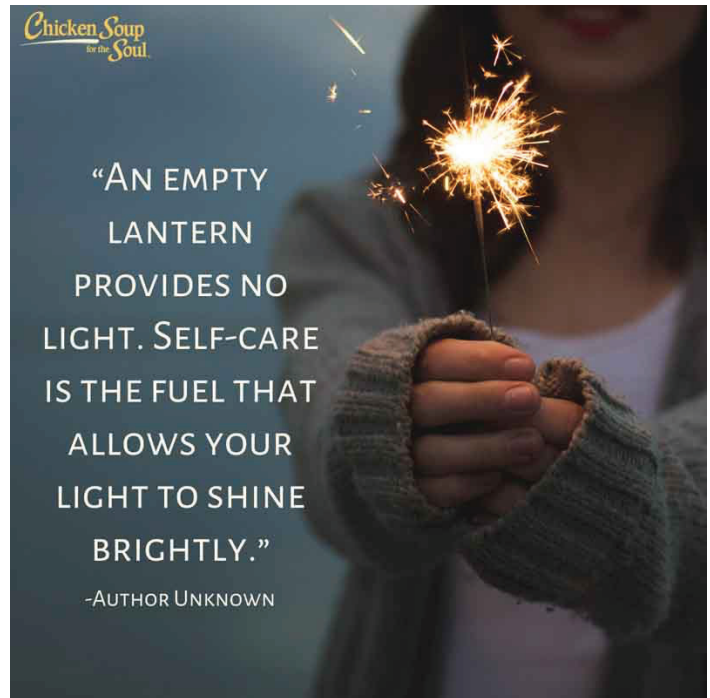


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Attention Groton Area Service Clubs

The Groton Daily Independent is doing an article on service clubs in the Groton Area. To make sure your service club is featured, please contact Dorene Nelson at gnelson@nvc.net. Thank you!



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!**



Vaccine hesitancy in South Dakota could prolong pandemic and delay a return to normal

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

Medical experts in South Dakota and across the country are concerned that reluctance among some people to get vaccinated against COVID-19 may prolong the pandemic, delay a return to normal life and possibly lead to more deaths.

Health officials say that the U.S. and individual states are in a race to reach "herd immunity," a level at which enough people are immune to the coronavirus to curtail its spread and reduce hospitalizations and deaths from the virus.

South Dakota has been a national leader in providing coronavirus vaccines to older residents and others at high risk of complications from COVID-19.

But as the vaccine rollout expanded to Phase 2, making anyone 16 and older eligible for vaccination, the demand for shots has waned and concerns have risen that herd immunity may be unobtainable.

"It's definitely concerning, and it's truly a race against time," said Dr. Shankar Kurra, vice president of medical affairs at Monument Health in Rapid City. "If we don't get to that threshold of herd immunity, we could end up losing the race and having a new surge or wave of cases and unfortunately more hospitalizations and deaths."



Shankar Kurra

National surveys and reports from medical experts in South Dakota reveal that vaccine hesitancy is more common among young people, rural and low-income residents, those with lower education levels and among some religious and political groups. Misinformation about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines is seen as a common reason people are deciding not to get vaccinated.

Failure to get enough people vaccinated could allow the current COVID-19 pandemic to linger and raises the likelihood that coronavirus variants, which appear to spread faster and more easily, would take hold and spread freely even among those who were vaccinated against the original version of the virus, Kurra said.

"That is what the race is about, to stop this pandemic, to prevent transmission so we don't get new variants, and finally to return to normal," Kurra said. "We can do this and actually end everything, and we won't have to be talking about COVID anymore."

South Dakota medical experts will be watching closely over the next month or so to see if vaccination rates remain stable now that eligibility has expanded to the largest population group so far.

"It's very important that we go through this Phase 2 with good numbers showing up to get immunized," Kurra said. "If we fail to do that in these hesitant groups, they will serve as a reservoir for the virus so it can con-

tinue to spread and possibly lead to more variants."

Teacher remains on vaccine fence

Meagan Jensen, 25, is an agriculture teacher at Sturgis High School who has followed the progress of the vaccination effort in the news and has so far decided not to get vaccinated.

Jensen, a graduate of South Dakota State University who now lives in Rapid City, said she is well aware of the risks of serious illness from COVID-19 and has gone "back and forth" on whether to get vaccinated.

Jensen said she has friends her age who contracted COVID-19 and had "extreme" symptoms that included hair loss and the inability to taste or smell. Jensen said she wonders if she will need proof of vaccination to travel abroad to destinations such as New Zealand. She also worries that failing to get vaccinated could put her students at risk.

In school buildings, Jensen said, she tries to maintain social distance from students and colleagues, and wore a mask when it was mandatory. Jensen said she has not worn a mask in the classroom since safety restrictions eased in the Meade County School District and masks were recommended but not required.

Jensen said she has concerns that any vaccine, including the COVID-19 vaccine, could reduce fertility in women, either in the short or long term.

Jensen said she was raised to think for herself and to respect the right of individuals to make their own decisions. She said she is aware that she now qualifies to receive the vaccine and feels that health providers have done a good job of making it easy to sign up for shots, but she remains reluctant.

Mostly, Jensen said she feels as if the vaccine probably is not necessary for her because she has gone this long through the pandemic without contracting COVID-19.

"I'm around FFA [Future Farmers of America] students all the time, so I've probably been exposed multiple times and I haven't gotten it," Jensen said. "If I haven't gotten COVID already, maybe I won't."

Doctor addresses vaccine 'myths'

Experts say that herd immunity can be obtained in two ways: either by enough people contracting COVID-19 and building up antibodies as they get sick and recover; or the much safer route of vaccinating enough people against the virus. No one is certain about the percentage of people who must be protected in order to achieve herd immunity, but many experts estimate it takes about 80-85% of the overall population.

Dr. David Basel, vice president for clinical quality at Avera Health in Sioux Falls, said failure to reach herd immunity would make it more likely that coronavirus variants will become the dominant strain of the virus in South Dakota and beyond.

If a large pocket of people in South Dakota or elsewhere does not obtain immunity to the coronavirus, it



Meagan Jensen, 25, is a teacher in the Meade County School District who has thus far been reluctant to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

VACCINE MYTH	VACCINE FACT
It was rushed and isn't safe.	Researchers took no safety shortcuts. Large studies show the vaccine is safe.
It changes your DNA.	It's impossible for the vaccine to change your DNA.
It can give you COVID-19.	The vaccine doesn't contain a live virus strain.
It contains egg protein.	It doesn't have egg proteins and can be given to people with egg allergies.
It causes severe side effects.	For most, the vaccine causes mild side effects that resolve in a few days.
It makes women infertile.	There is no evidence that the vaccine causes infertility.

Monument Health of western South Dakota has run newspaper ads to break down myths regarding the COVID-19 vaccines, including this ad in The Weekly Prospector of Spearfish.

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

creates a crucible of sorts for coronavirus variants to take hold and spread, thereby raising the potential that variants could infect those who received immunizations or had COVID-19 before.

"From my standpoint, I feel like we're in the race of the vaccine versus the variants," Basel said. "As long as our case rates are continuing to go back up again, I feel a sense of urgency."

Basel said the medical community is encouraging vaccinations while simultaneously trying to tamp down misinformation that he said overstates the risks of health problems or side effects from the vaccines.

"There's a whole host of myths that are out there that we try to fight," he said.

Among the false narratives about the COVID-19 vaccines, he said, are that the vaccines can cause COVID-19, that the shots reduce fertility, that the vaccines were rapidly authorized by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration without proper testing and trials, and that side effects from the shots can be severe.

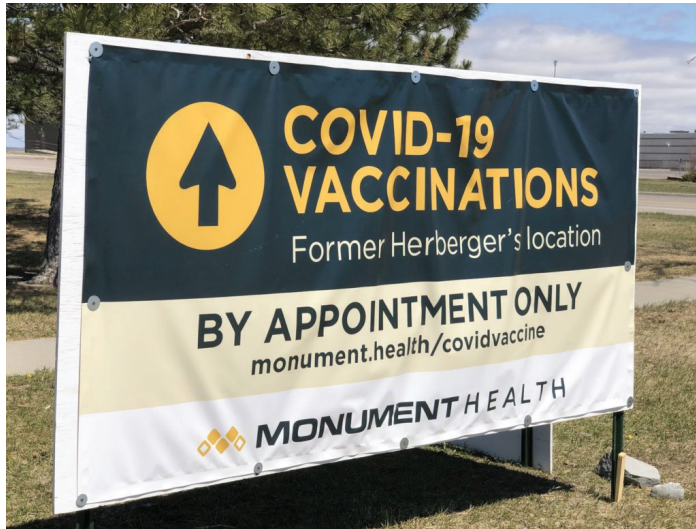
Basel said there is no evidence the vaccines affect fertility, and says they do not contain a live virus that could infect a recipient with COVID-19. The vaccines were tested using typical protocols even though the process was expedited to get vaccinations started as quickly as possible amid the pandemic that has killed more than 560,000 Americans and almost 3 million people worldwide.

Basel said that at 37 Avera hospitals across four states, the health group has not had a single patient hospitalized due to a COVID-19 vaccination.

Nursing assistant to skip shots

Jessica McDonald, 26, said that all of the residents at the South Dakota nursing home where she works as a certified nursing assistant have gotten vaccinated for COVID-19, but that she is not planning to get a shot.

McDonald, who lives in Piedmont, said she feels that the COVID-19 vaccines were rushed through the



Most vaccination centers in South Dakota still require an appointment, but health officials are hoping that more will soon take patients on a walk-in basis to encourage more people to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

the anti-vaccination group that is opposed to any vaccines; and the "fence sitters" who may want more information or need prompting to get vaccinated.

Avera and other health systems in South Dakota are still administering vaccines at a good rate, but some experts are concerned that the interest has waned among groups that recently became eligible for shots, including the large 18-65 age group without underlying medical conditions.

"We're not being overwhelmed ... people aren't necessarily breaking down our doors and having two or three people waiting for a shot," Basel said. "We could reach a point where the demand is exceeded by the supply, but we're not there yet."

Sanford Health recently announced that it had opened vaccinations up to people who walked into vaccination sites and who did not have an appointment. But the effort to promote vaccinations suffered a setback this week when the CDC temporarily halted use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine due to rare but potentially deadly incidents of blood clots in vaccine recipients.

The undecideds remain the target of campaigns to increase vaccination rates.

Basel said it is critical for those who are hesitant to get vaccinated to make an educated, sensible risk analysis when it comes to the COVID-19 vaccination.

