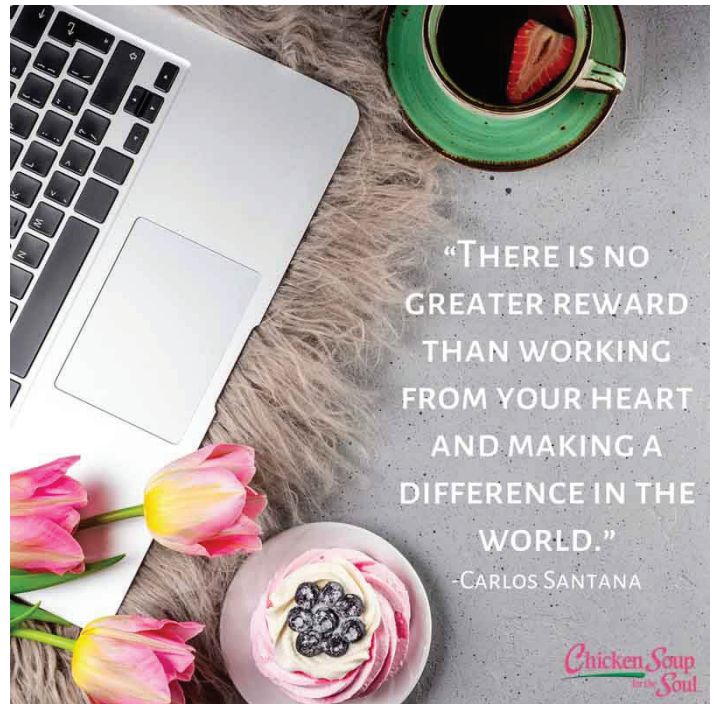


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Connie Stauch, Julie Hinds and Anita Lowary were the election workers at the Groton Community Center on Tuesday. The Groton Area Board of Education election was held across the district. Election results are on Page 3. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

**Weber
Landscaping
Greenhouse
opening this
Spring!**



**We will have a full greenhouse of beautiful
annuals and vegetables.**

Opening First Week of May!

**Located behind 204 N State St, Groton
(Look for the flags)**

**LET US HELP YOU BRIGHTEN
UP YOUR YARD!**

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Weismantel, Pharis re-elected to Groton School Board

The two incumbents were re-elected to the Groton Area Board of Education at Tuesday's election. Kara Pharis carried the Bristol and Andover precincts and had a total of 287 votes. Marty Weismantel carried the Columbia precinct and had a total of 283 votes. Ryan Tracy had 251 votes and Dr. Anna Schwan carried the Groton precinct and had a total of 216 votes. Voter turnout was 27.3 percent. Top two candidates in votes will earn a 3-year term beginning July 1, 2021.

GROTON AREA SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION RESULTS

Tuesday, April 13, 2021

	Anna Schwan	Martin D. Weismantel	Ryan Tracy	Kara M. Pharis	Poll Book Count
ANDOVER	7	18	11	22	29
BRISTOL	17	22	51	104	123
COLUMBIA	9	62	16	24	72
GROTON	183	181	173	137	381
TOTAL	216	283	251	287	605

Percentage of district ballots cast – 23.7%
(Eligible voters – 2,550)
Ballots spoiled, rejected or uncounted – 4

#415 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I would hope what I'm seeing today is the result of a data anomaly, but I seriously doubt we would have had anomalies affecting all of our metrics on the same date—seems a little too coincidental. We don't make the case for anything in particular based on one day's data, but I'm really not nuts about these numbers. New cases are higher than they've been in two months at 87,200. That brings our total up to 31,359,000, which is 0.3% higher than yesterday. Hospitalizations—and I'm thinking this almost has to be an anomaly—are at 77,730 today from almost 44,000 yesterday. I cannot find a report that there was some problem with the reporting or a change in the way it is done, but that kind of jump, if genuine, should have generated a news story and did not. We're at 562,927 deaths, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 1033 deaths reported today. I'll be curious to see what tomorrow looks like, particularly the number hospitalized.

On April 13, 2020, one year ago today, we had 579,001 cases and 23,477 deaths in the US. At this point, with just over four percent of the world's population, we had about 30 percent of the world's cases. Cases in prisons and meat packing plants continued to increase. The FDA approved a system to decontaminate used N95 masks so that health care workers could reuse these normally single-use items multiple times. Worldwide, there were nearly 1.86 million cases and almost 115,000 deaths.

I've been pretty sure all along here that we were in for a surge—a fourth wave, if you will—but I've also been pretty sure that it wouldn't be as ugly as things were over the winter. I still think I'm right about the first half of that statement, but I'm getting less sure about the second half. I had thought immunity from the huge number of prior infections and vaccinations would blunt the power of this current surge, but that's not what it's looking like in our bellwether, Michigan. What I'm seeing there could be the template for where the rest of us are headed, and if so, no one wants to come along on this trip. At all.

It appears variants are fueling this surge; while the department of health is having difficulty keeping up with new cases, the genomic testing that has been done shows they are a huge issue in the state. Hospitalizations are up and, as we've seen in some other places during this spring surge, the patients are younger. This may be largely a reflection of the fact that young people are the ones who are out and about, spreading the variants around. Of course, they'll inevitably catch up some folks in their social networks who won't do as well when infected as young people will, and that's a serious matter—or should be viewed as such. The health care system is under some severe stress. The state has been asking for increased allotments of vaccine, but I'm not so sure this would make much difference: The thing about vaccination is that you're not going to see the effect of increases there for at least six weeks, whereas keeping the supply up in places which haven't hit a surge yet might well have time to make a difference to those places. What is needed in the heart of the surge is measures with more immediate impact—the stuff no one wants to do: masking, distancing, staying home, knocking it off with the sports and the concerts and the parties and the gatherings.

If we look at that state's peak in the second half of November, we were seeing seven-day new-case averages around 7000 to 8000. They're hitting 7600+ now. This is despite the fact that 23 percent of residents have been fully vaccinated and 35 percent have received at least one dose of vaccine. The sort of good news is that deaths seem to be lower this time around, but honestly not all that much lower. In the winter, peak seven-day average deaths got above 4000 by a bit, and they're now around 3800. I don't have the details, but I think it's safe to assume Michigan preferentially targeted its elderly and medically vulnerable residents for the first vaccinations, so I'm going to guess that population is relatively better protected than others, and this could account for the somewhat lower deaths this time—or maybe, given deaths is a lagging indicator, we just haven't seen the worst yet. This is very concerning on several fronts, not least of which is the people currently under threat in Michigan. I wish them well. The rest of us too. We're going to need all the luck we can find.

We've been getting some reports after administration of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine of what looks like the same sort of rare blood clotting disorder as was seen in Europe with the Oxford/AstraZeneca

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vaccine. There have been six cases reported in the over 6.85 million doses of this vaccine administered in this country; one of these individuals has died and another is hospitalized. The condition is called cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) and it is presenting with an unusual combination of abnormal clotting and a reduction in platelets, cell fragments involved in blood clotting.

The CDC and FDA issued a joint statement this morning recommending a pause, possibly for just a few days, while the CDC puts its Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) on the job of reviewing the cases and sorting out their significance. ACIP is scheduled for an emergency meeting tomorrow afternoon, and their analysis can be expected to inform the FDA's review as it performs its own investigation. This means vaccination sites run through federal health channels will cease administering it and states were free to make their own individual decisions whether to continue or stop; all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia joined the pause.

So what are they investigating? First, they're probably going to make every effort to ascertain whether all the cases have been identified. Then they'll likely look at each case to understand the sequence of events, examine the medical history of each person affected to see whether there were predisposing factors for this possible side effect, and try to figure out the mechanism of action by which the vaccine might cause this sort of effect. I would guess they'll have clotting experts and immunologists and vaccinologists and who-knows-else combing through the available information and talking with the clinicians treating the patients. They need to decide whether it is likely the vaccine caused the events and if there's any way to identify people at risk, as well as determine whether it is safe to proceed with administering the vaccine. These folks don't take that responsibility lightly. Depending what turns up, the FDA could decide to amend or revoke the vaccine's emergency use authorization (EUA). Unless there's something here we haven't seen yet, revocation seems highly unlikely to me.

A concern that was given as the reason for such a rapid reaction is that a very commonly-used medication for the treatment of abnormal blood clots, a drug called heparin, is believed to exacerbate the problem in these cases, making things worse. That means doctors who don't know this are highly likely to treat a patient presenting with abnormal clots with the worst possible medication. The agencies want time to establish awareness in the health care community that this is a potential side effect so that, according to the statement, they "can plan for proper recognition and management due to the unique treatment required with this type of blood clot." In other words, they want doctors prepared to spot these cases and aware they should not be using heparin when they do. This pause gives the regulators a chance to spread the word.

All of the cases were in women between 18 and 48 years of age and happened between six and 13 days after the dose was administered. The symptoms have been severe headache, abdominal pain, leg pain, and/or shortness of breath within three weeks after the vaccine was administered. People experiencing these symptoms within four weeks of vaccination are advised to contact their health care provider and provide the information that this vaccine has been received. I would guess this advisory might be added to the patient information given out to those receiving the vaccine.

It seems likely this is related to the appearance of the same condition in people who have received the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine; they are both adenovirus-vectored vaccines, and that vector appears to be the focus of interest right now. You may recall that these vaccines use a nonreplicating form of common cold virus called adenovirus as a means for getting the vaccine's nucleic acid into the patient's cells. The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine uses a chimpanzee virus for the purpose, and the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine uses a human virus. It looks to me as though experts may suspect an immune response to those virus vectors might be leading to the side effect.

If this side effect is indeed as rare as it appears to be—literally less than one in a million doses—it's easy to see why it didn't turn up in clinical trials involving a few tens of thousands of participants. That rarity also makes it seem probable the risk will be deemed to be outweighed by the potential benefit of this vaccine. Even for severe side effects, I believe it would be usual to accept that level of risk, especially when we have a disease that itself has a high enough likelihood of severe outcomes. I'm not in posses-

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sion of the computational firepower or the data to compute this, but it is, as Mom used to say, a lead pipe cinch that more than one of those 6.8 million vaccinated people would have died from Covid-19 without the vaccination, likely many more.

Meanwhile, if you've received this vaccine, you can relax if it was more than four weeks ago. If you received it more recently than that, you can probably also relax—see note on rarity above and also note all cases so far have occurred within 13 days; but you should remain alert for the symptoms described. I will mention two other things: (1) There have been zero reports of such a side effect for either of the mRNA vaccines—Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech; so folks who've received either of these are in the clear on this one. (2) This series of events should boost everyone's confidence in the safety of the Covid-19 vaccines. Here, when there were six cases of something in the entire country, the regulatory structure that approves and oversees these vaccines responded quickly, decisively, and appropriately. Since no drug or vaccine is 100 percent safe and there is always the possibility of something bad happening, it is heartening to see the response happen exactly as it should—no messing around and making excuses. This is good science done well. I'll also note that the US has contracted for enough vaccine doses for the entire country with a lot to spare, so if it should happen—as I do not think it will—that this vaccine loses its EUA, there's still going to be enough to go around to everyone who wants to be vaccinated—plus those who decide later to go ahead with it.

For the record, several other countries are taking their cues from the US agencies and also pausing use of the vaccine; the company has announced it will delay its upcoming rollout in Europe. The company is also pausing administration of doses in its current clinical trials—a two-dose and a booster trial. Everybody's being highly responsible here.

Meanwhile, we're getting very close to a quarter of us fully vaccinated in the US. We're at 192,282,781 doses out of the 245, 364,805 doses delivered for administration. According to what's been reported so far (updates seem to keep coming in for a few days after the date of vaccination), 2.6 million doses went out yesterday, and almost 37 percent of the population has received at least one dose.

We have heard from the FDA how it plans to manage the review of the Pfizer/BioNTech request for an amendment for its existing EUA, and my prediction of a few nights ago is not what they plan to do. Apparently, amendments do not require the full-blown process we saw used for the initial EUA for all of the current vaccines and which I described the other night. Nope, it seems they're going to handle the application in-house without involving its Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee. This probably means the decision could come fairly quickly. They are not giving a timeline, but agency review should take less time than all the steps in processing an initial EUA application. I guess we'll have to wait and see.

We talked very recently about Pfizer/BioNTech's six-month report that their vaccine was more than 90 percent effective at this point and 95 to 100 percent effective against severe disease. Today, Moderna made a similar announcement of similar results at six months. Their numbers are 90 percent overall and 95 percent against severe disease. This is based on over 900 total cases seen, including 100 severe cases. Since these results take us through April 9, they're going to reflect the current mix of variants in the population, which is also good news for both vaccines. We should note these data have not yet been published. They also announced some preliminary results of booster dose/variant booster dose testing in mice. The results look promising, but it's early for those yet.

The NFL sent a memo around today to all of its teams establishing a rule that any support personnel who work with or close to players must be vaccinated, with narrow exceptions for "bona fide medical or religious ground" for refusing vaccination. They will also require teams to submit vaccination reports and will base relaxation of restrictions on the content of those reports. I wish they'd mandated vaccination for players too; but I applaud these requirements. I think they can make a pretty sound case that allowing unvaccinated individuals the opportunity to infect their most important asset, the athletes, is not reasonable.

That wraps up the day. Stay safe. Contribute to holding this virus at bay. We'll talk again.

Statement from Health Secretary Kim Malsam-Rysdon Regarding Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine No Adverse Cases Identified in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. – Tuesday, Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon, released the following statement following the joint statement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), recommending a temporary pause in the administration of the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine. This comes after six reported U.S. cases among women of rare and severe type of blood clots after receiving the vaccine:

“The safety and well-being of all South Dakotans is our top priority. Out of an abundance of caution, and until we know more on the reported cases, all vaccinators across our state will follow the CDC’s and FDA’s recommendations, and pause all administration of the J&J vaccine until further notice,” said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. “We remain confident all those who’ve already received the J&J shot have no reason for immediate concern but encourage residents to speak with their medical providers should concerns arise.”

As of today, 15,743 South Dakotans have received the J&J vaccine and no adverse cases of concern have been identified in the state. According to the statement by the CDC and FDA, any adverse events ‘appear to be rare’ and those affected would experience ‘severe headache(s), abdominal pain, leg pain, or shortness of breath within three weeks after vaccination’.

“Our Department remains in contact with healthcare providers across the state, who are all closely monitoring this development within their patient community,” added Malsam-Rysdon.

Governor Noem Asks President Biden to Uphold Mount Rushmore Fireworks Agreement

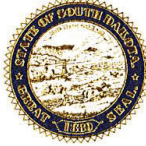
PIERRE, S.D. – Today, on President Thomas Jefferson’s birthday, Governor Kristi Noem sent this letter to President Joseph R. Biden advocating for South Dakota’s Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration.

“This year, as we mark our independence from [COVID-19], Mount Rushmore would be the perfect place for a national celebration and fireworks show,” wrote Governor Noem, referring to President Biden’s message that held up Independence Day as a target for Americans to begin returning to normal.

“We are committed to hosting a Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration that is safe and responsible and working closely with the National Parks Service (NPS) to do so. I respectfully ask that you continue the hopeful message you shared earlier this year and uphold our Agreement to host the event this year,” continued Governor Noem.

In the letter, Governor Noem asked President Biden to uphold the Memorandum of Agreement between NPS and the State of South Dakota regarding the Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration. Governor Noem responded to NPS’s reasons for cancelling the fireworks celebration. She also outlined the due diligence that the State of South Dakota and other entities undertook to ensure that last year’s celebration could be conducted safely and responsibly.

You can read Governor Noem’s letter to President Biden on the next three pages of the GDI.



STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
KRISTI NOEM | GOVERNOR

April 13, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20500

Mr. President,

Last month, the National Park Service (NPS) notified us that they would be renegeing on our Memorandum of Agreement to return fireworks to Mount Rushmore National Memorial in a safe and responsible manner.

I am raising this issue with you because the letter we received from NPS contradicts statements you made in March that held up Independence Day as a target date for Americans to begin returning to normal:

[B]y July the 4th, there's a good chance you, your families, and friends will be able to get together in your backyard or in your neighborhood and have a cookout and a barbeque and celebrate Independence Day. ...After this long hard year, that will make this Independence Day something truly special, where we not only mark our independence as a nation, but we begin to mark our independence from this virus.

There is a long history of celebrations of American independence at Mount Rushmore National Memorial, including fireworks displays from 1998 to 2009 and again in 2020. This year, as we mark our independence from this virus, Mount Rushmore would be the perfect place for a national celebration and fireworks show.

The NPS sent a letter listing several reasons why they believe a fireworks celebration would not be safe or responsible this year, but the facts and data tell a very different story.

NPS first outlined health and safety concerns for employees and visitors if fireworks returned this year, focusing specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic and current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. Last year, we hosted

Joseph R. Biden
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April 13, 2021

more than seven thousand people. Contact tracing weeks after the event could not trace a single case of COVID-19 to the event – in South Dakota or in any other state.

Moreover, COVID-19 vaccination efforts are moving much more quickly than anticipated. As of April 9, roughly 20% of the country is fully vaccinated – and over 50% of South Dakotans have received at least their first shot. We believe this was part of the inspiration for your optimistic statements. Given the progress we are making as a nation, wouldn't cancelling an event months in advance due to COVID concerns fail to recognize both the science and the evidence?

NPS also cites potential tribal concerns. In South Dakota, we value the partnerships we have with each of our state's nine tribes. Accordingly, the tribes were consulted before last year's event and invited to attend our planning meetings. South Dakota's Department of Tribal Relations was involved in every step of the process. And attendees of last year's event enjoyed Native American-led programming before the fireworks itself, including a performance by Dakota Hoop Dancer Jasmin Pickner-Bell and a reading by Lakota Storyteller Darrell Red Cloud. We would also consult with tribal leaders for this year's event and again invite them to join us to celebrate America's birthday in 2021.

NPS also cited environmental risks to the park itself, including perchlorate levels in the water at the Memorial and wildfire risks to the Black Hills. But prior to conducting the 2020 celebration, NPS published a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) stating that the event would not harm the natural environment of the Black Hills. In addition, when environmental conditions have not been favorable to the fireworks celebration—as in 2002, for example—we have refrained from holding the event. The same approach would occur this year.

Finally, with regard to the statement that the 2020 event's attendance limitations "impacted tens of thousands who were not able to visit the Memorial or had their visit cut short," NPS is painting a very misleading picture. Long before the pandemic hit, the State of South Dakota agreed to limit attendance for the fireworks due to previous years' poor crowd control and the resulting overcrowding. It is also why we celebrate on July 3, so that everyone can enjoy the Memorial on July 4.

In planning last year's event, we did our due diligence to ensure this event could be held safely and responsibly:

- We worked with the U.S. Department of the Interior on all required environmental reviews.
- We followed every item on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance checklist.

Joseph R. Biden
Page 3
April 13, 2021

- We held multiple community meetings and public hearings leading up to the event.
- We created a "Go/No-Go Checklist" with conditions that must be met on the day of the event, including fire preparedness levels, wind speeds, and burning index. This list was reviewed regularly and signed by the Interior Department on the day of the event.
- We implemented an incident management team that met every guideline outlined by Ready.gov.
- We had an emergency operations center on site for two weeks—one week leading up to the event and one week after.
- We created and adhered to an emergency response checklist and manual.
- We assigned specific solicitors to handle First Amendment permits and accommodations.
- We coordinated with NPS on all communication activities relating to the event.

We are committed to hosting a Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration that is safe and responsible and working closely with NPS to do so. I respectfully ask that you continue the hopeful message you shared earlier this year and uphold our Agreement to host the event this year.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

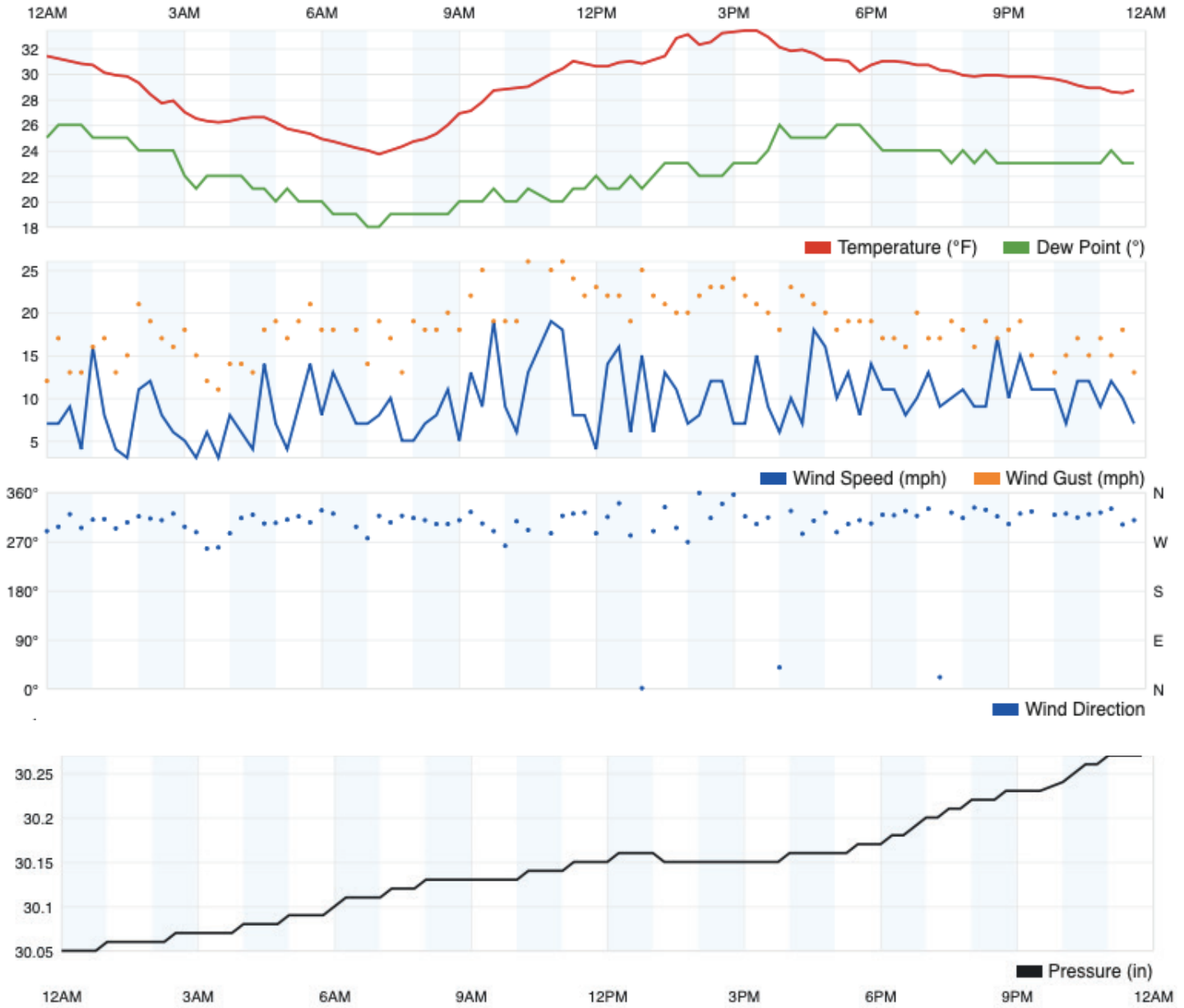


Kristi Noem
Governor

Groton Daily Independent






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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
High: 43 °F	Low: 26 °F	High: 44 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 46 °F


 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION




Mostly Cloudy into Friday

Today/Tonight
Highs: 40s
Lows: 20s


Thursday
Highs: 40s


Friday
Highs: 40s
Rain/Snow West


Saturday
Highs: Mid 40s- Lower 50s


www.weather.gov/abr
Updated: 4/14/2021 4:47 AM Central

Skies will remain mostly cloudy through Thursday with continued cool conditions. Highs will be in the 40s both today and Thursday. Light rain and light snow is possible along the Missouri River Thursday night into Friday.

Today in Weather History

April 14, 1991: Thawing ice on top of a television tower fell onto buildings below in Garden City, Clark County. The ice had accrued during a freezing rain event on the 11th and 12th. No one was injured, but damage estimates ranged from \$35,000-\$40,000.

April 14, 2005: A dust devil developed on the west side of Bison as a dry cold front passed through the area. As it moved east across town, it blew out windows on several automobiles, damaged a 160 square foot section of roof from a house, and tore shingles off several buildings. The dust devil also pulled a flagpole out of the ground. No one was injured. The dust devil was approximately 20 feet wide, and the path length was one and a half miles.

1886: The deadliest tornado in Minnesota history razed parts of St. Cloud and Sauk Rapids, leaving 72 dead and 213 injured. 11 members of a wedding party were killed including the bride and groom. The bottom of the Mississippi River was seen during the tornado's crossing. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the StarTribune.

1912: On her maiden voyage, the RMS Titanic rammed into an iceberg just before midnight. The "unsinkable ship" sank two hours and forty minutes later into the icy water of the Atlantic Ocean near Newfoundland, Canada. Tragically, 1,517 passengers including the crew were lost. A nearby ship, the Carpathia, rushed to the Titanic and was able to save 706 people.

