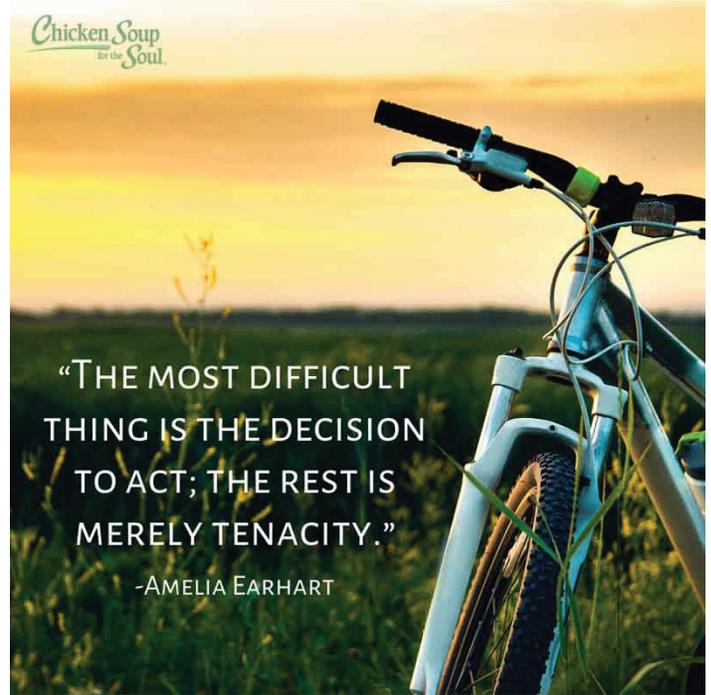


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Interstate 29 Northbound Construction Begins in Roberts County in April

WATERTOWN, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation says crews will begin construction on Interstate 29 northbound lanes from MRM 224 (Peever Exit) to MRM 239 (north of Sisseton) on Monday, April 5, 2021.

Crews will begin laying out traffic control and preparing for two-way traffic to be placed on the southbound lanes of I-29.

Work on the project includes overlaying the existing pavement and improving bridge decks and guardrails on the northbound lanes. This project also includes an asphalt overlay of S.D. Highway 10 at Exit 232.

The prime contractor on this \$17 million project is Michels Corporation of Brownsville, Wisconsin. The project is scheduled to be complete by November, 2021.

For complete road construction information, visit <https://sd511.org> or dial 511.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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The first wave of free agency is done, and most of the big-name free agents have been signed. The Vikings have continued to plug holes in the roster by signing players who will, at the very least, compete for a starting spot this season. Last week we broke down the Dalvin Tomlinson and Patrick Peterson signings, so if you missed it make sure to grab last week's paper. One more note on the Peterson signing, however. Most free agents sit back and let interested teams call the player's agent before choosing the best offer, but not Peterson. He told his agent to reach out to the Vikings, which should make fans happy – it's not often a star player prefers playing in Minnesota.



By Jordan Wright

The Vikings have made six signings since last week, plus a trade. Two of those players were on the roster last year and figure to have the same role going into 2021. Ameer Abdullah and Mike Boone battled it out last season for the third RB spot, and both players were on the last year of their contract. With Boone signing in Denver, Abdullah was brought back to add depth to the running back room and to be a reliable presence on special teams. His signing won't prevent the Vikings from drafting a RB in the later rounds, however.

The Vikings also re-signed wide receiver Chad Beebe, who has shown glimpses of potential since signing as an undrafted rookie. He has never been able to put it all together, and at this point, it's fair to wonder if he ever will. Beebe will be battling it out with Olabisi Johnson for the third WR spot, but don't be surprised if the Vikings bring in more competition before training camp opens.

Besides re-signing two players, the Vikings also brought back two players who played for the team just two seasons ago. Stephen Weatherly will be coming back after spending a year in Carolina, and he will compete for the only open starting spot on the defensive line. The team has four defensive ends on the roster (Danielle Hunter, DJ Wonnum, Kenny Willekes, and Weatherly), so the position is in fine shape.

Mackensie Alexander, who spent the 2020 season with the Bengals, was brought back to provide depth at cornerback. It's looking like the plan at cornerback is for Patrick Peterson and Cameron Dantzler to start on the outside, with Jeff Gladney playing the slot. Alexander, Mike Hughes, Harrison Hand, and Kris Boyd are penciled in as backups. Peterson and Alexander bring some vital veteran experience, while Dantzler, Gladney, and Hughes are high-upside youngsters.

The Vikings had a hole at safety after Anthony Harris signed with the Eagles, which led to the team bringing in Xavier Woods. Drafted by the Cowboys in the sixth round of the 2017 draft, Woods has developed into a solid safety. Woods is good in coverage, and he's even better when he's operating in towards the line of scrimmage. He can also play the slot, giving the 25-year-old a diverse skill set.

The Vikings also signed linebacker Nick Vigil. The Vikings now have nine linebackers on the roster and with Anthony Barr and Eric Kendricks holding two starting spots, that leaves seven players fighting snaps.

Besides the eight free agents the Vikings signed this offseason, the team also traded for an offensive lineman. The Vikings sent a sixth-round pick to the Arizona Cardinals for center/guard Mason Cole. The former third-round pick in 2018 has started 32 games for the Cardinals. He has primarily played center but has shown the ability to move over and play guard. Unless he takes a dramatic step forward, it's highly unlikely Cole will be a starter for the Vikings, but his position flexibility makes him a solid backup. Skol!

Listen to Your Gut

The patient knew something was wrong. After appointments with several specialists, multiple scans, and tests, she was given a diagnosis. Still, she felt certain something was not right. I sat down with her and listened. We repeated a test she had a year prior, and this time the test garnered a different result. There was a tumor growing. She

listened to her gut, she persisted and with an accurate diagnosis she got the medical care she needed.

Usually, it does not help to repeat a medical test. Nine times out of ten the result is the same. However, if as a patient, you get that feeling that something is amiss, seek out answers and find someone who will listen. That does not mean you need every possible test. Tests are costly. They are only a tool and using the wrong tool can cause more harm than good.

Physicians are adeptly trained in the application of the tools of medicine. Throughout college, four years of medical school and another three or more years of residency training, an M.D. or D.O. invests over 10,000 to 15,000 clinical hours while learning the art of medicine. Ideally, as physicians gain experience and confidence, we learn to discern when a test is needed, and how to avoid an unnecessary test.

Most importantly, a well-trained physician learns that listening to the patient history is a more powerful tool than any test. The history is the story of the patient's current and past symptoms as told by the patient. It does not come from the chart, is not in a textbook, and cannot be determined by a blood test or CT scan. To obtain it, a physician must listen.

Unfortunately, physicians often interrupt a patient within the first 10 to 15 seconds of the visit. Pressures from time, from documentation, from insurance companies, and from the next patient that is waiting can contribute to the detriment of the interview. However, with careful listening and guidance from the physician, the patient will frequently provide all that is needed to reach an accurate diagnosis.

We can all learn more by listening. Whether listening to our bodies, our family, our friends, or even our adversaries, it is time well spent. When we take the time to listen, we are one step closer to the truth. You'll feel it in your gut.

Andrew Ellsworth, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



By Andrew Ellsworth, MD ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

Rancher Prepares Drought Plan to Save Grass, Soil and Cows

Recent storms added some precipitation to southwest South Dakota, but the current drought map still shows wide areas of the state in moderate to severe drought. While spring isn't quite here yet, farmers and ranchers prepare to deal with drier soils.

Bart Carmichael knows of drought challenges during his three decades as a cow-calf rancher near Faith, SD. Taking care of grass and soil in his pastures is top priority to optimize current and future grazing and ranch resiliency.

"In the 2017 drought, we rotated the cattle quicker between pastures because the grass wasn't growing. After 10 months, we pulled the cattle totally off pasture and put them in the feedlot for four months. That actually turned out to be a good thing."

Write a drought plan

His goal is to graze the herd for 12 months a year. "The longest we've ever had cattle rotating between pastures is 11 months. When the weather dictates we can't graze, we'll put them on hay, move them off pasture or do whatever it takes for the time being. But when the drought breaks, we go back right to grazing the same pasture where we left off," Carmichael says.

An important part of his drought plan is herd management by key dates when the rains stay away. "Even just running mother cows on pasture, we have ranked them by A, B, and C herds. When drought forces a stocking rate reduction, the C herd is sold right away. That way you can keep your core. If drought severity continues, then the B group goes next," he says.

This scenario played out in the 2017 drought. "We sold the C and B herds, keeping our core A herd, which we put in a feedlot for four months. When the weather finally changed, we still had grass left that responded to spring moisture, so we were good to go. Our plan to adapt and do what you have to do, is better than holding on to the bitter end," Carmichael adds. He figures he has enough grass this year until October. Carmichael is one of the growing number of ranchers who subscribes to the "Rotate, rest, and recover" grassland management rule of thumb.

Sound economics drive the plan

Carmichael has witnessed area ranchers try to graze through a drought. "We had a neighbor one time try to run an entire herd on pasture through two years of drought. The first year it didn't rain, he grazed all of his old grass off. During the following spring without rain, he sold all of his cows for \$1,300 a pair. We had already sold only our C herd at that point, and because of our drought plan we didn't have to pull the plug on all of them. When it finally rained, he ended up buying heifer calves back for \$1,300 a head that fall. So economically, it's pays not to hold on to the bitter end, and risk losing everything," he adds.



Bart and Shannon Carmichael on their ranch near Faith, SD.

Unemployment Claims Filed for Week Ending March 20

PIERRE, S.D. – During the week of March 14-20, a total of 248 initial weekly claims for state unemployment benefits were processed by the Department of Labor and Regulation. This is a decrease of 107 claims from the prior week's total of 355.

The latest number of continued state claims is 4,944 for the week ending March 13, a decrease of 8 from the prior week's total of 4,952. This indicates the number of unemployed workers eligible for and receiving benefits after their initial claim.

For week ending March 20, a total of \$1.2 million was paid out in state benefits, in addition to \$1.7 million in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), \$162,000 in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and \$323,000 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) benefits.

The Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund balance was \$150.6 million on March 21.

Benefits paid since March 16, 2020:

- Regular State = \$107.9 million
- FPUC = \$225.6 million
- PUA = \$19.6 million
- PEUC = \$7.2 million

Total = Approximately \$360.3 million

DSS helps ensure families have correct child safety seats

PIERRE – The South Dakota Department of Social Services (DSS) is helping ensure children ride in the best child safety seat for their height and weight when parents can't afford to buy one.

State law requires parents and caregivers use child safety seats. The "best" child safety seat is one that correctly fits the child, the vehicle, and is used correctly every time. South Dakota's Child Safety Seat Distribution program provides proper child safety seats at no cost to families that meet income eligibility requirements as well as those who have children with special needs.

"Keeping children safe is always a top priority for DSS and that includes when they're traveling in a car or truck," said DSS Cabinet Secretary Laurie Gill. "Having a child in the best car seat is critical to their safety and that's why this program is so important."

There are several types of child safety restraints ranging from convertible seats to booster seats. You can learn more about each of these and other child safety seat information by visiting dss.sd.gov and clicking on the Child Care tab.

Keeping kids secure when they travel is critical to the DSS mission of strengthening families. Over the past four fiscal years, DSS and its distributing partners have provided more than 10,000 child safety seats in South Dakota. DSS currently has 69 distributing partners located in 44 counties across the state.

"DSS supports families with the resources they need to be healthy and safe," Gill said. "We know child safety seats save lives."

For more information about the program, including whether you qualify for a child seat and how to contact a program in your region, please visit dss.sd.gov and click on the Child Care tab.

South Dakota State Fair Announces Jon Pardi to Play at 2021 Fair

HURON, S.D. –The South Dakota State Fair and Legend Seeds welcome Jon Pardi to the South Dakota State Fair grandstand on Sunday, September 5, 2021.

Jon Pardi's focus is making country music that will last through decades, bringing an old-school flare back to mainstream country. His music is filled with fiddle, twang, and steel guitar, bringing new ideas to country's old sound. Pardi has been noted for his "long-lasting mark on the genre" by Music Row and his impressive ability to carve out his own path creating "the kind of country music multiple generations came to know, and love" according to Variety magazine.

In 2017, Pardi took home the Country Music Association Award for New Artist of the Year and the Academy of Country Music Award for New Male Vocalist of the Year. He has since been nominated for three more awards, including Album of the Year for his albums California Sunrise and Heartache Medication. In 2020, Jon Pardi became the first country artist to have two #1 singles on country radio with "Heartache Medications" and "Ain't Always the Cowboy".

Ticket presales begin May 24 for Friends of the Fair VIPs, June 14 for backrest holders, and June 17 for Friends of the Fair. Tickets will go on sale to the general public June 21. For more information on presales and ticket sales go to www.sdstatefair.com.

The 2021 South Dakota State Fair runs Thursday, September 2, through Monday, September 6. Channel Seeds preview night will be Wednesday, September 1. For more information on State Fair events, contact the Fair office at 800-529-0900, visit www.sdstatefair.com or find them on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

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#399 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Yes, as expected, we're worse off this week; there are many signals we're not finished getting worse. We had only one day below 50,000 new cases this week, and five days were above 60,000. While we're down today, this is a Sunday, and we know how Sundays are. We are now at 30,281,700 cases in the US, 0.1% more than yesterday. There were 41,400 new case reports today. Hospitalizations have been ticking up and are now at 40,325 people hospitalized with this virus today, almost 2000 above our most recent dip.

We're up to ten from six (and only four just two weeks ago) states and territories in the red zone, at 31 in orange, and have 13 in yellow. One-week increase in total cases was 381,400 last week and is up to 439,400 this week, so we're seeing very concerning levels of growth. Two-week increase was 808,700 last week and is up to 820,800 this week. I have us at a one-week daily average new-case number of 62,771.4, which is 15 percent above last week. We're in worse shape, and it concerns me that we have more states in trouble now than last week. This is a terrible trajectory.

I track 54 states and US territories, including the District of Columbia; and we have just one over 10 percent increase in two weeks, Vermont at 11.43 percent. We're up to eight states above five percent from four and from one two weeks ago. Highest per capita rates of increase are in New Jersey, Michigan, New York, Rhode Island, and Connecticut; all but one of these were among the leaders a week ago.

There have been 548,829 deaths in the US in this pandemic, 0.1% more than we had yesterday. There were 465 deaths reported today; we've been below 1000 more days than not this week. The number of weekly deaths is down again to 984.9, almost 100 below last week. States with the most per capita deaths this week were Kentucky, Massachusetts, Georgia, California, and New Jersey.

On March 28, 2020, one year ago today, we'd settled into a steady rate of increase which had our doubling time at about four days—which is awful. We were at 123,072 cases with New York and New Jersey responsible for just over half of these, a situation which held for some weeks; they were also the only states over 10,000 cases. Over 7000 people were hospitalized in New York alone. There had been 2126 deaths. One of those was an infant, the first infant Covid-19 death in the country. States had begun to push primary elections back. Decontaminating N95s used by health care workers was becoming a thing, a business even.

We had our first lesson in "correlation does not equal causation" on this day; here's the short version: "Let's say you had guests to dinner (way, way back when we were still doing things like that) and Uncle Hal was hanging out in the kitchen while you were cooking. He grabbed a few slices of the raw potatoes you were preparing and ate them. (You said, 'Ew! Who eats raw potatoes?') Later that night, Uncle Hal died in his sleep. Would it be reasonable to conclude that the raw potatoes killed him? It would not. The fact that two things happened close in time is not evidence one caused the other. Life is full of coincidences. Now if you wrongly decided raw potatoes are toxic and swore never to eat them, that probably wouldn't make your life materially worse, but drawing the same kinds of unfounded conclusions about which drugs to use in a life-threatening infection could cause some significantly bad outcomes."

Worldwide, we were now over 600,000 cases. Other than the US, hardest-hit countries: Italy – 70,065 cases, 10,023 deaths; Spain – 54,273 cases, 5690 deaths; Germany – 48,582 cases, 325 deaths; Iran – 35,409 cases, 2517 deaths.

We talked about the Northeast and Michigan last night. Tonight's subject is Florida, a state which has tended to get out ahead of all the waves throughout this pandemic. I know some folks who work with Covid-19 patients in Florida, and the signals I've been getting from them lately are that things are going to hell again there. The numbers confirm that: Case numbers have been rising; they're eight percent above where they were two weeks ago, although hospitalizations and deaths are still relatively lower. Undoubtedly a good share of what's happening here is B.1.1.7; Florida has more of it in proportion to total cases than any other state. Additionally, vaccination is lagging, although it should help keep the dying down somewhat that they aggressively sought to vaccinate the elderly right from the start. Another good share of the problem in the state is that they have rejected restrictions and have been courting tourists pretty vigor-

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ously: There's been a huge influx of spring-breakers that have some cities imposing curfews and sending the police to enforce them; that's not over yet either. A whole lot of the sick this time around are young; the average age for new infections is just 30, and a third of hospitalizations are in people 45 and younger.

With respect to the entire country, here's what Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, put out in a tweet today: "We know it's a race between vaccinations & variants. Well, despite phenomenal vaccination rates, variants pulled ahead this week. Infections up in 34 states. Test positivity up in 38. Hospitalizations up in 20. Holding tight until more folks vaccinated key to winning this race." (I added punctuation to make this readable; the words are all his.)

Our biggest issue is likely that we simply lack the will to mitigate transmission. We want to go places and do things and have fun, to hell with the fallout. You may have seen those cute social media posts that circulate from time to time labeled "Why my toddler is crying." They're accompanied by a photo of a kid red-faced and screaming because Mommy won't let him climb into the oven with the Christmas turkey or some such. Well, I often feel as though I live in a country peopled by toddlers, all throwing tantrums because Mommy won't let them climb into the oven with the Christmas turkey; but since they're grown-ups and can rent their own apartments and drive and everything, they just go ahead and do whatever the hell they want. We say we're tired of this virus and so we're just going to do whatever we want; then when it doesn't go away, we throw ourselves on the ground screaming, all mad because it's hot in this oven and it hurts. Sigh.

The big issue other than what public health experts rather charitably call "pandemic fatigue" is variants. That's not exactly a surprise, is it? I mean, I might have mentioned the problem once or twice. Variants of Concern have showed up in every state and are increasing as a proportion of identified cases in those places where they've showed up. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, CDC director, pointed out the problem at the press briefing on Friday. She mentioned the increasing vaccinations, something for which we just need a little more time and the increasing lockdowns in Europe as the virus burns out of control again, issuing this warning: "We just don't want to be at this rapid uptick of cases again, and that is very possible that that could happen."

The good news in all of this, if we can find some, is that, since we have done a pretty good job of vaccinating the highest-risk people, we might not get the steep jump in hospitalizations and deaths that we saw in earlier surges. There'll still be plenty of dying to go around, but probably not commensurate with the case numbers according to historical patterns. We've been warned and warned, but we're still there in the oven, all snuggled up with that roasting turkey because we want what we want and we want it when we want it, even if it kills someone (else). I'm reaching the point where I'd be willing to let the toddlers climb on in there; but I don't want to be dragged along, and unfortunately, in a pandemic, that's how it works. That's why the word, public, shows up in public health—because the bad decisions of a few are certain to kill some folks who weren't consulted at all in that decision.

So we're all pretty clear that I—well, and the CDC too—think travel is a very bad idea right now: We're heading into a surge, by all indications, and we do not need these variants to be catching free rides around the country with you on your vacation. They're getting them though. People are going to die—people who didn't have to—because of all of this travel. In another month or two, that will likely be different; however, things are deteriorating at the moment. But I also know you're traveling anyhow; I see your Facebook posts and talk to your relatives and hear from you too—see the TSA data and AAA reports. I'm frustrated and worried and depressed, but I'm not stupid; so let's talk about safety insofar as that horse hasn't already left the barn.

First thing: Vaccination is not a surefire guarantee you won't become infected. It's looking pretty surefire against severe disease, but it seems likely some percentage of the folks who've been vaccinated will get infected and sick enough to show symptoms. Please keep this in mind if you've been vaccinated and feeling sort of bulletproof. We also don't know yet whether you can become asymptotically infected so that you can spread the virus; likely the chance of it is reduced, but not eliminated. Also, while children have not been at high risk throughout this pandemic, some of them do get sick and a few die. Since right now very few children—and no one under 16—are being vaccinated, it makes sense to take some measures

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to protect them. Funny thing about percentages: Even though only a tiny percentage of kids dies from this, if one of them is your kid, he's 100 percent dead.

So, with that said, can you travel with family if they're not all vaccinated? The rule is that fully vaccinated people (two weeks past the last dose of vaccine) can mingle indoors and unmasked with unvaccinated members of one other household at a time, provided none of the unvaccinated people is compromised or at high risk for severe Covid-19. Now, I know we're all treating the travel guidance as just a suggestion, but this one really, really is not just a suggestion; we're trying to keep those unvaccinated people alive. If you're all going to be sitting together in a car for a day or two, it wouldn't hurt to limit your contacts with others before and during the trip. Be nice to do that after travel too, just in case you have brought a hitchhiking variant home with you.

As summer comes on and fades into fall, unless disaster befalls us—like a dangerous new variant that evades natural and vaccine-induced immunity, in which case all bets are off—I expect this guidance will all relax; but for now, you're going to need to wear masks when you're indoors with others not in your travel group. Same rules we're (presumably) following at home now. It's not a great plan to rent a big cabin or beach house with a bunch of families unless every single person is fully vaccinated. While you're planning, do some checking up on the amount of transmission in the community where you're visiting and which variants are circulating there; this can inform you in deciding which precautions to maintain.

Best to choose outdoor activities as much as possible and stick to large, uncrowded indoor venues. Exercise precautions when flying from the moment you step into an airport until you step out of the building at your destination. Cruises are still highly discouraged; the close quarters and shared air make them particularly problematic. This is also more than a suggestion. If you doubt the wisdom of this, please review stories from last January through March: start by Googling Diamond Princess and Grand Princess for a refresher. Give it a couple of weeks, and we could—should—have a different picture at that time.

Check out testing and quarantine requirements at your destination. Most domestic destinations, except for Hawaii, have eliminated those; but there are requirements for arrival in many countries and requirements for returning to the US from many as well. Countries that currently permit Americans to enter may have testing and/or quarantine rules. Vaccinated people can skip over those in Iceland, in Greece as of May 14, and several others. Thailand and Australia may set up the same sort of tiered entry system in the next few months. Some countries specify which vaccines are acceptable for this low-requirement entry; so far, all of the vaccines specified are the ones authorized in the US. I would advise checking as you plan travel to make sure your destination is one that has approved the vaccine you've received. If you're traveling with unvaccinated children, check with the destination country's tourism or travel agency to see what the requirements will be; these vary, but some hold children to the same rules as adults.

Most tour operators—the folks that conduct group tours—are encouraging travelers on their excursions to be vaccinated, but not requiring it. Some have moved to requiring vaccination; I expect that number will grow over time. Some cruise lines are requiring proof of vaccination to travel, and there is talk of designating areas on planes or entire flights for vaccinated travelers. Likewise there's some consideration being given to setting aside floors in hotels for the vaccinated. I imagine much of this will wait on the domestic level until anyone in the US who wants a vaccine can receive one; internationally, it's going to be more difficult because there are such wide swaths of the world where vaccination is going to take a long time to reach. Nonetheless, I expect some sort of digital coronavirus passport to become commonplace and required as time goes on. It seems probable travel to many destinations will become difficult or impossible for the unvaccinated.

There is growing evidence that plans to delay second doses of two-dose vaccines by as much as four months in the interest of getting first doses into more people, a strategy being implemented in several countries around the world, may not play out well for all people. There are a couple more studies available now in preprint (so not yet peer-reviewed) that deal with this issue. One study from a group at the Francis Crick Institute and King's College in London involved 151 older cancer patients and 54 healthy adults after their first and second doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Findings were, in the authors' words,

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that "Delayed boosting potentially leaves most solid and haematological cancer patients wholly or partially unprotected, with implication for their own health; their environment and the evolution of VOC strains." That means those folks with cancers are not protected adequately by a single dose of a two-dose vaccine.

The other from a group in British Columbia, Canada, looked at antibody levels in 12 long-term care recipients who had received a single dose of vaccine and compared them with 22 younger health care workers. Findings were that binding antibodies were four-fold lower and inhibition of ACE2 binding was 3-fold lower and that these lower levels did result in failure to neutralize the virus in vitro (in the lab). While we know two doses, as administered in the phase 3 clinical trials, offers strong protection even in these older age groups, it is looking very much as though a single dose isn't going to get the job done in these folks and delaying a second dose is probably not a great plan. With all the US got wrong during this pandemic, it appears this is one thing we did, indeed, do just right. I remember Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stubbornly insisting we would go through with a vaccination schedule supported by the evidence from the clinical trials while he was being pressured from all sides to loosen up. That's looking pretty smart about now.

As bleak as things are starting to feel again now, there are bright spots. One of them is Zoea Baltag of Bucharest, Romania, who received her second vaccine dose recently. This is a big deal for her because she's spent the past year staying away from family, and she's missed them. Born in 1916, a couple of years before the great influenza pandemic of 1918-19, this 104-year-old woman told the AP, "I missed very much my great-grandson, I want to see him growing up. I've not been able to be with my grandchildren because I stayed isolated from them until now in order to not risk catching the virus."

