suddenly turned into COVID-19 wards, forcing women to change plans for where they will be giving birth. At least one hospital director has banned staff from taking vacations.

Ambulances in Poland have been waiting for hours in front of hospitals to unload their patients or have had to transport patients to distant facilities.

Morawiecki said younger people — those under 50 and even some under 40 — are making up a larger

share of those hospitalized than ever before. Among them now is 49-year-old Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, who unsuccessfully challenged President Andrzej Duda in an election last year.

In Hungary, a surge of infections has produced the highest death rate per 1 million inhabitants in the world in recent days, and daily record-breaking numbers of COVID-19 patients being treated in hospitals has led to a severe strain on the country's health care system.

That comes even though Hungary is among the European Union countries with the highest vaccination rates, thanks to its reliance on Chinese and Russian vaccines in addition to those approved by the EU.

Facing a lack of qualified medical staff to treat the nearly 12,000 COVID-19 patients now hospitalized, Hungary has authorized medical students to come in to help. Some Hungarian hospitals have also sought volunteers to assist nurses and doctors in COVID-19 wards, giving training sessions to those without medical backgrounds.

"The majority of hospital wards have become COVID wards, intensive wards are exponentially overloaded, operating rooms have shut down and their ventilators are occupied by COVID patients fighting for their lives. We've run out of available health care workers and the hospitals are looking for volunteers to help," the Hungarian Chamber of Doctors wrote.

In Romania, record high numbers of patients in ICU units have been recorded on consecutive days this week.

"This is the most pressure we've felt," says Roxana Patulea, a 28-year-old ICU doctor at the Ploiesti Emergency Jupiter Hospital and Bucharest University Emergency Hospital.

"Despite the vaccine, there are many more patients than during the second wave and there are no beds in ICU. It's sad — often we have to choose patients according to the criteria of severity or age," she told The Associated Press.

Patulea said she and her colleagues have been working 24-hour shifts during this surge, snatching bits of sleep in between night-time emergencies.

Meanwhile, infections have also soared in past weeks in many Balkan countries, which have responded by tightening lockdown restrictions. Health authorities warn that the systems are so overburdened and medical workers are so exhausted after a year of extreme pressure that patients are not receiving optimal care.

"The pressure on our hospital is huge," said Dr. Tatjana Adzic Vukicevic, who runs a newly built coronavirus facility outside Belgrade. "It cannot be described with words, we are putting in extreme efforts."

Associated Press writers Justin Spike in Budapest, Hungary; Stephen McGrath in Sighisoara, Romania; Karel Janicek in Prague; and Jovana Gec in Belgrade, Serbia, contributed to this report.

Cosmic mouthful: Tasters savor fine wine that orbited Earth

By MASHA MACPHERSON and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

BORDEAUX, France (AP) — It tastes like rose petals. It smells like a campfire. It glistens with a burnt-orange hue. What is it? A 5,000-euro bottle of Petrus Pomerol wine that spent a year in space.

Researchers in Bordeaux are analyzing a dozen bottles of the precious liquid — along with 320 snippets of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon grapevines — that returned to Earth in January after a sojourn aboard the International Space Station.

They announced their preliminary impressions Wednesday — mainly, that weightlessness didn't ruin the wine and it seemed to energize the vines.

Organizers say it's part of a longer-term effort to make plants on Earth more resilient to climate change and disease by exposing them to new stresses, and to better understand the aging process, fermentation and bubbles in wine.

At a one-of-a-kind tasting this month, 12 connoisseurs sampled one of the space-traveled wines, blindly tasting it alongside a bottle from the same vintage that had stayed in a cellar.

A special pressurized device delicately uncorked the bottles at the Institute for Wine and Vine Research in Bordeaux. The tasters solemnly sniffed, stared and eventually, sipped.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 83 of 90

"I have tears in my eyes," Nicolas Gaume, CEO and co-founder of the company that arranged the experiment, Space Cargo Unlimited, told The Associated Press.

Alcohol and glass are normally prohibited on the International Space Station, so each bottle was packed inside a special steel cylinder during the journey.

At a news conference Wednesday, Gaume said the experiment focused on studying the lack of gravity — which "creates tremendous stress on any living species" — on the wine and vines.

"We are only at the beginning," he said, calling the preliminary results "encouraging."