"A lot of people say, 'I'm worried about a potential long-term risk of vaccinations and I'd rather avoid those if possible,'" Basel said. "But you're



David Basel

"You're really making a choice between a very low, very theoretical risk of a side effect or adverse effect from the vaccination versus a known, considerably higher, clear and present danger of adverse effects of COVID." -- Dr. David Basel, Avera Health

authorization process by the FDA, and she is not convinced the vaccinations are completely safe.

"I have this one to worry about, so I can't take any chances," she said, pointing to her 4-year-old daughter as they ate lunch in Rapid City. "It was rushed, like an emergency thing."

McDonald said she heard from some co-workers that they regretted getting vaccinated, but she couldn't say exactly what they regretted except that they felt pressured into getting the shots by family members.

McDonald said she does not consider herself a staunch vaccination opponent, or "anti-vax" person, but she noted that she does not get the annual immunization shot against influenza. She has had allergic reactions to some past vaccinations. She said she feels like the risk of negative outcomes from the vaccine outweigh the potential risks from contracting COVID-19.

"I think I've made up my mind," she said. "I trust my immune system."

Basel said the population can be divided into three groups when it comes to vaccines: The "eager beavers" who want vaccines as quickly as possible;

and the "fence sitters" who may want more

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really making a choice between a very low, very theoretical risk of a side effect or adverse effect from the vaccination versus a known, considerably higher, clear and present danger of adverse effects of COVID – because we're still seeing people get hospitalized, still seeing people of all ages dying and still seeing other long-term impacts like brain fog and other negative outcomes."

'Not a test bunny'

Randy Dudek of Rapid City said he received the vaccination against COVID-19 but only because he was required to as an electrician who sometimes works at Ellsworth Air Force Base in Box Elder.

"I'm not a test bunny for anybody," he said.

Dudek, 32, said he also has concerns about whether the vaccine-approval process was rushed. He gets his information about the vaccines from CDC bulletins sent to his work email and from news outlets, but not social media, which he said is rife with misinformation.

Dudek, a married father of two, said his wife has not gotten vaccinated because she works from home.

"I know it [COVID-19] affects everybody differently, but I would consider myself and my wife to be pretty healthy," he said.

South Dakota had its peak COVID-19 infection and death rates in November and early December; the state so far has had about 105,900 total COVID-19 cases and 1,950 deaths.

The state has been a consistent leader in COVID-19 vaccination rates among U.S. states since the phased-in vaccination process began.

As of April 13, 2021, the state had about 306,650 people who had received one dose of any vaccine, a rate of about 51.0%, and about 217,950 people who were fully vaccinated, a rate of about 36.5%. In the U.S. as a whole on that date, about 122.3 million people had received one dose, a rate of 36.8%, and roughly 75.3 million people were fully vaccinated, a rate of 22.7%.

On the basis of national surveys conducted in September and December, the CDC reported that the percentage of respondents who did not intend to get vaccinated had fallen from 38.1% in September to 32.1% in December.

The surveys showed that several population and socioeconomic groups were more likely to express hesitancy to get vaccinated, including younger adults, women, non-Hispanic Blacks, adults living in rural areas, adults with lower educational attainment and lower incomes, and those without health insurance. All vaccinations in South Dakota are free for patients.

A poll in late March by the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation showed that among all population groups, Republicans and white evangelical Christians were most likely to say they won't get vaccinated, with almost 30% of both groups responding that they will "definitely not" get shots.

The overall population of people who said they would "definitely not" get vaccinated remained relatively unchanged over the past few months, with 15% in that category in December compared with 13% in March.

The poll had some good news, however, in that fewer respondents reported they were in "wait and see" mode and had moved more favorably toward getting vaccinated. The poll also showed that more Black respondents, who earlier were among the most reluctant to get vaccinated, had received vaccinations or said they planned to soon.

Still, the Kaiser polls have highlighted the challenges the medical community faces in trying to encourage those who are hesitant to change their minds and get vaccinated.

"And while the poll indicated that some arguments are effective at persuading hesitant people — such as sharing that the vaccines are nearly 100% effective at preventing hospitalization and death — those messages do almost nothing to change the minds of people who have decided not to be vaccinated," the March 30, 2021, Kaiser report stated.

A report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in early April showed estimated vaccine hesitancy rates for the nation, and indicated that hesitancy was greatest in the Great Plains and Southeast regions. In South Dakota, the estimates showed greater hesitancy in the middle third of the state compared with the east and west edges.

In South Dakota, the state's mostly rural population may face geographic challenges in getting vacci-

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nated easily, said Tim Heath, immunization program manager for the South Dakota Department of Health.

"We've got a good population of farmers and ranchers who may not want to stop what they're doing to go down and get the vaccine, and then do so twice," Heath said. "For the most part, we try to go where people are and get them vaccinated. We are expanding places where the vaccine is available ... and relying on local providers."

South Dakota has a history of high rates of vaccination against the flu, one measure of the willingness of a state's population to accept the efficacy of vaccines in general.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, South Dakota had the fifth-highest rate of flu vaccinations in the nation in 2019-2020, with 58.7% of residents six months or older getting the flu shot (Rhode Island was highest with 60.9%). South Dakota led all Great Plains states in flu vaccinations that year, with Nebraska the next closest (58.3%) and Wyoming the lowest (47.3%).

But state health and medical officials still face significant hurdles in educating and encouraging vaccinations for South Dakotans who have been reluctant to get the COVID shots so far, even as the state has opened eligibility to Phase 2, or anyone over 18.

Heath said the state has done a good job of vaccinating people 65 and up, those at the highest risk of serious complications or death from COVID-19.

Young adults and some middle-aged people, especially men, may not regularly see a doctor who likely would provide them with authoritative encouragement to get vaccinated, Heath said.

"They're generally young, healthy and may not always go to the doctor for wellness visits even if those are covered by insurance," he said. "They may not have that constant, once-a-year touch with their providers."

Mother hesitates, but no longer

Amanda Williams, an Iowa native who now lives and works in Rapid City, said she has underlying medical conditions that qualified her for a shot very early in the vaccination phase-in but decided against it because she was "nervous and scared."

Her parents, ages 59 and 66, had fairly severe side effects after their first dose that included weakness, fatigue, aches and pains. The second doses did not cause side effects, she said.

Williams, 41, said she weighed the risks of exposure to the virus versus her perceived risks of getting vaccinated and chose not to get the shots.

But on a recent day, while at work cleaning tables at the food court at the Rushmore Mall in Rapid City, Williams said she had decided to register to get vaccinated.

She began to worry that working among so many diners who were unmasked could put herself, her parents and perhaps her daughter at risk of getting COVID-19.

"I suppose I should have been more concerned about the virus than the shot because I work around so many people," Williams said.

The deaths due to COVID-19 in South Dakota so far have been largely in the 60-plus age group, with 78% of the 1,950 deaths taking place in that age group.

In early April, the state reported a 7% rise in COVID-19 cases in the 20-29 age group over a six-week period, making that group responsible for about 19% of all active cases in the state at that time.

Heath said some younger residents may not have had prior exposure to transmittable diseases such as measles and polio that were successfully diminished by vaccines. But he said disease data show that cases of those illnesses tend to rise anytime a reduction in vaccinations occurs.

"We're getting further away from people seeing these vaccine-preventable diseases in the past and how horrible they are," Heath said. "But it's a never-ending cycle. We have a drop in coverage, and then we see a rise in cases in an area."

Heath said the state is preparing surveys to drill in on who is hesitant to get vaccinated in South Dakota and why. Those results could drive further educational campaigns and target resistant populations better, he said.

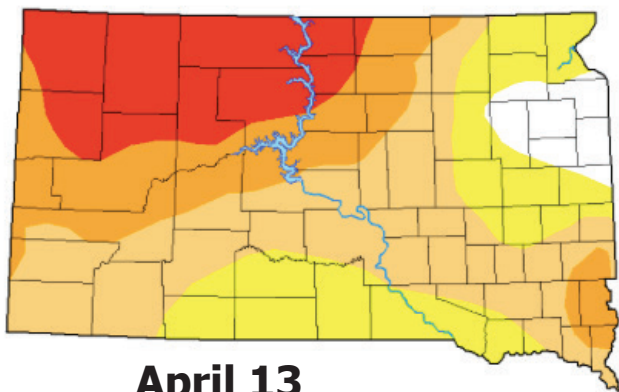
"We need to do some more push media-wise out there to reach some of those harder-to-reach populations," Heath said. "We need to get the word out that the vaccine is free, it works, so come in and get it," Heath said.

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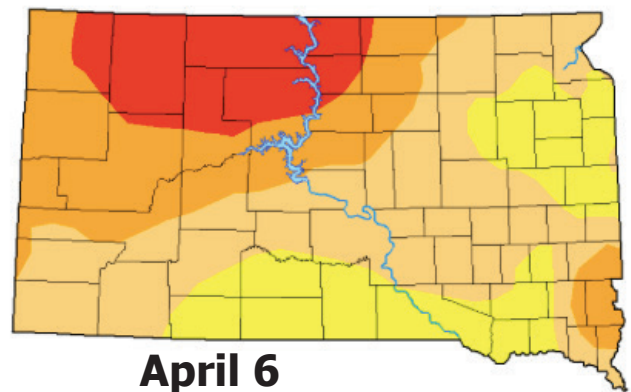
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Drought Monitor

Drought Classification



April 13



April 6

High Plains

The High Plains generally saw cooler than normal temperatures and widespread precipitation over the last week. Locally heavy amounts of rainfall (more than 2 inches) helped erase long moisture deficits in eastern South Dakota and southeastern North Dakota, resulting in improvements to moderate drought. In the remainder of the region, precipitation wasn't enough to prevent worsening conditions. Moderate drought (D1) expanded in South Dakota and extreme drought (D3) expanded in both North and South Dakota to reflect the growing moisture deficits and its effect on soil moisture. Agricultural field reports indicate planters are being idled, except in the southeastern corner of the state, and cattle are being culled.

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#417 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Today looks somewhat better than yesterday. There were 61,400 new cases reported today, still uncomfortably close to the kinds of numbers we were seeing last summer when things were so rough. The worrisome number is that our seven-day new-case average is now up to 71,511, which is very near our worst days last summer. Consider we were down to a seven-day average of 54,214 less than a month ago on March 20; today's average represents a 32 percent increase since then. With the numbers of folks we're vaccinating, this number should not be increasing at that rate; I blame carelessness and variants. We are now at 31,506,000 total cases in the US during this pandemic, which is 0.2% more than yesterday's total. Hospitalizations are up again today at 47,379. Total deaths are 564,696, which is 0.1% more than yesterday's total. There were 770 deaths reported today. We should note that Europe passed one million deaths last week, according to the WHO. So much loss.