Baltag is the oldest person in Bucharest to be vaccinated—and certainly one of the oldest anywhere, I'd guess. Her entire family is now vaccinated, so they are looking forward to holidays spent together again. She declared, "A vaccine is the only way to get rid of this virus." She's not too old to be right about that. She suffered no side effects from the vaccine.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	459	438	896	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2862	2776	6124	40	Substantial	6.9%
Bennett	386	372	1201	9	Minimal	0.0%
Bon Homme	1514	1479	2151	26	Minimal	3.3%
Brookings	3799	3634	12543	37	Substantial	2.9%
Brown	5281	5123	13176	91	Moderate	6.4%
Brule	700	688	1918	9	Minimal	13.3%
Buffalo	423	409	907	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	1007	980	3316	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	268	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1342	1273	4069	21	Substantial	8.6%
Clark	411	386	972	5	Substantial	34.5%
Clay	1864	1808	5618	15	Substantial	5.6%
Codington	4194	4012	9992	80	Substantial	14.5%
Corson	475	461	1020	12	Minimal	9.5%
Custer	779	758	2802	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	3091	2937	6815	66	Substantial	11.6%
Day	679	641	1850	29	Moderate	3.0%
Deuel	490	474	1172	8	Moderate	22.7%
Dewey	1437	1408	3917	26	Moderate	0.0%
Douglas	443	428	945	9	Minimal	8.3%
Edmunds	490	472	1097	13	Minimal	5.3%
Fall River	564	538	2726	15	Moderate	2.8%
Faulk	364	349	709	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	1008	944	2331	42	Moderate	9.4%
Gregory	570	524	1333	30	Moderate	8.8%
Haakon	260	248	559	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	743	693	1848	38	Moderate	18.5%
Hand	354	340	862	6	Moderate	4.0%
Hanson	376	369	755	4	Moderate	6.3%
Harding	92	91	188	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2359	2298	6795	37	Moderate	4.7%
Hutchinson	826	771	2463	26	Moderate	1.9%

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Hyde	138	136	430	1	Minimal	10.0%
Jackson	284	269	926	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	257	576	16	None	0.0%
Jones	91	90	234	0	Minimal	28.6%
Kingsbury	724	646	1733	14	Substantial	20.8%
Lake	1289	1216	3533	18	Substantial	15.1%
Lawrence	2886	2821	8748	45	Moderate	1.5%
Lincoln	8186	7896	21055	77	Substantial	13.6%
Lyman	624	599	1924	10	Moderate	4.5%
Marshall	364	345	1255	6	Substantial	7.2%
McCook	780	738	1724	24	Substantial	11.5%
McPherson	240	235	576	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2686	2626	7965	31	Moderate	6.2%
Mellette	255	253	751	2	None	0.0%
Miner	289	269	602	9	Moderate	6.3%
Minnehaha	29544	28410	81326	342	Substantial	11.6%
Moody	623	602	1811	17	Minimal	1.7%
Oglala Lakota	2083	2018	6745	49	Moderate	4.0%
Pennington	13232	12892	40641	191	Moderate	7.5%
Perkins	351	335	841	14	Minimal	10.5%
Potter	387	380	867	4	Moderate	3.4%
Roberts	1308	1230	4280	37	Substantial	18.1%
Sanborn	337	330	712	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	821	785	2199	26	Moderate	8.7%
Stanley	339	336	968	2	Minimal	8.7%
Sully	136	133	329	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1189	4206	29	Minimal	8.3%
Tripp	733	704	1528	17	Moderate	17.1%
Turner	1129	1044	2824	53	Substantial	13.5%
Union	2121	2010	6566	41	Substantial	15.0%
Walworth	751	718	1865	15	Moderate	15.1%
Yankton	2907	2812	9641	28	Substantial	9.5%
Ziebach	338	326	883	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1912	0		

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South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	87816	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13742	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5592	5%
Hispanic	4257	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2622	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1703	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1512	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	60956	909
Male	56286	1024

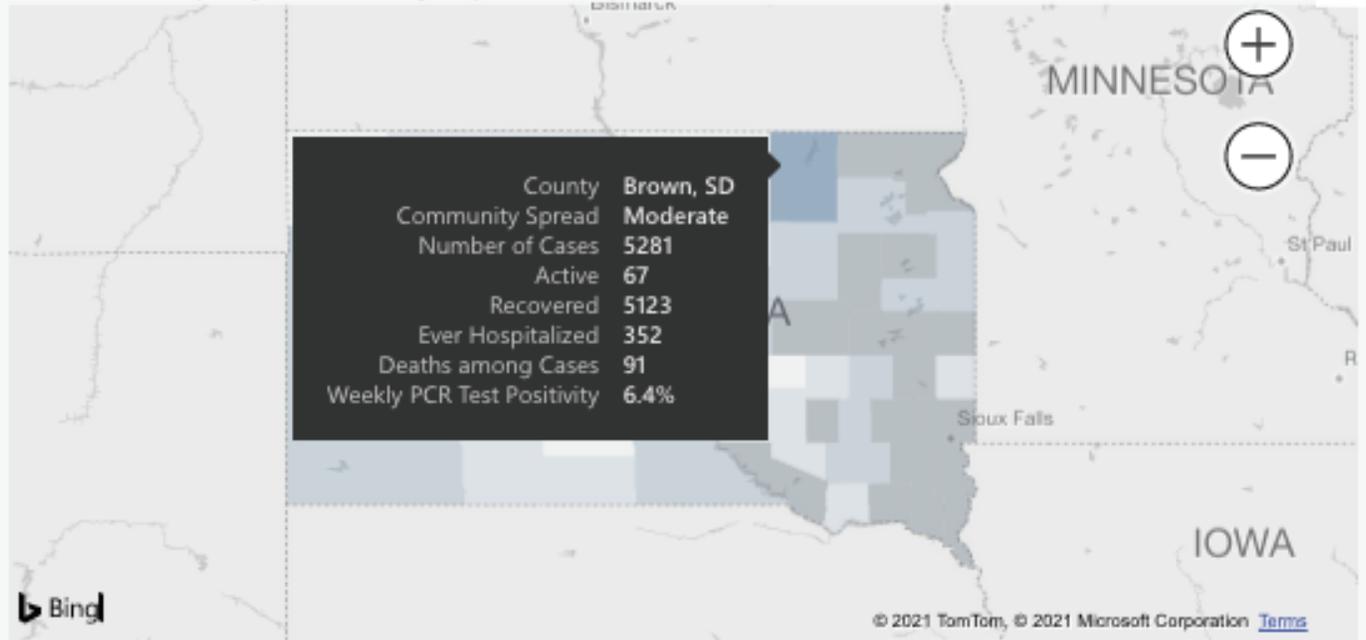
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Brown County

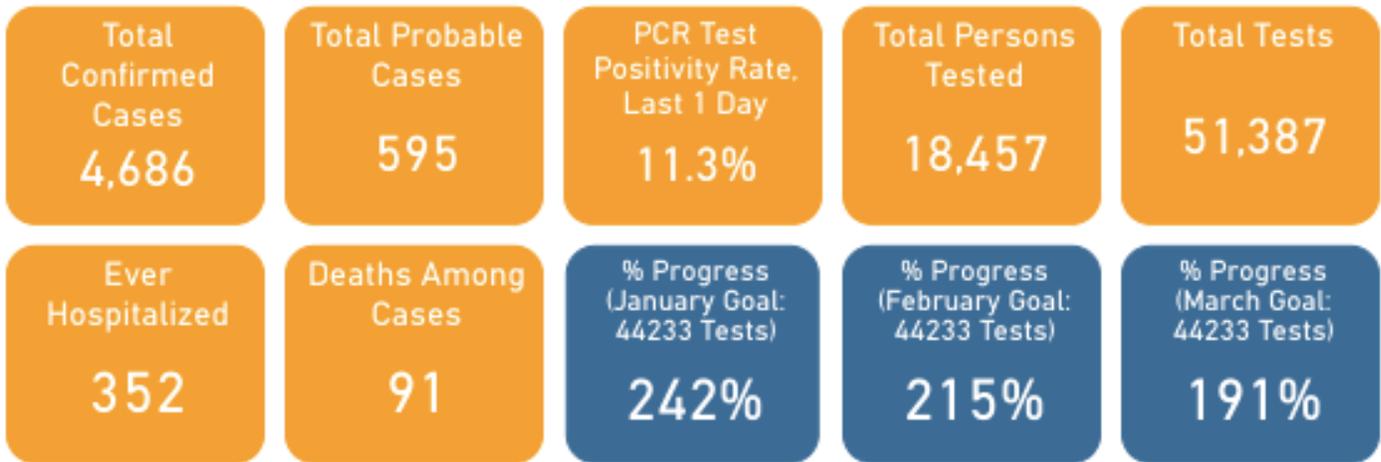


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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



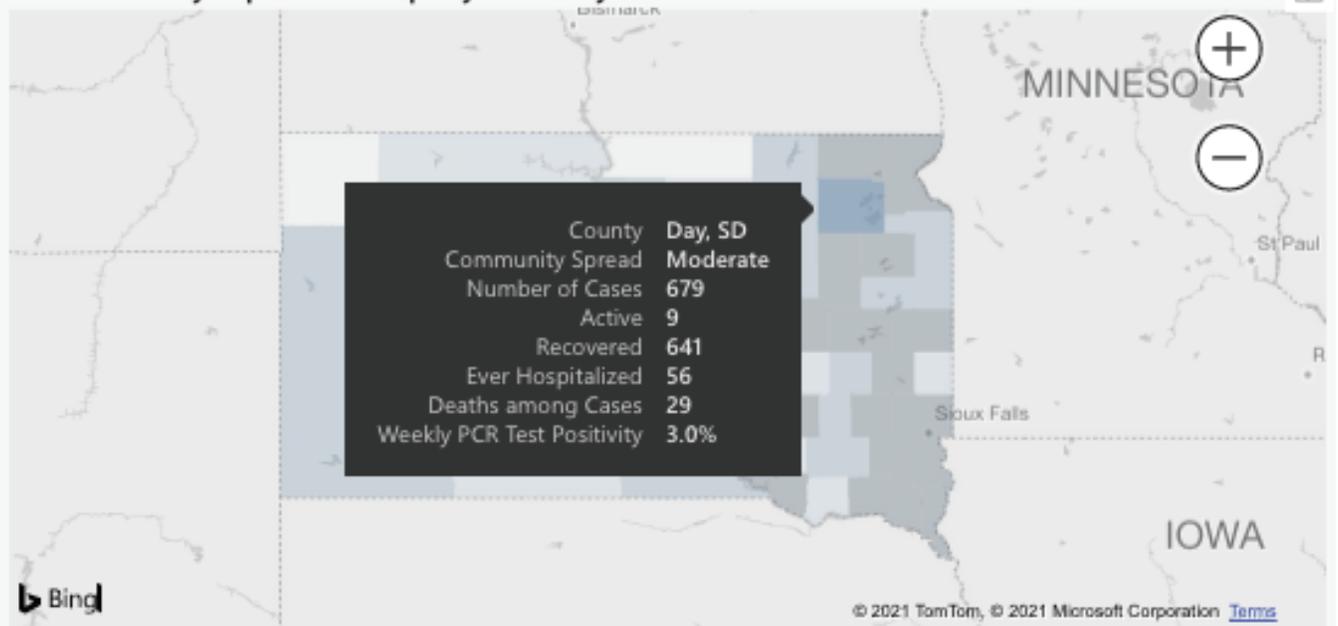
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Day County

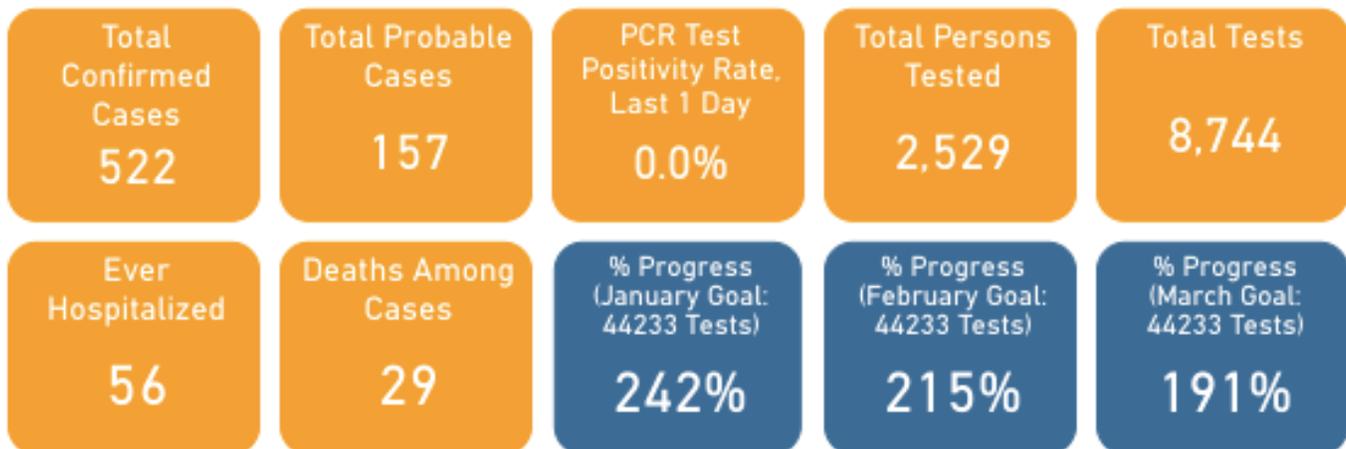


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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

398,808

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	7,957
Moderna	189,197
Pfizer	201,654

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

246,577

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	7,957
Moderna - 1 dose	45,547
Moderna - Series Complete	71,825
Pfizer - 1 dose	40,858
Pfizer - Series Complete	80,398

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

42%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	41.74%
Series Complete	27.32%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	1,203	437	383	820
Beadle	8,577	2,488	3,044	5,532
Bennett*	564	142	211	353
Bon Homme*	4,389	873	1,758	2,631
Brookings	12,967	3,853	4,557	8,410
Brown	19,033	4,721	7,156	11,877
Brule*	2,159	479	840	1,319
Buffalo*	148	82	33	115
Butte	2,888	890	999	1,889
Campbell	1,247	179	534	713
Charles Mix*	3,820	1,166	1,327	2,493
Clark	1,615	499	558	1,057
Clay	6,693	2,173	2,260	4,433
Codington*	12,644	3,614	4,515	8,129
Corson*	340	70	135	205
Custer*	3,591	807	1,392	2,199
Davison	9,819	2,919	3,450	6,369
Day*	3,246	838	1,204	2,042
Deuel	1,899	559	670	1,229
Dewey*	428	60	184	244
Douglas*	1,460	428	516	944
Edmunds	1,759	387	686	1,073
Fall River*	3,172	652	1,260	1,912
Faulk	1,341	351	495	846
Grant*	3,698	688	1,505	2,193
Gregory*	2,146	564	791	1,355
Haakon*	641	119	261	380

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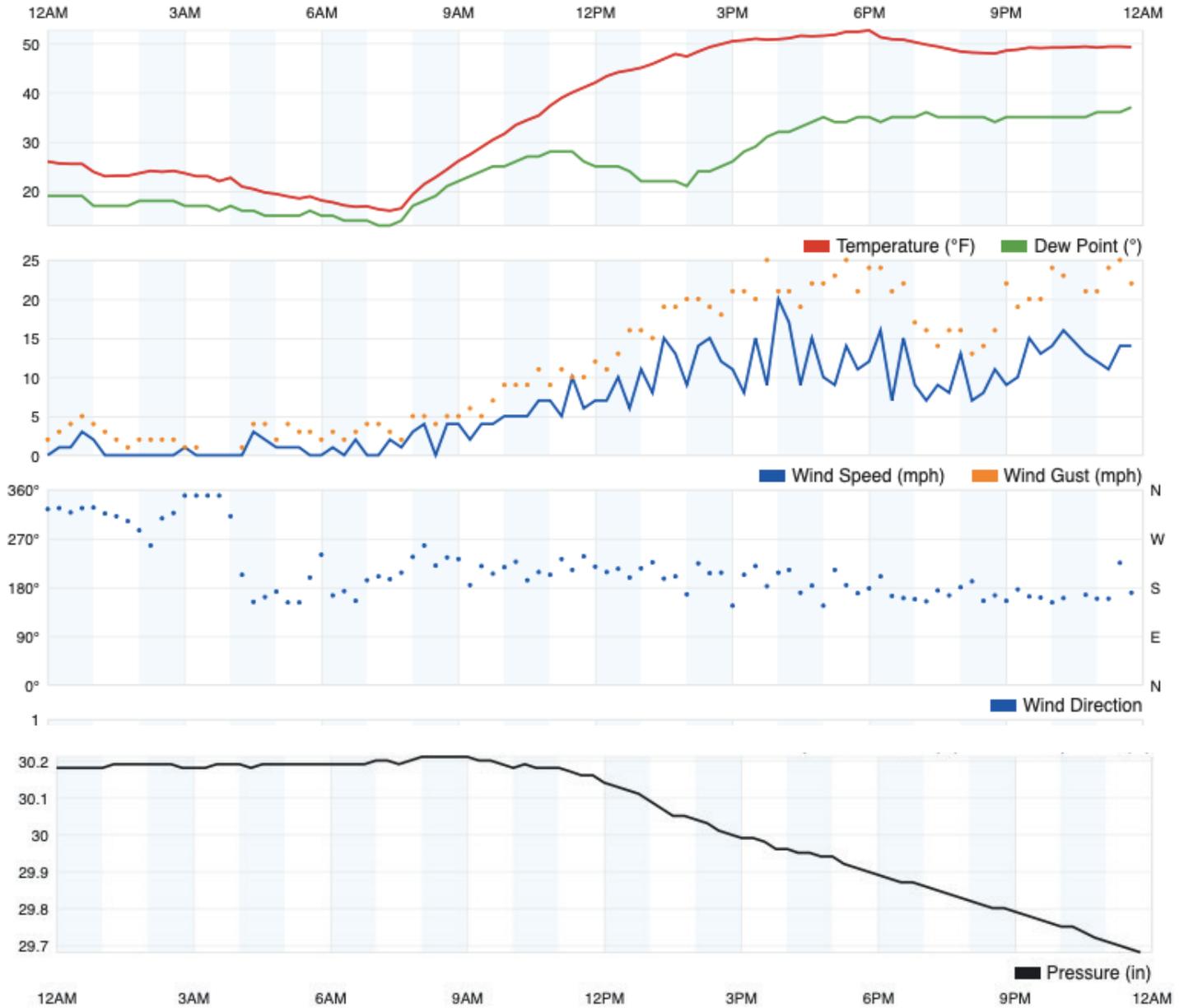
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Hamlin	2,239	591	824	1,415
Hand	1,794	556	619	1,175
Hanson	678	230	224	454
Harding	144	50	47	97
Hughes*	10,020	2,416	3,802	6,218
Hutchinson*	4,343	1,130	1,606	2,736
Hyde*	647	151	248	399
Jackson*	481	109	186	295
Jerauld	1,121	317	402	719
Jones*	759	137	311	448
Kingsbury	3,086	948	1,069	2,017
Lake	5,653	1,961	1,846	3,807
Lawrence	10,816	3,300	3,758	7,058
Lincoln	31,759	6,220	12,769	18,989
Lyman*	955	263	346	609
Marshall*	2,262	746	758	1,504
McCook	2,862	664	1,099	1,763
McPherson	315	69	123	192
Meade*	8,034	1,766	3,134	4,900
Mellette*	57	9	24	33
Miner	1,130	296	417	713
Minnehaha*	101,480	21,217	40,129	61,346
Moody*	2,262	730	766	1,496
Oglala Lakota*	207	51	78	129
Pennington*	46,310	8,888	18,711	27,599
Perkins*	779	253	263	516
Potter	1,185	345	420	765
Roberts*	5,232	976	2,128	3,104
Sanborn	1,299	383	458	841
Spink	3,635	787	1,424	2,211
Stanley*	1,497	331	583	914
Sully	494	126	184	310
Todd*	205	45	80	125
Tripp*	2,441	405	1,018	1,423
Turner	4,290	982	1,654	2,636
Union	4,173	1,503	1,335	2,838
Walworth*	2,338	390	974	1,364
Yankton	12,561	2,635	4,963	7,598
Ziebach*	67	15	26	41
Other	7,711	2,325	2,693	5,018

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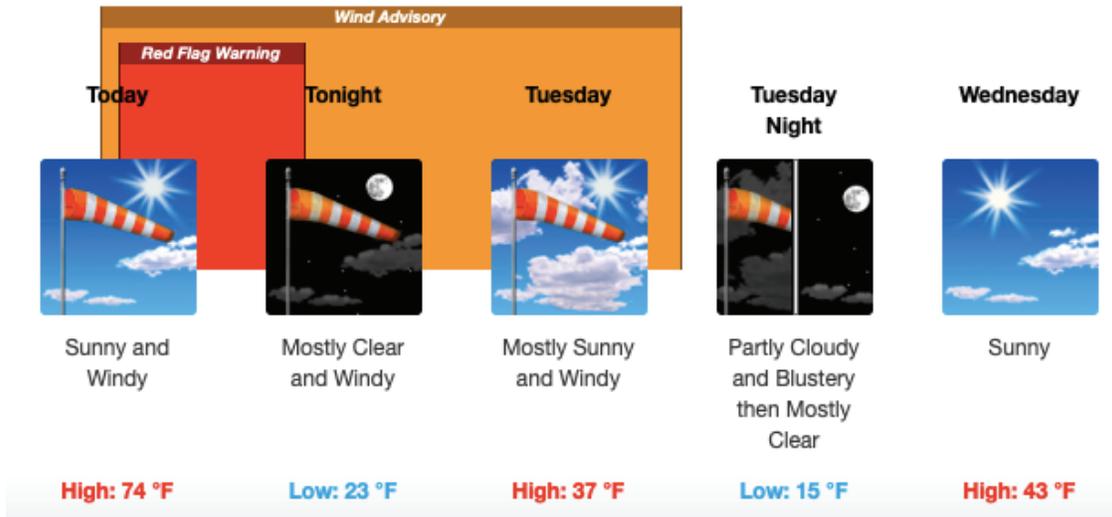
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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High Winds And Red Flag Warning Monday

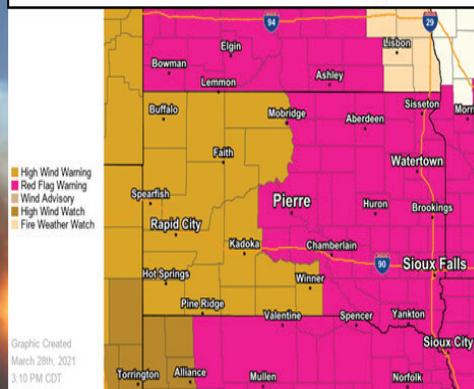
Highs: 55-70
(Cooler in north central SD)

Relative Humidity: 15-25%

Winds: 40-50 mph for areas east of the Missouri, may get above 60 mph for areas west of the river

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

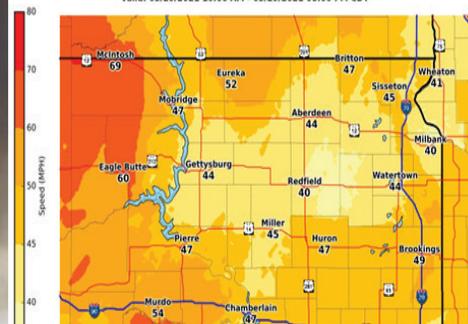
Current Hazards for Monday



Graphic Created March 28th, 2021 3:10 PM CDT

Max Wind Gusts

Valid: 03/29/2021 10:00 AM - 03/29/2021 08:00 PM CDT



A red flag warning is in effect through the forecast region Monday as above normal temps and high winds will create a fire weather concern. Wind speeds east of the Missouri are expected 40-50 mph while areas west of the river may reach above 60 mph.

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Today in Weather History

March 29, 1982: An early season Tornado briefly touched down at Swett, South Dakota (11 miles west of Martin). The tornado overturned and heavily damaged a mobile home. One person was slightly injured, and another barely escaped injury, as he left the trailer just seconds before the storm struck.

March 29, 1998: A supercell thunderstorm produced 13 tornadoes across southern Minnesota. The strongest tornado was an F4. Two people died during this tornado event.

1848: Niagara Falls eased to a trickle during the late afternoon and then became "silent" for 30 hours. Most people noticed the silence on the morning of the 30th. This is the only time in recorded history that both Falls stopped flowing. An ice jam at the neck of Lake Erie and the Niagara River entrance between Fort Erie, Ontario Canada, and Buffalo, NY, was caused by the wind, waves, and lake currents. People even ventured into the gorge, discovering relics like weapons from War of 1812.

1886: Rainfall amounts of 6-12 inches occurred over northwest Georgia in a 3-day period from March 29 through April 2. This caused record flooding on the Oostanula and Etowah Rivers that merge to form the Coosa River. Floodwaters, up to 11 feet deep covered portions of Broad Street in Rome with extensive record flooding. The stage height reached 40.3 feet. Flood stage is 25 feet. This record flood and another major flood in 1892 prompted the citizens of Rome to raise the town by 12 feet. This feat was accomplished by bringing in thousands of wagon loads of dirt. An official rainfall amount of 7.36 inches was recorded on this day in Atlanta. The 7.36 inches is the most Atlanta has seen in one day since record-keeping began in 1878.

1942: A slow-moving low-pressure system brought 11.5 inches of snow to the nation's capital on March 29, 1942. It still stands as the highest March snowfall on record in Washington, D.C. on a single calendar day. Also, Baltimore, Maryland recorded an imposing total of 21.9 inches of snow on the same day. On the flip side, eight days later, the temperature in D.C. soared to 92 degrees on April 6, 1942, and it remains the highest temperature on record for April 6.

2007: If thunder is heard, one should go to a lightning safe area. A high school athlete was struck and killed by lightning at a track meet in Carbondale, Illinois. A bolt or 2 had been seen miles away, and a distant rumble of thunder was heard before the deadly strike.

1920 - Clear Spring, MD, received 31 inches of snow in 24 hours to establish a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1921 - The temperature in Washington D.C. dropped from 82 degrees to 26 degrees thus ending an early spring. (David Ludlum)

1935 - A severe duststorm blanketed Amarillo, TX, for 84 hours. During one six hour period the visibility was near zero. (28th-31st) (The Weather Channel)

1945 - Providence, RI, hit 90 degrees to establish a March record for the New England area. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms spawned tornadoes in Mississippi, and produced high winds and heavy rain in Louisiana. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 92 mph at Houma LA, and caused a million dollars damage in Terrebonne Parish. Avondale LA was deluged with 4.52 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms in the Lower Mississippi Valley spawned a tornado which injured two persons at Bunkie LA, and produced high winds which down a large tree onto a trailer at Bastrop LA claiming the life of one child and injuring another. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced torrential rains in northeastern Texas and southwestern Arkansas. Longview TX reported 14.16 inches of rain. More than eleven inches of rain at Henderson TX caused a dam to give way, and people left stranded in trees had to be rescued by boat. Total damage in northeastern Texas was estimated at 10 to 16 million dollars. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in southeastern Texas and southern Louisiana. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes, including one which injured seven persons at Gray LA. Thunderstorms also produced golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 70 mph at Port O'Conner TX, and produced up to six inches of rain in Beauregard Parish LA. (Storm Data)

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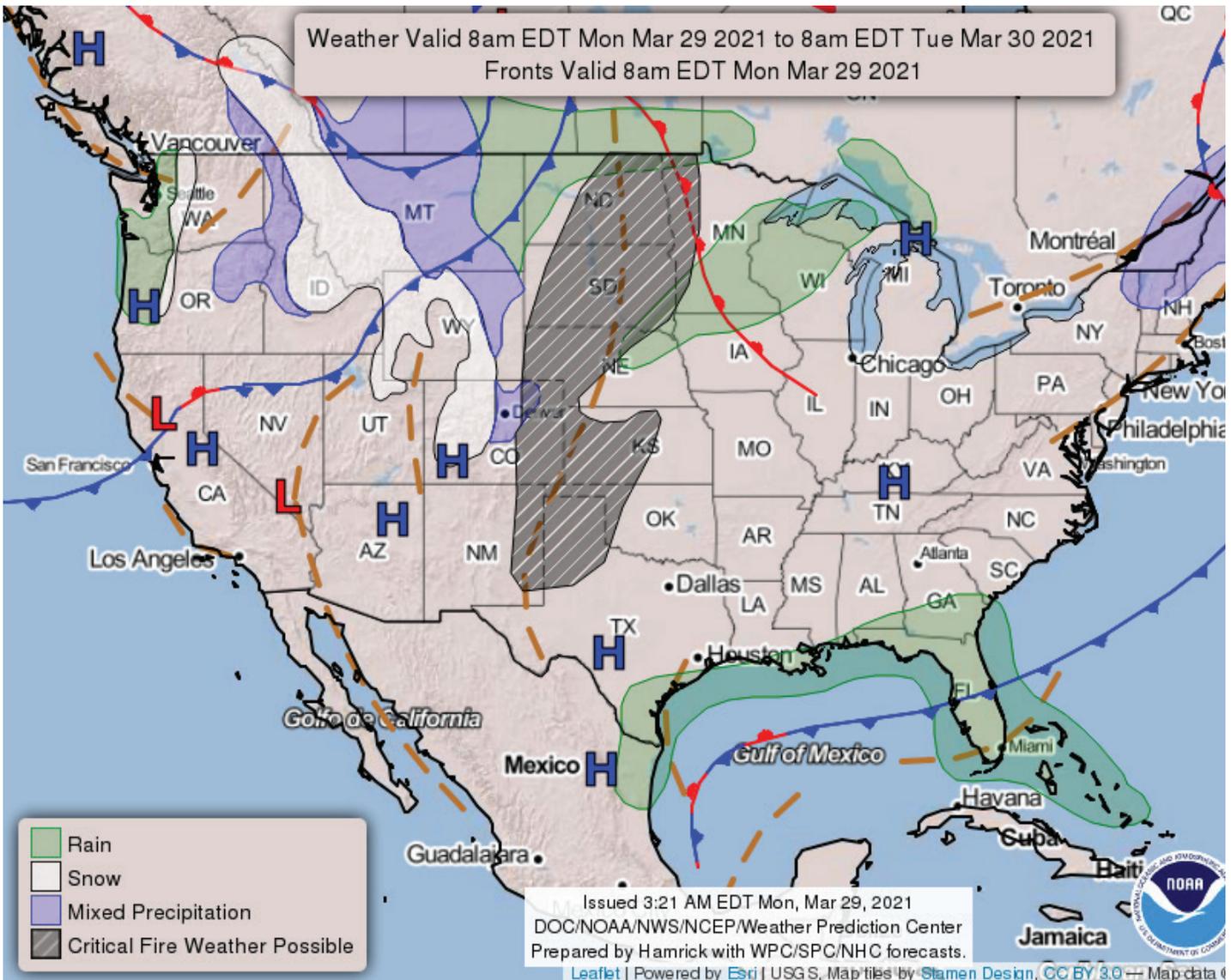
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 53 °F at 5:51 PM
Low Temp: 16 °F at 7:30 AM
Wind: 25 mph at 3:41 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 78° in 1910, 1986
Record Low: -9° in 1969
Average High: 47°F
Average Low: 25°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 1.01
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.36
Average Precip to date: 2.03
Precip Year to Date: 0.54
Sunset Tonight: 7:58 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:17 a.m.



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A TEN-STRINGED INSTRUMENT

A wealthy gentleman was known for having an extensive violin collection. When Fritz Kreisler heard of the collection, he went to see the instruments and meet the person who owned them.

When he saw them, he was overcome with joy. Turning to their owner, he pointed at one of the instruments and said, "May I play that one?"

