

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 1 of 78

- [1- Groton Area COVID-19 Numbers](#)
- [2- School Board Election Cracker Barrel](#)
- [2- Spring Testing Dates set](#)
- [2- Track & Field Day Set](#)
- [3- Spotlight on Groton Area Staff: Adam Franken](#)
- [4- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [7- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [14- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [15- Weather Pages](#)
- [18- Daily Devotional](#)
- [19- Tour Ad](#)
- [20- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [21- News from the Associated Press](#)



Groton Area School District
 Active COVID-19 Cases
 Updated March 29, 2021 4:27 PM

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	t
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0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION CRACKER BARREL

The Groton Area Senior Government class will be hosting a school board candidate cracker barrel on Tuesday, March 30, 2021 at 7:00 PM in the GHS Arena.

The four candidates on the ballot for two school board seats are Anna Schwan, Martin D. Weismantel, Ryan Tracy, and Kara M. Pharis. The school board election is scheduled for Tuesday, April 13, 2021.

The public is welcomed to attend.

SPRING TESTING: GRADES 3-8, AND 11

by Mrs. Sombke

Spring Testing Schedule Reminder!

Middle School and High School:

April 6-7th: Grades 6-8 and 11 will be taking the SD ELA/Math in the morning (8:18-11:14am). Rest of day runs as usual.

April 8-9th: Grades 6-8 and 11 will be taking the SD ELA/Math in the afternoon (12:43-3:40pm). First through fourth hour classes run as usual.

April 12-14th: 8th grade will be taking the SD Science during their Science class period.

April 12th: 11th grade will be taking the SD Science in the morning (1-3rd hour).

Elementary:

April 13th: 5th grade will be taking the SD Science in the morning 8:30am-12:00pm. Students will still go to morning specials and recess as usual.

April 19-22nd: Grades 3-5 will be taking the SD ELA/Math in the morning 8:30-11:30/11:45am. Students will still go to morning specials and recess as usual.

FYI: At the MS/HS the class lists with testing room assignments will be posted on Monday morning by the office and outside of the classrooms being used for testing. The teachers administering the assessments will be receiving the lists on Friday during their training session and I will put copies in the teacher's mailboxes for attendance purposes on Friday afternoon as well.

TRACK AND FIELD DAY

Track and Field Day has been set for Thursday, May 6. We will start events at 12:30. We will not be having a picnic this year at the elementary school. There is no makeup day scheduled. Thank you!

Spotlight on Groton Area Staff

Name: Adam Franken

Occupation: Agricultural Education Instructor

Length of Employment: 2004-Present

As a largely agricultural state, South Dakota is a chief producer of corn and soybeans. To maintain the growth of crops, and subsequently the economy, there is a need for trained farmers and agricultural experts. In the Groton Area, the person who is most likely to teach students about crops and livestock is Adam Franken, the resident Agriculture Education Instructor.

As the Agricultural Education Instructor, Mr. Franken teaches students about subjects like Plant Science, Animal Science, Wildlife and Fishery, Ag Processing, and Horticulture. In total, he teaches a combined total of 90-100 students in his classes, ranging from Freshmen to Seniors. Mr. Franken enjoys teaching through open discussions and hands-on activities, as he believes that is the best way to ascertain what a student already knows and what they need to learn. Franken is also well known for his sense of humor amongst students and staff, making it a point to lighten the atmosphere in the classroom with a joke or sarcastic remark.

Adam Franken graduated from Chester Area High School while he was living in the southeast area of South Dakota. He graduated from South Dakota State University in 2004 with a major in Ag Education. Soon after obtaining his Ag Education degree, Mr. Franken began to search for schools that required an Agriculture teacher. However, in the year after his graduation, he only found four open positions in South Dakota. Soon after his first interview for the position at Groton Area High School, he was offered a position as the Agriculture teacher. He leapt at the opportunity and began working at Groton Area High School.

In addition to his work as a teacher, Adam Franken also works as a FFA Advisor and Cross-Country coach. He participates as a youth group leader at his church. He plays the guitar and will sometimes compose songs as teaching aids for his classes, much to the chagrin of his students. Despite the occasional mid-lesson guitar solo, or perhaps because of it, Adam Franken is a well-respected teacher and source of knowledge on all things Agriculture.



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

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 4 of 78

#400 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We have 30,352,600 cases in the US at this time, 0.2% more than yesterday. That means there were 70,900 new cases today, which is much more than we've been seeing in at least a week. There were 39,924 people hospitalized today, which is down from yesterday, but still above our recent low point. There were 715 deaths reported today. So we now have lost 549,544 lives to this, 0.1%, more than yesterday.

My June 2 Update started out this way: "No kidding! I did not miscount. We really are at #100. That sort of knocks me over. Who'd have thought back in February I'd still be at this in June? Not me. Sadly, at this point, it looks very much like there will be a #200 one day."

On September 10, in Update #200 I wrote this: "Now at this point, I'm not going to be foolish and predict there will not be a #300; in fact, I'm kind of thinking there will be. Maybe a #400 too. Because I don't think this virus is going to magically go away, even once we have a vaccine. . . . I think we're going to be living in this altered state of reality for some months yet; with luck and good decisions, fewer, but with bad luck or poor decisions, more." We can see, of course, how that went.

Then 100 days ago on December 19: "Milestone: 300 posts. Who saw that coming when this thing was starting out? How do I feel about that? Mostly tired, discouraged, and worried. This far into this thing, and it's worse than ever. We haven't learned a thing in all this time." While "worse than ever" isn't accurate to describe today, it is worse than it's been in a while and far worse than it should be. Everything else in that December statement is a good description of where I am today. It was and remains disappointing to realize we're no better than this.

And now, on the occasion of Update #400, I don't pretend to know what the future will bring; but I am doubting we'll see a #500, especially one that posts 100 days from now on July 7. By then maybe we'll be looking at a weekly check-in, if that: In July either we'll be in the final stages of this pandemic, which would mean these Updates are no longer needed, or we won't, in which case I suspect I will have given up thinking I can be helpful. Time will tell.

On March 29, 2020, one year ago today, we were at 141,096 cases and 2469 deaths. The only states that had not yet had a death were Hawaii and Wyoming; the US Virgin Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands had also not yet had a death. New York had 8500 people hospitalized. Florida was, in the words of a trauma physician there, "descending into chaos;" a year later, according to folks on the front lines, it's never really gotten better. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said at a press briefing that it is "entirely conceivable" that we'll have more than one million cases, but that adherence to mitigation strategies could reduce those numbers. He also said that up to 100,000 might die, adding, "What we're trying to do is not to let that happen." Sigh.

The Kay Bailey Hutchinson Convention Center in Dallas was converted to a hospital facility. The Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans was also converted to a hospital. The governor of Illinois was saying he did not have sufficient hospital capacity to handle Covid-19 cases. The governor of Ohio was saying he did not have enough N95 masks to deal with the pandemic. Fourteen thousand National Guard personnel were supporting the response across the country. Major League Baseball was trying to figure out how to hold a season—or part of one.

Worldwide, cases were over 710,000 and deaths were at 33,597. Italy was showing a slight decline in deaths this day; cases were at 97,689 and deaths at 10,779. Spain seemed to be seeing a slight slackening in numbers too with 57,560 cases and 6528 deaths. Mexico was blowing up with a 237 percent increase in cases in just a week. We had no idea what was ahead of us.

We're probably not done yet with trouble. As cases increase in many parts of the country, disastrously so in some, the TSA's latest figures indicate we're continuing to set pandemic-era records for air travel. They screened nearly 1.6 million people yesterday, marking 17 consecutive days over one million travelers. That puts us at over 60 percent of pre-pandemic numbers. I don't expect even a calamitous increase in cases will slow us down now, so all I've got left is hope, and honestly, not much of that. I think we're determined to do this the hard way.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 5 of 78

We've talked about experimental concerts intended to determine whether it can be safe to bring lots of people together without social distancing if we do adequate testing and exercise other precautions. We discussed findings from a concert in Germany in Update #253 posted November 2 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4134986019851106> #296; this post has links to other more thorough discussions of the protocol for the experiment. And then there was a concert in Barcelona; I wrote about this in Update #296 posted on December 15 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4262053713811002>.

Now, there's been another event in Barcelona, this time for 5000 concert-goers. A team from a local hospital helped to organize the proceedings, testing people for virus before and relying on public medical records to track the after-effects. People were so starved for public events that even folks who didn't particularly care for the musical act performing signed up for tickets. The goal is to learn more about what is and is not safe in our new reality so that maybe more of these events can be held. There's another series of similar experiments slated to run next month in Liverpool, England. There are major music events already canceled for this year and others slated to go on, including Roskilde, the biggest musical festival in Denmark. We'll see what we learn. Time to figure out what's safe these days as we try to take up some of the activities we've been missing.

The federal government is adding another 12 mass vaccination sites and expanding the retail pharmacy program from 17,000 to almost 40,000 pharmacies. The stated goal, according to the White House briefing today, is to get a site within five miles of 90 percent of us. Of course, we rural folks are in the 10 percent who are highly unlikely to end up within five miles of a site, but then we're not within five miles of a grocery store either. I think we can all acknowledge the practical realities of our demographics. There will also be funding for programs to get people to vaccination sites; this should be most helpful, especially to elderly, disabled, and impoverished people. I don't want anyone's reason not to be vaccinated to be that they couldn't access vaccine which is available. I hope all of this helps to provide that access.

I also read of a new front in the effort to get everyone who's willing vaccinated—the three or four million Americans who are homebound, who cannot leave their homes or who can do so only with great difficulty. These folks are primarily elderly—most in their 80s—and have multiple medical conditions, sometimes including cognitive impairment. While they may not be able to leave home, they frequently live with family members who do go outside the home, so these frail people are at risk of infection, as well as at risk of serious consequences if they become infected. Several organizations who provide home health care are launching at-home vaccination efforts to address this need. Because this group was not prioritized when nursing homes were targeted, there have been issues getting a vaccine supply for such work; it appears this population has fallen between the cracks. Another issue is cost: While the government reimburses administration costs, the Medicare reimbursement of \$16.94 for the first shot and \$28.39 for the second (no idea why those two amounts are different), won't come close to the cost of travel time and time spent in the home for the professionals who administer these doses. I'm going to guess when all of that is figured in, the real cost per dose is going to run \$100 to \$200 or more, depending how far apart these patients are. There are also the logistical issues with individual distribution of a vaccine which comes in multi-dose vials, is fragile once thawed, and must be administered within six hours of opening a vial. This part of the problem becomes easier to deal with when Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine is available—a one-dose vaccine with less rigid temperature requirements makes the whole thing much easier.

Across the country, vaccine doses continue to go out at a rapid pace. Nearly 146 million doses have been administered out of the almost 181 million shipped. Our seven-day average is up to 2.8 million, which is excellent progress. At this point, according the CDC data (which lags due to the time it takes to gather data and compile reports), close to 53 million of us have been fully vaccinated; that's over 20 percent of the over-18 population.

French pharmaceutical company Sanofi has been collaborating with the British company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) in developing a vaccine, which has run into snags. While they're now getting a phase 2 trial underway, the companies—both giants—have now signed deals to use their production capacity to help get other companies' vaccines onto the market. Sanofi has been doing fill and finish for Pfizer/BioNTech, and

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 6 of 78

now GSK is doing the same for Novavax. You have to know I'm in favor of these sorts of agreements. By the time the Sanofi/GSK candidate is ready for prime time, it is likely we'll be in a better place all around so that they can go back to making their own product. And more vaccines is better.

We have a new CDC analysis published today in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report on the real-world effectiveness of the two currently-authorized mRNA vaccines in the US population. Efficacy as reported in clinical trial data is always reflective of a sort of ideal set of circumstances, and actual effectiveness in a more diverse population tends to run a bit lower. That said, the news here is excellent: In a study of 4000 health care workers and first responders, all individuals with plenty of occupational exposure, through some of our worst days in terms of transmission from mid-December to mid-March, both the Moderna and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines were 80 percent effective after one dose and 90 percent effective after two doses in preventing all infections, including asymptomatic ones. The study involved routine testing as well as monitoring the health of the volunteers, so they had a good handle on infection rates. These findings are consistent with what's been seen in Israel and the UK, at the University of Texas and in southern California. The evidence continues to accumulate: These are very good vaccines indeed. I remind myself from time to time that the CDC was prepared to authorize any safe vaccine with at least 50 percent efficacy, and look where we are now. With all of our troubles, this has been a bright spot.

William Torres is a UPS driver in Midland, Texas. His coworkers told KOSA News, "He's one that will light up a room when he walks in with just a smile." Thing is, most of those coworkers haven't seen Torres' smile since December when he became ill with Covid-19. Torres has been really sick. He spent 64 days in the hospital, many of those in ICU, and he's not back to good health yet.

He told KOSA, "A lot of people catch it and they get a mild version of it. But if you get the severe version like I did, it's going to try to kill you." He added he thought for a while he might die, describing the feeling that he just could not get enough air into his lungs.

His coworkers have been worried about Torres, who is home on oxygen now and working hard to recover so he can get back to work. In the meanwhile, he's had a birthday and his coworkers decided to give him a little surprise. They organized a birthday parade—cars, motorcycles, big old UPS trucks all decked out with posters, streamers, and balloons, kids hanging out the window waving, horns honking. Torres, sitting in front of his house, waving back, was delighted.

He told KOSA, "It was great. Cause in the hospital, after a while I got to have one guest and my wife would go every day. But seeing a bunch of people is a whole different thing." He also had a message for the folks who don't think this is a real thing or a big deal: "I say wear your mask. It's not worth dying for, y'know?" From a guy who's in a position to know. We'll wish him well in his recovery.

Stay safe. I'll be back tomorrow.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 7 of 78

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	459	438	897	15	Minimal	12.0%
Beadle	2863	2780	6125	40	Substantial	10.7%
Bennett	386	372	1202	9	Minimal	3.6%
Bon Homme	1514	1479	2151	26	Moderate	5.0%
Brookings	3803	3639	12555	37	Substantial	6.0%
Brown	5286	5126	13185	91	Substantial	9.4%
Brule	700	688	1918	9	Minimal	2.7%
Buffalo	423	409	907	13	Minimal	5.3%
Butte	1007	981	3318	20	Minimal	1.3%
Campbell	131	127	268	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1342	1274	4079	21	Substantial	3.8%
Clark	412	386	976	5	Substantial	12.5%
Clay	1865	1809	5618	15	Substantial	9.7%
Codington	4200	4017	10024	80	Substantial	15.8%
Corson	475	461	1022	12	Minimal	0.0%
Custer	779	758	2803	12	Moderate	9.6%
Davison	3091	2939	6821	66	Substantial	17.9%
Day	679	641	1851	29	Moderate	16.0%
Deuel	491	475	1173	8	Moderate	0.0%
Dewey	1437	1408	3917	26	Minimal	2.0%
Douglas	443	428	945	9	Minimal	15.4%
Edmunds	490	472	1097	13	Minimal	6.7%
Fall River	564	538	2726	15	Moderate	7.6%
Faulk	364	350	709	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	1008	944	2331	42	Moderate	15.3%
Gregory	571	524	1334	30	Moderate	4.9%
Haakon	260	248	559	10	None	0.0%
Hamlin	745	693	1851	38	Moderate	6.2%
Hand	354	340	862	6	Minimal	0.0%
Hanson	376	369	756	4	Minimal	14.3%
Harding	92	91	188	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2360	2299	6795	37	Moderate	1.4%
Hutchinson	828	773	2464	26	Substantial	23.4%

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 8 of 78

Hyde	138	136	431	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	284	269	926	14	None	0.0%
Jerauld	275	257	576	16	Minimal	9.1%
Jones	91	90	234	0	Minimal	11.1%
Kingsbury	725	647	1734	14	Substantial	20.4%
Lake	1292	1219	3538	18	Substantial	18.0%
Lawrence	2886	2821	8754	45	Moderate	4.7%
Lincoln	8196	7907	21065	77	Substantial	13.1%
Lyman	624	600	1924	10	Moderate	10.8%
Marshall	364	345	1256	6	Moderate	0.0%
McCook	781	742	1724	24	Moderate	9.7%
McPherson	240	235	578	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2686	2628	7968	31	Moderate	7.1%
Mellette	255	253	751	2	None	0.0%
Miner	289	270	602	9	Moderate	15.4%
Minnehaha	29582	28448	81399	342	Substantial	13.9%
Moody	623	603	1811	17	Minimal	0.0%
Oglala Lakota	2083	2018	6750	49	Minimal	1.7%
Pennington	13237	12899	40650	191	Moderate	6.0%
Perkins	351	336	842	14	Minimal	5.9%
Potter	387	381	867	4	Minimal	4.0%
Roberts	1308	1232	4288	37	Substantial	12.9%
Sanborn	337	331	711	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	823	785	2201	26	Moderate	6.2%
Stanley	339	336	968	2	Minimal	4.8%
Sully	136	133	330	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1189	4212	29	Minimal	0.0%
Tripp	733	705	1529	17	Moderate	9.1%
Turner	1130	1045	2826	53	Substantial	9.5%
Union	2124	2014	6575	41	Substantial	12.0%
Walworth	751	718	1868	15	Moderate	11.5%
Yankton	2910	2816	9643	28	Substantial	11.8%
Ziebach	338	326	883	9	Minimal	9.1%
Unassigned	0	0	1913	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 9 of 78

South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	87894	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13744	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5591	5%
Hispanic	4263	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2626	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1703	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1515	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	61012	909
Male	56324	1024

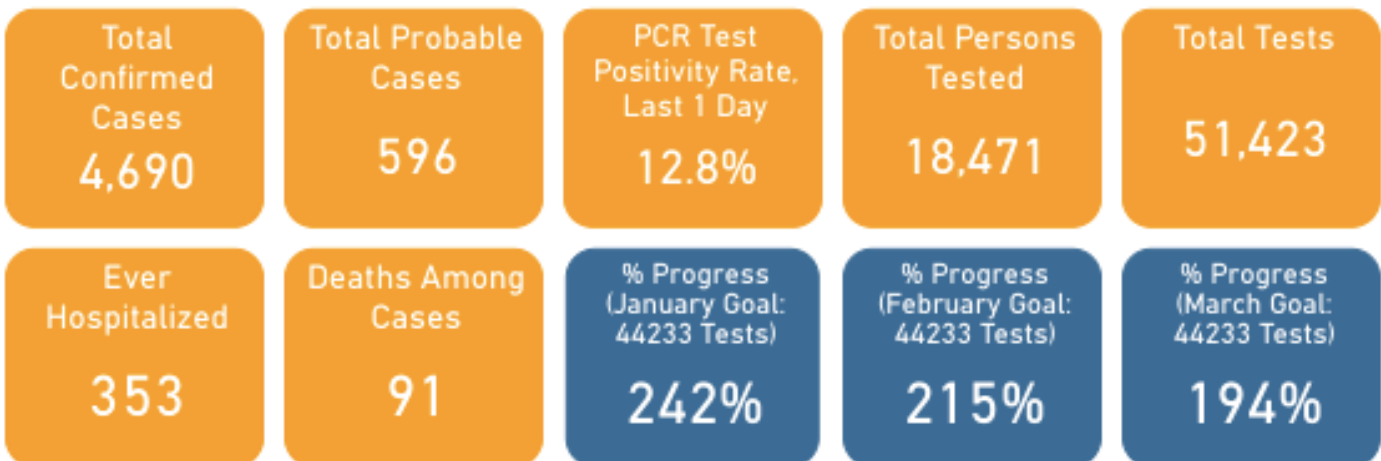
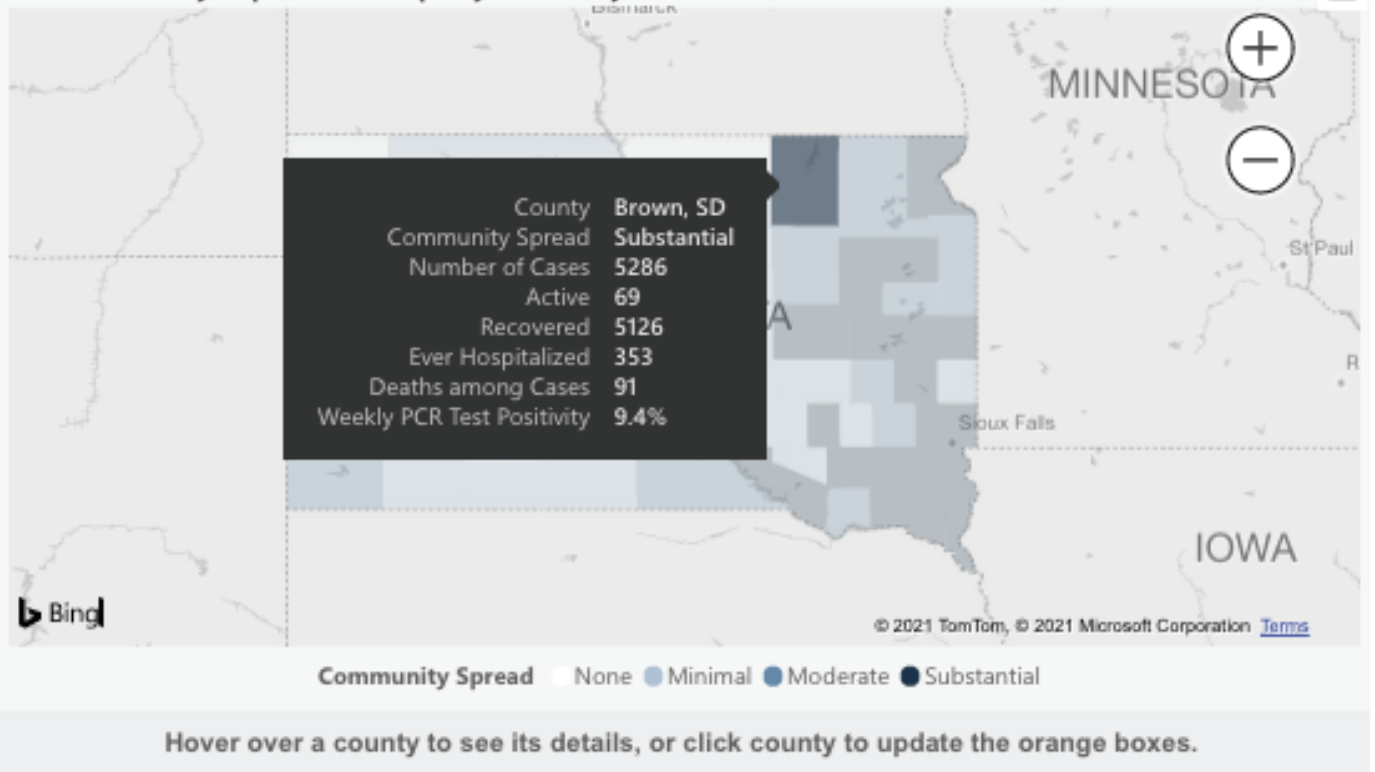
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 10 of 78

Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



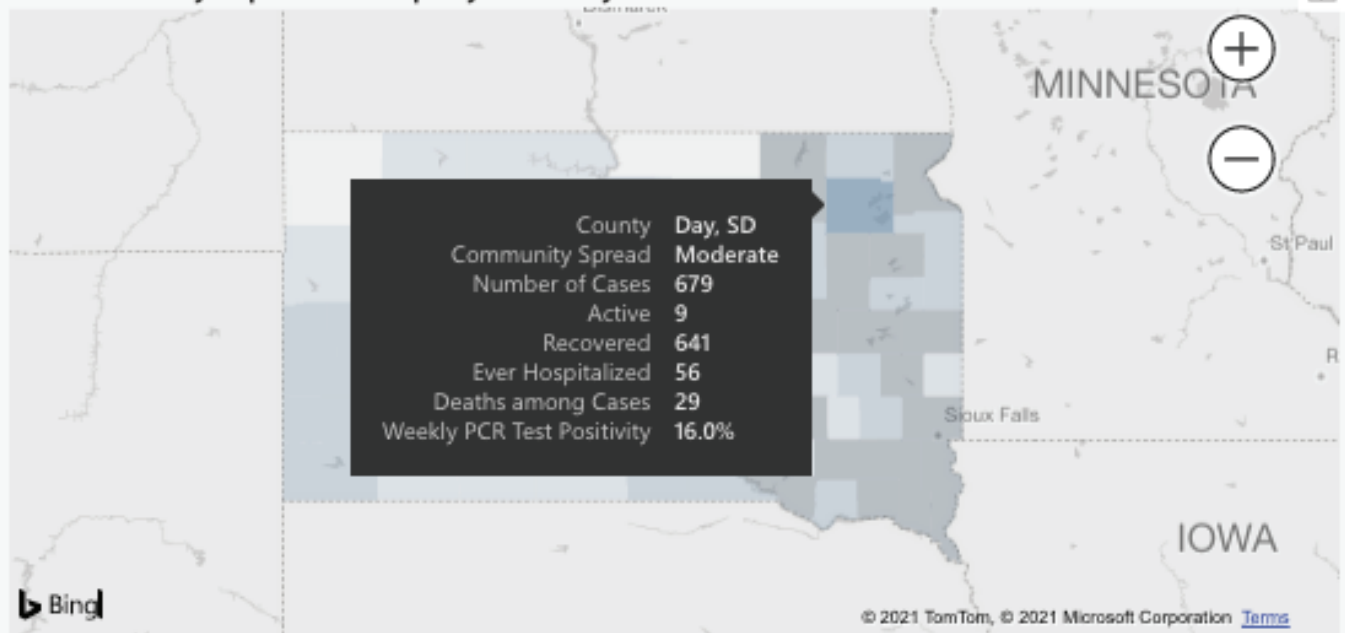
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 11 of 78

Day County

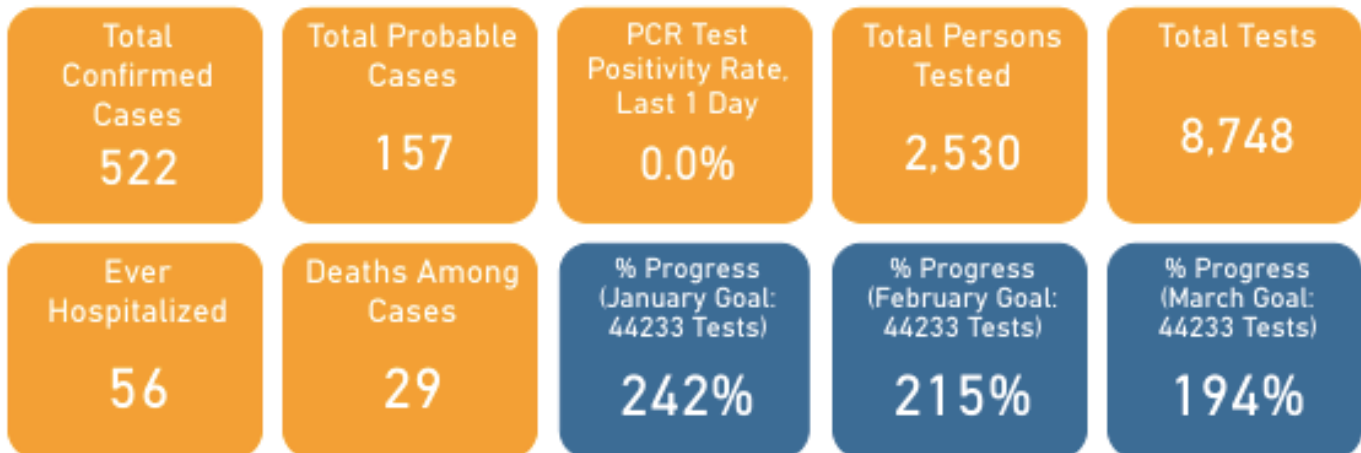


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 12 of 78

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

402,066

State Allocation

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

248,063

State Allocation

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

42%

State & Federal Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	8,033
Moderna	190,159
Pfizer	203,874

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	8,033
Moderna - 1 dose	45,589
Moderna - Series Complete	72,285
Pfizer - 1 dose	40,454
Pfizer - Series Complete	81,710

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	41.96%
Series Complete	27.59%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	1,207	439	384	823
Beadle	8,593	2,494	3,049	5,543
Bennett*	564	142	211	353
Bon Homme*	4,402	876	1,763	2,639
Brookings	13,104	3,852	4,626	8,478
Brown	19,082	4,716	7,183	11,899
Brule*	2,163	479	842	1,321
Buffalo*	148	82	33	115
Butte	2,893	893	1,000	1,893
Campbell	1,247	179	534	713
Charles Mix*	3,823	1,169	1,327	2,496
Clark	1,621	491	565	1,056
Clay	6,774	2,180	2,297	4,477
Codington*	12,782	3,662	4,560	8,222
Corson*	340	70	135	205
Custer*	3,607	803	1,402	2,205
Davison	9,893	2,945	3,474	6,419
Day*	3,257	841	1,208	2,049
Deuel	1,906	562	672	1,234
Dewey*	429	61	184	245
Douglas*	1,462	430	516	946
Edmunds	1,769	393	688	1,081
Fall River*	3,176	652	1,262	1,914
Faulk	1,344	352	496	848
Grant*	3,709	691	1,509	2,200
Gregory*	2,146	564	791	1,355
Haakon*	641	119	261	380

Groton Daily Independent

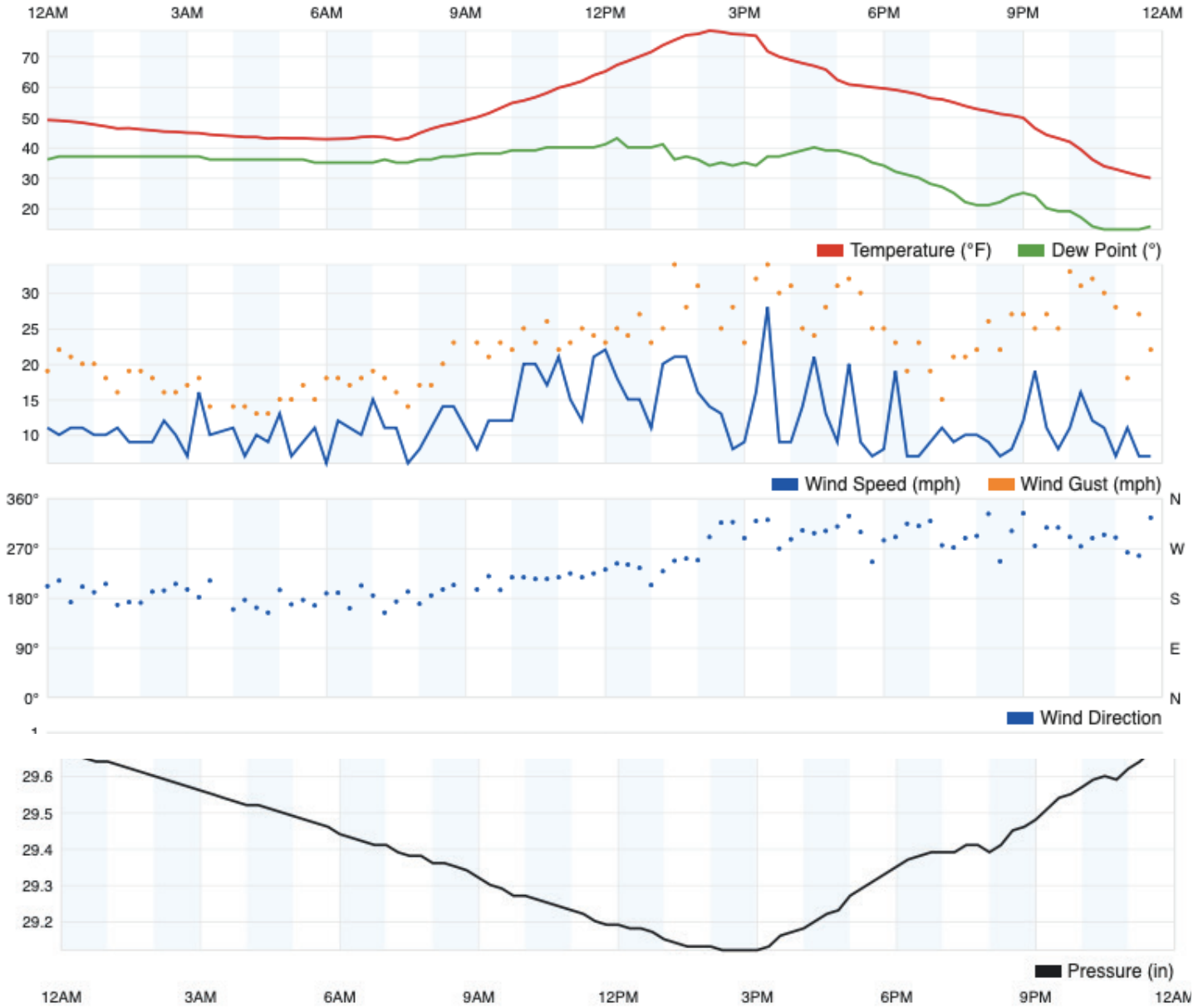
Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 13 of 78

Hamlin	2,262	598	832	1,430
Hand	1,794	556	619	1,175
Hanson	683	231	226	457
Harding	145	51	47	98
Hughes*	10,069	2,417	3,826	6,243
Hutchinson*	4,391	1,096	1,647	2,743
Hyde*	649	153	248	401
Jackson*	481	109	186	295
Jerauld	1,121	317	402	719
Jones*	760	136	312	448
Kingsbury	3,157	905	1,126	2,031
Lake	5,678	1,946	1,866	3,812
Lawrence	10,865	3,319	3,773	7,092
Lincoln	32,053	6,100	12,976	19,076
Lyman*	956	264	346	610
Marshall*	2,299	773	763	1,536
McCook	2,886	644	1,121	1,765
McPherson	316	68	124	192
Meade*	8,119	1,757	3,181	4,938
Mellette*	57	9	24	33
Miner	1,136	294	421	715
Minnehaha*	102,585	20,998	40,791	61,789
Moody*	2,310	688	811	1,499
Oglala Lakota*	207	51	78	129
Pennington*	46,758	8,938	18,910	27,848
Perkins*	780	254	263	517
Potter	1,191	347	422	769
Roberts*	5,260	950	2,155	3,105
Sanborn	1,305	383	461	844
Spink	3,641	789	1,426	2,215
Stanley*	1,504	332	586	918
Sully	494	126	184	310
Todd*	206	46	80	126
Tripp*	2,442	404	1,019	1,423
Turner	4,311	991	1,660	2,651
Union	4,185	1,507	1,339	2,846
Walworth*	2,339	391	974	1,365
Yankton	12,687	2,661	5,013	7,674
Ziebach*	69	15	27	42
Other	7,833	2,317	2,758	5,075

Groton Daily Independent

























Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 14 of 78

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 15 of 78

Tue 3/30	Wed 3/31	Thu 4/1	Fri 4/2	Sat 4/3	Sun 4/4
38° 17°F	42° 19°F	58° 37°F	72° 38°F	76° 44°F	81° 45°F
					
Mostly Cloudy/Wind	Sunny	Mostly Sunny/Wind	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy
 0 in	 0 in	 0 in	 0 in	 0 in	 0 in
 	 	 	 	 	 

Not Available

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 16 of 78

Today in Weather History

1823 - A great Northeast storm with hurricane force winds raged from Pennsylvania to Maine. The storm was most severe over New Jersey with high tides, uprooted trees, and heavy snow inland. (David Ludlum)

1899 - A storm which buried Ruby, CO, under 141 inches of snow came to an end. Ruby was an old abandoned mining town on the Elk Mountain Range in the Crested Butte area. (The Weather Channel)

1977 - Hartford, CT, hit 87 degrees to establish a record for the month of March. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm spread heavy snow across the Ohio Valley and Lower Great Lakes Region. Cleveland OH received sixteen inches of snow in 24 hours, their second highest total of record. Winds gusting to 50 mph created 8 to 12 foot waves on Lake Huron. The storm also ushered unseasonably cold air into the south central and southeastern U.S., with nearly one hundred record lows reported in three days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter-like storm developed in the Central Rockies. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to 15 inches at the Brian Head Ski Resort, and winds in Arizona gusted to 59 mph at Show Low. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along and ahead of a slow moving cold front produced large hail and damaging winds at more than fifty locations across the southeast quarter of the nation, and spawned a tornado which injured eleven persons at Northhampton NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Low pressure produced heavy snow in central Maine and northern New Hampshire, with up to eight inches reported in Maine. A slow moving Pacific storm system produced 18 to 36 inches of snow in the southwestern mountains of Colorado in three days. Heavier snowfall totals included 31 inches at Wolf Creek Pass and 27 inches at the Monarch Ski Area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

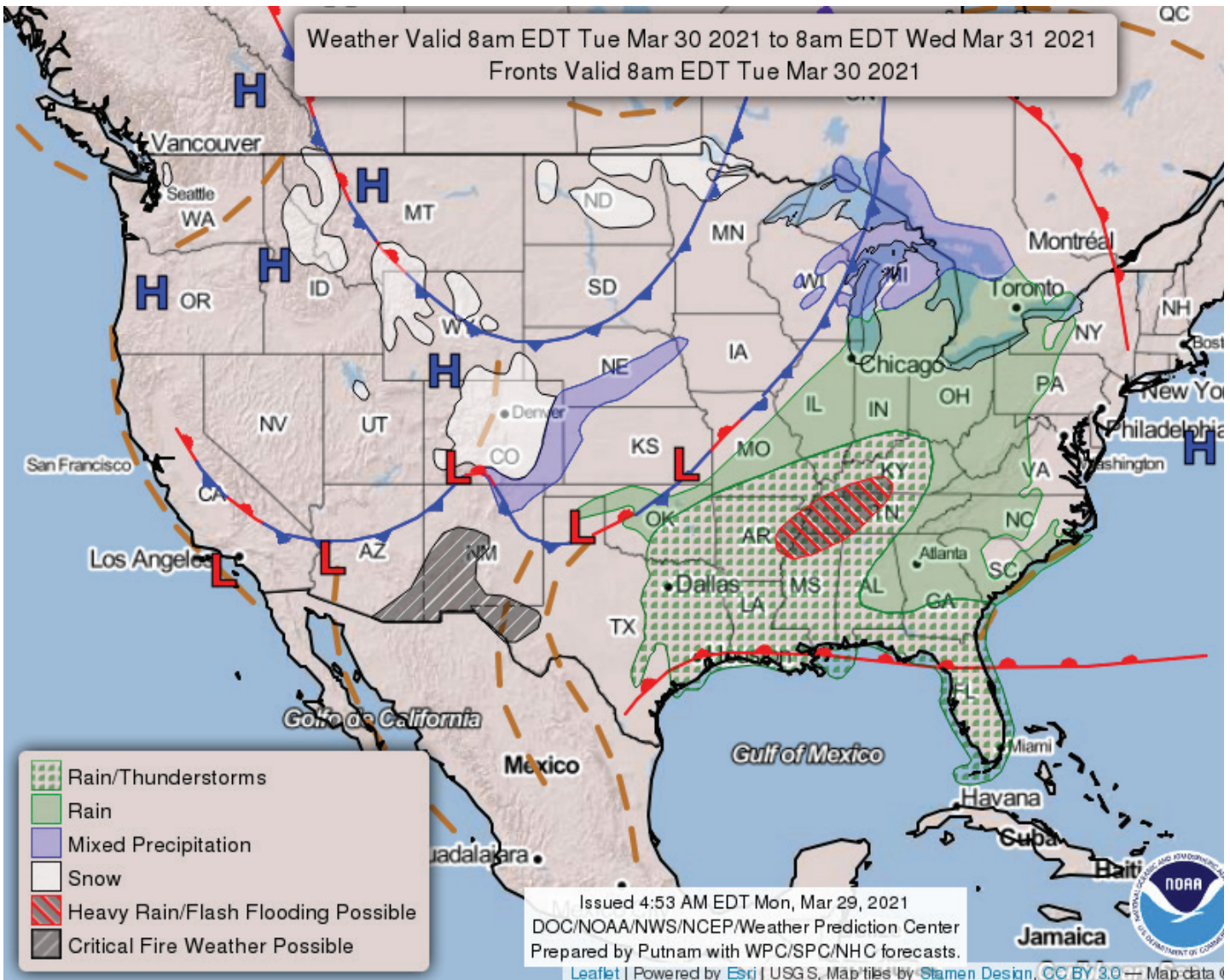
Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 17 of 78

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 79 °F at 2:12 PM (RECORD HIGH)
Low Temp: 30 °F at 11:56 PM
Wind: 35 mph at 10:04 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 86
Record Low: 0°
Average High: 48°F
Average Low: 26°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 1.06
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.36
Average Precip to date: 2.08
Precip Year to Date: 0.54
Sunset Tonight: 8:00 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 18 of 78



WHY WAIT ON GOD

Waiting, at best, is difficult. Giving up, however, can be disastrous.

We often hear the warning, "Don't ever pray for patience. God may take you at your word and hide from you for a long, long time." Whether or not we pray for patience, we often end up waiting on God for a long, long time, and in the process, learn patience. It is easy to convince ourselves that "I've waited long enough. It's time for me to strike out on my own. God will eventually catch up with me."

"We wait in hope for the Lord," said David, "He is our help and shield!" Why would a king with armies and wise men, property, and power, advise people to wait? Why not, as the warrior he once was, "move into combat?"

From his past, David could predict his future with God in control. First, the God who created all things is above all things, sees all things, controls all things and, when it is time, appears and "does His thing." David had experienced God at work in his life and certainly came to believe in God's presence and power in his life. So, he reassures us and reminds us that He "is now and will be in the future our helper and our shield."

Second, as our helper, He will, at the appropriate time, deliver us. We may not know when or understand what method of deliverance He will use, but we do know that He will deliver those who trust in Him. We have His word because it is in His Word. However, until He does come and deliver us, we are reminded that He is our shield – the One who will defend us until He delivers us. Our hope and help are in His hands.

Prayer: Give us faith, Father that will not falter or fail as we wait on You, our helper and shield. May we trust in Your greatness and goodness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. Psalm 33:20

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 19 of 78

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 20 of 78

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

400 homes evacuated, Rushmore closed amid South Dakota fires

NEMO, S.D. (AP) — Three separate wildfires in the Black Hills of South Dakota have forced evacuations of more than 400 homes northwest of Rapid City and shut down Mount Rushmore, authorities said Monday.

A fire that started near Schroeder Road in the Nemo area, about 15 miles (24 kilometers) northwest of Rapid City, had burned as much as 1 1/2 square miles (4 square kilometers) and was “still moving” on Monday afternoon, according to the Pennington County Sheriff’s Office. Several outbuildings and at least one home have been destroyed, officials said.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who traveled to Rapid City to oversee the response, said the Schroeder Road fire started on private property. She said “there have been losses and that is tragic.” No injuries have been reported.

The Sheriff’s Department warned earlier that it was a “very active and dangerous scene.” About 250 firefighters were battling the blaze on a windy afternoon when gusts have ranged from around 50 mph to 72 mph, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Two additional blazes were burning southwest of Rapid City, near Keystone, with one covering an estimated 75 acres (30.35 hectares) and the other 20 acres (8.09 hectares). That has caused Mount Rushmore National Memorial to close through at least Wednesday, as well as surrounding roads.

South Dakota transportation officials shut down a 42-mile (68-kilometer) stretch Interstate 90 from Kadoka to Murdo for three hours due to grass fires.

South Dakota governor kills transgender bill, but orders ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Monday killed a bill that would have banned transgender women and girls from female sports, then later issued weaker executive orders that include restrictions but which conservatives decried as political face-saving.

Lawmakers in more than 20 states have introduced similar bans this year, with Republican governors in three states — Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi — signing them into law. A federal court blocked a similar law in Idaho last year.

Noem’s partial veto of the bill riled GOP lawmakers and tarnished the Republican governor’s status among social conservatives. Shortly after the bill died, the governor, who has emerged as a prominent national figure in the GOP, issued two executive orders for a ban, but Republican lawmakers said the orders amounted to little more than an effort to salvage her reputation with conservatives.

The bill’s sponsor, Republican Rep. Rhonda Milstead, said Noem’s orders were “a weak message” made after she has fallen from favor with conservatives who have taken up the issue. Milstead had pushed the issue in South Dakota, arguing that athletes who are born male are naturally stronger, faster and bigger than those born female. The bill had included enforcement mechanisms and required schools to annually gather documentation of athletes’ sex at birth.

Transgender advocates said efforts to bar transgender girls and women from sports deprive transgender children of a chance to belong to a sports team when they need all the support they can get. They have also noted that most transgender athletes don’t hold a significant competitive advantage over their peers.

“Transgender kids belong in South Dakota, and they belong in sports,” said Susan Williams, who heads an advocacy organization called the Transformation Project. “It’s beyond time for elected officials in South Dakota to stop these unnecessary yearly attacks on transgender people.”

Even though the high school activities association has said there are currently no transgender students playing in girls’ sports, Noem ordered that all girls who want to play in girls’ sports leagues in public schools have to present a birth certificate or affidavit showing they were born female. A second order applied to public universities in the state, but amounted to a recommendation they enact bans. The governor also

promised to call lawmakers back into session in the coming months to take up the matter.

"Only girls should play girls' sports," Noem said in a statement, adding that she was issuing the orders because the Legislature had rejected her partial veto of the bill.

After initially saying she was excited to sign the bill this month, Noem has found herself caught in a political mess, facing tough lobbying from business interests, legal threats and talk of betrayal from social conservatives who had been reassured she was on their side.

Noem has been denigrated by conservatives for issuing a partial veto against the bill passed by the Legislature on March 8. The partial veto struck two sections from the bill and limited it to high school and elementary sports. She had argued the bill amounted to a "participation trophy" because applying the ban to collegiate athletics would result in lawsuits and the NCAA pulling tournaments from the state.