On April 15, 2020, one year ago today, the US had 633,267 cases and 28,278 deaths from Covid-19. We seemed to be leveling off overall, although the declines in the early-hit states looked like they were accompanied by growing case reports in a number of less populous states across the nation. If you were looking, you were not concluding this was just about over. Unfortunately, not all of us were looking.

While outbreaks of infection in meat packing plants and agricultural enterprises were threatening aspects of the US food supply, farmers were forced to dump milk due to the huge loss in demand as schools and restaurants were closed. Covid-19 tests were in short supply in at least some areas and results delayed. Los Angeles shut down all concerts and sporting events for the rest of the calendar year. Fire and police departments were getting hammered with cases; if you consider that these folks continued to go to work every day of the pandemic and frequently had to interact with the public and work at times in close quarters, that should not be much of a surprise to anyone. Another occupational group with high numbers of cases was health care workers; the estimate on this day was around 9000. The first indications were emerging that the most infectious time in the course of a case may be the two or three days before symptoms appear. There were 2,064,115 cases and 137,020 deaths worldwide.

We are getting some alarming reports of critical capacity in some Michigan hospitals. In some health care systems, numbers of patients are above those seen last fall in our worst wave. Detroit has been mentioned as a particularly problematic area of the state. The medical director of Infection Prevention and Epidemiology at Beaumont Health, Dr. Nick Gilpin, said in a release, that patients they are now seeing are younger and sicker than they'd been seeing, needing "intense medical attention." He indicated that younger patients have been coming in later in the course of the disease, likely because they think they can get better on their own, so that by the time they are seen, they have "pneumonia, blood clots and severe lung injury. This trend does not seem to be slowing down." Seven-day average new daily cases in Michigan are up to a terrifying 79 per 100,000 residents with 10,000 new cases per day. Consider that unchecked spread starts at 25 daily new cases per 100,000 and that the state with the second-most daily new cases is New Jersey with 41 per 100,000. Seven-day average deaths are up to 46 per day from 16 per month in mid-March. This all sounds very bad.

Thirty-eight states are reporting increases in hospitalizations over the past week, some more than others. The current outbreak is very spotty across the country. Thirty-three states have had increases in new cases over the past two weeks—all the states along the Great Lakes from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania. South Dakota and Minnesota also report increases. The Upper Midwest isn't a great place to be these days. Maine, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Maryland appear to be in some trouble. Colorado, Oregon, and Washington are also increasing. The southern part of the country has much less of a surge at present. Arizona and Nevada have some trouble, and Florida and Georgia may be looking at hard days ahead. Experts think weather is playing a role—warmer temperatures and longer days seem to decrease transmission, so southern states are doing better and northern ones worse. Canada's having some new trouble too. Cases across the country are skewing younger; the high vaccination rate among the elderly is reducing the number of cases in this group.

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Another thing that seems to be operating still is sheer dumbheadedness. Case in point: The Minnesota Youth Wrestling Championships were moved to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for a couple of weeks ago because of restrictions on crowd size in their home state. There were so many entrants that the venue managers added additional space to accommodate them all. So 2100 wrestlers, their parents, and other spectators crowded themselves into the venue for a long weekend of fun and Covid-19. Not only that, but since this one was such a hit, there is a plan to bring a regional event into the same city from five states. The Minnesota Department of Health has linked 16 confirmed cases in nine counties and eight schools to the event. Since 64 teams from at least 52 counties were in attendance at the tournament, there will likely be more, perhaps many more. The Minnesota Department of Education has alerted schools to watch for cases, recommending that everyone who attended should be tested. This virus doesn't care whether you believe in it; it believes in you.

A couple of nights ago we talked about the fact that some vaccinated people are going to get Covid-19; these vaccines are—none of them—100 percent effective. We knew that from the start. And now we have numbers to put to these so-called breakthrough infections. The CDC says it has identified 5800 cases in fully-vaccinated people. Almost 6000 seems like a lot, doesn't it? It does, until you recall that we have around 78.52 million people fully vaccinated. That works out to 0.007% or one in every 13,534 vaccinated people, which is considerably better odds than the very conservative number of just about one in 10 Americans who've been infected with this virus so far.

And before you get all excited about the 95 percent efficacy and start wondering why five percent of vaccinated people aren't getting breakthrough infections, remember that efficacy is calculated based on the percentage of people who do or don't get infected. 95 percent efficacy doesn't mean 95 percent of people won't get infected and five percent will; it means your chance of being infected is 95 percent smaller than if you were not vaccinated, so you take the number of people who would have gotten infected and find five percent of that. The breakthrough reports we're seeing are pretty much in line with what the clinical trials predicted, allowing for issues with reporting and such in the less controlled real world compared with the careful tracking that happens in a clinical trial.

There were breakthrough infections in all age groups, but 40 percent of the infections occurred in people over 60. Sixty-five percent of them were female, and 35 percent male—no idea what's operating there, but some of this may be that women tend to go to the doctor when they feel ill more than men; so they'd also be more likely to be diagnosed. Twenty-nine percent were asymptomatic; I'm not sure how or why they were diagnosed at all since it isn't very usual to test asymptomatic people, especially if they've been fully vaccinated. Seven percent of them have been identified as having been hospitalized, and one percent (74 people) have died. Percentages there are 0.00009 percent who died, or one in 1,060,810 fully vaccinated people; in the population 0.2% have died, which is one in 580. Those who have died have been elderly people who may have had underlying conditions, so it seems quite likely they did not mount a strong immune response to the vaccine.

I would guess it is likely overall that the factor determining who has breakthrough infections is going to be largely a characteristic of the individual recipient, not a characteristic of the vaccine—what's called primary vaccine failure; and there is so far no evidence or really even any hint that variants are anything of a factor in these cases, which would be secondary vaccine failure. So far. And according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, "even when a vaccine fails to protect against infection, it often protects against serious disease." And that's the important point.

Bottom line: These vaccines are performing brilliantly. They are performing as anticipated. They are making vaccinated people safer; and if we can persuade enough of us to take them, they will make everyone safer, even those who can't take a vaccine or who don't respond so well to it. With effective herd immunity, your risk of infection, once you're fully vaccinated, is going to plummet further, a lot further. Listen to your friends and neighbors who don't think they want to be vaccinated, and see what you can do to help them reach a different decision. But listen first, try to understand their concerns, and respond with empathy. Calling them stupid or irresponsible or unpatriotic or whatever will probably not help them

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to reach a decision you'd like; listening and understanding and acknowledging their concerns just might. Might not too, but it gives you a better shot at persuasion.

We have now administered 198,317,040 doses of vaccine in the US out of the 255,400,665 doses that have been delivered. This means about 3.5 million doses went into people in the last day, above our seven-day average of 3.3 million. We should have 200 million doses administered by the weekend. Over 30 percent of adults—78.5 million people—are fully vaccinated, and 48 percent—almost 126 million—have received at least one dose. We are still moving along at a good pace. For the record, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has scheduled a follow-up meeting on that potential rare complication of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine for next Friday. I would guess we'll know what they plan to do with it after that meeting.

There is a study that became available in preprint from Oxford University that compares the risks of these rare blood clots called cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) after infection with the coronavirus with the risks for the condition in those who have received the vaccines currently available in the UK—Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech, and Oxford/AstraZeneca—and influenza vaccine. We should note here that the research arm of the University which was involved with the development of one of these vaccines is entirely separate from the research arm which conducted this study and that their data came from the European Medicines Agency (the EU's version of our FDA), not internal tracking. They examined health records of over 500,000 positive cases, 489,871 vaccinated individuals, and 172,724 cases of influenza. Their findings were that the incidence of CVST is 10 times higher following the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccination than following vaccination with the mRNA—Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna—vaccines. when examined across all age groups. They also found that the incidence of CVST is about 100-fold higher in people who have had Covid-19 than in the general population. Some 30 percent of total cases of CVST were seen in people under 30 years of age.

We should add that data are still being collected, so this would not be definitive, also that several experts have pointed out some deficiencies in the study's design and execution. Dr. Anthony Fauci commented on the methodological concerns in a hearing of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis today. He took issue with the comparisons drawn, saying, "It will be clear that you cannot make any statement, the way this is designed, about the adverse events following the vaccination with the mRNA comparing to anything else." He also mentioned that peer review could quite likely sort out what he referred to as some "confusion" due to "procedural gaps." I always issue a caution when I present research findings from work that has not yet been peer-reviewed because the review process often leads to amendments in a research report that strengthen the quality of the work.

For the record, this does not serve as evidence the researchers at Oxford are putzes. Not at all. It is the rare scientific paper that doesn't undergo some changes during peer review. You get a lot of sets of eyes on work, and more often than not, those eyes will see things the authors of the paper missed. That's what the peer-review process is intended to do. So we'll wait on this one to see what review yields.

Sarah Studley was engaged to Brian Horlor in November, 2019. They planned a beautiful wedding for a year later in San Diego. Then, as she told the Washington Post, "It became very clear that it was going to be a very bad idea for us to proceed." So they got married anyhow on schedule in a civil ceremony. She wore her wedding dress, and the couple had a small dinner with close family. She explained, "It was not what I would have chosen, but there were definitely things about it that were wonderful." And they were married, which is, after all, the point of a wedding.

They planned a large reception for this June to celebrate with a larger circle of friends and family; and she bought a beautiful gown to wear at that event; but it became apparent we weren't going to have enough people vaccinated for a big party then either. She said, "It seemed like it was not going to be possible to have a reception that was both safe and fun, so we decided to call it off." Disappointing, for sure. So now she had a nice dress and nowhere to wear it; it's not like you wear a wedding gown to the random social event, right? So she's been waiting for a suitable occasion for this second dress, and it occurred to her that perhaps her first vaccination appointment was just the thing.

