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"I CANNOT DO ALL THE GOOD THAT THE WORLD NEEDS. BUT THE WORLD NEEDS ALL THE GOOD THAT I CAN DO."

-JANA STANFIELD



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.



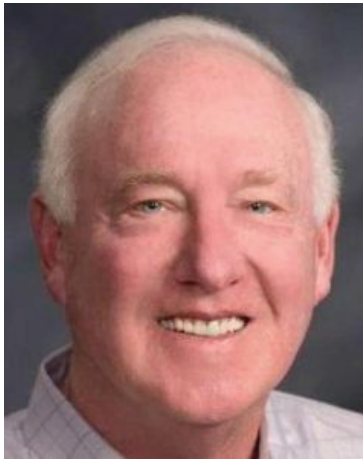
Lawmaker: South Dakota can implement medical marijuana program by November

By: Bart Pfankuch March 25, 2021

Despite failed attempts by South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to delay implementation of a medical marijuana program, a legislative leader on marijuana issues believes the state can be ready to roll out its first prescriptions for legal pot by Nov. 18, 2021, as scheduled.

Noem said the state needed more time to enact a well-designed regulatory framework, but her bill to put off the July 1, 2021, implementation date by a year failed in the Legislature.

The medical marijuana program, created by Initiated Measure 26, was approved by nearly 70% of voters in November 2020. IM 26 requires creation of a regulatory framework by the Department of Health within 120 days of its taking effect, or by Oct. 29, 2021, and issuance of the first medical marijuana prescription cards to patients within 140 days, or by Nov. 18, 2021.



Mike Derby

Rep. Mike Derby, head of the unofficial "Cannabis Caucus" in the Legislature, said the state should have sufficient time to develop and implement a program before the statutory deadlines.

"I believe that timeline is doable, and I feel good about it," said Derby, R-Rapid City. "I think we can do it in a responsible way and meet the wishes of the voters."

Experts say most states have taken a year to 18 months to fully implement a new medical marijuana program.

With passage of IM 26 taking place on Nov. 3, 2020, South Dakota will have had slightly more than a year to prepare for the issuance of the first prescriptions for medical marijuana. North Dakota recently took nearly two years to implement its medical marijuana program, while Minnesota took about 13 months to start its program.

Derby said the Legislature allocated roughly \$4 million to several state agencies to prepare for legalization of marijuana and has hired Cannabis Public Policy Consulting of Sudbury, Mass., to aid in preparation.

"We have had four months in the legislative session to look at this, and South Dakota has already hired one of the best consultants in the country," Derby said. "We in the Legislature always felt we could roll it out sooner."

Noem has created a medical marijuana work group to prepare for legalization, though little is known about

the group, its membership or its agenda.

Daniel Bucheli, spokesman for the state Department of Health, said the department is working behind the scenes to prepare for a rollout of medicinal pot.

"We are working through the many components needed to administer a responsible medical marijuana program in South Dakota," Bucheli wrote to News Watch on March 22.

Noem's office sent out a proposed series of amendments to IM 26 on March 22 that included a limit of three homegrown marijuana plants for patients, a ban on smokable marijuana for patients under 21 and a decriminalization of small amounts of marijuana, among other things. The governor's proposed compromise amendment does not include a delay of the program start date.

"I believe that timeline is doable, and I feel good about it ... I think we can do it in a responsible way and meet the wishes of the voters."

-- Rep. Mike Derby, R-Rapid City

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, R-Mobridge, said he had seen the governor's proposed amendments to IM 26 and noted that a special session of the Legislature would likely be needed to enact them.

The process to find common ground on medical marijuana legislation has been difficult so far, he said. "The whole thing is, the communications have been very, very rough between the governor's office and the Legislature when it comes to what exactly the ask is here," Gosch said on March 23. "There has not been an official ask and therefore it has not been on my radar."

South Dakota's legislation allows patients with certain medical conditions to get a card that allows them to obtain, possess and use medicinal marijuana.

South Dakota Initiated Measure 26 defines qualifying conditions as: a chronic or debilitating disease or medical condition or its treatment that produces one or more of the following: cachexia or wasting syndrome; severe, debilitating pain; severe nausea; seizures; or severe and persistent muscle spasms, including those characteristic of multiple sclerosis; or any other medical condition or its treatment added by the department.

Meanwhile, one representative of the state health-care industry said the medical community stands ready to respond to whatever rules are put in place regarding legalization of medical marijuana.

Tim Rave, president of the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations, noted that two of the industry group's largest members, Sanford and Avera health systems, already operate in neighboring states where medical marijuana is legal.

"Our positions as both individual members and as an association [have] always been that we will follow whatever the law is; we'll follow the curbs and gutters as they are set up," Rave said.

One goal for South Dakota medical providers will be to ensure they are following state laws while not violating federal laws, which do not recognize marijuana as a legal drug. Rave also said the medical community will provide input on a regulatory framework for medical marijuana if and when asked, even if tweaks to the program are needed well after implementation.

"We will plan an active role in putting our members' voices on the table in the rule-making process," he said. "Obviously we didn't get any potential changes made this legislative session, but that doesn't mean we can't come back next legislative session and advocate for anything we see that are challenges, because to be honest, some of this we may not know until it is up and running and we'll have to work through it as it comes up."

Governor Noem Proposes Medicinal Marijuana Fixes to Legislature

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem proposed three changes to Initiated Measure 26 (IM 26) to fix problems with the measure as drafted.

"As you know, IM 26 was passed by the voters in November 2020," Governor Noem wrote in a letter to legislators. "My administration is preparing to implement IM 26 when it takes effect on July 1. As we prepare to do that, there are three legislative changes that I would ask you to consider."

The proposed changes are:

Setting a maximum of three marijuana plants in a user's home, for personal medicinal use;

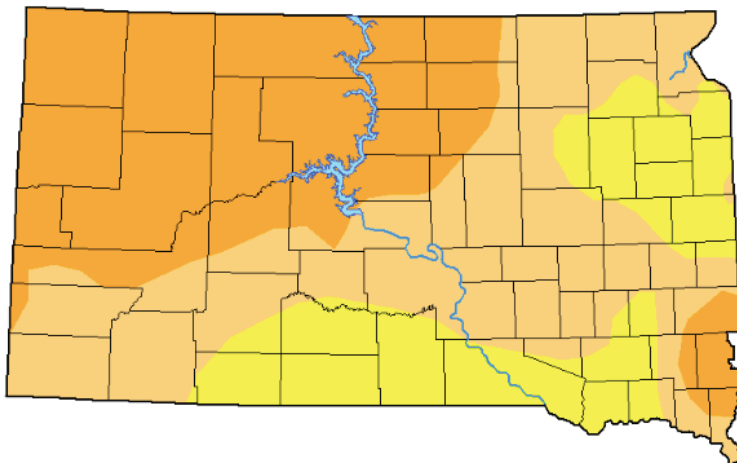
Prohibiting smoking or vaping for those under age 21;

Clarifying the Department of Health's "seed to sale" rulemaking authority.

Drought Monitor No change from last week

Map released: Thurs. March 25, 2021

Data valid: March 23, 2021 at 8 a.m. EDT



Intensity:

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

Author(s):

Brad Pugh, NOAA/CPC

High Plains

Frequent precipitation during the past two weeks continues to result in additional improvements to parts of the central Plains and central Rockies. 7-day total amounts (March 16-22) ranged from 1 to 3 inches, locally more, across a broad region including south-central Nebraska and much of Kansas. As of March 22, Grand Island Nebraska has received 6.95" so far this month which makes it the wettest March on record. The drought amelioration extends west to the central Rockies where numerous improvements were made including a two-category change from D3 to D1 in southwest El Paso County and southeast Teller County as SPIs are now D1 at all timescales. The removal of D3 in southeast Colorado and southwest Kansas was based on: SPIs are either neutral or positive dating back to 6 months and improving soil moisture conditions. In contrast to the major improvements across the central Rockies and central Plains during the past two weeks, persistent dryness continues to support additional expansion of D2 (severe) and D3 (extreme) drought across parts of North Dakota.

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Happy Spring, Tourism Partners & Friends!

I'm amazed at how quickly the month of March flew by. The official start of spring has already come and gone. That can only mean one thing: Peak summer travel is nearly upon us!

Like us, I am sure you are gearing up for what is promising to be a very good summer of travel in The Mount Rushmore State. Our marketing campaign, with a new theme this season of 'GO GREAT PLACES,' is running full speed in our target markets, and we're receiving a strong number of inquiries from all over the country. To read the latest news about our 2021 summer marketing campaign, please check out this press release we just issued this week. You can also learn more details about the campaign and see marketing examples.

Here is some of the latest news from your team in the Department of Tourism:

Well, we knew this day would eventually come, but we were hoping it was still a few years off. Chad Coppess, our incredible and gifted Visual Assets Manager, is retiring on June 8th! During his nearly 30 years with the department, Chad has taken thousands of photos, traveled thousands and thousands of miles, and has literally covered nearly every square inch of this state. His work has inspired millions around the globe to make our Great Faces and Great Places their vacation destination. Chad leaves behind an amazing photo legacy as well as some awfully humongous shoes to fill. Further down in this email, you will see a spotlight about Chad. Please take some time to read it and to send him a congratulatory email. We are certainly going to miss our colleague and friend!

With Chad's pending departure, we are looking for a new Visual Assets Manager! If you know of somebody who may fit the bill, please share this link featuring the job announcement and online application form. Applications are due April 1, 2021.

As we prepare to say goodbye to one awesome team member, we are beyond thrilled to WELCOME a new team member who is a familiar face to many of you! Erin Weinzettel recently joined our marketing team as our Global Marketing & Brand Manager. Erin previously oversaw our Tourism account at Lawrence & Schiller and knows our industry like the back of her hand. On top of that, she has a brilliant marketing mind. Erin is working directly on our campaigns and will also oversee our work with other state agencies, like Game, Fish and Parks. Below you will see more information about Erin. Please drop her a line and welcome her back to our industry!

The Governor's Tourism Advisory Board will be meeting in Pierre on Thursday, April 8th, at the Ramkota Hotel & Conference Center in Amphitheater #1. The meeting will begin at 9 a.m. Central and conclude at 3 p.m. Central. We are limiting in-person attendance at the meeting. If you have an interest in seeing if there is still room to join us, please email Harla Jessop.

The department will be conducting a webinar on shared rentals/short-term rentals in our state (Airbnb, VRBO, etc.) on April 6th at 10 a.m. Central. Doug Schinkel, director of the Business Tax Division at the Department of Revenue, will join us to discuss how short-term rental properties are taxed in our state and if they are 'playing by the rules' when it comes to state and local tax obligations. Register for the webinar [here](#).

Additionally, the department will also be conducting a webinar on April 20th and 21st to give an update to the industry on our work. We normally do these spring meetings in-person, but this year (and, hopefully, only this year!) we'll be providing the 'Spring Tourism Updates' online. Keep an eye out for a special email about this webinar and how to register.

Finally, we have some great outreach planned for National Travel and Tourism Week, May 2-8. In the coming days and weeks, you'll be seeing several special emails sharing what we have planned for this important week, so watch your inboxes for the latest news.

In closing, I'd like to share that we recently received the latest Key Travel Sentiment Indicators from our good friends at Longwoods International. This particular insight from future travelers really jumped out at us, and it's of the utmost importance as we head into our peak summer season. Longwoods shared:

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“Almost half of American travelers report that clear health and safety protocols, and especially masks and distancing requirements, are still very important to them when choosing their destination. Thus...DO NOT roll back your protocols too quickly...nor should your stakeholders stop promoting the extra steps you are taking to keep your visitors/communities as safe as possible.”

Let’s continue to be diligent and smart as we prepare for our summer influx of visitors. If we can be of any assistance to you as you begin to gear up for peak season, or if we can answer any questions you may have, don’t hesitate to reach out. I can always be contacted at James.Hagen@TravelSouthDakota.com.

Be well, friends!

Jim Hagen
Secretary of Tourism

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#397 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I had really hoped I would never have to say this again: Everything's up once more. There were 77,800 new cases reported today. We're now at 30,178,300, which is 0.3 percent more than yesterday. Hospitalizations are increased today too to 40,568. And there now have been 547,589 lives lost to this virus in the US, 0.3 percent more than yesterday. There were 1407 deaths reported today.

Here's my opening on Update #32 posted March 26, 2020 (actually very early on March 27—I was up late that night), one year ago today: "We mark today as the day the US overtook China as the epicenter of this pandemic. We should not have ended up here." We should not have: We had plenty of time to prepare; we just didn't do it. We were at 83,329 cases, another 22 percent increase from the day before, while China was at 81,782 with close to zero new local transmissions. Didn't take us long to catch up. They had one case for every 17,100 people, and we had one case for every 4000. New York and New Jersey were leading the country with a combined 53 percent of our cases; this situation persisted for months. Cases in New York City were doubling every three days: terrifying. Top 10 states were still accounting for over 80 percent of our cases, which left the rest of us feeling far too smug, to disastrous consequence in the end. Which feels pretty familiar. Nearly half of states were reporting more than 100 new cases per day. Chicago and Detroit were shaping up to be new hot spots.

We had lost 1222 people at this point, setting a new record for deaths reports in a day with 233. It's hard to remember when we thought that was a lot. We were still desperately short of testing, our biggest failing for months and months to come. Can't stop what you can't detect.

Worldwide, there were 510,108 cases with the US now proudly leading the way. Italy was in second place, and China in third. Dr. Ashisih Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, in a Facebook Live Q&A predicted on this day that we were in for the long haul. "This is not a virus that goes away in two weeks or four weeks or six weeks. We are going to be living with this, in one form or another, for 12 to 18 months if we are lucky." Not wrong there. Guy looks pretty damned smart to me. There had been 23,568 deaths worldwide on this day.

The federal government has stopped the distribution of an Eli Lilly monoclonal antibody treatment, bamlanivimab for solo use because it is not effective against variants B.1.427, B.1.429, and B.1.526. The first two of these were first detected in California, and the other in New York. Unless combined with another monoclonal antibody, we suspect this is not a good choice. You will recall that monoclonal antibodies are lab-made, highly-purified versions of an antibody we make in response to this virus. It may still be used with another Lilly monoclonal, etesevimab because these seem to be effective when used in combination. Lilly is working now to scale up production of etesevimab.

If I wanted to study viral transmission, I would want to study college students. They're transmission machines—living in dormitories and, no matter the guidelines, having more social contacts than most other folks. Apparently, I'm not alone in that because there's a new study getting underway in just this population. The work, sponsored by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, will look at 12,000 college students on select campuses across the country. Half of them will be vaccinated with the Moderna vaccine at the outset, and the other half will be vaccinated four months later. The participants, who will be followed for five months, will swab their noses daily for virus, give blood samples periodically for an antibody screen, and answer questions routinely through an app. The researchers expect to ask over 25,000 contacts of these students to swab their noses daily, give blood samples for antibody testing, and answer weekly questions too. The goal is to spot infections within a day or two of their occurrence and determine how long a person remains infectious to others, as well as to nail down whether or not fully vaccinated individuals can transmit virus. This one should be interesting to watch.

We've been hearing since early on about people whose sensory functions were disrupted by Covid-19; some 77 percent of patients experience a loss or disorder of the sense of smell, and since that is so intimately related to the sense of taste, frequently a loss there as well. Some people entirely lose their ability to smell, some have a muted sense, and others develop parosmia, a disorder in which scents are perceived

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as having a different, usually highly unpleasant, smell. What we think is going on is that the virus disrupts neural pathways between the sensory apparatus in your nose and the brain. The sense comes back for most people, but it can take weeks to months.

The recommended treatment is something called smell training. This has a history, so it's not way out there: It has been successfully used to treat the loss of the sense of smell that can follow other viral infections. According to a New York Times article, it's sort of like physical therapy for your nose; but you can do this for yourself. It is suggested you choose four strong scents that are familiar to you and that are associated with strong memories or emotions. This can be anything with an association for you; one woman would blow out a candle and sniff the scent that arises after that; others might choose spices from their pantries. Some people choose things that smell bad. Essential oils might be an option. Ask someone with a normal sense of smell to sniff them first to make sure the scent escapes the container sufficiently for the purpose. Then smell each one, using short, repeated sniffs for about 20 seconds, so the whole process will take just over a minute. You should try to remember the scent or taste (as appropriate) as you sniff. Do this twice a day for at least three months, and you can continue for as long as a year if necessary.

Younger people generally recover the sense of smell faster than older people; the olfactory receptors do not recover as well in older individuals. It is important to keep this up over time, which can be difficult if nothing seems to be happening. It is suggested you record the sessions on a calendar to stay on track and form the habit of training every day; keeping a diary can also be helpful, especially as things begin to change. Because scent is such an important part of life, it's worth the trouble to hang in there for a long while as you push your olfactory system to respond.

In related news, a new study published yesterday in Nature Medicine found evidence that this virus infects the mouth, gums, and salivary glands in patients. There are two implications: (1) This could relate to the loss of the sense of taste seen in patients, and (2) the mouth may be an important source of spread. We knew that testing saliva is one good way to detect the virus; this helps us to understand why that might be as well. Cells in the mouth express the ACE2 receptor, the cellular entry point for virus, so they would certainly be susceptible to it. Virus was found in the salivary glands of about half of patients who died from the infection. People with mild or asymptomatic infection had viral RNA in their mouth cells. Saliva from infected but asymptomatic people infected cells in laboratory tissue culture. People whose nasal swabs tested negative sometimes have virus in their saliva. This adds to what we now know about this virus.

We're getting something right. We've talked about the unprecedented number of vaccine doses that would be shipped this week for states, and we talked about whether we could get all of those doses into arms. Up to today, 3.2 million was our record day for administration of vaccines; but today, we blew that out of the water with 3.38 million doses administered. (As an aside, I'm delighted to note that my husband and I were two of those 3.38 million, which is cause for great gratitude and celebration on the Miller homestead.) Our seven-day average is up to 2.62 million doses. I know I say this a lot, but this is simply remarkable.

There are three more federally-supported mass vaccination sites coming online in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Virginia. They are slated to provide an additional 15,000 doses per day and are targeted at underserved communities who have not had equitable access thus far. That brings us up to 25 federally-supported sites delivering over 115,000 doses per day. The importance of getting vaccine into every segment of the population cannot be overemphasized. Just as I have pointed out with respect to getting vaccine to other countries, we must recognize that none of us is safe until all of us are safe. Even if you don't cotton to giving out vaccine to people who don't "deserve" it by your lights, if you are interested in your own safety, then you should be interested in seeing every single person who's willing receiving vaccine as expeditiously as possible. This is an important part of that effort.

There has been some question whether Janssen/Johnson & Johnson was going to meet its goal of delivering 20 million vaccine doses by the end of the month. Just two days ago, they'd shipped only five million, so there were serious concerns about their ability to meet the commitment. Well, things are working out: They'd shipped nine million by today, and they expect to deliver 11 million more next week. The deal with Merck for fill and finish, the FDA authorization of Catalent for fill and finish that released a lot

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of doses they had stockpiled, and the administration's invocation of the Defense Production Act (DPA) to help with materials and equipment seem to have put them over the top.

In less happy news, the University of Washington's Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), one of the nation's premier purveyor of health statistics, has issued its latest projection for deaths from this pandemic. They typically project farther out into the future than the CDC's ensemble forecast, which goes only a couple of weeks; longer projections are always less reliable. Nonetheless, this outfit has been getting things right more than they're missing, and they are projecting at least 600,000 dead in the US by July 1. This seems very realistic to me given they're looking at a date 97 days in the future and their projection requires only around just over 550 deaths per day. That's not out of line with what we've been seeing, even allowing for some decreases in coming weeks. The projection also says we could save 10,000 of those lives if we were to increase mask use from 75 percent of the population, which is the current number, to 95 percent. I wonder whether the will exists for that—guessing not. The report also says, "The majority of states in the northern half of the country now have increasing transmission, with the most pronounced increases in Michigan. The increases are likely related to the combination of the spread of the B.1.1.7 variant and recent increases in mobility." Translation: The variants and our own refusal to inconvenience ourselves are killing people.

We are seeing child care centers as foci of infection just lately. In Douglas County of Nebraska, there is an outbreak at a child care center with more than 100 cases of B.1.1.7. This variant is shaping up to be a big problem with its higher transmissibility. I guess we'll find out soon whether it is more lethal in children as it has appeared to be in adults. We really need to get child care providers vaccinated.

Bean's Café started up in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1979. It's a day shelter, according to their website, "a place for the homeless and hungry to eat, rest, read, watch TV, make a phone call, or just relax. They serve three meals a day every day of the year to anyone who needs one, homeless or not, and also run The Children's Lunchbox, which has for years sent food packs home with children from school on Fridays for the weekend and also provides meals over the summer when there are no school lunches.

Like many such organizations providing food to those in need, their resources have been strained during the pandemic; according to the AP, they're feeding 700 to 800 people a day right now. Imagine how it felt for Bean's Café CEO Lisa Sauder when she received a call on Christmas Eve offering her 30,000 pounds of food—not just cans and boxes, but produce and meat. Turns out someone's misfortune was someone else's lucky day. A semi-truck carrying all that food crashed into a ditch that day. No one was hurt, but the companies who were supposed to receive the food loaded in back decided they wouldn't be able to sell it as planned. So the towing company called Sauder up to see whether she was interested.

She certainly was. She told KTTU TV, "We were just about out of fresh produce. This time of year, fresh produce gets harder and harder for us to get and so to be given this gift of produce that we can be given right away for meals . . . it's gonna help so many people." So the food was delivered—all 15 tons of it: chicken, eggs, vegetables, hamburger, berries, and more. Three weeks' supply for the busy soup kitchen in the nick of time for Christmas. Sauder said, "It really is kind of a little bit of a Christmas miracle." Nice.

Take care. We'll talk tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	457	437	893	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2852	2761	6088	40	Substantial	6.9%
Bennett	386	372	1199	9	Minimal	0.0%
Bon Homme	1512	1479	2148	26	Minimal	3.3%
Brookings	3761	3612	12468	37	Substantial	2.9%
Brown	5264	5113	13121	91	Moderate	6.4%
Brule	699	686	1916	9	Minimal	13.3%
Buffalo	423	409	907	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	1006	977	3304	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	264	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1337	1270	4058	21	Substantial	8.6%
Clark	406	373	969	5	Substantial	34.5%
Clay	1853	1804	5596	15	Substantial	5.6%
Codington	4180	3986	9949	80	Substantial	14.5%
Corson	475	460	1018	12	Minimal	9.5%
Custer	779	754	2787	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	3071	2928	6783	66	Substantial	11.6%
Day	683	646	1838	29	Moderate	3.0%
Deuel	489	469	1167	8	Moderate	22.7%
Dewey	1435	1408	3914	26	Moderate	0.0%
Douglas	443	428	943	9	Minimal	8.3%
Edmunds	490	471	1093	13	Minimal	5.3%
Fall River	562	538	2714	15	Moderate	2.8%
Faulk	363	349	709	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	1005	938	2326	40	Moderate	9.4%
Gregory	571	521	1331	30	Moderate	8.8%
Haakon	260	248	557	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	740	690	1855	38	Moderate	18.5%
Hand	354	337	857	6	Moderate	4.0%
Hanson	376	366	751	4	Moderate	6.3%
Harding	92	91	188	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2355	2291	6772	36	Moderate	4.7%
Hutchinson	816	769	2455	26	Moderate	1.9%

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Hyde	138	136	428	1	Minimal	10.0%
Jackson	284	269	924	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	256	571	16	None	0.0%
Jones	91	89	232	0	Minimal	28.6%
Kingsbury	710	637	1726	14	Substantial	20.8%
Lake	1287	1202	3519	18	Substantial	15.1%
Lawrence	2885	2818	8704	45	Moderate	1.5%
Lincoln	8146	7853	20952	77	Substantial	13.6%
Lyman	621	596	1911	10	Moderate	4.5%
Marshall	364	339	1251	6	Substantial	7.2%
McCook	778	735	1711	24	Substantial	11.5%
McPherson	240	235	571	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2685	2620	7943	31	Moderate	6.2%
Mellette	255	252	751	2	None	0.0%
Miner	285	266	598	9	Moderate	6.3%
Minnehaha	29398	28255	81012	341	Substantial	11.6%
Moody	623	602	1807	17	Minimal	1.7%
Oglala Lakota	2082	2015	6734	49	Moderate	4.0%
Pennington	13218	12871	40512	191	Moderate	7.5%
Perkins	351	333	839	14	Minimal	10.5%
Potter	387	380	865	4	Moderate	3.4%
Roberts	1298	1222	4280	36	Substantial	18.1%
Sanborn	336	330	709	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	820	783	2195	26	Moderate	8.7%
Stanley	339	336	967	2	Minimal	8.7%
Sully	136	133	329	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1189	4202	29	Minimal	8.3%
Tripp	732	700	1521	17	Moderate	17.1%
Turner	1127	1034	2816	53	Substantial	13.5%
Union	2110	1987	6530	41	Substantial	15.0%
Walworth	748	715	1860	15	Moderate	15.1%
Yankton	2900	2803	9627	28	Substantial	9.5%
Ziebach	338	326	884	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1925	0		

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South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	87464	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13717	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5594	5%
Hispanic	4246	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2605	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1697	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1510	1%

COVID-19 Variant	# of Cases
B.1.1.7	14
B.1.429	5
B.1.351	1
B.1.427	0
P.1	0

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	60761	906
Male	56072	1022

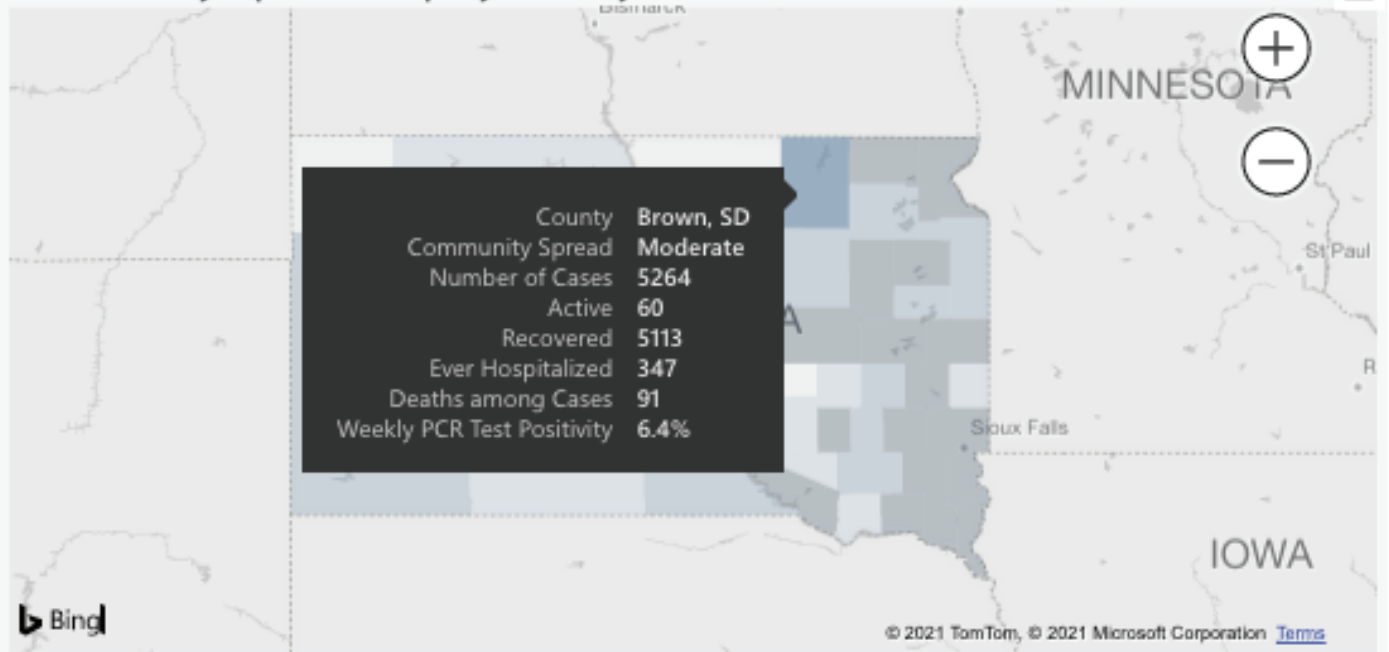
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Brown County

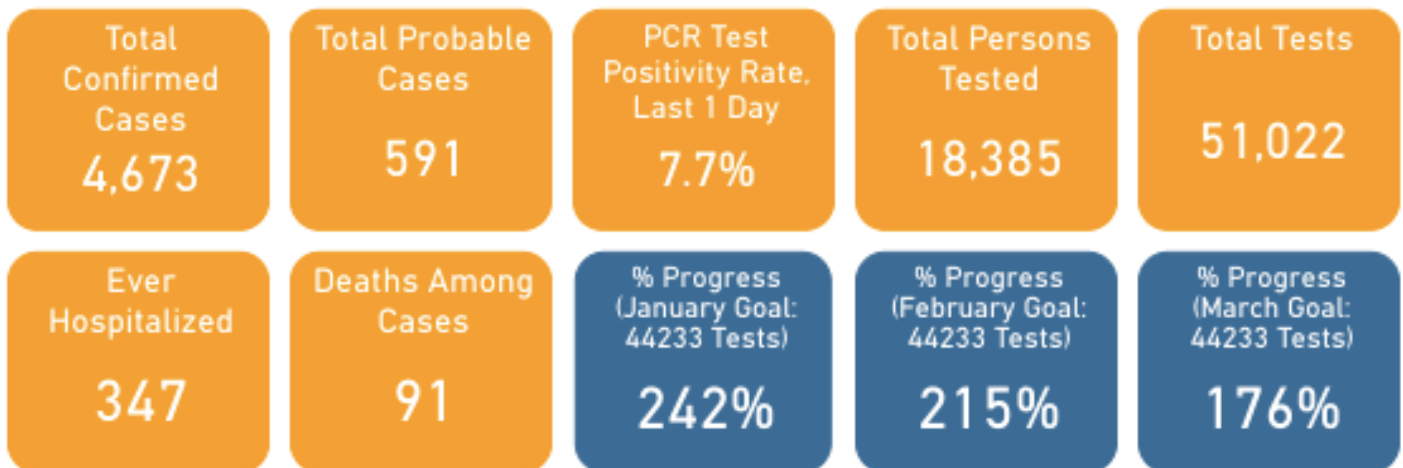


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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.