1922: The Mississippi River reached a record height of 21.3 feet at New Orleans, Louisiana, and the river was still rising, with the crest still a week away. Understandably, the City of New Orleans was nervous as reports of levees failing upriver reached the city. A crevasse below New Orleans would relieve the pressure on the town's strained levees on the 27th, spared the city from disaster.

1935: Black Sunday refers to a particularly severe dust storm that occurred on April 14, 1935, as part of the Dust Bowl. During the afternoon, the residents of the Plains States were forced to take cover as a dust storm, or "black blizzard," blew through the region. The storm hit the Oklahoma Panhandle and Northwestern Oklahoma first and moved south for the remainder of the day. It hit Beaver around 4:00 p.m., Boise City around 5:15 p.m., and Amarillo, Texas, at 7:20 p.m. The conditions were the most severe in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles, but the storm's effects were felt in other surrounding areas.

1999: In Sydney, Australia, a hailstorm causes \$1.6 billion in damage, making it the costliest hailstorm to strike a populated city in the country. The hail damaged some 22,000 homes and more than 60,000 vehicles. Also, aircraft damage at Sydney Airport was extensive.

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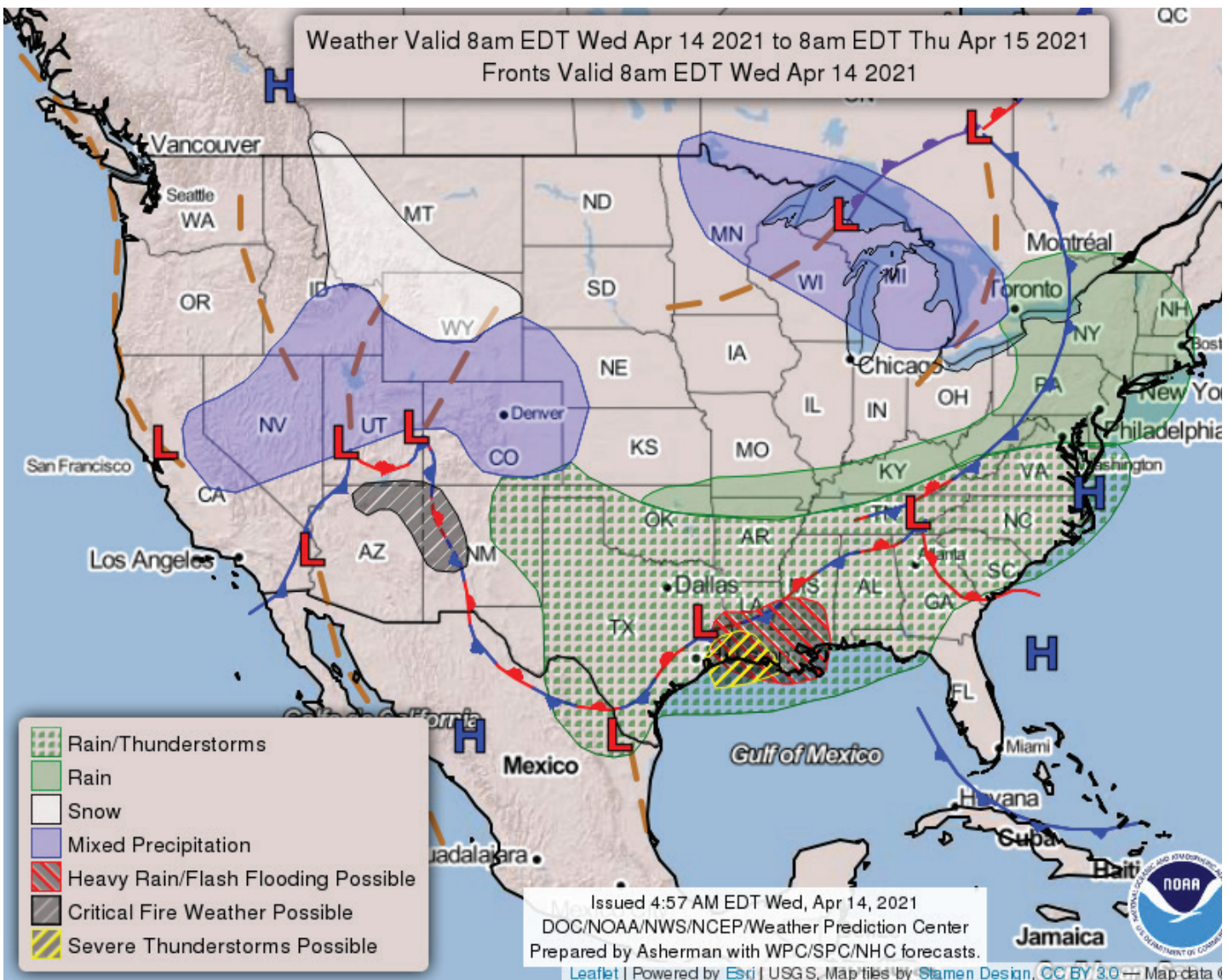
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 2:40 PM
Low Temp: 24 °F at 7:20 AM
Wind: 26 mph at 10:27 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 89° in 1908
Record Low: 9° in 1928
Average High: 57°F
Average Low: 31°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 0.63
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.29
Average Precip to date: 2.81
Precip Year to Date: 2.47
Sunset Tonight: 8:19 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:48 a.m.



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FRIEND OR FOE?

James wrote, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord!"

God's power to heal has an important place in Scripture. In fact, of the 1,257 narrative verses in the four Gospels, 484 are related specifically to healing. We believe in God's healing power and know He can heal. David also believed in God's healing power and believed that God could heal him. But where did David begin in his plea for God's help?

David was hanging on to life by a thread. He felt total rejection by God because of a major sin he had committed. It had become a life-defeating burden that was too heavy to bear, too big to overlook, and too obvious to ignore. In fact, he said that God "pierced him and His hand came down hard upon him." He knew he was being punished by God for sinning against God. Punished, but not abandoned. Punished – yet pursued.

After thoroughly describing his mental, physical and spiritual sicknesses to God, he cried out, "I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin." In his wisdom and from his former relationship with God, he realized that God would not bring about physical and mental healing unless David first confessed his sin and need for spiritual healing.

There can be little doubt that sin and physical and mental illnesses are intimately connected. Yet, many only want God's physical and mental healing. With God, all healing begins with confession and repentance – which brings spiritual healing.

Prayer: When we need healing, Lord, if we have sinned, may we first repent, ask for forgiveness and grace, and then experience Your healing. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But I confess my sins; I am deeply sorry for what I have done. Psalm 38:18

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. April 11, 2021.

Editorial: South Dakota Vaccinations And 'Fortunate' Timing?

The race to vaccinate Americans against the COVID-19 novel coronavirus took on curious dimensions for South Dakota this past weekend thanks to a national news story and a state press release.

On Saturday, CNN reported that analysis of national vaccination efforts showed the blue states — that is, states that backed Democrat Joe Biden in the 2020 president election — are ahead of red states, which backed Republican Donald Trump, in getting people vaccinated. According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 46% of those 18 and older in states won by Biden have had at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, while the number in states Trump won drop to 41%. This report matches up with various polls conducted in recent months that indicate Democrats are more likely to get vaccinated than Republicans, particularly GOP men.

However, South Dakota (along with fellow red state Alaska) is running against this trend, having one of the best vaccination rates in the country.

This was affirmed Saturday when the South Dakota Department of Health announced it reached a milestone by surpassing the 50% mark in having people ages 18 and older receiving at least one vaccination.

Why is South Dakota's vaccination effort producing results when — according to voting patterns, at least — it should not? There is a lot of room for speculation.

One explanation is that the state has seemed to organize its vaccination rollout fairly well. Department of Health officials have given credit to Gov. Kristi Noem for giving them the latitude to create a system that has worked with vaccination partners statewide who have, in turn, worked to engage the public about vaccination opportunities and availability. This has become more evident as vaccine supplies have grown and become more dependable the past three months.

A lot of credit, too, must go to South Dakotans, who have so far largely embraced the need for the vaccine. While it may not necessarily mean the pace will continue as the willing come forward and the unwilling hold back, it does indicate that the vaccine is broadly popular.

And there is another possibility that may play into this situation.

South Dakota's COVID case rate remained relatively low through much of the first few months of the pandemic while much of the nation was hit hard. Our surge — our darkest time — came in the second half of fall and early winter, when cases exploded and the death toll soared. (From Halloween to New Year's Eve, the state's COVID death toll exploded from 425 to 1,488, an increase of 350%.) For a time, South Dakota had some of the highest fatality and infection rates in the world.

In the midst of that pandemic storm here, the first vaccine was released, with a second following weeks thereafter. This was a great sign of hope coming in the wake of a bleak stretch — one that South Dakotans, reeling from the surge, may have more eagerly embraced because of fresh, painful memories.

Whatever the reason and whatever theories, the numbers don't lie. South Dakota has been a vaccination leader in this country. While the pandemic has yet to run its course, and there may be more variant issues ahead, we can hopefully maintain that vaccination pace to some degree. It's up to us, and so far, we've held up out end rather nicely.

END

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SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

10-15-19-45-68, Mega Ball: 9, Megaplier: 4

(ten, fifteen, nineteen, forty-five, sixty-eight; Mega Ball: nine; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$220 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$67 million

South Dakota health officials ask for pause on J&J vaccine

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials asked vaccine providers to put Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 shots on hold after a request Tuesday from federal officials.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration asked for a pause following reports of blood clots developing in six people in the U.S. who had received the vaccine.

"The safety and well-being of all South Dakotans is our top priority," Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon said in a release. "Out of an abundance of caution, and until we know more on the reported cases, all vaccinators across our state will follow the CDC's and FDA's recommendations, and pause all administration of the J&J vaccine until further notice."

Federal authorities said all six cases occurred among women between the ages of 18 and 48, and symptoms occurred six to 13 days after vaccination.

South Dakota has administered nearly 16,000 doses of the J&J vaccine, with no adverse cases reported.

"We remain confident all those who've already received the J&J shot have no reason for immediate concern, but encourage residents to speak with their medical providers should concerns arise," Malsam-Rysdon said.

Noem asks Biden to allow fireworks at Mount Rushmore in July

KEYSTONE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem sent a letter to President Joe Biden Tuesday asking that he intervene and allow a Fourth of July fireworks display at Mount Rushmore.

The National Park Service has denied a permit for the fireworks this year, citing concerns about the spread of COVID-19, tribal opposition and the environment.

Fireworks returned to Mount Rushmore last year for a Fourth of July celebration that included a campaign stop by then-President Donald Trump. It was the first time Mount Rushmore has hosted a fireworks show since 2009.

Wildfire risks had cancelled previous Fourth of July displays.

Noem's request comes after the national memorial was recently closed for several days because of a large wildfire at its doorstep.

The governor asked Biden to uphold the Memorandum of Agreement between National Park Service and South Dakota.

"We are committed to hosting a Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration that is safe and responsible and working closely with the National Parks Service to do so," Noem wrote. "I respectfully ask that you continue the hopeful message you shared earlier this year and uphold our Agreement to host the event this year."

Matriarch in fight against Dakota Access Pipeline has died

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — LaDonna Allard, a woman considered a matriarch in the fight against the Dakota Access pipeline, has died at age 64.

An online obituary says Allard died April 10 in Fort Yates where she lived.

Allard founded the first Dakota Access pipeline protest camp in March 2016. It grew in size over the next

few months and inspired others to set up camps where the Cannonball and Missouri rivers meet.

Thousands of people from around the world soon arrived to stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its fight against the pipeline.

Allard stepped up against the pipeline because one of her sons is buried on a hill near the route of the line, which crosses under the Missouri River just upstream of the Standing Rock Reservation, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

In the days since her death, numerous friends and supporters have honored her on social media.

"A true matriarch has passed -- bless you Ladonna Brave Bull Allard," the Lakota People's Law Project said on Facebook. "You will be remembered for all you have done to serve humanity: Sacred Stone, your mentoring of the young, your strength and vision. Prayers up...#NoDAPL forever."

Allard's Sacred Stone Camp was modeled after a similar camp on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota to protest the Keystone XL Pipeline.

Law enforcement made hundreds of arrests at demonstrations in the camps along the Standing Rock border in 2016 and 2017.

Wrestlers at youth tournament contract the coronavirus

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minnesota health officials are urging those who attended a recent youth wrestling tournament in South Dakota to get tested for COVID-19 after a number of wrestlers contracted the coronavirus.

Officials have been concerned about youth sports fueling an increase in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations.

Positive infections have been found in 16 of the 2,000 wrestlers plus spectators from Minnesota who were in Sioux Falls for a state meet held by the Northland Youth Wrestling Association March 31-April 3, the Star Tribune reported.

The tournament, which involved wrestlers from 52 Minnesota counties, was moved from Rochester to Sioux Falls where coronavirus restrictions for sporting events are less stringent.

A mask mandate in Sioux Falls expired March 13. The arena venue encouraged masks and social distancing but did not require them. TV coverage showed unmasked athletes and spectators packed tightly together during the tournament.

While children rarely suffer severe COVID-19 symptoms, they can pass the virus to parents or other older adults who are more vulnerable, said Michael Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.

That is especially true now that a more infectious B.1.1.7 variant of the coronavirus is believed to be the cause of as many as 60% of new infections in Minnesota. That variant was first identified in England and spread quickly among children and younger adults in Europe, Osterholm said.

Royal funeral offers chance for William, Harry to reconcile

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When Prince Philip's funeral takes place on Saturday, it will be more than a focal point for national mourning. Many will also be watching for any signs of reconciliation between Prince Harry and the royal family, especially with his elder brother Prince William.

It will be the first time that Harry comes face-to-face with the royal family since he and his wife Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, stepped away from royal duties last March and moved to California with their young son, Archie.

While that departure caused a huge rift in the monarchy, family relations took a further dive last month when Harry and Meghan gave a candid interview with U.S. talk show host Oprah Winfrey. Among other revelations, Harry confirmed rumors that he and his brother had been growing apart, saying "the relationship is 'space' at the moment" — though he added that "time heals all things, hopefully."

Harry also told Winfrey that his father, heir to the throne Prince Charles, was not accepting his calls for

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a time.

And the couple threw a bombshell by revealing that an unnamed member of the royal family had expressed concern about "how dark" their child's skin color might be due to Meghan's biracial heritage. Days after the explosive racism accusations were aired, William shot back, telling reporters that his was "very much not a racist family."

In spite of the tensions, Saturday's funeral will almost certainly remind the brothers of their shared grief at another royal funeral more than two decades ago — when, as young boys, both walked behind their mother Princess Diana's coffin in 1997.

On Saturday, Harry, 36, and William, 38, are both expected to join other senior royals and walk behind their grandfather's coffin, as the funeral procession makes its way through Windsor Castle.

Many observers believe that Philip's funeral will provide an ideal opportunity for "The Firm" to show a united front to the world and for the royal brothers to smooth over tensions. Philip, who had been married to Queen Elizabeth II for more than seven decades, died last week at 99.

"They shared emotion. They share grief at the present time because of the death of their grandfather," former Prime Minister John Major, who was appointed the princes' guardian after Diana's death, told the BBC this week. "I hope very much that it is possible to mend any rifts that may exist."

But Angela Levin, Harry's biographer, said it would be inappropriate for the royals to talk about their personal issues in the run-up to the funeral, and there may not be time afterward if Harry rushes back to the U.S.

"I absolutely think it would be wrong to be all about themselves before the funeral. And I think that it's wrong to imagine that they're going to pour out their hearts and give each other a hug, when so much has happened in the year and William has had to take on so much more responsibility," she told the AP.

Penny Junor, another royal biographer, thinks the damage done by the Winfrey interview - especially the racism accusations, which she called "unforgivable" - would be very difficult to come back from.

"(Harry) was disrespectful to his father. He talked about a private matter on a global stage. There's a lot to sort out," Junor said. Both of the brothers are "very stubborn people," she added, and "William will have been really hurt and angry at his brother for the interview."

Harry arrived in the U.K. on Monday and is in quarantine, but he can attend the funeral in line with government rules that make exceptions for such occasions. Meghan, who is pregnant with their second child, was advised by her doctor not to make the long trip, officials said.

The brothers have had contrasting roles and personalities from birth, though in recent years those differences have increasingly come to the fore.

As the younger brother to a future king — the so-called "spare" to the heir — Harry had far fewer responsibilities and a reputation as the party prince before serving in the army and settling down in his 30s. He found success and enjoyed popularity in Britain with the Invictus Games, the sporting event he founded for disabled and wounded members of the military.

Yet his place in the monarchy became further diminished with the birth of William's three children, who bumped him down to sixth in line to the throne.

It was clear from at least 2019 that Harry wanted a break from the constraints of the monarchy to craft his own narrative. That year Harry and Meghan separated from the Royal Foundation, originally set up as the brothers' joint charitable venture, so they could have their own platform.

The princes' separate statements this week in tribute to Philip reflected their personalities and differing styles. While William's stated that he and his wife Kate will "continue to do what (Philip) would have wanted and will support The Queen in the years ahead," Harry's tone was much more informal and light-hearted.

The younger brother praised Philip for being "authentically himself" and thanked him for his "dedication to Granny." He also wrote: "While I could go on, I know that right now he would say to all of us, beer in hand, 'Oh do get on with it.'"

Still, Levin and Junor said the brothers had enjoyed an incredibly close bond from childhood, and both were hopeful the time would come for them to reconcile their differences.

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"Harry said to me when I was interviewing him for my biography, he said that William is the only person he can really trust," said. "He felt if he went and met people, he didn't know if they were liking him for what he was rather than who he was. But they could discuss anything, he and William."

Historian Ed Owens, who wrote "The Family Firm: Monarchy, Mass Media and the British Public 1932-1953," about the royal family's public relations strategy in the last century, agreed that it was "still early days" for a royal reconciliation.

"I don't think there's going to be any great sort of family get-together or a return to sort of normalcy, sort of pre-Megxit, anytime soon," he said.

Minnesota shooting charging decision awaited, protests go on

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — Prosecutors expect to decide Wednesday whether to charge a white former police officer who fatally shot a Black man during a traffic stop in a Minneapolis suburb, sparking nights of protests and raising tensions amid the nearby murder trial of the ex-officer charged with killing George Floyd.

Brooklyn Center police officer Kim Potter and Police Chief Tim Gannon resigned Tuesday, two days after Potter shot 20-year-old Daunte Wright. Gannon has said he believed Potter mistakenly grabbed her pistol when she was trying to pull out her Taser.

Brooklyn Center Mayor Mike Elliott said at a news conference that the city had been moving toward firing Potter, a 26-year veteran, when she resigned. Elliott said he hoped her resignation would "bring some calm to the community," but that he would keep working toward "full accountability under the law."

Washington County Attorney Pete Orput told WCCO-AM that he had received information on the case from state investigators and hoped to have a charging decision on Wednesday. Orput did not respond to a message from The Associated Press. While the shooting happened in Hennepin County, prosecutors referred the case to nearby Washington County — a practice county attorneys in the Minneapolis area adopted last year in handling police deadly force cases.

"We have to make sure that justice is served, justice is done. Daunte Wright deserves that. His family deserves that," Elliott said.

But police and protesters faced off once again after nightfall Tuesday, with hundreds of protesters gathering again at Brooklyn Center's heavily guarded police headquarters, now ringed by concrete barriers and a tall metal fence, and where police in riot gear and National Guard soldiers stood watch.

About 90 minutes before a 10 p.m. curfew, state police announced over a loudspeaker that the gathering had been declared unlawful and ordered the crowds to disperse. That quickly set off confrontations, with protesters launching fireworks toward the station and throwing objects at police, who launched flashbangs and gas grenades, and then marched in a line to force back the crowd.

"You are hereby ordered to disperse," authorities announced, warning that anyone not leaving would be arrested. The state police said the dispersal order came before the curfew because protesters were trying to take down the fencing and throwing rocks at police. The number of protesters dropped rapidly over the next hour, until only a few remained. Police also ordered all media to leave the scene.

Gannon has said he believed Potter mistakenly grabbed her gun when she was going for her Taser. But protesters and Wright's family members say the shooting shows how the justice system is tilted against Black people, noting Wright was stopped for an expired car registration and ended up dead.

Brooklyn Center, a suburb just north of Minneapolis, has seen its racial demographics shift dramatically in recent years. In 2000, more than 70% of the city was white. Today, a majority of residents are Black, Asian or Hispanic.

Elliott said he didn't have information on the police department's racial diversity at hand but that "we have very few people of color in our department."

After stopping Wright for the expired license plates, police tried to arrest him on an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a

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gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

Body camera footage released Monday shows Wright struggling with police when Potter shouts, "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" She draws her weapon after the man breaks free from police and gets back into the car.

After firing a single shot from her handgun, the car speeds away, and Potter says, "Holy (expletive)! I shot him."

Wright died of a gunshot wound to the chest, according to the medical examiner.

Protests began within hours.

In her one-paragraph letter of resignation, Potter said, "I have loved every minute of being a police officer and serving this community to the best of my ability, but I believe it is in the best interest of the community, the department, and my fellow officers if I resign immediately."

Wright's father, Aubrey Wright, told ABC's "Good Morning America" that he rejects the explanation that Potter mistook her gun for her Taser.

"I lost my son. He's never coming back. I can't accept that. A mistake? That doesn't even sound right. This officer has been on the force for 26 years. I can't accept that," he said.

Ben Crump, the Wright family's attorney, spoke outside the Minneapolis courthouse where fired police officer Derek Chauvin is on trial in Floyd's death. Crump compared Wright's death to that of Floyd, who was pinned down by police when they tried to arrest him for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market last May.

Daunte Wright "was not a threat to them," Crump said. "Was it the best decision? No. But young people don't always make the best decisions. As his mother said, he was scared."

Iran president calls 60% enrichment an answer to 'evilness'

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran's president on Wednesday called his country's decision to dramatically increase its uranium enrichment after saboteurs attacked a nuclear site "an answer to your evilness," saying Israel hoped to derail ongoing talks aimed at reviving Tehran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers.

This weekend's sabotage at the Natanz nuclear facility appears to be part of an escalating shadow war between the two countries. Israeli authorities have not commented on the attack, but are widely suspected of having carried it out.

Iran announced Tuesday it would increase uranium enrichment up to 60%, its highest level ever, in response to the attack. That could draw further retaliation as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed never to allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon. While Iran's move keeps enrichment below weapons-grade levels of 90%, it is a short step away.

Speaking to his Cabinet, an impassioned President Hassan Rouhani said the first-generation IR-1 centrifuges that were damaged in the attack would be replaced by advanced IR-6 centrifuges that enrich uranium much faster.

"You wanted to make our hands empty during the talks but our hands are full," Rouhani said.

He was referring to ongoing talks in Vienna that are aimed at finding a way for the United States to re-enter Tehran's nuclear agreement and have Iran comply again with its limits. The accord prevented Iran from stockpiling enough high-enriched uranium to be able to pursue a nuclear weapon in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Rouhani added: "60% enrichment is an answer to your evilness. ... We cut off both of your hands, one with IR-6 centrifuges and another one with 60%."

Rouhani also accused Israel of being behind the Natanz attack.

"Apparently this is a crime by the Zionists. If the Zionists take an action against our nation, we will respond," he said, without elaborating.

In Jerusalem at a Memorial Day commemoration, Netanyahu appeared to reference Iran.

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"We must never remain apathetic to the threats of war and extermination of those who seek to eliminate us," he said.

Officials initially said the enrichment would begin Wednesday. However, an early Wednesday morning tweet from Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Kazem Gharibabadi, suggested it might come later.

"Modification of the process just started and we expect to accumulate the product next week," Gharibabadi wrote.

He later posted a letter addressed to IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi warning against "any adventurism by (the) Israeli regime" against Iranian nuclear sites.

"The most-recent cowardly act of nuclear terrorism will only strengthen our determination to march forward and to replace all (damaged) centrifuges with even more advanced and sophisticated machines," Gharibabadi wrote. "Even the most insane criminals will finally — and soon — realize they must never threaten Iranians."

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful, though the West and the IAEA say Tehran had an organized military nuclear program up until the end of 2003. An annual U.S. intelligence report released Tuesday maintained the American assessment that "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that we judge would be necessary to produce a nuclear device."

The talks in Vienna are aimed at reviving America's role in the agreement — and lifting the sanctions that former President Donald Trump imposed after unilaterally withdrawing America from the accord in 2018. Rouhani in his comments Wednesday insisted Iran still seeks a negotiated settlement over its program.

"The U.S. should return to the same conditions of 2015 when we signed the nuclear deal," Rouhani said.

Iran previously had said it could use uranium enriched up to 60% for nuclear-powered ships. However, the Islamic Republic currently has no such ships in its navy. The IAEA has confirmed that Iran informed it of its plans to enrich up to 60%.

Iran had been enriching up to 20% — and even that was a short technical step to weapons-grade levels.

The weekend attack at Natanz was initially described only as a blackout in the electrical grid feeding above-ground workshops and underground enrichment halls — but later Iranian officials began calling it an attack.

Alireza Zakani, the hard-line head of the Iranian parliament's research center, referred to "several thousand centrifuges damaged and destroyed" in a state TV interview. However, no other official has offered that figure and no images of the aftermath have been released.