"I'm sorry," said the owner, "but I will not allow you to touch that violin. It is too costly."

Kreisler visited the gentleman once again and made the same request. On this occasion, however, the man relented and gave him permission to play the violin. Gently and lovingly Kreisler removed the violin from the case and played it as only a master could.

With tears in his eyes the owner said, "Take it – it's yours. It must be owned by someone who can play it as you can."

Make "music to Him on the ten-stringed lyre," said David. All ten strings were to be used to proclaim the glory of God in worship!

Someone has said that "the body is to be used as that ten-stringed" instrument. We have two ears, two eyes, two feet, two hands, one tongue and one heart. But as the owner had to give permission to Kreisler to play the violin, we too must "offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to Him." It's only "reasonable," said Paul, in view of all that God has done for us. Reasonable, indeed, but the choice is ours.

Prayer: Lord, may we be an instrument of beauty and wonder in Your hands as we willingly surrender to You. Unless we do, we remain worthless. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Praise the Lord with melodies on the lyre; make music for him on the ten-stringed harp. Psalm 33:2

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FREE DATE CHANGES ON 2021 TOURS*

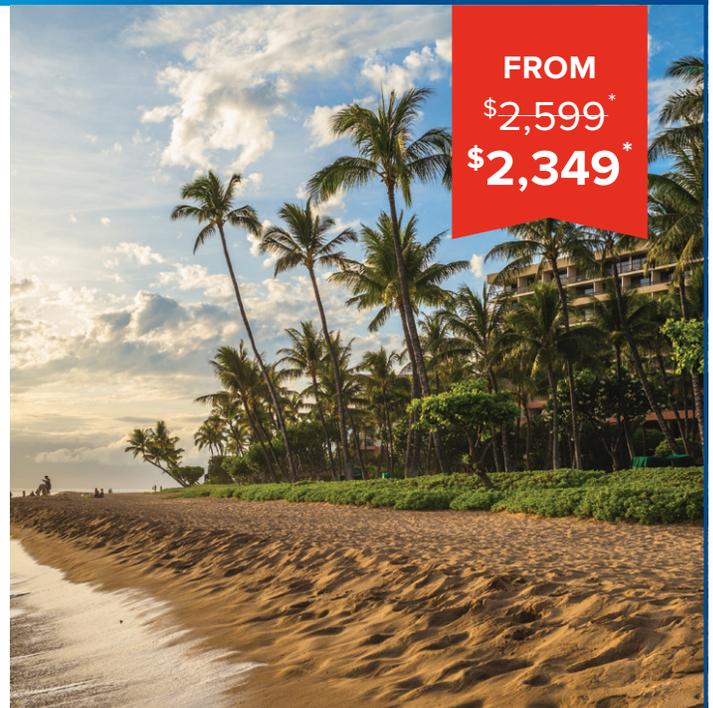


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*Free date changes anytime up to 45 days prior to departure for land tours, up to 95 days prior to departure for cruise tours. Deposits and final payments remain non-refundable. Prices are per person based on double occupancy plus \$299 in taxes & fees. Single supplement and seasonal surcharges may apply. Add-on airfare available. Offers apply to new bookings only, made by 6/30/21. Other terms & conditions may apply. Ask your Travel Consultant for details.

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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

City known for motorcycle rally mulling over man-made lake

By DEB HOLLAND Black Hills Pioneer

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — A man-made lake with amenities for all ages could be coming to Sturgis.

It all began when the city began discussing some sort of outdoor aquatics venue within the city. The city made a call for citizens to serve on a committee to discuss a splashpad.

But it was evident early on that committee members did not want a splashpad, but some sort of outdoor pool.

Allison Carter, chairperson of the Sturgis Aquatics Committee, said they worked toward that end, but funding, cost and location were identified as barriers.

"In order to build something like Spearfish has, we believed was just completely out of the realm for Sturgis. It was just too expensive. We were getting cost estimates of 9, 12 and 15 million dollars to build something like that."

Added to that were high maintenance costs.

"From an ecological standpoint, it made sense to move away from that direction," she said.

The committee also saw as a priority serving all ages and all abilities with what they are now calling the Sturgis Lakeside Adventure Park, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

"We didn't think a splashpad offered the citizens of the community enough on its own," she said.

Another priority for the committee was how an aquatics venue could contribute to the health of all citizens, Carter said.

The city had told the committee they were looking to place a splashpad in a park on 24 acres of land at the Sturgis Fairgrounds. The city has plans to sell the fairgrounds land to a developer for housing, but retain land for a park within a housing development.

The aquatics committee reached out to a Verona, Wisconsin-based company called Commercial Recreation Specialists to learn more about a firefighter-themed splashpad which some citizens had researched in recent years. They found out at that time that the company also does lakes.

Carter said many of the committee members liked the idea of building a lake.

"They presented us with the idea that we could build a lake very easily and very cost effectively," she said.

But the committee had the same questions Carter believes many Sturgis citizens will also have such as: "Are you kidding me? You're going to build a lake? If so, how?" she said.

CRS has been doing aquatic design for 30 years.

"They have been a great resource for us," Carter said.

Ron Romens, president of CRS, said that a lake in the heart of Sturgis is very "doable," and would provide endless possibilities for active recreation.

"We specialize not only in the body of water, but also in the recreation that goes around that body of water," he said.

That could be a walking path, a beach, a miniature golf course and more, he said.

"There needs to be spaces and recreation for all ages so they feel comfortable coming to the park," Romens said.

He said a lake could range in price from \$1.5 million to \$5 million depending on what the client wants.

The committee also has been working with Gene Fennell and Fennell Design, Inc. in Rapid City concerning the design of the park.

The committee liked the idea of the lake because they would be creating a natural eco-system which could be used by students for science lessons and more throughout the year.

Plus, the lake could be used year around not only for swimming and water play, but also for ice skating or sledding.

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Minnesota lawmaker proposes secession to border states

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Republican Minnesota state representative is proposing legislation that would let Minnesota counties secede from the state and join border states.

Rep. Jeremy Munson, of Lake Crystal, introduced the bill Thursday and tweeted out an image promoting a union with South Dakota. It shows nearly every county west of the Twin Cities metro as part of a newly imagined South Dakota.

“Minnesota becomes more politically polarized every year and the metro politicians have shown us that rural Minnesotans are no longer represented by St Paul. It’s time to leave,” read a webpage on Munson’s campaign website.

Republican South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem appeared to support Munson’s idea by retweeting his plan with a note that said her state will “roll out the red carpet for people who love personal responsibility” and freedom.

Noem appeared in ad campaign attempting in July to persuade Minnesota businesses into relocating to South Dakota by promoting its looser COVID-19 restrictions.

Opponents have blasted the bill as a publicity stunt and said it would not only involve time and money, it would require approval from county boards, the Legislature, Congress and voters.

Ship ‘partially refloated,’ but still stuck in Suez Canal

By ISABEL DEBRE and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — Engineers on Monday “partially refloated” the colossal container ship that continues to block traffic through the Suez Canal, authorities said, without providing further details about when the vessel would be set free.

Satellite data from MarineTraffic.com showed that the ship’s bulbous bow, once lodged deep in the canal’s eastern bank, had been partly wrested from the shore — although it remained stuck at the canal’s edge. The ship’s stern had swung around and was now in the middle of the waterway, tracking data showed.

Although the development marked the vessel’s most significant movement since getting stuck last week, the salvage crew urged caution as obstacles loomed.

“Don’t cheer too soon,” Peter Berdowski, CEO of Boskalis, the salvage firm hired to extract the Ever Given, told Dutch NPO Radio 1.

Last Tuesday, the skyscraper-sized Ever Given got stuck sideways in the crucial waterway, creating a massive traffic jam. The obstruction has held up \$9 billion each day in global trade and strained supply chains already burdened by the coronavirus pandemic. At least 367 vessels, carrying everything from crude oil to cattle, were still waiting to pass through the canal, while dozens were taking the lengthy alternate route around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa’s southern tip — a detour that costs ships hundreds of thousands of dollars in fuel and other costs.

With canal transits stopped, Egypt already has lost over \$95 million in revenue, according to the data firm Refinitiv. If the ship is freed in the next few days, clearing the backlog of ships waiting to pass through the canal would take over 10 days, Refinitiv added.

The partial freeing of the vessel came after intensive efforts to push and pull the vessel with 10 tugboats when the full moon brought spring tide, canal services firm Leth Agencies said, raising the canal’s water level and hopes for a breakthrough. Videos shared widely on social media showed tugboats in the canal sounding their horns in celebration.

Even as salvage work was ongoing, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi portrayed the development as a victory in his first comments on the stranded vessel.

“Egyptians have succeeded in ending the crisis,” he wrote on Facebook.

However, the rescue team said the ship’s bow remained stuck in the sandy clay at the canal’s edge.

“The good news is that the stern is free but we saw that as the simplest part of the job,” said Berdowski, noting that workers would struggle to haul the 220,000-ton vessel over the clay of the canal bank.

An official at Shoei Kisen Kaisha Ltd., the company that owns the Ever Given, confirmed the vessel’s

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bow had moved slightly, but warned the bottom of the ship was touching the seafloor. The official spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

On Monday morning, an Associated Press journalist could see that the ship's position had distinctly changed — where previously only the ship's stern was visible, the ship's side could now be seen.

Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei, the head of the Suez Canal Authority, said workers had straightened the vessel's position by 80% and that the stern had moved 102 meters (334 feet) from the canal bank.

The price of international benchmark Brent crude dropped some 2% to just over \$63 on the news.

With high tide returning at 11:30 a.m. local time on Monday, salvage crews resumed their attempts to tow the ship into the middle of the waterway. An Egyptian TV channel aired live footage of five tugboats with ropes around the ship's bow, their engines churning, struggling to nudge it away from the shore. Weather forecasts showed strong winds, gusting up to 32 kph (20 mph).

Although the vessel is vulnerable to damage in its current position, the vessel's owner said that the ship's engine was functional and it would head north when freed. It wasn't decided whether the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship, would continue to its original destination of Rotterdam or if it will need to enter another port for repairs, the Shoei official said. Workers would first try to pull it toward the Great Bitter Lake, a wide stretch of water halfway between the north and south end of the canal, where it would undergo technical examination, according to canal authorities.

Ship operators did not offer a timeline for the reopening of the crucial canal, which carries over 10% of global trade, including 7% of the world's oil. Millions of barrels of oil and liquified natural gas flow through the artery from the Persian Gulf to Europe and North America.

The unprecedented shutdown has threatened to disrupt oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East and raised fears of extended delays, good shortages and rising costs for consumers.

Canal authorities have desperately tried to free the vessel by relying on tugs and dredgers alone, even as analysts warned that 400-meter-long ship may be too heavy for such an operation. As a window for a breakthrough narrows with high tide receding this week, fears have grown that authorities would be forced to lighten the vessel by removing the ship's 20,000 containers — a complex operation, requiring specialized equipment not found in Egypt, that could take days or weeks.

The salvage team's next step is dredging beneath the vessel's bow with high pressure water jets to wrench the ship from the clay, said Berdowski.

"If that doesn't work, then in the end you will have to remove weight and that can only happen by removing containers from the front," he added. "But that is a process that will take time."

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

AP Exclusive: WHO report says animals likely source of COVID

By KEN MORITSUGU and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A joint WHO-China study on the origins of COVID-19 says that transmission of the virus from bats to humans through another animal is the most likely scenario and that a lab leak is "extremely unlikely," according to a draft copy obtained by The Associated Press.

The findings offer little new insight into how the virus first emerged and leave many questions unanswered, though that was as expected. But the report does provide more detail on the reasoning behind the researchers' conclusions. The team proposed further research in every area except the lab leak hypothesis.

The report is being closely watched since discovering the origins of the virus could help scientists prevent future pandemics — but it's also extremely sensitive since China bristles at any suggestion that it is to blame for the current one. Repeated delays in the report's release have raised questions about whether the Chinese side was trying to skew its conclusions.

"We've got real concerns about the methodology and the process that went into that report, including the

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fact that the government in Beijing apparently helped to write it," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a recent CNN interview.

China rejected that criticism Monday.

"The U.S. has been speaking out on the report. By doing this, isn't the U.S. trying to exert political pressure on the members of the WHO expert group?" asked Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian.

The report is based largely on a visit by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan, the Chinese city where COVID-19 was first detected, from mid-January to mid-February.

In the draft obtained by the AP, the researchers listed four scenarios in order of likelihood for the emergence of the coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. Topping the list was transmission from bats through another animal, which they said was likely to very likely. They evaluated direct spread from bats to humans as likely, and said that spread through "cold-chain" food products was possible but not likely.

Bats are known to carry coronaviruses and, in fact, the closest relative of the virus that causes COVID-19 has been found in bats. However, the report says that "the evolutionary distance between these bat viruses and SARS-CoV-2 is estimated to be several decades, suggesting a missing link."

It said highly similar viruses have been found in pangolins, which are another kind of mammal, but also noted that mink and cats are susceptible to the COVID-19 virus, suggesting they could be carriers, too.

The AP received the draft copy on Monday from a Geneva-based diplomat from a WHO-member country. It wasn't clear whether the report might still be changed prior to release, though the diplomat said it was the final version. A second diplomat confirmed getting the report too. Both refused to be identified because they were not authorized to release it ahead of publication.

The WHO did not immediately respond to emails and phone calls seeking comment.

Peter Ben Embarek, the WHO expert who led the Wuhan mission, said Friday that the report had been finalized and was 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," he said.

The draft report is inconclusive on whether the outbreak started at a Wuhan seafood market that had one of the earliest clusters of cases in December 2019.

The discovery of other cases before the Huanan market outbreak suggests it may have started elsewhere. But the report notes there could have been milder cases that went undetected and that could be a link between the market and earlier cases.

"No firm conclusion therefore about the role of the Huanan market in the origin of the outbreak, or how the infection was introduced into the market, can currently be drawn," the report said.

The market was an early suspect because some stalls sold a range of animals — and some wondered if they had brought the new virus to Wuhan. The report noted that a range of animal products — including everything from bamboo rats to deer, often frozen — were sold at the market, as were live crocodiles.

As the pandemic spread globally, China found samples of the virus on the packaging of frozen food coming into the country and, in some cases, have tracked localized outbreaks to them.

The report said that the cold chain, as it is known, can be a driver of long-distance virus spread but was skeptical it could have triggered the outbreak. The report says the risk is lower than through human-to-human respiratory infection, and most experts agree.

"While there is some evidence for possible reintroduction of SARS-CoV-2 through handling of imported contaminated frozen products in China since the initial pandemic wave, this would be extraordinary in 2019 where the virus was not widely circulating," the study said.

The report cited several reasons for all but dismissing the possibility the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, a speculative theory that was suggested and promoted by former U.S. President Donald Trump among others.

It said such laboratory accidents are rare and the labs in Wuhan working on coronaviruses and vaccines are well-managed. It also noted that there is no record of viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 in any laboratory before December 2019 and that the risk of accidentally growing the virus was extremely low.

Keaten reported from Geneva. Associated Press Science Writer Victoria Milko in Jakarta, Indonesia, contributed. The AP 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.

AP Exclusive: Pandemic means far fewer eyes on kids' welfare

By SALLY HO and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

LANSFORD, Pa. (AP) — Ava Lerario lived in a home marked by both love and chaos, even before the walls of the pandemic started closing in on her fractured family.

Sandwiched between two brothers, the 9-year-old was her father's princess, and she loved to snuggle up with her mom to read. She sometimes lugged her favorite stuffed animals all the way to the bus stop, where she never hesitated to share toys or books, or befriend a new or lonely kid.

But neighbors noticed she and her brothers didn't play outside. Protective services visited their home at least twice, in 2019, over reports of potential abuse of Ava's younger brother. Her father, Marc Lerario, had an explosive temper. Her mother, Ashley Belson, struggled with drug addiction and considered leaving him.

But she didn't dare take Ava. If she left with his favorite — the one who shared his strawberry blond hair and could calm him with a smile — Ashley feared he'd kill her.

In the end, Ashley wasn't the only one who died.

An Associated Press analysis of state data reveals that the coronavirus pandemic has ripped away several systemic safety nets for millions of Americans — many of them children like Ava. It found that child abuse reports, investigations, substantiated allegations and interventions have dropped at a staggering rate, increasing risks for the most vulnerable of families in the U.S.

In the AP's analysis, it found more than 400,000 fewer child welfare concerns reported during the pandemic and 200,000 fewer child abuse and neglect investigations and assessments compared with the same time period of 2019. That represents a national total decrease of 18% in both total reports and investigations.

The AP requested public records from all 50 state child welfare agencies and analyzed more than a dozen indicators in 36 states, though not every state supplied data for total reports or investigations. The analysis compared the first nine months of the pandemic — March to November 2020 — with the same time period from the two previous years.

And there are signs in a number of states that suggest officials are dealing with more urgent and complex cases during the pandemic, according to the analysis, though most child welfare agencies didn't provide AP thorough data on severity.

A loss in reports means greater potential for harm because "there has not all of the sudden been a cure for child abuse and neglect," said Amy Harfeld, an expert in child abuse deaths with the Children's Advocacy Institute.

"Children who are experiencing abuse or neglect at home are only coming to the attention of CPS much further down the road than they normally would," Harfeld said. "When families aren't getting what they need, there are consequences for everyone."

With many children out of the public eye, the U.S. system of relying on teachers, police and doctors to report potential abuse and neglect to Child Protective Services — known by various names across states — has been failing. During the pandemic, it became too late for many: the diabetic 15-year-old Wisconsin girl who died of medical complications despite 16 CPS reports in her lifetime, the 8-year-old Nevada boy who mistakenly drank a chemical substance stored in a soda bottle, the Phoenix teen beaten by his father with a bat.

School personnel are the top reporters of child abuse; they're the most important eyes and ears for child welfare agencies across states. Teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, nurses and other adults working in school settings are trained to identify warning signs and mandated by law to report any potential issues of child abuse or neglect.

The AP found that child abuse and neglect reports from school sources fell sharply during the pandemic

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as the U.S. pivoted to online learning — by 59%. For comparison, there was a 4% decline of reports nationally from nonschool reporter sources. In many states, school reports remained below pre-pandemic numbers even when in-person instruction resumed in some fashion.

“The pandemic and the resulting isolation reminds us that we cannot rely solely on a system that only responds after a child is hurt,” said Kurt Heisler, who oversaw the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System during the Obama administration. “What happens when we don’t have mandated reporters in front of children? It reminds us that we need another way to support and reach these families.”

The issue has affected other parts of the world, too, as Japan saw a record number of child abuse victims and the U.K. reported a significant increase in the number of maltreatment-suspected deaths and serious injuries.

Ava’s school, Panther Valley Elementary School in Nesquehoning, closed March 13. Ava lost her refuge, where she won Student of the Month honors every year and was known for singing and dancing her heart out during school band concerts. As the pandemic spread, few people understood the tumult inside the family’s home in the former coal mining town of Lansford.

School wasn’t a priority for the family then. The youngest, Marc Lerario Jr., has a severe form of autism, which made learning difficult even in the best of circumstances. Ashley, the breadwinner, lost her waitressing job as her restaurant shuttered amid coronavirus restrictions. The family applied for food stamps and relied on savings, said older brother, Brian Belson, now 17.

Before the pandemic, Marc Lerario seemed to be turning a corner, despite his record of a dozen assault charges — including domestic violence incidents against Ashley. He quit smoking and drinking, worked out, and watched movies or played video games with the family, Belson said. But in April 2020, Marc’s grandmother died of COVID-19 at a nursing home outside Philadelphia. He was hours away and never got to say goodbye, and he spiraled into depression.

That month, when the first economic stimulus checks came through, Patti Burt prayed the financial lifeline would ease some of the burdens her daughter, Ashley, was likely facing: “I said, ‘God, I hope they’re happy.’ I knew inside that Ashley was not happy, she was in pain.”

Ashley’s drug use escalated while Marc, unmedicated for bipolar disorder, slipped into extreme bouts of paranoia. School officials say it doesn’t appear Ava ever logged on for virtual school.

And on May 26, her body was found nestled in her fluffy bedding at home. Police say her father put a bullet in her head while she slept. Officials say he also fatally shot Ashley, his partner of more than a decade, and then himself. Ashley was found with high levels of meth in her system on a blowup mattress in the living room that Marc set up to stand guard against the invisible monsters of his paranoia, authorities said.

Ava’s brothers were home that morning and found the bodies.

Despite Marc Lerario’s criminal record, the prior report on child welfare in the home, and the children’s absence from remote learning, no red flags were raised to law enforcement or other officials.

Principal Robert Palazzo knew that in a high-poverty area, nearly everyone would be affected by the pandemic. He worried for teachers, some of whom work second jobs, and students in the online-only model. Palazzo describes a survivalist mentality - teachers and others helped who they could first.

Nearly a quarter of families didn’t participate in virtual school, so it wasn’t unusual that even enthusiastic, high-achieving learners like Ava might never log in to the district’s platforms, he said. Some parents, frustrated by technology and access issues, chose to go it alone, and Palazzo didn’t blame them. The usual truancy rules, in which the school must report to CPS any unexplained absence of more than six consecutive days, didn’t apply based on new state guidelines. Palazzo said the school called all 550 students at the start and made at least five attempts to reach Ava’s family about absences, via a letter, phone calls and email.

“We had everything in place that we should have had in place,” Palazzo said. “When we close the school doors, it changes everything.”

Months before the pandemic, the family was reported in two calls to CPS on the same October 2019 day. The reports involved injuries to the youngest child, Marc Jr. A social worker interviewed Junior at school with a teacher present, and abuse was denied in two home visits. It’s not clear whether the allegations were substantiated, but older brother Brian said his parents didn’t hurt Junior.

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Pennsylvania's Office of Children, Youth, and Families has acknowledged missteps by authorities in Ava's case. Social workers weren't notified of Ava's death, with officials learning instead from a Facebook post. The agency noted in a report that it didn't know there were guns in the home or about any criminal history. Erin James, office spokeswoman, declined to answer specific questions about Ava's case, citing privacy laws.

A former school psychologist, Palazzo said he has long advocated for Carbon County to adopt the Handle with Care protocols, a national initiative that prompts law enforcement to notify the school if police are called to a family's home. He said he doesn't believe anyone at his school knew about the child welfare report involving Ava's family, and he's unaware of any intervention on his campus, as Junior attended a different school. He believes teachers could have reached out to Ava if they knew that police or CPS had investigated her family.

Palazzo said he and the rest of the school grapple with the what-ifs: If school had been open, would there have been a chance to save Ava? That motivated school officials to reopen the doors to students as soon as possible.

"We want all kids to have access to school, not only because of reading and math, but because of well-being, because of access to another positive adult in their life," Palazzo said.

AP's analysis suggests officials may be dealing with more severe cases of child abuse in several states, based on an assessment of priority response times, families that have previously been involved with CPS, and deaths and serious injuries.

For example, although Maryland investigated far fewer child abuse reports during the pandemic, the state saw about 1,500 more reports involving prior victims than in March through September the previous year. Nebraska, which also had significantly fewer child abuse and neglect reports during the pandemic, had dozens more investigations that required a 24-hour response — assigned to the most urgent priority cases — than in 2019.

Louisiana also acknowledged a decrease in reports and increase in severity, noting the state saw more domestic violence involving weapons, psychiatric issues with caregivers, and serious injuries.

"We serve some of the most vulnerable families in Louisiana, and we know they were hit particularly hard by the pandemic," said Rhenda Hodnett, assistant secretary of child welfare at the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services.

Many states said the number of reports have recovered some, however slowly, over the past year, but that it is too soon to draw conclusions about the ongoing pandemic's effects on child welfare. Colorado rejected the notion that fewer reports prove unreported abuse.

"These decreases do not tell us that child abuse and neglect is going unreported," said Minna Castillo Cohen, director of Colorado's Office of Children, Youth and Families. "It's possible that families and communities came together and weathered this storm together."

AP's analysis showed that despite far fewer child abuse reports and school referrals, the percentage of reports accepted for further investigation and assessment largely remained steady during the pandemic. This suggests that while the work of social workers was consistent, there are likely untold cases of abuse going unreported, with at-risk children remaining invisible to the system without the attention of an in-person school environment, experts and some state officials said.

Much of a social worker's typical caseload involves minor maltreatments that more often signal poverty and a lack of resources over nefarious parenting, making Child Protective Services crucial for support of vulnerable families. Within the system, state laws and processes vary widely, making child abuse trends notoriously difficult to track even in normal times. Experts aren't sure how the loss in child abuse reports during the pandemic can or will be recovered.

Critics say teachers can overreport minor or unsubstantiated cases that don't meet the legal definition of abuse, confusing poverty with neglect as heightened by racial and other biases, and clogging up the system. But AP's analysis shows the rate of substantiated cases of abuse also generally remained steady among completed investigations between 2018 and 2020, even with a diminishing number of teacher referrals.

"Even if teachers were saying 'I'm going to report because I think this child seems dirty,' we do that so

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the child can get the attention and some intervention can happen," said Laurel Thompson, of the School Social Work Association of America and the retired director of student services for Florida's Broward County Public Schools, one of the country's largest districts. "Whether it's abuse or neglect or poverty, it is still a child in need."

Lansford police Chief Jack Soberick was the first to respond to the scene when Ava died. The lawn was mowed, the house was clean, and the refrigerator had food.

"I don't believe this would have happened this way if not for the pandemic pushing him beyond the brink," Soberick said of Marc Lerario. "This is a horrific, horrible main example, but I'm sure similar things to a lesser degree happened not just in Carbon County — throughout Pennsylvania and the nation."

Soberick said the police department was not aware of Lerario's warrants, which didn't appear in federal tracking databases. In 2018, he was charged with choking Ashley in Lansford, but she failed to appear at the court hearing and the charges were dropped. Among earlier arrests: four assault charges at a child's birthday party in New Jersey in 2009, an assault charge in Maryland against Ashley in 2015, and a guilty plea to assaulting his mother in 2013 in Philadelphia. His mother did not want to comment for this story.

Ava's death was one of 105 child fatalities investigated for child abuse in Pennsylvania in 2020; that's 11 more than in 2019. Other states that saw a significant increase in child deaths with suspected maltreatment include Alabama, Kentucky, Ohio, Texas, Maryland and Arizona, according to AP's analysis. Pennsylvania also had 113 more near fatalities — a 67% increase in injuries so serious that they left the child hospitalized in serious or critical condition.

In state officials' report about Ava's death, they suggest social workers do criminal background checks upfront when assessing families reported to them, and they urged schools to track attendance during the pandemic to report unresponsive parents for welfare checks.

Ava never had the chance to return to school. Instead, she's now memorialized in a cafeteria mural, quoting her characteristic enthusiasm: "It's like a thousand suns out here."

The state's fatality review said: "When the victim child was in school, she did have a good relationship with the staff and did reach out for help in the past. If she were in school, that may have continued."

Fassett reported from Santa Cruz, California. Associated Press journalist Manuel Valdes in Seattle contributed to this report.

Follow Sally Ho on Twitter at http://twitter.com/_sallyho and Camille Fassett at <http://twitter.com/cam-fassett>

Stuck ship thrusts sleepy Suez Canal village into limelight

By SAM MAGDY Associated Press

AMER, Egypt (AP) — The sleepy farming village of Amer overlooks the Suez Canal, one of the world's most important waterways. Last week, the village was suddenly thrust into the limelight after a massive container ship, the Ever Given, got stuck nearby.

The contrast between tranquil village life and the busy artery of global shipping is stark.

Farmers in Amer eke out a living tending to small fields and livestock, while before them pass behemoths of world trade — vessels carrying millions of dollars' worth of cargo.

But the canal is also a source of intense pride for residents of the area, including the nearby town of Suez. They call it "our canal" and the older ones still remember then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision in 1956 to nationalize the canal despite fierce pressure from Western powers.

"I was five or six years old, celebrations were everywhere," said Abdel-Wahab, 71, who works as a waiter in Suez. "It was like you freed your son who was taken against your will."

The village, along with other areas along the western bank of the canal, was abandoned during the 1967 Mideast war and its residents were only allowed to return in the 1970s.

They are now rooting for canal authorities as they battle to dislodge the vessel.

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It was a windy morning when the Ever Given — one of the world's largest container ships — got wedged sideways in a single-lane stretch of the canal last Tuesday.

Amer resident Fatima was feeding poultry on the roof of her three-story home when she saw the massive ship sitting motionless in the canal. At first, she didn't think it was unusual.

"Sometimes, one vessel stops for a reason or another," the elderly woman said Sunday,

Dressed in a dark blue jalabiya, or traditional loose-fitting garment, she was sitting at the gate of her house with a neighbor. The women were chatting and drinking tea.