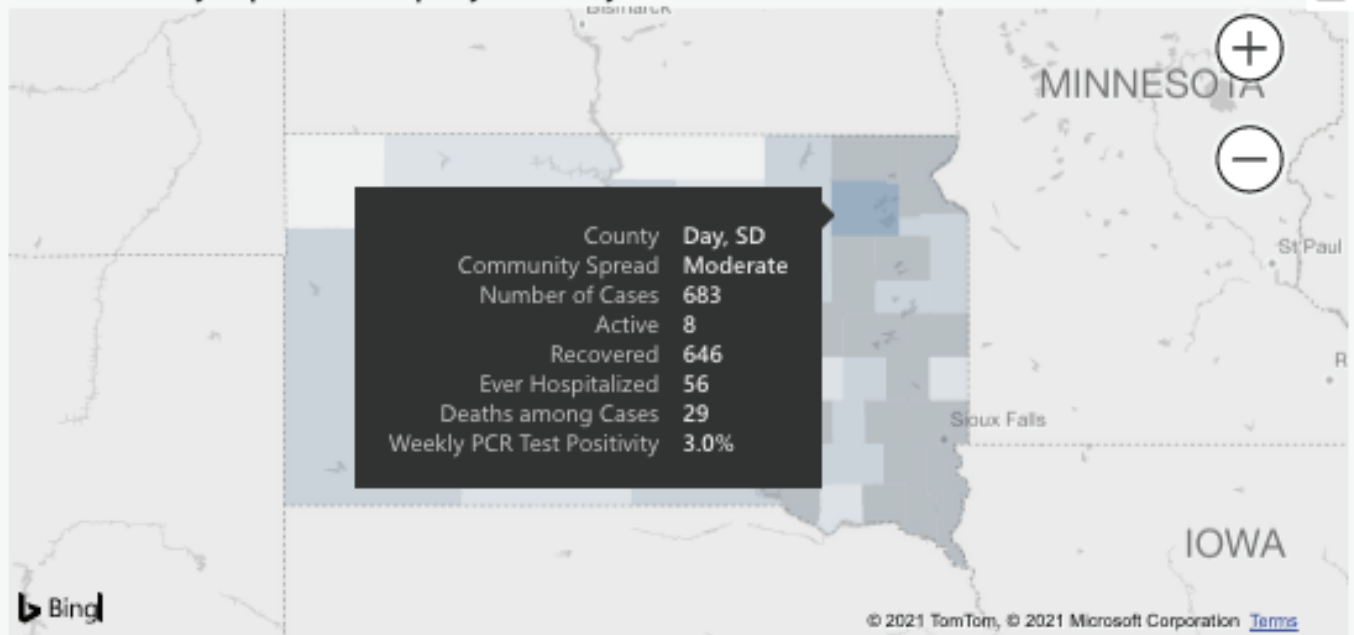
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Day County

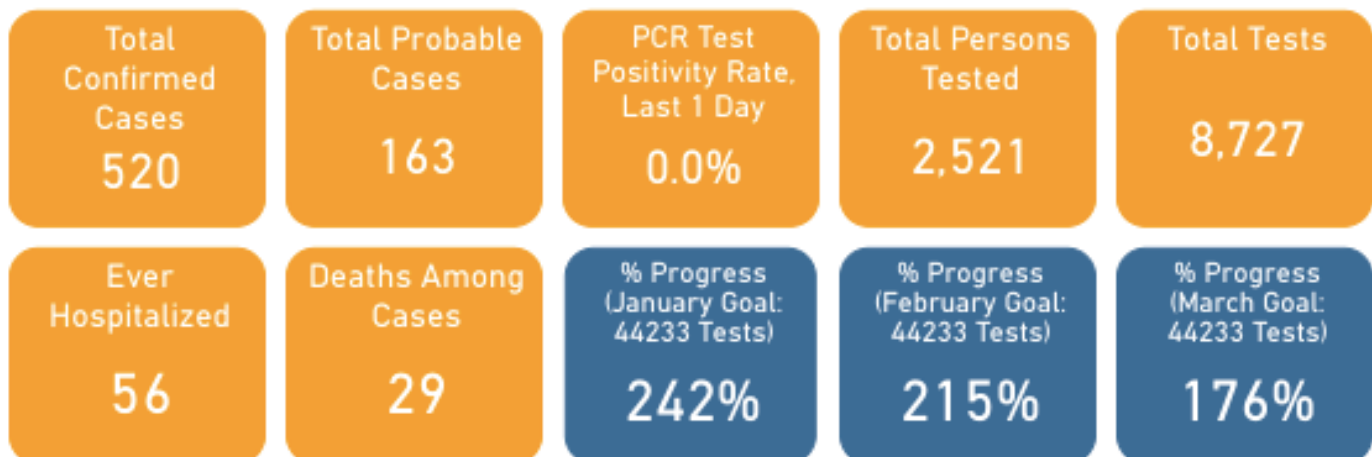


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread None Minimal Moderate Substantial

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



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

380,096

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	6,836
Moderna	182,329
Pfizer	190,931

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

236,257

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	6,836
Moderna - 1 dose	45,635
Moderna - Series Complete	68,347
Pfizer - 1 dose	39,964
Pfizer - Series Complete	75,483

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

40%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	40.07%
Series Complete	25.82%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	1,086	378	354	732
Beadle	8,274	2,441	2,916	5,357
Bennett*	561	143	209	352
Bon Homme*	4,145	819	1,663	2,482
Brookings	12,185	4,337	3,924	8,261
Brown	17,580	4,652	6,464	11,116
Brule*	2,128	490	819	1,309
Buffalo*	143	85	29	114
Butte	2,707	933	887	1,820
Campbell	1,235	175	530	705
Charles Mix*	3,734	1,148	1,293	2,441
Clark	1,569	469	550	1,019
Clay	6,269	2,119	2,075	4,194
Codington*	11,847	3,293	4,277	7,570
Corson*	329	69	130	199
Custer*	3,431	785	1,323	2,108
Davison	9,121	2,823	3,149	5,972
Day*	3,009	817	1,096	1,913
Hamlin	2,125	635	745	1,380
Hand	1,781	557	612	1,169
Hanson	603	209	197	406
Harding	132	40	46	86
Hughes*	9,351	2,117	3,617	5,734
Hutchinson*	4,178	1,137	1,520	2,657
Hyde*	640	150	245	395
Jackson*	462	114	174	288
Jerauld	1,104	304	400	704

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Hamlin	2,045	621	712	1,333
Hand	1,760	550	605	1,155
Hanson	584	206	189	395
Harding	122	48	37	85
Hughes*	9,043	2,211	3,416	5,627
Hutchinson*	4,135	1,106	1,514	2,620
Hyde*	632	152	240	392
Jackson*	453	117	168	285
Jerauld	1,080	294	393	687
Jones*	723	129	297	426
Kingsbury	2,993	1,009	992	2,001
Lake	5,466	1,968	1,749	3,717
Lawrence	10,210	3,272	3,469	6,741
Lincoln	30,515	5,841	12,336	18,177
Lyman*	941	267	337	604
Marshall*	2,091	673	709	1,382
McCook	2,759	641	1,059	1,700
McPherson	293	75	109	184
Meade*	7,624	1,816	2,904	4,720
Mellette*	53	13	20	33
Miner	1,099	285	407	692
Minnehaha*	96,661	19,694	38,481	58,175
Moody*	2,202	706	748	1,454
Oglala Lakota*	203	51	76	127
Pennington*	44,519	9,165	17,677	26,842
Perkins*	758	246	256	502
Potter	1,172	344	414	758
Roberts*	5,005	1,065	1,970	3,035
Sanborn	1,234	374	430	804
Spink	3,577	805	1,386	2,191
Stanley*	1,418	296	561	857
Sully	449	101	174	275
Todd*	196	48	74	122
Tripp*	2,320	448	936	1,384
Turner	4,211	973	1,619	2,592
Union	4,115	1,481	1,317	2,798
Walworth*	2,297	355	971	1,326
Yankton	11,819	2,789	4,515	7,304
Ziebach*	62	14	24	38
Other	7,397	2,223	2,587	4,810

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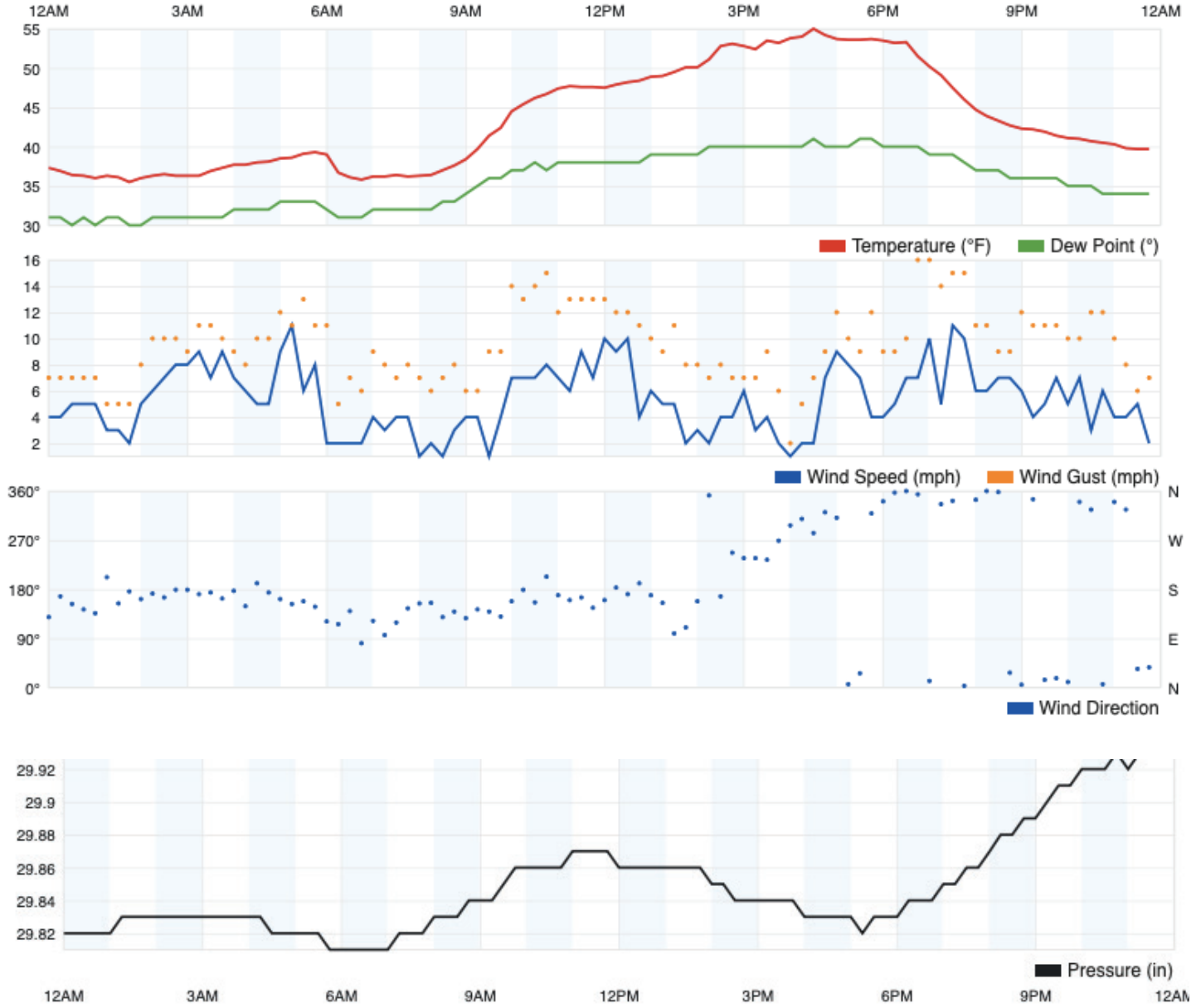
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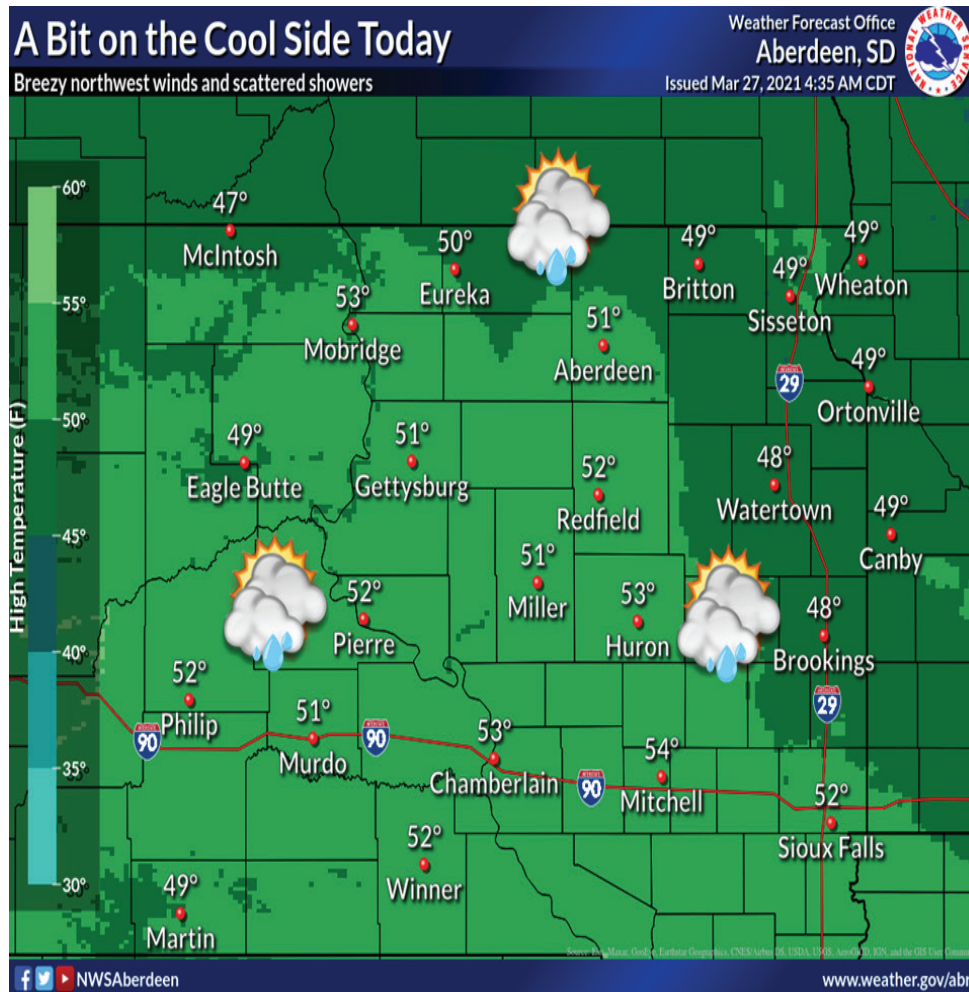
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
Mostly Cloudy then Scattered Showers	Partly Cloudy	Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Sunny and Breezy
High: 50 °F	Low: 23 °F	High: 61 °F	Low: 39 °F	High: 79 °F



Rain across eastern South Dakota will move eastward into Minnesota through the morning hours. Otherwise, expect another disturbance to slide southeast across the region this afternoon, bringing scattered showers. Skies will remain mostly cloudy today along with increasing northwest breezes, creating a somewhat cool day to start the weekend. Warmer and drier conditions, along with increasing winds will begin on Sunday and last into Monday. Fire danger will become a concern for the latter half of the weekend and into early next week.

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Today in Weather History

March 27, 1993: Rain and rapid snowmelt caused the Big Sioux and Vermillion Rivers to rise to 1 to 8 feet above flood stage March 26th through March 31st, 1993. The worst of the flooding occurred in far southeast South Dakota where large areas of farmland were under water. The floodwaters closed at least four state highways in southeast South Dakota and blocked dozens of smaller roads in the east. Large chunks of ice on the Big Sioux led to many temporary ice jams. The ice jams took out fences and washed out roads. In some areas, the ice had to be pushed off of the streets with tractors.

1890: The middle Mississippi Valley saw a significant tornado outbreak on this day with 24, estimated F2 or stronger tornadoes impacting the area. Tornadoes killed at least 146 people. The most notable of the tornadoes was an estimated F4 that carved a path from the Parkland neighborhood to Crescent Hill in Louisville, Kentucky. This tornado destroyed 766 buildings and killed an estimated 76 to 120 people. Most of the deaths occurred when the Falls City Hall collapsed.

1931: A blizzard struck western Kansas and adjoining states was called the "worst since January 1888". Twenty children, ages seven to fourteen, were stranded in a makeshift school bus for 33 hours during this blizzard.

1946: Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada thawed out as the mercury soared to 74 degrees, their warmest March temperature on record.

1950 - A three day snowstorm in the High Plains Region finally came to an end. The storm produced 34 inches of snow in 24 hours at Dumont, located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and a total of 50 inches. (David Ludlum)

1964: Great Alaskan earthquake left at least 100 dead in Anchorage, Alaska. The magnitude 9.2 quake is the largest in US history and the second strongest worldwide. Waves reached 103 feet above the low - tide mark.

1984 - The temperature at Brownsville, TX, soared to 106 degrees, and Cotulla, TX, reached 108 degrees, equalling the March record for the U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - The second blizzard in less than a week hit eastern Colorado and western Kansas. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at San Isabel CO. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Goodland KS. The high winds piled snow into massive drifts, closing roads for days and killing thousands of cattle. Snow drifts thirty feet high were reported in northwest Kansas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Temperatures rose quickly, then dropped just as rapidly, in the central U.S. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 80s. In southeastern Colorado, the temperature at Lamar CO reached 91 degrees. Strong southerly winds gusted to 63 mph at Gage OK. Strong northwesterly winds, gusting to 61 mph at Goodland KS, then proceeded to usher much colder air into the area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Two tornadoes were reported, and there were 77 other reports of large hail and damaging winds. Baseball size hail was reported at Willow OK and Bartlesville OK. Twenty-six cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Yankton SD with a reading of 84 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994: The Southeastern Palm Sunday Tornado Outbreak occurred on this date. What began as a peaceful Palm Sunday quickly changed to a historic day in weather history when a powerful tornado ripped through southern Alabama and Georgia. By the time the storm was over, 22 people were dead, and 92 were injured. The F4 tornado cut a 50-mile path from Ragland in St. Clair, County Alabama to the Georgia line. The storm touched down near Ragland at 10:51 am. The storm struck Ohatchee than roared across northeastern Calhoun County, passing near Piedmont and hitting Goshen in Cherokee County. The most disastrous damage occurred at Goshen, where the twister struck the Goshen United Methodist Church at 11:37 am. 20 people were killed at the church, which did not hear the tornado warning issued 10 minutes earlier by the National Weather Service in Birmingham. A tornado watch had been released at 9:30 am. Following the tornadoes, Vice President Al Gore pledged to extend NOAA Weatheradio coverage into the areas affected by the twisters, which had previously been unable to receive the alarm signals.

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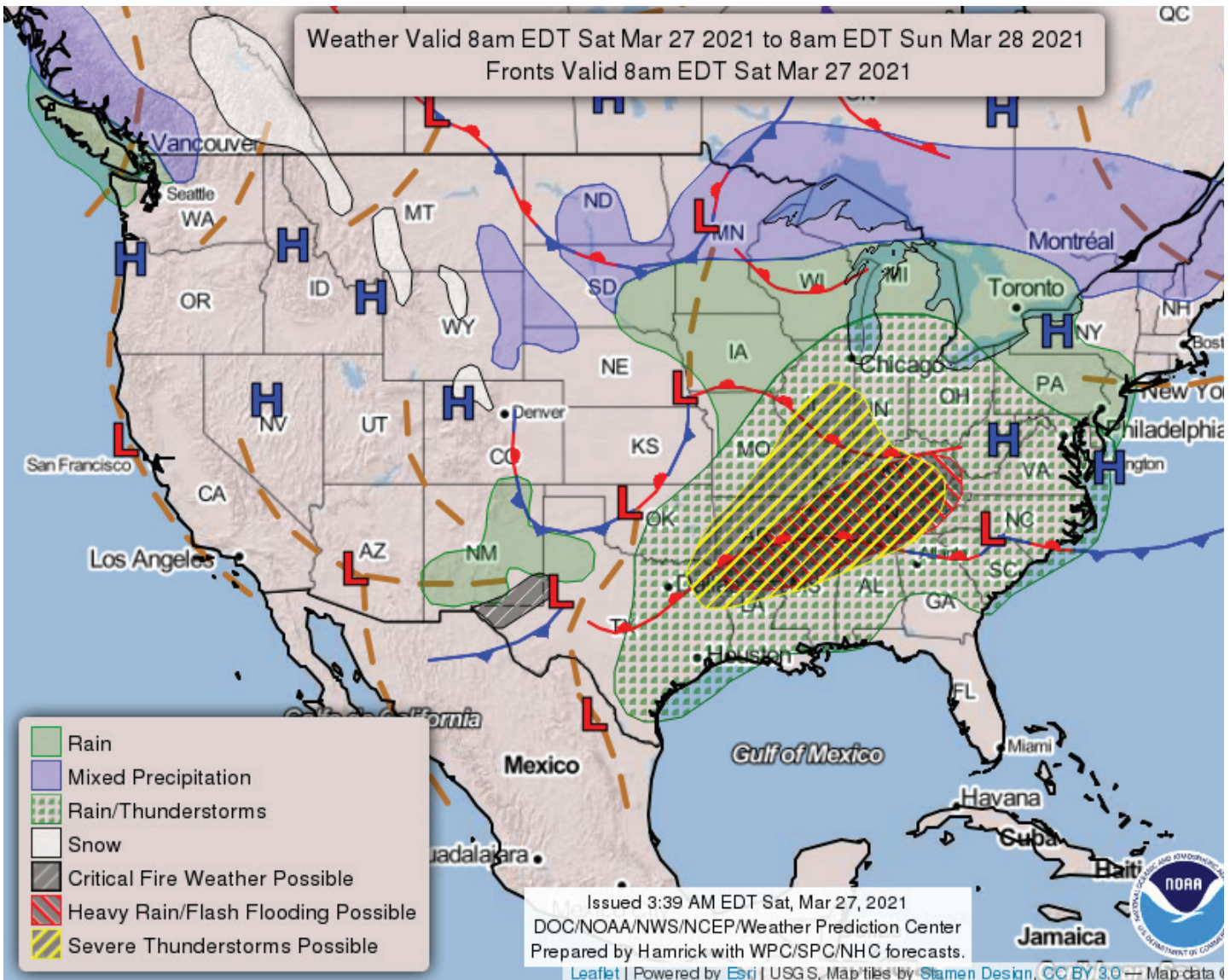
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 55 °F at 4:30 PM
Low Temp: 35 °F at 1:45 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 6:36 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 83° in 1946
Record Low: -12° in 1913
Average High: 46°F
Average Low: 24°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.92
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.94
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:56 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:21 a.m.



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A STRAIGHT LINE

When the first railroad was built in Russia, the Czar wanted train tracks to be laid from Moscow to another city that he enjoyed visiting.

"Where do you want me to lay the tracks?" asked the engineer, unrolling a map before him.

After thinking for a moment, the Czar took a ruler and drew a straight line across the map from Moscow to that particular city and said loudly, "There!"

The Lord has drawn a "straight line." We find it in His Word. It is a line that begins at our feet, goes through the cross of Jesus, the empty tomb, the risen Christ and ends with Him in heaven. But that line is often difficult to follow. Even for King David.

"I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity," he wrote. Acknowledging this "sin" must have been difficult for him to confess. Hear his cry, "Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me." He could find no relief from his guilt and God would not give him any peace. "Day and night your hand was heavy on me."

When we sin and do not repent and ask God for His forgiveness, we can expect – and be thankful for – His "heavy hand on" us. Sometimes we "feel" His hand when we are emotionally unsettled, going through a period of sickness, or sensing feelings of alienation or anxiety. How fortunate we are – for this is God speaking to us, trying to get our attention because He wants us to "confess our sins" and forgive us. Then He will remove our guilt, restore His peace and renew our relationship with Him.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for giving us a conscience that forces us to look at the sin in our lives and the opportunity to realign our relationship with You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. Psalm 32:5

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
- 03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
- 06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
- 07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
- 08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

News from the Associated Press

1st all-Black starting lineup graces South Dakota prep hoops

By BRIAN HAENCHEN Sioux Falls Argus Leader

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — It is not uncommon for high school basketball teams to plug a new piece into their starting lineup in the final game of a state tournament.

But by having Angok Akot join Akok Aguer, Eli Williams, Tahj Two Bulls and Mikele Kambalo for last weekend's Class AA third-place game vs. Yankton, the Sioux Falls Washington Warriors are believed to be the first team in state history to start five Black players.

Akot, who had been on the cusp of joining the starting lineup throughout the season, came off the bench the day before to score 10 points in a loss to intra-city rival O'Gorman, which rallied from 10 points down with six minutes left.

"It speaks for the whole diversity of Washington and the way that all the students and all the staff treat each other there. It's just amazing," Washington boys basketball coach Craig Nelson said. "Our guys are so looked up to amongst the entire school. These kids have just done things the right way, treated people the right way. They've embodied what the 'Circle of Courage' is at Washington and we're so proud of them."

The top-seeded Warriors wound up losing 62-55 to Yankton. Afterward, Williams and Aguer spoke to the significance of the team's starting lineup, the Argus Leader reported.

"You never really see many all-five Black lineups," said Williams, who finished with four assists. "We wanted to let everyone know that there's color here. There is diversity. We wanted everybody to know that we care and that there are other people out there who care about us, too."

Added Aguer: "In basketball, it doesn't matter what color you are or anything like that. It just matters about your family and who you are as a person."

Nelson said he and assistant coach Tim Reck have built such a strong relationship with this group of players that they are able to have discussions about race and diversity, as well as social issues. "It's just a unique situation that we have that we've become that close and can talk about anything and everything," he said.

"It means everything," Williams said of his role as an athlete in bringing attention to social justice issues. "I get to show and speak out for those who are scared, the ones who go to predominantly-white schools and are scared to speak out for what they think is right. I know they get picked on. When they see us on the screen showing that we care and that we want to speak out and make sure that everything is known, it means a lot and I know it means a lot for our coaches to do it, too."

Asked to reflect upon his time as a Washington Warrior, Williams said: "It means the world. I'll never get to play for a team like this ever again. I love these boys from the bottom of my heart. I'm just sad I don't get to play another year with them."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

04-25-37-46-67, Mega Ball: 15, Megaplier: 3

(four, twenty-five, thirty-seven, forty-six, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: fifteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$137 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$238 million

Noem wants lawmakers to change medical marijuana rules

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem on Friday pitched lawmakers a proposal that would limit parts of a voter-passed law legalizing medical marijuana in South Dakota, but she conceded that the drug will become legal for patients on July 1.

The Republican governor previously pushed the Legislature to delay implementation of the state's medical marijuana program by a year so that a committee could study the issue. But Senate Republicans scuttled that effort.

Ahead of lawmakers meeting Monday for the final day of this year's scheduled legislative session, Noem renewed her push to scale back parts of the law. Only this time, she limited her request to the number of cannabis plants allowed in medical marijuana users' homes, minors' ability to smoke pot for medical purposes, and the authority granted to the Department of Health to track marijuana before it is sold.

"In my opinion, these are necessary changes to allow for a successful implementation of IM 26 beginning on July 1," she said in a letter to lawmakers, referring to the bill by its shorthand name.

Advocates for medical marijuana have argued that the law voters passed is sufficient. They have been especially resistant to the proposal for a cap of three cannabis plants per medical user's home, saying it wouldn't be sufficient to meet a patient's medical needs.

Noem also wants to prohibit people under age 21 from smoking or vaping medical marijuana, saying it would encourage recreational pot use and pointing out that medical users can ingest the drug in other ways. She is also pushing lawmakers to make it clear that the Department of Health can track cannabis while it is cultivated and sold.

It wasn't clear when or if lawmakers will officially consider Noem's proposal, as the deadline already passed for considering legislation under normal circumstances.

Lawmakers could take up the governor's proposal Monday, but it would require support from two-thirds of both legislative chambers to suspend the rules governing the Legislature. They could also consider the proposal during a special legislative session, which would require either a call from the governor or the support of two-thirds of both chambers.

Police investigating a hate crime in South Dakota town

SALEM, S.D. (AP) — After a swastika and racial slur were spray-painted on a Black man's car in Salem, South Dakota, the sheriff's office is investigating the incident as a hate crime.

Josh Gadsden said he woke up early Thursday to find his Dodge Charger spraypainted with racist symbols, including the N-word, a swastika and what he said appeared to be the Confederate flag, KELO-TV reported.

Gadsden, who has lived in Salem for five years, said that this is not the first time he has experienced racism. He said other people have supported him, adding "It's the rotten eggs in the basket that makes it bad for the whole town."

The McCook County Sheriff's office said if the perpetrator is caught they would face felony vandalism and hate crime charges.

Tribe removes disputed coronavirus reservation checkpoints

EAGLE BUTTE, S.D. (AP) — The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has taken down the coronavirus checkpoints on its South Dakota reservation that were a point of contention between the tribe and Republican Gov. Kristi Noem and the Trump administration.

Cheyenne River spokesman Remi Bald Eagle said the tribal council made the decision to remove the nine checkpoints because of declining infection rates and the arrival of coronavirus vaccines on the reservation.

Bald Eagle said the approximately 175 workers who staffed the checkpoints around the clock, seven days a week will be offered jobs helping with vaccination sites, contact tracing and quarantine support.

The tribe also hopes to work with President Joe Biden's new Bureau of Indian Affairs staff to maintain control over its police department, after the Trump administration sent a letter in December saying the

agency would begin managing the department.

The tribe filed a lawsuit alleging the BIA began to aggressively pursue a longstanding issue over tribal officers' background checks in order to pressure it to shut down its checkpoints, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The tribe established the checkpoints to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and barred some drivers from passing through or stopping on the reservation. Noem said the checkpoints on state and federal highways were illegal because they were interfering with interstate commerce.

The tribe argued in its lawsuit that the checkpoints were legal because the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that tribes can exercise civil jurisdiction over non-members regarding conduct that threatens health and welfare.

After Noem was unsuccessful in getting the checkpoints dismantled, she turned to the Trump administration for help.

The tribe's lawsuit accused the Trump administration of trying to coerce and threaten the tribe to remove the checkpoints or risk losing coronavirus funding and control over its police department.

The federal government filed a motion last September to dismiss the lawsuit, arguing that it was no longer relevant, in part because President Donald Trump could not be sued over his official work conduct.

There are about 8,600 people who live on the reservation. Bald Eagle said vaccines obtained through the Indian Health Service are available to tribal and non-tribal members who are age 18 or older.

Bovine tuberculosis found in South Dakota cattle herd

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Bovine tuberculosis has been confirmed in a South Dakota cattle herd for the first time in four years.

The state's Animal Industry Board says an infected beef cow was first identified in January by meat inspectors at a Minnesota packing plant during routine inspection. Records linked the cow to a herd in Corson County, where additional animals were later found to be infected.

State veterinarian Dustin Oedekoven says bovine tuberculosis is not currently a threat to food safety or human health because of milk pasteurization and meat inspection programs, the Argus Leader reported.

According to the South Dakota State University Extension office, cattle rarely show symptoms of the chronic respiratory disease. But, when they do they're often vague and can include weight loss and sluggishness.

The progressive disease may only be transmitted to other animals when in close proximity for prolonged periods of time, according to Oedekoven.

The State Veterinarian's office is working closely with the herd owner and other producers in the Corson County area, as well as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Standing Rock Sioux Tribal officials, area veterinarians and wildlife officials to reduce further spread of the disease.

Some Poles flout virus rules as harder lockdown takes effect

By VANESSA GERA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — The Piw Paw club in Warsaw advertised its event as a "Pandemic Fashion Show," with models wearing "masks from the Spring 2021 collection."

But even before the show could start on Friday night, police swept in. They cleared away the few customers and arrested the club owner, who has defiantly kept his doors open despite pandemic restrictions banning the sale of alcohol or indoor dining — and despite earlier police raids and detentions.

A raft of new pandemic restrictions took effect in Poland on Saturday to slow the spread of the coronavirus as central Europe has emerged as a global hot spot. But as the club raid shows, authorities already had problems with people flouting the existing rules.

Piw Paw owner, Michal Maciag, says he is close to bankruptcy. He has used different ruses to try to stay open. Though he said he doesn't consider the coronavirus worse than other diseases and does not wear a mask, Maciag has declared his bar a "mask factory." On Friday evening several people were sewing masks in a corner.

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Those drinking beer did not "buy" the beer, which is illegal, they asked for a "degustation." A tip box was set up for those who wished to make a donation.

Maciag's continued insistence on opening the bar to customers is also motivated by anger with the authorities.

When police swept in on Friday night, a still-maskless Maciag held a beer in his hand and nonchalantly filmed police with his phone. He played a song, over and over, made up of vulgar lyrics directed at Poland's ruling Law and Justice party as police took people's details.

"This is all just a performance," Maciag said of the police raid.

Minutes later, police had forced him outside and into their van.

Poland on Friday marked its third straight record high in new COVID-19 cases — more than 35,000 in one day in the country of 38 million people. To date, the pandemic has taken the lives of more than 51,000 Poles.

As he announced the new restrictions, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said they would be crucial to saving lives as a new virus mutation first detected in Britain spreads fast. Poland's strapped health sector is barely coping as it is.

"We are one step away from crossing the border beyond which we will not be able to properly heal patients, heal our citizens," Morawiecki said Thursday. "We must do everything to avoid such a scenario."