Business groups have said that if the NCAA withdrew tournaments it would cost the state millions of dollars and up to 100 full- and part-time jobs.

The governor's use of a "style and form" veto — usually reserved for cleaning up technical language — also had lawmakers arguing she was overstepping the constitutional bounds of her office. The House on Monday rejected her style and form veto and instead attempted to override it as an outright veto. The bill died after failing to get the two-thirds vote necessary to overcome a veto.

Democrat Rep. Erin Healy lauded the bill's failure, saying it would have "discriminated against a whole group of people who are already vulnerable."

Thune criticizes Biden's border policy, says wall is needed

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Sen. John Thune is piling on criticism of President Joe Biden's immigration strategy, insisting after visiting the border in South Texas that he's convinced a wall is necessary.

The Republican from South Dakota and other GOP senators last week toured a federal migrant facility in Donna, Texas, and spoke with members of the U.S. Border Patrol. As Democrats in Congress look to pass immigration reforms, the border trip gave Republicans a chance to criticize Biden's approach and call for beefed up security.

"Right now, it's just chaos," Thune said. "We need some order."

The No. 2 Senate Republican told the Associated Press on Sunday that there is appetite among GOP senators for an initiative passed in the House that would offer a process for immigrants brought to the country illegally as children to obtain U.S. citizenship. But he indicated that Republicans will push for concessions, such as resuming border wall construction and reinstating former President Donald Trump's policy of making asylum seekers wait in Mexico.

"The conditions that Democrats never want to put into the conversation about immigration are the steps that are necessary to keep the border secure and to stop the flow," he said.

Thune called it a border "crisis" that could have been prevented if Biden had heeded the warnings of the U.S. Border Patrol and immigration experts. The number of migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border has surged in recent weeks, presenting a challenge to Biden's legislative agenda.

Biden administration officials have said they inherited an untenable situation that resulted from what they say was Trump's undermining and weakening of the immigration system. But Thune blamed Biden's reversal of Trump's policies, saying it sent a "green light" to people looking to come to the U.S.

He acknowledged border security is "a challenge that's faced the country for some time," but worried about border patrol reports that half of its resources are going to caring for children who arrive alone.

He said one official at the facility in Donna asked one of his fellow senators to delete a video he took that showed children tightly packed in plastic partitions and sleeping under foil blankets.

"It breaks your heart to see these kids," Thune said, "just packed in there like sardines."

Democrats have countered Republicans' concerns about the border facilities by alleging hypocrisy after years of cheering tougher Trump policies. They say part of the surge has been caused by immigrants who were stuck at the border waiting to advance legitimate asylum claims the Trump administration failed to

process.

But Thune said that “as long as the perception is that there’s an open, porous border, people are going to keep coming.”

Suspect arrested in Rapid City homicide, police say

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Police have arrested a 40-year-old man in connection with a homicide in Rapid City last week.

Officers were sent to a residence last Tuesday for a welfare check and found the body of 44-year-old Andrew Willard Bear Robe Jr. in the garage. According to police, his injuries were consistent with a homicide. Police said the suspect was arrested Saturday evening on a possible charge of second-degree homicide. The investigation into the homicide is active and ongoing.

Legislators consider Noem’s edits to transgender sports bill

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Legislators are convening in South Dakota’s Capitol Monday to take up the only veto by Gov. Kristi Noem following a legislative session that included more than 200 bills.

The governor used a “style and form” veto to block a House bill barring transgender women and girls from competing in sports programs designated for females. Such vetoes are usually used to clean up technical language in a bill, not change its scope or power.

Besides excluding collegiate athletics, Noem is proposing two sections be struck from the bill entirely. Noem believes if the bill becomes law it would result in punitive action from some organizations, including the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the American Civil Liberties Union.

That has led state lawmakers who passed it to call Noem’s move unconstitutional. Both the Senate and the House will formally consider Noem’s recommended changes, and if a majority in each chamber concur, the day’s business will be done.

But Republican leaders are telling their caucus to reject the governor’s changes, which would send the bill back to her and she would have another chance to sign in. Two-thirds majority of lawmakers would be needed to override a veto if Noem doesn’t sign it.

Noem could also call a special session where a new bill with her changes could be considered.

Sink Hole Investigation: Historic Photos Show South Dakota Operated Second Underground Mine in Hideaway Hills

RAPID CITY, S.D., March 29, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- Historic photographs from the 1960s provide evidence the state of South Dakota operated a second mine beneath portions of the Black Hawk area that began to collapse in April 2020, leaving homes in the Hideaway Hills subdivision worthless.

The photos, taken by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other agencies, contradict state claims it conducted surface mining only. They also demonstrate that the whole neighborhood may be in danger of collapse, not just the portion that has done so already.

“We have been digging to find these pictures, and what they show is the state was doing plenty of digging too – underground, in the northwest part of the subdivision” says Kathleen Barrow of Fox Rothschild, who is seeking class action status in a lawsuit on behalf of 300 homeowners against the state. “This is further proof that the state of South Dakota is responsible for the danger my clients are facing and the damage to their homes and neighborhood.”

The photos show a mine entrance in the side of a cliff not far from where the state was also conducting surface mining.

“It’s pretty obvious it’s some kind of entrance to underground workings,” says Nick Anderson, a geologist in Rapid City. “What we can see in the photos matches testing we’ve done with electric conductivity and resistivity and other technology indicating voids beneath the surface.”

The photos also corroborate anecdotal evidence collected from older residents, who remember exploring

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 24 of 78

the mine entrance in the northwest portion of Hideaway Hills when they were children.

For generations, the state operated gypsum mines throughout the region and still owns the subsurface and mineral rights. The lawsuit charges the state failed to properly remediate and maintain unstable land after the mining operation was shuttered in the early 1990s and surface property was sold to builders who developed Hideaway Hills. Homeowners were not informed of the hidden dangers to the land and their homes caused by the state's mining activity and neglect, Ms. Barrow said.

Large sinkholes – collapsing mine cavities – that opened last year forced some Hideaway Hills homeowners to evacuate. Houses in the neighborhood cannot be sold as values have dropped to zero.

The state contends it is not responsible for the destruction, even though a trust fund created with revenue generated from the mining operation is now valued at over \$330 million.

The case is Andrew Morse and John and Emily Clarke et al. v. State of South Dakota et al., No. 46CIV-20-000295 in the Circuit Court, 4th Judicial District, County of Meade, South Dakota.

For more information on Fox Rothschild, visit foxrothschild.com.

Media Contact: Mark Annick mark@androvett.com 800-559-4534

View original content to download multimedia: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/sink-hole-investigation-historic-photos-show-south-dakota-operated-second-underground-mine-in-hideaway-hills-301257324.html>

SOURCE Fox Rothschild

Video shows Asian American woman assaulted on NYC street

NEW YORK (AP) — An Asian American woman was attacked by a man who repeatedly kicked her in front of witnesses who seemingly stood by, according to surveillance footage released by the New York City Police Department.

The 65-year-old woman was walking in midtown Manhattan on Monday afternoon when a man came up to her and kicked her in the stomach, knocking her to the ground, the NYPD said.

The man then stomped on the woman's face several times while hurling anti-Asian sentiments at her, police said. He later casually walked away, the footage shows.

The woman was hospitalized with serious injuries.

According to video footage, a man inside a building lobby seemingly stopped what he was doing to watch the assault. Later, two more men wearing blazers walked into the frame and one of them closed the door as the woman was on the ground.

The property developer and manager of the building, Bordsky Organization, wrote on Instagram that it was aware of the assault and the staff who witnessed it were suspended pending an investigation.

The NYPD's Hate Crime Task Force is investigating the attack and has asked anyone with information to contact the department.

NYPD says there have been 33 hate crimes with an Asian victim so far this year, news outlets reported.

Police Commissioner Dermot Shea previously said the agency would increase their outreach and patrols in predominantly Asian communities amid a national spike of anti-Asian hate crimes.

According to a report from Stop AAPI Hate over 3,795 incidents were reported to the organization from March 19, 2020, to February 28, 2021. The organization said that number is "only a fraction of the number of hate incidents that actually occur."

Thailand denies forcing fleeing villagers back to Myanmar

By TASSANEE VEJPONGSA Associated Press

MAE SAM LAEP, Thailand (AP) — Thailand's prime minister denied Tuesday that his country's security forces forced villagers back to Myanmar who had fled from military airstrikes, saying they returned home on their own accord.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, nevertheless, said his country is ready to shelter anyone who is escaping fighting, as it has done many times in recent decades. His comments came a day after humanitarian

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 25 of 78

groups said Thailand has been sending back some of the thousands of people who have fled a series of Myanmar military airstrikes.

"There is no influx of refugees yet. We asked those who crossed to Thailand if they have any problem in their area. When they say no problem, we just asked them to return to their land first. We asked, we did not use any force," Prayuth told reporters.

"We won't push them back," he said. "If they are having fighting, how can we do so? But if they don't have any fighting at the moment, can they go back first?"

The weekend strikes, which sent ethnic Karen people to seek safety in Thailand, were another escalation in the violent crackdown by Myanmar's junta on protests against its Feb. 1 takeover.

At least 510 protesters have been killed since the coup, according to Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which says the actual toll is likely much higher. It says 2,574 people have been detained. Protests continued Tuesday despite the deaths of more than 100 people on Saturday alone.

The coup that ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi reversed the country's progress toward democracy since her National League for Democracy party won elections in 2015 after five decades of military rule.

At Thailand's Mae Sam Laep village along the Salween River, which forms the border with Myanmar, paramilitary Thai Rangers on Tuesday twice waved off a boat that had come from the other side carrying seven people, including one lying flat and another with a bandage on his head. But ambulances soon arrived on the Thai side and it landed anyway.

Thai villagers helped medical staff carry the injured people on stretchers to a small clinic at a nearby checkpoint. One man had large bruises on his back with open wounds, an injury one medical staffer said could have been caused by an explosion.

An elderly woman in the group had small cuts and scabs all over her face. Thai nurses in protective gear to guard against COVID-19 attended to her, giving her and others tests for the coronavirus.

Another villager from the boat, 48-year-old Aye Ja Bi, said he had been wounded by a bomb dropped by a plane. His legs were hit by shrapnel and his ears were ringing, he said, but he was unable to travel to get help until Tuesday.

The airstrikes appeared to be retaliation for an attack by guerrillas of the Karen National Liberation Army on a government military outpost, in which they claimed to have killed 10 soldiers and captured eight. The group is fighting for greater autonomy for the Karen people.

Thai authorities, who claimed weeks ago to be preparing for an influx of refugees, have responded inconsistently. A group of 2,500-3,000 refugees crossed into Thailand on Sunday, according to several humanitarian aid agencies who have long worked with the Karen.

They said on Monday, however, that Thai soldiers had begun to force people to return to Myanmar.

"They told them it was safe to go back even though it is not safe. They were afraid to go back but they had no choice," said a spokesperson for the Karen Peace Support Network, a group of Karen civil society organizations in Myanmar.

Two other people confirmed that refugees were being sent back to Myanmar. All three spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the issue.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanee Sangrat said in a statement Monday night that claims some Karen were being forced to return to Myanmar were inaccurate and "cite information solely from non-official sources without confirming the facts from official sources on the ground."

"In fact, the Thai authorities will continue to look after those on the Thai side while assessing the evolving situation and the needs on the ground," he said.

The army has restricted journalists' access to the area where the villagers crossed the border.

Myanmar's government has battled Karen guerrillas on and off for years — along with other ethnic minorities seeking more autonomy — but the airstrikes marked a major escalation of violence.

Political organizations representing the Karen and Kachin in northern Myanmar have issued statements in recent weeks warning the government against shooting protesters in their regions and threatening a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 26 of 78

response.

They were joined Tuesday by the Three Brothers Alliance, which represent the guerrilla armies of the Rakhine, Kokang and Ta-ang -- also known as Palaung -- minorities.

The alliance condemned the killing of protesters and said if it did not stop immediately, they would abandon a self-declared cease-fire and join with other groups to protect the people.

Their statement, like those of the Karen and Kachin, seemed to suggest that any military response by them would be in their home areas, not in the cities of central Myanmar where the protests and repression have been the strongest.

Supporters of the protest movement are hoping that the ethnic armed groups could help pressure the junta. Protest leaders in hiding say they have held talks, but there have been no commitments.

The United States on Monday suspended a trade deal with Myanmar, also known as Burma, until a democratic government is restored in the Southeast Asian country.

The office of the U.S. Trade Representative said the country was immediately suspending "all U.S. engagement with Burma under the 2013 Trade and Investment Framework Agreement." Under the agreement, the two countries cooperated on trade and investment issues in an effort to integrate Myanmar into the global economy, a reward for the military's decision to allow a return to democracy — a transition that ended abruptly with last month's coup.

The announcement Monday doesn't stop trade between the two countries. Last week, the United States restricted American dealings with two giant Myanmar military holding companies that dominate much of that country's economy.

China sharply reduces elected seats in Hong Kong legislature

By ZEN SOO and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — China has sharply reduced the number of directly elected seats in Hong Kong's legislature in a setback for the territory's already beleaguered democracy movement.

The changes were announced Tuesday after a two-day meeting of China's top legislature.

The legislature will be expanded to 90 seats, and only 20 will be elected by the public. Currently, half of the 70-seat legislature — 35 seats — is directly elected.

The move is part of a two-phase effort to rein in political protest and opposition in Hong Kong, which is part of China but has had a more liberal political system as a former British colony. China imposed a national security law on Hong Kong last year and is following up this year with a revamp of the electoral process.

The crackdown comes in the wake of months of pro-democracy protests in 2019 that brought hundreds of thousands to the streets and turned violent as the government resisted the movement's demands.

"It's a very sad day for Hong Kong. The election system is completely dismantled," said former lawmaker and Democratic Party member Emily Lau.

"They are going to get rid of opposition voices because under this new system, which is so oppressive and restrictive, I don't think any self-respecting individual will want to take part," Lau said.

China's top legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, amended Hong Kong's constitution to pave the way for the changes. The Hong Kong government is now tasked with revising its electoral laws and holding an election.

In the current 70-member legislature, voters elect half the members and the other half are chosen by constituencies representing various professions and interest groups. Many of the constituencies lean pro-Beijing, ensuring that wing a majority in the legislature.

The new body will have 20 elected members, 30 chosen by the constituencies and 40 by an Election Committee which also chooses the city's leader.

The committee, which will be expanded from 1,200 to 1,500 members, is dominated by supporters of the central government in Beijing.

Election hopefuls will undergo vetting by the national security police and a committee that oversees national security in the city.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 27 of 78

A new separate body will also be established to review the qualifications of candidates for office in Hong Kong to ensure the city is governed by “patriots,” in the language of the central government.

The full National People’s Congress rubber-stamped a proposal in mid-March that authorized the Standing Committee to amend the Basic Law, the constitution that has governed Hong Kong since the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997 under a “one country, two systems” framework that promised it semi-autonomy for 50 years.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said at a news conference Tuesday that the new committee to vet candidates will consist of a few government officials who are also trusted by the central government.

Lam dismissed concerns that the changes will affect plans for the city to achieve universal suffrage and allow residents to vote for their leader.

“I may as well say this very categorically that the central government is very sincere to give Hong Kong people so-called more democracy, that is, universal suffrage,” Lam said.

She blamed pro-democracy lawmakers for objecting in 2014 to a proposal that would have allowed residents to vote for the chief executive on the condition that Beijing would vet the candidates.

“As we move ahead with the current set of improvements in place, then in accordance with Hong Kong’s actual situation and in an orderly and gradual manner ... I’m quite certain that we will still have universal suffrage in selecting the chief executive,” she said.

“We just need to act in concert, and make sure that we are not moving away from this very fundamental concept of ‘one country, two systems,’” she said.

The political opposition in Hong Kong — which has sought more democracy — sees the changes as part of a broader effort to keep them out of office.

Democratic Party chairman Lo Kin-hei said there are questions whether the new system “can actually reflect what Hong Kong people think and what Hong Kong people believe.”

Lo said members of the Democratic Party are still discussing whether they plan to run for election.

“All those changes will affect how we discuss and affect how our party members think about the election system, and whether or not we will run for election in the future,” he said.

In part, it comes down to the definition of patriots. The opposition tried to block legislation by filibustering a key legislative committee for months and disrupting legislative proceedings.

Beijing, which prioritizes political stability, sees these actions as interfering with the governing of Hong Kong and wants to keep these actors out of government.

A statement by Beijing’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office said the Hong Kong national security law provided a solid legal foundation to safeguard national security and that the electoral reforms provide a “solid institutional guarantee” of the city’s “one country, two systems” framework and ensure that only “patriots” rule Hong Kong.

The statement also said that with the electoral changes, the relationship between the city’s leader and the legislature will be smoother, and the “various deep-seated contradictions and problems that have plagued Hong Kong for a long time” will be more effectively resolved.

Moritsugu reported from Beijing.

World leaders call for pandemic treaty, but short on details

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — More than 20 heads of government and global agencies called in a commentary published Tuesday for an international treaty for pandemic preparedness that they say will protect future generations in the wake of COVID-19.

But there were few details to explain how such an agreement might actually compel countries to act more cooperatively.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and leaders including Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain, Premier Mario Draghi of Italy and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 28 of 78

proposed "a renewed collective commitment" to reinforce preparedness and response systems by leveraging the U.N. health agency's constitution.

"The world cannot afford to wait until the pandemic is over to start planning for the next one," Tedros said during a news conference. He said the treaty would provide "a framework for international cooperation and solidarity" and address issues like surveillance systems and responding to outbreaks.

International regulations governing health and implemented by WHO already exist — and can be disregarded by countries with few consequences. Despite an obligation for nations to share critical epidemic data and materials quickly with WHO, for example, China declined to do so when the coronavirus first broke out.

And with no enforcement powers, WHO officials had little means of compelling them to share details, an AP investigation last year found.

Steven Solomon, WHO's principal legal officer, said the proposed pandemic treaty would need to be ratified by lawmakers in the participating countries.

"Specifics about enforcement will be up to member states to decide on," Solomon said.

European Council President Charles Michel first laid out the idea of a pandemic treaty at the U.N. General Assembly in December. Joining Tedros at Tuesday's briefing, Michel said the global community needs to "build a pandemic defense for future generations that extends far beyond today's crisis. For this, we must translate the political will into concrete actions."

Gian Luca Burci, a former WHO legal counsel who is now a professor at the Graduate Institute of international affairs in Geneva, described the proposal as an attempted "big fix" involving information sharing, preparedness and response, saying the concept is "like a Christmas tree, frankly."

"But to me, the risk is that it diverts attention from the tool that we have" — WHO's existing International Health Regulations, Burci said recently. He said his fear was those regulations would get short shrift and receive "cosmetic improvements, but fundamentally remain a weak instrument."

Although the 25 signatories of the commentary called for "solidarity," and greater "societal commitment," there was no indication any country would soon change its own approach to responding to the pandemic. China, Russia and the United States didn't join in signing the statement.

WHO legal officer Solomon said the pandemic treaty might also address issues such as the sharing of vaccine technology and vaccine supplies, but gave no indication how that might happen. Despite WHO's calls for patents to be waived during the pandemic, rich countries have continued to oppose efforts by poor countries to compel them to share vaccine manufacturing technology.

Tedros pleaded with rich countries last week to immediately donate 10 million COVID-19 vaccines so that immunization campaigns could start in all countries within the first 100 days of the year. Not a single country has yet publicly offered to share its vaccines immediately. Of the more than 459 million vaccines administered globally, the majority have been in just 10 countries — and 28% in just one. WHO didn't identify the countries.

Jamey Keaten contributed to this report from Geneva.

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With ship now freed, a probe into Suez Canal blockage begins

By SAMY MAGDY and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — Experts boarded the massive container ship Tuesday that had blocked Egypt's vital Suez Canal and disrupted global trade for nearly a week, seeking answers to a single question that could have billions of dollars in legal repercussions: What went wrong?

As convoys of ships again began traveling through the artery linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas, a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 29 of 78

canal service provider said more than 300 vessels carrying everything from crude oil to cattle were waiting for their turn, a process that will take days. Egyptian government officials, insurers, shippers and others similarly waited for more details about what caused the skyscraper-sized Ever Given to become wedged across the canal on March 23.

When blame gets assigned, it will likely lead to years of litigation to recoup the costs of repairing the ship, fixing the canal and reimbursing those who saw their cargo shipments disrupted. Since the vessel is owned by a Japanese firm, operated by a Taiwanese shipper, flagged in Panama and now stuck in Egypt, matters quickly become an international morass.

"This ship is a multinational conglomeration," said Capt. John Konrad, the founder and CEO of the shipping news website gcaptain.com.

Experts boarded the Ever Given as it idled Tuesday in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, just north of the site where it previously blocked the canal. A senior canal pilot, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to journalists, told The Associated Press that experts were looking for signs of damage and trying to determine why the vessel ran aground.

There could be significant damage to the the ship, Konrad warned. Stuck for days across the canal, the ship's middle rose and fell with the tide, bending up and down under the tremendous weight of some 20,000 containers across its 400-meter (quarter-mile) length. On Monday, when workers partially floated the ship, all that pressure came forward to its bow.

"Structural integrity is No. 1. You know, there was a lot of strain on that ship as it was sagging in the waterway," Konrad said. "They have to check everything for cracks and particularly that rudder and the propeller in the back that's connected to the engine room."

"And then they have to go through all the mechanical equipment, make sure they test the engines, all the safety valves, all the equipment, and then determine that it's safe to sail either by itself or with a tug escort to the next port," he added.

The ship's owner, Shoei Kisen Kaisha Ltd., said Tuesday that it would be part of the investigation along with other parties, though it did not identify them by name. It also refused to discuss possible causes of the grounding, including the ship's speed and the high winds that buffeted it during a sandstorm, saying it could not comment on an ongoing investigation. Initial reports also suggested a "blackout" struck the vessel, something denied by the ship's technical manager.

The company added that any damage to the ship was believed to be mostly on its keel. It said it was not immediately known whether the vessel will be repaired on site in Egypt or elsewhere, or whether it will eventually head to its initial destination of Rotterdam. That is a decision to be made by its operator, rather than the shipowner, the company said.

The grounding of the ship had halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce. Analysts expect it could take at least another 10 days to clear the backlog. The losses to shippers, as well as any physical damage to the vessel itself, likely will see lawsuits.

Shoei Kisen Kaisha Ltd. is covered with some \$3 billion in liability insurance through 13 Protection & Indemnity Clubs. Those clubs are not-for-profit mutual insurers used by the vast majority of global shipping firms.

Global legal firm Clyde and Co. said the Ever Given's owner likely would pay Egypt's canal authority for the assistance already rendered to the vessel. The authority also could fine the Ever Given.

"We anticipate a detailed investigation will follow which will determine the cause," the firm said. "Evidently the cause will impact upon the legal liabilities of the ship and cargo interests."

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi traveled Tuesday to a canal office in Ismailia to praise those who freed the vessel.