Like other villagers, they did not want to give their full names for fear of getting in trouble with the authorities who have restricted media access to the area.

Almost a week after the accident, tug boats and dredgers, taking advantage of high tides, partially floated the Ever Given on Monday, but it remains unclear how long it would take to set it free.

The pointed bow of the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned vessel remains stuck on sandy clay along the canal bank. Experts said that despite the partial success, the worst option — having to remove containers from the vessel to lighten the load — is not yet off the table.

The giant ship carries some 20,000 containers. Taking them off would likely add even more days to the canal's closure, further disrupting a global shipping network. A prolonged closure would cause delays in the global shipment chain. The canal handles some 10% of the world trade flow. Last year, some 19,000 vessels passed through it, according to official figures.

The closure could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East. Already, Syria has begun rationing the distribution of fuel in the war-torn country because of delayed shipments.

Over the past week, the salvage efforts have been the main topic of conversation in Amer, home to several thousand people who grow clover and cabbage and tend to water buffaloes, cows, goats and sheep.

"We have not seen anything like that before," Abdel-Wahab, the waiter, said of the Ever Given's misfortune.

Journalists have been visiting the village, in part to get a better view of the vessel.

"For sure, you're coming for the ship," whispered a farmer to a reporter. His donkey cart was sitting in the middle of a narrow road just a few dozen meters (yards) from the vessel.

"It's there, standing like the mountain," said another man when asked how to get closer to the ship.

Villager Mohammed Said, 72, who works in Suez as a garbage collector, said the grounding of the Ever Given is unique in the canal's history, and that he hopes the vessel can be dislodged quickly.

"It's a tragedy impacting not only Egypt, but the whole world," he said.

Obama family matriarch has died in a Kenyan hospital at 99

By TOM ODULA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Sarah Obama, the matriarch of former U.S. President Barack Obama's Kenyan family has died, relatives and officials confirmed Monday. She was at least 99 years old.

Mama Sarah, as the step-grandmother of the former U.S. president was fondly called, promoted education for girls and orphans in her rural Kogelo village. She passed away around 4 a.m. local time while being treated at the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga Teaching and Referral hospital in Kisumu, Kenya's third-largest city in the country's west, according to her daughter Marsat Onyango.

"She died this morning. We are devastated," Onyango told The Associated Press on a phone call.

"Mama was sick with normal diseases she did not die of COVID-19," a family spokesman Sheik Musa Ismail said, adding that she had tested negative for the disease. He said she had been ill for a week before being taken to the hospital.

President Barack Obama had been informed of the death and has sent his condolences, he said.

She will be buried Tuesday before midday and the funeral will be held under Islamic rites.

"The passing away of Mama Sarah is a big blow to our nation. We've lost a strong, virtuous woman, a matriarch who held together the Obama family and was an icon of family values," President Uhuru Kenyatta said.

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She will be remembered for her work to promote education to empower orphans, Kisumu Governor Anyang Nyong'o said while offering his condolences to the people of Kogelo village for losing a matriarch. "She was a philanthropist who mobilized funds to pay school fees for the orphans," he said.

Sarah Obama, was the second wife of President Obama's grandfather and helped raise his father, Barack Obama, Sr. The family is part of Kenya's Luo ethnic group.

President Obama often showed affection toward her and referred to her as "Granny" in his memoir, "Dreams from My Father." He described meeting her during his 1988 trip to his father's homeland and their initial awkwardness as they struggled to communicate which developed into a warm bond. She attended his first inauguration as president in 2009. Later, Obama spoke about his grandmother again in his September 2014 speech to the U.N. General Assembly.

For decades, Sarah Obama has helped orphans, raising some in her home. The Mama Sara Obama Foundation helped provide food and education to children who lost their parents — providing school supplies, uniforms, basic medical needs, and school fees.

In a 2014 interview with AP, she said that even as an adult, letters would arrive but she couldn't read them. She said she didn't want her children to be illiterate, so she saw that all her family's children went to school.

She recalled pedaling the president's father six miles (nine kilometers) to school on the back of her bicycle every day from the family's home village of Kogelo to the bigger town of Ngiya to make sure he got the education that she never had.

"I love education," Sarah Obama said, because children "learn they can be self-sufficient," especially girls who too often had no opportunity to go to school.

"If a woman gets an education she will not only educate her family but educate the entire village," she said.

In recognition of her work to support education, she was honored by the United Nations in 2014, receiving the inaugural Women's Entrepreneurship Day Education Pioneer Award.

AP sources: SolarWinds hack got emails of top DHS officials

By ALAN SUDERMAN Associated Press

Suspected Russian hackers gained access to email accounts belonging to the Trump administration's head of the Department of Homeland Security and members of the department's cybersecurity staff whose jobs included hunting threats from foreign countries, The Associated Press has learned.

The intelligence value of the hacking of then-acting Secretary Chad Wolf and his staff is not publicly known, but the symbolism is stark. Their accounts were accessed as part of what's known as the SolarWinds intrusion and it throws into question how the U.S. government can protect individuals, companies and institutions across the country if it can't protect itself.

The short answer for many security experts and federal officials is that it can't — at least not without some significant changes.

"The SolarWinds hack was a victory for our foreign adversaries, and a failure for DHS," said Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, top Republican on the Senate's Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. "We are talking about DHS's crown jewels."

The Biden administration has tried to keep a tight lid on the scope of the SolarWinds attack as it weighs retaliatory measures against Russia. But an inquiry by the AP found new details about the breach at DHS and other agencies, including the Energy Department, where hackers accessed top officials' private schedules.

The AP interviewed more than a dozen current and former U.S. government officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the confidential nature of the ongoing investigation into the hack.

The vulnerabilities at Homeland Security in particular intensify the worries following the SolarWinds attack and an even more widespread hack affecting Microsoft Exchange's email program, especially because in both cases the hackers were detected not by the government but by a private company.

In December, officials discovered what they describe as a sprawling, monthslong cyberespionage effort

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done largely through a hack of a widely used software from Texas-based SolarWinds Inc. At least nine federal agencies were hacked, along with dozens of private-sector companies.

U.S. authorities have said the breach appeared to be the work of Russian hackers. Gen. Paul Nakasone, who leads the Pentagon's cyber force, said last week the Biden administration is considering a "range of options" in response. Russia has denied any role in the hack.

Since then, a series of headline-grabbing hacks has further highlighted vulnerabilities in the U.S. public and private sectors. A hacker tried unsuccessfully to poison the water supply of a small town in Florida in February, and this month a new breach was announced involving untold thousands of Microsoft Exchange email servers the company says was carried out by Chinese state hackers. China has denied involvement in the Microsoft breach.

Sen. Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat and head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the government's initial response to the discovery of the SolarWinds hack was disjointed.

"What struck me was how much we were in the dark for as long as we were in the dark," Warner said at a recent cybersecurity conference.

Wolf and other top Homeland Security officials used new phones that had been wiped clean along with the popular encrypted messaging system Signal to communicate in the days after the hack, current and former officials said.

One former administration official, who confirmed the Federal Aviation Administration was among the agencies affected by the breach, said the agency was hampered in its response by outdated technology and struggled for weeks to identify how many servers it had running SolarWinds software.

The FAA initially told the AP in mid-February that it had not been affected by the SolarWinds hack, only to issue a second statement a few days later that it was continuing to investigate.

At least one other Cabinet member besides Wolf was affected. The hackers were able to obtain the private schedules of officials at the Energy Department, including then-Secretary Dan Brouillette, one former high-placed administration official said.

The new disclosures provide a fuller picture of what kind of data was taken in the SolarWinds hack. Several congressional hearings have been held on the subject, but they have been notably short on details.

Rep. Pat Fallon, R-Texas, indicated at one of the hearings that a DHS secretary's email had been hacked but did not provide additional detail. The AP was able to identify Wolf, who declined to comment other than to say he had multiple email accounts as secretary.

DHS spokeswoman Sarah Peck said "a small number of employees' accounts were targeted in the breach" and the agency "no longer sees indicators of compromise on our networks."

The Biden administration has pledged to issue an executive order soon to address "significant gaps in modernization and in technology of cybersecurity across the federal government." But the list of obstacles facing the federal government is long: highly capable foreign hackers backed by governments that aren't afraid of U.S. reprisals, outdated technology, a shortage of trained cybersecurity professionals, and a complex leadership and oversight structure.

The recently approved stimulus package includes \$650 million in new money for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to harden the country's cyber defenses. Federal officials said that amount is only a down payment on much bigger planned spending to improve threat detection.

"We must raise our game," Brandon Wales, who leads the cybersecurity agency, told a recent House committee hearing.

The agency operates a threat-detection system known as Einstein. Its failure to detect the SolarWinds breach before it was discovered by a private security company alarmed officials. Eric Goldstein, the agency's executive assistant director for cybersecurity, told Congress that Einstein's technology was designed a decade ago and has "grown somewhat stale."

Anthony Ferrante, a former director for cyber incident response at the U.S. National Security Council and current senior managing director at FTI Consulting, said part of the problem, both in government and in the private sector, is the lack of a skilled workforce.

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The Microsoft Exchange hack, which to date has not affected any federal government agencies, was also discovered by a private firm.

One issue that's flummoxed policy makers is that foreign state hackers are increasingly using U.S.-based virtual private networks, or VPNs, to evade detection by U.S. intelligence agencies, which are legally constrained from monitoring domestic infrastructure. The hosting services of Amazon Web Services and GoDaddy were used by the SolarWinds hackers to evade detection, officials said recently.

The Biden administration is not planning to step up government surveillance of the U.S. internet in response and instead wants to focus on tighter partnerships and improved information-sharing with the private-sector companies that already have broad visibility into the domestic internet.

Responsibility for responding to breaches, preventing new ones and providing oversight of those efforts is still unsettled, and last month leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee criticized the Biden administration for a "disorganized response" to the SolarWinds hack.

The Biden administration tapped Anne Neuberger, the deputy national security adviser for cyber and emergency technology, to respond to the SolarWinds and Microsoft breaches. It hasn't appointed a national cyber director, a new position, frustrating some members of Congress.

"We're trying to fight a multifront war without anybody in charge," said Sen. Angus King, an independent from Maine.

The Biden administration says it's reviewing how best to set up the new position. "Cybersecurity is a top priority," said White House spokeswoman Emily Horne.

Suderman reported from Richmond, Va. Associated Press writer James LaPorta contributed to this report.

Thousands flee into Thailand following Myanmar air strikes

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Thai authorities along the country's border with Myanmar are bracing Monday for a possible influx of more ethnic Karen villagers fleeing new airstrikes by the Myanmar military.

Myanmar aircraft carried out three strikes overnight Sunday, according to Free Burma Rangers, a humanitarian relief agency that delivers medical and other assistance to villagers. The strikes severely injured one child but caused no apparent fatalities, a member of the agency said.

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha on Monday acknowledged the problems across his country's western border and said his government is preparing for a possible influx of people.

"We don't want to have mass migration into our territory, but we will consider human rights, too," Prayut said.

Asked about people who have already fled into Thailand, Prayut said, "We have prepared some places, but we don't want to talk about the preparation of refugee centers at the moment. We won't go that far."

About 2,500 people, including 200 students, have crossed the Salween River into northern Thailand's Mae Hong Son province, according to Burma Free Rangers. An estimated 10,000 people are believed to be displaced in Myanmar's northern Karen state, the agency said.

Video shot Sunday shows a group of villagers, including many young children, resting in a forest clearing inside Myanmar after fleeing their homes. They carried their possessions in bundles and baskets.

The bombings may have been retaliation against the Karen National Liberation Army for having attacked and captured a Myanmar government military outpost on Saturday morning. The group is fighting for greater autonomy for the Karen people.

Leaders of the resistance to last month's military coup that toppled Myanmar's elected government are seeking to have the Karen and other ethnic groups band together and join them as allies, which would add an armed element to their struggle.

According to Thoolei News, an online site that carries official information from the Karen National Union, eight government soldiers were captured in Saturday's attack and 10 were killed. The report said one Karen guerrilla died.

The airstrikes mark an escalation in the increasingly violent crackdown by the Myanmar government

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against opponents of the Feb. 1 military takeover.

At least 114 people across the country were killed by security forces on Saturday alone, including several children — a toll that prompted a U.N. human rights expert to accuse the junta of committing “mass murder” and criticize the international community for not doing enough to stop it.

The U.N. Security Council is likely to hold closed consultations on the escalating situation in Myanmar, diplomats said Sunday, speaking on condition of anonymity ahead of an official announcement. The council has condemned the violence and called for a restoration of democracy, but has not yet considered possible sanctions against the military, which would require support or an abstention by Myanmar’s neighbor and friend China.

In Sunday’s bombings, Myanmar military aircraft attacked a Karen guerrilla position in an area on the Salween River in Karen state’s Mutraw district, according to workers for two humanitarian relief agencies.

Two guerrillas were killed and many more were wounded in those attacks, a member of the Free Burma Rangers said.

On Saturday night, two Myanmar military planes twice bombed Deh Bu Noh village in Mutraw district, killing at least two villagers.

The coup, which ousted the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule. It has again made Myanmar the focus of international scrutiny as security forces have repeatedly fired into crowds of protesters.

As of Sunday, at least 459 people have been killed since the takeover, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which has tallied deaths it was able to verify. The true toll is thought to be higher.

Funerals were held in Myanmar on Monday for those who died protesting against the coup over the weekend. In Yangon, friends and family gathered to say farewell to 49-year-old Mya Khaing, who was fatally shot on Saturday.

Friends told media that he was always at the front of protests.

As his coffin was moved toward the crematorium, mourners sang a defiant song from an earlier 1988 uprising against military rule. “There is no pardon for you till the end of the world,” the words said of the military, calling it “monsters.” “We will never forgive what you have done.”

Happy Monday? England embarks on major easing of lockdown

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — It’s being dubbed Happy Monday, with open-air swimmers donning their wetsuits for the first time in months and rusty golfers doing their best to get their drives down the middle of the fairway.

England has embarked on a major easing of its latest coronavirus lockdown that came into force at the start of the year, with families and friends able to meet up in outdoor spaces and many sports permitted once again.

And, as if right on cue, the weather is turning, with temperatures rising to levels more akin to southern Spain at this time of year.

Under Monday’s easing, groups of up to six, or two households, can socialize in parks and gardens once more, while outdoor sports facilities can reopen after the stark stay-at-home order, which has seen new coronavirus cases fall dramatically over the past three months, officially ended.

After months of being cooped up at home, many people are relishing the prospect of being able to enjoy their outdoor sport of choice, from tennis to open-air swimming. Organized team sports, such as children’s football clubs, can start up again too.

One of the first — if not the first — to re-open its doors on Monday was the Morley Hayes Golf Club, near Derby in central England, with players teeing off at 12:01 a.m. for a seven-hole floodlit charity tournament.

The other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are taking broadly similar steps. In Wales, thousands of people poured onto beaches and mountain spots on Saturday, after the authorities lifted travel restrictions that have been in place since December.

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Many aspects of England's lockdown remain in place with the British government stressing that it's taking a cautious approach to lifting the restrictions, not least because of rising cases in continental Europe.

Police welcomed the easing but stressed that officers will remain highly visible, including in open spaces, and will not hesitate to prosecute anyone going beyond what is allowed and threatening a resurgence of the virus

"We will continue to respond quickly to house parties or dangerous raves, taking enforcement action by handing out fines," said Deputy Assistant Commissioner Jane Connors, who leads the coronavirus response for London's Metropolitan Police. "We make no apology for our tough stance on shutting down those large gatherings which risk public safety."

Most nonessential businesses remain closed, along with pubs, restaurants, gyms, cinemas, theaters, museums and sports stadiums. And the government continues to urge people to work at home where they can, while traveling abroad is banned except for a few special reasons.

The U.K. has recorded more than 126,000 COVID-19 deaths, the highest toll in Europe. Deaths have decreased sharply over the past few weeks as the number of people contracting the virus has fallen dramatically during the lockdown and the rapid rollout of coronavirus vaccines. On Sunday, the U.K. recorded 3,862 new cases, the lowest daily figure in six months.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged the public to remain cautious and not to mix indoors. A "fresh air" public information campaign is launching warning against the dangers of gathering indoors.

"Despite today's easements, everyone must continue to stick to the rules, remember 'hands, face, space,' and come forward for a vaccine when called," he said.

Johnson said he hopes the easing will "kick-start a Great British summer of sport" as sports stars teamed up with the government to encourage a return to physical activity.

Restrictions have been eased as official figures showed more than 30 million people in the U.K. have received a first vaccine dose, accounting for about 57% of all adults.

The U.K. is aiming to give everyone over the age of 18 a first jab by July, with second shots delivered within 12 weeks of the first.

Health officials say the program will slow down in April because of a squeeze on supplies, in part because of a delayed order from India. The European Union, which has clearly lagged behind the U.K. during the vaccination drive, has also threatened to block shipments of vaccines from factories in the bloc unless drugmakers — notably Anglo-Swedish firm AstraZeneca — send more shots to EU nations.

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Suez Canal blockage adds to pressure points in global trade

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

Delays in freeing a mammoth container ship stuck in Egypt's Suez Canal have highlighted still more pressure points in global trade, a year after supply chains were disrupted by the pandemic.

Tugboats and salvage crews took advantage of high tides early Monday to partially refloat the Ever Given, which carries cargo between Asia and Europe. Shoei Kisen, the Panama-flagged ship's Japanese owner, said the bow had moved slightly but was still touching the seafloor, and it was unclear how long it would take to fully reopen the canal.

The ship has been lodged in a single-lane stretch of the canal for nearly a week, blocking traffic through the critical trade gateway. Earlier, it was feared the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship might be stuck for weeks.

Economists say the Ever Given's disruption of shipping through the Suez Canal probably won't have an impact on global trade for more than a few weeks, and is unlikely to derail global growth this year as more

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people get COVID-19 vaccines and economies reopen.

But it's another wake-up call for companies that have set up their business to rely on supply chains with little room for error, said William Lee, chief economist at the Milken Institute.

"This is a warning about how vulnerable our supply chains are and how the just-in-time inventory techniques that have been so popular have to be rethought," he said.

"The shortages and the supply chain shortages that cause assembly lines to shut down — that will have a greater impact," Lee added.

Many countries got a harsh lesson in those realities last year when commerce, was disrupted in myriad ways after new coronavirus outbreaks began in China, the world's factory floor.

Consumers everywhere soon found that ordering online was an adventure in the unknown, with many factories shut down and trade between Chinese provinces stalled. Obtaining supplies of medicines and vital personal protective equipment such as face masks and other medical supplies became challenging, and sometimes impossible.

Ships already are having to detour around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa to avoid the canal. That slows the arrival of containers at their destinations and when they can be emptied and then refilled with other goods bound somewhere else. That can drive up costs -- price increases that eventually reach consumers.

"Shipping prices are going to go up," said Gary Hufbauer, nonresident senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. "That will tighten up supply lines and mean shortages at the consumer level, and it will also mean somewhat higher prices for oil."

The incident is another ripple worsening shortages of shipping containers in Asia, which means retailers may be late getting TVs, furniture, clothes, auto parts and many other goods that are shipped via containers.

About 12% of global trade by volume goes through the Suez Canal, but it accounts for 30% of the world's daily shipping container freight. That makes it the most important conduit for trade between Europe and Asia. Some 19,000 vessels passed through the canal last year, according to official figures.

Lee of the Milken Institute points to the semiconductor industry as an area especially vulnerable to disruptions from shipping delays and is already plagued by shortages. Companies in Europe often get the components they need to make computer chips from suppliers in Asia.

"The shortage of semiconductors right now is so severe, that kind of delay in supply, even by a week or two, could also lengthen the delays in semiconductor production, which has stalled automobile and other electronics' production," Lee said.

The closure also affects oil and gas shipments. Nearly 10% of oil shipments and 8% of global liquid natural gas moves through the Suez Canal, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Much of the traffic involves transpiration of crude oil from the Middle East to Europe and the U.S. It's also become an important link for Russian oil to Asia.

The disruption from the canal blockage comes at tricky time for international trade and shipping, noted Fiona Boal, global head of commodities at S&P Dow Jones Indices.

"The cost of shipping goods from Asia to Europe hit a record high in recent months and global freight rates are already near three times the level of a year ago," she said.

At the same time, oil prices may be kept in check by worries that demand for oil will weaken amid renewed pandemic lockdowns in Europe. Benchmark U.S. crude oil for May delivery fell \$1.03 to \$59.91 per barrel on Monday after rising \$2.41 on Friday. Brent crude oil for May delivery lost \$1 to \$63.43 per barrel after gaining \$2.62 on Friday.

North and Latin America are likely to be less affected than Europe by the blockage in the Suez Canal, because much of the shipping container traffic that runs between the Americas and Asia moves through the Pacific to hubs like the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, or crosses through the Panama Canal.

"The impact on the U.S. will be less than on Europe," Hufbauer said.

Associated Press writer Mari Yamaguchi contributed from Tokyo.

Pleas for more aid to Syria: 'We don't have nearly enough'

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — At age 19, Fatima al-Omar is at her wits' end. In the last year alone, she lost her home to fighting in Syria's last rebel-held enclave and her mother was diagnosed with cancer. She became the sole breadwinner for her mother, three siblings and grandmother as they moved around between shelters.

Then the coronavirus struck, aggravating conditions in northwest Syria just as new fighting had uprooted 1 million people — the biggest wave of displacement in the country's 10-year war. By late 2020, al-Omar contracted COVID-19, costing her the last job she had picking olives. She hasn't been able to find work since and is now at risk of another eviction.

"It was all difficult, but it just keeps getting harder," al-Omar said, speaking by phone from the latest home she moved to in Binnish, a small town in rebel-held Idlib province.

Despite the worsening humanitarian situation across war-ravaged Syria, it's been getting tougher every year to raise money from global donors to help people like al-Omar. The aid community is bracing for significant shortfalls ahead of a donor conference that starts Monday in Brussels and is being co-hosted by the United Nations and the European Union.

Pledges were already dropping off before the coronavirus pandemic mainly due to donor fatigue. Officials fear that with the global economic downturn spurred by the pandemic, international assistance for Syria is about to take a new hit just when it is needed most. Earlier this month, a U.N. appeal for aid to Yemen, the world's worst humanitarian crisis, was less than 50% funded, in what U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres called a disappointment.

Across Syria, the pandemic has compounded the worst economic crisis since the conflict began in 2011. The local currency has crashed and food prices have soared — increasing by 222% from last year. Nine out of 10 people live below the poverty line and in northwest Syria, close to three-quarters of the 4.3 million residents are food insecure.

According to the U.N., 13.4 million people in Syria, more than half the country's pre-war population, need assistance. That's a 20% increase from last year.

"We don't have nearly enough money to provide all the services that are needed," said Mark Cutts, the U.N. deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria.

"It is still just a struggle for survival for all these people and it is often the women, the children and the elderly and people with disabilities who are suffering most."

The U.N. and other aid groups are seeking more than \$4 billion for aid within Syria at this year's conference, their biggest appeal yet. Another \$5.8 billion are requested for nearly 6 million Syrian refugees who fled their homeland.

Over the years, pledges have typically fallen short. The humanitarian appeal for 2020 was 45% below its \$3.82 billion target — nearly a 14% drop from the year before.

"We fully realize that in donor countries there is also a COVID effect, that budgets are strained," said Filippo Grandi, the U.N. high commissioner for refugees. "But clearly because of that same pandemic that has an effect on budgets, this is not the time to let go."

In the rebel-held area, coronavirus pandemic restrictions have further slowed economic activity, closing schools and reducing trade and movement with Turkey — the enclave's gateway to the world.

Women and children are being forced to find low-paying and risky jobs, including minors collecting trash, begging or being recruited by armed groups. Aid groups say reports of suicide attempts among young men and adolescents are on the rise.

One in three children are out of school, down from about 70% enrollment a year earlier, said Amjad Yamin, of Save the Children.

The World Food Program reduced its monthly food basket throughout Syria to stretch available funding and prevent a reduction in the number of people reached. That meant dropping calories from 2,100 per person to 1,264 — a 40% decrease. Some families said the rice ration in the basket has gone down by half.

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Meanwhile, water needs have increased by 40% because of the pandemic, but funding has not kept up. In a letter shared with The Associated Press, local non-governmental organizations told donors that cuts could potentially force as many as 55 water stations across northwestern Syria to shut down, denying nearly 740,000 people access to water.

"The gaps are enormous," said CARE International's Tue Jakobsen.

Reports of anticipated aid cuts — as high as 67% by some of the largest donors — were leaked in emails or relayed in private meetings. Aid workers have tried to adjust budgets and plan for the reductions.

The cuts could also put thousands of people out of work and force a couple of displacement camps to close, the letter shared with the AP said.

It has already been a struggle for al-Omar and her family to get help.

Since her family lost their home, they have not received any food assistance, she said. Savings have been used to pay for part of for her mother's cancer treatment. Charity and local donations financed the rest, including lengthy medical trips to Turkey. Cash assistance that has helped her pay rent is not guaranteed.

Al-Omar's pantry, where she kept food reserves such as pickles and jams, is empty. "We have nothing. We have no water. No food," said al-Omar, whose father abandoned the family 11 years ago. "We are below zero."

Al-Omar's best job was working from home, sewing masks and earning about \$7 for every 1,500 masks completed. It meant staying safe and looking after her siblings. But she lost it when she moved to Binnish where rent is cheaper.

A year into displacement, she dreams of a room in one of the camps for displaced people. "It would be better than all this moving," she said. "This is exhausting."

Dear Normal: Were you really that great in the first place?

By SOPHIA ROSENBAUM Associated Press

Dear Normal,

Everyone wants you back. It seems every day of this late-stage pandemic era is marked with someone wistfully talking about Normal: going back to you, starting new with you. It's all about norms and normalcy. All about you.

As for me, I'm not so interested in Normal. I defer to Taylor Swift: We are never, ever, ever getting back together.

It felt normal to want Normal back at first. Last year, in those first months, daydreaming of you was a constant daily escape from all of the endless dire possibilities. I wanted my life back. I wanted the control.

Complaining about commuting or being too busy was the norm in the B.C. (before COVID) era. But in those early days, the mundane was what we craved. Packing into a subway car, grabbing an unplanned drink with a friend, hugging parents, striking up a conversation with a stranger.

And yet all of those Normal desires felt entirely unfathomable. Would we ever be able to go to a crowded space? If we could, would we want to? The answer then felt like a definite no, especially with mortality and death constantly wailing in our ears. The fear of the unknown was like a weighted blanket, but one that provided no comfort or warmth.

It was then that I craved my Normal most.

It wasn't just me. Over the last year, our obsession with normalcy has shown up on Google, with the highest spike in searches around mid-April 2020, when it seemed we might have been able to resume life as we once knew it.

Searching for normal went up again around the start of the school year in September and around the holidays in late November. But as the search trends show, these desires for normalcy ebb and flow, constantly fading and morphing.

The collective yearning for normalcy was panic-inducing early on, around the time President Donald Trump was vowing to reopen America by Easter 2020. So much had already changed. Yet it felt then that we might just go back to Normal with the snap of a finger.

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By June, the pandemic's staying power was more clear, and then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was saying, "We cannot go right back to normal. We need new routines." Several months later, Vermont Gov. Phil Scott said, "We'll begin to again turn the spigot once more and get back to whatever normal will be."

By then, my brain was screaming: No way. Do others feel it, too, cringing every time new Normal, old Normal, any Normal is uttered? That to go back to you would mean we don't question the ways things were, that we ignore the cracks that have been exposed, and that we forget the lessons — good and bad — that have been learned?

The experience of living through the yearlong aberration feels like the rapid-fire history verses of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" — condensed into one tumultuous year. The world shuts down, a racial reckoning, a divisive election. Loss after loss after loss. A previously unimaginable attack on the peaceful American transfer of power. A jittery inauguration. Multiple vaccines — and a glimpse of a world beyond the pandemic.

After living through all that, going back to Normal feels more and more like returning to a lover we just can't seem to leave.

B.C., adaptability sometimes felt a lot different. It let us recover from jetlag and get used to a new time zone in days, sometimes hours. It let us move from the warming layered looks of winter to — unimaginably — a spaghetti-strap dress when the heat of summer comes. It's turning a new house into a home.

The past year has given adaptability a new meaning. Many people have a new perspective of their capabilities. Impossible things became possible: Maintaining relationships online and enduring not seeing family and friends, or anyone, for extended periods of time. A whole crop of young people finding grace after being robbed of moments big and small. We got used to it. We normalized the unimaginable.