Jane Anson, a wine expert and writer with the wine publication *Decanter*, said the wine that remained on Earth tasted "a little younger than the one that had been to space."

Chemical and biological analysis of the wine's aging process could allow scientists to find a way to artificially age fine vintages, said Dr. Michael Lebert, a biologist at Germany's Friedrich-Alexander-University who was consulted on the project.

The vine snippets — known as canes in the grape-growing world — not only survived the journey but also grew faster than vines on Earth, despite limited light and water.

Once the researchers determine why, Lebert said that could help scientists develop sturdier vines on Earth — and pave the way for grape-growing and wine-making in space.

Christophe Chateau of the Bordeaux Wine-Makers' Council welcomed the research as "a good thing for the industry," but predicted it would take a decade or more to lead to practical applications. Chateau, who was not involved in the project, described ongoing efforts to adjust grape choices and techniques to adapt to ever-warmer temperatures.

"The wine of Bordeaux is a wine that gets its singularity from its history but also from its innovations," he told The AP. "And we should never stop innovating."

Private investors helped fund the project, which the researchers hope to continue on further space missions. The cost wasn't disclosed.

For the average earthling, the main question is: What does cosmic wine taste like?

"For me, the difference between the space and earth wine ... it wasn't easy to define," said Franck Dubourdieu, a Bordeaux-based agronomist and oenologist, an expert in the study of wine and wine-making.

Researchers said each of the 12 panelists had an individual reaction. Some observed "burnt-orange reflections." Others evoked aromas of cured leather or a campfire.

"The one that had remained on Earth, for me, was still a bit more closed, a bit more tannic, a bit younger. And the one that had been up into space, the tannins had softened, the side of more floral aromatics came out," Anson said.

But whether the vintage was space-flying or earthbound, she said, "They were both beautiful."

Charlton reported from Paris. Nicolas Garriga in Bordeaux contributed.

Masks and gloves are saving lives — and causing pollution

By HAVEN DALEY Associated Press

PACIFICA, Calif. (AP) — Disposable masks, gloves and other types of personal protective equipment are safeguarding untold lives during the coronavirus pandemic. They're also creating a worldwide pollution problem, littering streets and sending an influx of harmful plastic and other waste into landfills, sewage systems and oceans.

In Northern California, environmental groups are tracking the issue along the coast — and trying to do something about it.

The Pacific Beach Coalition recently noticed a dramatic increase in discarded PPE on beaches in and around the city of Pacifica, south of San Francisco, where it's been doing monthly cleanups for nearly 25 years.

Volunteers record what they pick up to gauge what might end up in the ocean. Until 2020, the litter was mostly cigarette butts and food wrappers.

"What are we going to do? We got masks. We got gloves. We got all those hand wipes, the sani wipes.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 84 of 90

They're everywhere. They're in my neighborhood, in my streets. What can we do?" asked Lynn Adams, the coalition's president.

The group and others are calling attention to the issue, saying what's recorded is likely only a fraction of the personal protective equipment hitting beaches and oceans.

Larger mammals can ingest PPE, and plastic from the items can disrupt the ocean's food chains. "They're all made of plastic," Adams said.

A report last year by the advocacy group OceansAsia found nearly 1.6 billion masks would flood oceans in 2020 alone, based on global production estimates and other factors. OceansAsia said masks could take as long as 450 years to break down.

The Marine Mammal Center, a conservation group that rescues and rehabilitates mammals, conducts research and provides education, said animals can get trapped in discarded PPE, or mistake it for food.

"Obviously, PPE is critical right now, but we know that with increased amounts of plastic and a lot of this stuff getting out into the ocean, it can be a really big threat to marine mammals and all marine life," said the center's conservation educator, Adam Ratner.

One small thing Ratner suggests is cutting the loops before discarding a mask, which can help prevent animals from getting tangled in them.

Sophia Woehl was among those volunteering in the cleanup at a beach in Pacifica last week.

"We want to keep ourselves safe, but we also want to keep the rest of the environment safe, too, and we're not doing that right now with just leaving them on the ground," she said.

Associated Press writer Juliet Williams contributed to this report.

AP journalist Thein Zaw released from detention in Myanmar

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Thein Zaw, a journalist for The Associated Press who was arrested more than three weeks ago while covering a protest against the coup in Myanmar, was released from detention on Wednesday.