"We don't want this event to happen again in the Suez, but it was dealt with effectively and efficiently," he said in televised remarks.

On Monday, a flotilla of tugboats helped by the tides, wrenched the bulbous bow of Ever Given from the canal's sandy bank, where it had been firmly lodged. The tugs blared their horns in jubilation as they

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 30 of 78

guided the Ever Given through the water after days of futility that had captivated the world, drawing scrutiny and social media ridicule.

The Ever Given had crashed into a bank of a single-lane stretch of the canal about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez. That forced some ships to take the long, alternate route around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa's southern tip — a 5,000-kilometer (3,100-mile) detour that costs ships hundreds of thousands of dollars in fuel and other costs.

The unprecedented shutdown, which raised fears of extended delays, goods shortages and rising costs for consumers, added to strain on the shipping industry already under pressure from the coronavirus pandemic.

Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writers Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo and Isabel DeBre in Dubai contributed to this report.

Trump's heir? Pence reemerges, lays groundwork for 2024 run

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When former President Donald Trump was asked to list those he considers the future leaders of the Republican Party, he quickly rattled off names including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz. Conspicuously absent from the list: Mike Pence.

The former vice president is steadily reentering public life as he eyes a potential run for the White House in 2024. He's joining conservative organizations, writing op-eds, delivering speeches and launching an advocacy group that will focus on promoting the Trump administration's accomplishments.

But Trump's neglect in mentioning Pence during a podcast interview earlier this month signals the former vice president's unique challenge. For someone who built a reputation as one of Trump's most steadfast supporters, Pence is now viewed with suspicion among many Republicans for observing his constitutional duty in January to facilitate a peaceful transfer of power to the Biden administration, a decision that still has Trump fuming.

To prevail in a Republican presidential primary, Pence may have to reinforce his loyalty to Trump while defending his decisions during the final days of the administration when the president falsely alleged widespread voter fraud, contributing to a deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol. If anyone can achieve this awkward balance, some Republicans say, it's Pence.

"Anybody who can pull off an endorsement of Ted Cruz and become Donald Trump's vice presidential nominee should not be counted out," said Republican strategist Alice Stewart, who worked for Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign when Pence endorsed him. "He has a way of splitting hairs and threading the needle that has paid off in the past."

Pence aides generally brush off talk of the next presidential election. They insist he is focused on his family and next year's midterm elections, when Republicans are well positioned to regain at least one chamber of Congress. Allies argue that, over time, the anger will subside.

"I think 2024's a long time away and if Mike Pence runs for president he will appeal to the Republican base in a way that will make him a strong contender," said Republican Rep. Jim Banks of Indiana, who chairs the conservative Republican Study Committee and has already endorsed a Pence 2024 run. "If and when Mike Pence steps back up to the plate, I think he will have strong appeal among Republicans nationwide."

Pence declined to comment for this story. For their part, Trump aides warn against reading too much into the omission during the podcast interview.

"That was not an exclusive list," said Trump adviser Jason Miller. Still, Trump continued to deride Pence in the interview, falsely claiming Pence had the authority to unilaterally overturn the results of the election, even though he did not.

Trump has not said whether he will seek the White House again in 2024. If he doesn't, other Republicans are making clear they won't cede the race to Pence. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, is already visiting the critical primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 31 of 78

Since leaving office in January, Pence, who served as Indiana's governor and a member of Congress before being tapped as Trump's running mate, has kept a lower profile. He's pieced together a portfolio aimed at maintaining influence, paying the bills and laying the groundwork for an expected presidential run.

He's forged a partnerships with the conservative Heritage Foundation and has even been discussed as a potential president of the organization, according to two people familiar with the discussions. He's joined the Young America's Foundation and a top speakers' bureau, penned an op-ed for the Daily Signal in which he perpetuated falsehoods about the 2020 election, and recently toured a Christian relief organization in North Carolina. He will make his first public speech since leaving office next month at the Palmetto Family Council's annual fundraiser in South Carolina, another crucial primary state.

Pence has also discussed writing a book, according to aides, has been in continued conversation with his evangelical allies, and plans to spend much of the next two years helping Republican candidates as they try to reclaim House and Senate majorities in 2022. He's also planning to launch an advocacy organization that aides and allies say will give him a platform to defend the Trump administration's record and push back on the current president's policies as he tries to merge the traditional conservative movement with Trumpism.

"He's doing what he needs to be doing to lay the groundwork in the event he wants to set up an exploratory committee," Stewart said. "You have to make money, lay the groundwork, gauge the support and then pull the trigger."

Pence's allies see him as the natural Trump heir, someone who can keep his base engaged while winning back suburban voters who left the party in droves during the Trump era.

"Obviously Mike Pence has a very different persona, a very different tone. That probably is an understatement," said former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, a longtime friend who now leads the Young America's Foundation. "As long as he can still talk about the things that Trump voters care about, but do so in a way that's more reflective of kind of a Midwesterner, that I think ... would be attractive to those voters."

Skeptics, meanwhile, see another old, milquetoast white man saddled with Trump's baggage, but without his charisma. For these critics, Pence is a sycophant who debased himself for four years to avoid Trump's wrath — only to take the blame when Trump insisted, wrongly, that Pence could unilaterally overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The anger at Pence took a dangerously personal turn on Jan. 6 when rioters paraded through the Capitol chanting "Hang Mike Pence" as a mob outside set up a makeshift gallows. During Trump's impeachment trial for sparking the insurrection, video was presented showing Pence being rushed to safety, sheltering in an office with his family just 100 feet from the rioters.

Signs that many in the GOP still hold Pence responsible for losing the election have dotted the highway in many Trump strongholds, where masking tape and markers block out his name on Trump-Pence flags and lawn signs.

Meanwhile, others, like Pompeo, are trying to claim the Trump mantle without as much baggage.

"In many ways I think his future's in Trump's hands," longtime Republican pollster Whit Ayres said of Pence. If Trump publicly praises Pence as a loyal lieutenant, Ayers said, he can see him being a viable candidate. But if Trump continues to publicly blame Pence for their loss in November, "he's toast," Ayres said.

In the meantime, Pence has tried to project the impression that he and the former president have mended fences, referencing their conversations at a meeting last month with members of the conservative Republican Study Committee. Pence and Trump have spoken multiple times since leaving office, according to aides for both men.

"He was very complementary of President Trump and he told us that he and President Trump had been talking and reminiscing about the great accomplishments of the administration and all of that," said Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La., who attended.

While Johnson acknowledged the tensions during the final days of the administration "obviously adds a degree of difficulty" for Pence, he argued that the former vice president could overcome trepidation with a focus on Trump's policy achievements.

"He helped achieve those and so lays claim to that legacy," Johnson said.

"I think if he does get in he's a viable candidate," added Rep. Jeff Duncan of South Carolina, whose endorsement could provide Pence with a boost if he becomes a candidate. "He's a force to be reckoned with."

Some medical experts unconvinced about holding Tokyo Games

By YURI KAGEYAMA and STEPHEN WADE Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The Tokyo Olympics open in under four months, and the torch relay has begun to criss-cross Japan with 10,000 runners. Organizers say they are mitigating the risks, but some medical experts aren't convinced.

"It is best to not hold the Olympics given the considerable risks," Dr. Norio Sugaya, an infectious diseases expert at Keiyu Hospital in Yokohama, told The Associated Press. "The risks are high in Japan. Japan is dangerous, not a safe place at all."

Sugaya believes vaccinating 50-70% of the general public should be "a prerequisite" to safely hold the Olympics, a highly unlikely scenario given the slow vaccine rollout in Japan.

Fewer than 1% of the population has been vaccinated so far, and all are medical professionals. Most of the general public is not expected to be vaccinated by the time the Olympics open July 23.

"Tens of thousands of foreigners are going to be entering the country, including mass media, in a short period of time," Sugaya said, "the challenges are going to be enormous."

The Japanese government and local Olympic organizers have said vaccination is not a prerequisite for the Olympics, although the International Olympic Committee is encouraging the 15,400 Olympic and Paralympic athletes to be vaccinated when they enter Japan.

The number of COVID-19-related deaths in Japan is about 9,000 — far fewer than many countries — but Sugaya stressed the number is among the highest in Asia.

Hospital systems are stretched, especially in hardest hit areas such as Tokyo.

Japan never pushed PCR testing, meaning few mechanisms are in place to prevent infection clusters. There hasn't been a national lockdown, but the government has periodically issued a "state of emergency," urging people to work from home and restaurants to close early.

Dr. Toshio Nakagawa, who heads the Japan Medical Association, expressed serious concern about what he called "a rebound" of coronavirus cases. He called for preventive measures.

"To prevent a fourth wave, we have to act forcefully and extremely quickly," he told reporters earlier this month.

Taisuke Nakata and Daisuke Fujii, professors of economics at the University of Tokyo, have been carrying out projections for the spread of the coronavirus, adapting a standard epidemiological model but taking into account economic activity as measured by GDP and mobility data.

According to their projections, daily infection cases in Tokyo will total more than 1,000 people by May, peaking in July, right about the time the Olympics are on. Daily cases have hovered at about 300 people for Tokyo lately.

They say that's an "optimistic" scenario that assumes vaccines will be gradually rolling out by then.

The other possible scenario has the government declaring a state of emergency as daily cases climb. That could mean the Olympics will be held in the middle of an "emergency."

The professors declined to comment directly on the wisdom of holding the Olympics.

Despite the warnings, the Japanese government and Tokyo Olympics organizers remain determined to go ahead with the Games. Tokyo is officially spending \$15.4 billion to prepare the Olympics, but several government audits say it might be twice that much. All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

The chief driver of the Olympics is the IOC, which derives almost 75% of its income from broadcast rights and needs to get the games on television.

Organizers say they will hold a "safe and secure" Olympics by keeping athletes and officials in a "bubble," administering periodic tests, and then getting everyone to leave Japan as soon as possible.

Last week the IOC said it would cut back on the number of accredited participants entering Japan,

providing credentials only to those who "have essential and operational responsibilities."

Japanese news agency Kyodo has reported, citing unidentified sources, that 90,000 people are expected to enter Japan from abroad. About 30,000 of those are Olympic and Paralympic athletes, coaches, staff and officials.

That leaves 60,000, and Kyodo said the plan is to cut that to about 30,000, many of whom would be news media.

In addition, organizers said all ticket holders from abroad would be banned from entering.

Public opinion surveys show most Japanese want the Tokyo Games canceled or postponed again.

Taro Yamamoto, a former lawmaker, said Japan is not prepared to deal with an influx of travelers from abroad.

"If Japan has not been able to protect its own people, it cannot claim to be able to protect people from all over the world," during the Olympics, he said. "To keep insisting the Games will go on is just madness."

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

Yuri Kageyama is on Twitter <https://twitter.com/yurikageyama>

Stephen Wade is on Twitter <https://twitter.com/StephenWadeAP>

Vital to a clean world, scavengers left to plead for vaccine

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — The scavengers wait patiently for a dump truck to tip the trash on the summit of the landfill outside New Delhi. Armed with plastic bags, they plunge their bare hands into the garbage and start sorting it.

Every day, more than 2,300 tons of garbage is dumped at the landfill at Bhalswa that covers an area bigger than 50 football fields, with a pile taller than a 17-story building. And every day, thousands of these informal workers climb the precarious slopes to pick through what can be salvaged.

They are among the estimated 20 million people around the world — in rich nations and poor — who are pivotal in keeping cities clean, alongside paid sanitation employees. But unlike those municipal workers, they usually are not eligible for the coronavirus vaccine and are finding it hard to get the shots.

The pandemic has amplified the risks that these informal workers face. Few have their own protective gear or even clean water to wash their hands, said Chitra Mukherjee of Chintan, a nonprofit environmental research group in New Delhi.

"If they are not vaccinated, then the cities will suffer," Mukherjee said.

Manuwara Begum, 46, lives in a cardboard hut behind a five-star hotel in the heart of New Delhi and feels the inequity keenly. Chintan estimates that each year, those like her save the local government over \$50 million and eliminate over 900,000 tons of carbon dioxide by diverting waste away from landfills.

Still, they are not considered "essential workers" and thus are ineligible for vaccinations.

Begum has started an online petition pleading for vaccines and asking, "Are we not human?"

Sanitation workers employed by local governments in South Africa and Zimbabwe are likely to be in line for the COVID-19 vaccine after health workers, unlike those who sort through the trash. At the Dandora landfill in Kenya's capital of Nairobi, some of the scavengers who are not eligible for a shot wear medical gear discarded by hospitals and health clinics, saying it especially protects them from the weather during the rainy season.

There is no doubt that these people provide an essential service, says Louise Guibrunet, a researcher at National Autonomous University of Mexico who has studied the issue.

In Mexico, scavengers help municipal workers on garbage trucks and often collect trash from neighborhoods not served by authorities. The work is dangerous, and injuries are common, so governments have an incentive to not recognize them or provide benefits like health care, she said.

They often are already poor, moving to unfamiliar cities to eke out a living by sorting garbage, says

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 34 of 78

Robin Jeffrey, a professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. That many of these workers in India belong to poor Muslim or Dalit communities, who once were known as “untouchables” at the bottom of the country’s caste system, adds a layer of prejudice.

“The vaccine is just another, and very dramatic, example of an exclusion that has prevailed before COVID-19 came on the horizon,” said Jeffrey, who co-authored a book on waste in India in 2018.

India said it will give vaccines to everyone over 45 starting April 1. At private hospitals, each shot is sold for 250 rupees (\$3.45), but they are free at government hospitals.

Because the pandemic sent the price of oil crashing, it became cheaper to make new plastic than to recycle it. In many countries, closed borders brought recycling markets to a halt, lowering demand for reused materials that the workers collect.

In New Delhi, a pound of plastic bottles sells for the equivalent of 11 U.S. cents, half of what it brought before the pandemic. Sahra Bano, 37, who lives near the Bhalswa landfill and sells what she can scavenge, says she used to earn about 400 rupees (\$5) per day. Now, getting even half that is difficult.

Toxic runoff from the landfill infiltrates the groundwater, so she must spend 40 rupees (5 cents) per day on bottled water; the rest of what she earns goes for food. To earn enough to get one shot of the vaccine, she said she would have to collect and sell an additional 31 pounds of plastic bottles.

“We are struggling to feed our family. How can we buy vaccines?” she asks.

To get the free vaccine from an overburdened public hospital, she would have to wait there for days, and each day away from work is one without food on the table. Moreover, the stigma associated with waste workers in India means they are often turned away from such facilities.

“They don’t treat us well,” Bano says.

Any illness means visiting a drugstore, not a doctor, for medicine.

If they’re lucky, the person recovers, she says, adding: “If not, what can we do?”

Associated Press writers Tom Odula in Nairobi; Farai Mutsaka in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg contributed to this report.

This story has been updated with the correct spelling of the surname Begum, not Begun.

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

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Spanish resorts languish while Madrid hosts Europe’s parties

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — In Madrid, the real party starts at 11 p.m. after the bars close — and curfew kicks in.

That’s when young, polyglot groups of revelers from Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and, most noticeably, France, join their Spanish contemporaries in Old Madrid’s narrow streets to seek illicit fun. Most are in their early 20s, eager to party in the Spanish capital like they haven’t been able to do for months at home under strict lockdowns.

With its policy of open bars and restaurants — indoors and outdoors — and by keeping museums and theaters running even when outbreaks have strained hospitals, Madrid has built a reputation as an oasis of fun in Europe’s desert of restrictions.

Other Spanish regions have a stricter approach to entertainment. Even sunny coastal resorts offer a limited range of options for the few visitors that started to arrive, coinciding with Easter week, amid a set

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 35 of 78

of contradictory European travel rules.

"It's a real privilege for me to go into bars because in France you can't. Here I can go to restaurants, share time with friends outside of home, discover the city," Romy Karel said. The 20-year-old Berliner flew to Madrid last Thursday from Bordeaux, the southern French city where she's studying social sciences.

"I can't remember when was the last time I did this," she said.

The visitors are bringing some vital business to locals and giving politicians much to debate about before a polarized regional election. Isabel Díaz Ayuso, the regional president of Madrid who is running for reelection, is trying to attract votes beyond her conservative supporters by campaigning under the slogan of "freedom."

Outside the capital, efforts to jumpstart tourism are drawing mixed results. In part, that's due to a patchwork of rules at regional, national and even European levels that curb domestic nonessential travel in many countries while leaving a loophole for those seeking a Spanish holiday.

Although Germany has banned all domestic tourism and discouraged travel abroad, the government allows trips to Spain's Balearic Islands, which have a low infection rate. Bookings of flights and hotels followed even though many were disappointed to find on arrival that bars and restaurants were shut at night.

"In Germany, we have so many rules that coming here feels like freedom," said Marius Hoffman, 18, shortly after he landed in the archipelago's capital, Palma de Mallorca, this past weekend.

David Stock, another German traveler who visited Granada's famed Alhambra complex this week, acknowledged the paradox of his government's rules combined with Spain's embracing of tourists.

"There are strange rules everywhere these days," Stock said.

In France, hard-hit regions are curtailing free movement to a 10-kilometer (roughly six-mile) radius from home. Together with the nationwide nighttime curfew and the total closure of bars and restaurants since last October, it's proving too much for many, who look south for excitement.

France now accounts for one-fifth of all incoming flights to Madrid, while cellphone roaming data analysis has shown an increasing uptick of French mobiles in the Spanish capital since January — peaking around weekends.

When curfew begins, many of the fun-seekers head for underground gatherings advertised via messaging groups. Others recruit fellow party animals on their way back to their rented Airbnbs. Last weekend, police said they broke up more than 350 illegal parties, with some of the attendees hiding in closets or other "implausible" places.

Spain recently said it would extend a negative coronavirus test requirement in effect for arrivals by sea or air to include those entering from France by land.

Still, foreigners like Hoffman or Karel can fly direct from Munich or Bordeaux to beach resorts or cultural wonders in Spain, while Spaniards can't travel across regions in the country to their second homes or visit relatives.

This rankles with many, such as Nuria López, a 45-year-old pastry shop owner in the Spanish capital.

"It's unfair," López said. "But it does help the economy in Madrid and we need that."

Like her, many see the need to boost an industry that in 2019 accounted for 12.5% of Spain's gross domestic product and employed nearly 13% of its workforce. The near-total halt of international travel, paired with last year's first uncompromising lockdown, meant that the economy shrank 10.8% in 2020, the biggest drop since the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.

So even as hospitals filled once again after Christmas, politicians resisted the pressure to follow other European countries in ordering full stay-at-home orders, closing schools or most businesses.

To this day, Spain has avoided imposing quarantines for visitors from other EU member countries — unlike neighboring Portugal, which on Monday tightened the mandatory isolation requirement for most incoming travelers.

Pablo Díaz, a tourism expert with the Barcelona-based UOC university, said pandemic fatigue, especially among younger generations, and a lack of a common European policy have meant that "tourism has found ways to establish direct corridors in an organic way where the supply and demand meet."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 36 of 78

The uptick in bookings ahead of Easter week, he said, "has been like a breath of fresh air for tourism." "But that doesn't mean that the industry is going to come out of ICU any time soon," he added.

Bernat Armangué and Iain Sullivan in Madrid, Francisco Ubilla in Palma de Mallorca, Sergio Rodrigo in Granada, Thomas Adamson in Paris, and Kirsten Grieshaber in Berlin, contributed to this report.

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One Good Thing: A Singapore skyline view for migrant workers

By ANNABELLE LIANG Associated Press

SINGAPORE (AP) — The capsules of the Ferris wheel in Singapore were peppered with rain.

Not great for a bird's eye view of the city. But the migrant workers riding the Singapore Flyer attraction did not mind.

They were a fraction of at least 20,000 workers getting a treat, from members of the public and businesses.

The ItsRainingRaincoats initiative began calling for tickets to be donated to the workers in January.

A volunteer felt it was a meaningful way to use tourism vouchers from the government, founder Dipa Swaminathan said.

Singapore citizens aged 18 and older have received 100 Singapore dollars (\$74.30) in vouchers. They were to spend it on attractions, hotels and tours — businesses that have lost income during the coronavirus pandemic.

Swaminathan's group worked with the Ferris wheel operator and a booking platform to get tickets routed to the foreign workers.

"There are so many people who appreciate the contributions workers have made to Singapore and this is their chance to give back," Swaminathan said.

"There's a lot of joy in giving. I think that's what causes the public ... to support us in these kinds of endeavors," she told The Associated Press.

The group will keep organizing rides as long as tickets stream in.

A ticket, which includes entrance to an interactive display, costs 35 Singapore dollars (\$26). There are currently enough for 20,000 workers.

That is 2% of the 700,000 to 800,000 who live in Singapore, Swaminathan estimates.

She said the "contained" nature of the Ferris wheel makes it a good fit.

Volunteers reminded the riders to keep their masks on and keep a 1-meter distance during a recent visit.

Ganesan Thivagar visited with his dormitory mates. They waited while rides were briefly halted for bad weather.

When it was time to board, the 165-meter- (540-foot-) high view was spotty.

The 34-year-old was unfazed. He marveled at how Singapore had changed since he arrived 14 years ago.

He quickly got to taking photographs for his family in India's Tamil Nadu state.

"I am happy to enjoy the trip and enjoy together with my friends. Thanks to Singapore (I get to) come here," Thivagar said.

Workers like Thivagar have had a rough time, as their dormitories were early hotspots for coronavirus infections.

Migrant workers have accounted for most of Singapore's 60,000 reported cases.

Although the situation is under control, workers have tighter movement restrictions than the general population. These are being eased by authorities.

Natarajan Pandiarajan, 29, said the restrictions were "really difficult," so he was grateful for breathers

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 37 of 78

like his recent ride. "Inside many feelings I also have. But this time now, coming on, happiness," he said.

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Biden, CDC director warn of virus rebound if nation lets up

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and a top health official warned that too many Americans are declaring virus victory too quickly, appealing for mask requirements and other restrictions to be maintained or restored to stave off a "fourth surge" of COVID-19. The head of the CDC said she had a feeling of "impending doom" if people keep easing off.

The double dose of warnings on Monday came even as Biden laid out hopeful new steps to expand coronavirus vaccinations, with all adults to become eligible over the next five weeks. Biden announced plans to expand the number of retail pharmacies that are administering vaccines, and investments to help Americans get to vaccination sites. But the optimism was tempered by stark warnings about the potential for another wave of cases.

"This is deadly serious," Biden said, urging governors to reinstate mask mandates and other restrictions that some states have been easing.

Hours earlier, during a virtual White House health briefing, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, grew emotional as she reflected on her experience treating COVID-19 patients who are alone at the end of their lives.

"We have so much to look forward to, so much promise and potential of where we are and so much reason for hope," she said. "But right now, I'm scared."

"I'm going to lose the script, and I'm going to reflect on the recurring feeling I have of impending doom."

Cases of the virus are up about 10% over the past week from the previous week, to about 60,000 cases per day, with both hospitalizations and deaths ticking up as well, Walensky said. She warned that without immediate action the U.S. could follow European countries into another spike in cases and suffer needless deaths.