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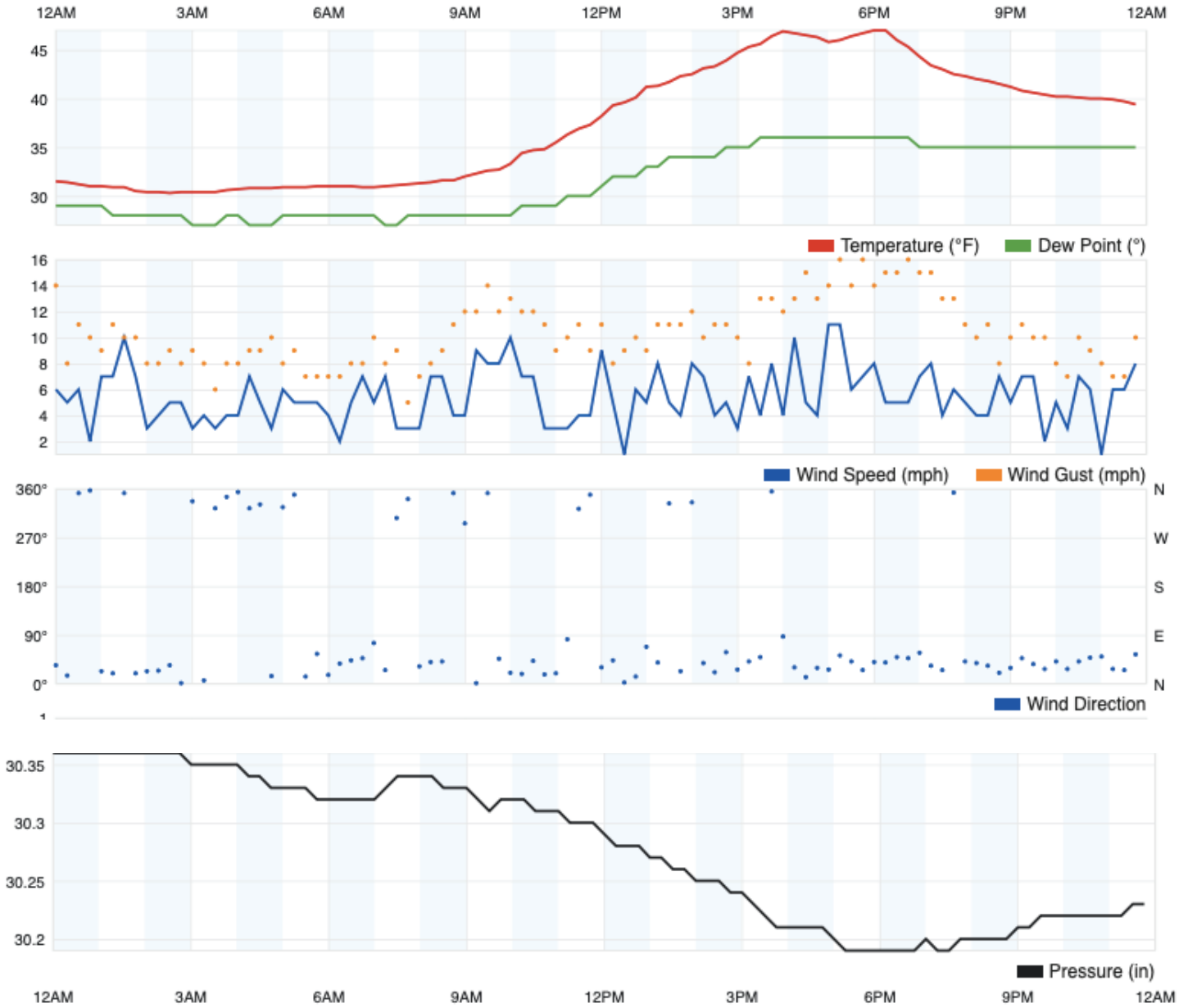
She explained, “[T]he idea of getting a vaccine is such a bright moment. It’s not a cure, it’s not the end of the pandemic, but it’s certainly an important turning point.” So she did her hair, chose nice jewelry, put on some make-up for the first time in most of a year, and slipped into the dress—polka-dot tulle over satin accompanied by peep-toe shoes. What a look! She certainly drew attention at the vaccination site. The nurse who vaccinated her said, “She stood out. You don’t see many people come in with white frilly dresses.” Folks at the site said she gave everyone a lift.

Studley said, “I’m already brainstorming what I’m going to do for my second dose.” I like her style. Take care. I’ll be back.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Chance
Rain/Snow
then Slight
Chance
Showers

High: 48 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 30 °F

Saturday



Sunny

High: 54 °F

Saturday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 30 °F

Sunday



Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance Rain

High: 60 °F

**Turning Milder
this Weekend**

Today
*Mostly Cloudy, Chance Rain/Snow AM West
Chance Rain PM Mainly West of James Valley
Highs 43-52°*

Saturday
*Partly Cloudy
Highs 47-59°*

Sunday
*Increasing Clouds & Warmer
Chance Rain Toward Evening North
Highs 54-67°*

Completed 3AM CDT NWS Aberdeen SD 

Overall, the mercury will be on the rise as we head into the weekend. Precipitation chances today should end with mainly dry conditions expected this weekend. #sdwx #mnwx

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Today in Weather History

April 16, 1967: Severe thunderstorms moved through areas of central and eastern South Dakota, producing large hail, damaging winds, and even a few tornadoes. The event began in the mid-afternoon hours and lasted into the evening. One of the tornadoes, an F1, formed over Lake Poinsette in Hamlin County. From there it moved from southwest to northeast, toward the northern shore, then made a loop and traveled toward the southeast. Two trailer houses and a few small buildings were damaged. 11 people were injured when a trailer house was turned over to one side, and then turned over on the other side. In Brown County, the storms produced hail 1.75 inches in diameter and 61mph winds.

April 16, 1976: A deepening low-pressure system moved northward out of Nebraska and across western South Dakota. Winds of 60 to 80 mph were reported across the area with gusts over 90 mph in southwest Minnesota. Some recorded wind speeds included 62 mph at Sioux Falls, 70 mph at Brookings, and 82 mph at Watertown. Many buildings were damaged, and many roofs were blown off and at Sioux Falls, and Huron airports planes were overturned. Across southwest Minnesota, many trees were uprooted, and several trucks were blown off of the highway. Across the area, many, barns, outbuildings, sheds, and older structures were demolished.

April 16, 2000: Heavy snow of 6 to 9 inches fell across parts of central and northeast South Dakota during the morning hours. The heavy snow caused many roads to become slushy and difficult to travel. The heavy snow also downed some tree branches. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Ferney, Miller, and Webster; 7 inches at Agar, Mellette, and Twin Brooks; 8 inches at Gettysburg, and 9 inches at Faulkton.

1849: Charleston, South Carolina recorded their latest freeze ever with a temperature of 32 degrees while 6 inches of snow fell at Wilmington, North Carolina. Snow fell as far south as Milledgeville, Georgia. A damaging hard freeze occurred from Texas to Georgia devastating the cotton crop.

1851: "The Lighthouse Storm" of 1851 struck New England on this date. Heavy gales and high seas pounded the coasts of New Hampshire and eastern Massachusetts. The storm arrived at the time of a full moon, and high tide was producing unusually high storm tides. The storm was so named because it destroyed the lighthouse at Cohasset, Massachusetts. Two assistant lighthouse keepers were killed there when the structure was swept away by the storm tide. [Click HERE](#) for more information.

2008: Typhoon Neoguri forms over the South China Sea on the 15th and rapidly intensifying to attain typhoon strength by the 16th, reaching its peak intensity on the 18th with maximum sustained winds near 109 mph. More than 120,000 people are evacuated from Hainan when heavy rains cause flash floods in low-lying areas. Three fatalities are attributed to the storm, though 40 fishermen are reported missing. Neoguri made landfall in China earlier than any other tropical cyclone on record, about two weeks before the previous record set by Typhoon Wanda in 1971.

1880 - A tornado near Marshall, MO, carried the heavy timbers of an entire home a distance of twelve miles. (The Weather Channel)

1933 - Franklin Lake, NH, was buried under 35 inches of snow. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1960 - A wind gust of 70 mph was measured at the Stapleton International Airport in Denver CO, their highest wind gust of record. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A slow moving storm system produced heavy rain over North Carolina and the Middle Atlantic Coast States. More than six inches of rain drenched parts of Virginia, and flooding in Virginia claimed three lives. Floodwaters along the James River inundated parts of Richmond VA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A storm in the northeastern U.S. produced a foot of snow at Pittsburg VT. Severe thunderstorms produced baseball size hail and spawned five tornadoes in the Southern High Plains Region. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A cold front, ushering sharply colder air into the north central U.S., brought snow to parts of Montana and North Dakota. At midday the temperature at Cutbank MT was just 22 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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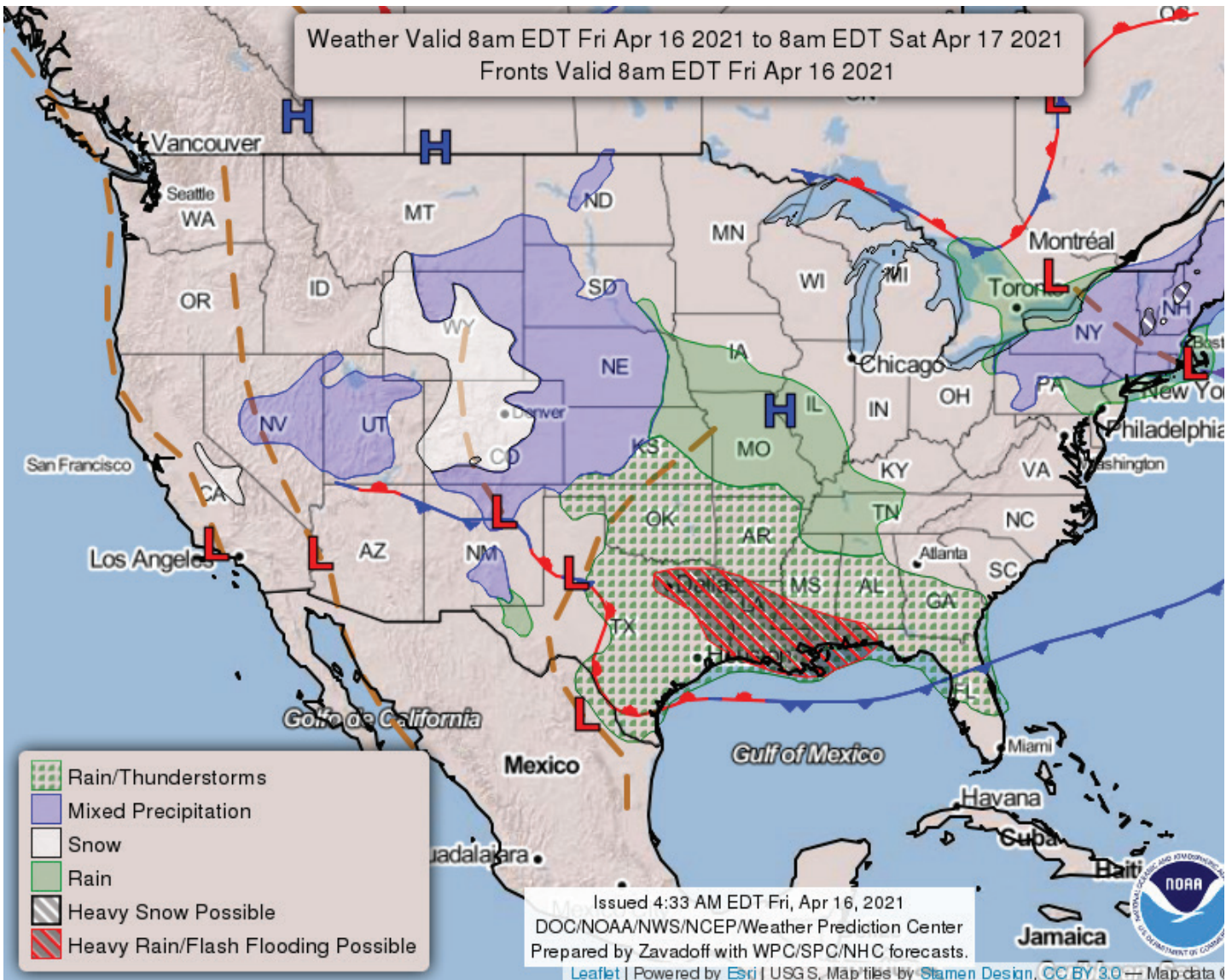
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 47.0 °F
Low Temp: 30.3 °F
Wind: 16 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 91° in 1913
Record Low: 14° in 1899, 1953
Average High: 58°F
Average Low: 32°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 0.74
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.29
Average Precip to date: 2.92
Precip Year to Date: 2.47
Sunset Tonight: 8:22 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:44 a.m.