Now, in late-stage pandemic life, the echoes of this unimaginable life creep into my dreams, leaving me wandering around a packed place like Walt Disney World maskless, or being the only exposed face in a sea of people wearing a mask. "It's normal," my therapist told me. "Everyone is having these dreams."

Well, great — more Normal I didn't ask for.

The thing about normalcy is that it's never universal. My Normal is not yours. And because of that, it perpetuates life's inequalities, many of which have been laid bare by the pandemic.

These are problems that don't have easy solutions and may not even be solved in our lifetimes. Sure, many people may want things to change. But will they commit to being part of that? Or will it be just like a resolution made at the start of a new year, one that is broken within a month or two?

When we have a green light to start living life again, to enter a new Normal, what will we hold onto from this time? Will we really stay unbusy? Will we care more about work flexibility, employee protections, access to medical coverage? Will anti-racism efforts, once at the forefront of the zeitgeist, be prioritized or forgotten? Will mass shootings become the exception rather than a painful rule?

Will there be any systemic change?

Not likely, "Pandemic" author Sonia Shah said on a recent episode of John Oliver's "Last Week Tonight."

"We usually go right back to business as usual as soon as the thing ends, as soon as we have a drug, as soon as we have a vaccine," she said. "We don't really do the fundamental social change."

We've already experienced that. When life changed, there was a period of adjustment. It took a while to get used to it. Then we did. That's happening again right now in the United States as more people are vaccinated and infection rates decrease. Already, the pulls of Normal are tugging.

For all the growth and change and adaptation that has happened in the past year, it is hard to even define what a post-pandemic normalcy might mean. The dictionary defines it simply as conforming to a standard — usual, typical, or expected. Is that really what we want? "If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be," Maya Angelou once said.

Without Normal, the path forward is more open, the opportunities perhaps broader. What if there's a whole lot of amazing that stands to be lost if Normal returns? What if, instead of banking on normalcy, we focused on that one-of-a-kind ability to adapt and evolve? Maybe that's the way forward, instead of simply reconciling with what was and trying to recreate something that's already had its day.

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It's too late, anyway. Remember, Normal: You and me, we already broke up.

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NCAA tourney hits halfway point, still the field vs. Gonzaga

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Writer

The Elite Eight marks the halfway point of the NCAA Tournament, but don't blink. It has the shelf life of chicken nuggets.

By the time your head hits the pillow tomorrow night, we'll be down to a Final Four and find out whether the selection committee is any better at seeding teams than the cooks at your local McDonalds.

Three of the four teams handed No. 1s — Gonzaga, Baylor and Michigan — are still in the field, which is average. But so are three Pac-12 Conference teams — No. 6 USC, No. 11 UCLA and No. 12 Oregon State — which definitely is not. Needless to say, the road would have been a lot smoother for the Pac-12 entries if their league got anywhere near the respect the Big Ten and Big 12 carried inside the room where it (seeding) happens.

USC and UCLA were the last two teams to claim their seats Sunday. The Trojans handily beat fellow Pac-12 member and seventh-seeded Oregon, while the Bruins needed overtime — after a last-second hiccup — to put away No. 2 Alabama 88-78.

"I'll never live that one down," UCLA coach Mick Cronin said afterward. "The kids bailed me out."

In the two other games, Gonzaga looked unbeatable one more time while steamrolling No. 5 Creighton 83-65, while Michigan had surprisingly little trouble shaking No. 4 Florida State 76-58, once again displaying the kind of balance and depth to upend the Zags' (29-0) quest for a title and the first perfect season since the 1975-76 Indiana Hoosiers.

"They just play so fast, so efficient with everything they do," said Marcus Zegarowski, who led Creighton with 19 points. "There are no lapses. You just can't take, not even a play, you can't take a second off or they're going to make you pay."

UCLA essentially took the last four seconds off, and the Tide made them pay. Leading by three with Alabama in-bounding the ball, Cronin chose not to have his players commit a quick foul and give up two free throws. Two passes later, Alex Reese canned a long 3-pointer — the tournament's first buzzer-beater — and you could have fried an egg on the top of Cronin's pate.

Fortunately, his players saw it otherwise. That nonchalance has paid dividends for these Bruins, who had to beat Michigan State in the First Four just to get into the big-boy bracket. UCLA is the first play-in team to get this far since VCU in 2011, the year the brackets were expanded to 68 teams.

"We knew we had nothing to worry about," UCLA guard Jaime Jaquez Jr. said. "This is March. It happens all the time."

The Bruins opened the extra period with a 3-pointer by David Singleton, then a steal and layup by Tyger Campbell and never looked back.

Speaking of hindsight, no matter how the Pac-12 trio fares from here on out, the selection committee still has some explaining to do. Nine Big Ten teams began the tournament — including four teams among the top eight overall seeds — and only Michigan is left. The Big 12 got seven entries and all but Baylor are home now watching on TV.

Monday's games pit Baylor against No. 3 Arkansas, which banished this year's real Cinderella, 15th-seeded Oral Roberts, in the Sweet 16. In the day's other game, Oregon State faces No. 2 Houston.

For all that, the real question hanging over the tournament since it began is whether the Bulldogs can be beat. Their three tournament victories have come by 43, 16 and 18 points. They boast three finalists for the national player of the year award in Corey Kispert, Drew Timme and freshman Jalen Suggs, and a fourth player, Joel Ayayi, who would be a star almost anywhere else.

But their best player against Creighton might actually have been point guard Andrew Nembhard, a transfer

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from Florida who scored 17 points, collected eight assists and reminded some folks why he was the first freshman for the Gators to start every game since Bradley Beal.

In fact, Gonzaga coach Mark Few's toughest job might not be preparing his team for USC come Tuesday. Instead, it could be managing expectations. This is his fourth trip to the Elite Eight in the last six years — all of which ended before their expiration date.

"I'm just telling you: We're not hung up on the undefeated thing at all," Few said. "We've got to go undefeated from here on out. We've got to go 3-0 if we want to win the championship, which that's been our goal all along. But nobody's talking about the overall undefeated thing at all."

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Call me by my name: Rome school backs transgender students

By PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Ripetta school of art in Rome recently joined a handful of high schools in Italy that give transgender students the right to be known by a name other than the one they were given at birth.

The initiative seeks to create an environment where transgender students feel secure and reflects a growing awareness in Italy of gender dysphoria among teenagers and children.

"I'm very happy about this," said Matteo Coccimiglio, an 18-year-old student at the school who was born as a girl but identifies as a man and is in the process of changing his legal gender from female to male.

He hopes the new rules at his school will help other teenagers transitioning their gender to "feel more protected" and "go through a lot less trouble than I went through."

Matteo said he felt trapped in his body growing up. He said he was bullied and suffered from anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. By the time he was 14 he mustered the courage to tell his parents that he wanted to change his gender. While they were supportive, it's been a long journey for the family.

His father, Franco Coccimiglio, said he initially struggled to come to terms with Matteo's desire to become a man, but now fully supports his transition.

"My only regret is that we could have started earlier," Coccimiglio said.

Even though surveys show public opinion is increasingly supportive of LGBTQ rights, Italy is still a conservative society, influenced by the Catholic Church's views on sexuality.

A 2016 survey assessing public support for transgender rights in 23 countries by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, ranked Italy 16th, below the U.S. and the six other Western European nations.

Some Italian universities allow transgender students to choose their name and gender in internal documents, even if they haven't yet legally changed their gender, but only recently have similar rules been adopted by a small number of high schools.

The Ripetta school adopted the new policy in December to give transgender students in transition a "serene" environment and the freedom to be themselves, said Sonia Mugello, a teacher at the school.

Psychotherapist Maddalena Mosconi, who heads a unit for minors at the gender transition center at San Camillo hospital in Rome, noted that transgender students are often bullied and more likely to drop out of high school than the general population.

"On many occasions, I have had to deal with adolescents who abandoned school due to bullying, due to being made fun of, due to not being accepted the way they are," she said.

Mosconi said the average age of people coming to her center for help is decreasing, which she attributed to growing awareness about transgender issues in Italy.

After graduating in June, Matteo wants to pursue a career as a cartoon animator. He started hormone therapy six months ago and is also undergoing psychiatric therapy. Gender reassignment surgery isn't required to change gender in Italy, but Matteo says he wants to have surgery to masculinize his chest.

"Somebody thinks that we do this to be recognized by others as (male or female)," he said. "But we

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don't care about this at all. We just do it because when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we can at last say 'I am finally myself.'"

Karl Ritter in Rome contributed to this report.

Swiss banker to Venezuelan kleptocrats becomes star witness

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Matthias Krull pulls up his pant leg and slides a gardening shear on the ankle monitor that for two years has been a constant reminder of his crimes.

With a court order in hand, and a child's voice echoing from the next room, the former Swiss banker snips the hard plastic — releasing a torrent of emotion as he contemplates his past mistakes and hopes for rebuilding what, until his arrest, had been a charmed life.

"Physically, I got used to it, but psychologically it's liberating," Krull said from the living room of his rented home in a leafy Miami suburb. "To be able to wear shorts again is a big thing. I was at my son's soccer games and everybody was in shorts in 100 degrees. I was in long pants."

Krull's troubles stem from his time as a banker in Venezuela, a nation that has been plagued by epic corruption in two decades of socialist rule, first under the populist President Hugo Chávez, then his hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro. During that time, Krull, who worked for the Julius Baer Group, played a singular role as the go-to private banker for the so-called Bolichicos — the privileged offspring of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution — as they looked to shuttle their overnight fortunes offshore. Among his would-be clients: Maduro's stepsons.

But then in 2018, the blond, bespectacled banker was arrested on money laundering charges at Miami's international airport while vacationing with his family. Thrust into a spotlight he never sought, the normally discreet European began his second act as the all-star witness to a U.S. federal criminal investigation known as Operation Money Flight, which seeks to untangle how Venezuelan kleptocrats stole billions in oil wealth from their country.

By all accounts, Krull's assistance mapping the shell companies and straw men strung across secretive jurisdictions like Antigua, Malta and Hong Kong where Venezuelans have hidden their ill-gotten wealth has proven decisive. Since pleading guilty in 2018, he has helped prosecutors enlist other Swiss bankers as witnesses, pressed Venezuelan money launderers to surrender and assisted numerous European investigations.

In recognition of those efforts, a judge in September slashed his original 10-year prison sentence by 65%, according to recently unsealed court filings — one of the largest reductions ever in Miami federal court. The judge also relaxed Krull's probation conditions, allowing him to remove the ankle monitor that kept him confined to his home from 7:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. He is scheduled to start his 42-month prison sentence this summer.

Hovering over his ordeal is a more vexing question: whether anyone else was responsible in the corruption. To date, Krull is the only banker to have been prosecuted in the U.S. in connection with the corruption even though numerous other white-shoe firms for years competed for a piece of what had been one of the world's hottest markets for wealth management. And while Julius Baer has dismissed his actions as those of a rogue employee, Swiss regulators last year found that the august money house, in its drive for profits, overlooked red flags and incentivized bad behavior, much as it did during an earlier financial scandal involving soccer governing body FIFA.

"The goal was to bring in new money," said Krull, who drifts midsentence between fluent Venezuelan Spanish and thick German-accented English. "They really didn't care about the portfolio's profitability." He added: "If I didn't take a client, someone else surely would have."

In a series of interviews with The Associated Press over the past 10 months, Krull recounted his remarkable journey from the German-born son of a Lutheran pastor to banker of choice to Venezuela's ruling elite.

Julius Baer, based in Zurich, declined to answer detailed questions about any oversight responsibility in

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Krull's criminal activities, so this story reflects Krull's own perspective. Many of the details, however, are backed up by court documents and U.S. officials who've spent years investigating corruption in Venezuela.

'ONBOARDING STAR'

To Krull's rivals in Venezuela, it was his unique upbringing that gave him an edge. His father moved the family from the German city of Munster to Venezuela when Krull was just 7. His parents later divorced, but he stayed in Caracas as his mother remarried another member of the church. Shuttling between a private German school and the poverty-stricken downtown parish where his stepfather lived and worked, Krull built a network of contacts among Caracas' elites while soaking in the playful slang of the hillside slums.

"It's never been difficult for me to adapt to the people around me," said the 47-year-old. "I can be as formal as required to comply with the standards in Europe or explain complex financial terms in a way regular people understand. It's one of my strengths."

He went to high school in Mexico City and college in Switzerland before returning to Caracas in 2004.

His early years at Julius Baer were something of a bonanza-fueled blur for the then single, 30-something expat. Chávez was at the peak of his power, oil prices surged to a record and rich Venezuelans were scrambling to stash their money abroad before it was seized by the government or vanished by hyperinflation.

"The joke among bankers was that the money was lying on the streets, you just had to pick it up," he said.

Krull said Julius Baer assigned 15 bankers to hunt for new clients in Venezuela compared with just three in neighboring Colombia, whose economy has traditionally been similarly sized. Other banks were hungry, too. But Krull outshined them all.

He estimates that over the course of his career he hauled in over \$1 billion in deposits for Julius Baer — earning him a vaunted spot year after year in the bank's "President's Club," the only Latin American adviser to consistently earn the distinction reserved for its top 10% performers.

With a salary, bonus and benefits that sometimes topped \$1.5 million a year, Krull says, he was dubbed internally as Julius Baer's "onboarding star." He owned two trendy restaurants in Caracas, a condo in Miami and pricey artwork by Venezuela's modernist maestros.

There was a riskier side, however. Bankers were routinely targeted for kidnapping or extorted by government officials. Krull says he was once confronted by an angry client who placed a gun on a table to demand the return of millions of dollars he had lost through another investment adviser. After that, Krull hired an armed bodyguard.

The final straw was a shooting outside his apartment in a tony Caracas neighborhood near the U.S. Embassy.

Krull and his girlfriend were heading to Europe to get married and had arranged an all-night soiree with friends. But at the last minute, his fiance fell ill with appendicitis and they canceled. During the night, police accosted a car parked outside his bottom-floor apartment. Gunfire erupted, three officers were killed and a chase ensued. One of the men eventually captured said he was waiting for a foreigner — presumably Krull — whom the gunman was expecting would arrive home before dawn.

"We took the decision that Venezuela is not the country to raise a family," said Krull.

In 2012, he relocated to Panama, but he still traveled to Venezuela and other countries every two weeks.

MEETING MADURO'S 'KIDS'

A high-risk currency deal gone awry led to Krull's arrest. But contrary to early media reports that he was the conspiracy's mastermind, Krull's role in the scheme was small and came late in the game, according to U.S. investigators. In the end, the suspicious transaction that landed him in hot water wasn't even carried out.

The dirty deal started in 2014, when one of his clients together with others made a loan to Venezuela's state-owned oil monopoly, PDVSA, in bolivars. Krull had no part in the deal. The oil company repaid the loan two months later in dollars at an official, windfall exchange rate. That allowed the conspirators to make off with 510 million euros, or almost 15 times what they had originally lent, according to the criminal complaint against Krull. Along the way, bribes were paid to top oil officials, the complaint said.

Two years later, Krull's client, who is identified in court documents as "Conspirator 7," asked him to move \$200 million in proceeds from the fake loan into a foreign bank account for two friends, according

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to investigators.

In court papers, "Conspirator 7" is identified only as the billionaire owner of a TV network in Venezuela. But two U.S. officials familiar with the case have identified him as Raul Gorrín, who in 2013 purchased the popular network Globovision and softened its anti-government coverage. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the allegations.

Krull was under orders from his employer to avoid any transactions involving the oil company, which was already on the radar of U.S. law enforcement. So he says he offered to connect the longtime client to a money manager in Panama. Unbeknownst to the two, the money manager in Panama was a U.S. government informant who had secretly recorded hundreds of meetings, phone conversations and text messages.

At a January 2017 meeting in Gorrín's office, Krull was introduced to the true beneficiaries of the \$200 million take. Opening the door to an adjoining conference room, he came face to face with three men clad in heavy gold chains and baseball caps who were introduced as "Los Chamos" — Venezuelan slang for "the kids." They were the rarely seen sons of Maduro's wife, "First Combatant" Cilia Flores.

"That was the moment when I realized I was over my head," said Krull, who squirmed his way out of lunch with the men and headed to the airport, his heart racing. "I didn't want to confront them, or tell them I didn't agree with their parents' politics. ... But when I was on the elevator going down, I said to myself, 'Why me? Why at this moment?'"

Krull says Gorrín persisted, eventually persuading him to make the introduction to the government informant. That was enough to get Krull charged as a member of a conspiracy to drain \$1.2 billion from PDVSA. Maduro's stepsons have not been charged.

Gorrín was charged in 2018 in a separate case for allegedly paying an array of lavish expenses — three jets, a yacht and champion show-jumping horses — on behalf of Venezuela's national treasurer as part of a scheme to pilfer more than \$1 billion from the government. Much of the proceeds were plowed into luxury Miami real estate, federal prosecutors allege. Gorrín remains a fugitive.

Howard Srebnick, a Miami-based attorney who has represented Gorrín in the past, did not respond to a request for comment but previously has said the Venezuelan businessman denies any wrongdoing.

TURNING A BLIND EYE

Krull insists he is being made the fall guy for a private banking system built on secrecy that facilitated the looting of Venezuela's state coffers.

While the bulk of the money flowing into Julius Baer's vaults from Venezuela was the byproduct of the country's own instability — hapless leadership, worthless currency and triple-digit inflation — Krull says he believes a good chunk represented the proceeds of corruption to which many banks turned a blind eye. Julius Baer was not the worst offender, he says, and indeed several other Swiss banks including HSBC Private Bank, UBS, Credit Suisse and Geneva-based Compagnie Bancaire Helvetique SA have turned up in U.S. or European criminal investigations.

"There was such an appetite to make money and to grow that many transactions didn't get the proper review," he says.

Krull cited the example of a Julius Baer office in Europe that he claims opened an account for a Venezuelan client even after he alerted his colleagues the businessman was under intense media scrutiny for possibly corrupt ties to Maduro. On another occasion, Krull said, a manager signed up a former oil official despite having closed an account belonging to the same man years earlier when both bankers were at Credit Suisse.

Krull filed a \$34 million wrongful termination lawsuit against Julius Baer in Venezuela in which he described a meeting at the start of 2017 where he, a manager and a senior compliance officer discussed what to do with several clients whose account information had been handed over to the U.S. Justice Department as part of a money laundering probe.

Instead of dropping the clients, Krull alleges, he was instructed by the compliance team to close only the corporate accounts while allowing the clients to keep their personal accounts, where the majority of their wealth was deposited.

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"The only purpose was to keep generating income for the bank and not take any real and concrete action to avoid money laundering or any other suspicious criminal activity," Krull alleges in the complaint.

Krull said that in his 14 years on the job, no compliance managers ever visited Venezuela even though they made the rounds of other offices in the region. He said two executives were hired in 2016 and 2017 despite having been fired from another bank due to Venezuela compliance problems.

Swiss regulators last year found many transactions over nearly a decade that point to "systemic failures" by Julius Baer in its obligations to combat money laundering. Specifically, the audit found that Julius Baer fell "significantly short" in investigating the identities of its Latin American clients and compensated bankers for attracting new wealth while paying scant regard to compliance and risk management goals.

Julius Baer didn't respond to a request for an interview or provide answers to detailed questions about Krull's allegations, citing ongoing litigation.

However, the bank pointed out in a statement that the criminal activity to which Krull pleaded guilty occurred outside of his work duties. The bank said it has cooperated with Swiss authorities, closed its offices in Panama and Venezuela and has tried to claw back the bonuses of employees in its Latin American group whose actions triggered the regulatory probe.

Krull's actions are "not compatible with the risk culture that we are seeking to achieve," Romeo Lacher, chairman of the Julius Baer Group, said of the Swiss regulator's findings last year. "Julius Baer has invested substantially over the past few years in strengthening our compliance and risk management processes to make them fit for the challenges of the future."

Mark Pieth, a money-laundering expert, said Swiss banks have been involved in several scandals in recent years so there is no excuse for them not knowing the source of the huge sums of money being raked in by their associates in Venezuela.

That's especially true for Julius Baer, he said, because it was one of a few Swiss banks criminally charged in a U.S. tax dodging case for helping Americans hide billions in offshore accounts. In 2016, it agreed to pay a \$547 million fine.

"With Venezuela, all sorts of alarm bells should've gone off," said Pieth, who recently retired from the University of Basel law school.

Pieth said he is surprised more Swiss financial institutions and their senior executives haven't been charged in the U.S. In Switzerland, financial markets supervisor FINMA, as part of its investigation of Julius Baer, sent written reprimands to two high-ranking managers — a punishment Pieth likened to "a slap on the knuckles."

"It's like asking casinos to identify gambling addicts," he said. "The bankers' job is to make money — not regulate themselves."

FINMA declined to identify the two bankers but noted that proceedings against a third banker were dropped after he pledged not to work in finance management ever again, while an investigation into a fourth person continues.

One of the four is former CEO Boris Collardi, who quit Julius Baer in 2017 to join another Swiss private bank, Pictet, as a partner.

"We took note of FINMA's decision early this year," Pictet said in a statement standing by Collardi, whose reprimand has no legal effect. "We have full confidence in his work."

For his part, Krull is hoping to get his life back on track. He's scheduled to start his 42-month prison sentence in July. In the meantime, he spends his days shuttling his kids to soccer games, connecting with old friends and lunching with his attorney.

"My main regret is that when I got dragged into this situation, I did not have the strength to blow the whistle and take a step forward by talking to the correct people," Krull said. "That will stay with me for the rest of my life."

Associated Press writer Jamey Keaten in Geneva contributed to this report.

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Unbeaten Zags keep rolling with 83-65 rout of Creighton

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Gonzaga guard Andrew Nembhard believes he still has room to improve.

The scary part is, he thinks that also might be true for the undefeated Bulldogs.

Nembhard had 17 points and eight assists, both season highs, to keep the NCAA Tournament's top overall seed rolling Sunday with a 83-65 rout of fifth-seeded Creighton in the West Region semifinals. Afterward, he insisted nobody was satisfied.

"I don't think we have peaked," he said. "I think, as I said earlier, we can always get better. We can always work on our stuff. So I think we're getting close, and we need to squeeze out that five percent that we talked about."

It's hard to imagine the Bulldogs (29-0) could play much better.

They extended their school-record winning streak to 33, the Division I record for consecutive double-digit wins to 26 and reached the Elite Eight for the fourth time in six years. Next up is Tuesday's West regional final against sixth-seeded Southern California, an 82-68 winner over seventh-seeded Oregon.

Some of Gonzaga's usual stars were content with supporting roles Sunday.

Second-team All-American Drew Timme led the way with 22 points, six rebounds and four assists as the Zags shot 59.6% from the field against a foe that led the Big East in defensive field goal percentage. Joel Ayayi added 13 points and eight rebounds.

First-team All-American Corey Kispert scored 12 points and Timme's fellow second-teamer Jalen Suggs finished with nine.

Defensively, the Zags held Creighton to 40 points over the final 30 minutes as they methodically turned a 27-25 game into a blowout. Gonzaga never trailed, led 43-33 at halftime and spent most of the second half pulling away.

The Bluejays (22-9) never really had a serious chance at advancing to the Elite Eight for the first time since 1941, when the NCAA Tournament only gave out eight bids.

"They just play so fast, so efficient with everything they do," said Marcus Zegarowski, who led Creighton with 19 points. "There are no lapses. You just can't take, not even a play, you can't take a second off or they're going to make you pay."

Denzel Mahoney added 13 points for Creighton.

Gonzaga extended its advantage to 20 points on Suggs' layup with 11:22 to go. That just about finished off Creighton as the Zags moved within three wins of becoming the first undefeated national champion since Indiana in 1976.

"I'm just telling you: We're not hung up on the undefeated thing at all," coach Mark Few said. "We've got to go undefeated from here on out. We've got to go 3-0 if we want to win the championship, which that's been our goal all along. But nobody's talking about the overall undefeated thing at all."

BIG PICTURE

Creighton: The Bluejays reached their first Sweet 16 since 1974 but didn't have nearly enough against a foe on a clear mission. They were simply overwhelmed by the Zags over the final 30 minutes.

Gonzaga: The Zags have won their first three tournament games by a combined 77 points.

UNFRIENDLY HINKLE

Big East teams haven't found Hinkle Fieldhouse to be any friendlier as a neutral court than it is when they play Butler each season.

Villanova and Creighton both lost here this weekend by double digits, and it might have been disconcerting for the Bluejays to hear the public address announcer saying things like "Bulldogs 3-pointer" when Gonzaga made a shot from beyond the arc.

Syracuse, which played in the Big East during the league's glory days, also lost at Hinkle on Saturday.

FALLING SHORT

On Thursday, Creighton coach Greg McDermott said the Bluejays couldn't rely on defense to beat Gonzaga. They needed to score.

When they didn't, the result was predictable.

"You have to score to play with Gonzaga. We just didn't score enough," McDermott said. "Obviously, the start of the second half was huge for us. We really felt like for us to have an opportunity, we had to win that first four-minute timeout. Instead they were able to take that lead from 10 to 14 and then it's an uphill battle against a team like that."

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/College-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Video of Floyd arrest may appear early at ex-cop's trial

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A former Minneapolis police officer goes on trial Monday in George Floyd's death, and jurors may not wait long to see parts of the bystander video that caught Derek Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck, sparking waves of outrage and activism across the U.S. and beyond.

Prosecutors have not said when they will play the video, but legal experts expect it to be early — maybe even in the prosecution's opening statement — as they seek to remind jurors of what is at the heart of their case.

"If you're a prosecutor you want to start off strong. You want to frame the argument -- and nothing frames the argument in this case as much as that video," said Jeffrey Cramer, a former federal prosecutor and managing director of Berkeley Research Group in Chicago.

Floyd was declared dead after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for about nine minutes. He held his position even as Floyd's "I can't breathe" cries faded and he went limp as he was handcuffed and lying on his stomach. Chauvin is charged with unintentional second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter.

Almost all of the jurors selected during more than two weeks of questioning said they had seen at least parts of the video, and several acknowledged it gave them at least a somewhat negative view of Chauvin. But they said they could set that aside.

The trial is expected to last about four weeks at the courthouse in downtown Minneapolis, which has been fortified with concrete barriers, fencing, and barbed and razor wire. City and state leaders are determined to prevent a repeat of damaging riots that followed Floyd's death, and National Guard troops have already been mobilized.

The key questions at trial will be whether Chauvin caused Floyd's death and whether his actions were reasonable.

For the unintentional second-degree murder charge, prosecutors have to prove Chauvin's conduct was a "substantial causal factor" in Floyd's death, and that Chauvin was committing felony assault at the time. For third-degree murder, they must prove that Chauvin's actions caused Floyd's death, and were reckless and without regard for human life. The manslaughter charge requires proof that Chauvin caused Floyd's death through negligence that created an unreasonable risk.

After jury instructions, prosecutors will begin with their opening statement, providing a road map of their case and telling jurors what they can expect to see at trial, said Mike Brandt, a local defense attorney who is watching the case closely. They'll outline what's to come, highlighting key witnesses

Chauvin's defense attorney, Eric Nelson, will likely use his opening statement to push back on what prosecutors say, and tell jurors that medical testimony and use of force experts will show a different view. Nelson has made clear that the defense will make an issue of Floyd swallowing drugs before his arrest, seeking to convince the jury that he was at least partially responsible for his death.

The county medical examiner's autopsy noted fentanyl and methamphetamine in Floyd's system, but listed his cause of death as "cardiopulmonary arrest, complicating law enforcement subdual, restraint, and neck compression."

Prosecutors are expected to play the bystander video early, because they will want to put the image of Chauvin with his knee on Floyd's neck in jurors' minds.

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"It sets the stage for anything to follow," Brandt said. "No matter what happens after that, we're done." He said that while the video is key, the case is really going to be a battle of experts on authorized use of force and cause of death.

Cramer agreed the video gives the prosecutors some "firepower," but said it's not going to be where the case is fought. He said people know Floyd died, but the key point of dispute is going to be why it happened and whether Chauvin acted reasonably in that moment.

"Obviously the result was tragic, but were the actions reasonable at that time for that officer," he said. The defense, he said, only needs one juror to believe prosecutors didn't prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt.

Fifteen jurors will appear in court Monday when the case starts, but Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill said the 15th was chosen simply to ensure that 14 would be in place once the trial begins. He's expected to dismiss that person immediately.

Two of the remaining 14 will be alternates, but the court hasn't made clear which ones.

The panel of 15 includes nine people who are white and six who are Black or multiracial, according to the court. Jury selection took more than two weeks, as jurors were questioned individually about their views on police, racial justice issues and pretrial publicity in the case.