Visibly thinner than before his arrest, Thein Zaw waved and smiled to photographers as he left Yangon's Insein Prison, notorious for decades for holding political prisoners.

His brothers and best friend took him home, which is an area of Yangon that has been placed under martial law. He told the AP that his mother told him through tears: "We thought we'd never see you again."

Thein Zaw had earlier said that the judge in his case announced at a court hearing that all charges against him were being dropped because he was doing his job at the time of his arrest.

He said that while in prison he was "worried every day," and last week he marked his 33rd birthday behind bars.

Despite his relief, he said he was concerned about the many journalists who remain imprisoned.

"Thanks to all who tried so hard for my release," he said. "But one thing that upsets me is that there are some people who are still inside, and I hope that they can get out as soon as possible."

Thein Zaw's father, Ba Win, greeted him with shampoo because it is local custom that people returning from prison must wash their hair before entering the house. His parents prepared pork curry and fish curry for his first meal at home.

His release was also emotional for lawyer Tin Zar Oo, who said she cried and jumped for joy when the judge announced the charges were being dropped.

"I was so happy. Thein Zaw looked at me, and I was even at a loss for words when they asked me if I had anything to say," she said. "I hugged Thein Zaw, and we both cried with joy."

Her client had been charged with violating a public order law that carries a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment.

He was one of nine media workers taken into custody during a Feb. 27 street protest in Yangon, the country's largest city, and had been held without bail. About 40 journalists have been detained or charged since the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, roughly half of whom

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 85 of 90

remain behind bars.

Authorities have also arrested thousands of protesters since the takeover as part of an increasingly brutal crackdown. On Wednesday, more than 600 demonstrators were released, a rare conciliatory gesture by the military that appeared aimed at placating the protest movement.

The AP and many press freedom organizations have called for the release of Thein Zaw and the other detained members of the press.

"The Associated Press is deeply relieved that AP journalist Thein Zaw has been freed from prison in Myanmar," said Ian Phillips, AP vice president for international news. "Our relief is tempered by the fact that additional journalists there remain detained. We urge Myanmar to release all journalists and allow them to report freely and safely on what is happening inside the country."

Thein Zaw was arrested as he was photographing police, some of them armed, charging down a street at anti-coup protesters. A video shows that although he stepped to the side of the street to get out of their way, several police rushed over and surrounded him. One put him in a chokehold as he was handcuffed and then taken away.

Tin Zar Oo saw her client for the first time since his arrest at a hearing on March 12 at which his pre-trial detention was renewed — and even then it was through a video link.

The International Press Institute, headquartered in Vienna, welcomed the release, saying he "was detained for doing his job as a journalist and should never have been behind bars in the first place."

"Myanmar must now immediately release all other journalists it is holding," said Scott Griffen, the institute's deputy director. "The military junta must stop all forms of harassment and intimidation of media covering demonstrations against the coup and end restrictions on publication and broadcasting by media outlets in the country."

Democrats vow vote on gun bills; Biden says 'we have to act'

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats said they are pushing toward a vote on expanded gun control measures as the nation reels from its second mass shooting in a week. President Joe Biden said "we have to act," but prospects for any major changes were dim, for now, in the closely divided Congress.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer vowed Tuesday morning to bring to the Senate floor legislation passed by the House that would require background checks for most gun sales and transfers. He said the Senate "must confront a devastating truth" after a lack of congressional action on the issue for almost three decades.

"This Senate will be different," Schumer, D-N.Y., said a day after a shooting at a crowded Boulder, Colorado, supermarket, killed 10 people, including a police officer. "The Senate is going to debate and address the epidemic of gun violence in this country."

While a Senate vote on new gun control would be the first in several years, Democrats do not have the votes to pass any significant reform. They are not even united themselves, as Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., told reporters Tuesday that he opposes the House legislation on background checks.

The Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing Tuesday on proposals for gun control. It is unclear whether any of the bills up for consideration — most of them involving more restrictive background checks — would have made a difference in the Colorado case. A 21-year-old man charged with killing eight people in the Atlanta area last week had purchased a 9 mm handgun hours before the murders, prompting advocates to push for longer waiting periods for purchases.

In brief remarks responding to the shooting, Biden urged Congress to move quickly to close the loopholes in the background check system and to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines — an effort that would be even more difficult to achieve politically. According to a police affidavit, the Colorado shooter had purchased an assault rifle six days earlier.