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HOPE IN THE LORD

Once, before going into battle, Alexander the Great began making elaborate preparations for a large military operation. He was so uncertain about the outcome of the battle that he gave away his possessions. One of his men, shocked and surprised, went to him in protest and said, "Sir, you are giving away everything you have!"

"Everything," said Alexander, "but hope."

Overwhelmed with sickness and facing death, David cried out, "My hope is in You! Save me from all my transgressions!" He realized that despite his vast wealth and power he was morally bankrupt and powerless over his life. He could do nothing to save himself.

But when David came to the end of all his possessions, he found himself at the beginning of what God had – the power to deliver and rescue him. "Save me," he cried, "from all my transgressions." His life must have passed before his eyes, frightened him into a sense of reality, and left him in a state of despair and hopelessness.

This verse contains one of life's most important messages. David, and each one of us, need to be "saved from our transgressions." Most of us recognize that fact. Knowing and facing that fact, however, is not enough. We must also accept the fact that life is beyond our control – not only our health but the number of days God will grant us. Like David, we must be prepared to face the certainty of death and the reality of judgment.

God used sickness, fear, and aging to get David's attention. God uses different means at different times to get our attention. What's God doing in your life today?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for Your love and the many ways You use to reach us and get our attention. Open our hearts and minds to see and hear You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And so, Lord, where do I put my hope? My only hope is in you. Psalm 39:7

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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

Bankers report strong growth in rural parts of 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Strong economic growth continues in rural parts of 10 Western and Plains states even though business continues to lag behind the level it was at before the coronavirus pandemic began, according to a new monthly survey of bankers.

The overall index for the region declined slightly from March's 71.9 but remained at a strong level of 69. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey, said improving grain prices, continued low interest rates and growing exports have all helped the economy in rural areas.

Bankers remain optimistic despite the challenges in the economy. The survey's confidence index was a healthy 72.4 in April even though it was slightly lower than March's 76.7.

"Federal stimulus checks, improving grain prices, and advancing exports have supported confidence, offsetting negatives from pandemic ravaged retail and leisure and hospitality companies in the rural economy," Goss said.

Goss said the region is adding jobs at a solid pace, but region still has about 184,000 fewer jobs than before the pandemic began. The hiring index also remained strong at 62.5 even though it was lower than March's 72.9 reading.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

Man dies after skid loader goes into farm pond near Colton

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The Minnehaha County Sheriff's Office is investigating a fatal farm accident. Deputies, Colton firefighters and state Department of Emergency Management employees were dispatched to the farm about 5 p.m. Wednesday where a skid loader had gone into a pond.

Before emergency responders arrived, family members and neighbors were able to use other equipment to remove the skid loader from the pond.

After the skid loader was removed, a male victim was found. Family members and emergency responders attempted lifesaving measures.

Life Flight was dispatched to the farm, but the victim was pronounced dead at the scene. He was not identified.

Fatal motel shooting in Rapid City apparently drug related

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Police believe a fatal shooting at a Rapid City motel earlier this month is drug related.

Five people have been charged in connection with the shooting on April 9 at the South Dakota Rose Inn, but so far none of the charges included homicide.

Jesus Vance was found dead in one of the rooms at the motel and one of the defendants was found outside with multiple cuts to his head, according to police.

Three of the five charged are in custody. Police spokesman Brendyn Medina said two remain at large.

Charges currently filed include aiding and abetting second-degree kidnapping and aggravated assault. Prosecutors have not said which or how many of the co-defendants are expected to be charged with homicide.

Medina said witness interviews lead police to believe there is a "drug distributing component" to the shooting, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Vance lived in Rapid City and was a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.

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Police: 8 dead in shooting at FedEx facility in Indianapolis

By CASEY SMITH Associated Press/Report for America

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — A gunman killed eight people and wounded several others before killing himself in a late-night shooting at a FedEx facility near the Indianapolis airport, police said, in the latest in a spate of mass shootings after a relative lull during the pandemic.

Five people were hospitalized after the Thursday night shooting, according to police. One of them had critical injuries, police spokesperson Genae Cook said. Another two people were treated and released at the scene. FedEx said people who worked for the company were among the dead.

A witness said that he was working inside the building when he heard several gunshots in rapid succession. "I see a man come out with a rifle in his hand and he starts firing and he starts yellin' stuff that I could not understand," Levi Miller told WTHR-TV. "What I ended up doing was ducking down to make sure he did not see me because I thought he would see me and he would shoot me."

Police have not identified the shooter or said whether he was an employee at the facility.

"We're still trying to ascertain the exact reason and cause for this incident," Cook said.

Craig McCartt, of the Indianapolis police, told NBC Today early Friday that officers still knew "very little."

It was the latest in a recent string of mass shootings across the U.S. Last month, eight people were fatally shot at massage businesses across the Atlanta area, and 10 died in gunfire at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado.

It was at least the third mass shooting this year in Indianapolis alone. Five people, including a pregnant woman, were shot and killed in January, and a man was accused of killing three adults and a child before abducting his daughter during an argument at a home in March.

Family members gathered at a nearby hotel to await word on loved ones — and some employees were bused there for tearful reunions. But other relatives said they still had no information about their loved ones hours later. Most employees aren't allowed to carry cellphones inside the FedEx building, making contact with them difficult.

"When you see notifications on your phone, but you're not getting a text back from your kid and you're not getting information and you still don't know where they are ... what are you supposed to do?" said Mindy Carson, holding back tears. Her daughter, Jessica, works in the facility and she had not heard from her.

Police were called to reports of gunfire Thursday just after 11 p.m., and officers "came in contact with (an) active shooter incident," Cook said. The gunman later killed himself.

"The officers responded, they came in and did their job. A lot of them are trying to face this, because this is a sight that no one should have to see," Cook said.

Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett lamented that the city was "confronted with the horrific news of yet another mass shooting, an act of violence that senselessly claimed the lives of eight of our neighbors."

FedEx released a statement saying it is cooperating with authorities.

"We are deeply shocked and saddened by the loss of our team members following the tragic shooting at our FedEx Ground facility in Indianapolis," the statement said. "Our most heartfelt sympathies are with all those affected by this senseless act of violence."

A man told WTTV that his niece was sitting in the driver's seat of her car when the gunfire erupted, and she was wounded.

"She got shot on her left arm," said Parminder Singh. "She's fine, she's in the hospital now."

He said his niece did not know the shooter.

Casey Smith is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Hong Kong democracy leaders given jail terms amid crackdown

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A Hong Kong court on Friday sentenced five leading pro-democracy advocates, including media tycoon Jimmy Lai, to up to 18 months in prison for organizing and participating in a massive march during 2019 anti-government protests that triggered an overwhelming crackdown from Beijing.

A total of nine advocates were given jail terms, but four of them, including 82-year-old lawyer and former lawmaker Martin Lee, had their sentences suspended after their age and accomplishments were taken into consideration.

They were found guilty earlier this month of organizing and participating in a massive protest in August 2019, where an estimated 1.7 million people marched in opposition to a bill that would have allowed suspects to be extradited to mainland China. The march was not authorized by the police.

Their convictions and sentencing are another blow to the city's flagging democracy movement, which is facing an unprecedented crackdown by Beijing and Hong Kong authorities. The sentences were swiftly met with international criticism.

The court suspended the 11-month prison sentence of Lee, who is known for his advocacy for human rights and democracy, for two years because of his age.

Lai, the founder of Hong Kong's Apple Daily tabloid, was sentenced to a total of 14 months in prison Friday for charges related to demonstration on Aug. 18, 2019, and a separate unauthorized march on Aug. 31, 2019.

Lai was also slapped with two additional charges Friday, one under the national security law accusing him of conspiring to collude with foreign powers and another accusing him of helping local activists to escape the city.

Prior to sentencing, Lai was already being held on other charges, including a previous charge of foreign collusion to intervene in the city's affairs — a new crime under a sweeping national security law that Beijing imposed on the city in 2020.

Lee Cheuk-yan, a pro-democracy activist and former lawmaker who helped organize annual candlelight vigils in Hong Kong on the anniversary of the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, was sentenced to a total of 14 months in prison for his participation in the the two August 2019 marches.

Lawyers Albert Ho and Margaret Ng both had their 12-month jail sentences suspended for two years. Former lawmaker Leung Kwok-hung was sentenced to 18 months, while another former legislator, Cyd Ho, was given a jail sentence of eight months.

Two other former lawmakers, Au Nok-hin and Leung Yiu-chung, who previously pleaded guilty, were also given jail sentences. Au got 10 months while Leung's eight-month jail term was suspended for one year.

In a separate case, former lawmaker Yeung Sum, was sentenced alongside Lai and Lee Cheuk-yan for their participation in the unauthorized assembly on Aug. 31, 2019, although his eight-month sentence was suspended for a year.