"I have to share the truth, and I have to hope and trust you will listen," she said.

Later Monday, Biden addressed the nation from the White House, declaring, "If we let our guard down now, we can see the virus getting worse, not better. People are letting up on precautions, which is a very bad thing."

Biden delivered a direct appeal to governors, state and local leaders to reinstate mask-wearing requirements if they have lifted them, and said he encouraged leaders to pause plans to further ease virus-related restrictions.

"Please, this is not politics, reinstate the mandate if you let it down," he said.

Biden announced that by April 19 at least 90% of the adult U.S. population would be eligible for vaccination — and would have access to a vaccination site within 5 miles of home. Quick vaccination would still depend on supply.

Biden had previously directed that all states make all adults eligible for vaccination by May 1, but many have moved to lift eligibility requirements sooner in anticipation of supply increases.

Meanwhile, the White House is moving to double the number of pharmacies participating in the federal retail pharmacy program — it has emerged as among the most efficient avenues for administering vaccines — and increase the number of doses for them to deliver. Retail pharmacies are located relatively close to most Americans and have experience delivering vaccines like flu shots.

Biden announced that the U.S. is expecting delivery of 33 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine this week

— including 11 million of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson shot.

More than 1 in 5 adults and nearly 50% of senior American are fully vaccinated, according to data from the CDC. On Thursday, the U.S. set new single-day record for shots in arms: more than 3.2 million.

"Now is not the time to let down," Biden said. "Now's not the time to celebrate. It is time to do what we do best as a country: our duty, our jobs, take care of one another."

"Fight to the finish," he added. "Don't let up now."

Walensky and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, appealed to elected officials, community leaders and everyday Americans to maintain social distancing measures and mask wearing.

"We are doing things prematurely," Fauci said, referring to moves to ease up on restrictions. Walensky appealed to Americans, "Just please hold on a little while longer."

She added: "We are not powerless, we can change this trajectory of the pandemic."

Walensky pointed to an uptick in travel and loosening virus restrictions for the increase in cases. "People want to be done with this. I, too, want to be done with this," she said.

"We've seen surges after every single holiday," she reiterated: "Please limit travel to essential travel for the time being."

The White House, meanwhile is ruling out the creation of a national "vaccine passport" for Americans to verify their immunization status, saying it is leaving it to the private sector to develop a system for people show they've been vaccinated. Some other countries are establishing national databases to allow vaccinated people to resume normal activities.

"We do know that there is a segment of the population that is concerned that the government will play too heavy-handed of a role in monitoring their vaccinations," said White House COVID-19 adviser Andy Slavitt. He said officials are worried that "it would discourage people" from getting vaccinated if the federal government was involved.

The administration, instead, is developing guidelines for such passports, touching on privacy, accuracy and equity, but the White House has not said when those guidelines will be ready.

Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire contributed to this report.

Witness describes seeing Floyd 'slowly fade away'

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A man who was among onlookers shouting at a Minneapolis police officer to get off George Floyd last May was to continue testifying Tuesday, a day after he described seeing Floyd struggle for air and his eyes rolling back into his head, saying he saw Floyd "slowly fade away ... like a fish in a bag."

Donald Williams, a former wrestler who said he was trained in mixed martial arts including chokeholds, testified Monday that he thought Derek Chauvin used a shimmying motion several times to increase the pressure on Floyd. He said he yelled to the officer that he was cutting off Floyd's blood supply.

Williams recalled that Floyd's voice grew thicker as his breathing became more labored, and he eventually stopped moving.

"From there on he was lifeless," Williams said. "He didn't move, he didn't speak, he didn't have no life in him no more on his body movements."

Williams was among the first prosecution witnesses as trial opened for Chauvin, 45, who is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death.

Prosecutors led off their case by playing part of the bystander video that captured Floyd's arrest on May 25. Chauvin and three other officers were fired soon after the video touched off outrage and protest, sometimes violent, that spread from Minneapolis around the world.

Prosecutor Jerry Blackwell showed the jurors the footage at the earliest opportunity, during opening statements, after telling them that the number to remember was 9 minutes, 29 seconds — the amount of time Chauvin had Floyd pinned to the pavement last May.

The white officer "didn't let up" even after a handcuffed Floyd said 27 times that he couldn't breathe

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 39 of 78

and went limp, Blackwell said.

"He put his knees upon his neck and his back, grinding and crushing him, until the very breath — no, ladies and gentlemen — until the very life was squeezed out of him," the prosecutor said.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson countered by arguing: "Derek Chauvin did exactly what he had been trained to do over his 19-year career."

Floyd was fighting efforts to put him in a squad car as the crowd of onlookers around Chauvin and his fellow officers grew and became increasingly hostile, Nelson said.

The defense attorney also disputed that Chauvin was to blame for Floyd's death.

Floyd, 46, had none of the telltale signs of asphyxiation and he had fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system, Nelson said. He said Floyd's drug use, combined with his heart disease, high blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body, caused a heart rhythm disturbance that killed him.

"There is no political or social cause in this courtroom," Nelson said. "But the evidence is far greater than 9 minutes and 29 seconds."

Blackwell, however, rejected the argument that Floyd's drug use or any underlying health conditions were to blame, saying it was the officer's knee that killed him.

Minneapolis police dispatcher Jena Scurry testified that she saw part of Floyd's arrest unfolding via a city surveillance camera and was so disturbed that she called a duty sergeant. Scurry said she grew concerned because the officers hadn't moved after several minutes.

"You can call me a snitch if you want to," Scurry said in her call to the sergeant, which was played in court. She said she wouldn't normally call the sergeant about the use of force because it was beyond the scope of her duties, but "my instincts were telling me that something is wrong."

The video played during opening statements was posted to Facebook by a bystander who witnessed Floyd being arrested after he was accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store. Jurors watched intently as the video played on multiple screens, with one drawing a sharp breath as Floyd said he couldn't breathe. Chauvin sat quietly and took notes, looking up at the video periodically.

"My stomach hurts. My neck hurts. Everything hurts," Floyd says in the video, and: "I can't breathe, officer." Onlookers repeatedly shout at the officer to get off Floyd, saying he is not moving, breathing or resisting. One woman, identifying herself as a city Fire Department employee, shouts at Chauvin to check Floyd's pulse.

The prosecutor said the case was "not about split-second decision-making" by a police officer but excessive force against someone who was handcuffed and not resisting.

Blackwell said the Fire Department employee wanted to help but was warned off by Chauvin, who pointed Mace at her.

"She wanted to check on his pulse, check on Mr. Floyd's well-being," the prosecutor said. "She did her best to intervene. ... She couldn't help."

The timeline differs from the initial account submitted last May by prosecutors, who said Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes, 46 seconds. The time 8:46 soon became a rallying cry in the case. But it was revised during the investigation.

Fourteen jurors or alternates are hearing the case — eight of them white, six of them Black or multiracial, according to the court. Only 12 will deliberate; the judge has not said which two will be alternates.

Before the trial began, Floyd family attorney Ben Crump blasted the idea that the trial would be a tough test for jurors.

"We know that if George Floyd was a white American citizen, and he suffered this painful, tortuous death with a police officer's knee on his neck, nobody, nobody, would be saying this is a hard case," he said.

After the day's proceedings, a few hundred protesters gathered outside the courthouse. Speakers called for justice for Floyd and others whose lives were lost in encounters with police. One speaker, Jaylani Hussein, shouted: "Police officers are not above the law!"

The downtown Minneapolis courthouse has been fortified with concrete barriers, fences and barbed and razor wire. City and state leaders are determined to prevent a repeat of the riots that followed Floyd's

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 40 of 78

death, with National Guard troops already mobilized.

Chauvin's trial is being livestreamed over the objections of the prosecution. Judge Peter Cahill ordered that cameras be allowed largely because of the pandemic and the required social distancing, which left almost no room for spectators in the courtroom.

Three other former officers go on trial in August because Cahill ruled there wasn't enough space to try all four at once.

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

UConn reaches 13th straight Final Four, beating Baylor 69-67

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — It took a great game from phenomenal freshman Paige Bueckers and a last-second stop with a disputed non-foul call to keep UConn's run of Final Four appearances going.

Bueckers scored 28 points and top seed UConn used a huge run spanning the final two quarters to beat No. 2 Baylor 69-67 on Monday night and reach a 13th consecutive Final Four in the women's NCAA Tournament.

"Each year that we do it, I still can't believe it," said UConn coach Geno Auriemma, who was showered by his team with confetti after the game.

UConn has made the national semifinals every season since 2008 and won six titles during that span. The Huskies will face Arizona on Friday night. The Wildcats are playing in their first Final Four after beating Indiana.

Bueckers was 6 years old when UConn started its run of appearances in the national semifinals.

"To be part of that history is wild," Bueckers said. "It's why I came here. ... Saw that as a young kid, wanted to be a part of that. It's surreal."

The Huskies (28-1) trailed 55-45 late in the third quarter before scoring 19 consecutive points, including 10 by Bueckers, who became the third first-year player to make first-team All-America.

"Paige got that look in her eye, started getting some buckets. And when Paige is scoring, the rest of the team really gains a lot of confidence," Auriemma said. "Our defense got just really good at the end, and we got some great stops."

Baylor (28-3) wouldn't go away as Bueckers went cold in the final minutes. Trailing 64-55, NaLyssa Smith, an All-American herself, ended the Lady Bears' drought with 6:47 left and sparked a 12-4 burst that got Baylor within one after DiJonai Carrington converted two free throws with 19.3 seconds left.

After a timeout, Baylor fouled Christyn Williams, who missed both free throws to give the Lady Bears one last chance.

Carrington, who finished with 22 points, drove the lane to the left and missed a contested jumper from the baseline where a foul could have been called, but wasn't.

"I personally don't see it as a controversial call. I've seen the replay, and one girl fouled me in my face and one girl fouled me in my arm," Carrington said. "So, at that point you can't do anything else. We drew up a play, (Smith) got fouled posting up and I got fouled driving. Nothing we could really do about that situation in particular. But, you know, turn the page."

LeBron James even tweeted that a foul should have been called. Baylor coach Kim Mulkey agreed.

"I've got still shots and video from two angles. One kid hits her in the face and one kid hits her on the elbow," Mulkey said.

Williams corralled the rebound and was fouled with 0.8 seconds left. She hit one of the free throws before Bueckers stole the inbounds pass at the buzzer.

No team has played UConn tougher over the last decade than Baylor, with each team winning four of the matchups. The Lady Bears (28-3) had won the previous two, including a 74-58 win at Connecticut in January of 2020.

They were supposed to meet this past January, but Mulkey came down with COVID-19 around Christmas

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 41 of 78

and the game was canceled.

The game got off to a fast start for UConn, which jumped out to a 16-4 lead behind Bueckers. But Baylor was just getting going. The Lady Bears closed the action-packed first quarter with a 20-10 run and trailed 26-24 after one.

"It seemed like for long stretches there, I just thought we were being manhandled there. They're bigger, quicker, faster, stronger," Auriemma said. "But we got a couple of key stops when we had to."

The offense slowed down in the second quarter. There were 11 blocks combined in the first half, including seven by Baylor, which led 39-37 at the break.

Carrington provided a huge spark off the bench, scoring 14 points to go along with two steals and a block in the opening 20 minutes.

Baylor went on a 10-2 run in the third quarter to push ahead 55-45. Then UConn took over, scoring the final eight points of the period after Lady Bears point guard DiDi Richards injured her hamstring when dribbling down the court and exited the game.

"We were up 10 at that point," Mulkey said. "Had to be a hamstring. Swung the whole momentum."

Williams and Bueckers highlighted an 8-0 spurt that made it a two-point game heading into the fourth quarter, when Richards returned only briefly.

Williams finished with 21 points and Evina Westbrook had 11, combining with fellow guard Bueckers for 60 of the Huskies' points as the Lady Bears neutralized UConn's front court.

STILL SIDELINED

UConn starting guard Nika Muhl missed her third straight game with a sprained right ankle she suffered in the team's opening-round win over High Point.

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

EXPLAINER: In ex-cop's trial, defense promises video too

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — It's clear video will be the central focus at the trial that began Monday for a white former Minneapolis police officer charged with killing George Floyd — and not just the widely seen bystander video that set off nationwide protests last year. The defense says it will also use videos to make its case.

Derek Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in the May 25 death of Floyd, who was Black. Chauvin pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for over 9 minutes during Floyd's arrest on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

HOW QUICKLY DID THE ISSUE OF VIDEO COME UP?

Almost immediately. Minutes into his opening statement, prosecutor Jerry Blackwell spoke about the widely circulated video shot by teenage bystander Darnella Frazier. He then played part of it for jurors.

The video shows Chauvin with his knee wedged into the back of Floyd's neck. Chauvin didn't move even as Floyd's body went limp.

Prosecutors clearly want the images and sounds of Floyd, pleading nearly 30 times that he couldn't breathe and calling for his mother, to stay fixed in jurors' minds throughout the trial and into deliberations.

"He put his knee upon his neck and his back, grinding and crushing him, until the very breath ... until the very life, was squeezed out of him," Blackwell told jurors.

WHAT ABOUT THE DEFENSE?

Defense attorney Eric Nelson in his opening statement said that video is just one exhibit among hundreds that will be entered into evidence.

"The evidence is far greater than 9 minutes and 29 seconds," he said.

That evidence, he said, includes video from officers' body cameras. He said the totality of the evidence would paint a different picture and help prove his client's innocence.

Nelson said other video would show Floyd slipping drugs into his mouth and the 6-foot-3 man struggling

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 42 of 78

with officers before Chauvin pinned him to the ground.

WILL THERE BE NEW VIDEOS?

Yes. Prosecutors Monday played video of a police surveillance camera that hadn't been previously released publicly. It shows officers first trying to get Floyd into a police vehicle, then pulling him out and putting him on the ground.

Prosecutors' first witness was police dispatcher Jena Scurry. She testified that she watched part of a live feed from that elevated surveillance camera during Floyd's arrest. Scurry said she checked the video feed off and on over several minutes from her desk. She grew concerned because the officers stayed in the same position for so long.

"My instincts were telling me that something is wrong. Something is not right," Scurry said.

Under cross examination by defense attorney Nelson, she agreed that the squad vehicle was shaking as officers were trying to get Floyd inside. The attorney didn't spell out why he wanted Scurry to note that, but he likely was seeking to illustrate Floyd's resistance.

Nelson also noted that police body-camera video will show how a growing crowd of onlookers were screaming at officers, which he said diverted attention from caring for Floyd to the possible threat in front of them.

"As the crowd grew in size, seemingly so too did their anger ... there is a growing crowd and what officers perceive to be a threat."

DOESN'T VIDEO ITSELF PROVE THE CASE?

Not necessarily. Despite the disturbing video, prosecutors still must show some supporting evidence that it was Chauvin's actions that contributed to Floyd's death, especially to prove murder.

The defense already indicated in pretrial hearings that they will try to show there wasn't a direct causal link between Chauvin's actions and Floyd's death, and that drugs Floyd took and underlying health conditions may have been responsible.

But many legal experts say the video evidence in Chauvin's case is among the most convincing they have ever seen.

"The video in this case is extremely compelling," said Phil Turner, a Chicago-based lawyer and former federal prosecutor. "If you are the defense, you want jurors to get in the weeds, into issues other than the video. If you are the prosecutors ... you want jurors focused on that video."

WILL JURORS BE ABLE TO VIEW VIDEO DURING DELIBERATIONS?

Jurors can't take copies of video into the deliberation room, view it there, and talk about it frame by frame. Under rules of trial procedure in Minnesota, they can ask the judge if they can see video evidence again. If allowed, they can only view it in open court with other trial participants present.

The rule is meant to prevent jurors from fixating on certain evidence to the exclusion of other evidence, explained Mary Moriarty, the former chief public defender for Hennepin County.

Turner said such a rule is not the standard elsewhere. He said allowing jurors to view video evidence in the jury room and to discuss what they see among themselves can be crucial in reaching the right verdict.

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

More than a dozen states to open vaccines to all adults

By MICHELLE R. SMITH and TERRY TANG Associated Press

More than a dozen states will open vaccine eligibility to all adults this week in a major expansion of COVID-19 shots for tens of millions of Americans amid a worrisome increase in virus cases and concerns about balancing supply and demand for the vaccines.

Meanwhile, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Monday that she had a recurring feeling of "impending doom" about a potential fourth wave of infections after cases in the U.S. rose 10% over the last week. She pleaded with Americans not to relax preventative practices such as social distancing and mask-wearing.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 43 of 78

"Just please hold on a little while longer," Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing. Several Northeastern states and Michigan have seen the biggest increases, with some reporting hundreds or thousands more new cases per day than they were two weeks ago.

A new study by the CDC concluded that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were 90% effective after two doses, a finding that Walensky said should offer hope.

States opening eligibility to anyone ages 16 and older on Monday included Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Ohio, North Dakota and Kansas.

The rapid expansion has fueled concerns that the number of eager vaccine seekers will far outstrip the available supply of shots, frustrating millions of newly eligible people who have waited since late last year for a chance to get an injection. Other officials have put their faith in a promised glut of vaccines and instead turned their attention to the next challenge: pressing as many people as possible to get the shots so the nation can achieve herd immunity at the earliest opportunity.

Vaccination rates in Texas have lagged behind much of the U.S., and although state officials put at least part of the blame on delays in data reporting, they also acknowledged that appointment slots are going unfilled.

Demand "has definitely decreased over the past couple of weeks," said Imelda Garcia, head of the state's expert vaccine allocation panel.

Texas is supposed to receive more than 1 million new doses this week. On Monday, the state launched a new online vaccine scheduler and phone number, taking a bigger role in efforts that had largely been done at the local level.

In Kansas, where some local health officials have said they are also struggling to find people to vaccinate, an additional 400,000 people are now eligible for shots. Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly has been criticized by Republicans for a slow, disorganized vaccine rollout, and she faced more criticism Friday when she announced the plan to expand eligibility. One Republican lawmaker said people with chronic medical conditions could be left behind.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards has said the state will soon have enough shots for everyone who wants one and that the challenge now is to make sure people want to get vaccinated.

Some counties in Illinois are being allowed to expand eligibility to all this week if they find doses are going unused. But in Chicago, the vaccine will not be available to everyone until at least May 1 because the city does not have enough shots on hand.

On Tuesday, Minnesota opens eligibility, followed by Indiana and South Carolina on Wednesday, Connecticut and Montana on Thursday, and New Hampshire and Colorado on Friday. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that residents over 30 will be eligible for vaccinations starting Tuesday, and everyone over 16 can sign up starting April 6.

Connecticut officials said "priority access" will be given to people with high medical risks or developmental disabilities once everyone 16 and up is eligible. That could include some hospitals organizing dedicated clinics or reserving appointment slots for people with those conditions, officials said.

Arizona opened up eligibility to all adults last week, but it has since been dealing with an unintended consequence: Interest in volunteering at four state-run vaccination sites plummeted almost immediately. Since February, thousands of volunteer shifts filled up within an hour. Now many remain vacant, said Rhonda Oliver, CEO of HandsOn Greater Phoenix, a nonprofit handling online volunteer recruitment.

"People saw it as a way to get the vaccine sooner," Oliver said. "We anticipated a drop-off, but we just didn't expect it to go off a cliff in a matter of 24 to 48 hours like this."

On Wednesday, the first day of the new eligibility, only 70 of the scheduled 145 volunteers appeared at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, and dozens of people either withdrew earlier or did not show up. Oliver said that put an unfair burden on volunteers who did show up and could not take breaks.

The shortage of volunteers should not affect wait times for those with appointments, Oliver said. HandsOn Greater Phoenix is hoping to lessen the hemorrhaging by reaching out to large companies and community groups looking for service activities. The group also is encouraging friends or family members who have

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 44 of 78

been vaccinated to volunteer together.

Many other states are still limited by a continued lack of supply.

California officials said the state can administer 3 million shots a week now, and Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has predicted that maximum capacity will climb to 4 million by the end of April. But supplies have limited the effort so far to 1.8 million shots per week, a figure that is expected to increase to 2.5 million per week in the first half of April and then 3 million by the end of April, when everybody 16 and older will be offered the vaccine.

Santa Clara County has been told it will get 58,000 doses this week, health officer Dr. Marty Fenstersheib said, but the state will begin allowing about 400,000 more people between 50 and 64 in the county to sign up as of Thursday, in addition to the current backlog.

"We don't have the vaccine, and we are concerned," Fenstersheib said.

Among the methods officials are employing to reach underserved communities are vans used as mobile clinics that travel to hard-hit neighborhoods and provide on-the-spot vaccinations.

In California, mobile clinics are helping vaccinate farmworkers who may not have transportation to larger vaccination sites or cannot navigate the state's online portal. Los Angeles also plans to have 10 mobile vaccination teams.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis said Monday that four mobile bus clinics will distribute vaccines to underserved communities.

While demand has dropped off in some communities, it's as brisk as ever in others, and sign-up hassles continue.

Lena Lawson, a 37-year-old technology consultant in Phoenix, tried to book a vaccine appointment since the new eligibility rules started. Working from home, she was able to periodically refresh appointment websites but had no luck for three days.

She happened to be up at 2 a.m. Sunday and finally got a slot at a Walgreens on Tuesday.

"I was pretty surprised. Oh, my God, I got an appointment. I'm good," Lawson said.

The effort was smoother for University of Utah professor Bill Johnson. He said he was bracing for a time-consuming and confusing experience but instead found it remarkably easy.

"We had to make the appointment online and got in two days later," said Johnson, 59, who got his first shot at the convention center in Salt Lake City. "It took us 10 minutes to drive there, and they jabbed us two minutes after we arrived."

Associated Press writers from around the United States contributed to this report.

Jurors shown video at ex-officer's trial in Floyd's death

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The video of George Floyd gasping for breath was essentially Exhibit A as the former Minneapolis police officer who pressed his knee on the Black man's neck went on trial Monday on charges of murder and manslaughter.

Prosecutor Jerry Blackwell showed the jurors the footage at the earliest opportunity, during opening statements, after telling them that the number to remember was 9 minutes, 29 seconds — the amount of time officer Derek Chauvin had Floyd pinned to the pavement last May.

The white officer "didn't let up" even after a handcuffed Floyd said 27 times that he couldn't breathe and went limp, Blackwell said in the case that triggered worldwide protests, scattered violence and national soul-searching over racial justice.

"He put his knees upon his neck and his back, grinding and crushing him, until the very breath — no, ladies and gentlemen — until the very life was squeezed out of him," the prosecutor said.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson countered by arguing: "Derek Chauvin did exactly what he had been trained to do over his 19-year career."

Floyd was fighting efforts to put him in a squad car as the crowd of onlookers around Chauvin and his fellow officers grew and became increasingly hostile, Nelson said.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 45 of 78

The defense attorney also disputed that Chauvin was to blame for Floyd's death.

Floyd, 46, had none of the telltale signs of asphyxiation and he had fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system, Nelson said. He said Floyd's drug use, combined with his heart disease, high blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body, caused a heart rhythm disturbance that killed him.