The restrictions are causing widespread economic pain, however. In a country where people for decades under communism found ways to trick the system to get by, some are again looking for ways to circumvent the rules to maintain income.

Piotr Nowakowski, a personal trainer, found himself out of work when the government closed gyms months ago. He now trains his clients in a small makeshift gym that he arranged on his parking spot in the underground garage of his apartment building.

Sometimes cars, with their noise and exhaust fumes, are a disturbance. But the neighbors haven't complained. By finding a way to keep working, he has been able to keep supporting his family and paying his bills and loans.

"I really had no choice," he said. "I had to react quickly. The restrictions came from one day to the next."

Ksawery Karczewski, a hairdresser, suddenly found himself without income when hair salons were forced to close last spring, including the one where he was employed. They were later allowed to open again but will be forced to close again on Saturday, which prompted a mad last-minute rush to barbers and hair salons on Friday.

After the first shutdown, Karczewski lost his job and switched to making house calls. He also carved out a small space in his apartment where he does his clients' hair.

An early round of financial help to business owners did not give him much money, and he feels that he cannot count on politicians to ensure help in the future.

"I think they are not thinking about us, more about themselves," Karczewski said.

Those flouting the rules often believe that it is not themselves, but the politicians and police who are breaking the law. The government introduced the lockdown by government decree, but without a formal state of emergency by parliament.

A prominent Warsaw lawyer, Jacek Dubois, argued that this means that the restrictions themselves are actually illegal under Polish law.

"If these regulations were introduced in accordance with the law and business activity was banned due to the extraordinary situation ... the authorities would have to compensate the entrepreneurs at some point," he said.

The new restrictions taking effect Saturday will last for a two-week period around Easter. They also lower the numbers allowed in churches.

Yet Health Minister Adam Niedzielski noted that even the earlier limits in the churches were not being respected. The Catholic faithful — usually the government's strongest supporters — are among the rule-breakers, too.

Bishop Ignacy Dec of the Swidnica diocese told the daily Nasz Dziennik this week that he opposed limits on church attendance.

"It is nonsense during an epidemic to close the source of spiritual and physical healing," he said.

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For many motel dwellers, eviction ban provides no relief

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — For more than five years, home for Armetrius Neason has been a hotel outside Atlanta. He's adorned the walls with dozens of pictures of Black celebrities and icons. It's the address on his driver's license and where he receives mail.

But last year as the COVID-19 pandemic raged, the hotel accused him of owing \$1,800 in back rent and threatened to lock him out, the 58-year-old said.

"I was packing my clothes. I really had nowhere to go," he recalled during a phone interview.

Efficiency Lodge said Neason — despite his lengthy stay — was a guest it could kick off the property without filing an eviction case in court.

"If you go to a Holiday Inn and you don't pay your room rate, the next day your key won't work," said Roy Barnes, a former Georgia governor and attorney for the lodge, which is co-owned by his brother, Ray Barnes. "It's the same law."

Neason's struggles reflect the heightened risk of homelessness faced by motel and hotel dwellers during the pandemic, housing attorneys say. Many states do not clearly define when hotel and motel guests become tenants — a designation held by traditional leaseholders that gives them the right to contest an eviction attempt before a judge. Hotel guests, in contrast, can be removed summarily.

The legal gap made motel living riskier than typical home renting even before the pandemic. Now it's even less stable, the attorneys say. Job losses during the pandemic have made it harder for millions of Americans to make rent. But hotel guests are excluded from a federal moratorium on evictions for people facing financial hardship during the coronavirus outbreak.

Hotel and motel residents in California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and Virginia have reported being expelled or threatened with immediate eviction over the past year.

"It's people that are even more economically vulnerable than most low-income tenants," said Alexis Erkert, an attorney at Southeast Louisiana Legal Services in New Orleans who has fought evictions at motels during the pandemic.

Hotel owners say they have also taken a hit during the COVID-19 outbreak and need paying customers to cover expenses.

"They just want their asset and their livelihood protected just like anybody else," said Marilou Halvorsen, president of the New Jersey Restaurant and Hospitality Association.

In another recent hotel dispute in Georgia, Demetress Malone accused staff at Lodge Atlanta of removing his door, cutting his power, taking his air conditioning unit and changing his lock after he had trouble paying rent for the room he had occupied for roughly a year, according to a lawsuit he filed against the property. A call and email to an attorney for Lodge Atlanta, Frank C. Bedinger, was not returned. A judge sided with Malone in November, saying the hotel had to file an eviction case against him in court.

At Efficiency Lodge, a private security guard carried an assault rifle and pointed it at residents as he went door-to-door forcing them to leave in September, according to Neason's attorney, Lindsey Siegel, and a lawsuit he and another current resident filed against the property. Siegel is with the Atlanta Legal Aid Society.

"I never seen nothing like that in my life, just to put a person out on the street," Neason said. "You had to go then."

Roy Barnes disputed that residents were forced out at gunpoint, saying security was searching for two

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people wanted for murder.

Neason, who works as a carpenter, came to the hotel in 2016 and was paying his weekly rent of \$200, but said a hotel employee told him he didn't have to pay the full amount during the pandemic. He was later presented with a bill for back rent, he said.

The room he lives in has a small kitchen with two electric burners. He's hung colorful sports caps off hooks in one corner and keeps free weights near the television stand.

Advocates say lawsuits by hotel residents are rare, and many other removals go unreported.

"These are people who have already been stretched to their limits, are broken," said Eric Tars, legal director of the National Homelessness Law Center. "Many of them assume, 'I am just staying as a guest at this motel.'"

Federal data suggests increasing numbers of people are relying on motels and hotels for long-term housing. The number of students in the U.S. who identified a hotel or motel as their primary nighttime residence jumped by nearly a quarter between the 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 school years to more than 105,000, according to numbers submitted by states to the U.S. Department of Education.

But the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention excludes hotels or motels rented to a "temporary guest or seasonal tenant" — terms it leaves local laws to define — from its eviction moratorium in place through March. Some states have stepped up to try to protect motel dwellers.

New Jersey has its own moratorium that explicitly protects people who live continuously at motels and hotels and have no permanent housing to which they can safely or legally return. Halvorsen said dozens of hotels have reported guests who have taken advantage of the stricter rule by checking in and then refusing to pay or leave.

The attorney general's office in North Carolina warned nearly a 100 hotels and motels in the state early in the pandemic that their residents could qualify as tenants. Georgia's Department of Law offered similar guidance.

But housing experts say with no clearly defined rule about when a hotel stay is no longer temporary or seasonal, residents of such properties remain vulnerable to quick expulsion when they can't pay.

In January, a DeKalb County judge ruled that Neason was a tenant and blocked the lodge from evicting him without going to court. The lodge has appealed.

"Who do you layoff and who gets foreclosed on if nobody pays?" Roy Barnes asked. "This is not an issue that's all good on one side and all bad on the other."

Floyd spurred broad push for change globally, activists say

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

Richard Wallace had seen it all before, and he wasn't hopeful.

It was, he thought, the same old story: Police kill a Black person, protests erupt, politicians pledge reforms and corporations offer platitudes about supporting needed change. But Wallace, the 38-year-old founder and executive director of Equity and Transformation, a social and economic justice advocacy group in Chicago, came to realize that this time was different.

This time the victim was George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black father of five captured in a sickening citizen video taking his final breaths under a white officer's knee. And this time, the victim would become a global symbol for change much broader than criminal justice reform.

"George Floyd has taken systemic racism from personal problem to America's issue," Wallace said. "It's clear we're seeing a growing and maturing of a movement."

As Minneapolis braces for Monday's opening statements in the trial of Derek Chauvin, the ex-officer who is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death, so does the world. Floyd was the spark that set the U.S. ablaze. In the days and months after his death on Memorial Day, millions of Americans, along with thousands in cities abroad, took to the streets in protests that were often peaceful but sometimes violent and destructive.

Even as many new supporters rallied to the Black Lives Matter cause, then-President Donald Trump's

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move to transform the unrest into a winning political issue, and his embrace of white supremacy, left the U.S. seemingly more divided on issues than ever.

Still, Floyd's global impact is undeniable. Federal, state and local governments have taken concrete steps — like supporting reparations and reinvesting in community resources — to address decades of harm visited on Black Americans and other minorities. Corporations, nonprofits, media and the entertainment industry have launched promising diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

People will remember 2020 not just as a year of upheaval over Floyd, but as a year in which people demanded and took bold action toward systemic change, said Nekima Levy Armstrong, a civil rights attorney and activist in Minneapolis. But, she added, much more of it is needed.

For Levy Armstrong, the stakes of the trial are high. The former Minneapolis NAACP branch president has watched her community rise up in response to unchecked police violence, only to have their spirits crushed by an acquittal and lack of grand jury indictments in the cases of Philando Castile, a Black man killed by police in a nearby suburb in 2016, and Jamar Clark, a Black man killed by city police in 2015.

"We have for too long lived inside of a culture of ignorance, not just in the U.S. but worldwide," she said. "I don't think that this country in particular, but the world itself, has ever had to reconcile the mistreatment, the abuse and the dehumanization of Black folks. But for some people, they're now beginning to see we have a problem, and we need to begin to take steps to address these problems."

Her assessment of the international impact of the case is not hyperbole. Some of the protests abroad — in Asia, the U.K., France and other European nations — rivaled American demonstrations last summer.

"Having the Black Lives movement embraced the way it was in this country was painfully healing, because it's not nice to have an occasion like the tragic death of George Floyd be the reason for people to acknowledge what you've been trying to share," said Sylvana Simons, who won a seat in the Dutch Parliament in elections held this month.

Community House for Supportive Development, a grassroots nongovernmental organization in Paris, joined five other NGOs in January to launch the first class-action lawsuit targeting France's police. The suit alleges a culture of systemic and racial discrimination in on-the-street identity checks.

Floyd "was a real catalyst, and not just in France, an earthquake, like a tsunami over the entire planet. In lots of countries," said the group's founder, Omer Mas Capitolin, who is Black. "In France today, we are all potential George Floyds."

In the U.S., the House of Representatives passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, a sweeping piece of legislation that implements bans on racial profiling, chokeholds, no-knock warrants and other law enforcement tactics that have precipitated the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police.

However, the legislation's chances in a Senate very narrowly controlled by Democrats are slim, and the Movement for Black Lives, a national coalition of more than 150 grassroots organizations associated with the BLM movement, has opposed the legislation as inadequate.

According to the police reform advocacy organization Campaign Zero, the number of people killed by police in the U.S. in 2020 was the second most since 2013, when it began tracking those figures.

Nearly 1,130 people were killed by police last year, and 58% of those deaths either began during traffic stops, in police responses to mental health crises or in situations where the person was reportedly not threatening anyone with a gun, according to the group's report.

Still, group co-founder Sam Sinyangwe said, "There are some shifts happening. And there's the potential to make massive changes through some of the solutions that are being implemented or piloted in cities, in response to protests."

And many are looking to carry the push for change well beyond the outcome of the trial, in Floyd's name and in the names of so many others.

"What the Black Lives Matter movement has done is use these various incidents to allow us to reevaluate the underlying cultural narrative," said David Hooker, associate professor of the practice of conflict transformation and peacebuilding at Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs.

Hooker, Wallace and others say that narrative — with its neat assignment of people into "good" and

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“bad” categories — promotes violence against racial minorities and aims to keep them from flourishing. Floyd, they say, is a perfect example: Here was a man who was once imprisoned but was striving to make a better life for himself and his family. His life mattered more than the few, less-savory details about his past that had been reported in the press and that could come up in his accused killer’s trial, said Wallace, who is also a member of the Movement for Black Lives’ national policy leadership team.

“That’s how racism works,” he said. “It’s about the bifurcation of Black people into silos of those deserving and undeserving of love, care, respect, or whatever.”

After being incarcerated for a run-in with the law during his early adult years, Wallace gained national recognition as the rapper, Epic. He also dedicated his life to activism, receiving Roosevelt University’s Matthew Freeman Social Justice Award among other achievements.

Then, earlier this month, Wallace said he had the kind of experience that reminds Black people “exactly who you are and what place you’re in.”

Combining a work trip to Los Angeles with family time for his daughter’s seventh birthday, Wallace booked a stay through Airbnb — a company that, as he points out, released a statement reaffirming its commitment to fight racism days after Floyd’s death and donated \$500,000 to the NAACP and the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation.

But Airbnb informed Wallace through email that his account was deactivated and his reservation canceled because a background report flagged Wallace’s criminal record from nearly two decades ago. Reached for comment, Airbnb said it implemented an appeals process in 2019 for people who feel they’ve been unfairly barred from using its service.

“We failed to clearly communicate to (Wallace) that this was even an option,” said Christopher Nulty, a spokesperson for the hospitality platform. He added that Wallace’s account was restored on Friday.

Still, for Wallace, the situation confirmed to him that systemic change has to be deep and structural.

“You’ll march for George Floyd,” the activist said, “but would you have hired him?”

Morrison reported from New York City. Noreen Nasir in Minneapolis, Elaine Ganley and Jeff Schaeffer in Paris, and Mike Corder in The Hague, Netherlands, contributed to this report.

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

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As daily deaths near 4,000, worst may lie ahead for Brazil

By DAVID BILLER and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazil currently accounts for one-quarter of the entire world’s daily COVID-19 deaths, far more than any other single nation, and health experts are warning that the nation is on the verge of even greater calamity.

The nation’s seven-day average of 2,400 deaths stands to reach to 3,000 within weeks, six experts told the Associated Press. That’s nearly the worst level seen by the U.S., though Brazil has two-thirds its population. Spikes of daily deaths could soon hit 4,000; on Friday there were 3,650.

Having glimpsed the abyss, there is growing recognition shutdowns are no longer avoidable -- not just among experts, but also many mayors and governors. Restrictions on activity they implemented last year were half-hearted and consistently sabotaged by President Jair Bolsonaro, who sought to stave off economic doom. He remains unconvinced of any need for clampdown, which leaves local leaders pursuing a patchwork of measures to prevent the death toll from spiraling further.

It may be too late, with a more contagious variant rampaging across Brazil. For the first time, new daily cases topped 100,000 on March 25, with many more uncounted. Miguel Nicolelis, professor of Neurobiology at Duke University who advised several Brazilian governors and mayors on pandemic control, anticipates

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the total death toll reaching 500,000 by July and exceeding that of the U.S. by year-end.

"We have surpassed levels never imagined for a country with a public health care system, a history of efficient immunization campaigns and health workers who are second to none in the world," said Nicoletti, who is also an epidemiologist. "The next stage is the health system collapse."

The system is already buckling, with almost all states' intensive care units near or at capacity. Dr. José Antônio Curiati, a supervisor at Sao Paulo's Hospital das Clinicas, the biggest hospital complex in Latin America, said its beds are full, but patients keep arriving. The city's oxygen supply isn't guaranteed, and stocks of sedatives required for intubation in intensive care units will soon run out.

"Four thousand deaths a day seems to be right around the corner," Curiati said.

On March 17 in northeastern Piaui state, nurse Polyena Silveira wept beside a COVID-19 patient who died on the floor for lack of beds at her public hospital. A photo capturing the moment went viral and served as a national wake-up call.

"When he was gone, I had two minutes to feel sorry before moving to the next patient," Silveira, 33, told the AP. "In eight years as a nurse, I'd never felt as much pain as that night. I'm near my limit, physically and mentally."

Brazil's state-run science and technology institute, Fiocruz, on Tuesday called for a 14-day lockdown to reduce transmission by 40%. Natalia Pasternak, a microbiologist who presides over the Question of Science Institute, pointed to a local example of success: The mid-size city of Araraquara in Sao Paulo state last month implemented lockdown and has seen its cases and deaths recede.

Pasternak declined to estimate Brazil's looming daily death toll but said the trend is for continued growth if nothing is done.

"We need coordinated action, and that's probably not going to happen because the federal government has no real interest in pursuing preventative actions," Pasternak said. "(Mayors and governors) are trying to implement preventative measures, but separately and in their own ways. This isn't the best approach, but it's better than nothing."

Minas Gerais, Brazil's second most populous state, has closed nonessential shops. Espirito Santo state will enter lockdown Sunday. Brazil's two biggest cities, Rio and Sao Paulo, have imposed extensive restrictions on nonessential activities. Their state authorities brought forward holidays to create a 10-day period of repose, which started Friday.

Restrictive measures, however, are only as strong as citizens' compliance. And Bolsonaro continues to undermine their willingness by painting even partial shutdown as an assault on one's right to earn an honest day's wages. He has lashed out at local leaders, particularly governors, who dare defy him.

"We need to open our eyes and understand this is no joke," Rio's Mayor Eduardo Paes said in a recorded message on the eve of the 10-day shutdown, stressing that no mayor wants to cause unemployment. "People are dying and, if everything continues as is, nothing is done, God only knows what could happen. No one knows this disease's limit. No one knows how many variants could emerge."

Hundreds of protesters marched along Rio's Copacabana beach the next morning. Most sported green-and-yellow shirts that are a hallmark of pro-Bolsonaro rallies and many declined to wear masks. They chanted "We want to work!" and directed vitriol at Paes.

The World Health Organization's director, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on Monday called for everyone in Brazil to muster a serious response -- "whether it's the government or the people."

"It's a concerted effort of all actors that will really reverse this upward trend. It is actually very fast and accelerating really, really fast," he said. "Especially we're worried about the (weekly) death rate, which doubled in just one month from 7,000 to 15,000."

The virus's spread has been turbocharged by the more contagious P1 variant that has become cause for concern beyond Brazil's borders, not just in South America. It has already been identified in the U.S., this week in New York. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said Wednesday that his team will be meeting with Brazilian authorities and are "quite concerned" about the situation in Brazil.

The U.S. has seen its death toll plunge since late January amid a massive vaccine rollout, and its seven-

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day average has dipped below 1,000. By contrast, Brazil's vaccine rollout has been strained, at best. The government bet big on a single vaccine provider, AstraZeneca, while for months rejecting offers to purchase others. Only after delivery delays from AstraZeneca jeopardized rollout did Brazil's health ministry begin buying — but too late for most deliveries to arrive in the first half of this year.

The nation has fully vaccinated less than 2% of its citizens, which experts widely consider an embarrassment for a country long regarded as a global model for vaccination programs.

More than 500 of the nation's most influential economists and executives this week wrote an open letter calling for mass vaccination and decrying the situation. They said that controversy regarding economic impacts of social distancing is a false dilemma and all levels of government should be prepared to implement emergency lockdown.

While Brazil's economy didn't contract as much as regional peers last year, the worsening health crisis casts a shadow over the 2021, according to William Jackson, chief emerging markets economist at Capital Economics. GDP will return to pre-crisis levels late this year, at earliest, marking a rather weak recovery relative to other emerging markets.

Monica de Bolle, a Brazilian senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, is more pessimistic, and expects another recession in 2021. Exactly how bad things become in coming months hinges on whether the P1 variant is already dominant nationwide, and is proven to cause reinfections or be more severe.

Either way, there's no time left to delay decisive action, she said.

"All in all, it's a huge disaster," said de Bolle, who has done postgraduate studies in immunology and genetics. "Could have been avoided; wasn't. Very difficult to fix now. The only real fix is a very harsh lockdown with the population really abiding by it, which may be a hard sell."

Savarese reported from Sao Paulo. AP reporter Marcelo de Sousa and videojournalist Mario Lobão contributed from Rio.

GOP lawmakers seek greater control over local elections

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

Partisan takeovers of election boards. Threats to fine county election officials and overturn results. Even bans on giving water to voters while they stand in line.

In addition to their nationwide efforts to limit access to the ballot, Republican lawmakers in some states are moving to gain greater control over the local mechanics of elections, from voter registration all the way to certifying results.

The bills, which have already become law in Georgia and Iowa, resurrect elements of former President Donald Trump's extraordinary campaign to subvert his loss, when his backers openly floated the notion of having legislatures override the will of the voters and launched legal challenges against measures that made it easier to vote during the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's an overreach of power," said Aunna Dennis, executive director of the Georgia chapter of the voting advocacy group Common Cause. "They're definitely trying to do an upheaval of our election system."

In a step widely interpreted as a way to check Georgia's Democratic strongholds, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp signed a bill Thursday to give the GOP-dominated Legislature greater influence over a state board that regulates elections and empowers it to remove local election officials deemed to be underperforming.

Other states are moving in similar directions.

In Iowa, after left-leaning counties sent voters absentee ballot applications in 2020, a recently signed law would bar election workers from sending the forms out unless requested and threatens to fine officials for violating rules. A South Carolina proposal would give lawmakers new oversight of the members appointed to the currently independent State Election Commission. In Arizona, a Republican proposal that has since died would have allowed the Legislature to overturn election results and appoint its own Electoral College representatives.

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The Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy group that supports expanded voter access, tallied more than 250 restrictive proposals in the states, many of them intended to roll back voting methods that were expanded because of the pandemic. That includes early and mail voting options, both of which were popular among voters who sought to avoid virus transmission at crowded polling places.

Republicans have said the bills are meant to shore up public confidence in elections, though members of the GOP have been the leading voices spreading baseless claims that the 2020 election was fraudulent. There is universal agreement among experts that the election, in which Republicans performed well in congressional and state legislative races, was free of widespread problems.

Georgia's new law is among the most consequential for future elections.

The measure will allow the Legislature to select the chair of the state election board and make the elected secretary of state a nonvoting member of the panel, essentially sidelining the chief election officer who was picked by voters. The board could then remove local election officials and replace them.

"This bill is a tragedy for democracy, and it is built on the lie of voter fraud," Lauren Groh Wargo, chief executive of the group Fair Fight Action, which advocates for greater voter participation, said on a call with reporters. "It means that radical, right-wing legislators, if they don't like how elections are being run in Quitman or Lowndes or Fulton or Dougherty counties, they can wholesale replace those election administrators and put folks from the other side of the state in charge."

The new law also forbids local officials from taking financial grants to help run their elections, narrows the window in which voters can request an absentee ballot and requires an ID to vote absentee by mail. It limits where ballot drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. Giving food or water to voters waiting in line to cast ballots is also forbidden.

Georgia confirmed President Joe Biden's victory with three statewide counts of nearly 5 million ballots, and there was no evidence of problems.

"They are tweaking the laws however they can to make it harder and to put up barriers for voters to stumble on," Georgia state Sen. Jen Jordan, a Democrat from Atlanta, said at an event sponsored by the progressive group The NewDEAL. "They also are kind of putting in this backstop, if you will. If that is not going to stop voters at the local level, then they are going to make sure they can come in and take over these local election boards."

The GOP is also cracking down on methods that counties used to increase participation and make voting easier during the pandemic.

Republicans in Texas, which already has some of the most stringent election laws in the country, are moving to effectively ban curbside voting, a method used in the last election by liberal-leaning Harris County, which includes Houston.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, earlier this month signed a GOP bill that closes voting sites at 8 p.m. rather than 9 p.m., shortens the window for early voting window by nine days, imposes new restrictions on mail and absentee voting, and threatens civil fines and criminal charges against local officials who depart from state election law or guidance.

"This is a total takeover of elections by the state," said Linn County Auditor Joel Miller, who was sued by the Trump campaign for mailing absentee ballot applications with some information already filled out to registered voters. "We did everything we could to increase participation and engagement in the democratic process, and evidently some people thought that more people participated than they wanted and they decided to put limitations on it."

Eliza Sweren-Becker, voting rights and elections counsel at the Brennan Center, said it's disheartening to see Republicans target the local election officials who worked to boost turnout and ensure polling places would be safe during the pandemic.

"It's really a shame because our local election officials, in many ways, were heroes last year, and to see them attacked by their state lawmakers is really unfortunate," she said.

Izaguirre reported from Lindenhurst, New York. Associated Press Writer Christina A. Cassidy in Atlanta

contributed to this report.

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Many history interpreters of color carry weight of racism

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

Stephen Seals stood onstage waiting to be auctioned off. Moments later, a white slave auctioneer pointed a gun at one of the other Black men gathered with Seals, and a Black mother cried for her children.

The scene, titled "What Holds the Future," was Seals' first scripted piece at Colonial Williamsburg, an immersive living-history museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, where costumed interpreters of history reenact scenes from the colonial past and portray figures from that period.

"Every time you did this piece, it hurt," said Seals, an actor-interpreter and community outreach and program development manager at the site.

After the scene, the actors would spend 15 minutes checking in with each other. Sometimes they cried together. Sometimes they sat in silence.

As historic sites like Colonial Williamsburg are working to be more racially inclusive, many actor-interpreters of color say they appreciate the efforts. But it's a weighty and often painful experience to portray enslaved people or others who lived through the racism of the past. The work of getting into character has them exploring difficult parts of history, and once they step back into the real world they still are confronted with current-day racism.

"I can take off the costume," said Deirdre Jones Cardwell, programming lead for the actor-interpreters at Williamsburg. "But I can't take off my Blackness."

Sharing stories of Colonial Williamsburg's residents of color is a relatively new phenomenon in the site's nearly 90-year history. It wasn't until 1979 when the museum began telling Black stories, and not until 2002 that it launched its American Indian Initiative. Even in recent years, interpreters say the stories of Black and Native American people haven't always gotten adequate programming slots, advertising and research support.

"There was a point in Colonial Williamsburg's history that interpreters weren't allowed to talk about slavery," Jones Cardwell said. "We've come a long way since that, but there's a long way to go."

Lately, Colonial Williamsburg expanded recruitment efforts and outreach to historically Black colleges and universities, partnered with local groups like the city's historic First Baptist Church, and set aside time monthly for employees of color to meet. Last year, the site launched unconscious bias training for senior leadership and plans for diversity training for all employees this year.

Similar efforts are underway at the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, in Grand Island, Nebraska, where a new permanent exhibit tells the story of a once-enslaved Black man who became one of the area's most prominent physicians. The museum is also partnering with a local multicultural coalition to explore the stories of 12 Black families who settled in northwest Nebraska in the 1880s.

But executive director Chris Hochstetler says more must be done. He estimates only 1% to 3% of the Stuhr's costumed interpreters are people of color. When he arrived at the museum in February 2020, Hochstetler "realized we needed to ask ourselves some serious questions about whether we are representing our community fully."

As the nation reckons with racism after high-profile police brutality cases last year, Jones Cardwell says Black interpreters are feeling more empowered to push for inclusive programming and hiring. But she says much of the burden has fallen on the shoulders of employees of color.

She is grateful for the moments she has out of character. During breaks, she does breathing exercises or prays. When she researches or teaches about the racial violence of the colonial era, she thinks of headlines of Black people being killed by police today.

"The more that you learn about this history, the heavier it feels," she said. "We're still dealing with ripples

from the past.”

Actor-interpreter Mary Carter takes off her costume whenever she can.

“Mentally, I can’t be in those clothes any longer than I have to,” she said.

“But,” she added, “even when they come off, I can’t put racism away.”

As Carter talks to guests about a 1705 law referring to biracial people as “an abominable mixture,” she is aware of the racism she’s faced herself as a mixed-race Black woman. It took years for her to realize the toll the work was taking, she says, and managers didn’t fully understand. So she leaned on Black colleagues, a therapist and Black women in the museum field.

Interpreters of color are often racially harassed by site visitors, and sexual abuse — physical and verbal — is common, especially against Black women, said Cheyney McKnight, a historical interpreter and founder of Not Your Momma’s History, an organization that helps historical sites develop inclusive programs. McKnight has begged managers to have security guards nearby. At times, speaking with hostile guests has left her in tears.

“It was like feeding me to the wolves every day,” said McKnight, who has worked with over 45 historical sites.

Talon Silverhorn, a Colonial Williamsburg American Indian interpreter and member of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, doesn’t portray a specific person. Instead, he shows up to work as himself and teaches guests about his tribe’s history. But even that takes an emotional toll.

Some guests have told him that the colonists should have completely wiped out Native Americans. In training, interpreters are taught to detach themselves from the stories they tell, but Silverhorn says that for interpreters of color, “there’s only so much of that that can be done.”

Last year, Silverhorn started going to therapy, which Colonial Williamsburg covers. It’s helped, but he said there’s still more work to do.

Novella Nimmo, education coordinator and actor-interpreter at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, often portrays her own great-grandmother, who was born into slavery.

“It’s draining but it’s also uplifting,” she said. “You’re telling a story that America wants to forget. You’re telling the story of your ancestors, who were never able to tell their stories. That’s what keeps me going. I remember their strength, and that gives me strength.”

Interpreters of color also would like to see white interpreters get more training on the histories of communities of color.

McKnight advocates for support groups, hazard pay and full therapy coverage for interpreters of color.

“The job of Black interpreters is different,” McKnight said. “And we need different support.”

Fernando reported from Chicago. She is a member of The Associated Press’ Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/christinetfern>.

Vice presidents’ policy projects come with political risks

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mike Pence led the coronavirus task force only to be constantly overruled by the White House. Al Gore’s efforts to “reinvent government” were largely forgotten during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Dan Quayle’s revamping of space policy never got much notice to begin with.

For decades, the job of a vice president was to try to stay relevant, to avoid being viewed, in the words of one occupant of the post, as “standby equipment.” But in recent administrations, the seconds-in-command have increasingly been deputized with special policy assignments that add some weight — and political risk — to the job.

That’s likely to be the case for Vice President Kamala Harris, who this week was named the new point person on immigration. The job comes as President Joe Biden is rolling back four years of stringent policies enacted by his predecessor and contending with intensifying Republican criticism over the increased flow of migrants to the U.S.-Mexico border.

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"It's usually a ceremonial role. This is definitely not a ceremonial task," said Nina Rees, a former deputy assistant for domestic policy to Vice President Dick Cheney.

Harris' team has clarified that the vice president does not own all of immigration policy. She will be focused on the diplomatic side, working with Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to try to stop the flow of migrants from those countries, and not on the difficult task of deciding who is let into the U.S., where they are housed and what to do with the children who arrive without their parents.

"The vice president is not doing the border," Harris spokeswoman Symone Sanders said.

Still, Harris' project is central to Biden's argument that he'll succeed in restoring American influence and credibility abroad and making the immigration process more humane.

"It's important for the administration to succeed in this," said Elaine Kamarck, who helped Gore lead the effort to overhaul and streamline government. "If you want to get to the source of the problem at the border, you've got to go into these countries and you've got to use American clout in any way you have it."

Now a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution, Kamarck is author of the book "Picking the Vice President," which argues that, starting with Gore, vice presidents have effectively formed governing "partnerships" with the president. That continued with Cheney — who had a hand in nearly everything George W. Bush's White House did — and Biden, who brought a deep knowledge of Capitol Hill and foreign policy when he joined Barack Obama's administration.

Kamarck's argument bucks the traditional wisdom, which says if a vice president does well on thorny issues, more credit goes to the president and, if not, it gives the president some political cover.

The matter of who gets praise, or blame, is even trickier when it's clear the vice president has White House aspirations.

That's an especially strong dynamic in the Biden White House. Harris' presidential ambitions are clear — she already ran unsuccessfully against Biden last year — and Biden's future is perhaps cloudier. The 78-year-old president said this week that "My plan is to run reelection" but later added, "I've never been able to plan four-and-a-half, three-and-a-half years ahead for certain."

"There's very little that compares to the experience of being in a White House and heading a major issue, spending time getting to know the main players, getting media attention," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. "If she can figure out a way to do this — whether it's 2024 or 2028 — it becomes part of her portfolio."

That, though, could also be a big 'if.' Democratic White Houses have for decades been confounded by border policy, as encapsulated by Obama. His administration deported a record number of people in the country illegally, but, late in his term, took unprecedented steps to provide legal protections for immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

"It is a huge problem on many different levels, both humanitarian and health and security," said Ray Sullivan, a Texas-based Republican strategist. "I also think it cuts across political lines. Folks from all political persuasions can look at the border crisis and think something's not working right at all."

John Adams once bemoaned the vice presidency as "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived." Gerald Ford, who spent only eight months as vice president before succeeding Richard Nixon, was so miserable that he urged Cheney not to take the job under Bush.