Report: Broad missteps left Capitol Police unprepared Jan. 6

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A blistering internal report by the U.S. Capitol Police describes a multitude of missteps that left the force unprepared for the Jan. 6 insurrection — riot shields that shattered upon impact, expired weapons that couldn't be used, inadequate training and an intelligence division that had few set standards.

The watchdog report released internally last month, obtained by The Associated Press ahead of a congressional hearing Thursday, adds to what is already known about broader security and intelligence failures that Congress has been investigating since hundreds of President Donald Trump's supporters laid siege to the Capitol.

In an extensive and detailed timeline of that day, the report describes conversations between officials as they disagreed on whether National Guard forces were necessary to back up the understaffed Capitol Police force. It quotes an Army official as telling then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund that "we don't like the optics of the National Guard standing in a line at the Capitol" after the insurrectionists had already broken in.

Inspector General Michael A. Bolton found that the department's deficiencies were — and remain — widespread. Equipment was old and stored badly, leaders had failed to act on previous recommendations

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to improve intelligence, and there was a broad lack of current policies or procedures for the Civil Disturbance Unit, a division that existed to ensure that legislative functions of Congress were not disrupted by civil unrest or protest activity. That was exactly what happened on Jan. 6 as Trump's supporters sought to overturn the election in his favor as Congress counted the Electoral College votes.

The report comes as the Capitol Police force has plunging morale and has edged closer to crisis as many officers have been working extra shifts and forced overtime to protect the Capitol after the insurrection. Acting Chief Yogananda Pittman received a vote of no confidence from the union in February, reflecting widespread distrust among the rank and file.

The entire force is also grieving the deaths of two of their own — Officer Brian Sicknick, who collapsed and died after engaging with protesters on Jan. 6, and Officer William "Billy" Evans, who was killed April 2 when he was hit by a car that rammed into a barricade outside the Senate. Evans laid in honor in the Capitol Rotunda on Tuesday.

The Capitol Police have so far refused to publicly release the report — marked throughout as "law enforcement sensitive" — despite congressional pressure to do so. House Administration Committee Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., issued a statement in March that she had been briefed on the report, along with another internal document, and that it contained "detailed and disturbing findings and important recommendations." Bolton was expected to testify before her panel on Thursday.

The report focuses heavily on failure of equipment and training Jan. 6 as Capitol Police were quickly overwhelmed by around 800 of Trump's supporters who pushed past them, beat them and broke windows and doors to get into the building. It also looks at missed intelligence as the insurrectionists planned the attack openly online, and as various agencies sent warnings that were disseminated incorrectly.

Bolton found that in many cases department equipment had expired but was not replaced and some of it was more than 20 years old. Riot shields that shattered upon impact as the officers fended off the violent mob had been improperly stored, Bolton found. Some weapons that could have fired tear gas were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them. Other weapons that could have done more to disperse the crowd were never staged ahead of the rally, and those who were ordered to get back-up supplies to the officers on the front lines could not make it through the aggressive crowd.

In other cases, weapons weren't used because of "orders from leadership," the report says. Those weapons — called "less lethal" because they are designed to disperse, not kill — could have allowed the police to better push back the rioters as they moved toward the building, according to the report.

In terms of the Civil Disturbance Unit, the report said there was a total lack of policy and procedure, and many officers didn't want to be a part of it. There were not enough guidelines for when to activate the unit, how to issue gear, what tactics to use or lay out the command structure. Some of the policies hadn't been updated in more than a decade and there was no firm roster of who was even in the division. The unit was at a "decreased level of readiness and preparedness" because there were no standards for equipment, the report said.

Bolton also laid out many of the missed intelligence signals — including a report prepared by the Department of Homeland Security in December that forwarded messages posted on forums supportive of Trump that appeared to be planning for Jan. 6. One part of that document included a map of Capitol tunnels that someone had posted. "Take note," the message said.

The report looks at a missed memo from the FBI in which online activists predicted a "war" on Jan. 6 — Sund told Senate investigators last month he never saw it. Bolton also details the force's own internal reports, which he said were inconsistent. One Capitol Police report predicted that the protesters could become violent, but Sund testified before the Senate in February that internal assessments had said violence was "improbable."

On intelligence, Bolton said, there was a lack of adequate training and guidance for dissemination within the department. There were no policies or procedures for open source data gathering — such as gathering information from the online Trump forums — and analysts "may not be aware of the proper methods of conducting open source intelligence work."

A timeline attached to the report gives a more detailed look at Capitol Police movements, commands

and conversations as the day unfolded and they scrambled to move staff and equipment to multiple fronts where people were breaking in.

The timeline sheds new light on conversations in which Sund begged for National Guard support. Sund and others, including the head of the D.C. National Guard, have testified that Pentagon officials were concerned about the optics of sending help.

The document gives the clearest proof of that concern yet, quoting Army Staff Secretary Walter Piatt telling Sund and others on a call that "we don't like the optics" of the National Guard at the Capitol and he would recommend not sending them. That was at 2:26 p.m., as rioters had already broken through windows and as Sund desperately asked for the help.

The Pentagon eventually approved the Guard's presence, and Guard members arrived after 5 p.m. While they were waiting, Sund also had a teleconference with Vice President Mike Pence, the timeline shows. Pence was in a secure location in the Capitol because he had overseen the counting of the votes, and some of the rioters were calling for his hanging because he had indicated he would not try to overturn President Joe Biden's election win.

The AP reported Saturday that Pence also had a conversation that day with acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller in which he directed that he "Clear the Capitol."

Study finds people want more than watchdogs for journalists

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A study of the public's attitude toward the press reveals that distrust goes deeper than partisanship and down to how journalists define their very mission.

In short: Americans want more than a watchdog.

The study, released Wednesday by the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, suggests ways that news organizations can reach people they may be turning off now.

"In some ways, this study suggests that our job is broader and bigger than we've defined it," said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute.

The study defines five core principles or beliefs that drive most journalists: keep watch on public officials and the powerful; amplify voices that often go unheard; society works better with information out in the open; the more facts people have the closer they will get to the truth; and it's necessary to spotlight a community's problems to solve them.

Yet the survey, which asked non-journalists a series of questions designed to measure support for each of those ideas, found unqualified majority support for only one of them. Two-thirds of those surveyed fully supported the fact-finding mission.

Half of the public embraced the principle that it's important for the media to give a voice to the less powerful, according to the survey, and slightly less than half fully supported the roles of oversight and promoting transparency.

Less than a third of the respondents agreed completely with the idea that it's important to aggressively point out problems. Only 11% of the public, most of them liberals, offered full support to all five ideas.

"I do believe they should be a watchdog on the government, but I don't think they should lean either way," said Annabell Hawkins, 41, a stay-at-home mother from Lawton, Oklahoma. "When I grew up watching the news it seemed pretty neutral. You'd get either side. But now it doesn't seem like that."

Hawkins said she believed the news media spent far too much time criticizing former President Donald Trump and rarely gave him credit for anything good he did while in office.

"I just want the facts about what happened so I can make up my own mind," said Patrick Gideons, a 64-year-old former petroleum industry supervisor who lives south of Houston. He lacks faith in the news media because he believes it offers too much opinion.

Gideons, though, said he gets most of his news through social media, which is skilled in directing fol-

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lowers toward beliefs they are comfortable with. He said he knows only one person who subscribes to a newspaper anymore — his 91-year-old father.

Polls show how the public's attitude toward the press has soured over the past 50 years and, in this century, how it has become much more partisan. In 2000, a Gallup poll found 53% of Democrats said they trusted the media, compared with 47% of Republicans. In the last full year of the Trump presidency, Gallup found trust went up to 73% among Democrats and plunged to 10% among Republicans.

The survey's findings point to some ways news organizations can combat the negativity.

Half a century ago, when newspapers were flourishing and before the internet and cable television led to an explosion in opinionated news, the public's view of the role of journalists was more compatible to how journalists viewed the job themselves, Rosenstiel said.

"We were the tough guys, we were the cops," he said.

The study indicates now that consumers are interested in news that highlights potential solutions to problems and want to hear about things that are working, he said.

"We tend to think that stories that celebrate the good things in society are soft stories, kind of wimpy," he said. "But they may be more important than we think in providing a full and accurate picture of the world."

People who put greater emphasis on loyalty and authority tend to be more skeptical of the core values that journalists try to uphold, as opposed to those who give greater weight to fairness, the study found. Changes in the way a story is framed can make it more widely appealing to different audiences.

In one example, researchers took a story about a canceled recreation center project in a low-income neighborhood and emphasized the element, less prominent in the original story, that the parks director had diverted funds designated for the project by the city's mayor. The change led to the story being seen as more trusted and appealing by a broader set of the public, especially those made who place value in authority.

The nationwide survey was conducted with 2,727 adults in the fall of 2019, with a second set of interviews done last August with 1,155 people who had completed the first survey.

The study found that majorities of Americans believe that the media doesn't care about them and tries to cover up its mistakes. Despite the negativity, Rosenstiel said he believes there's room for both sides to come to a better understanding of each other.

Believe it or not, most journalists are pretty sincere, said Rosenstiel, a former reporter for the Los Angeles Times and Newsweek.

"Regular people should note that when journalists say they are just doing their job, they actually mean that," he said, "because they define their job a certain way. They're not lying. They really don't think of themselves as secret agents of the Democratic Party. They have these set of principles that they think they're upholding."

Trump-era spike in Israeli settlement growth has only begun

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

EFRAT, West Bank (AP) — An aggressive Israeli settlement spree during the Trump era pushed deeper than ever into the occupied West Bank — territory the Palestinians seek for a state — with over 9,000 homes built and thousands more in the pipeline, an AP investigation showed.

If left unchallenged by the Biden administration, the construction boom could make fading hopes for an internationally backed two-state solution — Palestine alongside Israel — even more elusive.

Satellite images and data obtained by The Associated Press document for the first time the full impact of the policies of then-President Donald Trump, who abandoned decades-long U.S. opposition to the settlements and proposed a Mideast plan that would have allowed Israel to keep them all — even those deep inside the West Bank.

Although the Trump plan has been scrapped, the lasting legacy of construction will make it even harder to create a viable Palestinian state. President Joe Biden's administration supports the two-state solution but has given no indication on how it plans to promote it.

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The huge number of projects in the pipeline, along with massive development of settlement infrastructure, means Biden would likely need to rein in Israel to keep the two-state option alive. While Biden has condemned settlement activity, U.S. officials have shown no appetite for such a clash as they confront more urgent problems. These include the coronavirus crisis, tensions with China and attempting to revive the international nuclear deal with Iran — another major sticking point with Israel.

At the same time, Israel will likely continue to be led by a settlement hawk. In the wake of yet another inconclusive Israeli election, either Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or one of his right-wing challengers is poised to head the government, making a construction slowdown improbable.

Hanan Ashrawi, a veteran Palestinian spokeswoman, called the Trump administration a “partner in crime” with Netanyahu. She said Biden would have to go beyond traditional condemnations and take “very serious steps of accountability” to make a difference.

“It needs a bit of courage and backbone and willingness to invest,” she said.

According to Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog group, Israel built over 9,200 new homes in the West Bank during the Trump presidency. On an annual average, that was roughly a 28% increase over the level of construction during the Obama administration, which pressed Israel to rein in building.

Perhaps even more significant was the location of the construction. According to Peace Now, 63% of the homes built last year were in outlying settlements that would likely be evacuated in any peace agreement. Over 10% of the construction in recent years took place in isolated outposts that are not officially authorized, but quietly encouraged by the Israeli government.

“What we’re seeing is the ongoing policy of de facto annexation,” said Hagit Ofran, a Peace Now researcher. “Israel is doing its utmost to annex the West Bank and to treat it as if it’s part of Israel without leaving a scope for a Palestinian state.”

Israel has also laid the groundwork for a massive construction boom in the years to come, advancing plans for 12,159 settler homes in 2020. That was the highest number since Peace Now started collecting data in 2012. It usually takes one to three years for construction to begin after a project has been approved.

Unlike his immediate predecessors, who largely confined settlement construction to major blocs that Israel expects to keep in any peace agreement, Netanyahu has encouraged construction in remote areas deep inside the West Bank, further scrambling any potential blueprint for resolving the conflict.

Settler advocates have repeatedly said that it would take several years for Trump’s support to manifest in actual construction. Peace Now said that trend is now in its early stages and expected to gain steam.

“2020 was really the first year where everything that was being built was more or less because of what was approved at the beginning of the Trump presidency,” said Peace Now spokesman Brian Reeves. “It’s the settlement approvals that are actually more important than construction.”

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip — territories the Palestinians want for their future state — in the 1967 Mideast war. It withdrew from Gaza in 2005 but has cemented its control over east Jerusalem — which it unilaterally annexed — and the West Bank.

Nearly 500,000 Israeli settlers live in some 130 settlements and dozens of unauthorized outposts, according to official figures. That amounts to roughly 15% of the total population in the West Bank. In addition, over 200,000 Jewish Israelis live in east Jerusalem, which is also home to over 300,000 Palestinians.

The Biden administration says it is opposed to any actions by Israel or the Palestinians that harm peace efforts. “We believe, when it comes to settlement activity, that Israel should refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and that undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said this month.

Continued settlement growth could meanwhile bolster the case against Israel at the International Criminal Court, which launched an investigation into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories last month. Israel appears to be vulnerable on the settlement issue because international law forbids the transfer of civilians into lands seized by force.

Israel and its Western allies have rejected it as baseless and biased. Israel is not a member of the court, but any potential ICC warrants could put Israeli officials at risk of arrest abroad.

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UNPRECEDENTED SUPPORT

The settlements are scattered across the West Bank, running the gamut from small hilltop clusters of tents and mobile homes to full-fledged towns with residential neighborhoods, shopping malls and in one case, a university. Every Israeli government has presided over the expansion of settlements, even at the height of the peace process in the 1990s.

The Palestinians view the settlements as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace, a position with wide international support. Israel considers the West Bank to be the historical and biblical heartland of the Jewish people and says any partition should be agreed on in negotiations.

The two sides have not held serious talks in more than a decade, in part because the Palestinians view the continued expansion of settlements as a sign of bad faith.

Trump took unprecedented steps to support Israel's territorial claims, including recognizing Jerusalem as its capital and moving the U.S. Embassy there. His Mideast plan, which overwhelmingly favored Israel, was adamantly rejected by the Palestinians.

Trump's Mideast team was led by prominent supporters of the settlements and maintained close ties to settlement leaders throughout his tenure.

He remains popular in Efrat, a built-up settlement in the rolling hills south of Jerusalem that is expanding toward the north into the outskirts of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem.

"You keep using the term settlement," said Moti Kellner, a retiree who has lived in the area since 1986. "Walk around, does this look like something that's a camp, with tents and settling? It's a city!" He described Trump's policies as "very good, if they're not overturned."

Efrat's mayor, Oded Revivi, says Trump's legacy can be seen more in the increased approval of projects than in actual construction.

"When Trump got elected, the table was basically empty, with no building plans which were approved," he said. More importantly, he credits Trump with accepting the legitimacy of settlements, "instead of battling with the reality that has been created on the ground."

THE FEAR OF LOSING YOUR PLACE

Thousands of Palestinians work in the settlements, where wages are much higher than in areas administered by the Palestinian Authority, and on a personal basis, many get along well with their Jewish employers and co-workers.

"We do know how to live alongside one another, we do know how to build a peaceful relationship," says Revivi.

But most Palestinians view the growth of settlements as a slow and steady encroachment — not only on their hopes for a state, but on their immediate surroundings. As the years roll by, they watch as the gated settlements spill down hillsides, roads are closed or diverted, and terraced olive groves and spring-fed valleys come to feel like hostile territory.

Most Palestinians in the West Bank live in cities like Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus and Hebron, which are administered by the Palestinian Authority under interim peace agreements signed in the 1990s. Those cities are all largely surrounded by settlements, settlement infrastructure and closed military zones. Hebron has a Jewish settlement in the heart of its Old City.

Palestinians know to steer clear of settlements. Farmers who tend lands near them risk being beaten or pelted with rocks by the so-called Hilltop Youth and other Jewish extremists. Rights groups have documented dozens of attacks in recent months and say the Israeli military often turns a blind eye. Palestinians have also carried out attacks inside settlements, including the killing of a mother of six who was out jogging in December.

Around a kilometer (mile) north of Efrat, in an area administered by the PA, is a cultural and historical site popularly known as Solomon's Pools, a network of spring-fed stone reservoirs and canals with ruins dating back more than 2,000 years.

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Every few months, dozens of settlers — escorted by Israeli troops — break into the site and force out Palestinian visitors or renovation workers, according to George Bossous, CEO of the company that manages the site and an adjacent convention center.

“You always fear that you are losing more and more of your place,” he said. “To live together means you need to take care of everyone and give rights for all.”

Fatima Brijiyah heads the local council in al-Masara, a Palestinian village southeast of Efrat. The 70-year-old grandmother remembers wandering its hills in her youth, when she and her brother would ride on their father’s donkey when he went to fetch water from a nearby well.

The well is still there, but she says it’s too close to the settlement for Palestinians to visit it safely.

“You feel the pain of not being able to go there now, even just to look,” she said. “You feel that everything about the occupation is wrong.”

POINT OF NO RETURN?

Some critics say the U.S. focus on managing the conflict instead of resolving it has led to a point of no return. They say that there are so many settlements across the West Bank that it is impossible to create a viable Palestinian state. Others argue that Israel has become a single apartheid state in which millions of Palestinians are denied basic rights afforded to Jews.

Peace Now says that — at least in a logistical sense — a partition deal remains possible.

Under a two-state solution based on past proposals, up to 80% of the settlers could stay where they are. Many of the largest settlements are close to the 1967 lines and could be incorporated into Israel in mutually agreed land swaps.

That means at least 100,000 Jewish settlers, and likely more, would have to relocate or live inside a Palestinian state. Some 2 million Palestinians live inside Israel, where they have citizenship, including the right to vote.

“From a logistical standpoint, it’s very possible,” Reeves said. “From a political standpoint, that’s where the trick is.”

Most experts agree that a negotiated two-state solution would require an Israeli government with a mandate to make historic concessions, a united Palestinian leadership able to do the same and a powerful external mediator like the U.S. that could strong-arm both sides.

None of those three elements exist now or will in the foreseeable future.

Israelis are deeply divided over Netanyahu’s leadership, but a strong majority appears to support the settlements and are opposed to a Palestinian state. Those voters back right-wing parties that won 72 seats in the 120-member Knesset last month.

The Palestinians are geographically and political divided between the Western-backed Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Islamic militant group Hamas ruling the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians have not held a vote in more than 15 years, and elections planned for the coming months could be called off.

The last five U.S. presidents have tried and failed to resolve the conflict. The Obama administration scolded Israel over its settlements, while Trump unabashedly supported them. Neither made any headway in resolving the conflict with the Palestinians.

Biden, who has devoted much of his nearly 50-year political career to foreign policy, knows this well. His administration has signaled it hopes to manage the conflict, not resolve it.

“The question is, can there be momentum? There won’t be peace, but can there be momentum in these next four to eight years?” Reeves said.

“If there is, then I think a two-state solution is very much alive. If there’s not, and there’s another 100,000 settlers added, it just makes it that much harder to make peace.”

Japan’s Toshiba president steps down amid acquisition talks

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The president of Toshiba Corp. stepped down Wednesday, a week after the Japanese

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technology and manufacturing giant said it was studying an acquisition proposal from a global fund where he previously worked.

Nobuaki Kurumatani tendered his resignation at a board meeting, and the board accepted, effective Wednesday, Tokyo-based Toshiba said in a statement.

Kurumatani headed the Japan operations of CVC Capital Partners, which proposed the acquisition last week, before taking his post as chief executive of Toshiba in 2018.

Some questions had been raised, both within and outside Tokyo-based Toshiba, about Kurumatani leading the board discussions on the acquisition.

Kurumatani did not attend the online news conference, where two board members explained his resignation and fielded questions.

A company official read his statement that said the resignation was for personal reasons.

"Toshiba is a wonderful company and is Japan's precious wealth. I love Toshiba deeply," Kurumatani said in his message.

The CVC deal is estimated to be worth 2 trillion yen (\$18 billion) and will turn Toshiba private. Toshiba had said it was giving it "careful consideration." Osamu Nagayama, a board member, told reporters the proposal lacked details and could not yet be evaluated.

Trading in the company's shares was suspended when the news hit last week. Shares of Toshiba, whose sprawling business includes making elevators and railways, shot up on the CVC news and have been trading at nearly 5,000 yen (\$46).

CVC is a European private equity firm, based in Luxembourg, which has committed nearly \$162 billion in funds, managing more than 300 investors. It has declined to comment on the acquisition proposal or the president's resignation.

But speculation has been growing other funds may offer better prices.

Kurumatani will be replaced as chief executive and president by his predecessor, Satoshi Tsunakawa, who remained on the board, first as COO and currently chairman.

Tsunakawa oversaw some of the recent financial challenges at Toshiba. Before becoming CEO, in his previous stint from 2016, he had headed Toshiba's medical systems business, now a group company of Japanese camera and equipment maker Canon.

Tsunakawa told reporters Toshiba was ready to embark on growth as "an infrastructure services company." He promised to work in the interests of shareholders, employees and society overall, and continue to strengthen governance.

"We stand behind the principle of 'Do the right thing,'" he said, delivering the motto in English.

Toshiba, founded in 1875, was long revered as one of Japan's respected brands, developing the nation's first radar and microwaves, electric rice cookers and laptop computers.

It also invented flash memory, the ubiquitous computer chips that store and retain data for digital cameras, cell phones and other gadgets. Toshiba no longer makes laptops, and it has sold its computer chips division.

The company's fortunes began to crumble over its heavy investment in nuclear power. After the March 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima, costs of the business ballooned because of growing safety concerns. Some nations are turning toward sustainable energy.

Toshiba also had massive losses from the nuclear power operations of U.S. manufacturer Westinghouse, which Toshiba acquired in 2006. Westinghouse filed for bankruptcy protection in 2017.

In Japan, Toshiba is decommissioning nuclear plants, including the one in Fukushima, where the tsunami 10 years ago set off multiple reactor meltdowns.

In 2015, Toshiba acknowledged it had been systematically falsifying its books since 2008, as managers tried to meet overly ambitious targets. An outside investigation found it had inflated profits and hid massive expenses.

US to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11

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By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on America that were coordinated from that country, several U.S. officials said.

Biden will lay out his vision for the way forward in Afghanistan and the timeline for the withdrawal in remarks Wednesday afternoon, The White House said. Punctuating the nearly two decades U.S. troops have fought and died in Afghanistan, the president will then visit Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery to honor the sacrifice of those who died in recent American conflicts.

The decision to withdraw troops by fall defies a May 1 deadline for full withdrawal under a peace agreement the Trump administration reached with the Taliban last year, but leaves no room for additional extensions. A senior administration official on Tuesday called the September date an absolute deadline that won't be affected by security conditions in the country.

While Biden's decision keeps U.S. troops in Afghanistan four months longer than initially planned, it sets a firm end to two decades of war that killed more than 2,200 U.S. troops, wounded 20,000, and cost as much as \$1 trillion. The conflict largely crippled al-Qaida and led to the death of Osama bin Laden, the architect of the Sept. 11 attacks. But an American withdrawal also risks many of the gains made in democracy, women's rights and governance, while ensuring that the Taliban, who provided al-Qaida's haven, remain strong and in control of large swaths of the country.

Biden has been hinting for weeks that he was going to let the May deadline lapse, and as the days went by it became clear that an orderly withdrawal of the roughly 2,500 remaining troops would be difficult and was unlikely. The administration official said the drawdown would begin by May 1.

Biden's choice of the 9/11 date underscores the reason that American troops were in Afghanistan to begin with — to prevent extremist groups like al-Qaida from establishing a foothold again that could be used to launch attacks against the U.S.

The administration official said Biden decided that the withdrawal deadline had to be absolute, rather than based on conditions on the ground. "We're committing today to going to zero" U.S. forces by Sept. 11, and possibly well before, the official said, adding that Biden concluded that a conditioned withdrawal would be "a recipe for staying in Afghanistan forever."

Defense officials and commanders had argued against the May 1 deadline, saying the U.S. troop withdrawal should be based on security conditions in Afghanistan, including Taliban attacks and violence.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki didn't provide details of Biden's remarks planned for Wednesday, but she said during a White House briefing that Biden "has been consistent in his view that there is not a military solution to Afghanistan, that we have been there for far too long."

Psaki tweeted later Tuesday that Biden's visit to Arlington National Cemetery was "to pay his respects to the brave men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan."

Several U.S. officials confirmed Biden's withdrawal decision to The Associated Press, and an administration official provided details to reporters on condition of anonymity, speaking ahead of the announcement.

According to the administration official, the only U.S. forces remaining in Afghanistan will be those needed to protect diplomats there. No exact number was provided, but American troop totals in Afghanistan have been understated by U.S. administrations for years. Officials have quietly acknowledged that there are hundreds more in Afghanistan than the official 2,500 number, and likely would include special operations forces conducting covert or counterterrorism missions, often working with intelligence agency personnel.

Biden's new, extended timeline will allow a safe and orderly withdrawal of American troops in coordination with NATO allies, the administration official added.

The president's decision, however, risks retaliation by the Taliban on U.S. and Afghan forces, possibly escalating the 20-year war. And it will reignite political division over America's involvement in what many have called the endless war.