"There is no political or social cause in this courtroom," Nelson said. "But the evidence is far greater than 9 minutes and 29 seconds."

Blackwell, however, rejected the argument that Floyd's drug use or any underlying health conditions were to blame, saying it was the officer's knee that killed him.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with unintentional second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter. The most serious charge, the second-degree murder count, carries up to 40 years in prison. This is the first trial ever televised in Minnesota.

Bystander Donald Williams, who said he was trained in mixed martial arts, including chokeholds, testified that Chauvin appeared to increase the pressure on Floyd's neck several times with a shimmying motion. He said he yelled to the officer that he was cutting off Floyd's blood supply.

Williams recalled that Floyd's voice grew thicker as his breathing became more labored, and he eventually stopped moving. He said he saw Floyd's eyes roll back in his head, likening the sight to fish he had caught earlier that day.

Williams said he saw Floyd "slowly fade away ... like a fish in a bag."

Earlier, Minneapolis police dispatcher Jena Scurry testified that she saw part of Floyd's arrest unfolding via a city surveillance camera and was so disturbed that she called a duty sergeant. Scurry said she grew concerned because the officers hadn't moved after several minutes.

"You can call me a snitch if you want to," Scurry said in her call to the sergeant, which was played in court. She said she wouldn't normally call the sergeant about the use of force because it was beyond the scope of her duties, but "my instincts were telling me that something is wrong."

The video played during opening statements was posted to Facebook by a bystander who witnessed Floyd being arrested after he was accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store. The footage caused revulsion across the U.S. and beyond and prompted calls for the country to confront racism and police brutality.

Jurors watched intently as the video played on multiple screens, with one drawing a sharp breath as Floyd said he couldn't breathe. Chauvin sat calmly during opening statements and took notes, looking up at the video periodically.

"My stomach hurts. My neck hurts. Everything hurts," Floyd says in the video, and: "I can't breathe, officer." Onlookers repeatedly shout at the officer to get off Floyd, saying he is not moving, breathing or resisting. One woman, identifying herself as a city Fire Department employee, shouts at Chauvin to check Floyd's pulse.

The prosecutor said the case was "not about split-second decision-making" by a police officer but excessive force against someone who was handcuffed and not resisting.

Blackwell said the Fire Department employee wanted to help but was warned off by Chauvin, who pointed Mace at her.

"She wanted to check on his pulse, check on Mr. Floyd's well-being," the prosecutor said. "She did her best to intervene. ... She couldn't help."

The timeline differs from the initial account submitted last May by prosecutors, who said Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes, 46 seconds. The time 8:46 soon became a rallying cry in the case. But it was revised during the investigation.

Fourteen jurors or alternates are hearing the case — eight of them white, six of them Black or multiracial, according to the court. Only 12 will deliberate; the judge has not said which two will be alternates.

Before the trial began, Floyd family attorney Ben Crump blasted the idea that the trial would be a tough test for jurors.

"We know that if George Floyd was a white American citizen, and he suffered this painful, tortuous death with a police officer's knee on his neck, nobody, nobody, would be saying this is a hard case," he said.

After the day's proceedings, a few hundred protesters gathered outside the courthouse. Speakers called for justice for Floyd and others whose lives were lost in encounters with police. One speaker, Jaylani Hussein, screamed: "Police officers are not above the law!"

The downtown Minneapolis courthouse has been fortified with concrete barriers, fences and barbed and razor wire. City and state leaders are determined to prevent a repeat of the riots that followed Floyd's death, with National Guard troops already mobilized.

Chauvin's trial is being livestreamed over the objections of the prosecution. Judge Peter Cahill ordered that cameras be allowed largely because of the pandemic and the required social distancing, which left almost no room for spectators in the courtroom.

Three other former officers go on trial in August because Cahill ruled there wasn't enough space to try all four at once.

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

Canada pauses AstraZeneca vaccine for under 55

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canada on Monday suspended the use of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for people under age 55 following concerns it might be linked to rare blood clots.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization had recommended the pause for safety reasons and the Canadian provinces, which administer health in the country, announced the suspension Monday.

"There is substantial uncertainty about the benefit of providing AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines to adults under 55 given the potential risks," said Dr. Shelley Deeks, vice chair of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization.

Deeks said the updated recommendations come amid new data from Europe that suggests the risk of blood clots is now potentially as high as one in 100,000, much higher than the one in one million risk believed before.

She said most of the patients in Europe who developed a rare blood clot after vaccination with AstraZeneca were women under age 55, and the fatality rate among those who develop clots is as high as 40%.

Dr. Joss Reimer of Manitoba's Vaccine Implementation Task Force said despite the finding that there was no increase risk of blood clots overall related to AstraZeneca in Europe, a rare but very serious side effect has been seen primarily in young women in Europe.

Reimer said the rare type of blood clot typically happens between four and 20 days after getting the shot and the symptoms can mirror a stroke or a heart attack.

"While we still believe the benefits for all ages outweigh the risks I'm not comfortable with probably. I want to see more data coming out of Europe so I know exactly what this risk benefit analysis is," Reimer said.

The AstraZeneca shot, which has been authorized in more than 70 countries, is a pillar of a U.N.-backed project known as COVAX that aims to get COVID-19 vaccines to poorer countries. It has also become a key tool in European countries' efforts to boost their sluggish vaccine rollouts. That makes doubts about the shots especially worrying.

"This vaccine has had all the ups and downs. It looks like a roller coaster," said Dr. Caroline Quach-Thanh, the chair of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, when asked if the latest news will lead to further vaccine hesitancy.

Health Canada said it has not received any reports of blood clots in Canada, and the department's chief medical adviser, Dr. Supriya Sharma, said she still believes the vaccine's benefits outweigh the risks.

Last week, the department changed its label on the vaccine to warn about the rare risk of blood clots.

Only those 60 and above have received AstraZeneca in Ontario, Canada's most populous province.

"We have no concerns with those who have received it so far," said Dr. David Williams, Ontario's chief medical officer.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 47 of 78

Mark Mendelson, a 63-year-old Toronto man who has had heart surgery, said that he has no regrets about getting his first AstraZeneca dose two weeks ago and that he will get the second.

"Get what you can," Mendelson said. "I had no ill effects at all from the AstraZeneca. I am in a better position than those who don't have any vaccine at all. If you are betting person you would take those odds any day of the week. I'm quite prepared to roll the dice."

Several European countries that had suspended using the vaccine over concerns it could cause blood clots have resumed administering it after the EU's drug regulator said the vaccine was safe.

The vaccine is used widely in Britain, across the European continent and in other countries, but its roll-out was troubled by inconsistent study reports about its effectiveness, and then more recently the scare about clots that had some countries temporarily pausing inoculations.

Canada is expected to receive 1.5 million doses of AstraZeneca from the U.S. on Wednesday.

"The messaging has been brutal overall. I am fearful it is toast. It shouldn't be," said Dr. Andrew Morris, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Toronto and the medical director of the Antimicrobial Stewardship Program at Sinai-University Health Network.

Morris thinks those who are at a high risk for a bad COVID-19 outcome and over the age of 55 should get AstraZeneca if the other vaccines are not available to them, especially during a third wave of coronavirus infections.

Canadian regulators approved the Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. Canada has placed bigger bets on Pfizer and Moderna, ordering up to 76 million doses of Pfizer and up to 44 million of Moderna, compared with up to 20 million of AstraZeneca. It's not known when Canada will receive its first shipment of Johnson & Johnson.

Canada received its first shipment of AstraZeneca this month — 500,000 doses from India. Of the 194,500 doses that Ontario received, about 10,000 remain. They expire April 2.

Canada has lagged on vaccinating its population because it lacks the ability to manufacture the vaccine and has had to rely on the global supply chain for the lifesaving shots, like many other countries.

With no domestic supply, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government bet on seven different vaccines manufactured elsewhere and secured advance purchase agreements — enough to get 10 doses for each of Canada's 38 million people. While acquiring them has proven difficult, deliveries have ramped up this month. Canada expects to have more than 36.5 million doses by July and officials hope to get at least one dose into all adults who want one by the end of June.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization earlier recommended a four-month delay between doses after data from the U.K. and Quebec showed a good level of protection offered by the first shot. The U.K. has instituted a similar delay.

Review: Once more unto the breach in 'Godzilla vs. Kong'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

"Godzilla vs. Kong" begins, fittingly, with the big guy asleep.

There is King Kong, colossus of the big screen, slowly waking on a mountainside. He rouses slowly in the morning sun from slumber before showering in a nearby waterfall. It's, maybe, a little bit the same for the kind of movies King Kong symbolizes and still holds some dominion over: big spectacles of mass destruction made to be seen on equally towering screens. That kind of moviegoing has been in hibernation for much of the past pandemic year. "Godzilla vs. Kong," the only creature feature to dare wide release in some time, is a rock 'em-sock 'em monster-movie revival with all the requisite explosions, inane plot twists and skyscraper smashing to satisfy most lovers of gigantic amphibians. Vive le cinéma!

"Godzilla vs. Kong," directed by Adam Wingard, follows in the very big but quickly forgotten footsteps of the 2014 reboot "Godzilla," 2017's Vietnam-set, "Apocalypse Now"-tinged sequel "Kong: Skull Island" and 2019's "Godzilla: King of Monsters." But, of course, the lineage is much longer than that. Godzilla and Kong first squared off in 1962's "King Kong vs Godzilla" (Kong got first billing back then), the Toho Studios film that mashed together monsters both East and West. (Before the Japanese studio got involved, the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 48 of 78

original template had Kong meeting Frankenstein.)

This time, the ultra-heavyweight prize fight between the Coke and Pepsi of the MonsterVerse doesn't break any new ground. That might be its salvation. Wingard ("You're Next," "The Guest") gives us some solid supporting characters (Brian Tyree Henry as a podcasting conspiracy theorist on the right track is the best of the humans) and some slick sound design. But mostly "Godzilla vs. Kong" supplies appropriately silly sci-fi escapades and a few good rounds of monster mayhem, including, in their first meeting, a ballet of battleships on the open ocean.

One difference this go around: You can see the film immediately on either a Godzilla-sized screen or a salamander-sized one. "Godzilla vs. Kong," debuting Wednesday, is playing in theaters and streaming simultaneously on HBO Max. I saw it at home, with a five-year-old in the next room asking why the big monkey was so angry. For the mighty Empire State Building-climbing beast, it's a new, more humble home.

And it's home he seeks in "Godzilla vs. Kong." That sunny morning waterfall, it turns out, is an enclosed habitat for the locked-up ape, who's watched over tenderly by Dr. Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall) and her deaf adopted daughter Jia (Kaylee Hottle). When Godzilla makes a seemingly unprompted attack on Apex, a high-tech cybernetics company ruled by Walter Simmons (Demián Bichir), a plan is hatched to use Kong to lure Godzilla to the surface and then track Godzilla to his power source — an undiscovered center-of-the-world realm theorized to exist by "hollow Earth" proponent Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård). It's a scheme so obviously destined to run afoul and turn a metropolis into ruins that you can almost hear Kong pleading, "Please, no."

With a debt owed to Jules Verne, "Godzilla vs. Kong" makes its way, via Antarctica, to the center of the Earth. It covers a lot of mileage only to ultimately fall back where so many action blockbusters do: at the hands of a melomaniac tech CEO. It's not just a predictable foe for the kaijus, who have cycled through countless metaphors over the decades. It's also a somewhat ironic one. "Godzilla vs. Kong" is so much a totem to the powers of advanced technical wizardry.

Shot with a lustrous glow by Ben Seresin, the movie is soaked in the glossy sheen of CGI. King Kong, born in stop-motion, and Godzilla, once a guy in a suit, have swelled so much in design and texture that they now appear like veteran movie stars who have moved on from their B-movie origins. By they end, they appear exhausted, and who can blame them? They're likely tired from emerging again and again from the depths to play out our fantasies of destruction. Next time, someone should let Kong hit the snooze.

"Godzilla vs. Kong," a Warner Bros. release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for intense sequences of destruction, mayhem and creature violence. Running time: 113 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Georgia's new GOP election law draws criticism, lawsuits

By BEN NADLER and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Critics of Georgia's new Republican-backed election law issued fresh calls Monday to boycott some of the state's largest businesses for not speaking out more forcefully against the law, a day after advocacy organizations filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging it.

In a letter to more than 90,000 parishioners, Bishop Reginald Jackson, who presides over more than 400 African Methodist Episcopal churches in Georgia, said the law is "racist and seeks to return us to the days of Jim Crow."

Jackson is calling for corporate leaders at companies like Coca-Cola and Delta Air Lines to speak out in opposition.

"If we cannot persuade them or if they refuse to oppose this legislation then we will organize and implement a boycott of their companies," the letter says.

Coca-Cola said in a statement that the company has been engaged in "advocating for positive change in voting legislation."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 49 of 78

Delta Air Lines issued a statement touting some parts of the law, such as expanded weekend voting, but said "we understand concerns remain over other provisions in the legislation and there continues to be work ahead in this important effort."

In a separate letter, the children of some of the nation's most notable civil rights leaders said that far "too many of our lawmakers failed to take a stand and corporations did not go far enough to ensure every voting citizen had fair and equitable access to the most basic of American rights." The letter was written by Bernice A. King, the daughter of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; Al Vivian, the son of the Rev. C.T. Vivian; and John-Miles Lewis, the son of U.S. Rep. John Lewis.

A lawsuit filed Sunday by organizations including the Georgia NAACP, against Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and other members of the State Election Board, asks a judge to find that the law violates the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act and to block state officials from enforcing it.

The complaint argues that Republican "officials have resorted to attempting to suppress the vote of Black voters and other voters of color in order to maintain the tenuous hold that the Republican Party has in Georgia."

The change to Georgia's election law was made after Democrats won the presidential contest and two U.S. Senate runoffs in the once reliably red state.

The complaint was filed by the Georgia NAACP, Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, League of Women Voters of Georgia, GALEO Latino Community Development Fund, Common Cause and the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe.

The new election law was signed Thursday by Republican Gov. Brian Kemp, just hours after it cleared the state legislature. It is part of a tide of GOP-sponsored election bills introduced in states across the country after former President Donald Trump made false claims about election fraud.

The Georgia law adds a photo ID requirement for voting absentee by mail, cuts the amount of time people have to request an absentee ballot and limits where drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. It also bans people from handing out food or water to voters waiting in line and allows the Republican-controlled State Election Board to remove and replace county election officials.

Republicans in Georgia argue that the law is needed to restore voters' confidence.

"Georgia's Election Integrity Act that I signed into law expands early voting and secures our vote-by-mail system to protect the integrity of our elections," Kemp said in a recent tweet. "The Peach State is leading the nation in making it easy to vote and hard to cheat."

In an interview Monday, Raffensperger said he supported some of the changes but is against other aspects of the law.

Raffensperger said that requiring a photo ID for mail in ballots "is a much superior way of going, because it's an objective measure and not a subjective measure." But he said he does not support provisions that remove him as the chair of the State Election Board and replaces him with an appointee of the state legislature.

A separate lawsuit filed Thursday by the New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter and Rise Inc. seeks to block the law on similar grounds.

Sen. David Lucas, a Macon Democrat, said Republicans shouldn't be surprised that two lawsuits have already been filed.

"You did it, you voted for it, and now you've got to live with it," Lucas said. "We're going to spend the whole next year in the courthouse."

Also Monday, a Democratic lawmaker who was arrested after protesting the law Thursday returned to the state Capitol. Rep. Park Cannon, of Atlanta, was arrested and charged with two felonies after she knocked on the door to Kemp's office while he was on live television speaking about the voting bill he had just signed.

After Cannon walked with Martin Luther King III in a march around the Capitol, supporters with raised fists formed an aisle for Cannon to walk through to the House chamber. Cannon didn't respond to questions from reporters as she walked into the chamber.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 50 of 78

Republicans, meanwhile, said Cannon was grandstanding. Republican Sen. Randy Robertson said Cannon had ignored warnings and lawmakers needed to stand behind the police and state troopers who guard the Capitol.

Biden, CDC director warn of virus rebound if nation lets up

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and a top health official warned Monday that too many Americans are declaring virus victory too quickly, appealing for mask requirements and other restrictions to be maintained or restored to stave off a “fourth surge” of COVID-19. The head of the CDC said she had a feeling of “impending doom” if people keep easing off.

The double dose of warnings came even as Biden laid out hopeful new steps to expand coronavirus vaccinations, with all adults to become eligible over the next 5 weeks. Biden announced plans to expand the number of retail pharmacies that are administering vaccines, and investments to help Americans get to vaccination sites. But the optimism was tempered by stark warnings about the potential for another wave of cases.

“This is deadly serious,” Biden said, urging governors to reinstate mask mandates and other restrictions that some states have been easing.

Hours earlier, during a virtual White House health briefing, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, grew emotional as she reflected on her experience treating COVID-19 patients who are alone at the end of their lives.

“We have so much to look forward to, so much promise and potential of where we are and so much reason for hope,” she said. “But right now, I’m scared.”

“I’m going to lose the script, and I’m going to reflect on the recurring feeling I have of impending doom.”

Cases of the virus are up about 10% over the past week from the previous week, to about 60,000 cases per day, with both hospitalizations and deaths ticking up as well, Walensky said. She warned that without immediate action the U.S. could follow European countries into another spike in cases and suffer needless deaths.

“I have to share the truth, and I have to hope and trust you will listen,” she said.

Later Monday, Biden addressed the nation from the White House, declaring, “If we let our guard down now, we can see the virus getting worse, not better. People are letting up on precautions, which is a very bad thing.”

Biden delivered a direct appeal to governors, state and local leaders to reinstate mask-wearing requirements if they have lifted them, and said he encouraged leaders to pause plans to further ease virus-related restrictions.

“Please, this is not politics, reinstate the mandate if you let it down,” he said.

Biden announced that by April 19 at least 90% of the adult U.S. population would be eligible for vaccination — and would have access to a vaccination site within 5 miles of home. Quick vaccination would still depend on supply.

Biden had previously directed that all states make all adults eligible for vaccination by May 1, but many have moved to lift eligibility requirements sooner in anticipation of supply increases.

Meanwhile, the White House is moving to double the number of pharmacies participating in the federal retail pharmacy program — which has emerged as among the most efficient avenues for administering vaccines — and increase the number of doses for them to deliver. Retail pharmacies are located relatively close to most Americans and have experience delivering vaccines like flu shots.

Biden announced that the U.S. is expecting delivery of 33 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine this week — including 11 million of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson shot.

More than one in five adults and nearly 50% of senior American are fully vaccinated, according to data from the CDC. On Thursday, the U.S. set new single-day record for shots in arms: more than 3.2 million.

“Now is not the time to let down,” Biden said. “Now’s not the time to celebrate. It is time to do what we

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 51 of 78

do best as a country: our duty, our jobs, take care of one another.”

“Fight to the finish,” he added. “Don’t let up now.”

Walensky and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, appealed to elected officials, community leaders and everyday Americans to maintain social distancing measures and mask wearing.

“We are doing things prematurely,” Fauci said, referring to moves to ease up on restrictions. Walensky appealed to Americans, “Just please hold on a little while longer.”

She added: “We are not powerless, we can change this trajectory of the pandemic.”

Walensky pointed to an uptick in travel and loosening virus restrictions for the increase in cases. “People want to be done with this. I, too, want to be done with this,” she said.

“We’ve seen surges after every single holiday,” she reiterated: “Please limit travel to essential travel for the time being.”

The White House, meanwhile is ruling out the creation of a national “vaccine passport” for Americans to verify their immunization status, saying it is leaving it to the private sector to develop a system for people show they’ve been vaccinated. Some other countries are establishing national databases to allow vaccinated people to resume normal activities.

“We do know that there is a segment of the population that is concerned that the government will play too heavy-handed of a role in monitoring their vaccinations,” said White House COVID-19 adviser Andy Slavitt. He said officials are worried that “it would discourage people” from getting vaccinated if the federal government was involved.

The administration, instead, is developing guidelines for such passports, touching on privacy, accuracy and equity, but the White House has not said when those guidelines will be ready.

—
AP writer Jonathan Lemire contributed.

Biden boosts offshore wind energy, wants to power 10M homes

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is moving to sharply increase offshore wind energy along the East Coast, saying Monday it is taking initial steps toward approving a huge wind farm off the New Jersey coast as part of an effort to generate electricity for more than 10 million homes nationwide by 2030.

Meeting the target could mean jobs for more than 44,000 workers and for 33,000 others in related employment, the White House said. The effort also would help avoid 78 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year, a key step in the administration’s fight to slow global warming.

President Joe Biden “believes we have an enormous opportunity in front of us to not only address the threats of climate change, but use it as a chance to create millions of good-paying, union jobs that will fuel America’s economic recovery,” said White House climate adviser Gina McCarthy. “Nowhere is the scale of that opportunity clearer than for offshore wind.”

The administration’s commitment to the still untapped industry “will create pathways to the middle class for people from all backgrounds and communities,” she added. “We are ready to rock-and-roll.”

The administration said it intends to prepare a formal environmental analysis for the Ocean Wind project off New Jersey. That would move Ocean Wind toward becoming the third commercial-scale offshore wind project in the U.S.

The Interior Department’s Bureau of Ocean Energy Management said it is targeting offshore wind projects in shallow waters between Long Island and the New Jersey coast. A recent study shows the area can support up to 25,000 development and construction jobs by 2030, Interior said.

The ocean energy bureau said it will push to sell commercial leases in the area in late 2021 or early 2022.

The administration also pledged to invest \$230 million to upgrade U.S. ports and provide up to \$3 billion in loan guarantees for offshore wind projects through the Energy Department’s recently revived clean-energy loan program.

“It is going to be a full-force gale of good-paying, union jobs that lift people up,” said Energy Secretary

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 52 of 78

Jennifer Granholm.

Ocean Wind, 15 miles off the coast of southern New Jersey, is projected to produce about 1,100 megawatts a year, enough to power 500,000 homes, once it becomes operational in 2024.

The Interior Department has previously announced environmental reviews for Vineyard Wind in Massachusetts and South Fork wind farm about 35 miles east of Montauk Point in Long Island, N.Y. Vineyard Wind is expected to produce about 800 megawatts of power and South Fork about 132 megawatts.

Biden has vowed to double offshore wind production by 2030 as part of his effort to slow climate change. The likely approval of the Atlantic Coast projects — the leading edge of at least 16 offshore wind projects along the East Coast — marks a sharp turnaround from the Trump administration, which stymied wind power both onshore and in the ocean.

As president, Donald Trump frequently derided wind power as an expensive, bird-slaughtering way to make electricity, and his administration resisted or opposed wind projects nationwide, including Vineyard Wind. The developer of the Massachusetts project temporarily withdrew its application late last year in a bid to stave off possible rejection by the Trump administration. Biden provided a fresh opening for the project after taking office in January.

“For generations, we’ve put off the transition to clean energy and now we’re facing a climate crisis,” said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, whose department oversees offshore wind.