On Sunday night, hours before opening statements were set to begin, National civil rights leaders appeared at a prayer service alongside several of Floyd's family members. Several dozen attendees congregated in the benches at Greater Friendship Missionary Church, where preachers led worship, a choir sang and members of Floyd's family were joined by the Rev. Al Sharpton and Ben Crump, a civil rights attorney who also represents the Floyd family. The speakers called for justice in George Floyd's death, mirroring the words spoken by leaders during a protest earlier Sunday in downtown Minneapolis.

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

The Latest: Metro Manila, outlying provinces go on lockdown

By The Associated Press undefined

MANILA, Philippines — Philippine officials placed Metropolitan Manila and four outlying provinces, a region of more than 25 million people, back to a lockdown Monday at the height of the Lenten and Easter holiday travel season as they scrambled to control an alarming surge in coronavirus infections.

Only workers, government security and health personnel and residents on urgent errands would be allowed out of homes during the weeklong restrictions, which prohibited leisure trips and religious gatherings that forced the dominant Roman Catholic church to shift all its Holy Week and Easter activities online. The renewed lockdown brought President Rodrigo Duterte's administration under fire for what critics say was its failed handling of the pandemic.

A curfew in the capital region and the provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, and Rizal was also expanded to 11 hours starting at 6pm.

"The rule now is stay home," presidential spokesman Harry Roque told ABS-CBN News. "If we don't lock down again, our hospitals will be overwhelmed and the frontliners may not be able to help those who will seriously or critically get ill."

The Philippines has imposed one of the world's longest police- and military-enforced coronavirus quarantines and lockdowns, which caused the economy last year to contract by 9.5%, the worst economic setback since the Philippines began issuing such economic data just after World War II.

The World Bank has downgraded its economic growth forecast for the Philippines this year with one of its chief economists saying the country has been "less successful in the region in transitioning away from shutdowns to a more efficient containment strategy."

The Philippines has reported more than 721,800 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 13,170 deaths, the second highest in Southeast Asia after Indonesia.

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THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- UK variant hunters lead global race to stay ahead of COVID-19.
- Did COVID-19 stress, uncertainty stall anti-smoking push?
- Longest-serving bookseller among 25,000 Czech virus victims.
- UK to further ease lockdown; nervously eyes European virus surge
- Albania starts mass COVID vaccinations before tourist season
- Mexico's real COVID-19 death toll now stands at over 321,000.

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

BRISBANE, Australia — Australia's third-largest city Brisbane will enter a three-day lockdown Monday evening after the coronavirus was found spreading in the community.

Queensland State Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk told reporters that health authorities had identified four new cases of community transmission overnight and the lockdown was necessary for them to get on top of contact tracing.

Australia has so far been largely successful in stamping out the spread of the virus. However, vaccination efforts have only just begun with less than 1% of the nation's population vaccinated.

Authorities are requiring people in Brisbane to stay home except for essential purposes and to wear masks. Brisbane, the capital of Queensland state, is home to more than 2.5 million people.

BUCHAREST, Romania — A 104-year-old Romanian woman has received her second vaccine against COVID-19, becoming the oldest person in Romania's capital of Bucharest to be fully inoculated.

Accompanied by family members into Bucharest's Children's Palace, Zoea Baltag, born in 1916, welcomed her second dose of the Pfizer vaccine and declared it the only way to combat COVID-19.

"A vaccine is the only way to get rid of this virus," Baltag said.

The pandemic had forced the centenarian — whose granddaughter is a doctor and convinced her to get vaccinated — to spend around a year physically distancing from her close relatives,

"I missed very much my great-grandson, I want to see him growing up. I've not been able to be with my grandchildren because I stayed isolated from them until now in order to not risk catching the virus. Everyone in the family is vaccinated now we can now spend the holidays together," she said.

Baltag, who was born two years before the Spanish Flu pandemic, appeared sharp of mind and did not report any side-effects after receiving her first Pfizer vaccine. She waited the usual 15 minutes after her second dose in case of any adverse effects.

BERLIN — Authorities in Austria say people living in much of the western region of Tyrol will need to take a coronavirus test before traveling elsewhere, because of concerns about variant cases detected there.

Officials said Sunday that in the Kufstein district of Tyrol there have been 216 confirmed cases of a virus variant first detected in Britain that has since gained a further mutation which could make it more resistant to vaccines.

The same mutation — known as E484K — is also found in variants first detected in South Africa and Brazil.

People wanting to leave Kufstein district will need to provide a negative PCR test result between March 31 and April 14.

PRISTINA, Kosovo — The first batch of AstraZeneca vaccines from the Covax facility arrived Sunday in Kosovo, the last country in the continent yet to start inoculation.

Authorities said they got 24,000 vaccines through the Covax system which will be used for medical personnel, elderly people and those with chronic diseases.

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"We need much more and fast," Prime Minister Albin Kurti told The Associated Press at the international airport after the arrival of the vaccines.

Kosovar health authorities have reported 87,981 total confirmed cases and 1,840 confirmed deaths from COVID-19 as of Monday.

PARIS — Critical care doctors in Paris say surging coronavirus infections could soon overwhelm their ability to care for the sick in the French capital's hospitals, possibly forcing them to choose which patients to treat.

The sobering warning of "catastrophic medicine" was delivered Sunday in a newspaper opinion piece signed by 41 Paris-region doctors. Published by Le Journal du Dimanche newspaper, it comes as President Emmanuel Macron has been vigorously defending his decision not to completely lockdown France again as he did last year.

Since January, Macron's government has instead imposed a nationwide overnight curfew and followed that with a grab-bag of other restrictions.

But with infections soaring and hospitals increasingly running short of intensive care beds, doctors have been stepping up pressure for a full lockdown.

The Paris-region doctors who wrote in Le Journal du Dimanche said: "We have never known such a situation, even during the worst (terror) attacks" that targeted the French capital.

The doctors predicted that softer new restrictions imposed this month on Paris and other regions won't quickly bring the resurgent epidemic under control.

ROME — Police in Italy have been cracking down on violators of ordinances aimed at reining in what has been weeks of stubbornly high incidences of COVID-19 cases.

In Rome, where cafes, bars and restaurants can only provide take-out service, Carabinieri military police fined a bar owner 400 euros (\$480) after they noticed three people drinking inside and closed it for five days.

Elsewhere in the Italian capital on Saturday night, seven party-goers at an apartment were fined for violating anti-COVID-19 measures. In the Sicilian town of Avola, police fined 17 celebrants, none of them wearing masks, at a birthday party in a home, the daily La Sicilia said.

For the Easter holiday next weekend, there is a nationwide limit of one visit per day, by no more than two adults, to the home of family or friends, although there is no limit of children younger than 14.

SKOPJE, North Macedonia — North Macedonia on Sunday got the first batch of 24,000 Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines out of a total 100,000 that are expected to arrive through the COVAX system by April.

North Macedonian Health Minister Venko Filipce, accompanied by the U.S. and EU ambassadors, welcomed the vaccine shipment at the country's main airport near the capital Skopje.

He said the first 20,000 people to be immunized are over 75s and the chronically ill. The vaccination process will start Wednesday.

The tiny Balkan country began inoculations a month ago with about 11,000 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech and Russian Sputnik V vaccines for medical workers.

At least 4,000 vaccine-seekers from North Macedonia flocked to neighboring Serbia on Saturday after Serbian authorities offered foreigners free coronavirus jabs.

North Macedonia has recorded more than 126,000 coronavirus cases and more than 3,600 deaths.

TIRANA — Albania started a mass inoculation campaign Sunday ahead of the summer tourism season after acquiring 192,000 doses of Chinese coronavirus vaccine Sinovac earlier this week.

Hundreds of people age 70 and above gathered at Tirana's main Skanderbeg Square to get a jab in two big tents.

Liri Bizhiti, 76, one of those waiting in line, was happy to receive the vaccine after a year of isolation,

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and on the same day as her husband.

"Thank God it came," she told The Associated Press while accompanied by her daughter. "We are so happy."

Vaccination has proceeded slowly in the Balkan country since mid-January before the arrival of the Sinovac vaccine, with Albania receiving less than 100,000 Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Sputnik V doses. The country has inoculated 65,000 medical personnel, people age 80 and over, and schoolteachers so far.

LONDON — Britain is taking another small step out of lockdown as it looks nervously at a new virus surge inundating its European neighbors.

With U.K. coronavirus vaccination rates outstripping those of European Union nations, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is easing the stark "stay at home" message that has kept the virus in check for almost three months.

From Monday, it will be replaced in England with a message to stay local. People will be allowed to meet in groups of six outdoors and can resume outdoor sports such as basketball, tennis and golf.

Stephen Powis, medical director of the National Health Service in England, urged people to continue to follow the rules, saying the easing "does not mean job done." Britain has Europe's highest virus death toll, at over 126,000 people.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Dutch police have arrested a churchgoer for hitting and kicking a journalist who was reporting outside a service that was opened to a Protestant church's full congregation.

Reporters were outside the Mieraskerk church in the town of Krimpen aan den IJssel near Rotterdam when the incident happened Sunday. The church drew media attention after reports it had opened the service to its entire congregation despite a tough coronavirus lockdown and sharply rising infection rate in the Netherlands.

Police tweeted that a 43-year-old man was arrested after the incident Sunday. They added: "Let journalists do their work."

Dutch media report that journalists also were threatened in the fishing town of Urk, where another church opened its doors Sunday.

Churches and other religious meeting places are exempt from lockdown rules. However, the government advises them to restrict attendances to a maximum of 30 people. A church official in Krimpen aan den IJssel apologized after the incident.

WASHINGTON — A year after COVID-19 upended life for millions of Americans, there are troubling signs that the coronavirus may have also slowed progress against another deadly health threat: smoking.

Fewer smokers called quit-smoking hotlines last year and some smoked more, contributing to an unusual bump in cigarette sales — all in the middle of the stress, anxiety and uncertainty from the pandemic.

"It's hard for folks to quit using tobacco in the best of times, so what happens when life is suddenly turned upside down?" said Jen Cash, who oversees Minnesota's anti-tobacco programs.

Researchers are already concerned about COVID-19's impact on cancer screenings and opioid overdoses as many Americans were cut off from routine care and examinations. But services to help smokers quit -- delivered via phone and online -- would seem well-positioned to withstand the disruptions of the pandemic. The programs help with devising a plan and often provide free nicotine gums and patches.

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis is celebrating solemn Holy Week ceremonies for a second straight year without the usual throngs of pilgrims and tourists, kept away by pandemic safety concerns and travel restrictions.

Francis traditionally leads a Palm Sunday procession through St. Peter's Square and then celebrates an outdoor Mass for tens of thousands of faithful.

But Francis led a Palm Sunday service this year inside St. Peter's Basilica just as he did last spring. That

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was just weeks after the COVID-19 outbreak erupted in Italy, which was the first country in the West to be hit by the pandemic.

Only about 120 faithful, including nuns and a few families, attended and were socially-distanced. They wore protective masks as did participants in the procession of 30 red-robed cardinals, but Francis didn't use one.

LONDON — Even when there were just a few dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the U.K., professor Sharon Peacock recognized that the country needed to expand its capacity to analyze the genetic makeup of the virus.

The Cambridge University microbiologist set about bringing scientists together to work on genomic sequencing. That has made Britain a world leader in finding new variants that are more dangerous or resistant to vaccines.

The initiative helped make Britain a world leader in rapidly analyzing the genetic material from large numbers of COVID-19 infections, generating more than 40% of the genomic sequences identified to date. These days, their top priority is finding new variants that are more dangerous or resistant to vaccines, information that is critical to helping researchers modify the vaccines or develop new ones to combat the ever-changing virus.

"They've shown the world how you do this," said Dr. Eric Topol, chair of innovative medicine at Scripps Research in San Diego, California.

MEXICO CITY — Mexico's government is acknowledging that the country's true death toll from the coronavirus pandemic now stands above 321,000.

That is almost 60% more than the government's official test-confirmed number of 201,429. Mexico does little testing, and because hospitals were overwhelmed, many Mexicans died at home without getting a test. The only way to get a clear picture is to review "excess deaths" and review death certificates.

The government quietly published such a report, indicating there were 294,287 deaths linked to COVID-19 from the start of the pandemic through Feb. 14. Since Feb. 15 there have been an additional 26,772 test-confirmed deaths.

NEW YORK — High rates of COVID-19 throughout New York have left the majority of its nursing homes closed for most indoor visits despite relaxed guidance meant to help open them up for visitors.

A little more than half of New York nursing homes were ineligible for indoor visits in mid-March. New York updated its visitation rules Thursday in a way that will now allow visits to resume under certain conditions, even if a resident has recently tested positive.

But that relaxed standard might not clear the way for visitation in many homes having trouble keeping the virus out.

Floyd family, leaders hold prayer service on eve of trial

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — National civil rights leaders appeared alongside several family members of George Floyd at a prayer service Sunday night, hours before opening statements were set to begin in the murder trial of the former Minneapolis police officer charged in his death.

Several dozen attendees congregated in the benches at Greater Friendship Missionary Church, where preachers led worship, a choir sang and members of George Floyd's family were joined by the Rev. Al Sharpton and Ben Crump, a civil rights attorney who also represents the Floyd family.

The speakers called for justice in George Floyd's death, mirroring the words spoken by leaders during a protest earlier Sunday in downtown Minneapolis.

George Floyd, who was Black, was declared dead on May 25 after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee on George Floyd's neck for about nine minutes while George Floyd was handcuffed and pleading that he couldn't breathe.

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"My brother complied," Philonise Floyd said during the service. "He said 'I can't breathe.' He said 'mama.' He said 'tell my kids I love them'... Nobody should have to go through that, nobody should have to endure that."

Chauvin is charged with unintentional second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter. Proceedings are scheduled to begin Monday morning, and the trial is expected to last about four weeks.

Philonise Floyd called for a conviction and urged observers to focus on the bystander video capturing his brother's struggle, The Star-Tribune reported. Prosecutors have not said when they will play the video, but legal experts expect it to be early in the trial.

"I have faith that he will get convicted," Philonise Floyd said. "Just like everybody who's seen that video because the video is the proof."

Sharpton, founder and president of the National Action Network, added that the prayer service also served as a show of support for the Floyd family.

"I wanted them to see all these people come," Sharpton said during the event. "I wanted them to know we're with them... we will be there with them until the end."

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

This story has been corrected to show that opening "statements" were to begin Monday.

Funerals become scenes of Myanmar resistance, more violence

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Myanmar security forces opened fire Sunday on a crowd attending the funeral of student who was killed on the bloodiest day yet of a crackdown on protests against last month's coup, local media reported.

The escalating violence — which took the lives of at least 114 people Saturday, including several children — has prompted a U.N. human rights expert to accuse the junta of committing "mass murder" and to criticize the international community for not doing enough to stop it.

The Security Council is likely to hold closed consultations on the escalating situation in Myanmar, U.N. diplomats said Sunday, speaking on condition of anonymity ahead of an official announcement. The council has condemned the violence and called for a restoration of democracy, but has not yet considered possible sanctions against the military, which would require support or an abstention by Myanmar's neighbor and friend China.

The mounting death tolls have not stopped the demonstrations against the Feb. 1 takeover — or the violent response of the military and police to them. Myanmar Now reported that the junta's troops shot at mourners at the funeral in the city of Bago for Thae Maung Maung, a 20-year-old killed on Saturday. He was reportedly a member of the All Burma Federation of Student Union, which has a long history of supporting pro-democracy movements in the country.

According to the report, several people attending the funeral were arrested. It did not say if anyone was hurt or killed. But at least nine people were killed elsewhere Sunday as the crackdown continued, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which has been documenting deaths during demonstrations against the coup.

Some of the funerals held Sunday became themselves opportunities to demonstrate resistance to the junta.

At one in Bhamo in the northern state of Kachin, a large crowd chanted democracy slogans and raised the three-finger salute that has come to symbolize defiance of the takeover. Family and friends were paying their respects to Shwe Myint, a 36-year-old who was shot dead by security forces on Saturday.

The military had initially seized her body and refused to return it until her family signed a statement that her death was not caused by them, according to the Democratic Voice of Burma, a broadcast and online news service.

In Yangon, the country's largest city, meanwhile, mourners flashed the three-finger salute as they wheeled

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the coffin of a 13-year-old boy. Sai Wai Yan was shot dead by security forces as he played outside his home.

The Feb. 1 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule. It has again made Myanmar the focus of international scrutiny as security forces have repeatedly fired into crowds of protesters. At least 459 people have been killed since the takeover, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. The crackdown extends beyond the demonstrations: Humanitarian workers reported that the military had carried out airstrikes Sunday against guerilla fighters in the eastern part of the country.

Henrietta Fore, head of the U.N. children's agency UNICEF, said in Saturday's bloodiest day since the coup "an 11-year-old boy, an 11-year-old girl, two 13-year-old boys, a 13-year-old girl, three 16-year-old boys and two 17-year-old boys, (were) all reportedly shot and killed." She said "a 1-year-old baby girl gravely injured after being struck in the eye with a rubber bullet."

"In less than two months, at least 35 children have allegedly been killed, countless others seriously injured and almost 1,000 children and young people reported arbitrarily detained by security forces across the country" she said, condemning the indiscriminate killings and demanding that those responsible be held accountable.

The junta has accused some of the demonstrators of perpetrating the violence because of their sporadic use of Molotov cocktails and has said its use of force has been justified to stop what it has called rioting. While protesters have occasionally hurled firecrackers at troops and on Saturday carried bows and arrows, they remain vastly outgunned and have shown commitment to methods of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Saturday's death toll far exceeded the previous single-day high that ranged from 74 to 90 on March 14. The killings happened throughout the country as Myanmar's military celebrated the annual Armed Forces Day holiday with a parade in the country's capital, Naypyitaw.

"Today the junta of Myanmar has made Armed Forces Day a day of infamy with the massacre of men, women and very young children throughout country," said Tom Andrews, the U.N.'s independent expert on human rights for Myanmar. "Words of condemnation or concern are frankly ringing hollow to the people of Myanmar while the military junta commits mass murder against them. ... It is past time for robust, coordinated action."

Those calls were echoed by others. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was shocked by the killings of civilians, including children, and a group of defense chiefs from 12 countries also condemned the violence.

U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, and U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said: "The shameful, cowardly, brutal actions of the military and police – who have been filmed shooting at protesters as they flee, and who have not even spared young children – must be halted immediately."

President Joe Biden told reporters: "It's terrible. It's absolutely outrageous. Based on the reporting I've gotten, an awful lot of people have been killed. Totally unnecessary." Biden said his administration is working on a response but offered no details.

It's still not clear what action is possible — or how quick it could be. The U.N. Security Council has not advocated concerted action against the junta, such as a ban on selling it arms. China and Russia are both major arms suppliers to Myanmar's military as well as politically sympathetic.

If the Security Council isn't able to do anything, Andrews called for an emergency international summit. Human rights group Amnesty International also criticized the hesitancy to do more.

"U.N. Security Council member states' continued refusal to meaningfully act against this never-ending horror is contemptible," said Ming Yu Hah, the organization's deputy regional director for campaigns.

In the meantime, protesters have continued to rally in Myanmar's streets. In one demonstration in Yangon on Sunday, a small group made its way through a residential area that the day before had seen chaos with police shooting at demonstrators and the protesters responding with fireworks and Molotov cocktails. The march finished without incident.

In addition to unleashing violence against demonstrators, the military is also continuing to battle ethnic

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Karen fighters in the country's east. About 3,000 villagers from territory controlled by the Karen fled across the border to Thailand on Sunday after Myanmar military aircraft dropped bombs on a Karen guerrilla position, said workers for two humanitarian relief agencies.

The Karen National Union is one of more than a dozen ethnic organizations that have been fighting for decades to gain more autonomy from Myanmar's central government.

The tension at the border comes as the leaders of the resistance to the coup are seeking to have the Karen and other ethnic groups join them as allies. So far the ethnic armed groups have only committed to providing protection to protesters in areas they control.

Record rains cause flash flooding in Tennessee; 4 dead

By JOHN RABY and SARAH RANKIN Associated Press

Torrential rains across Tennessee flooded homes and at least one church and left roads impassable, prompting dozens of people to be rescued in the Nashville area. Authorities said four bodies were found Sunday in the flood's aftermath.

Nashville received more than 7 inches of rain, the second-highest two-day rainfall total ever recorded, Mayor John Cooper said at a news conference Sunday.

Ebony Northern said a normally tame creek running through her Nashville apartment complex swiftly rose after heavy rain started late Saturday night. Within an hour or so, she could see some first-floor units in other parts of the complex being flooded. She said people moved to the second floor and she also heard calls for boats come in over the fire department scanner.

"The units are a mess. Some of the outside air conditioning units have floated off," she said Sunday morning.

She said the American Red Cross arrived to assist her neighbors.

At least one church canceled in-person Palm Sunday services. The New Tribe Church in Mt. Juliet said on Facebook that knee-deep water flooded the building, busted out the glass of its front entrance and sent chairs through a hallway.

"I am smiling but our hearts are devastated," Pastor Jarod Smith said at the start of an online service. "We are standing in our worship center and there's just not enough words to describe what it actually looks like."

Nashville Fire Chief William Swann said swift-water teams were placed on standby in anticipation of the storms. At least 130 people were rescued from cars, apartments and homes, while about 40 dogs were moved from a Nashville boarding kennel, Camp Bow Wow, to another location.

Cooper said first responders walked along creek beds Sunday and worked with the Red Cross to canvass affected neighborhoods.

To the south in Williamson County, over 34 swift water rescues were carried out, according to county Emergency Management Agency Director Todd Horton. As many as 18 homes in one neighborhood had to be evacuated.

A portion of Interstate 40 was temporarily shut down due to high water that stranded a vehicle and its driver. The driver was able to get out of the vehicle and to safety, the Tennessee Highway Patrol in Nashville tweeted. First responders also told drivers to avoid part of I-24 south of Nashville.

Metropolitan Nashville Police Chief John Drake said three bodies were found after Seven Mile Creek flooded. The body of a 70-year-old Nashville man, identified by police Sunday night as Garry Cole, was found in a submerged car in the creek behind a store. The bodies of a 46-year-old woman and a 64-year-old man were found in a wooded area near a homeless camp.

Drake said a 65-year-old man's body was found on a golf course. Police later identified him on Twitter as Douglas Hammond, who lived nearby and was swept away as he got out of his car that had become stuck in floodwaters.

Many rivers and creeks were at or near their highest level since 2010, according to the National Weather Service. Floods in May 2010 caused 21 deaths in Tennessee and an estimated \$1.5 billion in damage in

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Nashville.

While there was no longer any precipitation falling, flooding remained a threat, Brittney Whitehead, a weather service meteorologist in Nashville, said Sunday afternoon.

"Over the next couple of days, we'll see some of our rivers continue to rise. And we've got several flood warnings out for those areas that we expect to remain high, at least into Monday," she said.

Major flooding was forecast on two rivers. The weather service predicted the Harpeth River near Kingston Springs, west of Nashville, would crest about 20 feet (about 6.1 meters) above flood stage on Sunday night, while the Duck River at Centerville would crest about 17 feet (about 5.2 meters) above flood stage Monday morning.

In Bristol, along the Virginia border, a NASCAR race on a dirt track Sunday was postponed until Monday after torrential rains flooded campgrounds and parking lots surrounding Bristol Motor Speedway.

In Brentwood, eight people and a dog stayed overnight at City Hall after flooding from the Little Harpeth River forced residents from their homes, City Manager Kirk Bednar said. Hotels in the area were booked up, in part due to spring break, he said.

Fifteen people were rescued and two were taken to the hospital at the City View Apartments in south Nashville, where the lower level of the building was flooded in waist-deep water. The fire department responded to reports of a collapse at the building following a mudslide, news outlets reported. The two hospitalized patients had injuries not considered to be life-threatening.

Drake, the Nashville police chief, also said an officer on his way home was hospitalized after his vehicle was caught in floodwaters. The officer got out of the car and was found clinging to a tree when he was rescued.

March historically is a turbulent month for weather in Tennessee. Last March, tornadoes killed more than 20 people and destroyed more than 140 buildings in Middle Tennessee.

New York lawmakers agree to legalize recreational marijuana

By MARINA VILLENEUVE, JENNIFER PELTZ and KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York is poised to join a growing number of states that have legalized marijuana after state lawmakers reached a deal to allow sales of the drug for recreational use.

The agreement reached Saturday would expand the state's existing medical marijuana program and set up a licensing and taxation system for recreational sales. Lawmakers are expected to vote on the bill Tuesday, the earliest they could consider it. Legislative leaders hope to vote on the budget Wednesday to meet the deadline of having a budget in place by April 1.

It has taken years for the state's lawmakers to come to a consensus on how to legalize recreational marijuana in New York. Democrats, who now wield a veto-proof majority in the state Legislature, have made passing it a priority this year, and Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration has estimated legalization could eventually bring the state about \$350 million annually.

"My goal in carrying this legislation has always been to end the racially disparate enforcement of marijuana prohibition that has taken such a toll on communities of color across our state, and to use the economic windfall of legalization to help heal and repair those same communities," Sen. Liz Krueger, Senate sponsor of the bill and chair of the Senate's finance committee, said.

The legislation would allow recreational marijuana sales to adults over the age of 21, and set up a licensing process for the delivery of cannabis products to customers. Individual New Yorkers could grow up to three mature and three immature plants for personal consumption, and local governments could opt out of retail sales.

The legislation would take effect immediately if passed, though sales wouldn't start until New York sets up rules and a proposed cannabis board. Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes estimated Friday it could take 18 months to two years for sales to start.

Adam Goers, a vice president of Columbia Care, a New York medical marijuana provider that's interested in getting into the recreational market, said New York's proposed system would "ensure newcomers have

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a crack at the marketplace" alongside the state's existing medical marijuana providers.

"There's a big pie in which a lot of different folks are going to be able to be a part of it," Goers said.

New York would set a 9% sales tax on cannabis, plus an additional 4% tax split between the county and local government. It would also impose an additional tax based on the level of THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, ranging from 0.5 cents per milligram for flower to 3 cents per milligram for edibles.

New York would eliminate penalties for possession of less than three ounces of cannabis, and automatically expunge records of people with past convictions for marijuana-related offenses that would no longer be criminalized. That's a step beyond a 2019 law that expunged many past convictions for marijuana possession and reduced the penalty for possessing small amounts.

And New York would provide loans, grants and incubator programs to encourage participation in the cannabis industry by people from minority communities, as well as small farmers, women and disabled veterans.

Proponents have said the move could create thousands of jobs and begin to address the racial injustice of a decades-long drug war that disproportionately targeted minority and poor communities.

"Police, prosecutors, child services and ICE have used criminalization as a weapon against them, and the impact this bill will have on the lives of our oversurveilled clients cannot be overstated," Alice Fontier, managing director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, said in a statement Saturday.

Some other states that have legalized recreational marijuana have struggled to address the inequities that the drug wars have wrought.

Three years after Massachusetts voters passed a ballot initiative making recreational cannabis legal in the state, Black entrepreneurs complained in 2019 that all but two of Massachusetts' 184 marijuana business licenses had been issued to white operators.

California voters legalized recreational marijuana sales in 2016 as well and invited people to petition to have old marijuana convictions expunged or reduced. But relatively few people took advantage of the provision initially.

Criminal justice reform advocates said New York's bill avoids that problem by setting up a process for marijuana convictions to be automatically expunged.

"We are very happy that the bill includes automatic expungement. It's integral to addressing past harms," said Emma Goodman, an attorney at the Legal Aid Society.

Melissa Moore, the Drug Policy Alliance's director for New York state, said the bill "really puts a nail in the coffin of the drug war that's been so devastating to communities across New York, and puts in place comprehensive policies that are really grounded in community reinvestment."

At least 14 other states already allow residents to buy marijuana for recreational and not just medical use. Cuomo has pointed to growing acceptance of legalization in the Northeast, including in Massachusetts, Maine and most recently, New Jersey.

New York does not have a statewide referendum process as California and Massachusetts do, so only the Legislature has the power to legalize recreational marijuana, as it did with same-sex marriage in 2011.

Past efforts to legalize recreational use have been hurt by a lack of support from suburban Democrats, disagreements over how to distribute marijuana sales tax revenue and questions over how to address drivers suspected of driving high.

It also has run into opposition from law enforcement, school and community advocates, who warn legalization would further strain a health care system already overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic and send mixed messages to young people.