Even Biden — though he used his eight years as vice president to help the Obama White House draw down U.S. troops in Iraq and oversee implementation of federal stimulus in response to the Great Recession — once noted that "Ben Franklin, when the Constitution was written, said 'we should refer to the vice president as 'his superfluous excellency.'"

Walter Mondale served as vice president to Jimmy Carter and wrote a 1976 memo that is credited with helping to redefine the office. Until then, he said, the vice president had largely been viewed as "standby equipment."

Mondale also pushed for and became the first vice president to have an office in the West Wing of the White House and a sizeable staff. His memo argued that the vice president should be a "general adviser" to the president rather than tackle specific tasks — advice Biden isn't following by turning to Harris on such a singular and politically important problem.

Cheney, who famously headed Bush's vice presidential search team before recommending himself for the job, perhaps best embodied the role of chief adviser. He helped shape the administration's decision to invade Iraq and overhaul national security laws, while also promoting environmental regulations that were more favorable to energy and industry interests and dramatically expanding the powers of the presidency and the executive branch.

Vice presidents finding themselves in thankless positions still remains more common than not, though. Confronting the outbreak of a virus he'd continue to insist would magically vanish, Donald Trump turned to Pence. But Trump repeatedly seized back the spotlight with nearly daily press briefings and eventually disbanded the task force altogether.

After Quayle worked on space issues, Gore helped lead environmental and technology projects for Bill Clinton but is also remembered for heading a task force to overhaul government. That job took Gore into the bureaucratic weeds. He delivered speeches on how agencies should write their rules, explaining that "means of egress" should be "exit routes."

"Short is better than long. Active is better than passive," Gore said in 1998 at the National Small Business Week Awards.

But Kamarck said the effort also allowed him to take a lead role in a vast array of issues — from procurement to immigration to housing policy to helping set airline safety standards after a major crash. Gore's work shrinking the federal government became a centerpiece of Clinton's successful 1996 reelection campaign, she said, though rifts that formed between the two after the Lewinsky scandal troubled the 2000 race.

"What if Monica Lewinsky had never happened, what if there hadn't been an impeachment over this? My guess is that Clinton would have been out there touting Gore, touting reinventing government," Kamarck said. "It would have been a big deal."

5,000 attend rock concert in Barcelona after COVID-19 screen

By JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — Five thousand music lovers are set to attend a rock concert in Barcelona on Saturday after passing a same-day COVID-19 screening, to test its effectiveness in preventing outbreaks of the virus at large cultural events.

The show by Spanish rock group Love of Lesbian has the special permission of Spanish health authorities. While the rest of the country is limited to gatherings of no more than four people in closed spaces, the concertgoers will be able to mix freely, although face masks are mandatory.

People with heart disease, cancer, or those who have been in contact with someone infected by COVID-19 in recent weeks were asked not to sign up. Ticket buyers chose between three venues in Barcelona where they must undergo a quick antigen test on Saturday morning. Those with negative results get a code on their mobile phone validating their ticket for the show at the city's Palau Sant Jordi starting at 7 p.m.

Organizers say it is the first commercial event of this size held in Europe during the pandemic.

The show is sold out. The tickets, ranging from 23-28 euros (\$27-33), include the cost of the test and the high-quality face mask that is obligatory except when eating or drinking at designated areas.

The concert is backed by local authorities and by experts of Barcelona's The Fight AIDS and Infectious Diseases Foundation, which also organized a case study around a smaller concert of 500 people in December. They said that the results of that preliminary case study showed that pre-screening with antigen tests and the use of face masks succeeded in preventing infections inside the concert despite there being no social distancing rules.

"This is another small step toward being able to hold concerts and cultural events" during the pandemic, said Dr. Boris Revollo, the virologist involved in the design of the health protocols.

In addition to being 10 times larger than the concert in December, this time there will be no control group maintained outside the concert hall.

Instead, concertgoers have agreed public health authorities can inform Revollo's team if they come down with the coronavirus in the weeks after the concert. With that information, Revollo's team will do an

analysis of infection rates among the 5,000 concertgoers compared with that of the general population to see if there are any discrepancies that could point to contagion at the concert.

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

Myanmar forces kill dozens in deadliest day since coup

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — As Myanmar's military celebrated the annual Armed Forces Day holiday with a parade Saturday in the country's capital, soldiers and police elsewhere reportedly killed dozens of people as they suppressed protests in the deadliest bloodletting since last month's coup.

A count issued by an independent researcher in Yangon who has been compiling near-real time death tolls put the total as darkness fell at 93, spread over more than two dozen cities and towns. The online news site Myanmar Now reported the death toll had reached 91.

Both numbers are higher than all estimates for the previous high on March 14, which ranged in counts from 74 to 90.

Figures collected by the researcher, who asked not to be named for his security, have generally tallied with the counts issued at the end of each day by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, which documents deaths and arrests and is widely seen as a definitive source. The Associated Press is unable to independently confirm the death tolls.

The killings quickly drew international condemnation, with multiple diplomatic missions to Myanmar releasing statements that mentioned the killing of civilians Saturday, including children.

"This 76th Myanmar armed forces day will stay engraved as a day of terror and dishonour," the European Union's delegation to Myanmar said on Twitter. "The killing of unarmed civilians, including children, are indefensible acts."

The death toll in Myanmar has been steadily rising as authorities grow more forceful with their suppression of opposition to the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule.

Up through Friday, the Association of Political Prisoners had verified 328 people killed in the post-coup crackdown.

Junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing did not directly refer to the protest movement when he gave his nationally televised Armed Forces Day speech before thousands of soldiers in Naypyitaw. He referred only to "terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and social security," and called it unacceptable.

This year's event was seen as a flashpoint for violence, with demonstrators threatening to double down on their public opposition to the coup with more and bigger demonstrations. The protesters refer to the holiday by its original name, Resistance Day, which marks the beginning of a revolt against Japanese occupation in World War 2.

State television MRTV on Friday night showed an announcement urging young people — who have been at the forefront of the protests and prominent among the casualties — to learn a lesson from those killed during demonstrations about the danger of being shot in the head or back.

The warning was widely taken as a threat because a great number of the fatalities among protesters have come from being shot in the head, suggesting they have been targeted for death. The announcement suggested that some young people were taking part in protesting as if it was a game, and urged their parents and friends to talk them out of participating.

In recent days the junta has portrayed the demonstrators as the ones perpetrating violence for their sporadic use of Molotov cocktails. On Saturday, some protesters in Yangon were seen carrying bows and arrows. In contrast, security forces have used live ammunition for weeks against what have still been overwhelmingly unarmed and peaceful crowds.

The military government does not issue regular casualty counts, and when it has released figures, the totals have been a fraction of what independent parties such as the U.N. have reported. It has said its

use of force has been justified to stop what it has called rioting.

In his speech Saturday, Min Aung Hlaing used the occasion to try to justify the overthrow of Suu Kyi's government, accusing it of failing to investigate irregularities in last November's general election, and repeating that his government would hold "a free and fair election" and hand over power afterward.

The military has claimed there were irregularities in the voting rolls for the last election, which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won in a landslide.

The junta detained Suu Kyi on the day it took power, and continues to hold her on minor criminal charges while investigating allegations of corruption against her that her supporters dismiss as politically motivated.

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for New York-based Human Rights Watch, said Saturday's events showed that the military, known in Myanmar as the Tatmadaw, should be prosecuted in international courts of law.

"This is a day of suffering and mourning for the Burmese people, who have paid for the Tatmadaw's arrogance and greed with their lives, time and time again," he said.

Prosecutors struggle with consistent story in Jan. 6 cases

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — There's little doubt the Oath Keepers were planning for something on Jan. 6. The question at the heart of the criminal case against its members and associates in the attack on the U.S. Capitol is: What, exactly, did they intend to do?

Authorities suggested for weeks in court hearings and papers that members of the far-right militia group plotted their attack in advance in an effort to block the peaceful transition of power. But prosecutors have since said it is not clear whether the group was targeting the Capitol before Jan. 6.

"The plan was to unlawfully stop the certification of the Electoral College vote ... and the plan was to be prepared to use violence if necessary," Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathryn Rakoczy said during a hearing this month. But the Oath Keepers "did not know precisely the way in which force and violence might be needed to support this plan," she said.

Authorities are still combing through a sea of evidence in what they say is likely the most complex investigation ever prosecuted by the Justice Department. More than 300 people are facing federal charges and more are expected. The most serious charges have been brought against 10 people described as members and associates of the Oath Keepers and several members of another far-right extremist group, the Proud Boys.

But as the sprawling investigation has unfolded, prosecutors have sometimes struggled to maintain a consistent narrative and had to walk back statements made in court hearings or in papers. It has created an opening for defense attorneys to try to sow doubt in the case.

"The government presented a theory (without evidence) that there was a weeks long plan to invade the Capitol," an attorney for one of the Oath Keepers, Jessica Watkins, wrote in a recent court filing. "There was no such plan."

In one case, prosecutors declared in court documents in January there was "strong evidence" the pro-Trump mob aimed to "capture and assassinate elected officials." The Justice Department quickly clarified it had no such evidence, blaming it on a miscommunication between prosecutors.

After she was pressed by a judge in a recent hearing, Rakoczy conceded authorities "do not have at this point someone explicitly saying, 'our plan is to force entry into the Capitol in order to stop the certification,'" but cautioned that the investigation is ongoing.

"Part of the reason that there wasn't necessarily as concrete a plan that one might expect is that they were waiting and watching to see what leadership did," she said.

Just a month earlier, Rakoczy told the same judge there's no other way to read the group's messages about stationing a "quick reaction force" outside the city other than that they needed weapons available "in the event the activities at the Capitol went badly."

"And those activities at the Capitol were a planned and very well-coordinated attack on the United States

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Capitol," she said.

Defense attorneys argue any discussions their clients had before Jan. 6 were in reference to providing security at the rally before the riot or protecting themselves against possible attacks from antifa activists.

The defendants can still be convicted of conspiring to obstruct Congress even if the plan was formulated only moments before they stormed the Capitol, said Jimmy Gurule, a former federal prosecutor who's now a professor at the University of Notre Dame law school. And prosecutors have some "pretty compelling circumstantial evidence," he said.

Communications detailed in court documents show the group discussing things like gear and training in the weeks leading up to Jan. 6. One man suggested getting a boat to ferry weapons across the Potomac River into their "waiting arms," authorities say.

In December, Kelly Meggs, who officials say was the leader of the Oath Keepers' Florida chapter, wrote in a message that he had "organized an alliance" with the Proud Boys. Days before Jan. 6, Meggs instructed someone to tell their friend "this isn't a rally," authorities say.

Many came dressed for battle on Jan. 6 in tactical vests and helmets. The leader of the Oath Keepers, who has not been charged, communicated with some of the defendants over a Signal chat called "DC OP: Jan 6 21," which prosecutors say shows the group was "activating a plan to use force on Jan. 6."

Authorities wrote in court papers that the group not only conspired to "forcibly storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 — they planned their attack in advance." The evidence is "irrefutable," prosecutors wrote in another document, that Watkins "recruited others to join, trained for, planned, and participated in a coordinated effort to, as she put it, 'forc(e) entry into the Capitol Building.'"

U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta agreed in February to keep Thomas Caldwell, who authorities have portrayed as a leader of the conspiracy, locked up while he awaits trial, saying the evidence showed he "engaged in planning and communications with others ... to plan a potential military-like incursion on the Capitol on January the 6th."

But after Caldwell's lawyer challenged that assessment, the judge reversed his decision and released Caldwell to home confinement. Mehta said there's no evidence he entered the Capitol on Jan. 6 or had been plotting to do so.

"Last time we were here 30 days ago, I was convinced that it was a plan to execute an incursion on the Capitol building," the judge told Caldwell's attorney. "You've raised some evidence that, I think, rebuts that notion."

The judge has since released other defendants, noting there's no evidence they assaulted anyone at the Capitol or, in some cases, don't appear to be as involved in the planning before Jan. 6.

But Mehta on Friday ordered Meggs to remain locked up, calling him a danger to the community. The judge said his communications in the weeks leading up to the attack show he was planning for violence in the streets of Washington even if none specifically mention a plot to storm the Capitol.

Prosecutors have also apparently been unable to get on the same page about what to say to the press.

A judge recently scolded the Justice Department over a "60 Minutes" interview during which the prosecutor who was leading the investigation suggested some of the rioters could face sedition charges. Former acting District of Columbia U.S. Attorney Michael Sherwin's interview appeared to violate Justice Department rules and Sherwin is now under internal investigation, a prosecutor told the judge.

Now vaccinated, older adults emerge from COVID hibernation

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Bill Griffin waited more than a year for this moment: Newly vaccinated, he embraced his 3-year-old granddaughter for the first time since the pandemic began.

"She came running right over. I picked her up and gave her a hug. It was amazing," the 70-year-old said after the reunion last weekend.

Spring has arrived with sunshine and warmer weather, and many older adults who have been vaccinated, like Griffin, are emerging from COVID-19-imposed hibernation.

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From shopping in person or going to the gym to bigger milestones like visiting family, the people who were once most at risk from COVID-19 are beginning to move forward with getting their lives on track. Nearly 45% of Americans who are 65 and older are now fully vaccinated.

Visiting grandchildren is a top priority for many older adults. In Arizona, Gailen Krug has yet to hold her first grandchild, who was born a month into the pandemic in Minneapolis. Now fully vaccinated, Krug is making plans to travel for her granddaughter's first birthday in April.

"I can't wait," said Krug, whose only interactions with the girl have been over Zoom and FaceTime. "It's very strange to not have her in my life yet."

The excitement she feels, however, is tempered with sadness. Her daughter-in-law's mother, who she had been looking forward to sharing grandma duties with, died of COVID-19 just hours after the baby's birth. She contracted it at a nursing home.

Isolated by the pandemic, older adults were hard hit by loneliness caused by restrictions intended to keep people safe. Many of them sat out summer reunions, canceled vacation plans and missed family holiday gatherings in November and December.

In states with older populations, like Maine, Arizona and Florida, health officials worried about the emotional and physical toll of loneliness, posing an additional health concern on top of the virus.

But that's changing, and more older people are reappearing in public after they were among the first group to get vaccinated.

Those who are fully vaccinated are ready to get out of Dodge without worrying they were endangering themselves amid a pandemic that has claimed more than 540,000 lives in the United States.

"Now there's an extra level of confidence. I am feeling good about moving forward," said Ken Hughes, a 79-year-old Florida resident who is flying with his wife for a pandemic-delayed annual trip to Arizona in April.

Plenty of older adults are eager to hop on a jet to travel. Others are looking forward to the simpler things like eating at a restaurant, going to a movie theater or playing bingo.

Sally Adams, 74, was among several older people who showed up for "parking lot bingo" in Glendale, Arizona. She felt safe because she'd been vaccinated and because she was in her car at the first bingo event in more than a year.

Once she fulfills the time to reach peak immunity, she plans to indulge in little things like eating out. Both her and her husband, who is also vaccinated, have only done takeout. Now, they feel like it will be OK to even eat indoors — as long as it's not crowded.

"We'll probably go in and take the farthest table from other people just to be on the safe side," she said.

Indeed, many older adults are taking a cautious approach, especially when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declined to ease recommendations for travel.

Frequent traveler Cindy Charest was so excited about the prospect of jetting away for the first time in more than a year that she posted an airplane emoji with a photo of her being vaccinated on social media.

But she's taking a wait-and-see attitude after the CDC recommended against nonessential air travel, for now.

"I think I got prematurely excited about it," said Charest, 65, of Westbrook, Maine. But she's ready to jump when the time comes. She's watching for changing guidance.

Others are also cautious.

"We're still in the thick of it," said Claudette Greene, 68, of Portland, Maine. "We've made a lot of progress but we're not done with this."

Kathy Bubar said she and her husband are completely vaccinated but are in no hurry to push things. The 73-year-old Portland resident is planning to wait until fall before planning any major travel. She hopes to go on a safari in December.

"My goal in all of this is to not be the last person to die from COVID. I'm willing to be patient and take as long as it takes," she said.

The Griffins were also cautious before they were reunited with their granddaughter.

Bill Griffin, of Waterboro, didn't dare have close contact with family members until after being vaccinated

because he has lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease and high blood pressure, all factors that pushed him into a high-risk category for COVID-19.

"Everybody wants to live for the moment, but the moment could have been very deadly. We listened to the scientists," he said.

Associated Press writers Adriana Gomez Licon in Miami and Terry Tang in Phoenix contributed to this report.

New attempts planned to free huge vessel stuck in Suez Canal

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — A giant container ship remained stuck sideways in Egypt's Suez Canal for a fifth day Saturday, as authorities prepared to make new attempts to free the vessel and reopen a crucial east-west waterway for global shipping.

The Ever Given, a Panama-flagged ship that carries cargo between Asia and Europe, ran aground Tuesday in the narrow canal that runs between Africa and the Sinai Peninsula.

The massive vessel got stuck in a single-lane stretch of the canal, about six kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez.

Peter Berdowski, CEO of Boskalis, the salvage firm hired to extract the Ever Given, said the company hoped to pull the container ship free within days using a combination of heavy tugboats, dredging and high tides.

He told the Dutch current affairs show Nieuwsuur on Friday night that the front of the ship is stuck in sandy clay, but the rear "has not been completely pushed into the clay and that is positive because you can use the rear end to pull it free."

Berdowski said two large tugboats were on their way to the canal and are expected to arrive over the weekend. He said the company aims to harness the power of the tugs, dredging and tides, which he said are expected to be up to 50 centimeters (20 inches) higher Saturday.

"The combination of the (tug) boats we will have there, more ground dredged away and the high tide, we hope that will be enough to get the ship free somewhere early next week," he said.

If that doesn't work, the company will remove hundreds of containers from the front of the ship to lighten it, effectively lifting the ship to make it easier to pull free, Berdowski said.

A crane was already on its way that can lift the containers off the ship, he said.

An official at the Suez Canal Authority said the authority planned to make at least two attempts Saturday to free the vessel when the high tide goes down. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief journalists. Egyptian authorities have prohibited media access to the site.

The salvage mission was turning its focus to the ship's lodged bow, after some progress was made towards freeing the ship's stern, the canal service provider Leth Agencies said Saturday.

Egypt Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouly called the ship's predicament "a very extraordinary incident," in his first public comments on the blockage in a press conference in Cairo. He said the head of the canal authority, Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei, would hold a news conference Saturday in the city of Suez to share more details of the operation.

Yukito Higaki, president of Shoei Kisen, the company that owns the giant container ship, told a news conference in Imabari, Japan on Friday night that 10 tugboats were deployed and workers were dredging the banks and sea floor near the vessel's bow to try to get it afloat again.

Shoei Kisen said Saturday the company was considering removing containers to lighten the vessel if refloating efforts fail, but that would be a difficult operation.

The White House said it has offered to help Egypt reopen the canal. "We have equipment and capacity that most countries don't have and we're seeing what we can do and what help we can be," President Joe Biden told reporters Friday.

An initial investigation showed the vessel ran aground due to strong winds and ruled out mechanical or

engine failure, the company and the canal authority said. GAC, a global shipping and logistics company, had previously said the ship had experienced a power blackout, but it did not elaborate.

A maritime traffic jam grew to around 280 vessels near Port Said on the Mediterranean Sea, Port Suez on the Red Sea and in the canal system on Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, according to canal service provider Leth Agencies.

Some vessels began changing course and dozens of ships were still en route to the waterway, according to the data firm Refinitiv.

A prolonged closure of the crucial waterway would cause delays in the global shipment chain. Some 19,000 vessels passed through the canal last year, according to official figures. About 10% of world trade flows through the canal, which is particularly crucial for transporting oil. The closure could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East.

It remained unclear how long the blockage would last. Even after reopening the canal that links factories in Asia to consumers in Europe, the waiting containers are likely to arrive at busy ports, forcing them to face additional delays before offloading.

Apparently anticipating long delays, the owners of the stuck vessel diverted a sister ship, the Ever Greet, on a course around Africa instead, according to satellite data.

Others also are being diverted. The liquid natural gas carrier Pan Americas changed course in the mid-Atlantic, now aiming south to go around the southern tip of Africa, according to satellite data from MarineTraffic.com.

Associated Press writer Mike Corder at The Hague, Netherlands, contributed.

Shots, and a musical serenade, at NYC vaccination center

By KATHY WILLENS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On a recent weekday, the sounds of Vivaldi, Mozart and Bach greeted hundreds of just-inoculated New Yorkers as they entered a medical observation area at one of the city's biggest COVID-19 vaccination sites, the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.

Hearing the music, many stopped to record videos of the five musicians in a piano and string ensemble gathered onstage, performing live.

For people on the road to immunity from the coronavirus, experiencing live music in the same space that served as a field hospital at the height of the pandemic was a fitting accompaniment on a day of hope.

For some of the musicians, it was something more.

Pianist Barbara Podgurski said her recent performances at the vaccination site were her first in public since the pandemic battered the city last spring.

"There were three months where I didn't play the piano because I felt hopeless," she said. "The reaction ... I haven't heard in a year. You realize how much people need music in their lives, to feel beauty and magic. It gives them hope."

The music is part of a series of daily, two-hour midday concerts from a collaboration between the nonprofit group Sing for Hope and violinist Victoria Paterson, who started her own nonprofit, Music and Medicine.

Paterson said many of her fellow musicians have been out of work since the city's music and performance scene shut down last spring.

The musicians who perform at the Javits Center are paid to play. There's a tip jar, too, but contributions go to Sing for Hope so the music can continue.

"We can't be buskers with family obligations at this stage in our careers," Paterson said.

Podgurski, who is also a music professor at the City University of New York, said that with the city's live entertainment scene still largely shut down, any paying job is extremely welcome. Some friends, she said, had to sell beloved instruments to pay bills.

Another recent performer at the Javits concerts was violinist Katie Kresek, concertmaster and co-orchestrator for the Tony-nominated Broadway musical "Moulin Rouge."

Before the pandemic, her schedule was full, including performances in New Zealand and Australia. But after the pandemic hit, "within two weeks, all of my coming year bookings were canceled."

Reflecting on playing at a vaccination center, Kresek said, "Emotionally, I felt I was contributing to this massive effort. It felt very gratifying to help out."

The music was appreciated, too, by people who had come to get their vaccinations.

"We've all experienced so much loss in the last year," said Janet Heit, who encountered the musicians after getting her shot. "It's very emotional coming here to get vaccinated for something that wasn't available when my father had COVID. Not only is it a great thing for the arts to have musicians, but it's soothing and uplifting."

Dr. Azmatullah Hussaini, a medical contractor at Javits, said he thought it helped put people nervous about their shots at ease.

"This past year has been a highly stressful environment and people's mental health has been suffering," he said. "But with people coming for the vaccine, this environment is filled with hope because this is a way to end the pandemic."

UK protesters scuffle with police during rally over new law

LONDON (AP) — Police in the English city of Bristol say they arrested 10 people during a third night of protest against a new policing law.

Hundreds of demonstrators against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill staged a sit-down protest outside a police station in the southwest England city on Friday night, and some scuffled with officers in helmets and shields who tried to break up the gathering.

The Avon and Somerset Police force said Saturday that eggs, bottles and bricks were thrown at officers and a police horse was daubed with paint.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson condemned what he called "disgraceful attacks against police officers in Bristol."

"Our officers should not have to face having bricks, bottles and fireworks being thrown at them by a mob intent on violence and causing damage to property," he said on Twitter. "The police and the city have my full support."

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Tensions rose when police broke up a vigil in Everard's memory because it violated coronavirus restrictions barring mass gatherings.

UK protesters scuffle with police during rally over new law

LONDON (AP) — Police in the English city of Bristol say they arrested 10 people during a third night of protest against a new policing law.

Hundreds of demonstrators against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill staged a sit-down protest outside a police station in the southwest England city on Friday night, and some scuffled with officers in helmets and shields who tried to break up the gathering.

The Avon and Somerset Police force said Saturday that eggs, bottles and bricks were thrown at officers

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and a police horse was daubed with paint.

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Israelis gather for Passover, celebrating freedom from virus

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A year ago, Giordana Grego's parents spent Passover at home in Israel, alone but grateful that they had escaped the worst of the pandemic in Italy. This year, the whole family will get together to mark the Jewish feast of liberation and deliverance from the pandemic.

Israel has vaccinated over half its population of 9.3 million, and as coronavirus infections have plummeted, authorities have allowed restaurants, hotels, museums and theaters to re-open. Up to 20 people can now gather indoors.

It's a stark turnaround from last year, when Israel was in the first of three nationwide lockdowns, with businesses shuttered, checkpoints set up on empty roads and people confined to their homes. Many could only see their elderly relatives on video calls.

"For us in Israel, really celebrating the festivity of freedom definitely has a whole different meaning this year after what we experienced," said Grego, who immigrated to Israel from Italy. "It's amazing that this year we're able to celebrate together, also considering that in Italy, everybody is still under lockdown."

Passover is the Jewish holiday celebrating the biblical Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt after a series of divine plagues. The week-long springtime festival starts Saturday night with the highly ritualized Seder meal, when the Exodus story is retold. It's a Thanksgiving-like atmosphere with family, friends, feasting and four cups of wine.

Throughout the week, observant Jews abstain from the consumption of bread and other leavened foods to commemorate the hardships of the flight from Egypt. Instead, they eat unleavened matzah.

Holiday preparations involve spring cleaning to the extreme to remove even the tiniest crumbs of leavened bread from homes and offices. Cauldrons of boiling water are set up on street corners to boil kitchenware, and many burn their discarded bread, known as chametz. Supermarkets cordon off aisles with leavened goods, wrapping shelves in black plastic.

Most Israeli Jews — religious and secular alike — spend the Seder with extended family. Last year's Passover was a major break in tradition.

Government-imposed restrictions forced the closure of synagogues and limited movement and assembly to slow the virus' spread. Some conducted the ritual meal with their nuclear family, others over videoconference, while an unfortunate few held the Seder in solitude.

Another lockdown was imposed over the Jewish High Holidays in September, again preventing family gatherings, and a third came earlier this year with the emergence of more contagious variants of the virus.

By the third lockdown, Israel had launched one of the most successful inoculation campaigns in the world after the government secured millions of doses from Pfizer and Moderna. Israel has now vaccinated more than 80% of its adult population.

It's too early to say that Israel's coronavirus crisis is over, as new variants could emerge that are resistant to the vaccines.

The vaccination campaign in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza has been slow to get off the ground, with Israel facing criticism for not sharing more of its supplies. Israel has vaccinated over 100,000 Palestinian laborers who work in Israel and West Bank settlements, and has sent a couple thousand doses to the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinians have imported more than 130,000 doses on their own, but it could be several months before shots are available for the vast majority of the nearly 5 million Palestinians in the territories. Experts say that could pose a risk to Israel's own public health efforts.

For now, however, Israelis are enjoying what feels like a post-pandemic reality, lending special significance to Passover.

"It's not only symbolic that it's the holiday of freedom, but it's also the holiday of the family," said Rabbi David Stav, chief rabbi of the city of Shoham and head of the liberal Orthodox organization Tzohar.

"This year, families are uniting. People that were so lonely, especially older people, who were disengaged from their families, all of a sudden they discover the freedom and the joy of being together with them."

Poland plans pensions for dogs, horses in state employment

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — They locate survivors in collapsed buildings, track down fugitives, foil drugs and explosives smugglers and help control rowdy crowds. All in exchange for food and lodging — and an occasional pat on the head.

But when retirement time comes, state care ends for the dogs and horses that serve in Poland's Police, Border Guard and Fire Service. They are given away, with no safeguards for their future welfare.

Following appeals from concerned service members, the Interior Ministry has proposed new legislation that would give these animals an official status, and paid retirement to help cover the often costly care bills their new owners face.

Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski described the draft law as a "moral obligation" which should get unanimous backing when presented in Parliament for approval later this year.

"More than one human life has been saved, more than one dangerous criminal caught thanks to the animals in service," he said in February.

The new law would affect some 1,200 dogs and more than 60 horses currently in service.

Each year, some 10% of the animals are retired, according to the Interior Ministry. Most of the dogs are German or Belgian Shepherds.

Pawel Kuchnio, handler of Warsaw police sniffer dog Orbita, says retired dogs almost always require expensive medical care, to deal with complaints such as strained hind joints.

The pension money "will certainly be a great help and will make things easier," he said.

The bill would confirm the unwritten rule that the animals' handlers have priority in keeping them before they're offered up for adoption.

But more importantly, it would extend state responsibility for the animals into their retirement time and secure financial support for the owners.

Slawomir Walkowiak, 50, a former policeman caring for retired service dogs and horses at Poland's only dedicated shelter, named "The Veterans' Corner," says regular state payments would ease concern over bills that reach into thousands of zlotys (dollars) monthly.

The privately run, farm-like shelter in Gierlatowo, west-central Poland, houses 10 dogs, and five retired police horses in a spacious paddock.

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The oldest horse there, Hipol, is in his late 20s and almost blind. Walkowiak says he would have a slim chance of surviving at a regular stable.

Walkowiak says many service dogs end up chained to posts or being given unsuitable tasks, as people think they would make good guardians for farms or other properties. This isn't always the case.

"The dog may suddenly remember that it was trained to bite and it will start biting, and when left alone at home it may demolish the couch because it needs to have something in its mouth," Walkowiak said.

In Warsaw, mounted police officer Dariusz Malkowski says he would have to pay the stabling fees for his 13-year-old black gelding Rywal if he were to keep him after retirement.

A stable box near Warsaw can cost some 2,500 zlotys (\$650) a month. The average pre-tax monthly salary in Poland is some 5,500 zlotys (\$1,400).

On patrol with Malkowski was Sgt. Katarzyna Kuczynska, riding 13-year-old Romeo II, or Romek, who can identify Kuczynska by her voice.

"These animals have worked for the state, they have done their jobs well and they should be entitled to health care and proper retirement — on green pastures in the case of horses," Kuczynska said.

Spurred by lockdown, Spain gives 4-day week a try

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — After years of waiting tables, Danae De Vries is one step closer to achieving her lifetime dream of becoming a theater coach.

Ironically, she owes that to the pandemic. It was after last year's brutal lockdown that shut the Spanish economy down for weeks that the owners of a small restaurant chain in Madrid offered De Vries to cut her weekly work schedule by one day.

Already struggling to make ends meet in a city that has seen rental prices spiral, the 28-year-old was hesitant at first — and then enthusiastic when she was told her wages would remain untouched.

"Now I have time to work, to see my family and friends, and to find enough time to study," she said. "It's marvelous to have time, to not rush everywhere and find a bit of inner peace."

A happier and more motivated De Vries is also better for her boss María Álvarez, the entrepreneur who turned her two-restaurant business upside-down when she proposed rotational four-day week shifts. Álvarez, a mother of two toddlers, and her startup partner at La Francachela had both struggled to keep the business going with no childcare support.

"There was a feeling that society had turned its back on families, that we had been betrayed," explained Álvarez. "As business owners, we had to come up with some solutions for our businesses, our employees and also for our personal lives."

Experimenting with cutting back one workday per week is about to go nationwide in Spain — the first country in Europe to do so. A three-year pilot project will be using 50 million euros (\$59 million) from the European Union's massive coronavirus recovery fund to compensate some 200 mid-size companies as they resize their workforce or reorganize production workflows to adapt to a 32-hour working week.

The funds will go to subsidizing all of the employers' extra costs in the first year of the trial and then reduce the government's aid to 50% and 25% each consecutive year, according to a blueprint by the Más País progressive party that's behind the initiative.

The only condition is that the readjustment leads to a real net reduction of working hours while maintaining full-time contract salaries, explained Héctor Tejero, a lawmaker with Más País in the Madrid regional assembly.

"It's not using the European funds for Spaniards to work less, it's about seeing how we can improve productivity and competitiveness of our companies," said Tejero.

Arguments in favor of the move also cite benefits for the overall economy. A mass shift to a three-day weekend would lead to more consumption, especially in entertainment and tourism, a backbone of the Spanish economy.