“As our country faces the interlocking challenges of a global pandemic, economic downturn, racial injustice and the climate crisis, we have to transition to a brighter future for everyone,” Haaland said.

Vineyard Wind is slated to become operational in 2023, with Ocean Wind following a year later.

Despite the enthusiasm, offshore wind development is still in its infancy in the U.S., far behind progress made in Europe. A small wind farm operates near Block Island in waters controlled by the state of Rhode Island, and another small wind farm operates off the coast of Virginia.

The three major projects under development are all owned by European companies or subsidiaries. Vineyard Wind is a joint project of a Danish company and a U.S. subsidiary of the Spanish energy giant, Iberdrola. Ocean Wind and South Fork are led by the Danish company, Orsted.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Monday it is signing an agreement with Orsted to share data about U.S. waters where the company holds leases. The data should aid NOAA’s ocean-mapping efforts and help it advance climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, the agency said. NOAA also will spend \$1 million to study the impacts of offshore wind operations on fishing operators and coastal communities.

Wind developers are poised to create tens of thousands of jobs and generate more than \$100 billion in new investment by 2030, “but the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management must first open the door to new leasing,” said Erik Milito, president of the National Ocean Industries Association.

Not everyone is cheering the rise of offshore wind. Fishing groups from Maine to Florida have expressed fear that large offshore wind projects could render huge swaths of the ocean off-limits to their catch.

AP source: VW plans brand-name change to ‘Voltswagen’ in US

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Volkswagen plans to change its brand name in the United States to “Voltswagen” as it shifts its production increasingly toward electric vehicles and tries to distance itself from an emissions cheating scandal.

A person briefed on the plan said a formal announcement is planned for Tuesday. The person didn’t want to be identified because the plans had not been made public.

The company had briefly posted a press release on its website early Monday announcing the brand name change. The press release was noticed by a reporter from USA Today before it was removed. The release was dated April 29.

The premature release comes as VW is taking reservations for the new ID.4 small electric SUV in the U.S. It’s the company’s only new electric model sold in the United States, though there are plans for more,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 53 of 78

including a nostalgic reprise of the company's Microbus.

Even with the ID.4 fully on sale, only a small fraction of VWs on U.S. roads will bear the "Volkswagen" name. The vast majority of VW's vehicle sales in the U.S. will still be powered by gasoline for the foreseeable future and will continue to be labeled simply as "VW." The German automaker sold just under 326,000 VW-branded vehicles in the U.S. last year.

The person who was briefed on the plan said the name Volkswagen Group of America, which also includes the Audi, Bentley, Bugatti and Lamborghini brands, won't change. Rather, only the 'k' in the Volkswagen brand itself will be changed to a 't.'

An exterior badge with the name "Volkswagen" will be affixed to the company's electric vehicles, while gas-powered vehicles will still have the normal "VW," but no brand name on them, the person said.

The premature news release said the move amounted to a public declaration of the company's future investment in electric mobility.

"We might be changing out our K for a T, but what we aren't changing is this brand's commitment to making best-in-class vehicles for drivers and people everywhere," VW of America CEO Scott Keogh said in the errant release.

Outside the United States, Volkswagen, like some other automakers, has sharply expanded its EV footprint. In Europe, the company tripled its battery-powered vehicle sales from 45,000 in 2019 to 134,000 in 2020. VW began selling its new electric compact ID.3 ahead of strict new European Union limits on auto emissions.

In the U.S., fully electric vehicles last year accounted for less than 2% of new vehicle sales. Tesla led the way, with an estimated 205,600 in U.S. sales, according to Autodata Corp. General Motors sold just under 21,000 Chevrolet Bolts, while Nissan sold a little more than 9,500 Leaf electric cars.

VW has been trying to repair its image after U.S. authorities in 2015 discovered that its so-called "clean diesel" vehicles cheated on emissions tests. The diesels switched pollution controls on during Environmental Protection Agency treadmill tests, then turned them off while on real roads.

Volkswagen in 2017 pleaded guilty and agreed to pay \$4.3 billion in U.S. civil and criminal penalties on top of billions more to buy back cars. Two people were sent to prison.

EXPLAINER: Pandemic shapes ex-officer's trial in Floyd death

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in George Floyd's death is being conducted under special circumstances due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The biggest single difference is that the trial is televised, which is common in many states but not in Minnesota. But there many other changes, ranging from the physical layout of the courtroom to the plastic barriers between participants, to the way sidebars are conducted.

CAMERAS IN COURT

Minnesota allows cameras in court, but only when the prosecution and defense agree — something that hasn't happened before in trials where interest was high enough that cameras were even considered.

By that rule, camera's wouldn't have been allowed at Chauvin's trial because Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison opposed them on the grounds that they could scare away potential witnesses.

But Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill ordered them anyway, citing intense interest in the trial, the limited courtroom space and the need for transparency. Cahill also cited Chauvin's right to a public trial.

COURTROOM SETUP

There is no traditional jury box and gallery. Jurors are seated at widely spaced desks, as are the prosecution, the defense, a court reporter, one seat each for the Floyd and Chauvin families and two for pool reporters. Plastic barriers have been erected throughout the courtroom, hand sanitizer is everywhere and participants wear masks most of the time.

Chauvin was initially supposed to be tried at the same time as the other three officers at the scene of Floyd's arrest, but Cahill determined that the county's largest courtroom simply couldn't be made to accom-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 54 of 78

moderate four defendants and their defense teams all at once. The other three officers go on trial in August.
SIDEBARS

At ordinary trials, the judge and attorneys huddle around the judge's bench — a nonstarter with the pandemic. Instead, the attorneys, the judge and Chauvin all put on headsets to talk over any legal or procedural issues out of the jury's hearing.

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

WHO report: COVID likely 1st jumped into humans from animals

By JAMEY KEATEN and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — A joint World Health Organization-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. 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 — a speculative theory that was promoted by former U.S. President Donald Trump among others. It also said the role played by a seafood market where human cases were first identified was uncertain.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious diseases expert, said he would like to see the report's raw information first before deciding about its credibility.

"I'd also would like to inquire as to the extent in which the people who were on that group had access directly to the data that they would need to make a determination," he said. "I want to read the report first and then get a feel for what they really had access to -- or did not have access to."

The report, which is expected to be made public Tuesday, 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.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said experts from seven different U.S. government organizations including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Health and the Department of Homeland Security had the report in hand.

"Seventeen experts, longstanding leaders from the field, including epidemiology, public health, clinical medicine, veterinary medicine, infectious disease, law, food security, biosafety, biosecurity -- we have a lot of experts in government -- will be reviewing this report intensively and quickly," she said at a daily briefing.

Matthew Kavanagh of Georgetown University said the report deepened the understanding of the virus's origins, but more information was needed.

"It is clear that that the Chinese government has not provided all the data needed and, until they do, firmer conclusions will be difficult," he said in a statement.

Last year, an AP investigation found the Chinese government was strictly controlling all research into its origins. And 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 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.

Still, suspicion of China has helped fuel the theory that the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, the Chinese city where the virus was first identified. The report cited several reasons for all but dismissing that possibility.

It said that such laboratory accidents are rare, that the labs in Wuhan were well-managed and there is

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 55 of 78

no record of viruses closely related to the coronavirus in any laboratory before December 2019.

The report is based largely on a visit by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan. The mission was never meant to identify the exact natural source of the virus, an endeavor that typically takes years. For instance, more than 40 years of study has still failed to pinpoint the exact species of bat that are the natural reservoir of Ebola.

In the draft obtained by the AP, the researchers listed four scenarios in order of likelihood for the emergence of the new coronavirus. 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 to humans from the packaging of "cold-chain" food products was possible but not likely.

That last possibility was previously dismissed by the WHO and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention but researchers on this mission have taken it up again, further raising questions about the politicization of the study since China has long pushed the theory.

While it's possible an infected animal contaminated packaging that was then brought to Wuhan and infected humans, the report said the probability is very low.

Mark Woolhouse, an epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh, said even that "very low probability" was an overstatement. "There's no compelling evidence of people actually being infected through packaging," he said, calling the theory "far-fetched."

Woolhouse said it was possible the source of COVID-19 might never be identified.

"The emergence of a new (disease) is always a sequence of unlikely events," he said. "It's hard to be definitive and rule anything out." But he said most scientists agree that bats are the most likely source.

Bats are known to carry coronaviruses and, in fact, the closest relative of the virus that causes COVID-19 has been found in bats.

The report said highly similar viruses have been found in pangolins, a scaly anteater prized in traditional Chinese medicine, but scientists have yet to identify the same coronavirus in animals that has been infecting humans.

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.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus acknowledged he had received the report over the weekend and said it would be formally presented Tuesday.

"All hypotheses are on the table and warrant complete and further studies," he said at a news conference.

The report is inconclusive on whether the outbreak started at a Wuhan seafood market that had one of the earliest clusters of human cases in December 2019. Research published last year in the journal *Lancet* suggested the market may have merely served to further spread the disease rather than being its source.

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

Ken Moritsugu reported from Beijing. Associated Press writers Maria Cheng in London, Victoria Milko in Jakarta, Indonesia, Zeke Miller in Washington, and Frank Jordans in Berlin, contributed to this report.

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Suez Canal reopens after stuck cargo ship is freed

By ISABEL DEBRE and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SUEZ, Egypt (AP) — Salvage teams on Monday finally freed the colossal container ship stuck for nearly a week in the Suez Canal, ending a crisis that had clogged one of the world's most vital waterways and

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 56 of 78

halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce.

A flotilla of tugboats, helped by the tides, wrenched the bulbous bow of the skyscraper-sized Ever Given from the canal's sandy bank, where it had been firmly lodged since March 23.

The tugs blared their horns in jubilation as they guided the Ever Given through the water after days of futility that had captivated the world, drawing scrutiny and social media ridicule.

"We pulled it off!" said Peter Berdowski, CEO of Boskalis, the salvage firm hired to extract the Ever Given. "I am excited to announce that our team of experts, working in close collaboration with the Suez Canal Authority, successfully refloated the Ever Given ... thereby making free passage through the Suez Canal possible again."

Navigation in the canal resumed at 6 p.m. local time (1600 GMT, noon EDT) said Lt. Gen. Osama Rabei, head of the Suez Canal Authority, adding that the first ships that were moving carried livestock. From the city of Suez, ships stacked with containers could be seen exiting the canal into the Red Sea.

At least 113 of over 420 vessels that had waited for Ever Given to be freed are expected to cross the canal by Tuesday morning, Rabei added at a news conference.

Analysts expect it could take at least another 10 days to clear the backlog on either end.

The Ever Given sailed to the Great Bitter Lake, a wide stretch of water halfway between the north and south ends of the canal, for inspection, said Evergreen Marine Corp., a Taiwan-based shipping company that operates the ship.

Buffeted by a sandstorm, the Ever Given had crashed into a bank of a single-lane stretch of the canal about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez. That created a massive traffic jam that held up \$9 billion a day in global trade and strained supply chains already burdened by the coronavirus pandemic.

Rabei said an investigation would determine why the Ever Given got stuck, and he estimated daily losses to the canal of between \$12 million to \$15 million.

"The Suez Canal is not guilty of what happened. We are the ones who suffered damage," he said.

At least 367 vessels, carrying everything from crude oil to cattle, had backed up to wait to traverse the canal. Dozens of others have taken the long, alternate route around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa's southern tip — a 5,000-kilometer (3,100-mile) detour that costs ships hundreds of thousands of dollars in fuel and other costs.

The canal is a source of national pride and crucial revenue for Egypt, and President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi praised Monday's events after days of silence about the blockage.

"Egyptians have succeeded in ending the crisis," he wrote on Facebook, "despite the massive technical complexity."

In the village of Amer, which overlooks the canal, residents cheered as the vessel moved along. Many scrambled to get a closer look while others mockingly waved goodbye to the departing ship from their fields of clover

"Mission accomplished," villager Abdalla Ramadan said. "The whole world is relieved."

The U.S. Embassy in Cairo tweeted its congratulations to Egypt.

The breakthrough followed days of immense effort with an elite salvage team from the Netherlands. Tugboats pushed and pulled to budge the behemoth from the shore, their work buoyed by high tide at dawn Monday that led to the vessel's partial refloating. Specialized dredgers dug out the stern and vacuumed sand and mud from beneath the bow.

The operation was extremely delicate. While the Ever Given was stuck, the rising and falling tides put stress on the vessel, which is 400 meters (a quarter mile) long, raising concerns it could crack.

Rabei praised the team, saying they "achieved a very difficult mission in record time," without damaging the vessel or its cargo.

Berdowski told Dutch radio station NPO 1 the company had always believed it would be the two powerful tugboats it sent that would free the ship. Monday's strong tide "helped push the ship at the top while we pulled at the bottom and luckily it shot free," he said.

"We were helped enormously by the strong falling tide we had this afternoon. In effect, you have the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 57 of 78

forces of nature pushing hard with you and they pushed harder than the two sea tugs could pull," Berdowski added.

The crew on the tugs was "euphoric," but there also was a tense moment when the huge ship was floating free "so then you have to get it under control very quickly with the tugs around it so that it doesn't push itself back into the other side" of the canal, he said.

Jubilant workers on a tugboat sailing with the Ever Given chanted, "Mashhour, No. 1," referring to the dredger that worked around the vessel. The dredger is named for Mashhour Ahmed Mashhour, assigned to run the canal with others when it was nationalized in 1956 by President Gamal Abdel-Nasser.

Once the Ever Given is inspected in Great Bitter Lake, officials will decide whether the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship hauling goods from Asia to Europe would continue to its original destination of Rotterdam or head to another port for repairs.

The crisis cast a spotlight on the vital trade route that carries over 10% of global trade, including 7% of the world's oil. Over 19,000 ships ferrying Chinese-made consumer goods and millions of barrels of oil and liquified natural gas flow through the artery from the Middle East and Asia to Europe and North America.

The unprecedented shutdown, which raised fears of extended delays, goods shortages and rising costs for consumers, has prompted new questions about the shipping industry, an on-demand supplier for a world under pressure from the pandemic.

"We've gone to this fragile, just-in-time shipping that we saw absolutely break down in the beginning of COVID," said Capt. John Konrad, the founder and CEO of the shipping news website gcaptain.com. "We used to have big, fat warehouses in all the countries where the factories pulled supplies. ... Now these floating ships are the warehouse."

International trade expert Jeffrey Bergstrand predicted "only a minor and transitory effect" on prices of U.S. imports.

"Since most of the imports blocked over the last week are heading to Europe, U.S. consumers will likely see little effect on prices of U.S. imports, except to the extent that intermediate products of U.S. final goods are made in Europe," said Bergstrand, professor of finance at the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business.

DeBre reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writers Mike Corder in The Hague, Netherlands, and Jon Gambrell in Dubai contributed.

US eyes additional UN action on N. Korea after missile tests

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Monday it's looking at "additional actions" that the United Nations might take to respond to North Korea's recent missile tests.

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield wasn't specific about what those actions might entail, but noted that the UN Security Council had met last week and renewed the mandate of experts who monitor sanctions against the North. The council is also expected to hold closed-door discussions on North Korea on Tuesday.

"We're looking at additional actions that we might take," Thomas-Greenfield said of the U.S. and others Security Council members.

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan will be meeting in Washington soon with his counterparts from Japan and South Korea to discuss North Korea strategy as the administration finalizes a review of how to approach the country. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who recently returned from Tokyo and Seoul, said the three countries are united in dealing with the challenges posed by Pyongyang.

"What we're seeing from Pyongyang in terms of these provocations does nothing to shake the resolve of our three countries along with allies and partners around the world to approach North Korea from a position of strength in order to diminish the threat that it poses to the region and beyond," Blinken said.

On Monday, North Korea accused the UN of a "double standard" over its reaction to the launches, which

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 58 of 78

violate UN sanctions, warning of serious consequences.

Last week, North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles into the sea in a defiance of U.N. resolutions that ban such launches by North Korea. Some experts say North Korea's missile launches, the first of their kind in a year, were aimed at applying pressure on the Biden administration.

Past short-range missile launches by North Korea have typically drawn U.N. Security Council condemnations, but not fresh sanctions. North Korea was slapped with toughened U.N. sanctions in 2016-17 following its provocative run of missile and nuclear tests aimed at acquiring the capability of launching nuclear strikes on the U.S. mainland.

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' 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 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 that 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 that 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.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 59 of 78

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 schedules of officials at the Energy Department, including then-Secretary Dan Brouillette, one former high-placed administration official said. The schedules were not confidential and are subject to open records laws.

Energy Department spokesman Kevin Liao said it "has found no evidence the network that maintains senior officials' schedules was compromised."

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 spokesperson Sarah Peck said that "a small number of employees' accounts were targeted in the breach" and that 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, said at 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.

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 policymakers 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 initially criticized the Biden administration for a "disorganized response" to the SolarWinds hack before the White House issued a statement clarifying its leadership structure.

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 na-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 60 of 78

tional 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 spokesperson Emily Horne.

Associated Press writer James LaPorta contributed to this report.

Rebels leave beheaded bodies in streets of Mozambique town

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Fierce fighting for control of Mozambique's strategic northern town of Palma left beheaded bodies strewn in the streets Monday, with heavily armed rebels battling army, police and a private military outfit in several locations.

Thousands were estimated to be missing from the town, which held about 70,000 people before the attack began last Wednesday.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility Monday for the attack, saying it was carried out by the Islamic State Central Africa Province, according to the SITE extremist monitoring group.

The rebel claim said the insurgents now control Palma's banks, government offices, factories and army barracks, and that more than 55 people, including Mozambican army troops, Christians and foreigners were killed. It did not provide further detail on the dead.

Earlier this month the United States declared Mozambique's rebels to be a terrorist organization and announced it had sent military specialists to help train the Mozambican military to combat them.

Palma is the center of a multi-billion dollar investment by Total, the France-based oil and gas company, to extract liquified natural gas from offshore sites in the Indian Ocean. The gas deposits are estimated to be among the world's largest and the investment by Total and others is reported to be \$20 billion, one of the largest in Africa.

The battle for Palma forced Total to evacuate its large, fortified site a few miles (kilometers) outside of the city.

The fighting spread across the town Monday, according to Lionel Dyck, director of the Dyck Advisory Group, a private military company contracted by the Mozambican police to help fight the rebels.

"There is fighting in the streets, in pockets across the town," Dyck told The Associated Press. The Dyck group has several helicopter gunships in Palma which have been used to rescue trapped civilians and to fight the rebels.

"My guys are airborne and they've engaged several little groups and they've engaged one quite large group," Dyck said. "They've landed into the fight to recover a couple of wounded policemen. ... We have also rescued many people who were trapped, 220 people at last count."

He said those rescued were taken to Total's fortified site on the southern African country's Afungi peninsula, where chartered flights flew many south to Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado province.

The rebels are well-armed with AK-47 automatic rifles, RPD and PKM machine guns and heavy mortars, Dyck said.

"This attack is not a surprise. We've been expecting Palma to be whacked the moment the rains stopped and the fighting season started, which is now," he said.

"They have been preparing for this. They've had enough time to get their ducks in a row. They have a notch up in their ability. They're more aggressive. They're using their mortars." He said many were wearing black uniforms.

"There have been lots of beheadings. Right up on day one, our guys saw the drivers of trucks bringing rations to Palma. Their bodies were by the trucks. Their heads were off."

Dyck said it will not be easy for the Mozambican government to regain control of Palma.

"They must get sufficient troops to sweep through the town, going house-to-house and clean each one

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 61 of 78

out. That's the most difficult phase of warfare in the book," Dyck said. "It will be very difficult unless there's a competent force put in place with good command and control to retake that town. It can be done. But it ain't going to be easy."

Without control of Palma, Total's operations are jeopardized, analysts say.

The battle for Palma is similar to how the rebels seized the port Mocimboa da Praia in August. The rebels infiltrated men into the town to live among residents and then launched a three-pronged attack. Fighting continued for more than a week until the rebels controlled the town center and then its port. The town, about 50 miles south of Palma, is still held by the rebels.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric condemned the violence in Palma, which he said has reportedly killed dozens of people, "including some trying to flee a hotel where they had taken shelter."

He referred to those trapped at the Amarula Hotel who tried to escape in a convoy of 17 vehicles on Friday. Only seven vehicles made it to the beach, where seven people were killed. Some in the other vehicles fled into the dense tropical jungle and were later rescued.

"We continue to coordinate closely with the authorities on the ground to provide assistance to those affected by the violence," Dujarric said.

The battle for Palma is expected to drastically worsen the humanitarian crisis in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, where the rebels started violent attacks in 2017. The insurgents began as a few bands of disaffected and unemployed young Muslim men. They now likely number in the thousands, according to experts.

"The attack on Palma is a game-changer in that the rebels have changed the narrative," said one expert who returned from Palma earlier this month.

"This is no rag-tag bunch of disorganized youths. This is a trained and determined force that has captured and held one town and is now sustaining a battle for a very strategic center," said the expert, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of visiting Palma. "They have called into question the entire LNG (liquified natural gas) investment which was supposed to bring Mozambique major economic growth over many years."

Known locally as al-Shabab, although they have no known affiliation with Somalia's jihadist rebels of the same name, the rebels' violence in Mozambique, a nation of 30 million, is blamed for the deaths of more than 2,600 people and caused an estimated 670,000 people to flee their homes.

"The attack on Palma has made a bad humanitarian situation worse," said Jonathan Whittall, director of analysis for Doctors Without Borders, which is working to help the displaced around Pemba, the provincial capital 100 miles south of Palma.

"Across Cabo Delgado, the situation was already extremely worrying for those displaced by violence and for those who are in areas that are difficult for humanitarian assistance to reach," Whittall said. "This attack on Palma has led to more displacement and will increase the needs that have to be addressed as a matter of urgency."

"For too long northern Mozambique has been a neglected humanitarian crisis," Whittall said, adding that his organization is exploring ways to expand its emergency response.

AP journalists Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations and Tom Bowker, in Uzes, France, contributed.

Thousands flee Myanmar airstrikes, complicating crisis

By TASSANEE VEJPONGSA Associated Press

MAE SAKOEP, Thailand (AP) — Thai soldiers began sending back some of the thousands of people who have fled a series of airstrikes by the military in neighboring Myanmar, people familiar with the matter said Monday. But Thai officials denied that as the insecurity on the border added a new dimension to an already volatile crisis set off by a coup in Myanmar.

The weekend strikes, which sent ethnic Karen people seeking safety in Thailand, represented another escalation in the violent crackdown by Myanmar's junta on protests of its Feb. 1 takeover. On Saturday,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 62 of 78

more than 100 people were killed in and around demonstrations throughout the country — the bloodiest single day since the takeover.

The violence by the Myanmar military — both on the border and in cities around the country — raised the question of whether the international community would respond more forcefully than it has thus far to a coup that ousted the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and reversed years of progress toward democracy.