"We are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the serious crisis of youth vaping and the continuing opioid epidemic, this harmful legislation is counterintuitive," said an open letter signed by the Medical Society of the State of NY, New York State Parent Teacher Association, New York Sheriff's Association and several other organizations March 11.

New York officials plan to launch an education and prevention campaign aimed at reducing the risk of cannabis among school-aged children, and schools could get grants for anti-vaping and drug prevention and awareness programs.

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And the state will also launch a study due by Dec. 31, 2022, that examines the extent that cannabis impairs driving, and whether it depends on factors like time and metabolism.

The bill also sets aside revenues to cover the costs of everything from regulating marijuana, to substance abuse prevention.

State police could also get funding to hire and train more so-called "drug recognition experts."

But there's no evidence that drug recognition experts can tell whether someone is high or not, according to R. Lorraine Collins, a psychologist and professor of community health and health behavior at the University at Buffalo. Collins was appointed to Cuomo's 2018 working group tasked with drafting cannabis regulations.

"I think it's very important that we approach that challenge using science and research and not wishes or unsubstantiated claims," Collins said.

Collins pointed to a 2020 report from the American Civil Liberties Union that found that Blacks are almost four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession compared to Whites, based on FBI statistics.

"Every New Yorker should be concerned about how these laws will be implemented or how those ways of examining drivers will be implemented in different communities," Collins said. "It's not likely to be equal."

The bill allows cities, towns and villages to opt out of allowing adult-use cannabis retail dispensaries or on-site consumption licenses by passing a local law by Dec. 31, 2021 or nine months after the effective date of the legislation. They cannot opt out of legalization.

Peltz and Matthews reported from New York City.

2 tugboats deploy to Egypt's Suez Canal as shippers avoid it

By JON GAMBRELL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — Two additional tugboats deployed Sunday to Egypt's Suez Canal to aid efforts to free a skyscraper-sized container ship wedged for days across the crucial waterway, even as major shippers increasingly divert their boats out of fear the vessel may take even longer to free.

The MV Ever Given, a Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship that carries cargo between Asia and Europe, got stuck Tuesday in a single-lane stretch of the canal. In the time since, authorities have been unable to unstuck the vessel and traffic through the canal — valued at over \$9 billion a day — has been halted, further disrupting a global shipping network already strained by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dutch-flagged Alp Guard, a specialist tugboat, arrived at the location Sunday, according to the stuck ship's technical management company, Bernard Schulte Shipmanagement. The Italian-flagged tugboat Carlo Magno was also close, having reached the Red Sea near the city of Suez early Sunday, satellite data from MarineTraffic.com showed.

The tugboats, along with at least 10 others already there, will be used to nudge the 400-meter-long (quarter-mile-long) Ever Given as dredgers continue to vacuum up sand from underneath the vessel and mud caked to its port side, Bernhard Schulte said.

Excavators dug Sunday on the eastern wall of the Suez Canal, hoping to free the bulbous bow of the Ever Given that plowed into the embankment, satellite photos showed. Bernard Schulte said the team was also waiting for the arrival of additional equipment to dredge the canal's seafloor. The THSD Causeway, a dredger registered in Cyprus, was expected to arrive by Tuesday.

Authorities canceled Sunday's planned freeing attempts "until sufficient tug power is in place," said canal services firm Leth Agencies. They plan to conduct an effort to free the vessel Monday to coincide with high tides, it said.

Officials have been desperately trying to avoid unloading the vessel, which likely would add even more days to the canal's closure. Taking containers off the ship would require a crane and other equipment that have yet to arrive.

On Saturday, the head of the Suez Canal Authority told journalists that strong winds were "not the only cause" for the Ever Given running aground, appearing to push back against conflicting assessments offered by others. Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei said an investigation was ongoing but did not rule out human or

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technical error.

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement maintains that their "initial investigations rule out any mechanical or engine failure as a cause of the grounding." However, at least one initial report suggested a "blackout" struck the hulking vessel carrying some 20,000 containers at the time of the incident.

Rabei said he remained hopeful that dredging could free the ship without having to resort to removing its cargo, but added that "we are in a difficult situation, it's a bad incident."

Asked about when they expected to free the vessel and reopen the canal, he said: "I can't say because I do not know."

Speaking on Sunday to the pro-government Egyptian television channel Extra News, Rabei said Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi had ordered the canal authority to prepare for all options, including taking containers off of the vessel. He said officials had been in talks with the U.S. about that possibility, without elaborating.

Shoei Kisen Kaisha Ltd., the company that owns the vessel, said it was considering removing containers if other refloating efforts failed.

The Ever Given is wedged about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the canal's Red Sea entrance near the city of Suez.

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. The closure could affect oil and gas shipments to Europe from the Middle East. Already, Syria has begun rationing the distribution of fuel in the war-torn country amid concerns of delays of shipments arriving amid the blockage.

As of early Sunday, over 320 ships waited to travel through the Suez, either to the Mediterranean or the Red Sea, according to canal services firm Leth Agencies. At least 10 of those vessels carried livestock, raising concerns about the animals. Rabei told the Saudi-owned satellite news channel Al-Arabiya that authorities planned to offer provisions to help them.

Dozens of others still listed their destination as the canal, though shippers increasingly appear to be avoiding the passage.

The world's biggest shipping company, Denmark's A.P. Moller-Maersk, warned its customers that it would take anywhere from three to six days to clear the backlog of vessels at the canal. Already, the firm and its partners have 27 ships waiting to enter the canal, with three stuck in the waterway itself and two more coming Sunday.

"We have until now redirected 15 vessels where we deemed the delay of sailing around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa equal to the current delay of sailing to Suez and queuing," the shipper said.

Mediterranean Shipping Co., the world's second-largest shipper, said it already had rerouted at least 11 ships around the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the canal. It turned back two other ships and said it expected "some missed sailings as a result of this incident."

"MSC expects this incident to have a very significant impact on the movement of containerized goods, disrupting supply chains beyond the existing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic," it said.

Associated Press writer Jon Gambrell reported this story from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and AP writer Samy Magdy reported in Suez. AP writers Isabel DeBre and Malak Harb in Dubai contributed to this report.

Virus fight stalls in early hot spots New York, New Jersey

By MARINA VILLENEUVE and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — A year after becoming a global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, New York and New Jersey are back atop the list of U.S. states with the highest rates of infection.

Even as the vaccination campaign has ramped up, the number of new infections in New Jersey has crept up by 37% in a little more than a month, to about 23,600 every seven days. About 54,600 people in New

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York tested positive for the virus in the last week, a number that has begun to inch up recently.

The two states now rank No. 1 and 2 in new infections per capita among U.S. states. New Jersey has been reporting about 647 new cases for every 100,000 residents over the past 14 days. New York has averaged 548.

The situation in New York and New Jersey mirrors a national trend that has seen case numbers inch up in recent days. The U.S. is averaging nearly 62,000 cases a day, up from 54,000 two weeks ago.

Asked Sunday what's going wrong in the U.S. as cases rise, President Joe Biden told reporters: "Based on what I'm hearing, apparently people are letting their guard down." Biden said he hopes to have a better sense of the situation after a meeting with his White House pandemic team on Monday.

Neither New York nor New Jersey is experiencing anything like what they saw last spring, when hospitals — and morgues — were overflowing. And like the rest of the country, both are in a much better place than in January, at the peak of the pandemic's winter spike.

But the lack of improvement or even backsliding in recent weeks has raised concerns that the states are opening too quickly and people are letting down their guard too much, just as potentially more contagious variants of the virus are circulating more widely.

"When we're seeing leveling off of cases or increase, that's when it's a time to rethink policies," said Roy Gulick, chief of the infectious diseases division at Weill Cornell Medical College and New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center.

In February, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo allowed the state's largest stadiums to host sporting events and concerts again, albeit at only 10% of normal capacity. New York City movie theaters have been allowed to reopen. Restaurants can now operate at 50% capacity in New York City and 75% capacity elsewhere in the state. Indoor fitness classes have resumed, too.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy has led a similar reopening, with the state's restaurants also allowed to operate at half capacity and barbers, salons and other personal care businesses resuming trade.

That's happened in other parts of the country, too.

Utah, Alabama, Arkansas and Indiana will end mask mandates in early April, joining states including Arizona, Texas, Mississippi, Montana and Iowa that have eliminated face covering requirements in recent weeks. Some states are allowing businesses to operate at full capacity.

But in Illinois, the state public health director on Friday emphasized the need to keep wearing masks and socially distancing amid an increase in cases and hospitalizations. The single-day total of confirmed and probable cases of the illness topped 3,000 Friday for the first time in seven weeks, and hospitalizations have jumped 15% in the past five days.

Murphy said in recent days that he is hitting pause on further loosening of the rules because of New Jersey's resurgence.

The number of people hospitalized with the virus in New York has plateaued around 4,600 since mid-March. New Jersey hospitals are reporting about 2,200 virus patients — up by roughly 300 in the past couple of weeks.

"They're spreading more quickly and our vaccination rates are improving every week, but they are certainly not where we want them to be," said Bruce Farber, chief of infectious diseases and public health and epidemiology for Northwell Health.

Experts cite several potential factors, including the spread of potentially more contagious variants in the densely populated region.

"Is there something different that's happening in this part of the country compared to some other parts of the country?" asked Dr. Ed Lifshitz, the medical director of New Jersey's communicable disease service within the state Health Department. "And the answer is probably yes."

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has questioned whether Cuomo is easing restrictions "for political reasons," despite cause for concern. The governor is facing calls for his resignation over sexual harassment allegations.

But then de Blasio himself announced that 80,000 more city employees would no longer work from

home, starting in May.

New York City's Public Advocate Jumaane Williams urged New York to pause reopening plans.

"I ask the governor to stick to the science, trust the experts, and pause the planned reopenings now, before they take effect and more are infected," Williams said.

Experts worry the public is getting the message that increased vaccination means the state is in the clear, even though only a fraction of the public has completed a full course. Vaccines lessen the risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19, but scientists are still studying how well they prevent the spread of the virus.

"To allow larger groups to gather, to give the message to the public that we're over the worst and that we can go back to normal is a mistake," Farber said.

Stony Brook University professor and neuroepidemiologist Sean Clouston said growth in new cases is concentrated in younger people, who can't get vaccinated in New York unless they have specific health conditions or certain jobs. He said their infection rates could drop once they're eligible, too.

Catalini reported from Trenton, New Jersey. Associated Press writer Kevin Freking in Delaware contributed to this report.

Rebels besiege town in northern Mozambique for fifth day

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Rebels fought the Mozambican army Sunday for the fifth straight day for control of the strategic northern town of Palma, as reports came in that dozens of civilians have been killed and bodies were littering the streets. The fate of scores of foreign energy workers was also unknown.

Some of the dead had been beheaded, according to Human Rights Watch. An attempt by expatriate workers to flee to safety came under heavy fire, causing many deaths, according to local reports.

The battle for Palma highlights the military and humanitarian crisis in this Southern African nation on the Indian Ocean. The three-year insurgency of the rebels, who are primarily disaffected young Muslim men, in the northern Cabo Delgado province has taken more than 2,600 lives and displaced an estimated 670,000 people, according to the U.N.

The attacks in Palma started Wednesday just hours after the French energy company Total announced that it would resume work outside the town on its huge natural gas project at Afungi, near Mozambique's northeastern border with Tanzania. Earlier rebel attacks prompted Total in January to suspend work on the project to extract gas from offshore sites.

The Mozambican army has been fighting the rebels in several locations to regain control of Palma, Col. Omar Saranga, a Ministry of Defense spokesman, said Sunday in the capital of Maputo.

Hundreds of Palma residents, both local and foreign, have been rescued, he said, adding that the defense forces are battling "to contain the criminal attacks of terrorists and restore normality in Palma."

Most communications in recent days with Palma and the surrounding area have been cut off by the insurgents, although some residents got messages out using satellite phones.

"(They said) they had seen bodies lying on the streets, that the sound of gunfire was ongoing. In fact, gunfire was recorded on the background as we spoke with them. And they were telling us that they were running for safety," Zenaida Machado, the Human Rights Watch representative in Mozambique, told The Associated Press.

Many Palma residents ran into the dense tropical forest surrounding the town to escape the violence. But a few hundred foreign workers from South Africa, Britain and France clustered at hotels that quickly became targets for the rebel attacks.

An estimated 200 Mozambicans and foreign workers sheltered at the Hotel Amarula. On Friday, a band of them in 17 vehicles drove together to the beach, where they hoped to be rescued, but the convoy came under heavy fire. Only 7 vehicles reached the beach, according to local reports and messages sent by survivors.

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Seven people in the convoy had been killed, the military spokesman confirmed Sunday.

The beach remained under insurgent fire, preventing rescue efforts from air or sea, according to the reports. The Hotel Amarula remained under attack and it's not known what happened to those in the 10 vehicles that did not reach the coast.

A ship that left Palma earlier carrying hundreds of people arrived Sunday in Pemba, the provincial capital about 100 miles south.

The fresh rebel violence brings into question the fate of Total's gas project, one of Africa's biggest private investments. Total paid nearly \$4 billion for a 26.5% stake in the project in 2019. It had planned to start gas shipments in 2024 but the deteriorating security situation has made that goal unlikely.

Total issued a statement Saturday saying due to the latest rebel attack it had "obviously" suspended all its operations in the Afungi peninsula. It said none of its staff at the Afungi site were victims of the attack.

"Total expresses its sympathy and support to the people of Palma, to the relatives of the victims and those affected by the tragic events of the past days," said the statement. "Total trusts the government of Mozambique whose public security forces are currently working to take back the control of the area."

Mozambique's rebels already hold the port town of Mocimboa da Praia, 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Palma, which they captured in August.

Mozambique's insurgents are known locally as al-Shabab, although they do not have any known connection to Somalia's jihadist rebels of that name. The rebels have been active in Cabo Delgado province since 2017 but their attacks became much more frequent and deadly in the past year.

AP journalist Tom Bowker in Uzes, France, contributed.

This story has been corrected to show that the convoy of 17 vehicles left the Hotel Amarula on Friday, not Saturday.

Suicide bomb hits Palm Sunday Mass in Indonesia, 20 wounded

By YUSUF WAHIL and NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

MAKASSAR, Indonesia (AP) — Two attackers believed to be members of a militant network that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group blew themselves up outside a packed Roman Catholic cathedral during a Palm Sunday Mass on Indonesia's Sulawesi island, wounding at least 20 people, police said.

Rev. Wilhelmus Tulak, a priest at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, said he had just finished celebrating Palm Sunday Mass when a loud bang shocked his congregation. He said the blast went off at about 10:30 a.m. as a first batch of churchgoers was walking out of the church and another group was coming in.

He said security guards at the church were suspicious of two men on a motorcycle who wanted to enter the building and when they went to confront them, one of the men detonated his explosives.

Police later said both attackers were killed instantly and evidence collected at the scene indicated one of the two was a woman. The wounded included four guards and several churchgoers, police said.

National Police Chief Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo told reporters when he visited the crime scene late Sunday that the two attackers are believed to have been members of the militant group Jemaah Anshorut Daulah, which has pledged allegiance to Islamic State group and was responsible for deadly suicide bombings on Indonesian churches in 2018.

He said one of the attackers was believed to have links to a church bombing in the Philippines.

The attack a week before Easter in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation came as the country was on high alert following December's arrest of the leader of the Southeast Asian militant group, Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been designated a terror group by many nations.

Indonesia has been battling militants since bombings on the resort island of Bali in 2002 killed 202 people, mostly foreign tourists. Attacks aimed at foreigners have been largely replaced in recent years by smaller, less deadly strikes targeting the government, police and anti-terrorism forces and people militants

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consider as infidels.

Police have identified one of Sunday's attackers only by his initial, L, who they believe was connected to a 2019 suicide attack that killed 23 people at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in the Philippine province of Sulu, Prabowo said.

He said the two attackers were linked to a group of suspected militants arrested in Makassar on Jan. 6, when a police counterterrorism squad shot and killed two suspected militants and arrested 19 others. Members of the squad were initially supposed to arrest the two slain men for their alleged role in the Philippine suicide bombing.

He said on Sunday police arrested four suspected militants believed to have links with the attackers in a raid in Bima, a city on Sumbawa island in East Nusa Tenggara province.

"We are still searching other members of the group and I have ordered the Densus 88 to pursue their movement," Prabowo said, referring to Indonesia's elite police counterterrorism squad.

Indonesia's last major attack was in May 2018, when two families carried out a series of suicide bombings on churches in the city of Surabaya, killing a dozen people including two young girls whose parents had involved them in one of the attacks. Police said the father was the leader of a local affiliate of Jemaah Anshorut Daulah.

President Joko Widodo condemned Sunday's attack and said it has nothing to do with any religion as all religions would not tolerate any kind of terrorism.

"I call on people to remain calm while worshipping because the state guarantees you can worship without fear," Widodo said in a televised address.

He offered his prayers to those injured and said the government would cover all costs of medical treatment. He said he had ordered the national police chief to crack down on any militant network that may be involved.

At the end of Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, which opened Holy Week ceremonies at the Vatican, Pope Francis invited prayers for the victims of violence. He cited in particular "those of the attack that took place this morning in Indonesia, in front of the Cathedral of Makassar."

"We join with Pope Francis in praying for the victims of this horrendous attack," said a statement emailed to The Associated Press by the Archdiocese of Washington.

In Atlanta, where the archdiocese is home to many Asian communities, Archbishop Gregory J. Hartmayer said in a statement that "As we enter today into the holiest week of the year, we grieve once again for the victims of senseless violence. I join in prayer for those killed and injured in the suicide bombing in Indonesia."

A video of the scene of the attack obtained by The Associated Press showed body parts scattered near a burning motorbike at the gates of the church.

At least 20 people were wounded in the attack and had been admitted to hospitals for treatment, said Mohammad Mahfud, the coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs.

Indonesia has been on high alert since police in December arrested Jemaah Islamiyah leader Aris Sumarsono, also known as Zulkarnaen. Over the past month the country's counterterrorism squad has arrested about 64 suspects, including 19 in Makassar, following a tipoff about possible attacks against police and places of worship.

Jemaah Islamiyah was once considered the preeminent terror network in Southeast Asia, but has been weakened over the past decade by a sustained crackdown. In recent years, however, a new threat has emerged in militants who fought with the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria and returned to Indonesia or those inspired by the group's attacks abroad.

Karmini reported from Jakarta, Indonesia.

Slovak premier resigns to end crisis over Russian vaccine

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

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PRAGUE (AP) — Slovakia's prime minister said Sunday he will step down to clear the way for a Cabinet reshuffle that will defuse a political crisis triggered by a secret deal to buy Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine.

Prime Minister Igor Matovic said he proposed swapping posts with Finance Minister Eduard Heger from his Ordinary People party and Heger said "I accept the challenge."

Heger said he would immediately open talks with coalition partners on a possible new government and was planning to meet President Zuzana Caputova on Monday for consultations.

The political crisis erupted when a secret deal came to light three weeks ago involving Slovakia's agreement to acquire 2 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. Slovakia is part of the 27-nation European Union, which has not authorized the Russian vaccine yet.

Two parties in Matovic's coalition government, Freedom and Solidarity and For People, which have clashed repeatedly with his Ordinary People party over how to tackle the pandemic, demanded his resignation as a condition for the coalition to survive.

Matovic has defended the Sputnik V purchase, saying it would speed up the vaccination program in one of the EU's hardest-hit countries. Slovakia has seen about 9,500 virus deaths in the pandemic.

Matovic agreed to resign if his major rival, Freedom and Solidarity leader Richard Sulik, and Justice Minister Maria Kolikova from the For People party also resigned, which they did. Amid the crisis, six ministers from all four parties in the coalition have resigned.

But Freedom and Solidarity rejected some of Matovic's other conditions, including a request for Sulik's party to give up one of its three ministries. Matovic said Sunday he dropped any other conditions "in order for the coalition to continue."

Two coalition parties — the For People conservatives and the right wing populists We Are Family — immediately said they accepted the prime minister's plan as a way out of the crisis. The pro-business Freedom and Solidarity party, which withdrew from the coalition until Matovic resigned, said it was ready to return to the government.

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Slovak premier resigns to end crisis over Russian vaccine

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Paris doctors warn of catastrophic overload of virus cases

By JOHN LEICESTER and JEFFREY SCHAEFFER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Critical care doctors in Paris say surging coronavirus infections could soon overwhelm their ability to care for the sick in the French capital's hospitals, possibly forcing them to choose which patients they have the resources to save.

The sobering warnings were delivered Sunday in newspaper opinions signed by dozens of Paris-region doctors. They came as French President Emmanuel Macron has been vigorously defending his decision not to completely lockdown France again as he did last year. Since January, Macron's government has instead imposed a nationwide overnight curfew and followed that with a grab-bag of other restrictions.

But with infections soaring and hospitals increasingly running short of intensive-care beds, doctors have been stepping up the pressure for a full French lockdown.

Writing in *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 41 Paris-region hospital doctors said: "We have never known such a situation, even during the worst (terror) attacks" that targeted the French capital, notably assaults by Islamic State extremists in 2015 that killed 130 people and filled Paris emergency wards with the wounded.

The doctors predicted that softer new restrictions imposed this month on Paris and some other regions won't quickly bring the resurgent epidemic under control. They warned that hospital resources won't be able to keep pace with needs, forcing them to practice "catastrophe medicine" in the coming weeks as cases peak.

"We already know that our capacity to offer care will be overwhelmed," they wrote. "We will be obliged to triage patients in order to save as many lives as possible. This triage will concern all patients, with and without COVID, in particular for adult patients' access to critical care."

Another group of nine critical-care doctors writing in the newspaper *Le Monde* also warned that intensive care units in Paris may have to refuse patients.

"The current situation is tending toward prioritization, also called 'triage,'" they wrote. "When just one ICU bed is available but two patients could benefit from it, it consists of deciding which of them will be admitted (and will perhaps survive) and which will not be admitted (and will quite probably die). This is where we are heading."

They also accused Macron's government of hypocrisy "by compelling health care workers to decide which patient should live and which should die, without stating so clearly."

Macron remains adamant that not locking France down again this year, like some other European countries, was sound government policy, even as more than 2,000 deaths per week push the country ever closer to the milestone of 100,000 people lost to the pandemic. The country now counts more than 94,600 virus-related deaths.

"We were right not to implement a lockdown in France at the end of January because we didn't have

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the explosion of cases that every model predicted," Macron said last week. "There won't be a mea culpa from me. I don't have remorse and won't acknowledge failure."

Macron's administration has been hoping to outrace the resurgent outbreak with its vaccination campaign, an ambition that appears increasingly unrealistic as hospitals struggle. After a sluggish start in December, France's inoculation drive stepped up this weekend with the start of injections for healthy people aged 70 and above.

More than 7.7 million people — close to 15% of all French adults — have had at least one jab of either the Pfizer, Moderna or AstraZeneca vaccines. The government says the pace will continue to pick up, with France expecting to get nearly 3 million additional Pfizer doses this week.

The European Union's vaccine czar, Thierry Breton, told French radio RTL on Sunday that the bloc will deliver 420 million vaccine doses to its member countries by July 15.

"The vaccines are coming," he said.

Breton also unveiled a mock-up of a proposed EU health certificate that could allow the bloc's residents to cross its internal borders more easily. The certificate shows if people have been vaccinated, tested negative for coronavirus or recovered from it. He said the certificate would be optional and could be available by mid-June.

Leicester reported from Le Pecq, France.

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

Jurors in ex-officer's high-profile trial face heavy burden

By MICHAEL TARM and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — One prospective juror's voice quivered as she told attorneys during jury selection that she feared for her family's safety if chosen for the panel that will decide the fate of a white former police officer charged with killing George Floyd. When the judge excused her, the woman exhaled in relief.

Jurors at all trials feel pressure, knowing their decisions will alter lives. But the weight on jurors in Minneapolis is in a whole different category as they'll be asked whether to assign guilt in the death of a Black man that prompted some of the largest protests in U.S. history.

Bystander video of the confrontation is expected to be a key exhibit at trial, with opening statements set for Monday. It shows Derek Chauvin using his knee to pin Floyd's neck to the ground for about nine minutes during an arrest last May. Floyd cried he couldn't breathe and called for his mother before his body went limp.

A looming question is whether Chauvin, charged with murder and manslaughter, can get a fair trial with so much pressure on jurors and with some potentially fearing the consequences to the city and country should they reach a verdict others oppose.

A high fence installed around the courthouse for the trial is a daily reminder for jurors of security concerns. On some days, protesters gathered just beyond it, holding signs that read, "Convict Derek Chauvin" and "The World Is Watching."

Jurors are well aware that Floyd's death led to months of protests in Minneapolis and cities nationwide. They're aware, too, that thieves took advantage of demonstrations to break into, ransack and sometimes burn down stores.

A judge denied a request to change the trial's venue, a ruling Chauvin could cite on appeal if convicted. Appeals with change-of-venue disputes at their core are rare but not unprecedented.

A U.S. appeals court in 1999 vacated white Detroit police officer Larry Nevers' conviction in the beating death of a Black motorist, even though evidence against him seemed strong. The court noted how at least one juror heard that the National Guard was on standby in case Nevers was acquitted and violence ensued.

"The Court cannot imagine a more prejudicial extraneous influence than that of a juror discovering that the City he or she resides in is bracing for a riot," it said. It added that letting the conviction stand would

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send the wrong message that rights to an impartial jury “do not extend to an obviously guilty defendant.”

Similarly, an appeals court in Florida tossed the conviction and ordered a new trial for a plain-clothed Hispanic officer, William Lozano, who fatally shot Black motorcyclist Clement Lloyd in 1989 as Lloyd sought to elude a patrol car trying to stop him for a traffic violation. A passenger on the motorcycle, Allan Blanchard, who was also Black, died in the resulting crash. Protests erupted in Miami.

At the 1991 trial in Miami, jurors found Lozano guilty of manslaughter. The appellate ruling months later that overturned the conviction highlighted how some jurors admitted they feared an acquittal would renew protests.

“We simply cannot approve,” the court said, “the result of a trial conducted ... in an atmosphere in which the entire community — including the jury — was so obviously (and) justifiably concerned with the dangers which would follow an acquittal.”

At his 1993 retrial in Orlando, more than 200 miles from Miami, Lozano was acquitted.

Numerous people expressed unease about serving on the panel for Chauvin’s trial during the more than two weeks of jury selection. At least one who became teary-eyed was excused, as were others who were visibly unnerved.

Others displayed no such apprehension. A Black man in his 30s who was ultimately put on the jury wrote on a questionnaire that the Chauvin trial was the biggest case of his lifetime. And he added: “I would love to be a part of it.”

Other police-related trials in which race may have played a role tested courts’ ability to reach fair verdicts amid intense public pressure.

The 2018 trial of white Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke in the fatal shooting of Black teenager Laquan McDonald was not moved out of Chicago and ended with guilty verdicts on second-degree murder and aggravated battery.

The 1992 trial of Los Angeles officers charged in the brutal beating of Black motorist Rodney King produced a far more contentious outcome. After months of political wrangling, it was moved to a suburb where a nearly all-white jury acquitted the officers, setting off riots in Los Angeles.

Critics said the venue change didn’t solve issues of impartiality and only resulted in a jury partial to the officers, deepening cynicism by some that justice can ever be fair when the victims are Black.

All the Chauvin jurors were asked before being impaneled if they could set aside outside influences and decide the case only on evidence presented at trial. They all assured the court that they could.

Alan Tuerkheimer, a Chicago-based jury consultant, said he believed the Chauvin jurors would become increasingly calm as the trial proceeds and would be able to block out the hubbub.

“The norm is jurors taking these things very seriously,” he said.

If the Chauvin jury faced an either-or decision on a single murder charge, that would have ratcheted up the pressure on jurors even further, said Steve Greenberg, a leading criminal attorney in Chicago who has tried over 50 murder cases. He said a release valve for them in deliberations is that they can opt to convict on lesser but still-serious charges.

“There is wiggle room that will allow all of them to feel good about their decision at the end of the day,” he said.

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

Expelled from US at night, migrant families weigh next steps

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

REYNOSA, Mexico (AP) — In one of Mexico’s most notorious cities for organized crime, migrants are expelled from the United States throughout the night, exhausted from the journey, disillusioned about not getting a chance to seek asylum and at a crossroads about where to go next.

Marisela Ramirez, who was returned to Reynosa about 4 a.m. Thursday, brought her 14-year-old son and left five other children — one only 8 months old — in Guatemala because she couldn’t afford to pay

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smugglers more money. Now, facing another agonizing choice, she leaned toward sending her son across the border alone to settle with a sister in Missouri, aware that the United States is allowing unaccompanied children to pursue asylum.