"I'm ready to face the penalty and sentencing and I'm proud that I can walk with the people of Hong Kong for this democracy," Lee Cheuk-yan said ahead of the court session, as supporters held up signs condemning political persecution. "We will walk together even in darkness, we will walk with hope in our hearts."

Hong Kong had enjoyed a vibrant political culture and freedoms not seen elsewhere in China during the decades it was a British colony.

Beijing had pledged to allow the city to retain civil liberties for 50 years after it was handed to Chinese rule in 1997, but recently has ushered in a series of measures, including the national security legislation and electoral reforms that many fear are a step closer to making Hong Kong no different from mainland cities.

Under the new rules, Hong Kong residents can be held liable for any speech or action deemed secessionist, subversive, terrorist or perceived as colluding with hostile foreign political groups or individuals. Electoral changes mean just 20 out of 90 Legislative Council members will be directly elected and Beijing

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will retain even tighter control over the body that picks Hong Kong's future chief executives.

Hong Kong's last British governor, Chris Patten, said that the Chinese Communist Party's "comprehensive assault" on freedoms of Hong Kong and its rule of law remains relentless.

"This week, we have witnessed some of the most distinguished of the city's peaceful and moderate champions of liberty and democracy placed in Beijing's vengeful sights," he said in a statement. "The CCP simply does not understand that you cannot bludgeon and incarcerate people into loving a totalitarian and corrupt regime."

Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific regional director, Yamini Mishra, said the sentences handed down Friday underlined the government's intention to "eliminate all political opposition" in Hong Kong.

"Having arrested the majority of Hong Kong's most prominent dissidents using the repressive national security law, the authorities are now mopping up remaining peaceful critics under the pretext of bogus charges related to the 2019 protests," Mishra said.

AP Interview: China to send 'positive message' on climate

BEIJING (AP) — A leading Chinese diplomat said Friday that his country, the world's largest carbon emitter, plans to send a "positive message" at a climate change meeting called by U.S. President Joe Biden for next week.

But Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng also signaled that China is unlikely to make any new proposal beyond its current commitments on climate change.

"For a big country with 1.4 billion people, these goals are not easily delivered," he said in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press. "Some countries are asking China to do more on climate change. I am afraid this is not very realistic."

He spoke as Biden's climate envoy, John Kerry, was discussing the issue on the second day of closed-door meetings with Chinese counterparts in Shanghai.

Le said he had no details on those meetings.

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced last year that China would be carbon-neutral by 2060 and aim to reach a peak in its emissions by 2030.

Biden has invited 40 world leaders, including Xi, to an April 22-23 virtual climate summit. The U.S. and other countries are expected to announce more ambitious national targets for cutting carbon emissions and pledge financial help for climate efforts by less wealthy nations.

Le didn't say whether Xi would join the summit, but said "the Chinese side is actively studying the matter."

Iran starts enriching uranium to 60%, its highest level ever

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran began enriching uranium Friday to its highest level ever, edging closer to weapons-grade levels to pressure talks in Vienna aimed at restoring its nuclear deal with world powers after an attack on its main atomic site.

A top official said only a few grams an hour of uranium gas would be enriched up to 60% purity — triple the level it once did but at a rate far slower than what Tehran could produce. International inspectors already said Iran planned to do so above-ground at its Natanz nuclear site, not deep within its underground halls hardened to withstand airstrikes.

The move is likely to raise tensions even as Iran negotiates in Vienna over a way to allow the U.S. back into the agreement and lift the crushing economic sanctions it faces. However, its scope also provides Iran with a way to quickly de-escalate if it chose.

The announcement also marks a significant escalation after the attack that damaged centrifuges at Natanz, an attack this past weekend suspected of having been carried out by Israel. While Israel has yet to claim it, it comes amid a long-running shadow war between the two Mideast rivals.

Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, Iran's parliament speaker, announced the move in a Twitter post later acknowledged by Iranian state television.

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"The young and God-believing Iranian scientists managed to achieve a 60% enriched uranium product," Qalibaf said. "I congratulate the brave nation of Islamic Iran on this success. The Iranian nation's willpower is miraculous and can defuse any conspiracy."

The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, the country's civilian nuclear arm, later acknowledged the move to 60%, according to state TV. Ali Akbar Salehi said the centrifuges now produce 9 grams an hour, but that would drop to 5 grams an hour in the coming days.

"Any enrichment level that we desire is in our reach at the moment and we can do it at any time we want," Salehi said.

State TV later referred to the decision as a "show of power against terrorist rascality." Mahmoud Vaezi, the chief of staff for Iran's president, similarly said it sent the message that Iran's atomic program "will not be stopped through the assassination of nuclear scientists and sabotage in nuclear facilities."

It wasn't clear why the first announcement came from Qalibaf, a hard-line former leader in the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard already named as a potential presidential candidate in Iran's upcoming June election.

While 60% is higher than any level Iran previously enriched uranium, it is still lower than weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Iran had been enriching up to 20% — even that was a short technical step to weapons grade. The deal limited Iran's enrichment to 3.67%.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors Iran's nuclear program, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Earlier this week, it sent its inspectors to Natanz and confirmed Iran was preparing to begin 60% enrichment at an above-ground facility at the site.

The heightened enrichment 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.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, on a visit to Cyprus, brought up Iran in a tweet after meeting his Cypriot counterpart.

"We discussed the bilateral ties between Israel and Cyprus as well as regional issues, most significantly the importance of stopping Iran's aggressive activities in the Middle East, which undermine regional stability and pose a danger to the entire world," he wrote.

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."

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 threat of higher enrichment by Iran already had drawn criticism from the U.S. and three European nations in the deal — France, Germany and the United Kingdom. On Friday, European Union spokesman Peter Stano called Iran's decision "a very worrisome development."

"There is no credible explanation or civilian justification for such an action on the side of Iran," Stano said. The Vienna talks aim to "make sure that we go back from such steps that bring Iran further away from delivering on its commitments and obligations"

Diplomats reconvened Friday for talks in Vienna. After talks Thursday, Chinese negotiator Wang Qun called for doing "away with all disruptive factors by moving forward as swiftly as we can on the work of negotiations, especially by zeroing in on sanction lifting."

The 2015 nuclear deal, which former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from in 2018, prevented Iran from stockpiling enough high-enriched uranium to be able to pursue a nuclear weapon if it chose in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

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

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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.

Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc. obtained by The Associated Press show no apparent above-ground damage at the facility.

Biden meets Japan's leader to boost China-facing alliances

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MARI YAMAGUCHI and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is welcoming Japan's prime minister to the White House on Friday in his first face-to-face meeting with a foreign leader, a choice that reflects Biden's emphasis on strengthening alliances to deal with a more assertive China and other global challenges.

Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also look to counter messaging from Chinese President Xi Jinping that America and democracies in general are on the decline, after the political turmoil and international withdrawal that marked Donald Trump's presidency.

The Biden administration calls managing U.S. policies toward the Indo-Pacific, where China under Xi is flexing growing economic and military power, the primary challenge for the United States. That helped guide Biden's decision, announced this week, to pull U.S. troops out of Afghanistan and free the administration to focus more on East Asia.

For Biden and Suga, "our approach to China and our shared coordination and cooperation on that front will be part of the discussion," press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday. The two will discuss other regional security issues, including North Korea's nuclear program.

Suga, a farmer's son who rose to Japan's highest political office after an early stint as a worker in a cardboard factory, succeeded boss Shinzo Abe last September, after long serving as his chief Cabinet secretary.

Suga expressed eagerness to meet with Biden early on despite global COVID-19 lockdowns. He looks to showcase security commitments with the United States, Japan's only treaty ally.

Heading to Washington, Suga told reporters he aimed to build "a relationship of trust" with Biden.

The months-old Biden administration, for its part, looks to Suga to keep going on alliance-strengthening moves by both countries.

The two governments have been working to strengthen technology supply chains independent of China during a shortage of semiconductors that's worrying businesses around the world. Japan is expected to announce an investment in 5G cellular networks, boosting alternatives to China's network, as part of that supply chain cooperation.

Both countries are expected in coming days to make deeper commitments to cutting climate-wrecking fossil fuel emissions, in line with Biden's climate summit with 40 world leaders next week.

The Biden administration may also have tougher requests of Japan, including pressing Suga for a rare public statement of support from a Japanese leader for Taiwan. China, which claims the self-governed island of Taiwan as its territory, tested U.S. and Taiwanese resolve weeks into the Biden administration by sending fighter jets and bombers near Taiwan.

Japan long has moved cautiously on steps that might worsen relations with China, though Suga has been more outspoken. His administration pushed its comfort zone in a statement stressing "peace and stability" on the Taiwan Strait. That came during a visit last month by Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, which was the Biden administration's highest-level face-to-face meeting at the time.

World leaders worry about Taiwan as a trigger for conflict between China and the United States.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned his Japanese counterpart in a call ahead of Suga's visit to see to it that China-Japan relations "do not get involved in the so-called confrontation between major countries," according to a Chinese government readout.

Japan's backing of the U.S. presence in the Pacific is growing as the nations promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific" vision of the democracies to counter China.

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But Japan's economy is intertwined with China's. That means even "with security concerns on the rise, Japan would have to take a two-pronged approach to balance competition and cooperation," said Akio Takahara, a professor and China expert at the University of Tokyo.

Japan considers China's growing military activity as well as its broad territorial claims to be a security threat. Japan is itself locked in a dispute with China over Beijing's claim to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, called Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea.

Elsewhere, Tokyo has watched with concern as China has built military installations on disputed territory it claims in the South China Sea.

U.S. ships regularly conduct so-called freedom of navigation operations, sailing into international waters that China claims as its own.

President Barack Obama was seen as cajoling China, in hopes of encouraging reforms. After initially praising Xi, Trump later took on China head-on and solo, with tariffs and insults, while building a golf-buddy relationship with Suga's predecessor, Abe. Biden has taken a different approach, reaching out to allies to try to form united fronts.

Suga and Biden "aim to show to the world that democracies can provide to the world an example," said Kenju Murakami, Japan's deputy consul-general in New York.

China also has taken note of the Biden administration's support for reviving a loose four-country coalition with Japan, India and Australia, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad. Biden and Suga on Friday are expected to announce steps through the Quad framework to help India produce COVID-19 vaccines.

Formed initially to coordinate relief efforts after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Quad had faded away for a time in part over concerns that its existence would provoke China, by suggesting the four countries were ganging up against it, noted Tanvi Madan, an expert on India and its relations in the Indo-Pacific at the Brookings Institution.

But "lately, all the things we worried about that China would do if they were provoked, they're already doing anyway," Madan said.