Reducing work hours from 40 to 35 per week in 2017 would have resulted in a 1.5% GDP growth and 560,000 new jobs, a study published earlier this year in the Cambridge Journal of Economics found. Sala-

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ries would have also increased nationally by 3.7%, especially benefitting women who more often take part-time jobs, the research said.

Software Delsol, in southern Spain, invested 400,000 euros last year to reduce working hours for its 190 employees and has since then reported a 28% reduction in absenteeism, with people choosing to go to the bank or see their doctor on their weekday off. Their sales increased last year by 20% and no single employee has quit since the new schedule was adopted.

Critics say that a pandemic-shaken economy is not the best scenario for experiments. With a 10.8% GDP contraction last year, its worst since the 1930s Civil War, Spain has suffered from intermittent lockdowns and the near-total freeze in international travel. Some experts argue that the priority should instead be fixing the country's dysfunctional labor market, which is dragging one of Europe's highest unemployment rates and is marred by precarious, low-wage jobs.

ESADE Business School's Carlos Victoria also warned against the one-size-fits-all approach of the proposal. "There are probably industries or economic areas in which a reduction of working hours won't necessarily lead to productivity gains," the economic policy researcher said.

But Más País argues that it's best to try first and decide later how to scale it up — or whether to do it at all.

Still, not all unions are fully backing the plan, conservatives have been defensive and CEOE, the main Spanish business association, has so far offered a lukewarm response to the project.

Nevertheless, at least half a dozen companies have already reached out expressing interest, according to Tejero, who said the pilot won't be launched at least until September, when and if mass vaccination helps revive the economy.

"In Spain, we have moved from presenteeism, where people had to be at the office for a very long time, to be in front of the computer, at home, for an even longer time," said La Francachela's Alvarez. "People are increasingly angry because remote working in itself is not going to solve our problems from a broader perspective."

What To Watch: Baylor-Villanova, Bueckers-Clark at NCAAs

By The Associated Press undefined

What to watch on Saturday at the NCAA tournaments in Indiana and Texas:

TOP GAMES

Men: No. 1 seed Baylor (24-2) vs. No. 5 seed Villanova (18-6), South Region semifinal, Hinkle Fieldhouse, Indianapolis. Tipoff: 5:15 p.m. Eastern on CBS.

Villanova is seeking its third men's national title in the last six years after winning it all in 2016 and 2018. The Wildcats have withstood a season-ending injury to point guard Collin Gillespie to get back to the Sweet 16. Baylor guards Jared Butler, Davion Mitchell and MaCio Teau are averaging a combined 55 ½ points through the first two rounds.

Women: No. 1 seed UConn (26-1) vs. No. 5 seed Iowa (20-9), River Walk Region semifinal, Alamodome, San Antonio. Tipoff: 1 p.m. Eastern on ABC.

This matchup features two of the most dynamic freshmen in the game and they happen to be good friends. UConn's Paige Bueckers is just the third freshman to earn first-team honors on the AP All-America women's team. Iowa's Caitlin Clark, a second-team All-America pick, leads the nation in points per game (26.8), total assists (209) and total 3-pointers (112).

WHAT ELSE TO WATCH FOR

Men: The other men's games include Loyola Chicago-Oregon State, Arkansas-Oral Roberts and Houston-Syracuse. ... Oral Roberts' Kevin Obanor is averaging 29.5 points in two NCAA Tournament games. That's the highest average of any player remaining in the tournament. ... The Oregon State-Loyola game marks just the second matchup between a No. 8 seed and a No. 12 seed in tournament history. No. 12 seed Missouri beat No. 8 seed UCLA, 82-73, in 2002.

Women: The rest of the women's schedule includes Baylor-Michigan, North Carolina State-Indiana and

Texas A&M-Arizona. ... Michigan is making its first Sweet 16 appearance. ... Texas A&M has produced plenty of suspense thus far in the tournament by squeaking past No. 15 seed Troy 84-80 and erasing a 12-point deficit to edge Iowa State 84-82 in overtime. The Aggies never led Iowa State in regulation and won on a buzzer-beater from Jordan Nixon, who scored 35 points. .

More AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness>

UN commission urges equality for women in decision-making

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N.'s premiere global body fighting for gender equality called for a sharp increase of women in global decision-making in a hotly debated final document adopted Friday night that saw continuing pushback against women's rights and a refusal to address issues of gender identity.

The Commission on the Status of Women reaffirmed the blueprint to achieve gender equality adopted 25 years ago at the Beijing women's conference and shone a spotlight on several major issues today, including the imbalance of power between men and women in public life and the growing impact of violence against women and girls in the digital world.

Diplomats were negotiating until almost the last minute over language on women human rights defenders, gender-based violence, and earlier on reproductive and sexual health and rights. Some Western nations sought unsuccessfully to get the commission to recognize gender non-conforming and transgender women. The closest they got was a reference to women and girls "who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination" and face "diverse situations and conditions."

The European Union said it would have liked to see "more ambitious language" in the 23-page document, stressing that "the systematic attempts by some delegations to derail the process and question international commitments and obligations on gender equality show that the pushback against women's rights continue."

Shannon Kowalski, director of advocacy and policy for The International Women's Health Coalition, said at a briefing earlier Friday that this year "Russia has been very vocal and on the front lines" in pushing "for language that is often regressing and that seeks to deny women and girls ... their rights." The Holy See often joined their positions, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Cuba were also vocal opponents on many issues, she said, while China opposed any reference to women human rights defenders.

"Russia played an exceptionally disruptive role in the negotiations," an EU diplomat said. "Today's low common denominator result demonstrates that a pushback against women's rights continues at the U.N., and that Russia is doing all it can to undermine progress on the issue." The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of private discussions.

The "Agreed Conclusions" were negotiated by the 193 U.N. member nations and adopted by consensus by the commission's 45 members at the end of a two-week meeting. The U.N. women's agency said more than 25,000 members of civil society registered to participate in the partly in-person but mainly virtual meeting that saw 200 side events led by member states and more than 700 events by civil society representatives.

After Ambassador Mher Margaryan, the commission chair, banged the gavel signifying consensus, about two dozen countries spoke.

Saudi Arabia stressed that any reference to gender "means women and men" and to marriage as "between women and men." China said it would not join consensus on the role of women human rights defenders.

In the document, the commission supports the important role of civil society in promoting and protecting the human rights and freedoms of all women, "including women human rights defenders."

U.N. Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said areas in the outcome document "do not please everybody," and the conclusions could have been "more ambitious" and the recommendations "even bolder and decisive."

She urged member states to use the recommendations "as a building block and to outperform what is contained in these Agreed Conclusions." She said next week's mainly virtual Gender Equality Forum in

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Mexico City, another follow-up to the 1995 Beijing conference, "will take forward what we have learned from the discussions of this commission and look at how we take concrete actions."

Mlambo-Ngcuka said the conclusions "contribute to important advances" on women's participation in public life, the main focus of the meeting along with tackling violence against women which increased during last year's COVID-19 pandemic.

The commission recognized that despite some progress women have a long road to reach equality with men in elections or appointments to decision-making bodies and administrative posts, she said. And it recognized that temporary special measures, including quotas, substantially contribute to increasing women's representation in national and local legislatures, and called on all governments to set specific targets and timelines to achieve the goal of 50/50 gender balance in elected positions.

On violence against women in the digital world, Mlambo-Ngcuka said the commission noted the lack of preventive measures and remedies. She said member states should take action to encourage women's digital participation and protect them, including from cyberstalking and cyberbullying.

The Beijing declaration and platform approved by 189 countries in 1995 called for bold action in 12 areas to achieve gender equality, including combating poverty and gender-based violence, ensuring all girls get an education and putting women at top levels of business and government, as well as at peacemaking tables.

It also said, for the first time in a U.N. document, that women's human rights include the right to control and decide "on matters relating to their sexuality, including their sexual and reproductive health, free of discrimination, coercion and violence."

In Friday's outcome document, the commission urges governments at all levels to "ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights."

It also urges governments to provide information on sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gender equality and women's empowerment" to adolescent girls and boys and young women and men, "with appropriate direction and guidance from parents and legal guardians."

On a positive note, the International Women's Health Coalition's Kowalski said the commission's meeting saw "very strong leadership" from a number of Latin American and Pacific island countries and the "really strong and vital return of the United States as a leader and defender of sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality and women's rights more broadly."

A highlight of the meeting was the virtual appearance by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, who told the commission "the status of women is the status of democracy" and President Joe Biden's administration will work to improve both.

Biden invites Russia, China to first global climate talks

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is including rivals Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China among the invitees to the first big climate talks of his administration, an event the U.S. hopes will help shape, speed up and deepen global efforts to cut climate-wrecking fossil fuel pollution, administration officials told The Associated Press.

The president is seeking to revive a U.S.-convened forum of the world's major economies on climate that George W. Bush and Barack Obama both used and Donald Trump let languish. Leaders of some of the world's top climate-change sufferers, do-gooders and backsliders round out the rest of the 40 invitations being delivered Friday. It will be held virtually April 22 and 23.

Hosting the summit will fulfill a campaign pledge and executive order by Biden, and the administration is timing the event to coincide with its own upcoming announcement of what will be a much tougher U.S. target for revamping the U.S. economy to sharply cut emissions from coal, natural gas and oil.

The session — and whether it's all talk, or some progress — will test Biden's pledge to make climate change a priority among competing political, economic, policy and pandemic problems. It also will pose a very public — and potentially embarrassing or empowering — test of whether U.S. leaders, and Biden in particular, can still drive global decision-making after the Trump administration withdrew globally and

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shook up longstanding alliances.

The Biden administration intentionally looked beyond its international partners for the summit, reaching



This satellite image from Cnes2021, Distribution Airbus DS, shows the cargo ship MV Ever Given stuck in the Suez Canal near Suez, Egypt, Thursday, March 25, 2021. The 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. (Cnes2021, Distribution Airbus DS via AP)

out to key leaders for what it said would sometimes be tough talks on climate matters, an administration official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. plans for the event.

Trump mocked the science underlying urgent warnings on global warming and the resulting worsening of droughts, floods, hurricanes and other natural disasters. He pulled the United States out of the 2015 U.N. Paris climate accords as one of his first actions. That makes next month's summit the first major international climate discussions by a U.S. leader in more than four years, although leaders in Europe and elsewhere have kept up talks.

U.S. officials and some others give the Obama administration's major-economies climate discussions some of the credit for laying the groundwork for the Paris accord. The United States and nearly 200 other governments at those talks each set targets for cutting their fossil-fuel emissions, and pledged to monitor and report their emissions. Another Biden administration official said the U.S. is still deciding how far the administration will go in setting a more ambitious U.S. emissions target.

The Biden administration hopes the stage provided by next month's Earth Day climate summit — planned to be all virtual because of COVID-19 and publicly viewable on livestream, including breakout conversations — will encourage other international leaders to use it as a platform to announce their own countries' tougher emission targets or other commitments, ahead of November's U.N. global climate talks in Glasgow.

The administration hopes more broadly the session will demonstrate a commitment to cutting emissions at home and encouraging the same abroad, the official said. That includes encouraging governments to get moving on specific, politically-bearable ways to retool their transportation and power sectors and overall economies now to meet those tougher future targets, something the Biden administration is just

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embarking on.

Like Bush's and Obama's major-economies climate forums, Biden's invite list includes leaders of the world's biggest economies and European blocs. That includes two countries — Russia and China — that Biden and his diplomats are clashing against over election interference, cyber attacks, human rights and other issues. It's not clear how those two countries in particular will respond to the U.S. invitations, or whether they are willing to cooperate with the U.S. on cutting emissions while sparring on other topics. China is the world's top emitter of climate-damaging pollution. The U.S. is No. 2. Russia is No. 4.

Climate scientists and climate policy experts largely welcomed Biden's international overture on climate negotiations, especially the outreach to China.

"China is by far the world's largest emitter. Russia needs to do more to reduce its emissions. Not including these countries because they aren't doing enough would be like launching an anti-smoking campaign but not directing it at smokers," said Nigel Purvis, who worked on climate diplomacy in past Democratic and Republican administrations.

Ideally, government leaders of China and other major economies will be looking for opportunities to talk over specific matters, such as whether broad agreement is possible on setting any price on carbon emissions, said Bob Inglis, a former Republican lawmaker who works to involve conservatives and conservative approaches in climate efforts. "That's why this kind of outreach makes sense."

Brazil is on the list as a major economy, but it's also a major climate backslider under President Jair Bolsonaro, who derailed preservation efforts for the carbon-sucking Amazon and joined Trump in trampling international climate commitments.

The 40 invitees also include leaders of countries facing some of the gravest immediate threats, including low-lying Bangladesh and the Marshall islands, countries seen as modeling some good climate behavior, including Bhutan and some Scandinavian countries, and African nations with big carbon sink forests or big oil reserves. Poland and some other countries on the list are seen by some as possibly open to moving faster away from dirty coal power.

Biden as a candidate pledged \$2 trillion in investment to help transform the U.S. into a zero-emission economy by 2050 while building clean-energy and technology jobs. Biden and other administration officials have been stressing U.S. climate intentions during early one-on-one talks with foreign leaders, and Biden climate envoy John Kerry has focused on diplomacy abroad to galvanize climate efforts.

Biden discussed the summit in a conversation Friday with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, with both leaders agreeing on the need to keep emissions-cutting targets ambitious, the White House said.

Democrats assail Georgia law, make case for voting overhaul

By STEVE PEOPLES and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

Democrats have seized on new voting restrictions in Georgia to focus attention on the fight to overhaul federal election laws, setting up a slow-building standoff that carries echoes of the civil rights battles of a half-century ago.

In fiery speeches, pointed statements and tweets, party leaders on Friday decried the law signed the day before by the state's Republican governor as specifically aimed at suppressing Black and Latino votes and a threat to democracy. President Joe Biden released an extended statement, calling the law an attack on "good conscience" that denies the right to vote for "countless" Americans.

"This is Jim Crow in the 21st Century," Biden said, referring to laws of the last century that enforced heavy-handed racial segregation in the South.

"It must end. We have a moral and Constitutional obligation to act," he said. He told reporters the Georgia law is an "atrocious" and the Justice Department is looking into it.

Georgia's Republican governor, Brian Kemp, lashed back, accusing Biden of attempting to "destroy the sanctity and security of the ballot box" by supporting what the governor sees as federal intrusion into state responsibilities.

Behind the chorus of outrage, Democrats are also wrestling with the limits on their power in Washington,

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as long as Senate filibuster rules allow Republicans to block major legislation, including H.R. 1, a sweeping elections bill now pending in the Senate.

Biden and his party are seeking to build and sustain momentum in the realm of public opinion — hoping to nationalize what has so far been a Republican-led, state-by-state movement to curb access to the ballot — while they begin a slow, plodding legislative process. Allies meanwhile plan to fight the Georgia law, and others, in court.

“What’s happening in Georgia right now, underscores the importance and the urgency,” said Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., in an interview Friday.

“This is about what is fundamental to our identity as an American people — one person, one vote.”

The emerging brawl over the politics and policy of voting access is swelling like nothing seen in recent years, harkening back to what many Americans may assume are well-settled rules ensuring equal access to the ballot.

But as Republican-controlled state legislatures from Georgia to Iowa to Arizona are taking dramatic action to limit early voting and force new voter ID requirements, the debate in Washington threatens to exacerbate the nation’s cavernous political divides in the early days of the Biden presidency, just as the Democratic president vows to unite the country.

It is expected to be a months-long slog in the narrowly divided Congress, specifically the Senate, where Democrats are, for now, unwilling to muscle their slim majority to change filibuster rules, despite the party’s urgent calls for action.

Instead, the Democrats are prepared to legislate the old-fashioned way, unspooling arguments in lengthy Senate debates, spilling out of the committee hearing rooms and onto the Senate floor, and forcing opponents to go on the record as standing in the way — much as South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond was positioned when he filibustered the Civil Rights Act of the last century.

“They’re literally squeezing the arteries of the lifeblood of America,” Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., the son of civil rights activists, said in an interview. “They are choking what makes us distinct and unique on the planet Earth.”

Booker would not, however, openly call for the end of the filibuster, a parliamentary tool requiring at least 60 votes to advance Senate legislation in some cases.

On Friday, the president revived his call on Congress to enact H.R. 1, an elections overhaul that would confront the Republican restrictions. He called as well for the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore some aspects of a landmark law struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013.

But Biden, like a shrinking number of other powerful Democrats, remains unwilling to embrace the so-called “nuclear option” — ending the filibuster — for fear it would further divide the country.

Meantime, the political fight was intensifying in Georgia, where years of voter registration drives in Black communities and steady population changes helped Biden win the once solidly red state.

Just as Kemp and several white state lawmakers celebrated the signing of the state’s new voting law on Thursday, state police officers handcuffed and forcibly removed state Rep. Park Cannon, a Black woman, after she knocked on the door of the governor’s private office.

Cannon was charged with obstruction of law enforcement and disruption of the General Assembly, both felonies. She was released from jail late Thursday. Donald Trump, the former president who promoted false claims of election fraud, congratulated the Georgia governor and state leaders on the new law.

As Congress hunkers down for the fight, a groundswell of outside efforts is spending millions to try to influence the debate and apply political pressure on voters, corporations and lawmakers in both parties.

A \$30 million advertising campaign is coming from the liberal group, End Citizens United, working with former Attorney General Eric Holder’s anti-gerrymandering group, the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, trying to persuade Democratic and Republican senators considered to be swing votes.

Other efforts are also underway, including from former first lady Michelle Obama, via the nonpartisan celebrity “When We All Vote” organization.

Civil rights leader Al Sharpton said Friday that he’s working with religious leaders in West Virginia and

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Arizona to press the home-state Democratic senators. He's well aware that this fight may go on for a while. "I'm prepared to go on this fight for however long it takes," he said. "Look at how long it took us to get the right to vote."

Sharpton also suggested that Black voters have been energized by the debate, which could lead to a surge in participation in next year's midterm elections despite the new voting requirements enacted by Republicans.

"By them being so blatant, I think that they play into our national strategy," Sharpton said. "We just need the Democrats in the Senate to stand up."

The Georgia law requires a photo ID in order to vote absentee by mail, cuts the time people have to request an absentee ballot and limits where ballot drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. The bill was a watered-down version of some of the proposals considered by the GOP-led General Assembly.

H.R. 1 is vast, and its Senate counterpart would confront the new Georgia law by expanding voting by mail and early voting, both popular during the pandemic. It would more broadly open ballot access by creating automatic voter registration nationwide, allowing former felons to vote and limiting the way states can remove registered voters from the rolls. It also addresses campaign financing and ethics laws.

Still, Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison warned his party would take Republicans to court "and fight about it there." A lawsuit filed late Thursday in the U.S. District Court in Atlanta by three groups — New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter Fund and Rise — challenged key provisions of the new Georgia law and said they violated the Voting Rights Act.

But Harrison also acknowledged that the filibuster was an "an obstacle" for the national Democrats' efforts to overturn the Republican-backed changes.

"I am delivering the message to everybody, particularly on my side of the aisle, that folks right now are very, very upset about where things are going," Harrison told The AP.

The chairman continued, "I'm going to do everything in my power, with every breath in my body, with every drop of blood that flows through my veins, to make sure that we fight back from this."

"We're not going back to Jim Crow 2.0," he said. "So we've got to do whatever we need to do to make sure that doesn't happen."

Peoples reported from New York. Mascaro reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Bill Barrow, Josh Boak and Amer Madhani contributed.

Former Trump adviser takes prominent role in voting battle

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

A GOP lawyer who advised former President Donald Trump on his campaign to overturn the 2020 election results is now playing a central role coordinating the Republican effort to tighten voting laws around the country.

Cleta Mitchell, a longtime Republican lawyer and advocate for conservative causes, was among the Trump advisers on a January phone call in which Trump asked Georgia election officials to "find" enough votes to declare him, and not Democrat Joe Biden, the winner of the battleground state.

Now Mitchell has taken the helm of two separate efforts to push for tighter state voting laws and to fight Democratic efforts to expand access to the ballot at the federal level. She is also advising state lawmakers crafting the voting restriction proposals. And, she said Friday, she is in regular contact with Trump.

"People are actually interested in getting involved and we have to harness all this energy," Mitchell said in an interview. "There are a lot of groups that have projects on election integrity that never did before."

Mitchell's new prominence tightens the ties between the former president, who has falsely insisted he lost the election due to fraud, and the GOP-led state voting overhaul that has helped turn a foundational principle of democracy into a partisan battleground.

Trump's false claims of fraud have fueled a wave of new voting restrictions. More than 250 proposed

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voting restrictions have been proposed this year by mostly Republican lawmakers, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. On Thursday, Georgia's GOP governor signed into law a measure requiring voters to present ID to vote by mail, gives the GOP-controlled state legislature new powers over local elections boards and outlaws providing food or water to people waiting in line to vote. Biden on Friday condemned it as "Jim Crow in the 21st Century."

In response, Democrats have stepped up the push for a massive federal election overhaul bill. That proposal, known as H.R. 1, would effectively neuter state-level voter ID laws, allow anyone to vote by mail if they wanted to and automatically register citizens to vote. Republicans view that as an encroachment on state control over elections and say it is designed to give Democrats an advantage.

"The left is trying to dismantle 100 years of advancement in election administration," Mitchell said, expressing bafflement at Democrats' charges that Republicans are trying to suppress votes. "We're watching two different movies right now."

Mitchell's most public involvement in the voting wars came in participation on Trump's call to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger Jan. 2. During that call, Mitchell insisted she had evidence of voting fraud, but officials with the Secretary of State's office told her that her data was incorrect.

The call is part of an investigation by the Fulton County District Attorney's office into whether Trump or others improperly tried to influence election officials. Mitchell would not discuss the call or the investigation.

Mitchell's involvement caused an outcry in the legal community and led to her departure from her long-time job at the law firm Foley & Lardner. But Mitchell says that has been a blessing.

"One of the great advantages of resigning from my law firm is that I can devote all my time to something I love," she said.

Mitchell has two new roles in an emerging conservative voting operation. She's running a \$10 million initiative at the limited government group FreedomWorks to both push for new restrictions in voting and help train conservatives to get involved in the nuts and bolts of local elections. She's also a senior legal fellow at the Conservative Partnership Institute, an organization run by former Republican Sen. Jim DeMint. She says she'll use that role to "coordinate" conservative voting positions, particularly in opposition to H.R. 1.

A onetime Oklahoma state legislator, Mitchell, 70, has links to other influential players in the conservative movement. She also serves as outside counsel to the American Legislative Exchange Committee, a conservative group that provides model legislation to state lawmakers and organized a call with state lawmakers and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz on opposing H.R. 1.

And Mitchell said she's been talking regularly with Republican state lawmakers about the need for new election laws. She would not identify whom she speaks with but said it's been a longtime passion.

"I've been working with state legislatures for several years to get them to pay attention to what I call the political process," Mitchell said. "I love legislatures and working with legislators."

She similarly would not detail her conversations with Trump or say whether they involved the new voting fights. "I'm in touch with the president fairly frequently," she said of Trump.

Repeated audits have shown no significant problems with the 2020 election. Trump and his supporters lost more than 50 court cases challenging its results.

Mitchell says she believes the courts used legal trickery to avoid ever truly addressing Trump's allegations of voter fraud.

That evidence had made some conservative groups careful not to echo Trump's baseless claims of election fraud, even as they argue for tighter restrictions on who Americans vote.

Mitchell's role could complicate that effort to keep a distance.

"I have concerns with the election but I do not think the election was stolen," said Noah Wall, executive vice president of FreedomWorks. However, Wall said he saw no conflict in working with Mitchell. "When we talk about what we're going to be focused on, I don't see any daylight between her issues and ours," Wall said.

Mitchell has a long history in the conservative movement, with positions on the boards of the National Rifle Association and the Bradley Foundation. She represented Trump's Environmental Protection Agency

chief, Scott Pruitt, and has been the campaign attorney for several Republican senators. She also is chair of the Public Interest Legal Foundation, a conservative election law project that she said may get involved in litigation against H.R. 1, should it pass, or in support of new laws like the one in Georgia.

AP Interview: Emmert says poor communication led to inequity

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Mark Emmert acknowledged the glaring failures to give the coaches and players in the women's tournament the same attention the NCAA gave the men was a result of a lack of communication between the two basketball staffs along with focusing on trying to tip off both events safely during a pandemic.

The NCAA president said the oversights resulted in overlooking differences that led to inequities that have cast a dark, looming cloud over the women's tournament.

"Clearly we should have had better communication between my teams," Emmert said in a 30-minute interview with The Associated Press on Friday. "Clearly we should have really had a better focus on a number of those details that are hardly details, but are really, really important."

"The emphasis that needed to be on health and wellness and the complete and utter focus on how to pull this off in a pandemic led us to get our eye off the ball on a handful of things and that's really unfortunate. Had we done that better we wouldn't have had these things emerge."

The NCAA announced on Thursday that it was hiring a law firm to review potential gender equity issues in all men's and women's championship events.

"We can't just say we're in favor of everything being equivalent and fair, we've got to make sure that's actually the case across the board," Emmert said.

The NCAA has been accused the past two weeks of not providing equal amenities to the teams in the men's and women's Division I basketball tournaments. Among other things, female players, coaches and staff in San Antonio have criticized the NCAA for not initially providing a full weight-training area to the women's teams, noting the men's teams in Indianapolis did not have the same problem.

"We dropped the ball in San Antonio in the women's basketball tournament," Emmert said.

He said now the focus is on making sure it doesn't happen again.

"We know that we've had decades of undervaluing women's sports throughout the entire sports spectrum," Emmert said. "We need to think through how we address that. We need to think through how we want to more aggressively support and promote women's sports."

The NCAA has also received criticism for using the term March Madness only to promote and brand the men's tournament. Emmert said the popular nickname could be used for the women's tournament if organizers and those who support the game want it.

"The mark March Madness isn't exclusively the men's basketball mark and it wasn't intended in that context," he said. "There has been an ongoing discussion about how to build the women's basketball brand and how much similarity versus how much distinction is appropriate between the two games."

While the budget to run the men's NCAA Tournament in 2018-19 was nearly double that of the women, according to a report in the New York Times, Emmert said those numbers were much closer for this year's tournaments, with both events being held in one geographic area.

"It has changed for this tournament," he said. "We spent on the women's side, about another \$16 million on COVID related expenses and less than that on the men's side."

Emmert apologized to women's basketball players.

"We failed to deliver the things they earned and deserved," he said. "Beg them to understand that's not a reflection of how they are valued and how much we care about their success as athletes and young women."

"It's been deeply frustrating and disappointing. My staff in San Antonio has been working so unbelievably hard. This should be a moment we're celebrating the return of college sports. Celebrating our ability to pull off championships in the midst of a pandemic and do it well. Instead we're having this conversation."

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It's disappointing and frustrating for everybody."

The controversy over the basketball tournament comes as the NCAA is heading toward potentially landscape-changing events for college sports.

The Supreme Court will hear arguments in an antitrust case involving the NCAA next week.

Meanwhile, the NCAA is trying to change its rules to allow athletes to earn money from third parties for things such as endorsements and personal appearances, but name, image and likeness reform has bogged down.

Dozens of states are forcing the issue with bills that will grant college athletes NIL rights. The NCAA is asking federal lawmakers for help, but none are in a rush to bail out the association.

At a time when Emmert is facing pressure to guide the NCAA through a tumultuous time, issues with the basketball tournaments have created yet another problem.

He plans to see it through.

"My timeline has always been as long as I'm successful in contributing to an enterprise in a meaningful way and my bosses are supportive then I like what I do a lot," Emmert said. "Nobody likes being in the middle of this. I love working for the NCAA. I'm very proud of all the things that have happened over the past decade.

"We've had a bunch of challenges to say the least but there's no doubt in my mind the NCAA is moving in a good direction despite all of this and as long as my board is supportive I want to keep doing this job."

More AP women's college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

North Korea snaps back at Biden over criticism of launches

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Saturday snapped back at President Joe Biden's criticism of its ballistic missile tests, calling his comments a provocation and encroachment on the North's right to self-defense and vowing to continuously expand its "most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power."

The statement issued by senior official Ri Pyong Chol came after the North on Thursday tested-fired two short-range missiles off its eastern coast in the first ballistic launches since Biden took office.

Experts say the flight data released by South Korea's military and North Korea's own description of the tests indicated that the North tested a new solid-fuel weapon that is designed to evade missile defense systems and is potentially nuclear capable.

The launches showed how the North continues to expand its military capabilities while nuclear negotiations with the United States remain stalled. They also underscored the growing threat such short-range weapons pose to U.S. allies South Korea and Japan, which host a combined 80,000 U.S. troops as the core of America's military presence in the region.

Biden was restrained as he admonished North Korea for the launches, which were a violation of U.N. sanctions against the North.

"We're consulting with our allies and partners," Biden said at the first news conference of his presidency on Thursday. "And there will be responses if they choose to escalate. We will respond accordingly. But I'm also prepared for some form of diplomacy, but it has to be conditioned upon the end result of denuclearization."

In comments carried by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency, Ri said the North expresses "deep apprehension" over Biden's remarks that were "openly revealing his deep-seated hostility toward the DPRK." DPRK refers to North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Ri said it was "gangster-like logic" for the United States to criticize the North's tactical weapons tests when the Americans are freely testing intercontinental ballistic missiles and could send their strategic military assets to the region surrounding the Korean Peninsula at any time.

He said the North doesn't have options other than building "invincible physical power" to defend itself

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because the United States and South Korea “constantly pose military threats” and continue with their combined military exercises, which the North claims are an invasion rehearsal.

“I think that the new U.S. administration obviously took its first step wrong,” Ri said.

“If the U.S. continues with its thoughtless remarks without thinking of the consequences, it may be faced with something that is not good.”

Ri, secretary of the ruling Workers’ Party’s Central Committee and vice chairman of the party’s Central Military Commission, is a former air force commander who has been seen as a key figure in the development of the North’s missile program.

Thursday’s launches followed a statement by North Korean leader Kim’s powerful sister last week, who berated the latest U.S.-South Korean military exercises that ended earlier this month and warned Washington to “refrain from causing a stink” if it wants to “sleep in peace” for the next four years.

The North has so far ignored the Biden administration’s efforts to reach out, saying it won’t engage in meaningful talks while Washington persists with “hostile” policies.

While Pyongyang has a history of testing new U.S. administrations with weapons demonstrations aimed at forcing Washington back to negotiations, Ri said that the North Koreans are “by no means developing weapons to draw someone’s attention or influence his policy.”

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

“For Kim Jong Un’s missiles man, Ri Pyong Chol, to label Biden’s press conference a provocation is essentially a threat that North Korea will respond to the U.S. policy review with more tests,” said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Seoul’s Ewha Womans University.

“Pyongyang is implementing a premeditated strategy of advancing military capabilities and raising tensions. Ri Pyong Chol has larger tests in the works and is trying to maximize political bang for his missile development buck.”

The United States has downsized its drills with South Korea and stopped sending nuclear-capable bombers and aircraft carriers since President Donald Trump’s first summit with Kim in 2018, where they issued vague statements on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without describing when and how it would occur.

But the talks stalled after the second Kim-Trump meeting in February 2019 collapsed over disagreements in exchanging the relief of crippling U.S. sanctions for the North’s disarmament steps.

Some experts say the allies should restore the normal scale and scope of their exercises to develop a response to the growing threat of North Korea’s short-range weapons, which it continued to test even as it suspended nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests.

Osbourne off ‘The Talk’ after inquiry into racism discussion

LOS ANGELES (AP) — CBS says Sharon Osbourne will no longer appear on its daytime show “The Talk” after a heated on-air discussion about racism earlier this month.

The network said Friday Osbourne had decided to leave the show after a review that found in part that “Sharon’s behavior toward her co-hosts during the March 10 episode did not align with our values for a respectful workplace.”

The network said its internal inquiry said the show’s co-hosts, including Osbourne and Sheryl Underwood, were not properly prepared by the show’s team for a discussion on race. But it said there was no evidence found to support Osbourne’s claim CBS ordered she be confronted about her support of British TV personality Piers Morgan.