Britain called for a closed meeting of the U.N. Security Council which will be held Wednesday afternoon, council diplomats said 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.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the surge in killings by the military on Armed Forces Day "absolutely horrendous," and urged greater unity and commitment by the international community to put pressure on the coup leaders to reverse course and go back to "a serious democratic transition."

"My message to the military is very simple: Stop the killing. Stop the repression of the demonstrations. Release the political prisoners, and return power to those that have really the right to exercise it," he told reporters at U.N. headquarters in New York.

Guterres said he's very worried that many trends look irreversible, "but hope is the last thing we can give up on."

In response to reports of people fleeing the airstrikes, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha had said earlier Monday that the country didn't want "mass migration" but that it was preparing for an influx of people and would take human rights issues into consideration.

But later, three people with knowledge of the matter said Thai soldiers had begun to force people to return to Myanmar.

"They told them it was safe to go back even though it is not safe. They were afraid to go back but they had no choice," said a spokesperson for the Karen Peace Support Network, a group of Karen civil society organizations in Myanmar.

Two other people confirmed that refugees were being sent back to Myanmar. All three spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the issue.

A spokesman for Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, said claims that some Karen were being forced to return to Myanmar were "inaccurate."

"Those reports cite information solely from non-official sources without confirming the facts from official sources on the ground. ... In fact, the Thai authorities will continue to look after those on the Thai side while assessing the evolving situation and the needs on the ground," Tanee Sangrat wrote in a statement.

In one border area, Thai soldiers refused to let journalists or curious locals approach or speak to those who had fled.

Myanmar aircraft carried out three strikes overnight Sunday, according to Dave Eubank, a member of the 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, he said.

Earlier strikes had sent about 2,500 people into northern Thailand's Mae Hong Son province and left at least four people dead and many wounded, according to the agency.

One witness described a "chaotic scene" as he watched hundreds of people cross the river border Sunday into Mae Hong Son.

"There were many children and women. It seemed like they had basic supplies to sustain themselves, but I don't know how long they can last without help," said La Rakpaoprai, who buys snacks and other goods in the mountainous border village of Mae Sakoep and sells them in remote areas.

Video shot Sunday showed 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. In addition to those who have fled to Thailand, an estimated 10,000 people are believed to be displaced inside Myanmar's northern Karen state, according to the Free Burma Rangers.

The bombings may have been in retaliation for a reported attack by the Karen National Liberation Army

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 63 of 78

in which they claimed to have captured a Myanmar government military outpost on Saturday morning. The group is fighting for greater autonomy for the Karen people.

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

The government has battled the Karen fighters on and off for years — as it has with other ethnic minorities seeking more autonomy — but the airstrikes are a worrying development at a time when the junta is also violently suppressing anti-coup protests in cities across the country.

As of Sunday, at least 459 people have been killed since the takeover, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. The true toll is thought to be higher.

On Saturday alone, at least 114 people across the country were killed by security forces, 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.

U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters his administration is working on a response but offered no details. The United States has already levied new sanctions on the junta, as have other countries — but they have had little effect so far.

“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.

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.

Despite the violence by security forces, protests have continued, and many used funerals of those killed on Saturday to show their resistance to the coup.

In Yangon, the country’s largest city, friends and family gathered Monday to say farewell to 49-year-old Mya Khaing, who was fatally shot on Saturday. 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 mourners sang. “We will never forgive what you have done.”

Associated Press journalists Jerry Harmer in Bangkok and Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.

A key to bridging the political divide: Sit down and talk?

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A few years ago, Dave Isay started worrying about America as he saw the middle ground between the political parties vanish into what he calls “disconnection and a vast void.”

“I am not ever concerned about people arguing with each other, because that’s healthy,” Isay said. “But I was concerned with people treating one another with contempt.”

Isay, the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, the winner of six Peabody awards and the founder of the oral history project StoryCorps, hatched an idea: The surest way to start rebuilding common ground, he decided, was to gather people of differing views and backgrounds to sit down and simply talk to each other.

It wouldn’t solve everything. But he felt it was a start, and he named his initiative accordingly: One Small Step.

One Small Step, which Isay established in 2018, is among a growing number of nonprofit initiatives whose aim is to narrow America’s increasingly toxic political divide. Philanthropic groups, which by law must remain non-political, may be ideally suited to serve that goal. Foundations last year donated \$57 million to such civic education and leadership programs, according to the research group Candid.

“One Small Step is all about this idea that we don’t have to treat each other with contempt — that you can look across the political divide and see each other as human beings,” Isay said.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 64 of 78

Which is what Gail Robinson and Kate Gareau found themselves doing late last month in a discussion organized by One Small Step that will eventually be heard in a StoryCorps podcast.

Robinson is a 74-year-old retiree who served in the administration of former Democratic Gov. Tim Kaine of Virginia.

Gareau is a 42-year-old real estate agent.

The two women live in Richmond, about 20 minutes apart. Yet they'd never met and probably never would have, if not for their joint involvement in One Small Step. During an hour-long conversation, Robinson and Kate Gareau reflected on their families and their spirituality. For both women, though, the most powerful experience was recognizing their commonalities.

"I've been involved in racial reconciliation efforts going back to high school, when I was in the NAACP Youth Council," Robinson said. "So this is something that's very dear to my heart."

"Our values are very similar," she added. "I've never made judgments about people based on their political affiliation. That has nothing to do with your character — unless you act like an idiot. How we deal with each other — civility — matters. Dignity matters."

Gareau, a political independent, arrived at a similar discovery.

"There is so much focus on people's differences, especially where politics is concerned, that many forget how similar they are," she said. "Between COVID and the election, we feel very insular, and we feel very separate. Showing we're not is really important."

That hardly means the two agree on political or other issues.

"While we talked about politics — and I can guess where she stands and she may guess where I stand — we didn't really talk about politics in finite terms," Gareau said. "I really appreciate her and her perspective, and I feel like she really appreciates me and my perspective."

After their conversation, Gareau and Robinson each reached out to StoryCorps to provide their contact information to the other. They plan to stay in touch and hope to meet in person once COVID-19 restrictions have eased.

As Isay describes it, One Small Step is predicated on the theories of Gordon Allport, a Harvard professor who studied the roots of prejudice and discrimination in the 1950s.

"When you put enemies face to face, and they have a visceral experience with one another, that sense of hate and fear can melt away and you can see the person in a new way," Isay said.

Yet, he cautioned, "if you do it wrong, you can make things actually much worse."

For that reason, StoryCorps began its new initiative gradually. But as One Small Step has developed, expansion has followed, with roughly 800 people meeting in pairs in about 40 cities. In Austin, Texas, for example, Amina Amdeen and Joseph Weidknecht discussed being on opposite sides at a rally protesting Donald Trump and yet still finding common ground. On the StoryCorps Connect app, a father and son strengthened their bond after decades of feeling distant from each other.

Some recorded conversations became part of the StoryCorps podcast or broadcast on NPR. Like all StoryCorps conversations, they were entered into the Library of Congress to be preserved as history. And this month, boosted by a national advertising campaign from The Ad Council, One Small Step is ready to grow even larger.

"The dream with One Small Step is that we convince the country it's our patriotic duty to see the humanity in people with whom we disagree, which is a complete moon shot," Isay said.

In the interest of fostering evenhandedness, StoryCorps has engaged both liberal and conservative donors. One Small Step's donors include the Hearthland Foundation, funded by Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw, well-known as progressive Hollywood donors, and the Charles Koch Initiative, funded by the billionaire philanthropist known for his support of Republican candidates and conservative issues.

"We've long held a vision of a world where people collaborate to solve problems and respect each other as different," said Sarah Ruger, director of free speech initiatives at the Charles Koch Institute. "What actually helps people connect across differences and builds those bridges? It turns out stories are one of the most powerful ways."

Rachel Levin, executive director of The Hearthland Foundation, noted that as storytellers themselves,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 65 of 78

Spielberg and Capshaw recognize the potency of storytelling and have supported Isay's work in StoryCorps for two decades. The USC Shoah Foundation, which Spielberg established in 1994, has worked to preserve the stories of Holocaust survivors and witnesses.

"Storytelling is key because you're helping to humanize the other," Levin said. "We live in such silos in our country. There's something about hearing somebody else's story, especially in audio. There's something so intimate about that."

"People need to know each other," Levin added. "They need to understand each other's experiences, their perspectives and One Small Step is helping that happen."

Likewise, Ruger said it's important for philanthropic groups to model the kind of partnerships they want to see in society.

"Innovation is the bottom line," she said. "And innovations require intellectual challenges and diversity."

Heidi Arthur, The Ad Council's chief campaign development officer, said One Small Step matches her group's Love Has No Labels campaign, which manages to "take the most divisive moments in our country and bring people messages of unity and hope around inclusion." That campaign, launched in 2015, has included recent commercials addressing the rising number of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic.

"There's no silver bullet," Arthur said. "But, you know, a lot of meaningful actions can add up to a real seismic shift in how people relate to each other."

One Small Step was initially meant to be done face-to-face, with plans to take it online in 2023. But Isay said the pandemic changed that. Last April, with the help of communications platform Vonage, which donated \$1 million in bandwidth to the project, One Small Step was up-and-running digitally.

"Remote interviews in some ways are more effective than face-to-face interviews because you don't have to worry about geography," Isay said. "These are still strangers coming together, and people just feel a little bit safer digitally."

That feeling of safety may be a key to its success.

"There's a place for shouting, but there's also a place for whispering in people's ears," Isay said. "Change can happen that way, too. We're hopeful that we'll be able to help the country take one small step back from this abyss that we're standing at right now."

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The AP is solely responsible for all content. For all of AP's philanthropy coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/hub/philanthropy>.

Happy Monday? England embarks on major easing of lockdown

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — It's been dubbed Happy Monday — the day people could put on a bathing suit and swim in an outdoor pool for the first time in months, or rusty golfers strove to hit their drives down the middle of the fairway.

Following a near three-month coronavirus lockdown that along with a rapid rollout of vaccines has seen infections fall dramatically, England embarked on a major easing of restrictions with families and friends able to meet up in outdoor spaces and many sports permitted once again. The other parts of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are taking broadly similar steps.

And, as if right on cue, the weather is improving, 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.

"It's only because of months of sacrifice and effort that we can take this small step towards freedom today and we must proceed with caution," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said at a media briefing.

Johnson said it's "inevitable" that cases would start to rise again in coming weeks as Europe struggles with a resurgence of the virus. However, he urged everyone to follow the rules and to get a vaccine jab when called.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 66 of 78

Though many aspects of everyday life remain off-limits for at least a few more weeks, many people are relishing their new freedoms, such as playing their outdoor sport of choice, provided the numbers involved meet the limits set out. Organized team sports, such as children's football clubs, can start up again too, up to any number.

One of the first — if not the first — to reopen 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.

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. It says that upcoming plans to lift restrictions, such as allowing pubs to serve beer outside from April 12, could be delayed if the virus backdrop deteriorates.

"The whole point about the road map and the timescale that we have got is that it gives us a chance to evaluate the data as we go forward," Johnson said.

Police stressed that officers will remain highly visible, including in open spaces, and won't hesitate to fine anyone going beyond what is allowed, such as those gathering at house parties.

"We make no apology for our tough stance on shutting down those large gatherings which risk public safety," said Deputy Assistant Commissioner Jane Connors, who leads the coronavirus response for London's Metropolitan Police.

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.

Though new coronavirus cases and deaths are at their lowest levels in around six months, the U.K. has suffered Europe's deadliest outbreaks, with more than 126,500 coronavirus-related deaths, according to government figures. Other measures put the death toll higher because in the early days of the pandemic a year ago, there was very little testing for the virus.

Families who lost loved ones have started painting a mural made up of almost 150,000 hand-drawn hearts on the south bank of the River Thames in London opposite the Houses of Parliament to remember those who have died. The mural is expected to stretch more than a half-mile (nearly a kilometer) when finished.

The "Covid-19 Bereaved Families For Justice" group, which is urging the government to call an inquiry into the handling of the pandemic, said the unlicensed mural isn't meant to be "political or antagonistic" but instead provide a "visual representation" of every life lost.

"Like the scale of our collective loss, this memorial is going to be enormous," said Matt Fowler, co-founder of the group, who lost his father to the virus.

Restrictions have been eased as official figures show 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. has been rolling out vaccines by age group — those 50 and above have been able to get a first shot — and is aiming to give everyone over the age of 18 a first jab by July.

Because of supply constraints, the rollout of first doses to those under 50 is being paused during April, with the focus primarily on delivering second shots to those deemed the most vulnerable.

"We continue to fortify the population, roll out the vaccine at the speed that we are," Johnson said.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at:

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'Captain Underpants' spin-off pulled for 'passive racism'

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A graphic novel for children that was a spin-off of the wildly popular "Captain Underpants" series is being pulled from library and book store shelves after its publisher said it "perpetuates

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 67 of 78

passive racism.”

The book under scrutiny is 2010’s “The Adventures of Ook and Gluk” by Dav Pilkey, who has apologized, saying it “contains harmful racial stereotypes” and is “wrong and harmful to my Asian readers.”

The book follows about a pair of friends who travel from 500,001 B.C. to 2222, where they meet a martial arts instructor who teaches them kung fu and they learn principles found in Chinese philosophy.

Scholastic said it had removed the book from its websites, stopped processing orders for it and sought a return of all inventory. “We will take steps to inform schools and libraries who may still have this title in circulation of our decision to withdraw it from publication,” the publisher said in a statement.

Pilkey in a YouTube statement said he planned to donate his advance and all royalties from the book’s sales to groups dedicated to stopping violence against Asians and to promoting diversity in children’s books and publishing.

“I hope that you, my readers, will forgive me, and learn from my mistake that even unintentional and passive stereotypes and racism are harmful to everyone,” he wrote. “I apologize, and I pledge to do better.”

The decision came after a Korean American father of two young children started a Change.org petition asking for an apology from the publisher and writer.

It also follows a wave of high-profile and sometimes deadly violence against Asian Americans nationwide since the pandemic began.

Earlier this month, the estate of Dr. Seuss said six of his books would no longer be published because they contained depictions of groups that were “hurtful and wrong,” including Asian Americans. The move drew immediate reaction on social media from those who called it another example of “cancel culture.”

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 has sent his condolences to his family, he said.

“My family and I are mourning the loss of our beloved grandmother, Sarah Ogwel Onyango Obama, affectionately known to many as “Mama Sarah” but known to us as “Dani” or Granny,” the former president posted on Twitter, with a photo of the young Obama with his grandmother. “We will miss her dearly, but we’ll celebrate with gratitude her long and remarkable life.”

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.

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 at-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 68 of 78

tended 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 PHOTOS: For migrants at border, both opportunity and risk

The Associated Press undefined

For many Americans, the scenes unfolding at the U.S.-Mexico border are visceral and jarring. A 7-year old girl from Honduras walking in the darkness to keep up with strangers she met on the perilous journey from northern Mexico to Texas. A migrant woman deported from the U.S. crying at a park across the international bridge in Mexico. A group of men standing in the shadows of the border wall after being spotted — and soon-to-be deported — by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents.

For those crossing, particularly unaccompanied children, there are opportunities and risks. A new U.S. president promised to dismantle his predecessor's policies governing asylum seekers who arrive at the southern border. Exactly who the new administration is allowing into the country is unknown, but thousands of children from Central America and Mexico who arrived in recent weeks are now in U.S. custody. Some families have been sent to relatives in the U.S. while they wait for asylum court appointments. And thousands of others have been expelled, mostly to Mexico, where they will decide whether to cross again or return home.

Migration flows at the U.S.-Mexico border are increasing for the third time in seven years under Republican and Democratic presidents. Unlike the Trump administration, President Joe Biden has chosen not to expel immigrant children — like the unaccompanied 7-year-old girl from Honduras photographed in Texas this week by the Associated Press — who arrive at the southern border without a parent. And new rules put in place by the Biden administration mean some families with "acute vulnerabilities" are being released to family in the U.S. and allowed to pursue asylum, while others in almost identical circumstances are not.

For migrant children and teens journeying from Mexico to the U.S., there is uncertainty, fear, hope and lots of waiting. On a recent day at a plaza near the McAllen-Hidalgo International Bridge point of entry into the U.S., a deported migrant boy launched a paper plane into the air while playing with other migrant children in Reynosa, Mexico.

A day earlier in Brownsville, Texas, a young child clutched a migrant woman's arm as they waited for a humanitarian group to process them after Border Patrol agents processed and released them at a bus station. Similar scenes play out every day in towns in Mexico and the U.S. — snapshots of the uneven luck met by immigrants arriving by the thousands at the border.

Pandemic masks ongoing child abuse crisis as cases plummet

By SALLY HO and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 69 of 78

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 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."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 70 of 78

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.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 71 of 78

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 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

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 72 of 78

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>

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.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 73 of 78

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 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 gov-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 74 of 78

ernment 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 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

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 75 of 78

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.

"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.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 76 of 78

"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.

Follow Goodman on Twitter: @APJoshGoodman

Indians gather for Holi celebrations as virus cases surge

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Hindus threw colored powder and sprayed water in massive Holi celebrations Monday despite many Indian states restricting gatherings to try to contain a coronavirus resurgence rippling across the country.

Holi marks the advent of spring and is widely celebrated throughout Hindu-majority India. Most years, millions of people throw colored powder at each other in outdoor celebrations. But for the second consecutive year, people were encouraged to stay at home to avoid turning the festivities into superspreader events amid the latest virus surge.

India's confirmed infections have exceeded 60,000 daily over the past week from a low of about 10,000 in February. On Monday, the health ministry reported 68,020 new cases, the sharpest daily rise since October last year. It took the nationwide tally to more than 12 million.

Daily deaths rose by 291 and the virus has so far killed 161,843 people in the country.

The latest surge is centered in the western state of Maharashtra where authorities have tightened travel restrictions and imposed night curfews. It is considering a strict lockdown.

Cases are also rising in the capital New Delhi and states of Punjab, Karnataka, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh.

The surge coincides with multi-stage state elections marked by large gatherings and roadshows, and the Kumbh Mela, or pitcher festival, celebrated in northern Haridwar city, where tens of thousands of Hindu devotees daily take a holy dip into the Ganges river.

Health experts worry that unchecked gatherings can lead to clusters, adding the situation can be controlled if vaccination is opened up for more people and COVID-19 protocols are strictly followed.

India, with a population of more than 1.3 billion, has vaccinated around 60 million people, of which only

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 77 of 78

9 million have received both doses of vaccine so far.

However, more than 60 million doses manufactured in India have been exported abroad, prompting widespread criticism that domestic needs should be catered to first.

The government said last week that there would be no immediate increase in exports. It said vaccines will be given to everyone over 45 starting April 1.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 30, the 89th day of 2021. There are 276 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot and seriously injured outside a Washington, D.C. hotel by John W. Hinckley, Jr.; also wounded were White House press secretary James Brady, Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy and a District of Columbia police officer, Thomas Delahanty.

On this date:

In 1822, Florida became a United States territory.

In 1842, Dr. Crawford W. Long of Jefferson, Georgia, first used ether as an anesthetic during an operation to remove a patient's neck tumor.

In 1867, U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward reached agreement with Russia to purchase the territory of Alaska for \$7.2 million, a deal ridiculed by critics as "Seward's Folly."

In 1870, the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited denying citizens the right to vote and hold office on the basis of race, was declared in effect by Secretary of State Hamilton Fish.

In 1975, as the Vietnam War neared its end, Communist forces occupied the city of Da Nang.

In 1987, at the 59th Academy Awards, "Platoon" was named best picture; Marlee Matlin received best actress for "Children of a Lesser God" and Paul Newman was honored as best actor for "The Color of Money."

In 1999, Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic (sloh-BOH'-dahn mee-LOH'-shuh-vich) insisted that NATO attacks stop before he moved toward peace, declaring his forces ready to fight "to the very end." NATO answered with new resolve to wreck his military with a relentless air assault.

In 2004, in a reversal, President George W. Bush agreed to let National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice testify publicly and under oath before an independent panel investigating the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In 2006, American reporter Jill Carroll, a freelancer for The Christian Science Monitor, was released after 82 days as a hostage in Iraq.

In 2009, President Barack Obama asserted unprecedented government control over the auto industry, rejecting turnaround plans from General Motors and Chrysler and raising the prospect of controlled bankruptcy for either ailing auto giant.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a single measure sealing his health care overhaul and making the government the primary lender to students by cutting banks out of the process.

In 2015, German officials confirmed that Germanwings co-pilot Andreas Lubitz was once diagnosed with suicidal tendencies and received lengthy psychotherapy before receiving his pilot's license; they believed Lubitz deliberately smashed his Airbus A320 into the French Alps, killing 150 people. Comedy Central announced that Trevor Noah, a 31-year-old comedian from South Africa, would succeed Jon Stewart as host of "The Daily Show."

Ten years ago: A top Libyan official, Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa, defected to Britain, dealing a blow to leader Moammar Gadhafi. Tilikum, the killer whale that had drowned trainer Dawn Brancheau in 2010 at SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida, resumed performing for the first time since the woman's death.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama commuted the prison sentences of 61 drug offenders, including more than a third serving life sentences. A Hennepin County, Minnesota, prosecutor announced that two Minneapolis police officers involved in the Nov. 2015 fatal shooting of Jamar Clark, a Black man, would not face criminal charges, a decision that drew outrage from community members.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, March 30, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 267 ~ 78 of 78

One year ago: Florida authorities arrested a megachurch pastor after they said he held two Sunday services with hundreds in attendance in violation of coronavirus restrictions. (The charges were later dropped.) A Navy hospital ship arrived in New York City to help relieve the coronavirus crisis gripping the city's hospitals. (President Donald Trump said a week later that he would allow coronavirus patients to be treated aboard the ship in addition to patients who did not have the virus.) Macy's, Kohl's and Gap Inc. all said they would stop paying tens of thousands of employees who were thrown out of work when the chains temporarily closed their stores because of the pandemic. Bill Withers, who wrote and sang a string of soulful songs in the 1970s that included "Lean on Me" and "Ain't No Sunshine," died at 81 in Los Angeles.

Today's Birthdays: Game show host Peter Marshall is 95. Actor John Astin is 91. Actor-director Warren Beatty is 84. Rock musician Graeme Edge (The Moody Blues) is 80. Rock musician Eric Clapton is 76. Actor Justin Deas is 73. Actor Paul Reiser is 65. Rap artist MC Hammer is 59. Singer Tracy Chapman is 57. Actor Ian Ziering (EYE'-an ZEER'-ing) is 57. TV personality Piers Morgan is 56. Rock musician Joey Castillo is 55. Actor Donna D'Errico is 53. Singer Celine Dion is 53. TV personality/producer Richard Rawlings is 52. Actor Mark Consuelos is 50. Actor Bahar Soomekh is 46. Actor Jessica Cauffiel is 45. Singer Norah Jones is 42. Actor Fiona Gubelmann is 41. Actor Katy Mixon is 40. Actor Jason Dohring is 39. Country singer Justin Moore is 37. Actor Tessa Ferrer is 35. Country singer Thomas Rhett is 31. Rapper NF is 30.