Gaetz and DeSantis: A friendship that may become a liability

By STEVE PEOPLES, BRENDAN FARRINGTON and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — When he launched his campaign to become Florida's governor in January 2018, few expected Ron DeSantis to prevail in America's toughest political battleground.

The 39-year-old congressman was largely unknown outside his Daytona Beach district. He didn't have the professional staff or fundraising prowess typically required to compete in such a large state. And he was going up against a more established rival for the Republican nomination.

But at his side, DeSantis had a key ally with strong connections in state politics and the respect of the White House: Matt Gaetz, the Florida congressman now embroiled in a federal sex trafficking investigation. Gaetz appeared at campaign events alongside DeSantis, played his Democratic rival Andrew Gillum in mock debate preparations and encouraged then-President Donald Trump to back DeSantis for governor.

At one campaign stop in Navarre, Florida, Gaetz jokingly referred to DeSantis as "Batman" to his "Robin."

There is no indication that DeSantis is tied to the federal probe of Gaetz, which has also ensnared several other prominent figures in Florida Republican politics. But the investigation could spark new scrutiny of their political partnership and become a liability for DeSantis as he runs for reelection ahead of a possible presidential bid in 2024.

The Associated Press spoke to nearly a dozen people with direct knowledge of how the DeSantis-Gaetz relationship evolved in recent years. Many of them spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations and observations. They describe a friendship of political convenience between two young, ambitious Republicans eager to rise in a party that was quickly being redefined by Trump.

Gaetz served as an informal political adviser to DeSantis. But as DeSantis became a more seasoned political player, the people said, the bond changed.

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"When Ron first got elected governor, he did not have any experience in Tallahassee and Mr. Gaetz did, and so he relied on Mr. Gaetz for his Tallahassee knowledge when he first got there," said Peter Feaman, a national committeeman for the Republican Party of Florida. "Once Ron got his feet underneath him up in Tallahassee, the only thing they've had in common is their support for Mr. Trump and conservative principles. Other than that, I'm not aware of any interaction between the two whatsoever."

Government agents are investigating whether Gaetz had sex with a 17-year-old and other underage girls and violated federal sex trafficking laws, people familiar with the probe have told the AP. No charges have been filed, and Gaetz has vehemently denied the allegations. The governor has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

Still, the investigation may be moving uncomfortably close to the governor's office. Besides Gaetz himself, the influential Florida political figures under federal scrutiny include Jason Pirozzolo, a hand surgeon and DeSantis campaign donor, and DeSantis' political appointee Halsey Beshears, the state's former top business regulator.

Asked specifically whether DeSantis or his staff had been questioned as part of the investigation, the governor's spokesperson Meredith Beatrice said: "This is an ongoing DOJ investigation. We have no comment."

DeSantis and Gaetz briefly overlapped in Congress. They were more frequent regulars at Fox News, where Gaetz was a recurring guest and DeSantis used a flood of appearances to gain momentum in the governor's race.

Those Fox News appearances also helped DeSantis get on Trump's radar. Gaetz built on that growing profile and was among the Republicans who encouraged Trump to endorse DeSantis in the GOP primary. Trump's ultimate backing unleashed a flood of fundraising dollars that put DeSantis on a path to victory.

Throughout the campaign, Gaetz was a steady presence. He was among those on stage with DeSantis when he was declared the winner in the governor's race.

After the victory, Gaetz was one of just four chairmen — and the only current elected official — to lead DeSantis' transition team. Gaetz, who spent six years in the Florida legislature, advised the governor-elect on hiring and policy decisions and appeared with him in public.

And as DeSantis began to fill out his administration, he tapped Gaetz's father, former Florida Senate President Don Gaetz, to serve on a transition advisory committee on education and workforce development.

While the governor and the congressman were close politically, they were in very different places in their personal lives. DeSantis was married with young children. Gaetz was single.

Modest signs of tension began to emerge as DeSantis settled into the governor's office.

One issue was Gaetz's habit of showing up at Republican political events, often with different women, dressed as if they were going out to a nightclub. Critics suggested privately that Gaetz was acting like a "frat boy." DeSantis' wife, Casey DeSantis, one of the governor's closest political advisers, was cooling to Gaetz as well.

Trump, who remains deeply popular among many GOP voters, could hold significant sway over each man's political future. While the former president is said to be fond of Gaetz and DeSantis, he has been more publicly aligned with the governor recently.

Over the weekend, DeSantis was the lone presidential prospect invited to share the stage with Trump at a private donor reception at Mar-a-Lago. Gaetz did not participate in the event, which was the party's biggest formal gathering since Trump left office.

As the investigation unfolds, DeSantis is taking steps to position himself for higher office. He recently hired veteran Republican consultant Phil Cox to lead his reelection team as part of a significant political expansion. The team is so far staying hyperfocused on his 2022 reelection, but allies privately acknowledge that a strong showing next year will put DeSantis in a strong standing for the 2024 presidential contest.

Meanwhile, Gaetz is continuing to look out for DeSantis' political ambitions — whether DeSantis wants him to or not.

Even as investigators were probing his activities this spring, Gaetz issued three separate press releases from his congressional office promoting DeSantis.

"He is a strong potential presidential candidate in 2024," Gaetz said he told Fox News, according to one of the official press releases. "The Biden team knows that, and so they're trying to somehow cast aspersions on the Florida experience because you know what, throughout America, there's a lot of Florida envy right now."

Video: Chicago boy wasn't holding gun when shot by officer

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Disturbing bodycam video released after public outcry over the Chicago police shooting of a 13-year-old boy shows the youth appearing to drop a handgun and begin raising his hands less than a second before an officer fires his gun and kills him.

A still frame taken from Officer Eric Stillman's jumpy nighttime body camera footage shows that Adam Toledo wasn't holding anything and had his hands up when Stillman shot him once in the chest about 3 a.m. on March 29. Police, who were responding to reports of shots fired in the area, say the boy had a handgun on him before the shooting. And Stillman's footage shows him shining a light on a handgun on the ground near Toledo after he shot him.

The release of the footage and other investigation materials Thursday comes at a sensitive time, with the ongoing trial in Minneapolis of former Officer Derek Chauvin in the death of George Floyd and the recent police killing of another Black man, Daunte Wright, in one of that city's suburbs. Before the Civilian Office of Police Accountability posted the material on its website, Mayor Lori Lightfoot called on the public to keep the peace and some downtown businesses boarded up their windows in the expectation that there could be unrest.

Small groups of protesters gathered at a police station and marched downtown Thursday night, but there were few signs of widespread demonstrations in the city.

"We live in a city that is traumatized by a long history of police violence and misconduct," Lightfoot said. "So while we don't have enough information to be the judge and jury of this particular situation, it is certainly understandable why so many of our residents are feeling that all too familiar surge of outrage and pain. It is even clearer that trust between our community and law enforcement is far from healed and remains badly broken."

Nineteen seconds elapsed from when Stillman got out of his squad car to when he shot Toledo. His bodycam footage shows him chasing Toledo on foot down an alley for several seconds and yelling "Police! Stop! Stop right (expletive) now!"

As the teen slows down, Stillman yells "Hands! Hands! Show me your (expletive) hands!"

Toledo then turns toward the camera, Stillman yells "Drop it!" and midway between repeating that command, he opens fire and Toledo falls down. While approaching the wounded boy, Stillman radios in for an ambulance. He can be heard imploring Toledo to "stay awake," and as other officers arrive, an officer says he can't feel a heartbeat and begins administering CPR.

In a lengthy email, Stillman's attorney Tim Grace said Toledo left the officer no choice but to shoot.

"The juvenile offender had the gun in his right hand ... looked at the officer which could be interpreted as attempting to acquire a target and began to turn to face the officer attempting to swing the gun in his direction," Grace wrote. "At this point the officer was faced with a life threatening and deadly force situation. All prior attempts to deescalate and gain compliance with all of the officer's lawful orders had failed."

But Adeena Weiss-Ortiz, an attorney for Toledo's family, told reporters the footage and other videos "speak for themselves."

Weiss-Ortiz said it's irrelevant whether Toledo was holding a gun before he turned toward the officer.

"If he had a gun, he tossed it," she said. "The officer said, 'Show me your hands.' He complied. He turned around."

The Chicago Police Department typically doesn't release the names of officers involved in such shootings this early on in an investigation, but Stillman's name, age and race — he's 34 and white — were listed in

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the investigation reports released Thursday.

Weiss-Ortiz said that she looked into Stillman's record but found no prior disciplinary issues.

Lightfoot, who along with the police superintendent had called on the police accountability board to release the video, asked the public to remain calm but decried the city's long history of police violence and misconduct, especially in Black and brown communities. She said too many young people are left vulnerable to "systemic failures that we simply must fix."

Choking up at times, Lightfoot described watching the video footage as "excruciating."

"As a mom, this is not something you want children to see," she said.

In addition to posting Stillman's bodycam footage, the review board released footage from other bodycams, four third-party videos, two audio recordings of 911 calls, and six audio recordings from ShotSpotter, the technology that led police to respond to gunshots that morning in Little Village, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on the city's southwest side.

Toledo, who was Hispanic, and a 21-year-old man fled on foot when confronted by police. The 21-year-old man was arrested on a misdemeanor charge of resisting arrest.

The review board, an independent board that investigates all shootings in Chicago involving police, initially said it couldn't release the video because it showed the shooting of a minor, but the board changed course after the mayor and police superintendent asked for it to be made public.

Lucky Camargo, an activist and lifelong resident of Little Village, decided not to watch the video. But neighbors described it to her as "an execution."

"This was wrong," she said. "I didn't need to watch the video to make that assessment on my own. I don't feel there was any justification to shoot someone."

Previous police shooting videos that went public have sparked major protests, including one released in 2015 showing a white officer shooting Black teenager Laquan McDonald 16 times, killing him. The officer was eventually convicted of murder.

Before the latest video's release, some businesses in downtown Chicago's "Magnificent Mile" shopping district boarded up their windows. Lightfoot said the city has been preparing for months for a verdict in the Chauvin trial and that it had activated a "neighborhood protection plan" ahead of Thursday's release.

"It happens now that these circumstances are sitting next to each other," she said.

Adam's mother described him as a curious and goofy seventh grader who loved animals, riding his bike and junk food. The Toledo family issued a statement urging people to avoid violent protests.

"We pray that for the sake of our city, people remain peaceful to honor Adam's memory and work constructively to promote reform," the family said.

Lightfoot and attorneys for the family and city said that in addition to the release of the video, all investigation materials should be made public, including a slowed-down compilation of what happened that morning.