"It should not be a partisan issue," Biden said. "This is an American issue. It will save lives, American lives."

Vice President Kamala Harris said Wednesday in an interview with CBS News that Biden would not ex-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 86 of 90

clude taking executive action on gun control measures, but "if we really want something that is going to be lasting, we need to pass legislation."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who has aggressively pushed for expanded gun control since the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that killed 20 children and six educators, expressed optimism about the chances for new laws with Biden in the White House and Democrats controlling the House and the Senate. He called it "the dawn of a new era."

Reality is likely more complicated. Senate Democrats do not currently have deep enough support among Republicans to pass new gun control legislation in the 50-50 Senate, as they would need 60 votes to do so. While expanding background checks is generally popular with the American public, even with some conservatives, Congress has been unable to find a successful compromise on guns in decades, making it one of the most intractable issues in American politics.

The gun debate also highlights a larger difficulty for Senate Democrats as they try to move forward on gun legislation and other policy priorities of the Biden White House. With the filibuster in place, forcing a 60-vote threshold for most legislation, House-passed bills on issues like gun control and voting rights are effectively nonstarters unless Democrats secure significant GOP support.

Some Republicans hinted that they would be open to negotiations, though it was unclear if there were any real bipartisan discussions. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said he was opposed to the House legislation, but "I'm certainly open to the discussion."

Manchin and Republican Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania, who have worked together for years to find compromise on background checks, both said they were opposed to the House legislation, which would close loopholes to ensure background checks are extended to private and online sales that often go undetected, including at gun shows, with some limited exemptions for family and other scenarios. A similar version Manchin and Toomey proposed just after the Sandy Hook shootings included a broader set of exemptions than the House bill.

The House also passed a second bill to extend a certain review period for background checks from three to 10 days. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., introduced the legislation after a shooter killed nine people at a Charleston, South Carolina, church in 2015.

Toomey said he would like to find legislation that could pass, but "that probably would require something that's a little bit different. So, we'll see if we can figure out how to thread that needle."

Manchin did not say whether he would restart negotiations, only that "we're going to try to do the responsible, reasonable thing."

Schumer and Connecticut Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy, a leading advocate for gun control, said they would meet this week to discuss a path forward. Schumer has not said when he will bring the House legislation up for a vote.

Democrats say they feel the environment around gun legislation has evolved, especially since that last major push in 2013. They point to troubles at the National Rifle Association, the long-powerful advocacy group that poured tens of millions of dollars into electing Donald Trump in 2016. The organization has been weakened by infighting as well as legal tangles over its finances.

"This is the moment to make our stand. NOW," tweeted Murphy as details of the Colorado shooting emerged Monday evening. "Today, our movement is stronger than the gun lobby. They are weak. We are potent. Finally, a President and a Congress that supports gun reform."

Democrats are hoping there is a gradual political shift among voters as well. A Pew Research Center poll in September 2019 showed a wide majority of Americans, 88%, supported making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks, which is what the House-passed bill would do. Ninety-three percent of Democrats and 82% of Republicans were in favor of the policy.

Many in the GOP base are still strongly opposed to gun control of any kind. In Tuesday's hearing, which was scheduled before the Colorado shooting, Republicans showed no signs of wavering. Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said that every time there is a shooting, the Senate engages in "ridiculous theater," with Democrats proposing laws that he said could take guns away from law-abiding citizens. Republicans have argued that

background checks would not stop most mass shootings and would prevent some lawful gun owners from purchasing firearms.

"We already know this pattern is predictable, over and over and over again," Cruz said.

Hong Kong halts use of Pfizer vaccine, cites defective lids

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong suspended use of the Pfizer vaccine Wednesday after its Chinese distributor informed the city that one batch had defective bottle lids.

The city's government said the suspension was immediate while the matter is investigated by distributor Fosun Pharma and BioNTech, the German company that created the vaccine with American pharmaceutical firm Pfizer.

BioNTech and Fosun Pharma have not found any reason to believe the product is unsafe, according to the statement. However, vaccinations will be halted as a preventive and safety measure.

The defective lids were found on vaccines from batch number 210102. A separate batch of vaccines, 210104, will also be not be administered.

The semi-autonomous territory of Macao also said Wednesday that its residents will not receive the Pfizer shots from the same batch.