An intelligence community report issued Tuesday about global challenges for the next year said prospects for a peace deal in Afghanistan are "low" and warned that "the Taliban is likely to make gains on

the battlefield. If the coalition withdraws support, the report says, the Afghan government will struggle to control the Taliban.

Congressional reaction to the new deadline was mixed.

"Precipitously withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan is a grave mistake," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "It is retreat in the face of an enemy that has not yet been vanquished and abdication of American leadership."

Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, slammed it as a "reckless and dangerous decision." He said any withdrawal should be conditions-based, adding that arbitrary deadlines could put troops in danger, create a breeding ground for terrorists and lead to civil war in Afghanistan.

Democrats were generally more supportive. Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said President Donald Trump's May 1 deadline limited Biden's options. "We still have vital interests in protecting against terrorist attacks that could be emanating from that part of the world, but there are other areas, too, we have to be conscious of," Reed said.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said troops should come home, and the U.S. must refocus American national security on more pressing challenges.

But at least one senior Democrat expressed disappointment. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire said in a tweet that the U.S. "has sacrificed too much to bring stability to Afghanistan to leave w/o verifiable assurances of a secure future."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed told the AP that the religious militia is waiting for a formal announcement to issue its reaction. The Taliban previously warned the U.S. of "consequences" if it reneged on the May 1 deadline.

In a February 2020 agreement with the Trump administration, the Taliban agreed to halt attacks and hold peace talks with the Afghan government, in exchange for a U.S. commitment to a complete withdrawal by May 2021.

Over the past year, U.S. military commanders and defense officials have said that attacks on U.S. troops have largely paused, but that Taliban attacks on the Afghans increased. Commanders have argued that the Taliban have failed to meet the conditions of the peace agreement by continuing attacks on the Afghans and failing to totally cut ties with al-Qaida and other extremist groups.

When Biden entered the White House in January, he was keenly aware of the looming deadline and had time to meet it if he had chosen to do so. He began a review of the February 2020 agreement shortly after taking office, and has been consulting at length with his defense advisers and allies.

In recent weeks, it became increasingly clear that he was leaning toward defying the deadline.

"It's going to be hard to meet the May 1 deadline," Biden said in March. "Just in terms of tactical reasons, it's hard to get those troops out." He added, "And if we leave, we're going to do so in a safe and orderly way."

Body missing, suspect arrested in '96 student disappearance

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Paul Flores was the last person seen with Kristin Smart before she vanished from a college campus on California's scenic Central Coast nearly 25 years ago and suspicion has followed him ever since.

He went from being a "person of interest" to a "suspect" to "the prime suspect."

Investigators never had enough evidence to charge him with a crime related to her disappearance until Tuesday when Flores was arrested on suspicion of murder in Smart's death. His father, Ruben Flores, was arrested as an accessory to the crime.

San Luis Obispo County Sheriff Ian Parkinson said arrests came after a search of the elder Flores' home last month using ground-penetrating radar and cadaver dogs turned up new evidence linked to Smart's killing, though her body has not yet been located.

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"Until we return Kristin to (her family) this is not over," Parkinson said.

Smart, 19, of Stockton, was last seen May 25, 1996, while returning to her dorm at California Polytechnic State University campus in San Luis Obispo after an off-campus party. Flores, a fellow freshman at the school at the time, had offered to walk her home.

Smart's family issued a statement saying it was a bittersweet day they had long waited for and a first step toward bringing their daughter home.

"While Kristin's loving spirit will always live in our hearts, our life without her hugs, laughs and smiles is a heartache that never abates," they said. "The knowledge that a father and son, despite our desperate pleas for help, could have withheld this horrible secret for nearly 25 years, denying us the chance to lay our daughter to rest, is an unrelenting and unforgiving pain."

Flores, 44, was arrested at his home in the San Pedro area of Los Angeles and taken to a police car in handcuffs wearing pajama bottoms and a surf T-shirt. His father, Ruben Flores, 80, was arrested at his Arroyo Grande home — about 15 miles (24 kilometers) south of the university — where sheriff's investigators conducted a new search for evidence.

Paul Flores has been under suspicion almost from the start, but the case picked up steam in the past couple years after Parkinson ordered a thorough review of the evidence and a fulltime cold case detective was hired.

New witnesses came forward and warrants allowed investigators to intercept and monitor Paul Flores' phone and text messages and search his own home, along with those of his mother, father and sister that turned up new evidence, Parkinson said. He declined to offer more details because search warrants are sealed.

Parkinson also credited the podcast "Your Own Backyard" for giving the case renewed widespread attention that led to a key witness coming forward.

The podcast's creator, Chris Lambert, was a musician who grew up in the area and was intrigued by a billboard offering a \$75,000 reward for information leading to Smart.

"Driving past that billboard was a periodic reminder that, oh yeah, they still haven't found that girl," Lambert said in a video posted on the podcast website. "It's different when somebody goes missing in your own backyard."

Parkinson held his news conference on the university campus, gesturing over his shoulder to the place nearby where Smart was last seen alive with Flores. He acknowledged missteps by law enforcement hampered the investigation.

Smart wasn't reported missing until three days after she was last seen. A dorm mate at the time said police were initially reluctant to take a missing persons report because it was Memorial Day weekend and she might have left the campus.

Smart's family said in their statement that "an indifference and lack of resolve we experienced early on set the course for many years."

The Smart family filed a \$40 million lawsuit in 1996 against Paul Flores and added the the university for allegedly not protecting their daughter. The case has been stayed awaiting a criminal case outcome, a family spokesman said.

The case was originally handled by Cal Poly police and the district attorney's office. Sheriff's investigators didn't get involved until a month later.

"There really is no hiding the fact that there was mistakes made early on and it made it much more difficult," Parkinson said. "You know that first 48 hours is pretty critical in a missing person or a homicide."

Parkinson likened the case to a puzzle where missing pieces are located, leading to new evidence and locations to search that then revealed other information.

"It's a very slow process to find each of those little pieces," he said.

They served over 40 search warrants at 16 locations over the years, collected nearly 200 new items of evidence and used modern DNA techniques to test more than three dozen older pieces of evidence. So much evidence was compiled that it would fill three terabytes on a computer hard drive, he said.

Paul Flores has remained mum through the years, invoking his Fifth Amendment right to not answer

questions before a grand jury and in a deposition for the lawsuit brought against him.

Flores had nothing to say when arrested, Parkinson said.

He was held without bail. His lawyer, Robert Sanger, declined to comment.

Ruben Flores was being held on \$250,000 bail. His lawyer, Harold Mesick, didn't immediately return an email message seeking comment from The Associated Press but he told the Los Angeles Times that his client was "absolutely innocent."

After Flores was arrested at his Arroyo Grande home, investigators executed a new search warrant. A coroner's tent was set up outside and radar was used to search the grounds. The sound of power saws and drills whined in the background as they searched under a large deck and in the garage.

The mayor of Arroyo Grande said the arrests had brought a sense of relief to the city of about 18,000 people that sits just inland from the scenic Central Coast.

"The disappearance of Kristin Smart has weighed heavily on the hearts of the people of Arroyo Grande all this time," Mayor Caren Ray Russom said. "She was never forgotten here, and many, many of us have closely followed this case for decades. ... I sincerely hope that these arrests will result in justice and closure for the Smart family."

In Minnesota, suburban mayor is thrust into policing debate

By KATHLEEN HENNESSEY and MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press Writer

Mike Elliott is among many who celebrated his election as mayor of Brooklyn Center as the beginning of a new era, marking the first time one of Minnesota's most racially diverse places would be led by a person of color. Elliott, a Black man who had emigrated from Liberia as a child, was almost giddy in talking about his plans for multicultural city hall.

"It's incredible, it's really incredible," Elliott said then of Hmong, African, Vietnamese and white residents living side-by-side in the inner-ring Minneapolis suburb's working-class neighborhoods. He called his 2018 election "an opportunity for the great diversity of the city to have a voice at the table."

A little more than two years later the mayor is finding out just how difficult it is to turn the page on the nation's racial history. The shooting of Daunte Wright, a Black man, by a white police officer has set off protests, political upheaval and painful reckoning about racism and representation in his small city. The debate echoes one that engulfed neighboring Minneapolis and many larger communities last year after the death of George Floyd. But in Brooklyn Center, it is playing out in a place where some believed they'd made progress -- only to be thrust to front lines of the fight.

"It's been very difficult for myself, for the community, to deal with the pain and the agony that comes from watching a young man be killed before our eyes," Elliott, 37, told reporters Tuesday.

Since the Sunday shooting, the mayor has become the face of this community's struggle, which comes as a former Minneapolis police officer is on trial in the Floyd case.

Elliott has promised transparency and vowed accountability for Wright's death. He's calmly fielded scores of questions from activists pressing for answers and plans. He's expressed empathy for the protesters who've clashed with police, and ventured out in the nighttime protest in protective gear to appeal for peace: "I could feel their pain. I could feel their anger. I could feel their fear," he said of this encounter.

Under pressure to swiftly fire the officer involved, Kim Potter, Elliott and the city council voted to fire the city manager, and give control of the police department to the mayor. On Tuesday, Potter and the police chief resigned. Elliot made clear the city already had been moving toward firing Potter. He said he hoped her departure would "bring some calm to the community."

But the mayor also has acknowledged systemic sources of the distrust between residents and police in his city. Of the roughly 50 sworn officers on the city's force, "very few" are people of color and none live in Brooklyn Center, he said, acknowledging he saw the latter as a clear problem.

"There is a huge importance to having a significant number of your officers living in the community where they serve," he said.

The racial gap is not uncommon in suburban police departments, but is especially stark in Brooklyn Cen-

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ter, one of a nation's many rapidly diversifying suburbs. About 45% of the roughly 31,000 residents are white, according to Census figures. Minneapolis, meanwhile, is 63% white.

The city has long drawn families from Minneapolis' historically Black north side neighborhood. But over the past two decades, Brooklyn Center has become home to thousands of immigrants from Laos, Vietnam and West Africa in search of affordable homes, good schools and community. Nearly a quarter of its residents are foreign born.

"It's the future face of America," said Rep. Samantha Vang, a Hmong-American and Democrat who represents Brooklyn Center in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Elliott, who fled civil war in Liberia with his grandmother, is part of the migration story. He landed in Brooklyn Center, already a hub Liberian of immigrants, as a middle schooler, according to friend and mentor George Larson, a former principal at Brooklyn Center High School.

Elliott told Larson he wanted to be secretary general of the United Nations. He participated in student government, organized volunteering projects and planned a prom. In 2010, he graduated from Hamline University in St. Paul with a degree in international management and a minor in political science. Elliott started a translation company and tutoring nonprofit before running for office.

"He had the leadership gene from the get go," Larson said.

Elliott lost his first bid, but won the mayor's office in 2018, defeating an incumbent who'd served for a decade. In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, he set some modest goals for a community that struggled to attract businesses.

At the end of his term, he hoped his city would be celebrating the arrival a movie theater, a grocery store co-op and "some nice sit-down restaurants," he said. He talked about starting a festival that could celebrate the city's many cultures and spark some connections.

"Really bringing people together, bringing people together to celebrate, but bringing them together to govern, as well," he said.

There are signs of progress. A labor organizer and former Brooklyn Center City Council candidate, Alfreda Daniels Juasemai, ran for office last year after noticing a "disconnect" between Brooklyn Center city officials and the city's residents, she said. Most, if not all, unelected city staff and police officers don't live in the city, and residents only see city council members during Halloween when they pass out campaign literature as they take their children trick-or-treating, she said.

Daniels Juasemai said Elliott is "trying his best" to change that through efforts like knocking on doors and asking residents how they're doing, or encouraging community members to attend city council meetings.

Having a mayor that looks like many of his constituents fosters an understanding that was absent before Elliott was elected, she said.

"It's easier for people in the city to connect with him, especially people within the Black and brown community, about the issues that are happening whether it's in the city or the country and how we can use that to make Brooklyn Center a better place," she said.

Senate filibuster test over Asian-American hate crime bill

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate is poised to start debate on legislation confronting the rise of potential hate crimes against Asian Americans, a growing problem during the coronavirus crisis that will also test whether the chamber can push past partisanship on an issue important to many constituents.

Typically, the Democratic-sponsored COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act might quickly face a filibuster, opposed by Republicans who prefer a different approach. But under the Senate leaders' agreement struck at the start of the year, Republicans and Democrats pledged to try to at least try to debate bills to see if they could reach agreement through the legislative process.

Ahead of Wednesday's initial votes, several leaders of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community in Congress gave personal and heart-wrenching stories of the racism they and their constituents have faced, incidents on the rise during the virus outbreak.

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"For more than a year, the Asian American community has been fighting two crises — the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-Asian hate," Rep. Grace Meng, D-N.Y., a co-author of the bill, said Tuesday at the Capitol.

Meng described well-documented but "horrifying" images of people being shoved and beaten in public attacks, and of her own conversations with survivors, including the families of the victims of deadly shootings last month in Atlanta. Six of those killed were women of Asian descent.

"Combating hate should not be a partisan issue. It's about the safety of all Americans," Meng said.

The bill is the most substantive congressional response to what has been an alarming rise in racist sentiment against Asian Americans, fueled in part by derogatory language about the virus' origins in China. Donald Trump, while president, played into that narrative with derisive nicknames for the virus. The moment harks back to earlier eras of racism against Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans and others of Asian heritage in this country.

Senate Republicans have panned the legislation for various shortcomings but have signaled they will not block it with a filibuster.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said as the "proud husband of an Asian American woman, I think this discrimination against Asian Americans is a real problem."

McConnell is married to Elaine Chao, the former transportation secretary, and he said Tuesday he was hoping to work out an agreement with Democrats to at least debate the bill and consider potential amendments.

Final passage, however, remains uncertain.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer launched the process to consider the bill this week, testing whether enough Republican senators will vote to proceed. Any one senator can halt the process, and it takes 60 votes in the Senate, which is evenly split 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans, to overcome a filibuster.

Schumer said he was open to considering changes to the bill. He is in conversations with McConnell on a package of amendments that could be considered, according to aides.

"We cannot and must not remain silent," Schumer said Tuesday. "There is no reason, no reason, this shouldn't be a bipartisan bill that passes the Senate."

A robust floor debate is rare for the Senate, which has ground to a halt due to pervasive partisanship. The gridlock has intensified calls from Democrats to change the filibuster rules to push past the opposition. Shy of taking that step, Schumer and McConnell had reached a tentative accord earlier this year to try to push past stalemates and allow senators to discuss and amend bills.

Several Republican senators indicated they would prefer to adjust the hate crimes legislation, but they are reluctant to exercise the filibuster on this bill. Opposing it could expose senators to claims they are being racially insensitive.

Leaving a caucus luncheon Tuesday, several GOP senators said they would not block the bill, but they were still looking at the legislation and proposed amendments to figure out what they would support.

"I don't believe we should be allowing these types of hate crimes out there, whether it's women or Asian Americans, so we're going to take a look at the text," said Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa. She said she wasn't aware of any "major objections" from Republicans.

Though timely, the legislation is also modest, what supporters see as a first step in a federal response to the rise of Asian American hate crimes. It would assign a point person within the Justice Department to expedite the review of COVID-19-related hate crimes and provide support for local law enforcement to respond to such incidents. The department would also work to limit discriminatory language used to describe the pandemic.

One bipartisan amendment would beef up support to law enforcement, and others are expected.

Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, the bill's co-author, told of her own experience. She said she is no longer comfortable taking a walk with her headphones listening to audio books because of the attacks on Asian American and Pacific Islanders in the U.S.

She said she hopes Republicans join in supporting the bill.

"An attack on one group in our country is truly an attack on all of us," she said.

Biden says pause on J&J shots shows gov't putting safety 1st

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's COVID-19 vaccination campaign hit a snag when federal regulators recommended a "pause" in administering Johnson & Johnson shots. But the White House portrayed the action as important validation of his measured approach throughout the rollout.

Biden declared Tuesday that even with a temporary loss of J&J's one-shot vaccine, there is a huge supply of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, enough that "is basically 100% unquestionable, for every single, solitary American."

Perhaps more concerning than any worry about supply, however, is the potential blow to public confidence in all of the vaccines, as polls suggest potentially tens of millions of Americans are hesitant to get the shots that public health experts say are necessary for the nation to emerge from the pandemic.

The pause actually should have the opposite effect, boosting confidence that the government is putting safety first, Biden and top health officials said at a White House briefing. The advisory by the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — citing a need to investigate reports of rare but potentially dangerous blood clots — was "testimony to how seriously we take safety," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert.

In the opening months of his presidency, Biden has put top priority on a robust response to the virus that has killed 559,000 Americans, with a vaccine campaign in which nearly 50% of adults have received at least one shot.

His actions have received generally strong reviews, and hesitancy toward taking the vaccine has gradually declined as inoculations have increased. With three vaccines in use in the U.S. and plenty of supply in the pipeline, Biden actually has received some criticism for not sharing more vaccines with other nations. The president said Tuesday's action proved the wisdom of his approach.

"My message to the American people on the vaccine is, I told you all," Biden told reporters after the announcement, adding that he "made sure we have 600 million doses" just from Pfizer and Moderna in the pipeline.

The Johnson & Johnson pause, which regulators say they hope to resolve within days, comes on the heels of production issues at the Baltimore plant that produces the J&J vaccine.

The White House, which got only about 12 hours' notice that some sort of announcement was coming and did not have any advance warning about the substance of the FDA and CDC's action, moved swiftly to minimize concerns about its impact. Aides recognized that they had to portray the decision as ensuring the "gold standard" of safety, to avoid feeding into vaccine hesitancy.

"I think it's a very strong argument for safety actually," Fauci said.

White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients added that the pause by the agencies "should reassure the American public that they will be very diligent and conservative about how they approach the vaccines."

They argued the pause proved the prudence of Biden's cautious approach to promises around vaccine supply and delivery, as well as his administration's reluctance to make commitments to share excess vaccine with the world because of concerns about potential setbacks such as this.

"They're clearly trying to reassure people there will be supply, and it will be safe," said former White House communications director Jennifer Palmieri. "You don't want this to have happened, but in terms of what are your tools when it does, they used their best ones — the president, the most senior person who has credibility and the top experts — to do it."

Due to supply issues, the J&J shot reflects just a small share of doses being administered, though it had been one of the most promising vaccines given its ease of administration and distribution. Zients said the U.S. still expects to take delivery of enough doses of the other two approved vaccines for every adult American to get their shots by the end of May. Moderna and Pfizer this week are delivering 28 mil-

lion doses to the federal government — enough to exceed even the current 3 million shot-per-day pace. Zients acknowledged that some states may have been caught off guard by Tuesday's announcement but said that reflected the speed with which officials moved to address the safety concerns. He added it was proof of Biden's commitment to "follow the science" in responding to the pandemic.

"We want the science agencies to lead with science," Zients said, saying no one at the White House was involved in the decision to call for the pause. "There's no reason for us to be involved in any of the scientific decisions, we bring nothing to the table."

The agencies said Tuesday they were investigating unusual clots that occurred in six women, of the more than 7.2 million adults who've received the shot. One of the patients died and another remains hospitalized in serious condition.

Officials said the delay had as much to do with educating physicians about the unique way the clots have to be treated as their desire to study the exceedingly rare side effect. The usual treatment, with the blood thinner heparin, could lead to dangerous patient outcomes, they said.

Fauci, speaking at the White House, advised those who had recently gotten J&J shots not to "get an anxiety reaction, because remember it's less than one in a million." He added, "However, having said that, pay attention" to potential symptoms of the clot including severe headaches, abdominal or leg pain, and shortness of breath.

Dr. Mati Hlatshwayo Davis, an infectious disease physician at the John Cochran VA Medical Center and St. Louis Board of Health, said the J&J pause might affect overall vaccine confidence but the transparency was critical to boosting confidence in minority communities that have some of the lowest uptake of the shots.

"Today was such a sign of strength and of leadership and of improved direction toward rebuilding trust in these communities," she said of the Biden administration's forthrightness about the issue. "They came to us as soon as this information became available knowing what was at stake."

"They're trusting the American public, and this gives these communities a reason to trust them," she said.

Expert: Ex-cop justified in pinning George Floyd to pavement

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The defense for a former police officer charged in George Floyd's death challenged the heart of the case against the officer, calling a use-of-force expert who testified that Derek Chauvin was justified in pinning Floyd and said it might have gone easier if the Black man had been "resting comfortably" on the pavement.

Taking the stand Tuesday at Chauvin's murder trial, Barry Brodd, a former Santa Rosa, California, officer, stoutly defended Chauvin's actions, even as a prosecutor pounded away at the witness, banging the lectern at one point during cross-examination and growing incredulous over Brodd's use of the "resting comfortably" phrase.

"It's easy to sit and judge ... an officer's conduct," Brodd testified. "It's more of a challenge to, again, put yourself in the officer's shoes to try to make an evaluation through what they're feeling, what they're sensing, the fear they have, and then make a determination."

He said he doesn't believe Chauvin and the other officers used deadly force when they held Floyd down on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind his back and Chauvin's knee on his neck or neck area for what prosecutors say was 9 1/2 minutes.

Brodd likened it instead to a situation in which officers use a Taser on someone fighting with officers, and the suspect falls, hits his head and dies: "That isn't an incident of deadly force. That's an incident of an accidental death."

Several top Minneapolis police officials, including the police chief, have testified that Chauvin used excessive force and violated his training. And medical experts called by prosecutors have said that Floyd died from a lack of oxygen because of the way he was restrained.

But Brodd said: "I felt that Officer Chauvin's interactions with Mr. Floyd were following his training, following current practices in policing and were objectively reasonable."

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The question of what is reasonable is important: Police officers are allowed certain latitude to use deadly force when someone puts the officer or other people in danger. Legal experts say a key issue for the jury will be whether Chauvin's actions were reasonable in those specific circumstances.

Prosecutor Steve Schleicher used his cross-examination to once again painstakingly go through video clips of a pinned-down Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe and then going limp.

The prosecutor hammered away at Brodd, saying that a reasonable officer in Chauvin's position would have known Floyd stopped resisting, that another officer told him he couldn't find a pulse, and that others said Floyd had passed out and was no longer breathing.

"And the defendant's position is, and was, and remains, as we see here at this moment, in this time, in this clip -- on top of Mr. Floyd on the street. Isn't that right?" Schleicher asked, as he banged his hand on the lectern repeatedly.

"Yes," Brodd replied.

At one point, Brodd argued that Floyd kept on struggling instead of just "resting comfortably" on the ground.

"Did you say 'resting comfortably'?" an incredulous Schleicher asked.

Brodd: "Or laying comfortably."

Schleicher: "Resting comfortably on the pavement?"

Brodd: "Yes."

The prosecutor went on to say that Floyd was moving, but it was because he was struggling to breathe by shoving his shoulder into the pavement.

Under questioning by the defense, Brodd also testified that bystanders yelling at police to get off Floyd complicated the situation for Chauvin and the others by causing them to wonder whether the crowd was becoming a threat, too.

Brodd also appeared to endorse what prosecution witnesses have said is a common misconception: that if someone can talk, he or she can breathe.

"I certainly don't have medical degrees, but I was always trained and feel it's a reasonable assumption that if somebody's, 'I'm choking, I'm choking,' well, you're not choking because you can breathe," he said.

Chauvin, a 45-year-old white man, is on trial on charges of murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death last May after his arrest on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson has argued that the 19-year Minneapolis police veteran did what he was trained to do and that Floyd died because of his illegal drug use and underlying health problems, including high blood pressure and heart disease. Fentanyl and methamphetamine were discovered in his system.

The defense began presenting its case on Tuesday after the prosecution rested following 11 days of testimony and a mountain of video evidence.

Nelson started by bringing up a 2019 arrest in which Floyd suffered from dangerously high blood pressure and confessed to heavy use of opioids. And he suggested that the 46-year-old Floyd may have suffered last May from "excited delirium" — what a witness described as a potentially lethal state of agitation and even superhuman strength that can be triggered by drugs, heart disease or mental problems.

Nelson also elicited testimony from another witness that Floyd panicked and cried over and over, "Please, please, don't kill me!" when officers first approached his SUV at gunpoint on the day of his death.

Nicole Mackenzie, a Minneapolis police training officer, was called by Nelson to expound on excited delirium. While Floyd was pinned to the ground, a relatively new officer at the scene had mentioned that Floyd might be suffering from such a condition.

Mackenzie testified that the signs of excited delirium can include incoherent speech, extraordinary strength and sweating, and that officers are trained to call paramedics, because a person in that state can rapidly go into cardiac arrest.

A now-retired paramedic who responded to that call, Michelle Moseng, testified that Floyd told her he had been taking multiple opioids about every 20 minutes.

The prosecution's expert witnesses rejected the notion that drugs or underlying health problems caused

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Floyd's death, with a cardiology expert on Monday saying that Floyd appeared to have "an exceptionally strong heart."

Also testifying was Minneapolis Park Police Officer Peter Chang, who helped at the scene that day. He said he saw a "crowd" growing across the street that "was becoming more loud and aggressive, a lot of yelling across the street."

"Did that cause you any concern?" Nelson asked.

"Concern for the officers' safety, yes," Chang replied.