Morgan, who is a friend of Osbourne’s, left “Good Morning Britain” after saying he didn’t believe Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, when she said in an interview that she had considered suicide when unhappy with her life in Britain’s royal family.

“The Talk” has been on hiatus while the March 10 discussion was investigated. CBS said it had conducted workshops and training this week “about equity, inclusion and cultural awareness for the hosts, producers and crew.”

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There was no immediate comment from Osbourne's publicist.

No replacement has been announced. CBS said the show will not return until April 12.

During the discussion of Morgan, Underwood asked Osbourne, "what would you say to people who may feel that, while you're standing by your friend, it appears that you gave validation or safe haven to something that he has uttered that is racist, even if you don't agree?"

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

After a commercial break, the discussion continued with Osbourne telling Underwood at one point: "Don't try to cry. If anyone should be crying, it should be me."

Osbourne gained TV fame with the 2002-2005 reality show "The Osbournes," which she produced and starred in alongside her heavy-metal rock star husband, Ozzy Osbourne, and two of their three children.

Sharon Osbourne, a manager for her husband and other musicians, was a judge on the British talent show "The X Factor" and on "America's Got Talent."

EXPLAINER: What does Georgia's new GOP election law do?

By BEN NADLER and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The sweeping rewrite of Georgia's election rules represents the first big set of changes since former President Donald Trump's repeated, baseless claims of fraud following his presidential loss to Joe Biden.

Georgia has been at the center of that storm. Trump zeroed in on his loss in the state, even as two Democrats won election to the U.S. Senate in January, flipping control of the chamber to their party. The 98-page measure that was signed into law Thursday by Republican Gov. Brian Kemp makes numerous changes to how elections will be administered, including a new photo ID requirement for voting absentee by mail.

Republican supporters say the law is needed to restore confidence in Georgia's elections. Democrats say it will restrict voting access, especially for voters of color. Here's a look at some of the top issues:

CAN THE STATE TAKE OVER LOCAL ELECTION OFFICES?

Much of the work administering elections in Georgia is handled by the state's 159 counties. The law gives the State Election Board new powers to intervene in county election offices and to remove and replace local election officials. That has led to concerns that the Republican-controlled state board could exert more influence over the administration of elections, including the certification of county results.

One target for intervention could be Fulton County, a Democratic stronghold that contains most of Atlanta. The heavily populated county has been plagued by problems, including long lines, and it is often singled out by Republican officials. Under the law, the board could intervene in up to four counties at a time and install a temporary superintendent with the ability to hire and fire personnel including elections directors and poll officers.

ARE PEOPLE BANNED FROM HANDING OUT SNACKS OR WATER TO VOTERS IN LINE?

The new law makes it a misdemeanor to hand out "any money or gifts, including, but not limited to, food and drink" to anyone standing in line to vote. The prohibition extends 150 feet from a polling place and 25 feet from any person standing in line.

Advocates of the law say they are attempting to crack down on political organizations or advocacy groups trying to influence voters just before they cast a ballot. Critics say it's cruel and would penalize even nonpartisan groups or individuals for something as simple as giving water to someone waiting in a long line. Democratic state Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler slammed the proposal Thursday before the bill was signed into law, saying: "They want to make it a crime to bring Grandma some water while she's waiting in line."

Polling places would be able to, but not required to, set up self-serve water dispensers for voters.

DOES THE BILL ELIMINATE SUNDAY VOTING?

Republicans had proposed at one time to limit early voting on weekends, a time when many Black churches conduct "souls to the polls" efforts to take congregants to vote. But Republicans reversed themselves, and

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the measure now expands weekend early voting. Previously, one day of weekend voting was required, with counties given the option of offering more. Now two Saturdays will be required, and counties can offer two Sunday voting days as well. Republicans point to this provision to argue they are actually expanding, rather than restricting, voting access.

"Contrary to the hyper-partisan rhetoric you may have heard inside and outside this gold dome, the facts are that this new law will expand voting access in the Peach State," Kemp said Thursday.

HOW WILL RUNOFFS CHANGE?

Georgia is the only state in the nation that mandates runoff elections between the top two finishers following general elections in which no candidate achieves a majority. Like some other states, Georgia also mandates runoffs for candidates who do not win a majority in a party primary.

The system came under scrutiny from Republicans after Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won twin runoffs in January.

The new law shortens the time for runoffs from nine weeks to four, with lawmakers saying the current span is "exhausting" and needs to be shortened to a "more manageable period."

Military and overseas voters will use ranked-choice absentee ballots to rank all possible candidates before a primary or general election, allowing their preferences to be determined in any possible runoff. Georgia only had three weeks before runoffs until 2013, when a federal judge ordered a longer gap to give military and overseas voters more time to return ballots.

The shorter period means less time for early and mail voting. Early voting had lasted three weeks before runoffs. Now early voting would begin "as soon as possible" but no later than the second Monday before the election, possibly leaving as little as five weekdays and no weekend days of early voting. Voters would also have less time to apply for a mail ballot.

No new voters could be registered in the period before a runoff because the registration deadline would be the day before the earlier election.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Three groups filed a lawsuit late Thursday to try to block the law. The New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter and Rise Inc. say the law violates the First and 14th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, as well as parts of the federal Voting Rights Act that say states cannot restrict Black voter participation.

"These unjustified measures will individually and cumulatively operate to impose unconstitutional burdens on the right to vote, to deny or abridge the voting rights of Black Georgians, and to deny Black voters in Georgia an equal opportunity to participate in the electoral process and elect candidates of their choice," says the lawsuit, which is filed against Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and Georgia's State Elections Board.

Opponents are also looking to Congress, which is considering nationwide voting standards. A Democratic-backed measure passed the House earlier this month, but faces opposition from Senate Republicans wary of a federal takeover of state elections.

The federal proposal 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.

Plan made to refloat ship blocking Suez Canal using tide

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — The company that owns the giant container ship stuck sideways across the Suez Canal said an attempt will be made to refloat the vessel by taking advantage of tidal movements later Saturday.

The Ever Given, owned by Japanese firm Shoen Kisen KK, got wedged Tuesday in a single-lane stretch of the canal, about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez.

At a news conference Friday night at company headquarters in Imabari, western Japan, Shoen Kisen President Yukito Higaki said 10 tugboats were deployed and workers were dredging the banks and sea floor near the vessel's bow to try to get it afloat again as the high tide starts to go out.

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"We apologize for blocking the traffic and causing the tremendous trouble and worry to many people, including the involved parties," he said.

Shoei Kisen said in a statement Saturday that the company has considered removing its containers to get the weight off the vessel, but it is a very difficult operation, physically speaking. The company said it may still consider that option if the ongoing refloating efforts fail.

A team from Boskalis, a Dutch firm specializing in salvaging, was working with the canal authority using tugboats and a specialized suction dredger at the port side of the cargo ship's bow. Egyptian authorities have prohibited media access to the site.

"It's a complex technical operation" that will require several attempts to free the vessel, Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei, head of the Suez Canal Authority, said in a statement.

Attempts earlier Friday to free it failed, said Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, the technical manager of the Ever Given.

The Suez Canal Authority has said it welcomed international assistance. The White House said it has offered to help Egypt reopen the canal. "We have equipment and capacity that most countries don't have and we're seeing what we can do and what help we can be," U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters.

An initial investigation showed the vessel ran aground due to strong winds and ruled out mechanical or engine failure, the company said. GAC, a global shipping and logistics company, had previously said the ship had experienced a power blackout, but it did not elaborate.

Bernhard Schulte said two canal pilots had been aboard when the ship got stuck. Such an arrangement is customary, but the ship's captain retains ultimate authority over the vessel, according to experts.

A maritime traffic jam grew to more than 200 vessels Friday outside the Suez Canal and some vessels began changing course. More than 100 ships were still en route to the waterway, according to the data firm Refinitiv.

Apparently anticipating long delays, the owners of the stuck vessel diverted a sister ship, the Ever Greet, to head around Africa instead, according to satellite data.

Others also are being diverted. The liquid natural gas carrier Pan Americas changed course in the mid-Atlantic, now aiming south to go around the southern tip of Africa, according to satellite data from MarineTraffic.com.

About 10% of world trade flows through the canal, which is particularly crucial for transporting oil. The closure also could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East.

Oil markets are absorbing the disruption for now, analyst Toril Bosoni said.

"Oil inventories have been coming down but they are still relatively ample," she told The Associated Press, adding that she believes the impact might be more pronounced in the tanker sector than in the oil industry.

"We are not losing any oil supply but it will tie up tankers for longer if they have to go around" the tip of Africa, she said, which is roughly an additional two-week trip.

At the White House, press secretary Jen Psaki said the U.S. does see "some potential impacts on energy markets from the role of the Suez Canal as a key bidirectional transit route for oil. ... We're going to continue to monitor market conditions and we'll respond appropriately if necessary, but it is something we're watching closely."

International companies are preparing for the effect that the canal's blockage will have on supply chains that rely on precise deliveries of goods. Singapore's Minister of Transport Ong Ye Kung said the country's port should expect disruptions.

"Should that happen, some draw down on inventories will become necessary," he said on Facebook.

The backlog of vessels could stress European ports and the international supply of containers, already strained by the coronavirus pandemic, according to IHS Markit, a business research group. It said 49 container ships were scheduled to pass through the canal in the week since the Ever Given became lodged.

The delay could also result in huge insurance claims by companies, according to Marcus Baker, global head of Marine & Cargo at the insurance broker Marsh, with a ship like the Ever Given usually covered at between \$100 million to \$200 million.

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Capt. Nick Sloane, a maritime salvage expert who led the high-profile effort to salvage the cruise ship Costa Concordia in 2012 told The Associated Press that freeing the cargo ship could take up to a week in the best-case scenario and warned of possible structural problems on the vessel as it remains wedged. That's if dredging works. If it doesn't, he estimated that an operation that involved removing the ship's cargo could take weeks, as it would require 300 barges to carry the ships some 20,000 containers.

Satellite and photos distributed by the canal authority show Ever Given's bow touching the eastern wall, while its stern appeared lodged against the western wall.

The Ever Given was involved in an accident in northern Germany in 2019, when it ran into a small ferry moored on the Elbe River in Hamburg. No passengers were on the ferry at the time and there were no injuries, but it was seriously damaged.

Hamburg prosecutors opened an investigation of the Ever Given's captain and pilot on suspicion of endangering shipping traffic, but shelved it in 2020 for lack of evidence, spokeswoman Liddy Oechtering told The Associated Press.

Oechtering also could not say what the investigation had determined the cause of the crash was, but officials at the time suggested that strong winds may have blown the slow moving cargo ship into the ferry.

Associated Press writers David Rising in Berlin, Pan Pylas in London, Nancy Benac in Washington, Jeffrey Schaeffer in Paris and Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed.

The pronoun used for Toril Bosoni has been corrected.

Beloved children's author Beverly Cleary dies at 104

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Beverly Cleary, the celebrated children's author whose memories of her Oregon childhood were shared with millions through the likes of Ramona and Beezus Quimby and Henry Huggins, has died. She was 104.

Cleary's publisher HarperCollins announced Friday that the author died Thursday in Carmel Valley, California, where she had lived since the 1960s. No cause of death was given.

Trained as a librarian, Cleary didn't start writing books until her early 30s when she wrote "Henry Huggins," published in 1950. Children worldwide came to love the adventures of Huggins and neighbors Ellen Tebbits, Otis Spofford, Beatrice "Beezus" Quimby and her younger sister, Ramona. They inhabit a down-home, wholesome setting on Klickitat Street — a real street in Portland, Oregon, the city where Cleary spent much of her youth.

Among the "Henry" titles were "Henry and Ribsy," "Henry and the Paper Route" and "Henry and Beezus."

Ramona, perhaps her best-known character, made her debut in "Henry Huggins" with only a brief mention.

"All the children appeared to be only children so I tossed in a little sister and she didn't go away. She kept appearing in every book," she said in a March 2016 telephone interview from her California home.

Cleary herself was an only child and said the character wasn't a mirror.

"I was a well-behaved little girl, not that I wanted to be," she said. "At the age of Ramona, in those days, children played outside. We played hopscotch and jump rope and I loved them and always had scraped knees."

In all, there were eight books on Ramona between "Beezus and Ramona" in 1955 and "Ramona's World" in 1999. Others included "Ramona the Pest" and "Ramona and Her Father." In 1981, "Ramona and Her Mother" won the National Book Award.

Cleary wasn't writing recently because she said she felt "it's important for writers to know when to quit."

"I even got rid of my typewriter. It was a nice one but I hate to type. When I started writing I found that I was thinking more about my typing than what I was going to say, so I wrote it long hand," she said in March 2016.

Although she put away her pen, Cleary re-released three of her most cherished books with three famous

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fans writing forewords for the new editions.

Actress Amy Poehler penned the front section of "Ramona Quimby, Age 8;" author Kate DiCamillo wrote the opening for "The Mouse and the Motorcycle;" and author Judy Blume wrote the foreword for "Henry Huggins."

Cleary, a self-described "fuddy-duddy," said there was a simple reason she began writing children's books. "As a librarian, children were always asking for books about 'kids like us.' Well, there weren't any books about kids like them. So when I sat down to write, I found myself writing about the sort of children I had grown up with," Cleary said in a 1993 Associated Press interview.

"Dear Mr. Henshaw," the touching story of a lonely boy who corresponds with a children's book author, won the 1984 John Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. It "came about because two different boys from different parts of the country asked me to write a book about a boy whose parents were divorced," she told National Public Radio as she neared her 90th birthday.

"Ramona and Her Father" in 1978 and "Ramona Quimby, Age 8" in 1982 were named Newbery Honor Books.

Cleary ventured into fantasy with "The Mouse and the Motorcycle," and the sequels "Runaway Ralph" and "Ralph S. Mouse." "Socks," about a cat's struggle for acceptance when his owners have a baby, is told from the point of view of the pet himself.

She was named a Living Legend in 2000 by the Library of Congress. In 2003, she was chosen as one of the winners of the National Medal of Arts and met President George W. Bush. She is lauded in literary circles far and wide.

She produced two volumes of autobiography for young readers, "A Girl from Yamhill," on her childhood, and "My Own Two Feet," which tells the story of her college and young adult years up to the time of her first book.

"I seem to have grown up with an unusual memory. People are astonished at the things I remember. I think it comes from living in isolation on a farm the first six years of my life where my main activity was observing," Cleary said.

Cleary was born Beverly Bunn on April 12, 1916, in McMinnville, Oregon, and lived on a farm in Yamhill until her family moved to Portland when she was school-age. She was a slow reader, which she blamed on illness and a mean-spirited first-grade teacher who disciplined her by snapping a steel-tipped pointer across the back of her hands.

"I had chicken pox, smallpox and tonsillitis in the first grade and nobody seemed to think that had anything to do with my reading trouble," Cleary told the AP. "I just got mad and rebellious."

By sixth or seventh grade, "I decided that I was going to write children's stories," she said.

Cleary graduated from junior college in Ontario, California, and the University of California at Berkeley, where she met her husband, Clarence. They married in 1940; Clarence Cleary died in 2004. They were the parents of twins, a boy and a girl born in 1955 who inspired her book "Mitch and Amy."

Cleary studied library science at the University of Washington and worked as the children's librarian at Yakima, Wash., and post librarian at the Oakland Army Hospital during World War II.

Her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages, and inspired Japanese, Danish and Swedish television programs based on the Henry Huggins series. A 10-part PBS series, "Ramona," starred Canadian actress Sarah Polley. The 2010 film "Ramona and Beezus" featured actresses Joey King and Selena Gomez.

Cleary was asked once what her favorite character was.

"Does your mother have a favorite child?" she responded.

Biographical material compiled by former AP staffers Polly Anderson and Kristin J. Bender.

Online: <http://www.beverlycleary.com/>

Dominion Voting sues Fox for \$1.6B over 2020 election claims

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dominion Voting Systems filed a \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit against Fox News on Friday, arguing the cable news giant, in an effort to boost faltering ratings, falsely claimed that the voting company had rigged the 2020 election.

The lawsuit is part of a growing body of legal action filed by the voting company and other targets of misleading, false and bizarre claims spread by President Donald Trump and his allies in the aftermath of Trump's election loss to Joe Biden. Those claims helped spur on rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 in a violent siege that left five people dead, including a police officer. The siege led to Trump's historic second impeachment.

Dominion argues that Fox News, which amplified inaccurate assertions that Dominion altered votes, "sold a false story of election fraud in order to serve its own commercial purposes, severely injuring Dominion in the process," according to a copy of the lawsuit obtained by The Associated Press.

"The truth matters. Lies have consequences," the lawsuit said. "... If this case does not rise to the level of defamation by a broadcaster, then nothing does."

Even before Dominion's lawsuit on Friday, Fox News had already filed four motions to dismiss other legal action against its coverage. And anchor Eric Shawn interviewed a Dominion spokesperson on air in November.

"Fox News Media is proud of our 2020 election coverage, which stands in the highest tradition of American journalism, and we will vigorously defend against this baseless lawsuit in court," it said in a statement on Friday.

There was no known widespread fraud in the 2020 election, a fact that a range of election officials across the country — and even Trump's attorney general, William Barr — have confirmed. Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, also vouched for the integrity of the elections in their states. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies were dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, which has three Trump-nominated justices.

Still, some Fox News employees elevated false charges that Dominion had changed votes through algorithms in its voting machines that had been created in Venezuela to rig elections for the late dictator Hugo Chavez. On-air personalities brought on Trump allies Sidney Powell and Rudy Giuliani, who spread the claims, and then amplified those claims on Fox News' massive social media platforms.

Dominion said in the lawsuit that it tried repeatedly to set the record straight but was ignored by Fox News.

The company argues that Fox News, a network that features several pro-Trump personalities, pushed the false claims to explain away the former president's loss. The cable giant lost viewers after the election and was seen by Trump and some supporters as not being supportive enough of the Republican.

Attorneys for Dominion said Fox News' behavior differs greatly from that of other media outlets that reported on the claims.

"This was a conscious, knowing business decision to endorse and repeat and broadcast these lies in order to keep its viewership," said attorney Justin Nelson, of Susman Godfrey.

Though Dominion serves 28 states, until the 2020 election it had been largely unknown outside the election community. It is now widely targeted in conservative circles, seen by millions of people as one of the main villains in a fictional tale in which Democrats nationwide conspired to steal votes from Trump, the lawsuit said.

Dominion's employees, from its software engineers to its founder, have been harassed. Some received death threats. And the company has suffered "enormous and irreparable economic harm," lawyers said.

One employee, Eric Coomer, told the AP he had to go into hiding over death threats because of the false claims. He has sued the Trump campaign, conservative media columnists and conservative media outlets Newsmax and One America News Network.

Dominion has also sued Giuliani, Powell and the CEO of Minnesota-based MyPillow over the claims. A rival technology company, Smartmatic USA, also sued Fox News over election claims for a similar sum of

money. Unlike Dominion, Smartmatic's participation in the 2020 election was restricted to Los Angeles County. Fox News has moved to dismiss the Smartmatic suit.

Dominion lawyers said they have not yet filed lawsuits against specific media personalities at Fox News but the door remains open. Some at Fox News knew the claims were false but their comments were drowned out, lawyers said.

"The buck stops with Fox on this," attorney Stephen Shackelford said. "Fox chose to put this on all of its many platforms. They rebroadcast, republished it on social media and other places."

The suit was filed in Delaware, where both companies are incorporated, though Fox News is headquartered in New York and Dominion is based in Denver.

Democrats assail Georgia law, make case for voting overhaul

By STEVE PEOPLES and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

Democrats on Friday seized on new voting restrictions in Georgia to focus attention on the fight to overhaul federal election laws, setting up a slow-building standoff that carries echoes of the civil rights battles of a half-century ago.

In fiery speeches, pointed statements and tweets, party leaders decried the law signed Thursday by the state's Republican governor as specifically aimed at suppressing Black and Latino votes and a threat to democracy. President Joe Biden released an extended statement, calling the law an attack on "good conscience" that denies the right to vote for "countless" Americans.

"This is Jim Crow in the 21st Century," Biden said, referring to laws of the last century that enforced heavy-handed racial segregation in the South.

"It must end. We have a moral and Constitutional obligation to act," he said. He told reporters the Georgia law is an "atrocious" and the Justice Department is looking into it.

Georgia's Republican governor, Brian Kemp, lashed back, accusing Biden of attempting to "destroy the sanctity and security of the ballot box" by supporting what the governor sees as federal intrusion into state responsibilities.

Behind the chorus of outrage, Democrats are also wrestling with the limits on their power in Washington, as long as Senate filibuster rules allow Republicans to block major legislation, including H.R. 1, a sweeping elections bill now pending in the Senate.

Biden and his party are seeking to build and sustain momentum in the realm of public opinion — hoping to nationalize what has so far been a Republican-led state-by-state movement to curb access to the ballot — while they begin a slow, plodding legislative process. Allies meanwhile plan to fight the Georgia law, and others, in court.

"What's happening in Georgia right now, underscores the importance and the urgency," said Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., in an interview Friday.

"This is about what is fundamental to our identity as an American people — one person, one vote."

The emerging brawl over the politics and policy of voting access is swelling like nothing seen in recent years, harkening back to what many Americans may assume are well-settled rules ensuring equal access to the ballot.

But as Republican-controlled state legislatures from Georgia to Iowa to Arizona are taking dramatic action to limit early voting and force new voter ID requirements, the debate in Washington threatens to exacerbate the nation's cavernous political divides in the early days of the Biden presidency, just as the Democratic president vows to unite the country.

It is expected to be a months-long slog in the narrowly divided Congress, specifically the Senate, where Democrats are, for now, unwilling to muscle their slim majority to change filibuster rules, despite the party's urgent calls for action.

Instead, the Democrats are prepared to legislate the old-fashioned way, unspooling arguments in lengthy Senate debates, spilling out of the committee hearing rooms and onto the Senate floor, and forcing opponents to go on the record as standing in the way — much as South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond was

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positioned when he filibustered the Civil Rights Act of the last century.

"They're literally squeezing the arteries of the lifeblood of America," Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., the son of civil rights activists, said in an interview. "They are choking what makes us distinct and unique on the planet Earth."

Booker would not, however, openly call for the end of the filibuster, a parliamentary tool requiring at least 60 votes to advance Senate legislation in some cases.

On Friday, the president revived his call on Congress to enact H.R. 1, an elections overhaul that would confront the Republican restrictions. He called as well for the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore some aspects of a landmark law struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013.

But Biden, like a shrinking number of other powerful Democrats, remains unwilling to embrace the so-called "nuclear option" — ending the filibuster — for fear it would further divide the country.

Meantime, the political fight was intensifying in Georgia, where years of voter registration drives in Black communities and steady population changes helped Biden win the once solidly red state.

Just as Kemp and several white state lawmakers celebrated the signing of the state's new voting law on Thursday, state police officers handcuffed and forcibly removed state Rep. Park Cannon, a Black woman, after she knocked on the door of the governor's private office.

Cannon was charged with obstruction of law enforcement and disruption of the General Assembly, both felonies. She was released from jail late Thursday. Donald Trump, the former president who promoted false claims of election fraud, congratulated the Georgia governor and state leaders on the new law.

As Congress hunkers down for the fight, a groundswell of outside efforts is spending millions to try to influence the debate and apply political pressure on voters, corporations and lawmakers in both parties.

A \$30 million advertising campaign is coming from the liberal group, End Citizens United, working with former Attorney General Eric Holder's anti-gerrymandering group, the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, trying to persuade Democratic and Republican senators considered to be swing votes.

Other efforts are also underway, including from former first lady Michelle Obama, via the nonpartisan celebrity "When We All Vote" organization.

Civil rights leader Al Sharpton said Friday that he's working with religious leaders in West Virginia and Arizona to press the home-state Democratic senators. He's well aware that this fight may go on for a while.

"I'm prepared to go on this fight for however long it takes," he said. "Look at how long it took us to get the right to vote."

Sharpton also suggested that Black voters have been energized by the debate, which could lead to a surge in participation in next year's midterm elections despite the new voting requirements enacted by Republicans.

"By them being so blatant, I think that they play into our national strategy," Sharpton said. "We just need the Democrats in the Senate to stand up."

The Georgia law requires a photo ID in order to vote absentee by mail, cuts the time people have to request an absentee ballot and limits where ballot drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. The bill was a watered-down version of some of the proposals considered by the GOP-led General Assembly.

H.R. 1 is vast, and its Senate counterpart would confront the new Georgia law by expanding voting by mail and early voting, both popular during the pandemic. It would more broadly open ballot access by creating automatic voter registration nationwide, allowing former felons to vote and limiting the way states can remove registered voters from the rolls. It also addresses campaign financing and ethics laws.

Still, Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison warned his party would take Republicans to court "and fight about it there." A lawsuit filed late Thursday in the U.S. District Court in Atlanta by three groups — New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter Fund and Rise — challenged key provisions of the new Georgia law and said they violated the Voting Rights Act.

But Harrison also acknowledged that the filibuster was an "an obstacle" for the national Democrats' efforts to overturn the Republican-backed changes.

"I am delivering the message to everybody, particularly on my side of the aisle, that folks right now are

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very, very upset about where things are going," Harrison told The AP.

The chairman continued, "I'm going to do everything in my power, with every breath in my body, with every drop of blood that flows through my veins, to make sure that we fight back from this."

"We're not going back to Jim Crow 2.0," he said. "So we've got to do whatever we need to do to make sure that doesn't happen."

Peoples reported from New York. Mascaro reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Bill Barrow, Josh Boak and Aamer Madhani contributed.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Larry McMurtry dies at 84

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Larry McMurtry, the prolific and popular author who took readers back to the old American West in his Pulitzer Prize-winning "Lonesome Dove" and returned them to modern-day landscapes in works such as his emotional tale of a mother-daughter relationship in "Terms of Endearment," has died. He was 84.

McMurtry died Thursday night of heart failure, according to a family statement issued through a publicist on Friday. The statement did not say where he died but noted that he'll be buried "in his cherished home state of Texas."

McMurtry, who had in his later years split his time between his small Texas hometown of Archer City and Tucson, Arizona, wrote dozens of books, including novels, biographies and essay collections. He simultaneously worked as a bookseller and screenwriter, co-writing the Oscar-winning script for the movie "Brokeback Mountain."

Several of McMurtry's books became feature films, including the Oscar-winners "The Last Picture Show" and "Terms of Endearment." His epic 1986 Pulitzer winner "Lonesome Dove," about a cattle drive from Texas across the Great Plains during the 1870s, was made into a popular television miniseries.

"'Lonesome Dove' was an effort to kind of demythologize the myth of the Old West," McMurtry told The Associated Press in a 2014 interview. But, he added, "They're going to twist it into something romantic no matter what you do."

The "Lonesome Dove" television miniseries starred Robert Duvall, who has often cited the project as a personal favorite and likened his role as retired Texas Ranger Augustus McCrae to acting in "Hamlet."

In a handwritten note from Duvall, texted to The Associated Press by his agent on Friday, the actor said McMurtry "was one of our most gifted of writers and one to be truly missed and revered."

"Being in the TV series 'Lonesome Dove' was the highlight of my life and for this I owe him great amounts of gratitude. His works reached out and blessed so many!" Duvall wrote.

"The Last Picture Show," his third novel, became a classic with its coming-of-age story set in a small Texas town. He and director Peter Bogdanovich were nominated for an Academy Award for their script for the movie, filmed in Archer City, located about 140 miles (225 kilometers) northwest of Dallas. The film adaptation of "Terms of Endearment," released in 1983, was written and directed by James L. Brooks and received Oscars for best picture, director and screenplay, with awards for star Shirley MacLaine and supporting actor Jack Nicholson.

"Sitting here thinking of the greatness of Larry McMurtry," Brooks tweeted Friday. "Among the best writers ever. I remember when he sent me on my way to adapt 'Terms' — his refusal to let me hold him in awe. And the fact that he was personally working the cash register of his rare book store as he did so."

McMurtry was born on June 3, 1936, into a family of ranchers. McMurtry graduated from what is now the University of North Texas in Denton in 1958 with a bachelor's degree in English and from Rice University in Houston with a master's degree in English in 1960. He was also a member of Stanford University's Stegner writing fellowship.

He wrote his first novel, "Horseman, Pass by," at the age of 25 in 1961. It was made into the movie "Hud" starring Paul Newman that came out two years later.

McMurtry opened his first used and rare bookstore in 1971 in Washington, D.C., and later opened other

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stores in Houston, Dallas and Tucson.

In the mid-1980s, lured by cheap real estate, he opened his Booked Up store in Archer City. Eventually, the store in Archer City was the only one remaining. He downsized the store — both in volume and storefronts — in an effort dubbed The Last Book Sale, but retained about 200,000 volumes.

He had about 28,000 books in his nearby home in Archer City. "I'm very attached to the books. I need them. I need to be among them," he told The AP in 2014.

McMurtry's writing collaboration with Diana Ossana began after she helped him get out of a slump following quadruple bypass heart surgery in 1991. They won the Academy Award for their screenplay for the 2005 movie "Brokeback Mountain," based on an Annie Proulx short story about two cowboys who fall in love. His most recent novel, "The Last Kind Words Saloon," came out in 2014.

He told the Associated Press in 1994 that his life throughout the 1980s had been peripatetic — traveling between his bookstores across the country and a home in Los Angeles. Then the surgery forced him to stop moving. "It just so happened that I stopped at Diana's kitchen table," he said.

The two, both divorced, had met at a Tucson catfish restaurant and struck up a friendship. After the surgery, McMurtry spent his time sleeping in Ossana's guest room, writing "Streets of Laredo" on a typewriter in her kitchen, or staring out the window.

She helped edit "Streets of Laredo" and then began encouraging him to accept screenwriting offers. "I was getting lots of offers then from the movies. I was very popular, but I didn't feel confident. I'd had real serious heart problems. I got a lot of offers and I think that she just got tired of me turning them down," he said.

When the offer came in for a script on the Depression-era bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd, Ossana and McMurtry tackled it together and then wrote the novel "Pretty Boy Floyd." After that they collaborated on dozens of screenplays.

From 1989 to 1991, McMurtry served as president of PEN America, a human rights organization of writers, literary and media professionals. The group's current president, Ayad Akhtar, said that McMurtry was "through and through a vigorous defender of the freedom to write."

McMurtry married Jo Ballard in 1959 and three years later, the couple had a son, singer-songwriter James McMurtry. In 1966, they divorced. In 2011, he got married for a second time: to Norma Faye Kesey, the widow of longtime friend Ken Kesey, author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." They held their marriage ceremony in the Archer City bookstore.

The statement from McMurtry's family said that he died surrounded by loved ones, including Ossana; his wife; his son; his grandson, Curtis; and his goddaughter, Sara Ossana. He also is survived by his sisters, Sue and Judy, and a brother, Charlie.

The late Don Graham, a professor of English and American literature at the University of Texas in Austin who died in 2019, called McMurtry "pre-eminently a storyteller" in a 2014 interview with the AP: "He's a great creator of characters and dialogue. That's one of the reasons he's had so much success in Hollywood."

AP National Writer Hillel Italie contributed to this report from New York City.

Snap-decision defense may not work for Minneapolis officer

By COLLEEN LONG and CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

Convicting a police officer of killing someone is notoriously difficult, in part because juries hesitate to second-guess the defendant when the officer claims to have made a split-second decision in a life-or-death situation. But that's probably not an argument Derek Chauvin can make.

The fired Minneapolis police officer who goes on trial Monday was captured on video pinning George Floyd to the pavement, his knee on the Black man's neck, for about nine minutes last May. Onlookers repeatedly shouted at Chauvin to get off, asked him to check for a pulse and warned that Floyd no longer seemed to be breathing.

"If I'm a prosecutor, I'm holding my stopwatch up for 8 minutes and 47 seconds and showing the jury

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how long that is," said Geoffrey Alpert, a criminology professor at the University of South Carolina who co-wrote "Evaluating Police Uses of Force."