The vaccines from the batch comprise a total of 585,000 doses, with the other batch number 210104 holding 758,000 doses, according to Hong Kong's Director of Health Constance Chan.

Although about 150,000 doses from the batch 210102 have been administered in the city so far, officials said during a press briefing Wednesday that the vaccines were safe to use despite the packaging defects, and that suspending the vaccination was a precautionary measure. Batch number 210104 remains in the warehouse and has not been used.

Chan said that there were over 40 instances when medical personnel found defective packaging, such as cracks on the vaccine bottles or leakages when the vaccine was diluted with saline before being administered.

None of these vaccines were given to residents and they were thrown away, officials said.

"Fosun has promised to carry out an immediate investigation so they are going to approach the manufacturer in Germany to look into their plant," Chan said. "When the vaccines arrive in Hong Kong, they will have a review of the whole logistics chain to see if that's the cause of the current situation."

She said that officials are urging manufacturers to give a report as soon as possible to check if the batches of vaccines in Hong Kong can be used, otherwise the manufacturers will have to deliver another batch of shots as soon as possible.

Residents who are slated to receive their second Pfizer dose starting on Saturday should get the second shot administered as soon as possible, if new vaccines arrive in Hong Kong after the recommended 19- to 42-day window following the first dose.

BioNTech said in a statement that it had launched an investigation to find the "root cause" of the vaccine packaging issues. It said the investigation would look into the entire supply chain of the vaccines from the time the vials were filled all the way to their handling at vaccination centers.

"The safety of our vaccinees and patients is of utmost importance to BioNTech," the statement said. "At this point, we have no reason to believe there is any safety risk posed to the population."

The company also said that no other region aside from Hong Kong and Macao had been supplied with doses from the affected batch.

Fosun Pharma said in a filing to the Hong Kong stock exchange that it received notice from BioNTech regarding the packaging defects on Tuesday night and informed Hong Kong and Macao authorities on Wednesday to temporarily suspend the vaccines.

The suspension of the Pfizer jab means the only vaccine currently offered to residents is China's Sinovac. The two vaccines are the only ones that were offered to residents in Hong Kong.

German expatriate Jannis Partsafas was among a group of people who received the Pfizer shot ahead

of the suspension.

"I got vaccinated this morning at 8.30 a.m. before the news went public about the vaccine suspension, and heard the news when I was on my way home," said 32-year-old Partsafas, who works in the sporting goods industry.

"I'm not very concerned about the safety, but I am worried that this may mean more people will turn down the option of getting vaccinated in Hong Kong which would impact herd immunity and the lifting of social-distancing measures," he said.

Some residents who had appointments to receive the Pfizer shots stood in line outside a community center in the city's Sai Ying Pun neighborhood at about 10.30 a.m. They eventually left when it became clear the vaccines would not be administered.

As of 8 p.m. Tuesday, 403,000 people had received vaccines in the city, of which 150,200 had received the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine, compared with 252,800 who had taken the Sinovac jab.

Tight Israeli vote means Arab Islamist could choose next PM

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — After a hard-fought election, an Arab Islamist could choose Israel's next prime minister. You read that correctly.

Tuesday's elections have left a razor-thin margin between a right-wing coalition led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a diverse array of parties bent on ousting him.

To prevail, each side may need the support of an Arab Islamist party that appears to have clinched just five seats in the 120-member Knesset but is not committed to either, according to near-final results.

That means the United Arab List, known by the Hebrew name Ra'am, could decide whether Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, remains in office.

It's an odd predicament for Netanyahu, who rose to power by rejecting compromise with the Palestinians and has used racist rhetoric in past campaigns to cast the country's Arab minority as a fifth column of terrorist sympathizers.

This time, however, in Israel's fourth elections in two years, Netanyahu sought Arab support in what many saw as a two-pronged strategy aimed at picking up votes and splitting the Joint List, an alliance of Arab parties that won a record 15 seats in elections last year.

If so, he succeeded, convincing Mansour Abbas, the leader of the United Arab List, to run a separate list. Now Abbas appears to hold the keys to the kingdom.

Israelis vote for party lists rather than individual candidates, and seats are apportioned out based on the percentage of votes received. No single party has ever won a 61-seat majority, so larger parties must assemble governing coalitions — often with fringe parties.