Nelson hasn't said whether Chauvin will take the stand. Testifying could open him up to devastating cross-examination but could also give the jury the opportunity to see any remorse or sympathy he might feel.

Cop, police chief resign 2 days after Black motorist's death

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — A white police officer who fatally shot a Black man during a traffic stop in a Minneapolis suburb resigned Tuesday, as did the city's police chief — moves that the mayor said he hoped would help heal the community and lead to reconciliation after two nights of protests and unrest.

But police and protesters faced off once again after nightfall Tuesday, with hundreds of protesters gathering again at Brooklyn Center's heavily guarded police headquarters, now ringed by concrete barriers and a tall metal fence, and where police in riot gear and National Guard soldiers stood watch. "Murderapolis" was scrawled with black spray paint on a concrete barrier.

"Whose street? Our street!" the crowd chanted under a light snowfall.

About 90 minutes before the curfew deadline, state police announced over a loudspeaker that the gathering had been declared unlawful and ordered the crowds to disperse. That quickly set off confrontations, with protesters launching fireworks toward the station and throwing objects at police, who launched flashbangs and gas grenades, and then marched in a line to force back the crowd.

"You are hereby ordered to disperse," authorities announced, warning that anyone not leaving would be arrested. The state police said the dispersal order came before the 10 p.m. curfew because protesters were trying to take down the fencing and throwing rocks at police. The number of protesters dropped rapidly over the next hour, until only a few remained. Police also ordered all media to leave the scene.

The resignations from Officer Kim Potter and Police Chief Tim Gannon came two days after the death of 20-year-old Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center. Potter, a 26-year veteran, had been on administrative leave following Sunday's shooting, which happened as the Minneapolis area was already on edge over the trial of an officer charged in George Floyd's death.

Brooklyn Center Mayor Mike Elliott said at a news conference that the city had been moving toward firing Potter when she resigned. Elliott said he hoped her resignation would "bring some calm to the community," but that he would keep working toward "full accountability under the law."

"We have to make sure that justice is served, justice is done. Daunte Wright deserves that. His family deserves that," Elliott said.

A decision on whether prosecutors will charge Potter could come as soon as Wednesday. Meanwhile, the cities of Brooklyn Center, Minneapolis and St. Paul imposed 10 p.m. curfews.

Gannon has said he believed Potter mistakenly grabbed her gun when she was going for her Taser. She can be heard on her body camera video shouting "Taser! Taser!" However, protesters and Wright's family members say there's no excuse for the shooting and it shows how the justice system is tilted against Blacks, noting Wright was stopped for an expired car registration and ended up dead.

Activists who attended the mayor's news conference called for sweeping changes to the Brooklyn Center Police Department and sharply criticized the acting police chief, Tony Gruenig, for not yet having a plan.

Elliott said the department has about 49 police officers, none of whom live in Brooklyn Center. He said he didn't have information on racial diversity at hand but that "we have very few people of color in our department."

The modest suburb just north of Minneapolis has seen its demographics shift dramatically in recent years. In 2000, more than 70% of the city was white. Today, a majority of residents are Black, Asian or Hispanic.

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After stopping Wright for the expired license plates, police tried to arrest him on an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

Body camera footage released Monday shows Wright struggling with police when Potter shouts, "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" She draws her weapon after the man breaks free from police outside his car and gets back behind the wheel.

After firing a single shot from her handgun, the car speeds away, and Potter says, "Holy (expletive)! I shot him."

Wright died of a gunshot wound to the chest, according to the medical examiner.

Protests began within hours.

In her one-paragraph letter of resignation, Potter said, "I have loved every minute of being a police officer and serving this community to the best of my ability, but I believe it is in the best interest of the community, the department, and my fellow officers if I resign immediately."

Wright's father, Aubrey Wright, told ABC's "Good Morning America" that he rejects the explanation that Potter mistook her gun for her Taser.

"I lost my son. He's never coming back. I can't accept that. A mistake? That doesn't even sound right. This officer has been on the force for 26 years. I can't accept that," he said.

Chyna Whitaker, mother of Daunte's son, said at a news conference that she felt police "stole my son's dad from him."

The Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association said in a statement Tuesday that "no conclusions should be made until the investigation is complete."

Prosecutors in Hennepin County, where the shooting occurred, said they have referred the case to nearby Washington County — a practice county attorneys in the Minneapolis area adopted last year in handling police deadly force cases. Washington County Attorney Pete Orput told WCCO-AM that he had received information on the case from state investigators and hoped to have a charging decision on Wednesday. Orput did not immediately respond to a message from The Associated Press.

Elliott, the mayor, called for the governor to move the case to the attorney general to prosecute.

Asked to comment, John Stiles, spokesman for the attorney general's office, said the attorney general has confidence in Orput's review of the case.

Ben Crump, the Wright family's attorney, spoke outside the Minneapolis courthouse where a fired police officer is on trial in Floyd's death. Crump compared Wright's death to that of Floyd, who was pinned down by police when they tried to arrest him for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market last May.

Daunte Wright "was not a threat to them," Crump said. "Was it the best decision? No. But young people don't always make the best decisions. As his mother said, he was scared."

Potter has experience with investigations into police shootings. She was the police union president and one of the first officers to respond after Brooklyn Center police fatally shot a man who allegedly tried to stab an officer with a knife in 2019, according to a report from the Hennepin County Attorney's Office.

After medics arrived, she told the two officers who shot the man to get into separate squad cars, turn off their body cameras, and not to speak to each other. She accompanied two other officers involved in the shooting while investigators interviewed them.

Biden to address joint session of Congress on April 28

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will address a joint session of Congress for the first time on April 28.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi extended the invitation to Biden on Tuesday, "to share your vision for addressing the challenges and opportunities of this historic moment." The White House said Biden accepted the invitation.

The speech will come just before Biden's 100th day in office, and will provide him an opportunity to update the American public on his progress toward fulfilling his promises. It will also give him a chance to

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make the case for the \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package he unveiled earlier this month, which the House is aiming to pass by July 4.

Traditionally all members of Congress and guests gather for a joint session in the House, the larger of the two chambers. However, the address is certain to look different this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Social distancing restrictions have been in place during the pandemic that require House lawmakers to conduct floor votes and other business in smaller groups, rather than convening hundreds in the chamber at once. Masks are required and the public visitors galleries, usually filled for such an event, have been closed during most of the pandemic.

Details on the Capitol's preparation for the event were not immediately available.

Presidents don't deliver a State of the Union address to Congress until their second year in office.

100 Days: Tokyo Olympics marked by footnotes and asterisks

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Tokyo pitched itself as "a safe pair of hands" when it was awarded the Olympics 7 1/2 years ago.

"The certainty was a crucial factor," Craig Reddie, an IOC vice president at the time, said after the 2013 vote in Buenos Aires.

Now, nothing is certain as Tokyo's postponed Olympics hit the 100-days-to-go mark on Wednesday. Despite surging cases of COVID-19, myriad scandals and overwhelming public opposition in Japan to holding the Games, organizers and the IOC are pushing on.

Tokyo's 1964 Olympics celebrated Japan's rapid recovery from defeat in World War II. These Olympics will be marked by footnotes and asterisks. The athletes will aim high, of course, but the goals elsewhere will be modest: get through it, avoid becoming a super-spreader event, and stoke some national pride knowing few other countries could have pulled this off.

"The government is very conscious of how 'the world' views Japan," Dr. Gill Steel, who teaches political science at Doshisha University in Kyoto, wrote in an email. "Canceling the Olympics would have been seen, at some level, as a public failure on the international stage."

The price will be steep when the Olympics open on July 23.

The official cost is \$15.4 billion. Olympic spending is tough to track, but several government audits suggest it might be twice that much, and all but \$6.7 billion is public money.

The Switzerland-based IOC generates 91% of its income from selling broadcast rights and sponsorship. This amounts to at least \$5 billion in a four-year cycle, but the revenue flow from networks like American-based NBC has been stalled by the postponement.

What does Tokyo get out of the 17-day sports circus?

Fans from abroad are banned, tourism is out, and there'll be no room for neighborhood partying. Athletes are being told to arrive late, leave early and maneuver around a moving maze of rules.

There are also reputational costs for Japan and the International Olympic Committee: a bribery scandal, botched planning, and repeated misogyny in the Tokyo Olympic leadership.

The IOC is betting Tokyo will be a distraction — "the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel"— as the closing ceremony comes just six months before the opening of the boycott-threatened Beijing Winter Olympics.

Various polls suggest up to 80% of Japanese want the Olympics canceled or postponed. And many scientists are opposed.

"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.

Japan's vaccine rollout has been almost nonexistent, few will get shots before the Olympics open, and Tokyo has raised its "alert level" with another wave predicted about the time of the opening ceremony. About 9,500 deaths in Japan have been attributed to COVID-19, good by global measures but poor by standards in Asia.

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And what's the impact of 15,400 Olympic and Paralympic athletes from more than 200 countries and territories entering Japan, joined by tens of thousands of officials, judges, media, and broadcasters?

"The risks are high in Japan. Japan is dangerous, not a safe place at all," Sugaya said.

The heavily sponsored torch relay with 10,000 runners crisscrossing Japan also presents hazards. Legs scheduled for Osaka this week were pulled from the streets because of surging COVID-19 cases and relocated into a city park — with no fans allowed. Other legs across Japan are also sure to be disrupted.

The IOC and Japanese politicians decided a year ago to postpone but not cancel the Olympics, driven by inertia and the clout of Japanese ad giant Dentsu Inc., which has lined up a record of \$3.5 billion in local sponsorship — probably three times more than any previous Olympics.

"I think the government knows full well the Japanese public doesn't want the Olympics as of now," Dr. Aki Tonami, who teaches political science at the University of Tsukuba, wrote in an email to AP. "But no one wants to be the one to pull the plug."

The Olympics may also determine the fate of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who replaced Shinzo Abe seven months ago. It was Abe who famously told IOC voters in 2013 that the Fukushima nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011, was "under control."

Despite being billed as the "Recovery Olympics," the northeastern area of Japan is still hurting a decade later. Many blame the Olympics for the slow recovery and siphoning off resources.

"Suga's fate is sealed," Tonami said. "I think he knows his tenure as a PM will not be a long one, so even though it would be nice for him personally to pull it off, it probably doesn't change the political conditions around him."

Steel was more optimistic.

"His government has a higher chance of surviving, even thriving, if they can pull off a successful Olympics — risky strategy, obviously, if it is a disaster."

IOC President Thomas Bach has repeatedly called Tokyo the "best prepared Olympics in history" and he's restated it during the pandemic. Handsome venues went up quickly including the \$1.4 billion National Stadium by Kengo Kuma and, though expensive, the Games were on track until the pandemic hit.

But the "safe pair of hands" have often been shaky.

Tokyo's initial logo was scrapped after claims it was plagiarized, the original stadium concept was dropped when costs soared past \$2 billion, and organizing committee president Yoshiro Mori — a former prime minister — stepped down two months ago after making derogatory comments about women. Artistic director Hiroshi Sasaki left a few weeks later, essentially for the same reason.

On top of it all, French prosecutors believe Tokyo landed the Olympics by channeling bribes to IOC voters. Rio de Janeiro apparently landed the 2016 Olympics the same way, prosecutors allege.

Tsunekazu Takeda, an IOC member at the time and head of the Japanese Olympic Committee, was forced to resign two years ago in the vote-buying scandal. He denied any wrongdoing.

Dr. Lisa Kihl, who studies sports governance and is the director of the Global Institute for Responsible Sport Organizations at the University of Minnesota, said corruption has become "institutionalized" in many sports governing bodies, particularly those operating across national borders.

"It's so easy to make money off the system," she said in an interview with the AP. "Nobody is going to rock the boat because everybody is benefitting from it. Professional sports organizations within a country -- specifically the U.S. -- have to abide by the rules of that country. Internationally, there is no body to hold organizations like the IOC accountable. Until sports internationally are governed like financial institutions, it's not going to change."

US to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on America that were coordinated from that country, several U.S. officials said Tuesday.

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The decision defies a May 1 deadline for full withdrawal under a peace agreement the Trump administration reached with the Taliban last year, but leaves no room for additional extensions. A senior administration official called the September date an absolute deadline that won't be affected by security conditions in the country.

While Biden's decision keeps U.S. troops in Afghanistan four months longer than initially planned, it sets a firm end to two decades of war that killed more than 2,200 U.S. troops, wounded 20,000, and cost as much as \$1 trillion. The conflict largely crippled al-Qaida and led to the death of Osama bin Laden, the architect of the Sept. 11 attacks. But an American withdrawal also risks many of the gains made in democracy, women's rights and governance, while ensuring that the Taliban, who provided al-Qaida's safe haven, remain strong and in control of large swaths of the country.

Biden has been hinting for weeks that he was going to let the May deadline lapse, and as the days went by it became clear that an orderly withdrawal of the roughly 2,500 remaining troops would be difficult and was unlikely. The administration official said the drawdown would begin by May 1.

Biden's choice of the 9/11 date underscores the reason that American troops were in Afghanistan to begin with — to prevent extremist groups like al-Qaida from establishing a foothold again that could be used to launch attacks against the U.S.

The administration official said Biden decided that the withdrawal deadline had to be absolute, rather than based on conditions on the ground. "We're committing today to going to zero" U.S. forces by Sept. 11, and possibly well before, the official said, adding that Biden concluded that a conditioned withdrawal would be "a recipe for staying in Afghanistan forever."

Defense officials and commanders had argued against the May 1 deadline, saying the U.S. troop withdrawal should be based on security conditions in Afghanistan, including Taliban attacks and violence.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden will deliver remarks Wednesday "on the way forward in Afghanistan, including his plans and timeline for withdrawing U.S. troops." She didn't provide details, but said during a White House briefing that Biden "has been consistent in his view that there is not a military solution to Afghanistan, that we have been there for far too long."

Psaki tweeted later Tuesday that Biden would also visit Arlington National Cemetery "to pay his respects to the brave men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan."

Several U.S. officials confirmed Biden's withdrawal decision to The Associated Press, and an administration official provided details to reporters on condition of anonymity, speaking ahead of the announcement.

According to the administration official, the only U.S. forces remaining in Afghanistan will be those needed to protect diplomats there. No exact number was provided, but American troop totals in Afghanistan have been understated by U.S. administrations for years. Officials have quietly acknowledged that there are hundreds more in Afghanistan than the official 2,500 number, and likely would include special operations forces conducting covert or counterterrorism missions, often working with intelligence agency personnel.

Biden's new, extended timeline will allow a safe and orderly withdrawal of American troops in coordination with NATO allies, the administration official added.

The president's decision, however, risks retaliation by the Taliban on U.S. and Afghan forces, possibly escalating the 20-year war. And it will reignite political division over America's involvement in what many have called the endless war.

An intelligence community report issued Tuesday about global challenges for the next year said prospects for a peace deal in Afghanistan are "low" and warned that "the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield. If the coalition withdraws support, the report says, the Afghan government will struggle to control the Taliban.

Congressional reaction to the new deadline was mixed.

"Precipitously withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan is a grave mistake," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "It is retreat in the face of an enemy that has not yet been vanquished and abdication of American leadership.

Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, slammed

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it as a "reckless and dangerous decision." He said any withdrawal should be conditions-based, adding that arbitrary deadlines could put troops in danger, create a breeding ground for terrorists and lead to civil war in Afghanistan.

Democrats were generally more supportive. Sen. Jack Reed, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said Trump's May 1 deadline limited Biden's options. "We still have vital interests in protecting against terrorist attacks that could be emanating from that part of the world, but there are other areas, too, we have to be conscious of," Reed said.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said troops should come home, and the U.S. must refocus American national security on more pressing challenges.

But at least one senior Democrat expressed disappointment. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire said in a tweet that the U.S. "has sacrificed too much to bring stability to Afghanistan to leave w/o verifiable assurances of a secure future."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed told The Associated Press that the religious militia is waiting for a formal announcement to issue its reaction. The Taliban previously warned the U.S. of "consequences" if it reneged on the May 1 deadline.

In a February 2020 agreement with the administration of President Donald Trump, the Taliban agreed to halt attacks and hold peace talks with the Afghan government, in exchange for a U.S. commitment to a complete withdrawal by May 2021.

Over the past year, U.S. military commanders and defense officials have said that attacks on U.S. troops have largely paused, but that Taliban attacks on the Afghans increased. Commanders have argued that the Taliban have failed to meet the conditions of the peace agreement by continuing attacks on the Afghans and failing to totally cut ties with al-Qaida and other extremist groups.

When Biden entered the White House in January, he was keenly aware of the looming deadline and had time to meet it if he had chosen to do so. He began a review of the February 2020 agreement shortly after taking office, and has been consulting at length with his defense advisers and allies.

In recent weeks, it became increasingly clear that he was leaning toward defying the deadline.

"It's going to be hard to meet the May 1 deadline," Biden said in March. "Just in terms of tactical reasons, it's hard to get those troops out." He added, "And if we leave, we're going to do so in a safe and orderly way."

A bitter custody battle and 3 young lives lost in California

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Erik Denton was supposed to see his three young children last Sunday, the one day every other week that he was allowed to be with them.

Three-year-old Joanna, her 2-year-old brother, Terry, and 6-month-old sister, Sierra, had been staying with their mother — Denton's ex-girlfriend — in Los Angeles. Fearful for their safety, their father had petitioned the court for custody March 1, alleging their mother, Liliana Carrillo, was delusional and had taken the kids and refused to tell him where they were.

Carrillo, in turn, filed a restraining order against him and claimed Denton was an alcoholic who may have sexually abused their eldest child.

As the case wound through family courts in Tulare and Los Angeles counties, the parents traded accusations in dozens of pages of documents. Police were called, social workers were consulted, alarming text messages and Facebook posts were saved as legal exhibits.

A week ago, a Los Angeles judge agreed to move the case to Tulare County, where a hearing was scheduled for Wednesday.

It would be too late.

The children were found dead Saturday by their maternal grandmother in her Los Angeles apartment. Carrillo was their suspected killer and was arrested in Tulare County, nearly 200 miles (322 kilometers) north of the scene.

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LA detectives are seeking her extradition as the coroner's office conducts autopsies on the children. Capt. Chris Waters, who oversees the LAPD's Juvenile Division, said the investigation is ongoing. She offered her condolences and said the deaths were particularly tragic during National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Denton, as well as attorneys who had represented Carrillo and Denton in their custody case, did not return requests for comment on Tuesday.

A memorial of photographs, candles, flowers and balloons paid tribute to the siblings as their father struggled to understand why his daughters and son had been left in their mother's care despite multiple red flags.

"I am afraid for my children's physical and mental well-being," Denton had written in court papers.

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, the largest child protective services agency in the nation, was involved in the case. In a statement, the department declined to comment on its role but said it "joins the community in mourning."

"Erik's hands were tied by the law," said Dr. Teri Miller, a Los Angeles emergency room physician who is Denton's cousin and helped him try to get custody of the kids. She told The Los Angeles Times: "He jumped through every hoop placed in front of him to get the kids back safely."

Denton's court filings tell of Carrillo's post-partum depression following the birth of their middle child. She began therapy but quit. She self-medicated with marijuana, he claimed. In texts and social media posts, she said things like "I wish I never had kids" and threatened to kill herself.

Carrillo also believed she was "solely responsible" for the coronavirus pandemic, Denton wrote, and she thought that Porterville, the Tulare County city where he, Carrillo and the children had lived, was home to a "giant sex trafficking ring."

In late February, her behavior worsened, court documents show. During an outing at the park, their oldest daughter had fallen and landed on her groin area and later said it hurt. Carrillo believed the pain was from Denton molesting her, a claim he denied. He said she was checked by a doctor who found no evidence of abuse; Carrillo said the examination wasn't thorough enough.

On Feb. 25, Carrillo allegedly tried to leave their home with the kids in the middle of the night. Denton called 911, and Carrillo did not believe the responding officer was really a member of the police department. She threatened to take the kids to Mexico, where she has family.

The next day, a social worker contacted Denton and said she was worried about Carrillo's mental state. She urged him to seek a court intervention, and Denton filed custody paperwork in Tulare County on March 1.

"I am very concerned about my partner," Denton wrote, "and want to get her the help she needs to recover from this mental break and to become stable. I want her interactions with the children to be safe and healthy."

Carrillo sought a temporary restraining order 12 days later in LA County. Through the courts, Denton and Carrillo agreed to swap Denton's days to see the children — a few hours every other Sunday.

Last Sunday was supposed to be just his second visit with the kids under the new schedule.

Instead, he spent it in grief.

Expert says cop was justified in pinning down George Floyd

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Former Officer Derek Chauvin was justified in pinning George Floyd to the ground because he kept struggling, a use-of-force expert testified for the defense Tuesday, contradicting a parade of authorities from both inside and outside the Minneapolis Police Department.

Taking the stand at Chauvin's murder trial, Barry Brodd, a former Santa Rosa, California, officer, stoutly defended Chauvin's actions, even as a prosecutor pounded away at the witness, banging the lectern at one point during cross-examination and growing incredulous when Brodd suggested Floyd was struggling because he wasn't "resting comfortably" on the pavement.

"It's easy to sit and judge ... an officer's conduct," Brodd testified. "It's more of a challenge to, again,

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put yourself in the officer's shoes to try to make an evaluation through what they're feeling, what they're sensing, the fear they have, and then make a determination."

He said he doesn't believe Chauvin and the other officers used deadly force when they held Floyd down on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind his back and Chauvin's knee on his neck or neck area for what prosecutors say was 9 1/2 minutes.

Brodd likened it instead to a situation in which officers use a Taser on someone fighting with officers, and the suspect falls, hits his head and dies: "That isn't an incident of deadly force. That's an incident of an accidental death."

Several top Minneapolis police officials, including the police chief, have testified that Chauvin used excessive force and violated his training. And medical experts called by prosecutors have said that Floyd died from a lack of oxygen because of the way he was restrained.

But Brodd said: "I felt that Officer Chauvin's interactions with Mr. Floyd were following his training, following current practices in policing and were objectively reasonable."

The question of what is reasonable is important: Police officers are allowed certain latitude to use deadly force when someone puts the officer or other people in danger. Legal experts say a key issue for the jury will be whether Chauvin's actions were reasonable in those specific circumstances.

Prosecutor Steve Schleicher used his cross-examination to once again painstakingly go through video clips of a pinned-down Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe and then going limp.

The prosecutor hammered away at Brodd, saying that a reasonable officer in Chauvin's position would have known Floyd stopped resisting, that another officer told him he couldn't find a pulse, and that others said Floyd had passed out and was no longer breathing.

"And the defendant's position is, and was, and remains, as we see here at this moment, in this time, in this clip -- on top of Mr. Floyd on the street. Isn't that right?" Schleicher asked, as he banged his hand on the lectern repeatedly.

"Yes," Brodd replied.

At one point, Brodd argued that Floyd kept on struggling instead of just "resting comfortably" on the ground.

"Did you say 'resting comfortably'?" an incredulous Schleicher asked.

Brodd: "Or laying comfortably."

Schleicher: "Resting comfortably on the pavement?"

Brodd: "Yes."

The prosecutor went on to say that Floyd was moving, but it was because he was struggling to breathe by shoving his shoulder into the pavement.

Under questioning by the defense, Brodd also testified that bystanders yelling at police to get off Floyd complicated the situation for Chauvin and the others by causing them to wonder whether the crowd was becoming a threat, too.

Brodd also appeared to endorse what prosecution witnesses have said is a common misconception: that if someone can talk, he or she can breathe.

"I certainly don't have medical degrees, but I was always trained and feel it's a reasonable assumption that if somebody's, 'I'm choking, I'm choking,' well, you're not choking because you can breathe," he said.

Chauvin, a 45-year-old white man, is on trial on charges of murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death last May after his arrest on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson has argued that the 19-year Minneapolis police veteran did what he was trained to do and that Floyd died because of his illegal drug use and underlying health problems, including high blood pressure and heart disease. Fentanyl and methamphetamine were discovered in his system.

The defense began presenting its case on Tuesday after the prosecution rested following 11 days of testimony and a mountain of video evidence.

Nelson started by bringing up a 2019 arrest in which Floyd suffered from dangerously high blood pressure and confessed to heavy use of opioids. And he suggested that the 46-year-old Black man may have

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suffered last May from “excited delirium” — what a witness described as a potentially lethal state of agitation and even superhuman strength that can be triggered by drugs, heart disease or mental problems.

Nelson also elicited testimony from another witness that Floyd panicked and cried over and over, “Please, please, don’t kill me!” when officers first approached his SUV at gunpoint on the day of his death.

Nicole Mackenzie, a Minneapolis police training officer, was called by Nelson to expound on excited delirium. While Floyd was pinned to the ground, a relatively new officer at the scene had mentioned that Floyd might be suffering from such a condition.

Mackenzie testified that the signs of excited delirium can include incoherent speech, extraordinary strength and sweating, and that officers are trained to call paramedics, because a person in that state can rapidly go into cardiac arrest.

An expert in forensic medicine previously dismissed Nelson’s excited-delirium suggestion during the prosecution’s case, saying Floyd met none of the 10 criteria developed by the American College of Emergency Physicians.

The defense’s first witnesses testified about a May 6, 2019, incident in which Floyd was pulled from a car and arrested by Minneapolis police.