Still, Alpert and other experts said that despite the strength of the video that prompted a nationwide outpouring of fury over Floyd's death, prosecutors could be hard-pressed to convict Chauvin of murder because of both the facts of the case and attitudes toward police.

Chauvin's lawyer is expected to argue that Floyd's swallowing of drugs during his arrest — along with the 46-year-old man's underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure and heart disease — caused or at least contributed to his death. Prosecutors argue it was Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck that killed him.

As for Chauvin, "the jury will have to overcome the suggestion that he was just trying to do his job well," said former federal prosecutor Taryn Merkl, senior counsel at the Brennan Center's Justice Program at New York University. "Most jurors don't want to believe officers go to work and think 'I'm going to kill someone today.'"

Phil Stinson, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University who tracks cases against police, said that out of thousands of deadly police shootings in the U.S. since 2005, fewer than 140 officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter. Only seven were convicted of murder.

Historically juries have been more willing to give officers the benefit of the doubt that they acted reasonably during violent or fatal encounters. Stinson said juries seem to also opt for lesser charges or acquit officers who have lost their job, seemingly asking themselves if the officers have been "punished enough already."

"Officers' criminal actions are not recognized as such by juries sometimes because everyone recognizes that policing in this country is often violent," he said.

In many cases, defense attorneys for police officers describe in great detail the chaos of the moment, the darkness of the street, the sound of what they thought was a weapon, a speeding car — circumstances that might have left an officer with little time to think about how to react.

In reviewing his research this week, Stinson found at least 25 officers who were charged over injuries or deaths sustained during chokeholds or restraints since 2005, and very rarely with murder or manslaughter. But many more officers were not charged.

The officers involved in the death of Eric Garner, who died in 2014 and uttered the same phrase Floyd did — "I can't breathe" — were not indicted in New York City even though there was excruciating video of Garner's final moments on a sidewalk. Because grand jury proceedings are largely secret, it's not known why the officers were not prosecuted.

But the tide may be turning on charging officers who use chokeholds and knee restraints increasingly banned by police departments.

In 2020, six officers were charged in such cases, including at least four after the nationwide outrage over Floyd's death. Most of those cases have yet to be resolved.

Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, has argued in court documents that Floyd probably died from fentanyl he consumed, or a combination of fentanyl, methamphetamine and underlying health conditions — not as a result of Chauvin's knee on his neck.

Nelson will be allowed to present some evidence from a 2019 arrest in which Floyd, as he did in 2020, swallowed pills as he was confronted by officers.

Some police officers have been found guilty in cases where prosecutors were able to show that a reasonable person would not have reacted in the same way. In Texas, officer Roy Oliver was convicted of killing 15-year-old Jordan Edwards by opening fire on a car full of teenagers as they left a house party. Oliver's partner testified that he had not perceived a threat.

Prosecutors in Chauvin's case hope the pleas from onlookers to check on Floyd will serve the same purpose.

On the citizen video, bystanders can be heard shouting at Chauvin and other officers at the scene over several minutes: "Is he breathing right now?" "Check his pulse. Check his pulse. Check his pulse, bro." "Bro, he has not moved, not one time!" "He's dying!" and "Get off of his neck! Get off of his neck!"

Alpert, the criminology professor, said that beyond the initial moments of the confrontation between

Chauvin and Floyd, there was little of the chaos that can affect sound decision-making.

"There may have been a split-second decision on what to do when Mr. Floyd would not get into the car and how do you handle it," he said. "But each second after that, there was no need for a split-second decision."

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

Trains crash in southern Egypt, killing at least 32

By NOHA ELHENNAWY and MOHAMED WAGDY Associated Press

TAHTA, Egypt (AP) — Two trains crashed Friday in southern Egypt, killing at least 32 people and injuring 165, authorities said in the latest of a series of deadly accidents on the country's troubled railways.

Someone apparently activated the emergency brakes on the passenger train, and it was rear-ended by another train, causing two cars to derail and flip on their side, Egypt's Railway Authorities said, although Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouly later added that no cause has been determined. The passenger train was headed to the Mediterranean port of Alexandria, north of Cairo, rail officials said.

Video showed twisted piles of metal with passengers covered with dust trapped inside — some bleeding and others unconscious. Bystanders removed the dead and laid them on the ground nearby.

One passenger was heard shouting on the video, "Help us! People are dying!" A female passenger appeared to be upside down, squeezed under the seats, and was crying, "Get me out, boy!"

Hazem Seliman, who lives near the tracks and heard the crash, said he initially thought the train had hit a car. When he arrived at the scene, he said he found the dead and injured on the ground, among them women and children.

"We carried the deceased and put the injured into ambulances," he said.

More than 100 ambulances were sent to the scene in the province of Sohag, about 440 kilometers (270 miles) south of Cairo, Health Minister Hala Zayed said, and the injured were taken to four hospitals. Injuries included broken bones, cuts and bruises.

Two planes carrying a total of 52 doctors, mostly surgeons, were sent to Sohag, she added at a news conference in the province, accompanied by Madbouly, who added that a military plane would bring those needing special surgery to Cairo.

Chief Prosecutor Hamada el-Sawy was on the scene to investigate the crash, he said.

"The (railway) service has been neglected for decades to an extent that made it quite outdated and extremely dangerous," Madbouly told reporters. "We have spent billions to upgrade the railway but we still have a long way to go in order to complete all the required work."

The government will pay the equivalent of \$6,400 in compensation to each family that had a relative killed, Madbouly said, while the injured will get between \$1,280 to \$2,560, depending on how badly they were hurt.

President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi said he was monitoring the situation and that those responsible would receive "a deterrent punishment."

"The pain that tears our hearts today cannot but make us more determined to end this type of disasters," he wrote on his Facebook page.

Egypt's rail system has a history of badly maintained equipment and mismanagement, and official figures said there were 1,793 train accidents in 2017.

In 2018, a passenger train derailed near the southern city of Aswan, injuring at least six people and prompting authorities to fire the chief of the country's railways. The same year, el-Sissi said the government needed about 250 billion Egyptian pounds (\$14.1 billion) to overhaul the rail system. Those remarks came a day after a passenger train collided with a cargo train, killing at least 12 people.

A year earlier, two passenger trains collided just outside Alexandria, killing 43. In 2016, at least 51 people were killed when two commuter trains collided near Cairo.

Egypt's deadliest train crash was in 2002, when over 300 people were killed after fire broke out in a train

traveling from Cairo to southern Egypt.

Business as usual: Thousands cross Mexico's southern border

By MARÍA VERZA Associated Press

FRONTERA COROZAL, Mexico (AP) — On the day this week that Mexico imposed new measures to shut down migrant crossings at its southern border, some 1,200 made the trip at a single remote jungle outpost without showing a document to anyone.

A man who helped board the migrants for the five-minute boat ride Sunday from Guatemala across the Usumacinta River knew the count because each one received a ticket.

Mexico wants to again appear cooperative, as in 2019 when, faced with tariffs from then-President Donald Trump, it deployed its newly created National Guard to slow the flow of migrants from Central America.

But the reality is it's business as usual, with entire communities making a living off the passing migrants.

Their reasons for heading north are familiar: violence, an inability to support their families, the devastation wrought by two major hurricanes in November and egged on by rampant misinformation.

Among those crossing Sunday was Yuri Gabriela Ponce, a 30-year-old mother from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, along with her husband and three children, ages 2, 5 and 9.

Now, having reached Mexico, they were uncertain how to proceed. As she rested Wednesday in the shade at a crossroads just north of the border, she worried about what would come next.

"They told us that farther ahead there is a checkpoint and we don't know what to do," Ponce said. "I hope that with the children they help us."

The family left Honduras after Ponce's husband lost his construction job and was unable to find another. They left two older children with relatives.

Initially they planned to cross into Mexico much farther south, but heard a rumor that criminals were stealing children and killing parents there. So they reversed course and came to this remote jungle outpost instead.

In the riverside Guatemalan community of La Tecnica, across from the frontier Mexican town of Frontera Corozal, a steady stream of vans arrived Wednesday. From each a dozen migrants exited, ate something, made calls to relatives.

"We're almost there," one young woman said into her cellphone as she ate breakfast on a street lined with restaurants, bathrooms and convenience stores near the river.

Within an hour there were more than 100 migrants at the river's edge. They were mostly from Honduras, many women with children barely old enough to walk.

They were led onto boats with outboard motors, everything organized and out in the open. When they reached the other side, only Mexico lay between them and the U.S. border.

More than two dozen taxis awaited, packed cabs leaving and empty ones returning. Those with guides got into cabs and disappeared into the Mexican countryside. Those without guides or money, like Ponce, walked up the road.

As in 2019, Mexico relies heavily on highway checkpoints transiting its narrow southern isthmus to prevent migrants heading north. It stepped up those efforts this week, as well as at airports in the region.

The more than 31,000 migrants the government has tallied so far this year roughly mirror the numbers from early 2019, before Trump forced Mexico to act. But Mexico's migrant detention numbers are more a sign of the government's effort than a reliable representation of the overall migration flow.

Much of that traffic becomes clandestine in Mexico as smugglers pack migrants into semi-trailers and vans or put them on buses or airplanes with fake documents. Often they only reappear at the U.S. border.

"The migrants are visible on the Guatemala side, but become invisible crossing into Mexico," said the Rev. René Sop Xivir of Jesuit Immigrant Services at the southern border.

On Sunday, even as more than 1,200 migrants crossed at the remote jungle outpost, dozens of Mexican immigration officials waited on the banks of the Suchiate River 300 miles away, facing news cameras as they turned back mostly Guatemalan shoppers with no intention of migrating.

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That show of purpose came days before a visit Tuesday by U.S. President Joe Biden's top immigration advisers, seeking to address the growing problem at the U.S. border.

"They want to pretend they are doing operations, for the press," Sop Xivir said. "In practice there isn't much control."

During a nearly 400-mile trip along the Mexico-Guatemala border, Associated Press journalists saw two National Guard patrols and seven military outposts — ranging from unmanned highway checkpoints to army bases, mainly holdovers from the 1994 Zapatista rebel uprising, that look for weapons and drugs, not migrants.

Sop Xivir said one of the crossings most used by families is called Gracias a Dios — "Thanks to God" — on the Guatemalan side.

"The whole town lives from crossing migrants — the smugglers, the restaurants, the hotels, everything," said a Gracias a Dios resident, who requested anonymity to avoid reprisals. "Look how much construction there is and the wads of cash that you see."

The traffic had slowed significantly in 2020 due to the pandemic, but now it's like early 2019 all over again, she said. "A few days ago, in a half-hour ... we saw hundreds walking along a mountain path."

Uncontrolled crossings dot Mexico's southern border. In some, like La Mesilla, residents set up a street market on both sides of the border three days a week. In others, there is just a customs booth surrounded by dirt roads crisscrossing the jungle.

At El Ceibo, where the head of Mexico's immigration agency was photographed this week reviewing operations, there is just a highway. Four days before he visited, two migrants paid \$5 to cross there on a motorcycle without anyone asking them for documents.

Among the most vexing issues for the Biden administration, as it was for Trump in 2019 and President Barack Obama in 2014, is the sheer number of unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S. border.

According to statistics from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, authorities encountered 9,457 children without a parent in February, a 61% increase from January.

About 100 miles up the road from Frontera Corozal, 16-year-old Evinson rested at a migrant shelter in Tenosique. He had walked for two days through jungle-covered hills to get around the official crossing at El Ceibo.

The lanky Honduran teen said he was trying to reach a cousin in New York. Someone at the Texas-Mexico border awaited him to help make that reunion possible, he said.

"I came because the gangsters chased me out, because they extort people and they gave me 48 hours to leave," Evinson said, asking to not use his surname because he feared for his safety.

A false rumor gave him hope it would all work out, he said, repeating what he'd heard: The U.S. government "was giving 90 days for unaccompanied minors to pass."

Colorado shooting suspect passed check in legal gun purchase

By PATTY NIEBERG and JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — The suspect in the Colorado supermarket shootings bought a firearm at a local gun store after passing a background check, and he also had a second weapon with him that he didn't use in the attack that killed 10 people this week, authorities and the gun store owner said Friday.

Investigators are working to determine the motive for the shooting, but they don't know yet why the suspect chose the King Soopers grocery store in Boulder or what led him to carry out the rampage, Police Chief Maris Herold said at a news conference.

"Like the rest of the community, we too want to know why — why that King Soopers, why Boulder, why Monday," Herold said. "It will be something haunting for all of us until we figure that out. Sometimes you just don't figure these things out. But, I am hoping that we will."

The quick response by officers, who traded gunfire with the suspect, kept many people inside the store out of danger, said Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty, who declined to say how many people were in the supermarket. The first officer on scene was killed.

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"Their actions saved other civilians from being killed," Dougherty said about the officers. "They charged into the store and immediately faced a very significant amount of gunfire from the shooter, who at first they were unable to locate."

More charges will be filed against 21-year-old Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa in the coming weeks in connection with firing at officers, Dougherty said.

John Mark Eagleton, owner of Eagles Nest Armory in the Denver suburb of Arvada, said in a statement that his store was cooperating with authorities as they investigate. The suspect passed a background check conducted by the Colorado Bureau of Investigation before purchasing a gun, Eagleton said.

Alissa used a Ruger AR-556 pistol, which resembles an AR-15 rifle with a slightly shorter stock, in the shooting, Herold said. An arrest affidavit says Alissa purchased it on March 16, six days before the shooting.

He also had a 9 mm handgun, which the police chief said was not believed to have been used in the attack. Herold didn't say how Alissa obtained it.

"We are absolutely shocked by what happened and our hearts are broken for the victims and families that are left behind. Ensuring every sale that occurs at our shop is lawful, has always been and will always remain the highest priority for our business," Eagleton said in the statement.

The gun store is in a shopping center that also has a chiropractic clinic, yoga studio and foot massage parlor. It is less than a half-mile from one of the restaurants Alissa's family owns and about 3 miles (5 kilometers) from his family's house in Arvada. A different King Soopers store is across the street.

Colorado has a universal background check law covering almost all gun sales, but misdemeanor convictions generally do not prevent people from purchasing weapons.

Alissa was convicted in 2018 of misdemeanor assault after he knocked a fellow high school student to the floor, climbed on top of him and punched him in the head several times, according to police documents. He was sentenced to probation and community service.

If Alissa had been convicted of a felony, his gun purchase would have been prohibited under federal law.

Dougherty, the district attorney, said Friday that the FBI and other agencies were looking into the background of Alissa and the victims and didn't yet have information to share. He said federal agencies were looking into "other firearms that might be connected to him" but refused to elaborate.

Dougherty said officials will limit how much they reveal about the investigation, which is expected to take months, to protect Alissa's right to a fair trial and ensure it takes place in Boulder County.

"If we share too much about the facts of the investigation, it's possible we'll see a motion by the defense to move this trial to somewhere else in the state of Colorado," Dougherty said. "And I want to make sure that the people of Boulder have the opportunity for this trial to be held and for justice to be done here."

Alissa made his first court appearance Thursday, where his public defender asked for a mental health evaluation but provided no details about his mental state. He is charged with 10 counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder over shots fired at a police officer who was not hurt.

Alissa was treated at a hospital before going to jail, his hands bound during the transfer by the handcuffs used by Officer Eric Talley, who died in the attack. Alissa has been moved to a jail outside Boulder County due to safety concerns stemming from threats made against him, county sheriff's spokeswoman Carrie Haverfield said in a statement Friday.

Alissa is being held without bail and has not yet entered a plea. His next court hearing will not be scheduled for two to three months to allow his attorneys to evaluate his mental state and evidence collected by investigators.

A Catholic funeral Mass for Talley will be celebrated Monday at a cathedral in downtown Denver. His funeral is scheduled for Tuesday in the Boulder County city of Lafayette. The 51-year-old joined the Police Department in 2010. He had seven children.

Anderson reported from Denver. Associated Press writers Brady McCombs and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City, Michael Balsamo and Colleen Long in Washington 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

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Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Pfizer CEO received his company's vaccine — he didn't refuse it

CLAIM: The CEO of Pfizer refuses to get the COVID vaccine.

THE FACTS: A video on social media is trying to spread doubt about COVID-19 vaccines by falsely claiming Albert Bourla, the chairman and CEO of Pfizer, "refuses" to get the vaccine his company created. In fact, he has already received two shots. "Albert Bourla received his second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on March 10, 2021," Pfizer spokesperson Faith Salamon told The Associated Press in an email. Bourla tweeted a photo of him receiving his second shot on March 10. "Excited to receive my 2nd dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech#COVID19 vaccine," his post reads. "There's nothing I want more than for my loved ones and people around the world to have the same opportunity." A popular video that includes the false banner, "PFEIZER CEO REFUSES VACCINE," has been shared thousands of times on Facebook. The name of the company is misspelled and some of the letters in the word "vaccine" have been replaced with an image of a coronavirus particle and a syringe. The video includes a clip of an interview Bourla did with CNBC on Dec. 14, but the video does not note the date. In that interview, host Meg Tirrell asked when Bourla planned to get the shot. In his response, Bourla never refused to get the vaccine -- he simply noted that, at the time, it wasn't yet his turn. "As soon as I can, I will. The only sensitivity here, Meg, is that I don't want to have an example that I'm cutting the line," Bourla said, according to the CNBC transcript. He went on to say he was 59, in good health, and not a frontline worker. "My type is not recommended to get vaccination right now," Bourla said.

— Associated Press writer Jude Joffe-Block in Phoenix contributed this report.

U.S. vice presidents are not required to salute service members

CLAIM: Vice President Kamala Harris disrespected the military when she failed to salute the military escorts when boarding Air Force Two on March 19 in Georgia.

THE FACTS: After Harris wrapped up her trip to Georgia to meet with grieving members of the Asian American community following a mass shooting, social media users began sharing a video of her boarding Air Force Two claiming she had failed to salute the troops at the base of the stairs. The video, viewed more than 900,000 times on Twitter, was shared widely by conservative social media accounts in an attempt to paint the vice president as unpatriotic and disrespectful to service members. "DISGRACEFUL:@VP Kamala Harris refuses to salute the honor guard at the steps of the aircraft. It is a clear demonstration of her dislike for those in uniform, both law-enforcement and military," tweeted Bernard Kerik, former New York City police commissioner. While Harris did not salute the troops, she is not required to. Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a statement that there is no instruction or regulation requiring the president or the vice president to return a hand salute to members of the Armed Forces. "Vice President Harris has made very clear her respect and admiration for the men and women of the military, as well as their families," Kirby said. According to Army regulation, the president as the commander-in-chief is required to receive a salute, but there is no requirement that the vice president receive a salute. "Some are trying to suggest the Vice President lacks respect for our military – this could not be further from the truth," Sabrina Singh, deputy press secretary to the vice president, said in a statement. In addition, Harris has no responsibility to salute the troops. "She has no authority over them according to the Constitution," Richard Waterman, University of Kentucky presidential historian, said in an email. "Her constitutional function is

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to serve as President of the Senate. Saluting the troops would be an act of courtesy, but this is another example of politics as usual in Washington." It's not the first time a member of the White House has been criticized over saluting service members. Former President Barack Obama made headlines not once, but twice, while in office. In 2013, Obama walked by a service member as he boarded Marine One without a salute, returning a few moments later to shake the guard's hand. A year later, he again made headlines when he saluted troops with a coffee cup in his hand as he departed Marine One. Before Obama, critics were also not happy with former President George W. Bush holding his dog, Barney, as he attempted to salute in 2001. According to historians, Ronald Reagan was the first president to regularly salute troops.

— Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

Judge did not rule Dominion machines were designed for fraud

CLAIM: "Finally, a judge has ruled Dominion Voting Machines were designed to create fraud."

THE FACTS: No judge has made such a ruling. In December, a judge handling a Michigan lawsuit allowed the release of a report that contained false claims about a human error in Antrim County and about Dominion Voting Systems election technology, including the unsubstantiated assertion that the company's machines were designed to create fraud. The release of that report, which has since been debunked, did not amount to the judge endorsing its claims. Social media users spreading the false claim based their arguments on a December article, which covered Michigan 13th Circuit Court Judge Kevin Elsenheimer's decision at the time to allow the release of a flawed report contained in a lawsuit seeking to challenge Antrim County's election results. Elsenheimer did not make a ruling supporting the report's contents. The 23-page report — signed by a former Republican congressional candidate with a history of spreading misinformation about Michigan's election — claimed Dominion was "intentionally and purposefully designed with inherent errors to create systemic fraud and influence election results." It claimed the results of the election in Antrim County, Michigan, should not have been certified because a forensic analysis of voting machines found a "machine error built into the voting software designed to create error." But that analysis is "critically flawed, filled with dramatic conclusions without any evidence to support them," according to a joint statement from the Michigan Department of State and the Michigan attorney general's office in December. Antrim County officials concurred in a press release, saying, "An analysis which should have been data and fact based is instead riddled with false and unsupported claims, baseless attacks, and incorrect use of technical terms." Dominion has presented evidence to show that its technology did not err in Antrim County during the 2020 election. Officials have thoroughly explained the human mistake that caused the small, Republican-leaning county to temporarily report unofficial results that reflected a landslide win for Joe Biden. Former President Donald Trump ultimately won the county with 61% of the vote. Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced in early March that the state had completed more than 250 election audits, all of which "confirmed the integrity and accuracy of the 2020 election." In her statement, Benson specifically mentioned the Antrim County audit, saying it found that "the Dominion machines used there accurately counted ballots throughout the county." There's also no evidence the election technology firm Dominion Voting Systems switched or deleted votes, used algorithms to unevenly weigh vote tallies, colluded with Democrats, or used foreign servers — despite repeated efforts by Trump and his supporters to claim it did.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in Seattle contributed this report.

CNN banner did not say Boulder shooting suspect was 'morally white'

CLAIM: CNN displayed a banner during coverage of the mass shooting in Boulder, Colorado, stating the gunman was "factually Arab, but morally white."

THE FACTS: The network didn't display such text, according to a CNN representative and a recording of the broadcast. A manipulated screenshot of a CNN broadcast was shared thousands of times on Facebook this week, fooling social media users who did not realize it was initially shared as satire. The fabricated image showed CNN host Brooke Baldwin and correspondent Lucy Kafanov in a split-screen display, with

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Kafanov reporting from Boulder at "1:01 p.m. MT." A banner below the journalists read, "DEVELOPING STORY: INVESTIGATION: SHOOTER WAS FACTUALLY ARAB, BUT MORALLY WHITE." However, a recording of the same moment on Tuesday in an online TV news archive shows the text on the screen actually read, "COLORADO SHOOTING SUSPECT BOOKED INTO JAIL TODAY." Further investigation of the fabricated image shows it originated on the Christian satire website The Babylon Bee. Emily Kuhn, senior director of communications at CNN Digital Worldwide, confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that the banner was fabricated and didn't match the network's font. Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, the 21-year-old suspect in a Boulder supermarket shooting that killed 10 people on Monday, appeared in court Thursday for the first time, and his attorney asked for a health assessment "to address his mental illness." 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.

— Ali Swenson

Supposed Taco Bell, Walmart offers on Facebook are fake

CLAIM: Taco Bell is offering \$60 and Walmart is offering \$75 to customers who share and comment on their posts.

THE FACTS: These offers are not real and were posted by accounts impersonating Taco Bell and Walmart, but thousands of Facebook users have shared posts with the claims this week. "Taco Bell is going to celebrate its 60th anniversary on March 24th and In order to help our loyal customers, Every single person who has shared & commented before 5PM Wednesday will be sent one of these boxes containing a \$60 Taco Bell gift-card plus surprises that will make your heart flutter!" reads a post from a Facebook page impersonating Taco Bell. "To celebrate the great news of Walmart becoming plastic bags free by the end of 2021, we are giving one of these Walmart gift-bags to everyone who has shared & commented before 9pm March 24th. Each person who does this will receive one gift bag full of goodies and a \$75 Walmart voucher," reads a post from a Facebook page posing as Walmart. The posts come from Facebook accounts that at first glance appear to match the name and branding of each company, but actually claim to represent an "unofficial community page." Representatives from both companies confirmed the posts are not real. "We can confirm that webpage is impersonating Taco Bell and does not represent the brand," Taco Bell's public relations team told the AP in an emailed statement. "The brand is not giving out \$60 to everyone who interacts with the post. Taco Bell's 60th birthday is actually in 2022." Casey Staheli, senior manager of national media relations at Walmart, said, "This page is not affiliated with or endorsed by Walmart. We take any fraud impacting our customers seriously and continue to implement and improve upon measures designed to help guard against various consumer scams."

— Ali Swenson

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China outlines COVID-origin findings, ahead of WHO report

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese officials briefed diplomats Friday on the ongoing research into the origin of COVID-19, ahead of the expected release of a long-awaited report from the World Health Organization.

The briefing appeared to be an attempt by China to get out its view on the report, which has become enmeshed in a diplomatic spat. The U.S. and others have raised questions about Chinese influence and the independence of the findings, and China has accused critics of politicizing a scientific study.

"Our purpose is to show our openness and transparency," said Yang Tao, a Foreign Ministry official. "China fought the epidemic in a transparent manner and has nothing to hide."

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The report, which has been delayed repeatedly, is based on a visit earlier this year by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan, the city in central China where infections from a new coronavirus were first reported in late 2019.

The experts worked with Chinese counterparts, and both sides have to agree on the final report. It's unclear when it will come out.

Feng Zijian, a Chinese team member and the deputy director of China's Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said the experts examined four possible ways the virus got to Wuhan.

They are: a bat carrying the virus infected a human, a bat infected an intermediate mammal that spread it to a human, shipments of cold or frozen food, and a laboratory that researches viruses in Wuhan.

The experts voted on the hypotheses after in-depth discussion and concluded one of the two animal routes or the cold chain was most likely how it was transmitted. A lab leak was viewed as extremely unlikely, Feng said.

His remarks were reported by state broadcaster CCTV, which said envoys from 50 countries and the League of Arab States and the African Union attended the briefing at the Foreign Ministry.

"China firmly opposes certain countries' attempts to politicize the origin tracing issue and make groundless accusations and hold China accountable," the ministry said in an online post about the briefing.

Separately, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, "I would like to stress that virus tracing is a scientific issue that should be studied by scientists through cooperation."

She told reporters that the experts are still discussing the contents and translation of the report, and she did not know when it would be released.

At a press briefing later Friday in Geneva, the World Health Organization expert who led WHO's China mission said the nearly 400-page report was finalized and in the process of being fact-checked and translated.

"I expect that in the next few days, that whole process will be completed and we will be able to release it publicly," WHO expert Peter Ben Embarek said.

At a Biden administration health briefing Friday, U.S. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the agency was looking forward to the release of the WHO report.

Dr. Anthony Fauci said the explanation that "most public health officials agree with" about how COVID-19 appeared in humans is that the virus was likely spreading in China below the radar for several weeks, allowing it to be well adapted by the time it was recognized.

The government's top infectious disease expert's comments came in response to speculation by former CDC head Robert Redfield on CNN that COVID-19 came from a lab.

"What he likely was expressing is that there certainly are possibilities ... of how a virus adapts itself to a efficient spread among humans," Fauci said.

EXPLAINER: Why is media access at the border an issue?

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Access to government-run facilities housing young immigrants on the border with Mexico has caused one of the first tussles between news organizations and the two-month-old administration of Joe Biden. Before the doors opened slightly this week, the media was limited in depicting how people in U.S. custody were being treated, and how that compared to what was done in the Trump years.

What's behind that? Here's a look.

WHY HAS MEDIA ACCESS BEEN BLOCKED?

The phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" is a cliché for a reason. And governments know it well.

"This is sort of the default that government agencies go to when things are unflattering," says Freddy Martinez, policy analyst for Open the Government, an organization that argues for government transparency.

News organizations say they have repeatedly sought access and been blocked. The Associated Press, for example, has asked Homeland Security officials for access to Border Patrol facilities at least seven times, without a response. The Biden administration has pointed to the need to establish safeguards for COVID-19 transmission and protecting the privacy of children as they work to set up their system for

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processing migrants.

"I will commit to transparency, as soon as I am in the position to implement what we are doing," the president said at a news conference this week. When pressed on how long it would take for that to happen, Biden said he didn't know.

But some journalists called that hypocrisy given his pledges during the campaign. After the news conference, CNN's Jake Tapper said that Biden's stance was "not really in keeping with the transparency that he promised the American people."

BUT I'VE SEEN SOME PICTURES OF CHILDREN IN RECENT DAYS. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Some of them aren't coming from the professional media but from people with special access.

U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat, on Monday released some still pictures he had been given that were taken at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility in Donna, Texas. Those photos, taken through plastic sheeting, showed children, several of them covered with blankets, lying on mats lined side by side on the floor.

The Department of Health and Human Services issued some government-shot video clips and, on Wednesday, allowed an NBC News camera crew and reporter Gabe Gutierrez to visit an HHS facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas.

In the NBC video, some children were shown lining up as oranges were distributed, and others played soccer at an outdoor field. Their faces were obscured. An empty dorm room, with four beds, was shown, as was clothing handed out to youngsters.

While that access was an important step, Gutierrez and others noted that the HHS-run centers are where children are sent after processing at a customs facility like the one visited by Cuellar. The customs locations are considered much more crowded, and journalists have still not been allowed access to them.

DID FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP ALLOW JOURNALISTS?

The three presidents who preceded Biden all allowed at least some access, Martinez and other groups that are seeking more access said in a letter this week to Alejandro Mayorkas, secretary of Homeland Security.

Such access wasn't always aimed at pleasing the press, though. Stephen Miller, Trump's top immigration advisor, told Politico's Playbook this week that he wanted the press to have access, reasoning that images of immigrants held at the border were something Trump's supporters wanted to see.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Because bad information often replaces no information. A lack of good information creates a vacuum that activists on both sides of the contentious issue of immigration are only too eager to fill, says Dan Shelley, executive director of the Radio Television Digital News Association. He says: "It is more important than ever that journalists be allowed the necessary access to report accurately and independently on the border patrol's response."

David Bauder is the media writer for The Associated Press, based in New York. Follow him on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/dbauder>

French army accused of killing 5 civilians in north Mali

By BABA AHMED Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — The French army launched an airstrike against an extremist group in northeastern Mali, as part of its Operation Barkhane to "to neutralize an armed terrorist group," it said in a statement.

"This strike was ordered after an intelligence and identification phase that made it possible to characterize the presence and regrouping of the terrorist armed group," the army said in a statement late Thursday.

But a rebel coalition in Mali claims the strike killed at least five civilians, including minors. The Tuareg rebellion movement known as the Coordination of Movements of Azawad condemned the French airstrike and called for an international investigation.

The differing accounts could heighten already growing distrust of the French army as extremist attacks increase in the West African country.

This is not the first time that the French army has been accused of an attack that resulted in the deaths of civilians. A few weeks ago, a community group accused the French army of killing more than 10 civilians in a raid that mistakenly hit a marriage celebration in central Mali.

Islamic extremist rebels were forced from power in Mali's northern cities with the help of a 2013 French-led military operation. However, the insurgents quickly regrouped in the desert and began launching frequent attacks on the Malian army and its allies fighting the insurgency.

The extremists have expanded their reach well into central Mali, where their presence has inflamed tensions between ethnic groups in the area.

Oregon State sues AP to stifle request in volleyball case

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Oregon State University leaders are suing to block disclosure of details about an investigation of abuse allegations in their volleyball program, even as they tout a refreshed mission for transparency following their president's resignation over the handling of sexual-misconduct cases at another school.

The school's trustees accepted F. King Alexander's resignation this week after details came to light about the way his former school, LSU, mishandled sexual-misconduct cases during his tenure.

The Associated Press sought records after its own reporting uncovered complaints from more than a dozen people close to or formerly part of current Oregon State volleyball coach Mark Barnard's program. Three players have considered suicide during his time there.

During open meetings to discuss Alexander's future, Oregon State's trustees apologized to their community and promised a new push for transparency and accountability when it came to protecting students on campus.