"We're in God's hands," Ramirez, 30, said in a barren park with dying grass and a large gazebo in the center that serves as shelter for migrants.

Lesdny Suyapa Castillo, 35, said through tears that she would return to Honduras with her 8-year-old daughter, who lay under the gazebo breathing heavily with her eyes partly open and flies circling her face. After not getting paid for three months' work as a nurse in Honduras during the pandemic, she wants steady work in the U.S. to send an older daughter to medical school. A friend in New York encouraged her to try again.

"I would love to go, but a mother doesn't want to see her child in this condition," she said after being dropped in Reynosa at 10 p.m.

The decisions unfold amid what Border Patrol officials say is an extraordinarily high 30-day average of 5,000 daily encounters with migrants. Children traveling alone are allowed to remain in the U.S. to pursue asylum while nearly all single adults are expelled to Mexico under pandemic-era rules that deny them a chance to seek humanitarian protection.

Families with children younger than 7 are being allowed to remain in the U.S. to pursue asylum, according to a Border Patrol official speaking to reporters Friday on condition of anonymity. Others in families — only 300 out of 2,200 on Thursday — are expelled.

Reynosa, a city of 700,000 people, is where many migrants are returned after being expelled from Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. The Border Patrol has said the vast majority of migrants are expelled to Mexico after less than two hours in the United States to limit the spread of COVID-19, which means many arrive when it's dark.

In normal times, migrants are returned to Mexico under bilateral agreements that limit deportations to daytime hours and the largest crossings. But under pandemic authority, Mexicans and citizens of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras can be expelled to Mexico throughout the night and in smaller towns.

Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott acknowledged in an interview last year that agreements limiting hours and locations for deportations are suspended "on paper" but said U.S. authorities try to accommodate wishes of Mexican officials. The U.S. also coordinates with nongovernmental organizations.

"I would never sit here and look at you and say Tijuana is not dangerous, Juarez is not dangerous, Tamaulipas (state) is not dangerous," Scott said. "However, a lot of it is like any other U.S. city. There are certain U.S. cities that there are pockets of it that are very dangerous and there are pockets of it that aren't."

Tamaulipas, which includes Reynosa, is among five Mexican states that the U.S. State Department says American citizens shouldn't visit. A U.S. travel advisory says heavily armed criminal groups patrol Reynosa in marked and unmarked vehicles.

More than 100 fathers, mothers and children who were expelled overnight waited in a plaza outside the Mexican border crossing at sunrise Saturday, many bitter about the experience and scared to venture into the city. Several said they left Central America in the past two months because they could finally afford it, but information about President Joe Biden's more immigrant-friendly policies contributed to their decisions. Some reported paying smugglers as much as \$10,000 a person to reach U.S. soil.

Michel Maeco, who sold his land in Guatemala to pay smugglers \$35,000 to bring his family of five, including children aged 15, 11 and 7, said he was going home after a 25-day journey. He left Guatemala after hearing "on the news" that Biden would allow families to enter the United States.

Maeco's family was expelled to the streets of Reynosa at 3 a.m. Saturday.

"Supposedly (Biden) was going to help migrants, but I see nothing," said Maeco, 36.

A Honduran woman who declined to give her name said she left two months ago because her home was destroyed in Tropical Storm Eta and she heard Biden would "open the border" for 100 days — unaware that the president's 100-day moratorium on deportations, suspended by courts, doesn't cover new arrivals. She planned to send her 9-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son across alone to live with their aunt in Alabama while she returns to Honduras.

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Underscoring the dangers, the Border Patrol said Friday that a 9-year-old Mexican girl died crossing the Rio Grande near the city of Eagle Pass.

Mexico's migrant protection agency, Grupos Beta, persuaded many overnight arrivals to be bused to a distant shelter. Crowds at the nearby park had thinned from a few hundred migrants days earlier.

Felicia Rangel, founder of the Sidewalk School, which gives educational opportunities to asylum-seeking children in Mexican border cities, sees the makings of a squalid migrant camp like in nearby Matamoros, which recently closed.

"If they get a foothold in this gazebo, this is going to turn into an encampment," she said as a church distributed chicken soup, bread and water to migrants for breakfast. "They do not want another encampment in their country."

Martin Vasquez is among the migrants staying for now. The 19-year-old was expelled after being separated from his 12-year-old brother, who was considered an unaccompanied child and will almost certainly be released to a grandfather in Florida. He said he was inclined to return to Guatemala, where he worked for a moving company, but wanted to wait a while "to see what the news says."

In Brazil, moms are bearing the brunt of pandemic's blow

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — When Sao Paulo city officials put out a call last month for 4,500 public school cleaning jobs, targeting Brazilian mothers affected by the raging pandemic, they were unprepared for the ensuing tsunami. More than 90,000 women applied in just two days.

"It exceeded our expectations, by far," said Armando Junior, who helped create the initiative, aimed at trying to alleviate skyrocketing unemployment among women and helping schools comply with new COVID-19 protocols for keeping classrooms hygienic and taking students' temperatures.

The overwhelming response offers a glimpse at how Brazilian women — particularly mothers — have been disproportionately sidelined by the crisis. Worldwide, as schools remain closed, many mothers juggle fewer work hours with homeschooling and household duties. Others put their careers on hold entirely, or were laid off.

Brazil is battling a brutal resurgence in COVID-19 cases, making it one of the hardest-hit countries in the world. Latin America's largest nation accounts for less than 3% of the global population, but with an average of 2,400 deaths each day, it accounts for a quarter of daily COVID-19 fatalities worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University data. Economists say the nation's worsening health and economic crises are further delaying the return of women to the workforce.

"This job fell from the sky for me," said Marilene Paixão, one of the mothers selected for the cleaning jobs. But just a month after Sao Paulo hired the women in mid-February, the city closed its schools again on March 15.

Starting in the 1950s, the participation of women in Brazil's workforce increased exponentially, but the pace began to slow in the early 2000s and plateaued from 2010 onwards. Even before the pandemic hit, only 53% of women were in the labor market, compared to 71% of men.

This is partly due to Brazilian women facing worse labor choices or requiring flexible hours to raise their children, particularly since public schools provide only half days of classes. As a result, a greater proportion of women work in Brazil's large informal sector or perform low-paying manual work like housemaids, according to Solange Gonçalves, an economist and professor at the Federal University of Sao Paulo.

"All these pre-existing inequalities only got stronger during the pandemic," said Gonçalves. "In a recession, lower-skilled employees are the first to be made redundant."

During the pandemic, more than 6.5 million Brazilian women exited the workforce, dropping their participation rate below 48% — the lowest in more than a decade, according to official data published this month.

Maria de Lourdes do Carmo, coordinator of a group that offers help to informal sector workers in Rio de Janeiro, says more people have been seeking assistance after losing their jobs. As for herself, after 26 years selling women's clothing on the street in the city's once-bustling center, do Carmo decided last year

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to pack up her things and wait for brighter days.

"I haven't been back since," do Carmo said. "Business is too weak. The street is empty."

The virus has slammed hospitals, which unexpectedly cost nurse Thassy Cruz, a 26-year-old single mom, her job at one of Sao Paulo's most prestigious medical facilities when it began treating only COVID-19 patients. Her 8-year-old daughter Alice suffers from asthmatic bronchitis, putting her at greater risk if she caught the virus, so Cruz quit her job rather than work with infected patients.

Now Cruz is homeschooling her daughter five days a week, still has no job and has emptied her savings account.

"I feel hopeless, everything went downhill," Cruz said. "Not working goes far beyond not being able to pay your bills. It's about the difficulty of facing the world without having an activity to go to every day. It's about feeling useful to yourself, and being part of a society."

Working women worldwide have paid a high price during the pandemic. Even among the world's richest nations, a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey this month found COVID-19 threatened to reverse the important gains women made over the last decade with "lasting, or even permanent" damage.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the impact stands to be worse. More people in the region work in sectors requiring close physical proximity, and fewer can work remotely, according to an International Monetary Fund paper.

In Brazil, average earnings dropped 6.2% for women in 2020 from the prior year compared to 3.4% for men, according to Marcelo Neri, director of the social policy center at the Getulio Vargas Foundation. The gender gap was especially pronounced among the wealthiest 10%, where women lost 5.5% of their wages and men just 0.4%. That reflects women either leaving the labor force or working fewer hours, consistent with their double roles, Neri said.

The Brazilian government's emergency pandemic aid program provided a lifeline to nearly 70 million poor and unemployed Brazilians, with single mothers receiving twice the stipulated amount.

One of the recipients was Kelly Regina da Silva, 25, who before the pandemic hit had made it out of her working-class slum and landed a lead acting role in a play across from Ipanema beach.

In hindsight, she finds the title and plot — "I Just Want to be Happy," about a group of slum dwellers chasing their dreams but finding prejudice and a staggering lack of opportunity — to be foreboding.

Shops, restaurants and cultural venues closed down, the cast disbanded and her nascent career came to an abrupt end. She left her rented apartment and moved in with a sister, then her mother, then a boyfriend. When she got pregnant, they split. Monthly pandemic aid ended in December.

Now seven months pregnant, she lives alone in a small room in one of the city center's many squats and works at a supermarket deli. It offers stability — even supermarkets stay open when the city clamps down on activity — though she said she's tired, and scared about exposing herself and her unborn child to the virus.

Brazil's Congress approved renewal of pandemic welfare payments this month but with tighter requirements, and da Silva doesn't qualify.

"I have to support myself," she said.

Colorado massacre spurs calls for state action on gun deaths

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — For the second time in less than a week, a 21-year-old man used a gun purchased legally in the United States to massacre people simply working or visiting a business. The mass shootings in Colorado and Georgia are giving new urgency to state efforts to enact gun restrictions, even while showing how hard it can be to prevent a tragedy.

A gunman opened fire Monday at a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado, with a weapon that resembles an AR-15 rifle, killing 10 people before he was captured. He bought the Ruger AR-556 pistol on March 16, the same day another 21-year-old man on the other side of the country killed eight people, six of them women of Asian descent, at Atlanta-area massage businesses.

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President Joe Biden called for action on gun reform after the two mass shootings, and U.S. Rep. Joe Neguse, who represents Boulder, asked Biden to ban imported semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines. But legislation in Congress faces an uphill climb, and it's been more than two decades since any major federal gun control laws have passed.

That means most significant gun legislation has been left to the states, including Colorado, where lawmakers have passed gun control laws in recent years. But the suspect in the supermarket shooting, Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, still could legally buy a firearm, keep it despite concerns about his mental state and open fire in a town that had tried to ban assault-style weapons.

That's led to calls for stronger action from the state, and Democratic leaders are listening. Still, support for gun rights is strong in parts of Colorado, and Second Amendment advocates argue new restrictions are not the answer.

Colorado has a law requiring background checks on almost all gun sales. The suspect had a misdemeanor assault conviction from high school, but it didn't prevent him from buying a gun from a shop near his suburban Denver home because most misdemeanors don't block people from legal firearm purchases.

The state also has a so-called red flag law that allows families to ask a judge to remove guns from people who could be dangerous. Alissa's family had concerns about his mental health and a sister-in-law had seen him with the weapon, police said.

But the law requires evidence that a person poses a significant risk in the near future. It's unclear whether anyone close to him was concerned enough to begin the court process in the six days between the gun purchase and the shooting, but general concerns about someone's behavior aren't typically enough to persuade a judge to order that weapons to be removed, said Jacob Charles, executive director of the Firearms Law Center at Duke University.

Meanwhile, a ordinance in the city of Boulder that banned assault-style weapons was struck down in court just days before the shooting because of a state law that bars local leaders from making their own gun rules. Now, state Senate Majority Leader Stephen Fenberg is drafting a bill to repeal that law. It could also be paired with other new legislation.

"There's not one answer to this problem. It has to be a complex and comprehensive set of policies because every tragedy is different," he said.

David Kopel with the libertarian think tank Independence Institute in Colorado questioned the effort to repeal the law. Allowing communities to pass their own rules could mean that law-abiding gun owners have a patchwork of rules to follow in every town they drive through, he said.

"Almost all law ultimately depends on voluntary compliance. You get more compliance when you have a uniform set of laws that everyone can know," Kopel said.

Some Colorado communities want to go the other way and have looser gun laws than those at the state level, he said.

Instead of passing new laws, Kopel argued, the state should increase funding for mental health treatment. In Alissa's case, authorities have said his family was concerned about his mental health and defense attorneys are asking for an evaluation.

To keep guns away from people in crisis, gun control activists say Colorado should create a waiting period. Both Colorado and Georgia, like the majority of states, allow people to get a gun right away. In the Atlanta area, the shooting happened just hours after the purchase.

Supporters say a waiting period could allow time for people to cool off if they're considering hurting themselves or others, though Kopel argued it would also unfairly affect gun-show sales.

Waiting-period legislation is already in the works in Colorado, and Georgia Democrats plan to introduce a measure that would require people to wait five days between buying a gun and getting it, state Rep. David Wilkerson has said. And with gun sales nationwide having surged to record levels last year amid pandemic-related uncertainty, lawmakers in at least four other states have proposed creating or expanding waiting periods.

Boulder community activist Caden McGhie, a 21-year-old college student, supported the idea in Colorado. Growing up after the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, he had nightmares from active shooter drills

at school.

"The real goal in all of this is to show people there is something you can do. You're not entirely powerless," McGhie said. "While this is absolutely terrifying ... we can make a difference, and we can make it now, and hopefully we can make it before something else happens."

Patty Nieberg, a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative, contributed to this story. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

UK variant hunters lead global race to stay ahead of COVID

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — On March 4, 2020, when there were just 84 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the U.K., professor Sharon Peacock recognized that the country needed to expand its capacity to analyze the genetic makeup of the virus.

The Cambridge University microbiologist understood that genomic sequencing would be crucial in tracking the disease, controlling outbreaks and developing vaccines. So she began working with colleagues around the country to put together a plan. Within a month, the government had provided 20 million pounds (\$28 million) to fund their work.

The initiative helped make Britain a world leader in rapidly analyzing the genetic material from large numbers of COVID-19 infections, generating more than 40% of the genomic sequences identified to date. These days, their top priority is finding new variants that are more dangerous or resistant to vaccines, information that is critical to helping researchers modify the vaccines or develop new ones to combat the ever-changing virus.

"They've shown the world how you do this," said Dr. Eric Topol, chair of innovative medicine at Scripps Research in San Diego, California.

Genomic sequencing is essentially the process of mapping the unique genetic makeup of individual organisms — in this case the virus that causes COVID-19. While the technique is used by researchers to study everything from cancer to outbreaks of food poisoning and the flu virus, this is the first time authorities are using it to provide real-time surveillance of a global pandemic.

Peacock, 62, heads Britain's sequencing effort as executive director and chair of the COVID-19 UK Genomics Consortium, known as COG-UK, the group she helped create a year ago.

During the first week of this month, COG-UK sequenced 13,171 viruses, up from 260 during its first 12 days of operation in March last year.

Behind that growth is a system that links the science of genomic sequencing with the resources of Britain's national health care system.

Positive COVID-19 tests from hospitals and community testing programs around the country are sent to a network of 17 laboratories, where scientists extract the genetic material from each swab and analyze it to identify that virus' unique genetic code. The sequences are then cross-referenced with public health data to better understand how, where and why COVID-19 is spreading.

When mutations in the virus correspond with an otherwise unexplained increase in cases, that's a clue that a new variant of concern is circulating.

The importance of genomic sequencing became obvious late last year as the number of new infections began to spike in southeastern England. When cases continued to rise despite tough local restrictions, public health officials went to work to find out why.

Combing through data from genome sequencing, scientists identified a new variant that included a number of mutations that made it easier for the virus to hop from one person to another. Armed with this information, Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed a national lockdown, scrapping a strategy of local restrictions that had failed to contain the new variant.

The scientific sleuthing is crucial, but it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Researchers must sift

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through the genetic sequences from thousands of harmless variants to find the rare dangerous ones, Peacock said.

"It's vital so that we can understand what variants are circulating, both in the United Kingdom and around the world, and therefore the implications of that on vaccine development and the way that we may have to adapt vaccines," she said.

The effort is a worldwide collaboration, with more than 120 countries submitting sequences to GISAID, a data-sharing hub originally created to track influenza viruses.

Iceland, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark actually sequence a higher percentage of their COVID-19 cases than Britain, and Denmark does the work faster. But COG-UK'S work, combined with Britain's size and high number of cases, have made it the world leader in sequencing COVID-19. The U.K. has submitted 379,294 of the almost 898,000 sequences in the GISAID database.

That work is paying dividends even for advanced countries like Denmark, where scientists use tools developed in Britain to analyze their own data, said Mads Albertsen, a professor at Denmark's Aalborg University who is part of the country's genomic sequencing effort.

"What the U.K. has just done by far best is the whole setup," Albertsen said. "They have many more researchers and a much more professional structure around how to use the data."

The U.S. is also trying to learn from Britain as the Biden administration reverses the anti-science policies of his predecessor that slowed the country's sequencing efforts, said Topol. Representatives from COG-UK took part in a recent call with American researchers and the Rockefeller Foundation aimed at building capacity in the United States.

"To Peacock and the crew's credit, they didn't just stop at sequence," Topol said. "They organized labs to do this other work, which is actually very intensive lab assessment. And then there's the epidemiologic assessment, too. So everything has to fire on every cylinder, you know. It's like a car with 12 cylinders. They all have to fire to move."

The U.K.'s sequencing success was built on the foundation of ground-breaking genetic science in Britain, stretching back to the work of James Watson, Francis Crick and Rosalind Franklin, who were credited with discovering the chemical structure of DNA. Other British scientists developed early sequencing techniques and later new technology that slashed the time and cost of sequencing.

That success attracted investment, such as the Wellcome Trust's 1992 decision to create the Sanger Centre to help map the human genome, further expanding the pool of expertise in Britain. And Britain's National Health Service provided a wealth of data for researchers to study.

Yet colleagues say Peacock personally deserves much of the credit for COG-UK's success, though she prefers to highlight the work of others.

A ferociously good organizer, she glued the nation's DNA detectives together through goodwill and chat-rooms. Part of the trick was persuading eminent scientists to put aside their egos and academic rivalries to work together to help fight the pandemic, said Andrew Page, an expert in computer analysis of pathogen genomics who is working with COG-UK.

Peacock's work on the project has earned her the moniker of variant-hunter-in-chief. But she prefers a simpler term.

"I consider myself, first and foremost, a scientist that's doing their best to try and help both the population in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to control the pandemic," she said. "Perhaps there's a better phrase for that, but scientist will do it."

Follow AP's coronavirus pandemic coverage at:
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>
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In Minneapolis, an immigrant street struggles to recover

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By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Nearly all the wreckage along Lake Street has been hauled away. The fire-swept buildings have been torn down or repaired. The police station is empty, its entryway sealed with stacked concrete blocks like a street corner pharaoh's tomb.

The street, the focus of so much violence when protests raged through Minneapolis after George Floyd died in police custody, looks almost normal in places.

Supermercado Morelia is again selling pickled cactus slices and two dozen varieties of Mexican cookies. At the Dur Dur grocery store, they're back to offering goat meat, rice in 20-pound bags and cheap money transfers to East Africa. Hufan Restaurant Cafe is trumpeting "the best Somali and American cuisine." The drive-thru at Popeyes is open every night until 11.

But look again, because plenty has also changed along Lake Street, a beacon for immigrants for more than a century.

The heart of the miles-long commercial and cultural corridor is struggling to recover. Politicians are bickering about rebuilding funds, crime is up across the city and the corridor is bracing for more protests as a former police officer goes on trial Monday in Floyd's death. And even when Minnesota's notorious winter surrendered recently to sunny, spring-like weather, the sidewalks in the hardest-hit neighborhoods remained quiet.

"There's a void," said Chris Montana, founder of one of America's few Black-owned micro-distilleries, Du Nord Craft Spirits, whose nearby warehouse was ransacked and set on fire during the protests. "You walk up and down Lake Street right now, the only signs of progress are that the piles of rubble have been replaced by empty fields."

At LV's Barber Shop, the door is locked, and the black barber chairs are layered in dust. At what was once Minnehaha Liquors, there's nothing but an old metal sign pointing to an empty lot. There's the dentist who hasn't returned to work, the bulldozed post office and the Mexican party supply store that keeps its door locked in the middle of the day because the staff is worried about crime.

Lake Street cuts a long path through Minneapolis, from the upscale bars at the street's west end, through the immigrant commercial enclaves, to the leafy neighborhoods of middle-class bungalows that reach to the Mississippi River. It also cuts a path through the city's history of immigrant life and deeply embedded inequality.

Over 100 businesses and organizations, many run by immigrants or racial minorities, were destroyed or displaced when the protests turned violent, said Allyson Sharkey, executive director of the nonprofit Lake Street Council, which has channeled more than \$8 million in grants to help them.

Businesses were already suffering when the riots began.

"People already had their savings wiped out by the first three months of COVID, so when the property destruction hit, there just wasn't any money left to rebuild," Sharkey said.

The street's recovery has been "a mixed bag," she said, with some businesses still boarded up and some customers avoiding the area, unsure if stores have reopened.

Anger at politicians and law enforcement runs deep among business owners.

"I called 911 — no help," said Abe Demmaj, an Ethiopian immigrant whose small furniture store was nearly emptied by looters. "I called the mayor's office. I called the governor's office."

Since then, nearly all the help has come from donations and private grants.

State assistance has become mired in a stark partisan and geographic divide, with Republican legislators pushing back against Democratic Gov. Tim Walz's proposed budget, which includes \$150 million to help businesses rebuild in Minneapolis and neighboring St. Paul.

The state's Democratic House majority, with its urban support base, has mostly supported Walz's plan. But rural Minnesota is overwhelmingly Republican, and the GOP's Senate majority has opposed anything that smacks of a bailout of Minneapolis. Republican leaders blame the damage on Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, another Democrat, saying they did not end the riots quickly enough.

The Lake Street Council estimates that small businesses sustained about \$250 million in uninsured dam-

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age along the corridor, from broken windows to large buildings that had to be torn down.

"The big fish can survive without help," said Pinky Patel, whose family dry cleaning business was looted and partially burned and did not have enough insurance. "For us, it's a problem."

Violence flared for days after the May 25 death of Floyd, a Black man who pleaded that he couldn't breathe as officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for about nine minutes during an arrest.

Captured on video by a bystander, the arrest set off waves of protests across the country and fueled a national reckoning on racial justice.

Chauvin, who is on trial on murder charges, worked out of the department's 3rd Precinct, a Lake Street fixture that quickly became a target of rioters. Police eventually abandoned the station as protesters took it over and set parts on fire.

The station is in the heart of Lake Street's working-class immigrant neighborhoods, where race and ethnicity and language jumble together.

"Here, everyone is welcome," said Patel, who immigrated from India. "Whatever language you speak, you're accepted. And you'll find at least one person who will be able to speak to you."

The neighborhoods have been welcoming immigrants for more than a century, since newly arrived Norwegians, Germans and Swedes did the shopping on Lake Street. When some neighborhoods fell into poverty in the 1970s and '80s, leaving a grid of cheap stores and empty buildings, new waves of immigrants brought them back.

First came the Somalis and Ethiopians fleeing war and poverty. Then came Latinos, many from Mexico. Immigrant entrepreneurs forged middle-class lives serving their working-class neighbors, who could not afford the stores in Lake Street's more exclusive neighborhoods.

"Immigrants made this community," Demmaaj said. "If you wanted to be an entrepreneur, this was the place to build something: restaurants, day cares, stores."

Over the past couple of decades, the neighborhood has become home to war refugees and hipsters, Somali restaurants and small nightclubs. You can now get \$3,000 bicycles along Lake Street's immigrant corridor and 10-pound bags of Mexican candy to fill party pinatas (complete with warnings — in Spanish and English — to brush your teeth afterward).

Many hope the end of Chauvin's trial will mark the beginning of the real recovery. A conviction, many here believe, is a foregone conclusion. Patel said the officer's actions were "inhuman."

But as jury selection was underway, new graffiti started appearing around Lake Street, ominous messages scrawled in black spray paint: "No Justice, No Street!"

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 29, the 88th day of 2021. There are 277 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 29, 1974, eight Ohio National Guardsmen were indicted on federal charges stemming from the shooting deaths of four students at Kent State University. (The charges were later dismissed.)

On this date:

In 1638, Swedish colonists settled in present-day Delaware.

In 1812, the first White House wedding took place as Lucy Payne Washington, the sister of first lady Dolley Madison, married Supreme Court Justice Thomas Todd.

In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln ordered plans for a relief expedition to sail to South Carolina's Fort Sumter, which was still in the hands of Union forces despite repeated demands by the Confederacy that it be turned over.

In 1867, Britain's Parliament passed, and Queen Victoria signed, the British North America Act creating

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the Dominion of Canada, which came into being the following July.

In 1912, British explorer Robert Falcon Scott, with his doomed expedition stranded in an Antarctic blizzard after failing to be the first to reach the South Pole, wrote the last words of his journal: "For Gods sake look after our people."

In 1936, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler claimed overwhelming victory in a plebiscite on his policies.

In 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted in New York of conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union. (They were executed in June 1953.)

In 1971, Army Lt. William L. Calley Jr. was convicted of murdering 22 Vietnamese civilians in the 1968 My Lai (mee ly) massacre. (Calley ended up serving three years under house arrest.) A jury in Los Angeles recommended the death penalty for Charles Manson and three female followers for the 1969 Tate-La Bianca murders. (The sentences were commuted when the California state Supreme Court struck down the death penalty in 1972.)

In 1973, the last United States combat troops left South Vietnam, ending America's direct military involvement in the Vietnam War.

In 2002, Israeli troops stormed Yasser Arafat's headquarters complex in the West Bank in a raid that was launched in response to anti-Israeli attacks that had killed 30 people in three days.

In 2010, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up in twin attacks on Moscow subway stations jam-packed with rush-hour passengers, killing at least 40 people and wounding more than 100.

In 2017, Britain filed for divorce from the European Union as Prime Minister Theresa May sent a six-page letter to EU Council President Donald Tusk. Two former aides to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie were sentenced to prison for creating a colossal traffic jam at the George Washington Bridge for political revenge, a scandal that sank Christie's White House hopes.

Ten years ago: Gunmen held an Iraqi government center in Tikrit (tih-KREET') hostage in a grisly siege that ended with the deaths of at least 56 people, including three councilmen, plus the attackers, who blew themselves up. A seriously ill 73-year-old British woman was accidentally dropped into the bitterly cold Norwegian Sea as rescue workers took her off the cruise ship Ocean Countess (Janet Richardson later died at a hospital).

Five years ago: Oscar-winning actor Patty Duke, 69, died in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho.

One year ago: President Donald Trump extended restrictive social distancing guidelines through April, bracing the nation for a coronavirus death toll that he acknowledged could exceed 100,000 people; Trump just days earlier had spoken about the country reopening in a few weeks. Dr. Anthony Fauci warned that the coronavirus could kill 100,000 to 200,000 Americans and that millions of Americans could become infected. Country singer Joe Diffie, who had a string of hits in the 1990s, died at 61 from what a spokesman said were complications from COVID-19. Josef Neumann, 72, died three months after he and four others were stabbed during a Hanukkah celebration north of New York City. Krzysztof Penderecki, an award-winning conductor and one of the world's most popular contemporary classical music composers, died at his home in Poland; he was 86.

Today's Birthdays: Author Judith Guest is 85. Former British Prime Minister Sir John Major is 78. Comedian Eric Idle is 78. Composer Vangelis is 78. Basketball Hall of Famer Walt Frazier is 76. Singer Bobby Kimball (Toto) is 74. Actor Bud Cort is 73. Actor Brendan Gleeson is 66. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Earl Campbell is 66. Actor Marina Sirtis is 66. Actor Christopher Lambert is 64. Rock singer Perry Farrell (Porno for Pyros; Jane's Addiction) is 62. Comedian-actor Amy Sedaris is 60. Model Elle Macpherson is 58. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., is 57. Actor Annabella Sciorra (shee-OR'-uh) is 57. Movie director Michel Hazanavicius (mee-SHEHL' ah-zah-nah-VEE'-see-oos) is 54. Rock singer-musician John Popper (Blues Traveler) is 54. Actor Lucy Lawless is 53. Country singer Brady Seals is 52. Former White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs is 50. Actor Sam Hazeldine is 49. International Tennis Hall of Famer Jennifer Capriati is 45. Actor Chris D'Elia is 41. Rhythm and blues singer PJ Morton is 40. Actor Megan Hilty is 40. Pop singer Kelly Sweet is 33.