A now-retired paramedic who responded to that call, Michelle Moseng, testified that Floyd told her he had been taking multiple opioids about every 20 minutes.

“I asked him why and he said it was because he was addicted,” said Moseng, who described Floyd’s behavior as “elevated and agitated” before the judge struck that remark from the record.

Moseng said she recommended taking Floyd to the hospital based on his high blood pressure, which she measured at 216 over 160.

On cross-examination, prosecutor Erin Eldridge got Moseng to testify that Floyd’s respiratory output, pulse, heart rate, EKG and heart rhythms were normal. Eldridge said Floyd was taken to the hospital and released two hours later.

The prosecution’s expert witnesses rejected the notion that drugs or underlying health problems caused Floyd’s death, with a cardiology expert on Monday saying that Floyd appeared to have “an exceptionally strong heart.”

Another defense witness Tuesday was Shawanda Hill, who was in the SUV with Floyd before his ill-fated encounter with Chauvin.

When he saw an officer at the window with a gun, Floyd “instantly grabbed the wheel and he was like, ‘Please, please, don’t kill me. Please, please, don’t shoot me. Don’t shoot me. What did I do? Just tell me what I did,’” Hill testified.

Also testifying was Minneapolis Park Police Officer Peter Chang, who helped at the scene that day. He said he saw a “crowd” growing across the street that “was becoming more loud and aggressive, a lot of yelling across the street.”

“Did that cause you any concern?” Nelson asked.

“Concern for the officers’ safety, yes,” Chang replied.

Nelson hasn’t said whether Chauvin will take the stand. Testifying could open him up to devastating cross-examination but could also give the jury the opportunity to see any remorse or sympathy he might feel.

Sikhs mark toned-down holiday amid continuing virus concerns

By MARGARET STAFFORD and GARY FIELDS Associated Press

LIBERTY, Missouri (AP) — Sikhs across the United States are holding toned-down Vaisakhi celebrations this week, joining people of other faiths in observing major holidays cautiously this spring as COVID-19 keeps an uneven hold on the country.

Vaisakhi, which falls April 13 or 14 depending on which of two dueling calendars one follows, marks the day in 1699 when Sikhism took its current form. Communities typically celebrate by gathering at gurdwaras, or places of worship, for prayer and the reading of hymns, and there are often processions, parades, other activities and food.

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While the ongoing pandemic has many people celebrating remotely this year just as in 2020, some, especially in the United States, are joining in masked, socially distant Vaisakhi gatherings.

"Sikh community members, especially those who faced hardships and loss during the pandemic, view Vaisakhi as a fresh start and a sign of hope that things will be better once again," said Sahej Preet Singh, community development manager at the Sikh Coalition, a national organization based in New York. "The Sikh worldview embraces resilience and Chardi Kala (relentless optimism)."

For the second year in a row, outdoor festivities at the Midwest Sikh Gurdwara and the traditional parade in the city of Shawnee, a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri, have been canceled. But in an improvement over 2020, some events will be held at the temple and via social media.

Komalpreet Kaur, a 16-year-old high school student in nearby Olathe, Kansas, said the parade is "the one big event of the year where everyone gets together, and we welcome other members of the community to participate. ... This is like our Christmas, and it's something we look forward to so much."

"But we are going to find alternatives this year to celebrate," she added.

Kaur has been lobbying officials in several area cities trying to get them to declare April Sikh Awareness and Appreciation Month, so far winning one such proclamation from Lenexa, Kansas. Kaur, who was raised in New York City before moving with her family to Kansas in 2017, said she wants to make others more familiar with her faith.

"Increasing awareness can combat the negativity and hate," she said.

In California's San Joaquin Valley, the Stockton Gurdwara Sahib organized a Tuesday evening service of prayers, readings from the Guru Granth Sahib scripture and music, held in-person while following health guidelines, said Tejpaal Singh Bainwal, a temple member and student of early Sikh American history. A more involved celebration including a vaccination clinic will be held this weekend, also under masking and social distancing rules.

In a normal year there would be a parade that attracts thousands, but it has been called off this year. Bainwal expects attendance at the events to be much lower as people focus instead on selfless service.

"People are practicing their faith in a different way since COVID," he said.

At Guru Nanak Darbar of Long Island, in Hicksville, New York, normally there's a giant tent set up in the parking lot to accommodate crowds of up to 2,000 people at a time coming for festivities and treats. This year the celebrations were marked by temperature monitors, social distancing and bagged meals to take home. Temple members set a more restrictive attendance level than required, allowing about 150 into prayer services that can normally accommodate 600.

"In a normal year we have a lot of stalls, a lot of food," said Harcharan Singh Gulati, the general secretary. "But this year we don't want to take any risk. We want people to take it home."

After all Vaisakhi celebrations were shut down in 2020, this year people were allowed inside the gurdwara in small groups for prayer, readings and religious songs.

"It's not like two or three years ago," Gulati said, "but it is better than what we had last year."

US recommends 'pause' for J&J shots in blow to vaccine drive

By ZEKE MILLER, LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. on Tuesday recommended a "pause" in use of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine to investigate reports of rare but potentially dangerous blood clots, setting off a chain reaction worldwide and dealing a setback to the global vaccination campaign.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration announced that they were looking into unusual clots in six women between the ages of 18 and 48. One person died.

The acting FDA commissioner expected the pause to last only a matter of days. But the decision triggered swift action in Europe and elsewhere as the drugmaker, regulators and providers moved to halt the use of the J&J vaccine, at least for now.

J&J said in a statement that it was aware of the reports of blood clots, but that no link to its vaccine had been established. However, the company said late Tuesday it would delay the rollout of its vaccine in

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Europe and pause new vaccinations in its trials that are still underway until it can update its guidance on how to proceed.

Hundreds of thousands of doses were due to arrive in European countries, where vaccinations have been plagued by supply shortages, logistical problems and concerns over blood clots in a small number of people who received the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not yet cleared for use in the U.S.

Any slowdown in the dissemination of the shots could have broad implications for the global vaccination effort. The J&J vaccine held immense promise because its single-dose regimen and relatively simple storage requirements would make it easier to use, especially in less affluent countries.

The clots, which happened six to 13 days after vaccination in veins that drain blood from the brain, occurred together with low platelets, the fragments in blood that normally form clots.

More than 6.8 million doses of the J&J vaccine have been given in the U.S., the vast majority with no or mild side effects.

"We know there are plenty of critics who say, 'Why? It's just a couple of cases. Why don't we just move along?'" said Dr. Peter Marks, director of the FDA's vaccine center. He noted past episodes when health problems surfaced in people who got new vaccines, such as the debut of the polio vaccine in 1955 and a vaccination campaign against a new form of flu in 1976.

When medical countermeasures injure people in the United States, "we don't have a lot of tolerance for that, and that tends to undermine vaccine confidence," Marks said. "So we simply have to do whatever we can to minimize or eliminate issues that might be considered friendly fire."

The decision immediately upended some vaccine programs around the U.S.: In Atlanta, a mass vaccination event for public school teachers that was to have used the J&J vaccine was scrapped. St. Louis health officials said they would reach out to 1,800 people who got the shots to warn them of potential health issues. And in Montana, two colleges that had hoped to vaccinate students with J&J doses before they head home for the summer canceled clinics.

Authorities stressed they have found no sign of clot problems with the most widely used COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. — from Moderna and Pfizer.

Seth Shockley of Indianapolis received the J&J vaccine Sunday and was initially worried when he heard about the potential side effects Tuesday. His concerns faded when he learned there were only six confirmed cases of blood clots.

"I would much rather take the risk with the vaccine — a much smaller risk — than to risk it with COVID," he said. Now he's more worried that the reports could result in more people refusing to get vaccinated.

The FDA said the cases under investigation appear similar to the clots that are possibly linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine. European regulators have stressed that the AstraZeneca risk appears to be far lower than the possibility of developing clots from birth control pills, which typically cause clots in about 4 of every 10,000 women who use them for a year.

Speaking at the White House, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top expert on infectious disease, said the pause would allow the FDA and the CDC to investigate the clotting cases and "to make physicians more aware of this."

A CDC committee will meet Wednesday to discuss the cases, and the FDA has launched an investigation into the cause of the clots and low platelet counts.

FDA officials emphasized that Tuesday's action was not a mandate. Doctors and patients could still use J&J's vaccine if they decide its benefits outweigh its risks for individual cases, Marks said.

The agencies recommend that people who were given the J&J vaccine should contact their doctor if they experience severe headache, abdominal or leg pain or shortness of breath within three weeks.

U.S. health authorities cautioned doctors against using a typical clot treatment, the blood-thinner heparin. European authorities investigating the AstraZeneca cases have concluded that the clots appear to be similar to a very rare abnormal immune response that sometimes strikes people treated with heparin, leading to a temporary clotting disorder.

While it's not clear yet if the reports among J&J recipients are related, doctors would treat these kinds of unusual clots like they treat people who have the heparin reaction — with different kinds of blood thinners

and sometimes an antibody infusion, said Dr. Geoffrey Barnes, a clot expert at the University of Michigan. Even without J&J's vaccine, White House officials said they remain on track to have enough supplies to vaccinate most American adults by the summer.

"We believe there's enough vaccine in the system — Moderna and Pfizer — for all Americans who want to get vaccinated by May 31 to do so," said Jeff Zients, the White House's COVID-19 response coordinator.

The J&J vaccine received emergency use authorization from the FDA in late February with great fanfare. Yet the shot only makes up a small fraction of the doses administered in the U.S. J&J has been plagued by production delays and manufacturing errors at the Baltimore plant of a contractor.

Last week, the drugmaker took over the facility to scale up production in hopes of meeting its commitment to the U.S. government of providing about 100 million doses by the end of May.

At the Green Wave Pharmacy in rural Clintwood, Virginia, many customers have specifically requested the J&J vaccine. Pharmacist Sheryl Pientka said the pharmacy in the Appalachian Mountains serves low-income and elderly people who prefer to get one shot instead of two.

Although the pharmacy has Moderna vaccines in stock, some elderly and homebound customers may wait for the J&J shot to get cleared for use again, Pientka said.

"It's a very small town where everyone knows everyone else, so people say, 'I know so-and-so got the vaccine. If she doesn't have a problem, then I'll go get it,'" she said.

St. Vincent seeks water, funds as volcano keeps erupting

By KRISTIN DEANE and DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

KINGSTOWN, St. Vincent (AP) — Leaders of volcano-wracked St. Vincent said Tuesday that water is running short as heavy ash contaminates supplies, and they estimated that the eastern Caribbean island will need hundreds of millions of dollars to recover from the eruption of La Soufriere.

Between 16,000 to 20,000 people have been evacuated from the island's northern region, where the exploding volcano is located, with more than 3,000 of them staying at more than 80 government shelters.

Dozens of people stood in lines on Tuesday for water or to retrieve money sent by friends and family abroad. Among those standing in one crowd was retired police officer Paul Smart.

"The volcano caught us with our pants down, and it's very devastating," he said. "No water, lots of dust in our home. We thank God we are alive, but we need more help at this moment."

Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves said in a press conference on local station NBC Radio that St. Vincent will need hundreds of millions of dollars to recover from the eruption but did not give any details.

He added that no casualties have been reported since the first big blast from the volcano early Friday. "We have to try and keep that record," he said. Gonsalves said some people have refused to leave communities closest to the volcano and urged them to evacuate.

Falling ash and pyroclastic flows have destroyed crops and contaminated water reservoirs. Garth Saunders, minister of the island's water and sewer authority, noting that some communities have not yet received water.

"The windward (eastern) coast is our biggest challenge today," he said during the press conference of efforts to deploy water trucks. "What we are providing is a finite amount. We will run out at some point."

The prime minister said people in some shelters need food and water, and he thanked neighboring nations for shipments of items including cots, respiratory masks and water bottles and tanks. In addition, the World Bank has disbursed \$20 million to the government of St. Vincent as part of an interest-free catastrophe financing program.

Adam Billing, a retired police officer who lived and tended to his crops on land near the volcano, said he had more than 3 acres of plantains, tannias, yams and a variety of fruits and estimates he lost more than \$9,000 worth of crops.

"Everything that (means) livelihood is gone. Everything," said Billing, who was evacuated. "We have to look at the next couple of months as it's not going to be a quick fix from the government."

The volcano, which had seen a low-level eruption since December, experienced the first of several major

explosions on Friday morning, and volcanologists say activity could continue for weeks.

Another explosion was reported Tuesday morning, sending another massive plume of ash into the air. It came on the anniversary of the 1979 eruption, the last one produced by the volcano until Friday morning. A previous eruption in 1902 killed some 1,600 people.

"It's still a pretty dangerous volcano," said Richard Robertson with the University of the West Indies' Seismic Research Center. "It can still cause serious damage."

Biden raises concerns with Putin about Ukraine confrontation

By MATTHEW LEE, RAF CASERT, and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — President Joe Biden urged Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday to "de-escalate tensions" following a Russian military buildup on Ukraine's border in their second tense call of Biden's young presidency.

Biden also told Putin the U.S. would "act firmly in defense of its national interests" regarding Russian cyber intrusions and election interference, according to the White House. Biden proposed a summit in a third country "in the coming months" to discuss the full range of U.S.-Russia issues, the White House said.

The Biden-Putin relationship has been rocky in the early going of the new U.S. administration. Biden is weighing action against Russia for the SolarWinds hacking campaign, Russian interference in the 2020 presidential election, reports of Russian bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and the poisoning and jailing of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

There is growing concern in the West about a surge of cease-fire violations in eastern Ukraine, where Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces have been locked in a conflict since Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Biden's call with Putin came as the top U.S. diplomat and the leader of NATO condemned the recent massing of thousands of Russian troops.

"President Biden emphasized the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the White House said in a statement. The White House added that Biden made clear that Russia must "de-escalate tensions."

More than 14,000 people have died in fighting in eastern Ukraine, and efforts to negotiate a political settlement have stalled. Over the past week, there have been daily reports of Ukrainian military casualties and rebels also have reported losses.

Ukraine has said Russia has 41,000 troops at its border with eastern Ukraine and 42,000 more in Crimea. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday the military buildup of the past three weeks was part of readiness drills in response to what he described as threats from NATO. He added the maneuvers in western Russia would last for two more weeks.

"The troops have shown their full readiness to fulfill tasks to ensure the country's security," Shoigu said.

The Kremlin in a statement said "during an exchange of opinions on Ukraine's internal political crisis," Putin told Biden about "approaches to a political settlement" based on the 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany and signed in Minsk, Belarus.

The White House provided no details on the timing or location of Biden's proposed summit.

Shortly after talking to Biden, Putin called Finnish President Sauli Niinisto, according to the Kremlin.

Finland was the venue for several meetings of Russian and U.S. leaders. It hosted a summit between Leonid Brezhnev and Gerald Ford in 1975, a meeting of Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush in 1990, talks between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton in 1997, and, most recently, a summit between Trump and Putin in July 2018.

Austria also is ready to serve as a summit venue, according to a spokesperson for the Austrian Foreign Ministry quoted by Russian news agencies.

Putin has repeatedly brushed off calls by U.S. officials to cease provocations on Ukraine's border and on other issues. Still, the White House said that holding talks can be useful.

"When it comes to diplomacy you don't stop calling for what are the right actions and the appropriate actions and the actions the global community believes are right just because you see a hesitation," White

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House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Earlier Tuesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was in Brussels for meetings with NATO allies and Ukraine's foreign minister, accused Russia of taking "very provocative" actions with the massing of troops.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg also called the Russian movements "unjustified, unexplained and deeply concerning." He said the Russian deployment was the largest concentration of troops near the Ukrainian border since 2014.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urged Western countries to make clear to Moscow that it would pay a price for its "aggression."

"The U.S. stands firmly behind the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine," Blinken told Kuleba at the start of their meeting at the residence of the U.S. ambassador to Belgium, a post once held by Blinken's uncle. "That's particularly important at a time when we're seeing, unfortunately, Russia take very provocative actions when it comes to Ukraine."

Kuleba replied that Ukraine was grateful for the support of the U.S. and NATO, an alliance that Kyiv is looking to join over fierce Russian objections.

Leonid Slutsky, a senior Russian lawmaker who chairs the foreign affairs committee in the lower house of parliament, said Biden's call marked "a step away from confrontation to dialogue."

"Such a position meets not only mutual interests, but also the interests of international security," Slutsky said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. "The good news is that the leaders of the two largest nuclear powers have confirmed their readiness for interaction on issues of strategic stability and arms control."

Although Biden agreed to extend a major arms control deal with Russia, he has been notably cool toward Moscow and highly critical of many of its activities.

Last month in an interview with ABC News, Biden agreed with the description of Putin as a "killer" and he has criticized the jailing of Navalny, the opposition figure. U.S. intelligence released a report last month finding that Putin authorized influence operations to help former President Donald Trump's reelection bid.

Putin in response to Biden's killer comment recalled his ambassador to the U.S. and pointed at the U.S. history of slavery and slaughtering Native Americans and the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II.

In his first call with Putin as president in late January, Biden raised concerns about the arrest of Navalny, Russia's cyberespionage targeting the U.S., and thereports of Russian bounties on American troops in Afghanistan. The Kremlin, meanwhile, focused on Putin's response to Biden's proposal to extend the last remaining U.S.-Russia arms control treaty.

After that call, Biden said in a speech before State Department officials that the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Putin were over.

US agency says women can get abortion pill via mail

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Women seeking an abortion pill will not be required to visit a doctor's office or clinic during the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. health officials said Tuesday in the latest reversal in an ongoing legal battle over the medication.

The Food and Drug Administration announced the policy change a day earlier in a letter to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, one of several medical groups that has sued over the restriction put in place under the Trump administration.

The FDA's acting head, Dr. Janet Woodcock, said an agency review of recent studies "do not appear to show increases in serious safety concerns," when women take the pill without first visiting a health facility and discussing the drug's potential risks, including internal bleeding.

The change clears the way for women to get a prescription for the pill — mifepristone — via telemedicine and receive it through the mail. However, abortion opponents are pushing legislation in several Republican-led states that would head off easier access.

Medication abortion has been available in the United States since 2000, when the FDA approved the use of mifepristone. Taken with a hormone blocker called misoprostol, it constitutes the so-called abortion pill.

About 40% of all abortions in the U.S. are now done through medication — rather than surgery — and that option has become more pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last year, the FDA waived in-person requirements for virtually all medications, including tightly controlled drugs such as methadone. But the FDA and its parent health agency argued the rules were necessary to ensure the pills were used safely. The rule requires patients to pick up the single tablet of mifepristone at a hospital, clinic or medical office and sign a form that includes information about the medication's potential risks.

The obstetricians and gynecologists group sued to overturn the rule, setting off a series of conflicting court decisions. Most recently, in January, the Supreme Court sided with the Trump administration to reinstate the longstanding rule on getting the drug in person.

The obstetricians group said in a statement Tuesday the FDA's about-face on the requirement shows "it is arbitrary and does nothing to bolster the safety of an already-safe medicine."

The move was also hailed by congressional Democrats, some of whom had called on FDA to reverse its policy in a February letter.

But abortion opponents said the move would jeopardize women's health.

"With this action, the Biden administration has made it clear that they will prioritize abortion over women's safety," said Jeanne Mancini, president of the anti-abortion group March for Life. "Chemical abortions should have more medical oversight, not less."

The FDA policy only applies during the COVID-19 health emergency. The obstetricians and gynecologists group and several other medical organizations are pushing to make medication abortion permanently available via online prescribing and mail-order pharmacies.

I got the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Now what?

By The Associated Press undefined

I got the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Now what?

Don't panic. U.S. health officials on Tuesday recommended pausing vaccinations with J&J's shot as they look into reports of six clots out of nearly 7 million doses given in the country.

Health officials say to be vigilant, but to remember that reports of blood clots that may be associated with J&J's single-dose vaccine are exceedingly rare.

"It's less than one in a million," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease specialist.

Common side effects after getting a COVID-19 vaccine can include arm pain and normal flu-like symptoms for a couple days afterward. Those aren't pleasant, but they aren't what officials are concerned about.

Instead, be on the lookout for different, more severe symptoms associated with the clots, particularly between one and three weeks after the shot. Those include severe headache, backache, abdominal pain, shortness of breath, leg swelling, tiny red spots on the skin or bruising.

If those symptoms show up, seek medical treatment right away. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued advice to help doctors spot these rare clots and safely treat them.

EXPLAINER: What's known about J&J's vaccine and rare clots

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

A rare, rogue immune response is the main suspect as authorities investigate highly unusual blood clots following use of two similar COVID-19 vaccines from Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca.

The U.S. recommended that states pause giving the J&J vaccine on Tuesday while authorities examine six reports of the unusual clots, including a death, out of more than 6.8 million Americans given the one-dose vaccination so far.

But the small number of cases sparked concern because just last week, European authorities said similar clots were possibly linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not yet OK'd in the U.S. That led some countries to limit its use to certain age groups.

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Also Tuesday, J&J delayed its imminent European rollout.

WHAT MAKES THESE CLOTS DIFFERENT?

These are not typical blood clots. They're weird in two ways.

First, they're occurring in unusual parts of the body, such as veins that drain blood from the brain. Second, those patients also have abnormally low levels of platelets -- cells that help form clots -- a condition normally linked to bleeding, not clotting.

Scientists in Norway and Germany first raised the possibility that some people are experiencing an abnormal immune system response to the AstraZeneca vaccine, forming antibodies that attack their own platelets. That's the theory as the U.S. now investigates clots in J&J vaccine recipients, Dr. Peter Marks, the Food and Drug Administration's vaccine chief, said Tuesday.

WHY SUSPECT IMMUNE RESPONSE?

The first clue: A widely used blood thinner named heparin sometimes causes a very similar side effect. Very rarely, heparin recipients form antibodies that both attack and overstimulate platelets, said Dr. Geoffrey Barnes, a clot expert at the University of Michigan.

"It kind of can cause both sides of the bleeding-clotting spectrum," Barnes said.

Because heparin is used so often in hospitals, that reaction is something "that every hospital in America knows how to diagnose and treat."

There also are incredibly rare reports of this weird clot-low platelet combination in people who never took heparin, such as after an infection. Those unexplainable cases haven't gotten much attention, Barnes said, until the first clot reports popped up in some AstraZeneca vaccine recipients.

Health officials said one reason for the J&J pause was to make sure doctors know how to treat patients suspected of having these clots, which includes avoiding giving heparin.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention later Tuesday provided advice on how to spot and treat the unusual clots.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SHOW?

In two studies in the New England Journal of Medicine last week, research teams from Norway and Germany found platelet-attacking antibodies in the blood of some AstraZeneca vaccine recipients who had the strange clots. The antibodies were similar to those found with the heparin side effect even though the patients had never used that blood thinner.

It's not yet clear if there's a similar link to the J&J vaccine. But the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines, as well as a Russian COVID-19 vaccine and one from China, are made with the same technology. They train the immune system to recognize the spike protein that coats the coronavirus. To do that, they use a cold virus, called an adenovirus, to carry the spike gene into the body.

FDA's Marks wouldn't say if the weird clots may be common to these so-called adenovirus-vector vaccines. In addition to the AstraZeneca data, J&J makes an Ebola vaccine the same way and he said authorities would examine "the totality of the evidence."

WHAT ABOUT OTHER VACCINES?

The most widely used COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. -- from Pfizer and Moderna -- are made with a completely different technology, and the FDA said there is no sign of a similar clot concern with those vaccines.

What about people worried because they received the J&J vaccination? Marks said it's important not to confuse the rare clot risk with normal flu-like symptoms people often feel a day or two after a COVID-19 vaccination. He said concerning symptoms, such as severe headache or severe abdominal pain, would occur a week to three weeks after the J&J vaccine.

IRS chief expects new child payments to start this summer

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's a strain, but the head of the IRS said Tuesday he expects to meet the July 1 deadline in the new pandemic relief law for starting a groundbreaking tax program aimed at reducing child

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poverty. That means new advance monthly payments of as much as \$300 per child could begin flowing to lower-income families this summer.

In testimony at a Senate hearing, IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig said it will cost nearly \$400 million and require the hiring of 300 to 500 people to get the new monthly payment system and electronic portal in place for the child tax credit. "The IRS will be working hard to deliver this program quickly and efficiently," he said.

"We have to create a new structure," Rettig said, adding that the tax-collecting IRS is "not historically" a benefits agency. The IRS, which has suffered budget cuts over the past decade, has been further burdened by the pandemic and the task of sending out hundreds of millions of economic stimulus payments in three rounds.

In embedding the expanded child tax credit in the \$1.9 trillion rescue legislation enacted last month, Democrats sought to provide support to families affected by the coronavirus pandemic and parents forced to cut down on work or give up jobs to take care of children after losing access to childcare. Democrats view the tax change as an opportunity to address income inequality worsened by the pandemic. According to some academic estimates, it would reduce the number of children living in poverty in the U.S. by more than half.

It temporarily increases the existing child tax credit from a maximum \$2,000 a year per child to \$3,000 for each child aged 6 to 17 and \$3,600 for children under 6. It offers the option for families to receive advance monthly payments, rather than waiting for a lump sum based on the parents' tax liability. The change will be in effect for a year under the rescue law; Democratic lawmakers have said they want to make it permanent.