Meanwhile, in the volleyball case, the school is pressing forward with a lawsuit against The AP to prevent disclosing details about an internal investigation of the team and Barnard, who critics say has been running an emotionally exploitative program. At least a dozen players have quit or transferred over the span of the last five years.

The coach was accused of threatening not to renew scholarships as a way of motivating players to perform better. He pitted them against each other, including asking team leaders to identify weak links on the roster in efforts to ostracize them from the team, accusers say.

The university, through spokesman Steve Clark, has disputed that a harsh environment led team members to contemplate suicide. He said Oregon State clearly communicates its scholarship offers and honors its commitments to athletes.

Clark, who did not respond to an email seeking answers for this story, said "appropriate action was taken" by athletic director Scott Barnes after an investigation conducted by the school's Equal Opportunity and Access office, but did not elaborate.

Shortly after publishing the second part of its series last November, the AP sought information and documentation about that investigation through open-records requests. Oregon State issued a blanket denial of the initial request, and after AP won an appeal to the local district attorney's office, the university sued the news-gathering agency in state court to prevent from having to disclose anything. A hearing in that case is set for June 25.

"This denial is just a continuation of them trying to manipulate the process from the very beginning," said Rick Lee, a former OSU basketball player who has been critical of the administration's handling of the volleyball case. "It warrants punitive punishment, and not just for the coach. It makes no sense that they'll open their mouth for one individual (Alexander) but stay absolutely silent in this situation."

Among the documents AP seeks are those related to a complaint by one player that triggered the investigation into possible violations of OSU policy with regard to bullying and retaliation against members of the volleyball team. It was completed last May and no conclusions were made public, or offered to the family of the player who made the complaint.

Across the country, LSU was facing its own reckoning over its handling of sexual-misconduct cases, most

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of which occurred years before trouble in Oregon State's volleyball program erupted. The key connection between the issues was the man in charge at each campus when the problems were made public: Alexander.

He was president of LSU from 2013-19, then came to Oregon State in 2020. When Oregon State's board of trustees was confronted with the full picture of Alexander's responses to the crises at LSU, it opted for a soul cleansing that ended with the president's resignation and multiple statements from the trustees vowing to do a better job.

"A lot of times things are swept under the rug," said Lamar Hurd, a former OSU basketball player who is now on the school's board, as he choked back tears while speaking in an open meeting Tuesday. "I want you to know that we don't do that here. That won't be done."

Hurd, who vowed Oregon State would "get it right" as it moves forward, did not respond to a message left on his cell phone by AP.

At least two parents of former Oregon State volleyball players used the public hearings about Alexander's future to ask questions about whether the volleyball issues were being considered. One said she had asked for a meeting with Alexander to discuss the volleyball program but was turned down, told the investigation into the program was closed. The trustees did not address those issues.

Nor have they responded to two emails from the AP seeking comment for this story, the second of which was also sent to the spokesman, Clark. One of the questions was about whether the board or Alexander had approved the lawsuit against AP.

"I'm guessing there's something in those records that they don't want out," said Dorina Waiters, whose daughter, Kyla, left Oregon State after a year on the volleyball team triggered depression that led to suicidal thoughts.

NASA gives all clear: Earth safe from asteroid for 100 years

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Whew, now here's some good cosmic news: NASA has given Earth the all clear for the next century from a particularly menacing asteroid.

The space agency announced this week that new telescope observations have ruled out any chance of Apophis smacking Earth in 2068.

That's the same 1,100-foot (340-meter) space rock that was supposed to come frighteningly close in 2029 and again in 2036. NASA ruled out any chance of a strike during those two close approaches a while ago. But a potential 2068 collision still loomed.

First detected in 2004, Apophis is now officially off NASA's asteroid "risk list."

"A 2068 impact is not in the realm of possibility anymore, and our calculations don't show any impact risk for at least the next 100 years," Davide Farnocchia of NASA's Center for Near-Earth Object Studies, said in a statement Friday.

Scientists were able to refine Apophis' orbit around the sun thanks to radar observations earlier this month, when the asteroid passed within 10.6 million miles (17 million kilometers).

Apophis will come within 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometers) on April 13, 2029, enabling astronomers to get a good look.

"When I started working with asteroids after college, Apophis was the poster child for hazardous asteroids," Farnocchia said. "There's a certain sense of satisfaction to see it removed from the risk list."

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.

How two friends made art history buying a \$70M digital work

By MATT O'BRIEN and KELVIN CHAN AP Technology Writers

It took a few minutes for Vignesh Sundaresan and Anand Venkateswaran to realize that they'd parted with \$69.3 million for a digital artwork stored in a JPEG file, coincidentally securing their place in art history.

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"We weren't sure we won," said Venkateswaran, describing the nerve-wracking final moments of the online auction for a collage of 5,000 images by the artist known as Beeple. "We kept refreshing the page."

The March 11 auction at Christie's in London immediately made Beeple's artwork one of the most expensive pieces ever sold by living artists, joining a well-known swimming pool painting by David Hockney and an iconic stainless steel rabbit sculpture by Jeff Koons.

Venkateswaran said he and his friend and business partner, Sundaresan, both in their 30s, are still coming to terms with their landmark purchase. They've also had to cope with outside concerns that the transaction could have been a convoluted scheme to inflate the value of the pair's investment portfolio.

That's because Venkateswaran and Sundaresan have invested heavily in a new form of digital collectible with the unwieldy name of non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. Based on cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain, these digital items function as exclusive certificates of authenticity, making it possible to turn easily copied digital files into unique collectibles — sometimes ones worth tens of millions of dollars.

The Beeple sale broke a record for the most expensive NFT ever sold and kick-started a global conversation about NFTs, their value and whether they are a lasting addition to the digital landscape. But the eye-popping sum involved drew global headlines and some suspicions that it could have been engineered for the publicity that drew more attention to NFTs, which could boost the value of the pair's existing holdings.

The involvement of Christie's, a centuries-old auction house, should be sufficient to reassure skeptics, Venkateswaran said in a call from his home in southern India. "I think the bigger problem here is that people thought this would be impossible."

That's certainly the case with Beeple himself, who in real life is a digital artist named Mike Winkelmann. "This whole NFT thing was not something I saw coming, at all," he said. During the auction, the artist was in his living room near Charleston, South Carolina, surrounded by family and a video crew, and said it felt like a "bomb went off in the room" as the bids quickly rose. Another bidder and cryptocurrency entrepreneur, Justin Sun, lost in the final seconds after the bids exceeded his previously set maximum.

The NFT market was already taking off, with transactions last year quadrupling to \$250 million, according to a report by NonFungible.com, a website that tracks the market. The Beeple sale turbocharged that growth and helped transform NFTs from niche tokens mainly appealing to cryptocurrency nerds to a new type of digital asset that's drawn mainstream attention from the art world, the music industry, sports and speculators.

Not to be outdone, auction house rival Sotheby's plans its own NFT sale, collaborating with the pseudonymous digital artist Pak in a sale next month.

Winkelmann began seeing the possibilities of NFTs for digital artists back in October when he tested the waters with an initial "drop" of his work. "People can actually own my art and collect it and, you know, pay good money," he said in an interview this week.

It was after another sale late last year that he reached out to one of the losing bidders, Sundaresan, who uses the pseudonym Metakovan.

The art world was not a common talking point for Sundaresan and Venkateswaran when they first met in 2013 while working at The Hindu, a daily newspaper in Chennai, India. Sundaresan was a 20-something technology consultant; Venkateswaran was a journalist.

Both had humble upbringings. Sundaresan couldn't afford a laptop when he was learning to code, so he'd walk around with a flash drive and borrow his friends' laptops, Venkateswaran said.

But by 2020, Sundaresan, now living in Singapore, had made himself rich on a series of cryptocurrency ventures and investments. With Sundaresan's money and Venkateswaran's analytical eye, they began exploring NFTs with a new fund called Metapurse.

Sundaresan, who declined to be interviewed this week, created the persona Metakovan as a reference to his affection for virtual worlds known as the "metaverse." The name means "King of Meta" in the Tamil language. Venkateswaran, who lives in Chennai with his wife and two kids, calls himself Twobadour. In a blog post last week the pair revealed their true identities and sought to dispel some of the mystery about their motivations.

"The point was to show Indians and people of color that they too could be patrons, that crypto was an

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equalizing power between the West and the Rest, and that the global south was rising," they wrote.

It was in December that the Metapurse pair made their first big Beeple investment, buying 20 of his works for \$2.2 million and gifting the artist with 2% of their new fund of NFT tokens, called B20s, that were designed to allow large groups of people to share ownership of an art piece.

That was the precursor to March's historic sale of Beeple's "Everydays: the First 5000 Days," a digital file combining works Beeple had created each day from May 2007 to the beginning of this year. Many of them are grotesque and cartoonish takes on what was happening in U.S. politics or pop culture. The works also follow Beeple's rise from a little-known graphic designer to an internet personality with a big Instagram following and multimedia projects with pop stars like Nicki Minaj and Justin Bieber.

"If you look at each picture at face value, obviously not all of them are going to stand the test of time," Venkateswaran said. "Not all 5,000 are masterpieces. That was never the argument. Not everything that Beeple puts out is gold. We don't worship at his feet. That's not what we were about. This is more about the combined narrative of what he represents."

The purchase has shocked art and finance worlds, but in some ways was fairly conventional, said New York art lawyer Leila Amineddoleh.

"A lot of the art market is saying, 'I own something unique, it's scarce, I own it, look at me.' This is not that different," she said. "The whole value of an NFT is being able to say this is an original. You're buying the bragging rights to say, 'I own the token.' But really, anyone can access the art."

Amineddoleh said the blockchain technology that underpins NFTs and other cryptocurrency markets also provides a transparent ledger to record art transactions. But for skeptics of the largely unregulated world of cryptocurrency, the sale has invited added scrutiny.

Christie's declined to comment on the details of the sale's financial structure except to say that the total amount was paid in a cryptocurrency known as Ether, marking Christie's first time accepting cryptocurrency as payment.

"There is obviously a money trail and Christie's had a set of exchanges that they were willing to work with, that they vetted and approved," Venkateswaran said. "And those are the exchanges that were used to make the payment. So Christie's has all the information."

Cryptocurrency exchanges can be prone to manipulative behavior, according to research co-authored by Friedhelm Victor of the Technical University of Berlin. But that typically involves investors who buy and sell the same assets repeatedly to create a fake sense of busy trading activity.

Such back-and-forth trading hasn't yet become common with NFTs, in part because they typically carry higher fees, Victor said. "Crazy speculation is not unusual," he said of the Beeple sale. "This is a really smart strategy to get some more attention to this whole space."

That has most definitely happened. But Venkateswaran said the attention doesn't mean he and Sundarshan are making a big profit off the tokens. "The math doesn't add up," he said.

O'Brien reported from Providence, Rhode Island and Chan reported from London.

Reopening hurdles linger for schools, despite rescue funding

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The latest federal coronavirus relief package includes \$81 billion that began flowing to states this week with the goal of helping schools reopen quickly — with one obstacle being that many of the districts' problems can't be solved by money.

Many parents want to keep their children home. Teachers have pushed back at reopening plans. And some districts say state guidelines on social distancing keep them from bringing all students back at once.

The money is welcome assistance for districts that have had to spend enormous sums on ventilation systems, laptops and protective equipment. With the end of the academic year approaching quickly, however, many are looking ahead to how to best spend the new money next fall.

For some districts that have yet to bring large number of students back to classrooms, no amount of

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money can help in the near term.

The Hillsboro School District, one of Oregon's largest, plans to begin introducing limited in-person learning for some students this month but cannot bring all students back full time because of guidelines on issues such as social distancing and bus transportation, said Beth Graser, a district spokesperson.

"There simply aren't people to hire to drive the buses we have, much less the fact that we would need to go through a purchasing process to secure additional buses if we were to increase our fleet to the point where we could feasibly overcome the transportation constraints," Graser wrote in an email.

The money released this week is part of \$122 billion included for K-12 schools in the \$1.9 trillion virus relief bill. Schools are strategizing over how to use the money over the next couple years to undo the pandemic's damage to the pace of learning and students' mental well-being.

Nearly half of U.S. elementary schools were open for full-time classroom learning as of last month, according to a survey by the administration of President Joe Biden, who has pledged to have most K-8 schools open full time in his first 100 days in office. While the administration touted the relief package as a way to help reopen schools, officials in some districts say they won't tap into the new funding for months.

In Ohio's Youngstown City School District, where about 40% of students are back in classrooms part-time, CEO Justin Jennings doesn't expect the newest federal money to change those numbers before the school year ends.

That's partly because students already were offered the opportunity to return for in-person learning, and partly because the district doesn't even expect to draw on the latest funding until at least the summer, Jennings said. Then it may go to more protective equipment, upgrading schools' air filtration systems and broadband access, and investing in transportation to allow for better social distancing, he said.

About 60 of the 77 large urban districts that make up the Council of the Great City Schools are at least partially open, Executive Director Michael Casserly said, and most of the rest already had plans to reopen by the middle of April. The new funding will help with the return to in-person learning, he said.

"There's a fair amount of money that will go to just efforts to reopen the buildings and make sure that everybody is safe," he said. "Those will be one-time expenditures that the school districts will make that won't necessarily build any long-term capacity, but they will help open the doors."

In Hartford, Connecticut, Superintendent Leslie Torres-Rodriguez said she expects the relief money will help the district bring more students back by expanding efforts to connect with families of students who have been absent or disengaged. The district has done close to 4,400 home visits this school year but often has lacked the resources to address the root causes of the problems, she said.

"Additional social workers, mental health and wellness supports would be so important and most immediately needed," she said.

Amid signs of slipping academic achievement, the school district in Connecticut's capital is encouraging all students to return for in-person learning on March 29, including some 9,600 students who have opted for virtual learning.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last week that students can safely sit 3 feet, instead of 6 feet, apart inside classrooms as long as they wear masks. But officials in some districts say that won't allow them to increase the number of days students learn in person unless state governments adopt the same guidance.

"If the guidance is permissible, we are excited to be able to do that," said Jeffrey Rabey, superintendent of Depew Public Schools in Buffalo's suburbs, where schools are operating with a hybrid model.

One of the biggest obstacles remains parent fears about the spread of the virus in schools, said Andre Perry, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He said districts have to show parents they are safe, especially in traditionally underserved schools where bathrooms often lacked soap or working sinks before the pandemic.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, where schools last week completed the transition from fully remote to a mix of remote and in-person learning, surveys indicate many families in the state's largest district may not want more time in classrooms.

The percentage of parents who say they prefer in-person learning over online has decreased in recent months, down to 47% this month from 56% in October, according to the district, which said parents have to feel prepared and safe sending their kids back.

"We are still working on looking at factors that may be able to help bring back additional students in-person in the weeks ahead," a district spokesperson said via email.

In Ohio's largest school district, Columbus, most students are back in classrooms part time under a hybrid schedule. Social distancing requirements that put capacity on school buses is one hurdle, and it doesn't make sense to buy hundreds more buses, officials said.

Another hurdle, district treasurer Stanley Bahorek said, is uncertainty about what's ahead and how schools might have to adapt.

"We're in a situation where we don't have a choice but to respond to an ever-changing environment," Bahorek said. "And that's the perspective that I hope people on the outside consider when they say, 'Well, why don't they just bring the kids back to school?'"

Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Michael Melia in Hartford, Connecticut; Kantele Franko in Columbus, Ohio; and Sara Cline in Salem, Oregon. Cline 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.

Shots in little arms: COVID-19 vaccine testing turns to kids

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

The 9-year-old twins didn't flinch as each received test doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine -- and then a sparkly bandage to cover the spot.

"Sparkles make everything better," declared Marisol Gerardo as she hopped off an exam table at Duke University to make way for her sister Alejandra.

Researchers in the U.S. and abroad are beginning to test younger and younger kids to make sure COVID-19 vaccines are safe and work for each age. The first shots are going to adults who are most at risk from the coronavirus, but ending the pandemic will require vaccinating children too.

"Kids should get the shot," Marisol told The Associated Press this week after the sisters participated in Pfizer's new study of children under age 12. "So that everything might be a bit more normal." She's looking forward to when she can have sleepovers with friends again.

So far in the U.S., teen testing is furthest along: Pfizer and Moderna expect to release results soon showing how two doses of their vaccines performed in the 12 and older crowd. Pfizer is currently authorized for use starting at age 16; Moderna is for people 18 and older.

But younger children may need different doses than teens and adults. Moderna recently began a study similar to Pfizer's new trial, as both companies hunt the right dosage of each shot for each age group as they work toward eventually vaccinating babies as young as 6 months.

Last month in Britain, AstraZeneca began a study of its vaccine among 6- to 17-year-olds. Johnson & Johnson is planning its own pediatric studies. And in China, Sinovac recently announced it has submitted preliminary data to Chinese regulators showing its vaccine is safe in children as young as 3.

Getting this data, for all the vaccines being rolled out, is critical because countries must vaccinate children to achieve herd immunity, noted Duke pediatric and vaccine specialist Dr. Emmanuel "Chip" Walter, who is helping to lead the Pfizer study.

Most COVID-19 vaccines being used around the world were first studied in tens of thousands of adults. Studies in children won't need to be nearly as large: Researchers have safety information from those studies and subsequent vaccinations of millions of adults.

And because children's infection rates are so low -- they make up about 13% of COVID-19 cases documented in the U.S. -- the main focus of pediatric studies isn't counting numbers of illnesses. Instead researchers are measuring whether the vaccines rev up youngsters' immune systems much like they do

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adults' — suggesting they'll offer similar protection.

Proving that is important because while children are far less likely than adults to get seriously ill, at least 268 have died from COVID-19 in the U.S. alone and more than 13,500 have been hospitalized, according to a tally by the American Academy of Pediatrics. That's more than die from the flu in an average year. Additionally, a small number have developed a serious inflammatory condition linked to the coronavirus.

Apart from their own health risks, there still are questions about how easily children can spread the virus, something that has complicated efforts to reopen schools.

Earlier this month, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, told Congress he expected that high school students likely would begin getting vaccinated in the fall. The elementary students, he said, may not be eligible until early 2022.

In North Carolina, Marisol and Alejandra made their own choice to volunteer after their parents explained the opportunity, said their mother, Dr. Susanna Naggie, an infectious disease specialist at Duke. Long before the pandemic, she and her husband, emergency physician Dr. Charles Gerardo, regularly discussed their own research projects with the girls.

In the first phase of the Pfizer study, a small number of children receive different doses of vaccine as scientists winnow out the best dosage to test in several thousand kids in the next phase.

"We really trust the research process and understand that they may get a dose that doesn't work at all but may have side effects," said Naggie, describing the decision-making that parents face in signing up their children.

But 9-year-olds have some understanding of the pandemic's devastation and "it's nice to participate in something where it's not just about yourself but it's about learning," Naggie added. "They do worry about others and I think this is something that really, you know, struck home for them."

For Marisol, the only part that was "a bit nerve-wracking and scary" was having to give a blood sample first.

The vaccination itself was "really easy. If you just sit still during the shot, it's just going to be simple," 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.

Belgium shows restored masterpiece but stolen panel rankles

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

GHENT, Belgium (AP) — Look closely, and one panel of the brilliantly restored lower half of the Ghent Altarpiece still has old varnish, right next to the vivid coloring that has come to life again in one of the most iconic works of Western art.

It seems older than the rest of the early 15th Century work, but in fact the browner panel is a copy dating to the 1940s — and a reminder of one of the greatest unsolved art crimes of all time: The 1934 theft of the Just Judges panel, painted by the Flemish Primitive Jan Van Eyck, whose works grace the world's greatest museums.

Restorers didn't want to give the copy the same makeover as other panels that have been cleaned up so far.

"We chose to leave that patina on, precisely to show clearly to the people that this is a copy, not the real Van Eyck," Canon Ludo Collin of Ghent's Saint Bavo's Cathedral said ahead of the opening of a new visitor center this weekend .

The real Just Judges could be anywhere, and Ghent still has a prosecutor and two police investigators tasked with solving the crime almost a century later. And over the years they have had the assistance — usually unsolicited — of amateur sleuths ranging from a former police commissioner to a cab driver, a computer expert and a children's book author.

Like the painting itself with its intricate detail, glowing light and religious subtleties, the crime story is

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hard to resist.

Magistrate Caroline Dewitte says that just before the chief suspect, Arsene Goedertier, died of a stroke half a year after the theft, he murmured: "Only I know where the panel is." And then there's the mysterious claim in the last of 14 extortion letters, one never sent, in which Goedertier wrote that "The Just Judges are in a place where neither I nor anyone else can take it without attracting the public's attention."

Adding to the mystery, police searching Goedertier's office found a series of so-far indecipherable drawings and strange acronyms that could possibly be linked to the theft. "It has shades of The Da Vinci Code," Dewitte said.

In its long history, the Ghent Altarpiece was nearly destroyed by iconoclasts in the 16th century, taken to Paris by horse and carriage after the French revolution, sold off to an art dealer, almost burned in the cathedral in 1822 and bricked in during World War I to avoid German appropriation.

After the Just Judges survived all that, then came what was quickly dubbed "the intrepid theft."

The disappearance was discovered on the morning of April 11, 1934, and soon afterward throngs flooded into the Gothic cathedral, potentially destroying key evidence that could have helped investigators.

"Just think what might have been lost in those first precious hours," Dewitte said.

Then the first letter arrived at the Ghent bishopric, demanding 1 million francs, a vast sum at the time, for the panel's safe return, and threatening to destroy the work if authorities didn't cooperate. The extortionist even gave back a minor rear panel that had also disappeared that night, to prove his credentials. Twelve more such letters followed and the 14th was found, unposted.

"It's a case that makes people fantasize," said Paul Drossens, the state archivist who now has the original police dossier in his care. In three big files, marked in red with "Never destroy," it contains everything from the letters, the appeal to Scotland Yard for help and the 1935 public warning that "the prosecutor's office is convinced that (the) panel was not destroyed and needs to be tracked down in the country, and primarily in Ghent and its environs."

It never was.

Ever since the massive restoration effort on the 15-by-11-foot altarpiece started in 2012 — stripping layers of old varnish and overpainting to reveal Van Eyck's brushwork — Dewitte said, "I was somehow hoping that it would lead to a breakthrough, because it is so sad that the original panel could not be part of it. It was not to be."

Canon Collin still holds out some hope for what he lovingly calls "the Loch Ness Monster of our cathedral," as it's been suggested that the panel might have been hidden somewhere inside the massive Gothic building.

In any case, authorities now want to ensure that all the remaining panels are perfectly protected from theft and humidity. If there is any drawback to the new visitor center, it is the massive glass encasement that keeps the public just too far away for a close inspection of one of Europe's greatest works of art.

"It is well protected against theft. But I won't say how it works," said Collin. "One panel is enough."

Photojournalist Virginia Mayo and videojournalist Mark Carlson contributed.

Romney gets Profile in Courage Award for impeachment vote

BOSTON (AP) — U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney was named the recipient of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award on Friday for splitting with his party and becoming the only Republican to vote to convict former President Donald Trump during his first impeachment trial.

The award was created by the family of the late president to honor public figures who risk their careers by embracing unpopular positions for the greater good, and is named after Kennedy's 1957 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Profiles in Courage."

"Senator Romney's commitment to our Constitution makes him a worthy successor to the senators who inspired my father to write 'Profiles in Courage,'" Kennedy's daughter, Caroline Kennedy, said in a statement from the JFK Library Foundation. "He reminds us that our Democracy depends on the courage,

conscience and character of our elected officials.”

Romney, 74, said he is inspired by the memory of his late father, George Romney, an automotive executive and governor of Michigan.

“When I think of courage, I think of my Dad,” said the Utah Republican, who is also the former governor of Massachusetts. “He did what was right regardless of consequence. I aspire to his example, though I have failed from time to time. We must subordinate our political fortunes to the causes of freedom, equal opportunity and truth, particularly as they are under assault here and abroad.”

Trump’s first trial in 2020 focused on the former president’s relationship with Ukraine. Romney became the first senator in U.S. history to vote for the conviction of a president who belonged to his own party, and was subject to intense criticism and even threats from Trump’s supporters.

But he did not back down, the foundation said.

When Trump and many Republicans questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election, Romney defended the integrity of the results and opposed efforts to overturn them.

After the Jan. 6 attempted insurrection by Trump’s supporters at the U.S. Capitol, Romney called on his fellow Republican senators to stand up for the truth about the election. At Trump’s second impeachment trial, Romney was one of seven Republican senators who voted to convict the former president of inciting the attack.

Kennedy’s book recounts the stories of eight U.S. senators who risked their careers by taking principled stands for unpopular positions. The award was created by the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation in 1989.

Romney will be presented with the award, a sterling silver lantern symbolizing a beacon of hope, at a virtual ceremony in May.

Previous winners have included Presidents Barack Obama, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush; U.S. Sen. John McCain; and Liberian peace activist and Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee. The recipients are selected by a bipartisan 15-member panel of national leaders.

Aid groups call on Biden to develop plans to share vaccines

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A coalition of nongovernmental organizations is calling on President Joe Biden to immediately begin developing plans to share an expected surplus of hundreds of millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses with the world, once U.S. demand for shots is met.

Biden has repeatedly said his primary focus is on ensuring all Americans can get vaccinated, and on Thursday he outlined a new goal to deliver 200 million doses cumulatively over his first 100 days in office. But with all adults set to be eligible for shots by May 1, and the U.S. set to have enough vaccine for its entire population by the end of July, Biden is being asked to facilitate the sharing of excess doses with the world — and to do so without putting strings on the injections or engaging in “vaccine diplomacy.”

In a letter to Biden sent Friday and obtained exclusively by The Associated Press, the groups — 30 NGOs including the ONE Campaign, the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Relief Services and Save the Children — call on Biden’s administration to commit to sharing excess doses through the World Health Organization-backed COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, or COVAX, facility.

“It is estimated that there could be twice as many deaths from COVID-19 if rich countries monopolize the first doses of vaccines instead of making sure they are distributed globally,” the groups write. “Vaccine hoarding could cost the global economy up to \$9.2 trillion. Wealthy countries will bear half of those costs because of supply chain disruptions and demand shocks.”

They argue COVAX would ensure the vaccines are distributed in a way to “maximize equity.” Other countries, such as Russia, China and Israel, have sought to use vaccine sales to bolster their geopolitical positioning.

Biden has moved to have the U.S. contribute financially to the COVAX alliance, which will share vaccines with more than 90 lower- and middle-income nations, but the U.S. has yet to commit to sharing any doses. To date, Biden’s administration has only approved the export of about 4 million doses of AstraZeneca’s

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vaccine, which is not authorized in the U.S. but is in use around the world, to Canada and Mexico.

In the coming months, the U.S. surplus is expected to reach into the hundreds of millions of doses, allowing for what the White House calls "flexibility" in responding to any shortfalls and future developments on the potential need for booster shots and vaccinating children.

The U.S. is injecting an average of about 2.5 million doses each day, and the pace is likely to dramatically rise later this month in conjunction with an expected surge in supply of the vaccines, putting the 200 million-dose goal well within reach.

The NGOs want the Biden administration to preempt any contractual or legal issues that U.S. manufacturers would have in sharing vaccines with the world and to outline a delivery schedule for when COVAX could begin to distribute U.S.-produced doses. They also call on drug companies to share manufacturing expertise and for the Biden administration to support the availability of raw materials for vaccines for doses to be distributed by COVAX.

They are calling on Biden to develop a framework for sharing vaccines now, so that once U.S. demand is met supply can quickly be shifted overseas.

Currently, all vaccines produced in the U.S. are claimed by the federal government under the terms of contracts signed by the manufacturers and the government.

The Biden administration has purchased enough doses of Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson vaccines to inoculate 150 million more people than the U.S. population by the end of the year.

The U.S. has also ordered 110 million doses of vaccine, enough for 55 million people, from Novavax, which is expected to file for emergency authorization as soon as next month, as well as 300 million doses, enough for 150 million people, from AstraZeneca.

"Given the optimistic outlook for vaccinating most Americans in the next few months and the huge number of excess doses the U.S. has in its pipeline, the U.S. is uniquely positioned to accelerate the global response to the pandemic by sharing vaccines," the groups write.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, March 27, the 86th day of 2021. There are 279 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 27, 1964, Alaska was hit by a magnitude 9.2 earthquake (the strongest on record in North America) and tsunamis that together claimed about 130 lives.

On this date:

In 1513, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon (hwahn pahns duh LEE'-ohn) sighted present-day Florida.

In 1884, the first telephone line between Boston and New York was inaugurated.

In 1942, during World War II, Congress granted American servicemen free first-class mailing privileges.

In 1945, during World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower told reporters in Paris that German defenses on the Western Front had been broken.

In 1968, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (gah-GAH'-rihn), the first man to orbit the Earth in 1961, died when his MiG-15 jet crashed during a routine training flight near Moscow; he was 34.

In 1973, "The Godfather" won the Academy Award for best picture of 1972, but its star, Marlon Brando, refused to accept his Oscar for best actor. Liza Minnelli won best actress for "Cabaret."

In 1975, construction began on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which was completed two years later.

In 1977, in aviation's worst disaster, 583 people were killed when a KLM Boeing 747, attempting to take off in heavy fog, crashed into a Pan Am 747 on an airport runway on the Canary Island of Tenerife (ten-uh-REEF').

In 1980, 123 workers died when a North Sea floating oil field platform, the Alexander Kielland, capsized during a storm.

In 1995, "Forrest Gump" won six Academy Awards, including best picture and a second consecutive

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best actor Oscar for Tom Hanks.

In 2015, Italy's highest court overturned the murder conviction of Amanda Knox and her ex-boyfriend in the 2007 slaying of Knox's roommate, bringing to a definitive end the high-profile case that had captivated trial-watchers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 2019, a Wisconsin man, Jake Patterson, pleaded guilty to kidnapping 13-year-old Jayme Closs and killing her parents; the plea spared the girl from the possible trauma of having to testify at his trial. (Patterson was sentenced to life in prison.) Facebook said it was extending its ban on hate speech to prohibit the promotion and support of white nationalism and white separatism.

Ten years ago: International air raids targeted Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's hometown of Sirte (SURT) for the first time as rebels quickly closed in on the regime stronghold.

Five years ago: A bombing in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore killed 65 people in a park crowded with Christians, including many children; a breakaway faction of the Taliban claimed responsibility. The Syrian government recaptured the historic city of Palmyra (pahl-MEER'-uh) from Islamic State fighters who had waged a 10-month reign of terror there.

One year ago: The House approved a \$2.2 trillion coronavirus rescue package; it was immediately signed by President Donald Trump. The president issued an order seeking to force GM to produce ventilators for coronavirus patients under the Defense Production Act. New outbreaks surged in cities including Chicago, Detroit and New Orleans; where crews rushed to build a makeshift hospital in the city's convention center. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that he had tested positive for the coronavirus. The Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, a civil rights leader who helped the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, died at 98.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Julian Glover is 86. Actor Jerry Lacy is 85. Hall of Fame racer Cale Yarborough is 82. Actor-director Austin Pendleton is 81. Actor Michael York is 79. Rock musician Tony Banks (Genesis) is 71. Rock musician Andrew Farriss (INXS) is 62. Jazz musician Dave Koz (kahz) is 58. Movie director Quentin Tarantino is 58. Rock musician Derrick McKenzie (Jamiroquai) is 57. Rock musician Johnny April (Staind) is 56. Actor Talisa Soto is 54. Actor Ben Koldyke is 53. Actor Pauley Perrette is 52. Singer Mariah Carey is 51. Rock musician Brendan Hill (Blues Traveler) is 51. Actor Elizabeth Mitchell is 51. Actor Nathan Fillion is 50. Hip-hop singer Fergie is 46. Jazz musician Tia Fuller is 45. Actor Emily Ann Lloyd is 37. MLB catcher Buster Posey is 34. Actor Brenda Song is 33. Pop singer-songwriter Kimbra is 31. Actor Taylor Atelian is 26. Actor/R&B singer Halle Bailey is 21. Classical crossover singer Amira Willighagen (TV: "Holland's Got Talent") is 17.