With around 88% of votes counted, Netanyahu and his natural allies, and the bloc opposing him, each lack a 61-seat majority in the Knesset.

Unless another party decides to switch sides, each would need Abbas' support to form a government and avoid yet another round of elections.

Unlike other Arab leaders, Abbas has not ruled out working with the Likud or other right-wing parties if he can secure gains for the Arab community, which faces widespread discrimination, mounting poverty amid the coronavirus pandemic and a wave of violent crime.

Arab parties have never asked to serve in an Israeli government or been invited to do so. Abbas could break with that tradition, potentially requesting a Cabinet post in return for his support. More likely, he would not hold an official post, but instead support the coalition from outside the government in return for greater public investment in housing, infrastructure and law enforcement in Arab communities.

In an interview with Army Radio on Wednesday, Abbas reiterated that he did not rule out joining either side and hinted at bolder ambitions. "We want to use not only parliamentary tools, but Cabinet tools to accomplish things for the benefit of Arab society," he said.

That may be difficult to pull off. Netanyahu's coalition would also have to include the Religious Zionist

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 89 of 90

Party, whose leading candidates are openly racist. The differences between Abbas and the far-right group would be difficult to bridge.

In a TV interview Wednesday, Abbas said the Religious Zionists were “not the address” for solving the political standoff.

There’s also a chance that Naftali Bennett, a right-wing leader who also remains uncommitted, throws his support behind the anti-Netanyahu bloc. In that case, it could dispense with the UAL if it maintained the support of the larger Arab Joint List. Netanyahu could also potentially form a coalition without the UAL if he convinces members of the other bloc to defect.

Abbas hails from the Islamic Movement, which was established in 1971 along the lines of the pan-Arab Muslim Brotherhood group. Its primary aim is the Islamization of Arab society, which it pursues through religious outreach and a vast network of charities.

The group split into two branches in 1996 over the question of whether to participate in politics.

The more radical northern branch, led by the firebrand cleric Raed Salah, rejects participation in Israeli politics and has been accused of having close ties to Hamas, the Palestinian militant group that also emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood. Salah has been arrested on a number of occasions, and is currently in jail after being convicted of inciting terrorism. Israel outlawed his group in 2015, accusing it of inciting violence.

The southern branch, to which Abbas belongs, has adopted a conciliatory stance toward Israel and is focused more on socio-economic issues than the conflict with the Palestinians. It has allied with secular and left-wing Arab parties in past elections, but has broken with them on issues related to its religious conservatism, such as support for LGBTQ rights.

Arabs make up around 20% of Israel’s population of 9.3 million. They have citizenship, speak fluent Hebrew and are well-represented in the medical profession and at universities.

But they face widespread discrimination in housing and public services. In recent years they have held regular protests condemning violent crime and accusing Israeli authorities of failing to do enough to protect their communities, allegations rejected by the police.

Israel’s Arab citizens have close family ties to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and largely identify with the Palestinian cause. That has led many Israeli Jews to view them with suspicion, something Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders have capitalized on in previous elections.

Ahead of polls in 2015, Netanyahu drew criticism after warning his supporters that Arabs were voting “in droves.” In 2019 he pushed for the placement of observers and cameras at polling stations in Arab areas, which critics said was an attempt to intimidate voters.

It remains to be seen whether those remarks will come back to haunt him.

Another victory would extend his 12 years in power — already the longest in Israeli history. Defeat would likely mean the end of his political career and leave him increasingly vulnerable to prosecution and potentially jail time as his trial on corruption charges proceeds. Or the country could plunge into another election campaign, prolonging two years of deadlock.

Abbas could decide which path awaits.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, March 25, the 84th day of 2021. There are 281 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On March 25, 1911, 146 people, mostly young female immigrants, were killed when fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. in New York.

On this date:

In 1634, English colonists sent by Lord Baltimore arrived in present-day Maryland.

In 1776, Gen. George Washington, commander of the Continental Army, was awarded the first Congressional Gold Medal by the Continental Congress.

In 1915, the U.S. Navy lost its first commissioned submarine as the USS F-4 sank off Hawaii, claiming

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 25, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 262 ~ 90 of 90

the lives of all 21 crew members.

In 1931, in the so-called "Scottsboro Boys" case, nine young Black men were taken off a train in Alabama, accused of raping two white women; after years of convictions, death sentences and imprisonment, the nine were eventually vindicated.