That has sparked criticism by Republicans, who have criticized the initiative as an expansion of the welfare state that removes the incentive for parents to seek work. They are expressing concern about fraud in the program and asking what the IRS will do to crack down on improper payments.

The new child tax credit "is not targeted to pandemic relief, and risks the loss of billions of taxpayer dollars in fraudulent and improper payments," Rep. Kevin Brady of Texas, the senior Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee, wrote in letters to Biden administration officials.

At Tuesday's hearing, Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, said he was concerned that the new tax benefit will remake the IRS' role into a "social welfare-oriented" agency.

Rettig, as the independent head of the IRS responsible for neutrally administering the benefit, isn't taking a position with either side. While acknowledging the possibility of some fraud in the program, he said the IRS will be fully able to detect and weed it out.

In addition, he told the senators, the new electronic portal for processing the child tax payments "will be as user-friendly as possible."

Rettig at the hearing also acknowledged that the national gap between federal taxes owed and actually collected is more than double, at about \$1 trillion annually, than official government estimates have indicated.

Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who pressed Rettig on the true size of the gap, called that "a jaw-dropping figure."

Democrats are putting a spotlight on the so-called tax gap, which deprives the government of revenue that could be put to constructive uses for society. The top 10% of earners have accounted for most of the gap, experts say, by underreporting their liabilities, intentionally or not, as tax avoidance or outright evasion.

Wyden also cited the perception that the Internal Revenue Service has tended to audit taxpayers of modest means more aggressively than the wealthy — an accusation that Rettig denied.

Florida to close wastewater reservoir with leak history

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Florida is moving to permanently close the leaky Piney Point wastewater reservoir that poured millions of gallons of water into Tampa Bay while threatening to burst open and

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flood nearby homes and businesses, Gov. Ron DeSantis said Tuesday.

The Republican governor said at a news conference at the site that the chronic challenges of containing polluted water at the long-closed phosphate plant must end.

"We want this to be the last chapter of the Piney Point story," DeSantis said.

The reservoir is located just south of Tampa in Manatee County, near waterways that flow into Tampa Bay. The governor said he has directed the Department of Environmental Protection to develop a closure plan, and that \$15.4 million in existing agency funds would be used to treat the wastewater to reduce the nutrients that can cause algae blooms and fish kills.

When a leak developed at the site this month, in a reservoir that once held 480 million gallons (1.9 million liters), experts fearing a collapse triggered the evacuation of more than 300 homes, businesses and farms in the area.

The worst was avoided as engineers rushed in vacuum trucks and other equipment to furiously pump out wastewater, relieving the pressure. Crews also installed a steel plate at the leak site to prevent additional flooding from a seam in the reservoir's plastic liner.

The reservoir contains what are called phosphogypsum stacks, a leftover from the phosphate mined for fertilizer. Officials say the water contains nitrogen, phosphorus, ammonia, and small amounts of radium and uranium, but is not radioactive.

There are about two dozen other similar phosphate wastewater reservoirs in Florida, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. They hold about 1 billion tons of phosphogypsum stacks similar to those at Piney Point. The EPA also says about 90% of the nation's phosphate is mined in Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee.

In Florida, the other phosphogypsum stacks have — so far — not had the same massive leak problems as Piney Point and there are no plans to close them, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

However, a Mosaic phosphate plant leaked millions of gallons of wastewater into Florida's underground aquifer after a sinkhole opened up in 2016 beneath a reservoir holding phosphogypsum stacks. Another Mosaic leak happened at a different plant in 2019, but officials said it was largely contained.

Noah Valenstein, the Florida DEP secretary, said the state also plans to sue HRK Holdings, which bought the Piney Point property in 2006 and promised a cleanup. Instead, the company filed for bankruptcy following a 2011 spill of 170 million gallons.

"Stay tuned for litigation," Valenstein said. "This is it. The site has to be closed."

Wilton Simpson, the Republican president of the Florida Senate, said lawmakers would work to fully fund the cleanup and closure of Piney Point. The Legislature is currently in session.

"By the end of session, we'll have a closure plan," Simpson said.

Iran says it will enrich uranium to 60%, highest level ever

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran will begin enriching uranium up to 60% purity after an attack on its Natanz nuclear facility, a negotiator said Tuesday, pushing its program to higher levels than ever before though still remaining short of weapons-grade.

The announcement marks a significant escalation after the sabotage that damaged centrifuges, suspected of having been carried out by Israel — and could inspire a further response from Israel amid a long-running shadow war between the nations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed never to allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon and his country has twice preemptively bombed Mideast nations to stop their atomic programs.

Already earlier in the day, Iran's foreign minister had warned that the weekend assault at Natanz could hurt ongoing negotiations over its tattered atomic deal with world powers. Those talks are aimed at finding a way for the United States to re-enter the agreement, the goal of which is to limit Iran's uranium enrichment in exchange for relief on sanctions.

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Nuclear negotiator Abbas Araghchi, in Vienna to begin informal talks Tuesday night, made a point to make his announcement in English.

"We believe this round of negotiations is the time for the U.S. to present a list and I hope that I can go back to Tehran with the list of sanctions which should be lifted," Araghchi told Iranian state television's English-language arm Press TV. "Otherwise, it would be a waste of time."

He said authorities would add another 1,000 "more-advanced" centrifuges to Natanz as well.

Iran had been enriching up to 20% — even that was a short technical step to weapons-grade levels of 90%.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the U.S. takes seriously Iran's "provocative announcement," saying it "calls into question Iran's seriousness with regard to the nuclear talks and underscores the imperative of returning to mutual compliance" with the deal.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, Israeli broadcaster Channel 12 reported an Israeli-owned ship had been attacked by Iran in the Gulf of Oman off the coast of the United Arab Emirates near Fujairah. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, an organization monitoring Mideast waterways run by the British navy, described it as "a possible incident," without elaborating. U.S. military officials declined to comment and Emirati officials did not acknowledge any incident there.

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful, though the West and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Tehran had an organized military nuclear program up until the end of 2003. However, the nuclear deal prevented it from having enough of a uranium stockpile to be able to pursue a nuclear weapon.

An annual U.S. intelligence report released Tuesday maintained the American assessment that "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that we judge would be necessary to produce a nuclear device."

The talks in Vienna are aimed at reviving America's role in that agreement, which former President Donald Trump abandoned, and lifting the sanctions he imposed.

The Vienna-based IAEA told The Associated Press that Iran had informed the agency it planned to begin enriching uranium up to 60% purity at its Natanz facility. IAEA inspectors have been closely monitoring Tehran's program since the 2015 nuclear deal.

Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's ambassador to the IAEA, said that "those who undertook an act of sabotage against the nuclear facility in Natanz probably wanted to undermine the process of" reviving the nuclear accord. Russia is a member of the nuclear deal.

The move to 60% had been hinted at in the past. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had threatened to go to that level in February if the country needed.

"We are determined to develop our nuclear capabilities in line with the needs of the country," Khamenei said then. "For this reason, Iran's enrichment will not be limited to 20%, and we will take whatever action is necessary for the country."

Iran previously had said it could use uranium enriched up to 60% for nuclear-powered ships. However, the Islamic Republic currently has no such ships in its navy.

The weekend attack at Natanz was initially described only as a blackout in the electrical grid feeding above-ground workshops and underground enrichment halls — but later Iranian officials began calling it an attack.

Alireza Zakani, the hard-line head of the Iranian parliament's research center, referred to "several thousand centrifuges damaged and destroyed" in a state TV interview. However, no other official has offered that figure and no images of the aftermath have been released.

The U.S. has insisted it had nothing to do with Sunday's sabotage. Israel is widely believed to have carried out the assault that damaged centrifuges, though it has not claimed it.

But earlier Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif still issued a warning to Washington.

"Americans should know that neither sanctions nor sabotage actions would provide them with an instrument for talks," Zarif said in Tehran alongside visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. "They should know that these actions would only make the situation difficult for them."

Zarif separately renewed his earlier warning to Israel over the sabotage, saying that if Iran determines its

archenemy was behind it, "then Israel will get its response and will see what a stupid thing it has done."

Kayhan, the hard-line Tehran newspaper, urged Iran to "walk out of the Vienna talks, suspend all nuclear commitments, retaliate against Israel and identify and dismantle the domestic infiltration network behind the sabotage."

Iran's withdrawal from the talks remains unlikely as the administration of President Hassan Rouhani, whose main diplomatic achievement was the 2015 accord, hopes to get the U.S. to rejoin it and provide desperately needed sanctions relief. But the announcement that it would enrich uranium further shows how pressure has been growing within Iran's theocracy over how to respond to the attack.

Rouhani met later Tuesday with Lavrov and stressed the importance of all parties returning to the deal. "We are neither ready to accept less than that, nor are we after achieving more than that," he said.

The gonzo art of writing for 'Borat Subsequent Moviefilm'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Screenplay writing, usually a fairly solitary, uneventful process, is more of a full-contact sport for a movie like "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm."

Work for the nine Oscar-nominated writers of the "Borat" sequel began conventionally enough. Brainstorming, a draft, a table read. But as soon as shooting starts, there's no telling what can happen, how people will react to Sacha Baron Cohen's Kazakh alter-ego, or what strange circumstances might befall their protagonist.

As Borat hurtles through the world, a team of writers trails along, endlessly writing and rewriting for every evolving scenario. Take, for example, when Baron Cohen ended up in a five-day lockdown with two QAnon believers. Anthony Hines, a writer and producer on the film, would reach Baron Cohen by stealthily taking a ladder to Baron Cohen's second-floor bedroom, like a Cyrano de Bergerac of comedy.

"It was quite sort of dark and dangerous," says Hines, a longtime collaborator of Baron Cohen's. "It was literally a matter of climbing up that ladder and poking your head into Borat's bedroom window at 2 a.m. and giving him feedback and giving him some ideas."

Like most things about "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm," the film's Academy Awards nomination for adapted screenplay is unusual. Seldom are the scripts to broad comedies nominated, but both "Borat" films have been. Its nine writers are the most ever nominated in the category. (When it won at the Writer Guild Awards, Baron Cohen theorized it was because 60% of the guild worked on the movie.) And the film's full title — "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" — is the longest ever for an Oscar nominee.

"When they read out the nomination and the title of the film, I think it will essentially feel like a filibuster," Dan Mazer said on a recent Zoom with Hines and four other of the film's writers, Peter Baynham, Dan Swimer, Jena Friedman and Nina Pedrad.

"If we win, it's a massive boost the trophy manufacturing industry," added Hines.

You can read a transcribed script of "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm," and it does make for a unique reading experience. Descriptions include "EXT. MEL GIBSON SQUARE - DAY." But the movie's final form gives you only a small window into the gonzo art of writing for Borat.

There are plenty of scenes scripted straightforwardly, but screenwriting for Borat also means finding ways to manipulate the real world, guessing how people will respond, and shoehorning those guerilla encounters into a coherent narrative. That adds up to, says Hines, "an extraordinary amount of writing — far, far more than a conventional movie."

"There's nine movies," says Swimer.

A lot of what they do never comes near the screen, nor is it even designed to. To help lure Rudy Giuliani for the film's infamous hotel room scene, they created a fake documentary about the coronavirus called "Keeping America Alive: How Trump Defeated COVID." After watching the tape, Giuliani's office OK'ed the interview under the impression it was for that film.

"That's a writing process all of its own. It's like scripts within scripts," says Hines. "We shot part of that

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documentary with other people who were not going to be in the movie like a sizzle reel with a voiceover going something like: "Where Trump saw an invisible enemy, the Democrats saw an invisible friend."

Sometimes — especially during the run-up to the 2020 election — real-life farce could seem like their handwork, too. Giuliani's Four Seasons Landscaping press conference, for instance.

"That was us as well," says Baynham. "We wrote the Landscaping thing."

Most of the writers are Borat veterans, many of them going back to "Da Ali G Show." But on "Subsequent Moviefilm," Baron Cohen (a credited writer, too, and a regular presence in the writing room) brought some fresh voices to Borat, including Friedman, Pedrad and Erica Rivinoja. Their input was key in mapping the journey of Borat's daughter Tutar through American-style misogyny and Borat's slow, strange transition to what might be called feminism.

But because "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" was made in secret, just joining the project was disorienting.

"I didn't really even know what the movie was," says Pedrad ("Saturday Night Live"). "I go, locked in a room, read the script. A couple pages in, I'm like: 'This sounds a lot like ... no. Is it?'"

In case of leak, scripts were written in code. Borat's name never appeared in the pages. "One minute, he was Sergio from Guatemala, then he was Apu from Armenia," says Hines. By the end, the names were all jumbled up. Johnny the Monkey was identified as Jeremy the Horse.

Friedman, a "Daily Show" veteran, was responsible for the scene set in a "pregnancy crisis center." There, Pastor Jonathan Bright, led to believe that Tutar is pregnant by her father, still argues against abortion.

"I can't believe we got that scene in a major motion picture," says Friedman. "I remember there was a discussion like, 'Do you think we'll really be able to get a pastor be OK with incest?' Just knowing what I know from those places, I was like, 'Absolutely, yes.'"

The writers will play out some scenes with actors beforehand to get a sense of likely responses to Borat. But they also encounter plenty of people who say things that couldn't possibly be prepared for. If Borat holds up a mirror to American society, the reflection is often unpredictable and disquieting.

That includes the plastic surgeon, Dr. Charles Wallace, visited by Borat and Tutar who frankly tells them that he would he would want to sleep with Tutar if Borat wasn't there. The moment still astounds Mazer.

"It's a really interesting dilemma we go through because the more extreme it is, the less people believe that it's real," he says. "You just go: How do people like that actually exist? And they do, and we find them, and it's more common than you would imagine."

Their plans are frequently upended. The pandemic, itself, caused a massive rewrite. Sometimes people get wind that it's Baron Cohen in disguise. For the scene with Tutar at a Republican women's event, Borat was removed at the last moment after producers overheard something. In the first "Borat" film, a Civil War reenactment scene was scrubbed when one of the reenactors' sons spotted Baron Cohen.

But remarkably frequently, the writers say, Baron Cohen finds a way to make happen the ridiculous scenarios they dream up — scenes they think can't possibly be pulled off. Sometimes they're watching along by a live video link. Sometimes they're hidden among a crowd, as Hines was while an overalls-clad Cohen performed as "Country Steve" at a pro-gun rally. Or they might be anxiously waiting for word in the writers' room.

"We'll be sitting there nervously going, 'How many of our jokes made it in? How did the scene go?' The amount of times we'll get a text back saying, 'We did it. We got X to happen. We got Y to happen,'" says Mazer, shaking his head. "It's like a bank job. It's like a celebration. You just go, 'I can't believe that happened. How did he get to it? I never in my wildest dreams imagined this crazy thing that we wrote ended up manifesting.'"

South Africa halts J&J vaccine jabs; Europe rollout delayed

By FRANK JORDANS, MARIA CHENG and ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South Africa suspended giving Johnson & Johnson vaccine shots Tuesday as a "precautionary measure" and the company delayed its European vaccine rollout following an FDA decision to pause the jabs while very rare blood clot cases are examined.

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South Africa has given more than 289,000 doses of the J&J vaccine to the country's health workers without any reports of rare blood clots, Health Minister Dr. Zweli Mkhize told reporters.

He said South Africa was halting the use of J&J jabs "out of an abundance of caution" and expected that questions over the J&J vaccine should "be cleared within a matter of days."

Mkhize said "in the unlikely event" that the J&J vaccines are permanently halted, South Africa would continue with its vaccination campaign in May using doses from Pfizer-BioNTech.

Earlier, Johnson & Johnson said it was delaying the rollout of its coronavirus vaccine across Europe amid the U.S. probe, a move that experts worried could further shake vaccine confidence and complicate worldwide COVID-19 immunization efforts.

The announcement came after regulators in the United States said they were recommending a "pause" in the single-dose shot to investigate reports of rare but potentially dangerous blood clots.

"We have made the decision to proactively delay the rollout of our vaccine in Europe," Johnson & Johnson said.

The delay is a further blow to vaccination efforts in the European Union, which have been plagued by supply shortages, logistical problems and concerns over unusual blood clots in a small number of people who received the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The blood clot reports prompted several countries in the 27-nation bloc to limit the AstraZeneca vaccine to older people. The bloc's drug regulator, the European Medicines Agency, has authorized the AstraZeneca shot for all people 18 and over.

Both the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines use a cold virus, called an adenovirus, to carry the coronavirus' spike gene into the body, prompting an immune response. Johnson & Johnson uses a human adenovirus to create its vaccine, while AstraZeneca uses a chimpanzee version.

In a statement Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration said they were investigating six cases of unusual clots, including one death, that occurred six to 13 days after vaccination with the J&J shot. The FDA commissioner said she expected the pause to last a matter of days.

The European Medicines Agency said it is "currently not clear" whether the J&J shot caused the rare clotting disorders.

Last week, the EU drug regulator said it found a "possible link" between the AstraZeneca shot and rare blood clots but said the benefits of vaccination far outweighed the risks of COVID-19. It noted the risk of such clots is less than the blood clot risk that healthy women face from birth control pills.

Dr. Adam Finn, a professor of pediatrics at Britain's University of Bristol, said it was possible the way the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines were made may have contributed to the unusual clotting disorders in a very small proportion of people.

"This may help give us a clue towards understanding the mechanism or a way to prevent this problem from occurring," Finn said. "Investigation of this phenomenon is now an extremely urgent international priority."

European regulators on March 11 endorsed the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for use in the EU, but the first supplies are only now arriving.

The EU ordered 200 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson in 2021. Britain ordered 30 million doses of the J& J vaccine, but has yet to authorize its use.

France had expected to receive 200,000 doses of the vaccine this week and was planning to start administering them next week to people aged 55 and over.

In Croatia, where one in four people have already refused to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine, the state health service said "panicky and hasty regulatory reactions should be avoided." The first of 900,000 J&J vaccines were to arrive Wednesday.

The head of Italy's National Health Institute, Silvio Brusaferro, said it was too early to say how the J&J slowdown will affect immunization plans, as the first deliveries of 180,000 doses arrived Tuesday.

Officials in Germany, which was due to receive 232,800 J&J doses this week and 10.1 million doses by the end of June, said Tuesday there was no immediate change in plans..

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"In principle, we naturally always take such warnings in an international context seriously and investigate them," Health Ministry spokesman, Hanno Kautz, told reporters in Berlin.

Spain was expecting 300,000 doses of J&J on Wednesday. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said the benefits of taking the vaccine remain greater than the risks but that more information is needed.

In February, South Africa began vaccinating health workers with the J&J vaccine in a research trial after abandoning plans to use the AstraZeneca shot when a preliminary study suggested the AstraZeneca vaccine was only minimally effective against the variant of COVID-19 that first arose in the country.

Last month, the African Union announced it signed a deal to buy up to 400 million doses of the J&J vaccine. Johnson & Johnson also has a deal to supply up to 500 million doses to the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative that helps get vaccines to the world's poor.

Any concerns about the J&J vaccine would be another unwelcome complication for COVAX and for the billions of people in developing countries depending on the program. COVAX recently was hit by supply issues after its biggest supplier, the Serum Institute of India, announced it would delay exports of the AstraZeneca vaccine for several months due to a surge of cases on the subcontinent.

Muslims mark Ramadan amid virus surge and new restrictions

By AMR NABIL and NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

MECCA, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Muslims in many parts of the world marked the start of Ramadan on Tuesday, but a spike in coronavirus cases in several countries has once again put curbs on the holy month's signature feasts and lengthy prayers in mosques.

Still, there were glimmers that Ramadan 2021 could feel less restricted than last year, when Islam's holiest period coincided with the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Mosques have since reopened and limits on movement have eased as vaccine rollouts continue in Muslim-majority nations. Clerics in such places as Indonesia have issued assurances the vaccine does not break one's daytime fast.

Ramadan is marked by longer prayers, dawn-to-dusk fasting and nightly feasts with family and friends, though crowded shoulder-to-shoulder gatherings in mosques and large gatherings for meals remain prohibited due to the continued spread of coronavirus globally.

Throughout Ramadan, Muslims abstain from any food or drink — including water — from morning to night. The monthlong practice is aimed at heightening remembrance of God, curbing unhealthy habits and deepening gratitude.

In Mecca, home to the Kaaba — Islam's most sacred site — Muslims performed socially distanced "taraweeh" prayers, marking the start of Ramadan. Observant Muslims around the world pray toward the Kaaba five times a day.

Only limited numbers of worshippers were being allowed inside the Grand Mosque that houses the Kaaba to prevent the spread of the virus. Saudi authorities were only allowing individuals who've been vaccinated or recently recovered from the virus to perform taraweeh prayers at the Kaaba.

In Lebanon, most Muslims began Ramadan on Tuesday amid soaring inflation. The small country is in the grips of the worst economic and financial crisis in its modern history, with the Lebanese currency losing some 80% of its value against the U.S. dollar in past months.

The crisis — a result of decades of endemic corruption and mismanagement — has been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Many people were having to scale back their Ramadan preparations.

"We cannot buy anything. We ask how much the lettuce is, the cucumber and the tomato," said Samiyeh al-Turk at a busy open air market in Beirut Monday. "How we are going to get through the month of Ramadan? I don't know," she added.

Israel was allowing 10,000 fully vaccinated Palestinian residents of the West Bank to pray in the al-Aqsa mosque on the first Friday of Ramadan. The sacred mosque in Jerusalem is open for prayers during Ramadan amid Israel's rapid vaccination rollout.

"We hope that it will be a good month after the great setback that the whole world was exposed to," Jerusalem shop owner Reyad Hallaq said.

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In the densely populated Gaza Strip, a nighttime curfew is aimed at restricting family gatherings as the virus continues to spread there.

The restrictions mean that Bessan Mabhouh may not see her parents and gather for iftar as they often would do several times during Ramadan.

"During the day, I'm also struggling with helping my children with their remote learning so I do not think this Ramadan will be nice away from my family," she said.

In Iraq, a curfew will remain in place from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. throughout Ramadan, with total lockdown on weekends. The Health Ministry warned that non-compliance with these measures could lead to three-day continuous lockdowns. Citing economic concerns for business owners, restaurants and pastry shops will be able to operate but solely through home deliveries.

Meanwhile, a 10-day lockdown due to increased infections went into effect on Tuesday in northeastern areas of Syria controlled by U.S.-backed fighters. The region, which borders Iraq and Turkey, is home to 5 million people.

In Indonesia, COVID-19 cases are also spiking. Mosques are being allowed to open for Ramadan prayers with strict protocols in place.

The government will allow people to hold "iftar" gatherings during Ramadan in restaurants, malls and cafes, which can open at 50% capacity. Iftar is the sought-after moment when Muslims traditionally break their daylong fast by eating dates and taking a sip of water before feasting with friends and family.

"Easing restrictions is like a breath of fresh air for us who are tired by this COVID-19 outbreak," said Anna Mardiyastuti, a resident in Indonesia's capital of Jakarta. "Yes, they should act to stop the virus, but not block the door to worship or change our tradition of Ramadan entirely."

In neighboring Muslim-majority Malaysia, Wan Noradriana Balqis, 21, welcomed the return of community prayers in mosques but said she will avoid busy Ramadan bazaars. Coronavirus cases in Malaysia have more than tripled since January.

"I don't think it's a good idea to reopen the bazaars. The rules are there but many people don't follow them," the database administrative officer said.

Vaccinations pose a challenge for Muslim nations administering shots throughout Ramadan. Officials were working to ease concerns over the Islamic teaching that Muslims should refrain "from anything entering the body" between sunrise and sunset.

Indonesia's top clerical council went so far as to say Muslims eligible for vaccinations are "required" to take the shots during Ramadan.

Governments, meanwhile, were also working to uphold some restrictions.

In India, where infections have peaked in recent days, scholars are appealing to the country's 200 million Muslims to follow anti-virus protocols and refrain from large gatherings. Many Indian cities dealing with virus surges have imposed nighttime curfews, and it remains unclear whether the faithful will be allowed to perform taraweeh prayers in mosques.

In Pakistan and Iran, fasting is expected to begin Wednesday.

The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan has refused to close mosques in Pakistan, even as new infections reach levels similar to the start of the pandemic. Mosque leaders are entrusted with ensuring no one over 50 years-old enters and that social distancing is maintained, but rarely do adherents follow these restrictions.

Muslims in Indian-controlled Kashmir continue to suffer from two back-to-back lockdowns that left tens of thousands without any means to earn their livelihoods. The disputed region, the only part of Hindu-dominated India that is majority Muslim, was under an unprecedented military lockdown in 2019 before coronavirus lockdowns were imposed last year. Local charities plan to distribute Ramadan ration kits for families in need.

And in Egypt, the government prevented mosques from serving free meals during Ramadan and banned traditional charitable iftars that would bring together strangers at long tables.

Student fires at officers at Tennessee school, is killed

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By TRAVIS LOLLER and ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

A student opened fire on officers responding to a report of a possible gunman at a Tennessee high school Monday, and police shot back and killed him, authorities said. The shooting wounded an officer and comes as the community reels from off-campus gun violence that has left three other students dead this year.

Police found the student in a bathroom at Austin-East Magnet High School in Knoxville, a city about 180 miles (290 kilometers) east of Nashville, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Director David B. Rausch said at a news conference. They ordered the student to come out, but he wouldn't comply, and that's when he reportedly opened fire, Rausch said. Police fired back.