In 1947, a coal-dust explosion inside the Centralia Coal Co. Mine No. 5 in Washington County, Illinois, claimed 111 lives; 31 men survived.

In 1954, RCA announced it had begun producing color television sets at its plant in Bloomington, Indiana.

In 1963, private pilot Ralph Flores and his 21-year-old passenger, Helen Klaben, were rescued after being stranded for seven weeks in brutally cold conditions in the Yukon after their plane crashed.

In 1965, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led 25,000 people to the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery after a five-day march from Selma to protest the denial of voting rights to Blacks. Later that day, civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit homemaker, was shot and killed by Ku Klux Klansmen.

In 1985, "Amadeus" won eight Academy Awards, including best picture, best director for Milos (MEE'-lohsh) Forman and best actor for F. Murray Abraham.

In 1987, the Supreme Court, in Johnson v. Transportation Agency, ruled 6-3 that an employer could promote a woman over an arguably more-qualified man to help get women into higher-ranking jobs.

In 1988, in New York City's so-called "Preppie Killer" case, Robert Chambers Jr. pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in the death of 18-year-old Jennifer Levin. (Chambers received 5 to 15 years in prison; he was released in 2003 after serving the full sentence.)

In 1990, 87 people, most of them Honduran and Dominican immigrants, were killed when fire raced through an illegal social club in New York City.

Ten years ago: Canadian opposition parties brought down the Conservative government in a no-confidence vote, triggering an election that gave Prime Minister Stephen Harper a clear Conservative majority in Parliament.

Five years ago: A suicide bomber believed to be a teenager blew himself up in a soccer stadium south of the Iraqi capital, killing 29 people and wounding 60. The Rolling Stones unleashed two hours of thundering rock and roll on an ecstatic crowd of hundreds of thousands of Cubans and foreign visitors in Havana; the free concert came two days after President Barack Obama concluded his historic visit to Cuba.

One year ago: The Senate unanimously passed a \$2.2 trillion economic rescue package steering aid to businesses, workers and health care systems engulfed by the coronavirus pandemic; the largest economic relief bill in U.S. history included direct payments to most Americans, expanded unemployment benefits and \$367 billion for small businesses to keep making payroll while workers were forced to stay home. The number of U.S. deaths from the pandemic topped 1,000. Spain's death toll rose past 3,400, eclipsing China's, after a one-day spike of 700 fatalities. Royal officials said Britain's Prince Charles had tested positive for the coronavirus. Pennsylvania lawmakers voted to delay the state's primary by five weeks to June 2. With Broadway theaters dark, the Tony Awards, set for June 7, were postponed.

Today's Birthdays: Film critic Gene Shalit is 95. Former astronaut James Lovell is 93. Feminist activist and author Gloria Steinem is 87. Singer Anita Bryant is 81. Actor Paul Michael Glaser is 78. Singer Sir Elton John is 74. Actor Bonnie Bedelia is 73. Actor-comedian Mary Gross is 68. Actor James McDaniel is 63. Movie producer Amy Pascal is 63. Rock musician Steve Norman (Spandau Ballet) is 61. Actor Brenda Strong is 61. Actor Fred Goss is 60. Actor-writer-director John Stockwell is 60. Actor Marcia Cross is 59. Author Kate DiCamillo is 57. Actor Lisa Gay Hamilton is 57. Actor Sarah Jessica Parker is 56. Baseball Hall of Famer Tom Glavine is 55. TV personality Ben Mankiewicz is 54. Olympic bronze medal figure skater Debi Thomas is 54. Actor Laz Alonso is 50. Singer Melanie Blatt (All Saints) is 46. Actor Domenick Lombardozzi is 45. Actor Lee Pace is 42. Actor Sean Faris is 39. Comedian-actor Alex Moffat (TV: "Saturday Night Live") is 39. Former auto racer Danica Patrick is 39. Actor-singer Katharine McPhee is 37. Comedian-actor Chris Redd (TV: "Saturday Night Live") is 36. Singer Jason Castro is 34. Rapper Big Sean is 33. Rap DJ-producer Ryan Lewis is 33. Actor Matthew Beard is 32. Actor-singer Aly (AKA Alyson) Michalka (mish-AL'-kah) is 32. Actor Kiowa Gordon is 31. Actor Seychelle Gabriel is 30.