The student died at the school, and the officer was taken into surgery after being shot at least once in the upper leg, authorities said. The officer was expected to recover, and no one else was hurt. It wasn't yet clear why the student brought a gun to school or why he fired at officers.

"It's a sad day for Knoxville, and it's tough for Austin-East," Rausch said.

Asked about the overwhelming police response to a call that came in just before afternoon dismissal, Knoxville Police Chief Eve Thomas said, "We have a student, a school incident. It's our worst fear, an active shooter in a school."

The shooting comes as more classrooms are reopening to students after months of remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic, which cut down the number of mass killings in the U.S. The nation has seen series of mass shootings in recent weeks, including eight people killed at three Atlanta-area massage businesses on March 16 and 10 people killed at Colorado supermarket on March 22.

Knox County Schools restarted in-person learning in August, but Austin-East Magnet High School went back to virtual instruction briefly in February after the spate of shooting deaths of students. The school will be closed again Tuesday and Wednesday.

Speaking outside a hospital, Knoxville Mayor Indya Kincannon told news station WATE-TV that she spoke with the wounded officer and he was conscious and in good spirits.

Kincannon, a former Knox County Schools board president, spoke at a February press conference about the gun violence that took the lives of three Austin-East students less than three weeks apart this year. Two of the victims were 15, and the other was 16.

"I know that school is a safe place," Kincannon said at that time, according to the Knoxville News Sentinel. "It's a place where people are learning. ... The issues with violence are happening in the community, and it's affecting kids when they're outside of the school. That's why we are focusing our efforts to protect the innocent, protect the school, protect the children and students and staff."

The newspaper reported that the school was adding three school resource officers and stepping up patrols around dismissal time.

State Rep. Sam McKenzie, who represents the district and went to the school, said in a statement: "I am at a loss to describe my sadness as yet another horrific act of gun violence has happened in my community," urging people to "reclaim the sanctity of our beloved neighborhood."

"This is the fourth unnecessary shooting involving the Austin East community this year and we must make sure we take every step and make every effort to prevent these tragedies from continuing to occur," McKenzie's statement said.

Gov. Bill Lee mentioned the shooting at a Monday news conference but said he had little information.

"I just wanted to make reference to that and ask, for those who are watching, online or otherwise, to pray for that situation and for the families and the victims that might be affected by that in our state," he said.

Last week, the Republican governor signed legislation that will make Tennessee the latest state to allow most adults 21 and older to carry handguns — openly or concealed — without first clearing a background check and training. Lee backed the legislation over objections from law enforcement groups, who argued that the state's existing permit system provided an important safeguard for knowing who should or shouldn't be carrying a gun.

When asked earlier this year whether recent mass shootings in Georgia, Colorado and others gave him any concern about timing, Lee said the increased penalties mean that "we in fact will be strengthening laws that would help prevent gun crimes in the future."

Immediately eligible: NCAA on verge of transfer rule change

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Sports Writer

Whether it is the start of free agency in college sports or simply the fair thing to finally do for the athletes, the NCAA is about to make a monumental change to its transfer rules.

The Division I Council meets Wednesday and Thursday, and the agenda includes voting on a proposal that would grant all college athletes the ability to transfer one time as undergraduates without having to then sit out a season of competition.

All indications are the proposal will pass. When it does, athletes in football, men's and women's basketball, baseball and men's ice hockey will for the first time be immediately eligible to play after switching schools without asking for special permission.

For decades, the penalty of giving up a year of eligibility helped deter athletes from transferring, at least in those high-profile sports. In all other NCAA sports, athletes were allowed to switch schools once before graduating and play immediately.

The exception will soon be available to everyone — which is likely to mean more transfers than ever.

South Dakota State athletic director Justin Sell, a member of the council, said the lack of uniformity in the rules across sports had become difficult to justify.

"Trying to create opportunities for students that are equitable across the board, it becomes much more difficult to create a case of why a football student-athlete should be sitting out when a volleyball student-athlete doesn't have to," Sell said.

The NCAA has been examining its rules regarding athletes who transfer seemingly forever. But three and a half years ago Sell was put in charge of a working group tasked with making substantive changes.

From that, the transfer portal was created and athletes no longer had to ask for permission to be released from their scholarships if they wanted to switch schools and receive financial aid. No longer could coaches stand in the way if a player wanted to leave or dictate where they could go.

Sell's group considered the idea of lifting the year-in-residence rule, which forced athletes to sit out the year after transferring, but never quite got there.

"We walked right up to this question ... but the Rice Commission report (on college basketball) came out and they asked that no further action be taken on transfers at the time," said Mid-American Conference Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher, who was part of the working group. "So boom, we walk up to the question and then we stop."

Instead, the waiver process was tweaked to allow athletes to receive immediate eligibility by showing a hardship of some sort that necessitated the transfer. That led to problems.

Some high-profile players such as quarterback Justin Fields, who transferred from Georgia to Ohio State in 2019, were granted waivers by the NCAA, creating an expectation that all players would be cleared to play right away.

When that didn't happen, players, coaches and fans criticized the NCAA and claimed the waiver process was inconsistent and unfair. A working group led by Steinbrecher concluded that waivers were no solution.

"There was a broad segment of the membership that recognized that ultimately, what we needed to get to, is a legislative solution. Not a patchwork of waivers," said Steinbrecher, who is also a member of the DI Council.

The council was set to vote on the legislative solution in January, but the Justice Department warned the NCAA its rule changes regarding transfers and name, image and likeness compensation might violate antitrust laws. NIL reform is still bogged down, but there is optimism the council can move forward on transfer rules.

If not, the council is prepared to pass a blanket waiver that would give all athletes transferring this year immediate eligibility. That is not the preferred route.

"I think the messaging or the language that I've heard from the council is they are looking to get to a permanent solution if at all possible," Steinbrecher said.

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The main issue still to be hammered out are deadline dates for athletes to notify their schools they intend to transfer. Dates under consideration now are May 1 for fall and winter sport athletes and July 1 for spring sports.

"Transfers affect the other kids on the roster, too," Sell said. "Kids want to know who their starting point guard is. Or their starting shortstop."

Conferences typically have their own rules that require athletes to sit out a season when they transfer within a league, but those are starting to disappear. The American Athletic Conference on Tuesday followed the Atlantic Coast Conference and Mid-American Conference in eliminating its intraconference transfer policies to abide by NCAA rules.

NOTES: The other big item on the council agenda this week is lifting the prolonged recruiting dead period in all sports. Because of the pandemic, off-campus recruiting by coaches and official visits to campus by prospective athletes have been banned for more than a year.

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Poll: 15% of Americans worse off a year into pandemic

By SARAH SKIDMORE SELL AP Personal Finance Writer

While most Americans have weathered the pandemic financially, about 38 million say they are worse off now than before the outbreak began in the U.S.

Overall, 55% of Americans say their financial circumstances are about the same now as a year ago, and 30% say their finances have improved, according to a new poll from Impact Genome and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. But 15% say they are worse off.

The problem is more pronounced at lower-income levels: 29% of Americans living below the federal poverty line say their personal finances worsened in the past year. Roughly that many also find themselves in a deepening financial hole, saying they struggled to pay bills in the past three months.

Britney Frick, 27, is among those whose finances have taken a hit. She worked as a substitute teacher before the pandemic but her role was eliminated. Initially, she found a telecommunications job that allowed her to work from home, but the hours began to dwindle then dried up altogether.

Frick ended up unemployed for six months but was able to get by using her savings, reduced rent and help from her parents.

"I am slowly getting back on my feet but am nowhere near where I was before COVID," she said.

Frick got a job at a daycare in March and the steady work is helping her rebuild her financial picture.

"I am still living paycheck to paycheck but at least the paycheck is covering the bills," she said. "But I am happy to be back at work honestly and happy that things are kind of returning to normal."

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the economy — the United States still has 8.4 million fewer jobs than it had in February 2020, just before the pandemic struck.

The government has passed three major relief bills in response, which included direct economic relief payments to individuals. That has helped ease the suffering of some.

The latest round of government payments — \$1,400 to individuals — were sent out beginning last month.

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Households, on average, are using, or plan to use about one-third of the money to pay down debt, about 25% on spending and put the rest into savings, according to a report released last week from the New York Federal reserve. That closely mirrored spending of prior relief payments.

Overall, the Impact Genome/AP-NORC poll found 52% of Americans say they were able to save money for most of the past three months, while 37% broke even and 10% were short on paying bills. Among Americans living below the poverty line, 29% say they struggled to pay bills recently, while just 16% have saved. By comparison, 61% of those living far above the poverty line say they have been able to save. The federal poverty line for a family of four in 2019, prior to the pandemic, was \$25,750.

There also are wide racial disparities, with 57% of white Americans, 47% of Hispanics and just 39% of Black Americans saying they have saved recently. Black and Hispanic Americans are about twice as likely as white Americans to say they have come up short on bill payments.

Andrew Holland said his family's finances were fairly steady for most of the pandemic. The California resident worked as a hospice nurse and case manager and his wife kept her job with a refinery. But the stress and isolation of the pandemic led him to reconsider his work.

Unlike before the pandemic, he had no in-person interaction with colleagues or friends to relieve some of the pressure of his job. So he quit and found a new job in hospice care with fewer hours. His wife also got a new job with better pay.

While their family finances took a temporary hit and they spent some savings, he expects to recover. Holland and his wife have started tracking their spending more closely and are now planning for an earlier retirement.

"This really made me look at what do I want to do and when do I want to do it," Holland, 35, said. "I feel incredibly lucky that the worst that happened is I lost a month's of wages and got a job with fewer hours."

The poll found many Americans — nearly a third — had not had investment or similar long-term savings accounts set up even before the pandemic. Another 19% say they have been able to add more to investments like a 401(k) or a college savings plan, and 38% say the amount hasn't changed compared to last year.

Holland said he is disheartened by the inequality of how the pandemic has played out for people, and is concerned the imbalance will never be corrected.

"I am glad that it gave me the push to look at my finances and plan a little bit more for the future," Holland said. "I definitely wish it had come at a much lower cost for the world as whole."

Mick Jagger and Dave Grohl team up for a pandemic anthem

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Mick Jagger and Dave Grohl have teamed up for a hard-rock pandemic anthem called "Eazy Sleazy."

"It's a song that I wrote about coming out of lockdown, with some much needed optimism," Jagger said in a statement Tuesday. "Thanks to Dave Grohl for jumping on drums, bass and guitar. It was a lot of fun working with him."

The duo recorded the song and video in different studio locations — Jagger at home and Grohl in the Foo Fighters studio — and the lyrics mention "prison walls," "virtual premieres," numbers that are "grim" and Zoom calls. Jagger complains: "I've got nothing left to wear."

The song also name-checks Bill Gates, lampoons conspiracy theories and those who deny climate change and gleefully reveals "There's aliens in the deep state."

But there seems to be hope. Jagger looks ahead and sees a "garden of earthly delights" when vaccines are administered and lockdown ends.

"Everything's gonna get really freaky/Alright on the night/Soon it'll be a memory/You're trying to remember to forget."

Suez Canal chief: Vessel impounded amid financial dispute

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Egyptian authorities impounded a massive cargo vessel that blocked the Suez Canal last month amid a financial dispute with its owner, the canal chief and a judicial official said Tuesday.

Lt. Gen. Osama Rabie said the hulking Ever Given would not be allowed to leave the country until a compensation amount is settled on with the vessel's Japanese owner, Shoen Kisen Kaisha Ltd.

"The vessel is now officially impounded," he told Egypt's state-run television late Monday. "They do not want to pay anything."

There was no immediate comment from the vessel's owner.

Rabie did not say how much money the canal authority was seeking. However, a judicial official said it demanded at least \$900 million. The state-run Ahram daily also reported the \$900 million figure.

That amount takes into account the salvage operation, costs of stalled canal traffic and lost transit fees for the week that the Ever Given blocked the canal.

The official said the order to impound the vessel was issued Monday by a court in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia, and that the vessel's crew has been informed Tuesday.

He said prosecutors in Ismailia also opened a separate investigation into what led the Ever Given to run aground. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

Rabie said negotiations were still ongoing to reach a settlement on compensation.

He warned last week in an interview with The Associated Press that bringing the case before a court would be more harmful to the vessel's owner than settling with the canal's management.

Litigation could be complex, since the vessel is owned by a Japanese firm, operated by a Taiwanese shipper, and flagged in Panama.

The Panama-flagged ship that carries some \$3.5 billion in cargo between Asia and Europe ran aground March 23 in the narrow, man-made canal dividing continental Africa from the Asian Sinai Peninsula.

The vessel had crashed into the 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.

On March 29, salvage teams freed the Ever Given, ending a crisis that had clogged one of the world's most vital waterways and halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce. The vessel has since idled in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, just north of the site where it previously blocked the canal.

The unprecedented six-day 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.

Rabie, the canal chief, told state-run television there was no wrongdoing by the canal authority. He declined to discuss possible causes, including the ship's speed and the high winds that buffeted it during a sandstorm.

When asked whether the ship's owner was at fault, he said: "Of course, yes."

Rabie said the conclusion of the authority's investigation was expected Thursday.

Bunny snatched: Record-holding giant rabbit stolen in UK

LONDON (AP) — Police say one of the world's biggest bunnies has been stolen from its home in central England.

Darius, a Continental Giant rabbit, disappeared from his enclosure in a backyard in the village of Stoulton over the weekend, the West Mercia Police force said. They did not elaborate on why they thought it was a theft instead of an escape.

The force appealed for any information about or sightings of Darius, who is gray-brown and 129 centimeters (4 feet, 3 inches) long at full stretch. He holds the Guinness World Records citation for the world's longest rabbit. Rabbits of his type are known to weigh about 15 to 20 pounds (7 to 9 kilograms).

Owner Annette Edwards, a large-rabbit breeder and model, urged the culprit or culprits to return Darius to his home 160 kilometers (100 miles) northwest of London, saying it was a "very sad day."

She initially offered a 1,000 pound (\$1,370) reward, but tweeted Tuesday: "Please Please I am so upset Can you bring my Darius back I am putting the reward up to 2,000 pounds (\$2,748)."

Russia says troop buildup near Ukraine is a response to NATO

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's defense minister said Tuesday that the country's massive military buildup in the west was part of readiness drills amid what he described as threats from NATO.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the maneuvers in western Russia that have worried neighboring Ukraine and brought warnings from NATO would last for another two weeks.

Speaking at a meeting with the top military brass, Shoigu said the ongoing exercise was a response to what he claimed were continuous efforts by the United States and its NATO allies to beef up their forces near Russia's borders.

In the past three weeks, the Russian military has deployed two armies and three airborne formations to western regions "as a response to the alliance's military activities threatening Russia," the defense minister said.

"The troops have shown their full readiness to fulfill tasks to ensure the country's security," he said.

The U.S. and its allies have sounded alarm about the concentration of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine and increasing violations of a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine, where Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces have been locked in a conflict since Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

More than 14,000 people have died in fighting in eastern Ukraine, and efforts to negotiate a political settlement have stalled. The chief of NATO on Tuesday called the recent Russian deployment the largest concentration of troops near the Ukraine border since 2014.

The White House said U.S. President Joe Biden voiced concern over the Russian buildup and "called on Russia to de-escalate tensions," during a phone call Tuesday with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In separate meetings with Ukraine's foreign minister, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg strong support for Ukraine and warned Russia against pressing ahead with its troop buildup along the former Soviet republic's eastern border.

Amid the recent tensions, the United States notified Turkey that two U.S. warships would sail to the Black Sea on April 14 and April 15 and stay there until May 4 and May 5. The U.S. Navy ships have made regular visits to the Black Sea in past years, vexing Moscow.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov denounced the latest deployment as "openly provocative," adding that "American ships have absolutely nothing to do near our shores."

"They are testing our strength and playing on our nerves," Ryabkov said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. "Seeing itself as the Queen of the Seas, the U.S. should realize that the risks of various incidents are very high. We warn the U.S. that it should stay away from Crimea and our Black Sea coast for their own benefit."

NATO chief Stoltenberg expressed the Western military alliance's "unwavering" support for Ukraine during a news conference on Tuesday with Ukraine's foreign minister, calling the Russian movements "unjustified, unexplained and deeply concerning."

The Kremlin has argued that Russia is free to deploy its troops wherever it wants on its territory and has repeatedly accused the Ukrainian military of "provocative actions" along the line of control in the east and of planning to retake control of the rebel regions by force.

Ryabkov reaffirmed Tuesday that "if there is any escalation, we will do everything to ensure our own security and the security of our citizens whenever they are," adding that "Kyiv and its Western curators will bear all the responsibility for the consequences of that hypothetical escalation."

Analysis: Iran's powerful Guard faces scrutiny after attacks

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By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The recent sabotage at Iran's main nuclear enrichment facility is just the latest setback for the country's Revolutionary Guard, though the paramilitary force is rarely publicly criticized due to its power.

But with some of its leaders now considering vying for the presidency, the Guard's influence and failures could become fair game.

In just over the last year, the Guard shot down a Ukrainian commercial airliner, killing 176 people. Its forces failed to stop both an earlier attack at Iran's Natanz facility and the assassination of a top scientist who started a military nuclear program decades earlier. Meanwhile, its floating base in the Red Sea off Yemen suffered an explosion.

Then on Sunday, the nuclear facility, of which the Guard is the chief protector, experienced a blackout that damaged some of its centrifuges. Israel is widely believed to have carried out the sabotage that caused the outage, though it has not claimed it. In the wake of the attack, Iran announced Tuesday it would begin enriching uranium at 60% purity, the highest level its program has ever reached.

No one in Iran has directly called out the Guard for these failures — and that isn't surprising. The force created after its 1979 Islamic Revolution has an extensive intelligence apparatus rivaling those of Iran's civilian government — and it is brutal in its clampdown on dissent. Former detainees at Tehran's Evin prison describe the Guard as running an entire ward of the facility housing politically sensitive prisoners. Local journalists can face arrest, prosecution and imprisonment for their work.

Around the edges, however, criticism is beginning to leak out.

Eshaq Jahangiri, President Hassan Rouhani's top vice president and a reformist, lamented that "nobody is ready to be responsible" for what happened at Natanz in remarks that appeared aimed at the Guard.

"Which body is responsible to identify and prevent the country's enemies from doing something in the country? Has anyone ever been held accountable, or been held responsible or reprimanded, for what the biggest enemy of this country is doing here?" Jahangiri asked in a video shared widely on social media.

Separately quoted by the hard-line newspaper Kayhan, Jahangiri added: "People need to know what the resources, credibility and prestige of the country are being spent on."

That's another apparent dig at the Guard, whose business interests through construction and other industries reach into the billions of dollars. The exact scope of all its holdings remains unclear, though experts' estimates run from 15% to as much as 40% of Iran's overall economy.

This new willingness to point the finger — however carefully — in the direction of the Guard may in part be due to the upcoming June presidential election.

Rouhani, a relatively moderate cleric within Iran's theocracy whose administration struck a 2015 nuclear deal that brought Iran relief on sanctions, cannot run again due to term limits. That's created a potential free-for-all filing period for candidates when it opens in May.

Within Iran, candidates exist on a political spectrum that broadly includes hard-liners who want to expand Iran's nuclear program and confront the world, moderates who hold onto the status quo and reformists who want to change the theocracy from within. Those calling for radical change find themselves blocked from even running for office by Iran's constitutional watchdog, the Guardian Council.

A soldier has yet to serve as Iran's top civilian leader since the Islamic Revolution, in part over the initial suspicion that its conventional military forces remained loyal to the toppled shah. However, a line of former Guard leaders have begun raising their profiles ahead of the vote, and many may try to run.

They include Mohsen Rezaei, an outspoken former top commander; Hossein Dehghan, an adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei; Rostam Ghasemi, a former oil minister; and Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, the speaker of Iran's parliament known for his support of a bloody crackdown on students in 1999.

A young generation of Guard leaders is in the mix as well, led by Saeed Mohammad, who once headed the Guard's powerful Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters that is one of Iran's biggest business conglomerates.

The debate over how much power the Guard should wield in Iran's politics is as old as the Islamic Re-

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public itself. Yet the force has been able to portray itself as the country's defender through mass media on Iranian state television. Private local channels don't exist.

That includes the Iranian spy TV show "Gando," a fever dream of conspiracy theories in line with the Guard's worldview. Its second season just aired, drawing more criticism for its depiction of Iran's civilian government as being weak and overwhelmed by foreign powers.

But there's a clear line between their idealized television version and the reality of these recent attacks striking the heart of one of Iran's most powerful forces.

"We spent our resources and capabilities for the production of a TV series to portray ourselves as powerful in the fields of security and intelligence, as well as accusing our officials of spying," wrote the hard-line daily Jomhuri Eslami, asking why recent attacks hadn't been thwarted.

The election may soon see more people soon asking that question publicly.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 14, the 104th day of 2021. There are 261 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 14, 1912, the British liner RMS Titanic collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic at 11:40 p.m. ship's time and began sinking. (The ship went under two hours and 40 minutes later with the loss of 1,514 lives.)

On this date:

In 1759, German-born English composer George Frideric Handel died in London at age 74.

In 1828, the first edition of Noah Webster's "American Dictionary of the English Language" was published.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was shot and mortally wounded by John Wilkes Booth during a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in Washington.

In 1910, President William Howard Taft became the first U.S. chief executive to throw the ceremonial first pitch at a baseball game as the Washington Senators beat the Philadelphia Athletics 3-0.

In 1935, the "Black Sunday" dust storm descended upon the central Plains, turning a sunny afternoon into total darkness.

In 1960, Tamla Records and Motown Records, founded by Berry Gordy Jr., were incorporated as Motown Record Corp. The Montreal Canadiens won their fifth consecutive Stanley Cup, defeating the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-0 in Game 4 of the Finals.

In 1965, the state of Kansas hanged Richard Hickock and Perry Smith for the 1959 "In Cold Blood" murders of Herbert Clutter, his wife, Bonnie, and two of their children, Nancy and Kenyon.

In 1970, President Richard Nixon nominated Harry Blackmun to the U.S. Supreme Court. (The choice of Blackmun, who was unanimously confirmed by the Senate a month later, followed the failed nominations of Clement Haynsworth and G. Harrold Carswell.)

In 1981, the first test flight of America's first operational space shuttle, the Columbia, ended successfully with a landing at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1994, two U.S. Air Force F-15 warplanes mistakenly shot down two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters over northern Iraq, killing 26 people, including 15 Americans.

In 1999, NATO mistakenly bombed a convoy of ethnic Albanian refugees; Yugoslav officials said 75 people were killed.

In 2004, in a historic policy shift, President George W. Bush endorsed Israel's plan to hold on to part of the West Bank in any final peace settlement with the Palestinians; he also ruled out Palestinian refugees returning to Israel, bringing strong criticism from the Palestinians.

Ten years ago: Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi rolled defiantly through the streets of Tripoli the same day NATO air strikes shook the city. North Korea confirmed it was holding an American who was detained in November 2010, reportedly for proselytizing. (Eddie Jun was freed in May 2011.) ABC canceled two of

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its longtime soap operas, "One Life to Live" and "All My Children."

Five years ago: Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders aggressively challenged each other's judgment during a Democratic debate in Brooklyn, New York, sparring over Wall Street banks, how high to raise the minimum wage and gun control. The first of two strong earthquakes struck southern Japan; the temblors killed at least 50 people.

One year ago: President Donald Trump announced that he was cutting off U.S. payments to the U.N. health agency, the World Health Organization; Trump said it had not done enough to stop the coronavirus from spreading. Louisiana again delayed its presidential primary, rescheduling it for July 11. (The late date made the primary irrelevant to the selection of the nominees.) NASCAR driver Kyle Larson was fired by the Chip Ganassi Racing team, two days after he used a racial slur on a live stream of a virtual race. Hank Steinbrenner, the oldest son of George Steinbrenner and one of four siblings who owned controlling shares of the New York Yankees, died at 63.

Today's Birthdays: Country singer Loretta Lynn is 89. Actor Julie Christie is 81. Retired MLB All-Star Pete Rose is 80. Rock musician Ritchie Blackmore is 76. Actor John Shea is 73. Actor Peter Capaldi is 63. Actor-turned-race car driver Brian Forster is 61. Actor Brad Garrett is 61. Actor Robert Carlyle is 60. Rock singer-musician John Bell (Widespread Panic) is 59. Actor Robert Clendenin is 57. Actor Catherine Dent is 56. Actor Lloyd Owen is 55. Baseball Hall of Famer Greg Maddux is 55. Rock musician Barrett Martin is 54. Actor Anthony Michael Hall is 53. Actor Adrien Brody is 48. Classical singer David Miller (Il Divo) is 48. Rapper Da Brat is 47. Actor Antwon Tanner is 46. Actor Sarah Michelle Gellar is 44. Actor-producer Rob McElhenney is 44. Roots singer JD McPherson is 44. Rock singer Win Butler (Arcade Fire) is 41. Actor Claire Coffee is 41. Actor Christian Alexander is 31. Actor Nick Krause is 29. Actor Vivien Cardone is 28. Actor Graham Phillips is 28. Actor Skyler Samuels is 27. Actor Abigail Breslin is 25.