"We acknowledge that the release of this video is the first step in the process toward the healing of the family, the community and our city," they said in a joint statement. "We understand that the release of this video will be incredibly painful and elicit an emotional response to all who view it, and we ask that people express themselves peacefully."

Whether the officer is charged with a crime is up to the Cook County State's Attorney's office, which gets the accountability board's report after it completes its investigation.

The Chicago Police Department has a long history of brutality and racism that has fomented mistrust among the city's many Black and Hispanic residents. Adding to that mistrust is the city's history of suppressing damning police videos.

The city fought for months to keep the public from seeing the 2014 video of a white officer shooting McDonald, and also tried to stop a TV news station from broadcasting video of a botched 2019 police raid in which an innocent, naked, Black woman wasn't allowed to put on clothes until after she was handcuffed.

Day workers leaving India's Mumbai as virus dries up jobs

By RAJANISH KAKADE Associated Press

MUMBAI, India (AP) — Migrant workers are piling into rail stations in India's financial capital Mumbai to head back to their home villages now that virus-control measures have dried up work in the hard-hit region.

"What do I do now?" asked Ramzan Ali, who'd been earning up to 500 rupees (\$7) per day as a laborer but has been out of work for two weeks.

He arrived at Kurla railroad station on Friday morning and joined a long line to buy a ticket to board a train for Balrampur, his village in northern Uttar Pradesh state. Ali, 47, hopes to find some work in the village to feed his wife and four children.

The government of Maharashtra state, home to Mumbai, imposed lockdown-like curbs on Wednesday for 15 days to check the spread of the virus. It closed most industries, businesses and public places and limited the movement of people, but didn't stop bus, train and air services.

An exodus ensued, with panicked day laborers hauling backpacks onto overcrowded trains leaving Mumbai. The migration is raising fears of the virus spreading in rural areas.

Maharashtra has been the center of the nation's recent record surge in new infections. On Friday, India recorded another high of 217,353 new cases in the past 24 hours, pushing its total since the pandemic began past 14.2 million. The Health Ministry also reported 1,185 fatalities in the past 24 hours, raising deaths to 174,308.

The rush among migrant workers was not as desperate as last year when Indian Railways suspended all passenger train services during a strict and sudden nationwide lockdown. That forced tens of thousands of impoverished workers to walk or ride trucks and buses in soaring heat as they tried to return home.

Also, northern states like Punjab, Haryana and New Delhi and western Rajasthan state haven't seen large-scale movement of migrant workers yet because it's the harvesting season. Big farms have hired workers to harvest wheat and other crops and prepare for sowing new crops.

Mohammad Aslam, 24, is a tailor in Mumbai but said he has been sitting idle for 18 days. He was in line to board a train with relatives and others heading to the town of Muzaffarpur in eastern Bihar state.

"My extended family has a farm there and I can earn some money by working there," he said.

Shiva Sanjeev, 27, was desperate to get on to a train because his 70-year-old grandfather is seriously ill in Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh state.

"I am getting frantic calls from my parents and other family members to get back to my hometown," he said.

GOP leaders diverge on Trump, putting party in limbo

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — One by one, the Republican leaders of Congress have made the trip to Mar-a-Lago to see Donald Trump.

Kevin McCarthy visited after the deadly Jan 6 Capitol insurrection, counting on the former president's help to win back control of the House in 2022. The chair of the Senate Republican campaign committee, Rick Scott, stopped by to enlist Trump in efforts to regain the Senate. Lindsey Graham goes to play golf.

But missing from the appearances has been perhaps the most powerful Republican elected official in the country, Mitch McConnell, a onetime ally who ushered the former president's legislative and judicial agenda to fruition, but now claims to want nothing to do with Trump.

The very public pilgrimages, and the noticeable refusal to make one, have placed congressional Republicans at a crossroads, with one branch of the party keeping close to Trump, hoping to harness the power of his political brand and loyal voters for their campaigns, and the other splitting away, trying to chart the GOP's post-Trump future.

With no obvious heir apparent or leader-in-waiting, the standoff between the party's two highest-ranking figures poses an uneasy test of political wills and loyalties, particularly for the rank-and-file lawmakers in

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Congress dependent on both men for their political livelihoods. Congress has become more Trump-like in the former president's absence, as a new generation of Trump-aligned lawmakers emerges, particularly in the Senate, and more centrist Republicans announce their retirements.

"We've got enough problems without fighting within ourselves," said Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., who was swept into office this year with Trump's support.

"You know, being a football coach, that's what I would tell our players and coaches," he said. "You bring your whole team down. So that's pretty much how I think about this. As a team, we don't need arguing between teammates. We just need them to be on the same page."

The stark fallout was on display at the Republican donor retreat when Trump lashed into McConnell as a "stone-cold loser" but then was feted with an honorary award from Scott, the National Republican Senatorial Committee chair launching the campaign efforts.

Asked about it later, McConnell responded with perhaps the most cutting retort of all: He simply ignored Trump.

"What I'm concentrating on is the future," said McConnell, the Senate Republican leader.

Unlike past presidents who did not win a second term, the end of Trump's presidency has not brought closure as much as it has a lingering uncertainty on Capitol Hill about the party's pathway back to power. He is promising to return to the political stage, perhaps for his own bid for the White House. But more immediately he is being enlisted by GOP leaders in support of congressional candidates to win back the House and Senate.

As McConnell tries to position Republicans as the opposition to President Joe Biden's agenda, it is clear that while he is the leader of the Senate, Trump remains, for now, the leader of the GOP.

"Is it ideal? I don't know. But is it sustainable? Sure," said Scott Jennings, a GOP strategist and longtime McConnell confidant. "It's easy to see how they both could frankly be successful in their individual goals without ever speaking another word to each other."

Jennings said McConnell and Trump aren't jockeying for power as much as bringing complementary skills to the campaigns ahead. The former president can rev up his base of supporters with rally-style speeches while McConnell can assemble the campaign strategies and candidates to regain control of the Senate.

"One of them is in party-building mode, which is McConnell, and the other one is in ax-grinding mode," he said.

"They don't have to be golfing buddies," he said.

The congressional leaders want, and expect, Trump to play a role in next year's midterm elections as they try to wrest control from Democrats, who have the slimmest majorities in the House and Senate in recent memory.

"God, yes," Graham, R-S.C., said recently. "He's sitting on a mountain of money and has a 90% approval rating among Republicans."

McCarthy, the House Republican leader, said Trump has been helpful so far in House GOP campaign efforts. "Like all of the former presidents, they help, they're engaged in many different ways," McCarthy said.

Yet as Trump assembles a political operation from his private club in Florida, his biggest priority so far appears to be trying to defeat some of the party's most prominent lawmakers, including Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, who were among those voting to impeach him over the Jan. 6 insurrection.

While Trump has also endorsed some GOP incumbents, other Republican lawmakers, particularly in the Senate, have simply announced they are retiring.

Asked specifically if Trump should quit attacking the Republican Party's leaders, McCarthy demurred.

"The No. 1 thing I want to have happen is make sure the next century is the American century," he said. "If the next century is going to be ours, we're going to have to change administrations, we're going to have to change Congress. That's my focus."

The deadly riot has become a political line of demarcation on Capitol Hill over those GOP lawmakers who stood with Trump to overturn Biden's victory during the Electoral College tally. Trump was impeached for

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inciting the insurrection as he urged a mob of supporters to “fight like hell” for his presidency.

One of the lawmakers Trump recently endorsed is Alabama GOP Rep. Mo Brooks, who is running for the Senate seat that will be vacant with the retirement of longtime GOP Sen. Richard Shelby.

Brooks had been a leader of the House efforts to challenge the election results and joined the rally outside the White House on Jan. 6. Trump encouraged the mob that day to head to the Capitol. Five people died, including a Trump supporter shot by police and a police officer who died later after fighting the mob of Trump loyalists who stormed the Capitol.

At a dinner last month at Mar-a-Lago, Scott said he encouraged the president’s support to win back the Senate — after the primaries are settled.

Many Republicans recall the 2010 election when they won back control of the House, but not the Senate, because some of the candidates who won primary elections on the tea party wave were too conservative or hardline to appeal to voters statewide.

Shelby said he wished the former president and McConnell would “put their differences aside,” minding President Ronald Reagan’s admonition not to battle each other.

“Republicans fighting Republicans benefits who? The Democrats,” said Shelby.

“I wish he’d stay out of all the Senate races, but he’s not,” Shelby said about Trump.

“He’s got a lot of energy, he’s got a dedicated following. I don’t think he’s looking for retirement.”

Amid hesitancy, Louisiana gets creative in vaccine outreach

By MELINDA DESLATTE Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Brass bands playing at a 24-hour drive-thru coronavirus vaccine event. Doses delivered to commercial fishermen minutes from the docks. Pop-up immunization clinics at a Buddhist temple, homeless shelters, truck stops and casinos, with shots available at night or on weekends.

And now, door-to-door outreach getting underway in neighborhoods where few people have gotten vaccinated.

Louisiana is making a full-court press to get shots in arms, with aggressive — and sometimes creative — outreach to make it as easy as possible to get vaccinated. The effort comes as vaccine supplies are surging but demand is not.

The state has enlisted health care workers, colleges, community groups and church pastors to help cajole the hesitant and set up vaccination events. Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards has thrown open vaccine access to anyone age 16 or older. The health department has launched a call center to answer vaccine questions and set up appointments for those without internet access or limited tech skills.

Civic organizations and faith-based groups working with the state have started using get-out-the-vote tactics, knocking on doors and making phone calls, to pitch the vaccine.

But even with widespread ease of access, Louisiana officials struggle with a problem almost as vexing as COVID-19 itself: How to persuade those who are iffy about the shot to roll up their sleeves.

“I, quite frankly, don’t know what folks are waiting for. It just doesn’t make sense to me, but I’m going to continue to appeal to them,” Edwards said.

Health officials anticipate a difficult time reaching the threshold scientists believe is needed to stop uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, a benchmark of 70% or higher of the population having immunity either through vaccination or past infection. The problem has taken on particular urgency as more virulent and contagious virus strains reach the United States.

State surveys indicate 40% or more of Louisiana residents are hesitant about getting the vaccine or entirely unwilling to do so. And while Louisiana is administering doses at rates greater than some other Southern states, it remains among the bottom six in vaccinating adults 18 and older, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Other states also are trying novel approaches, either because they’ve seen noticeable dips in vaccine interest or have concerns about equitable access.

Alaska’s health department is weighing creating vaccine clinics in airports. Ohio’s health agency asked

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vaccine providers to develop sites near bus stops and to consider offering mobile immunization services. In Connecticut, the health department launched an effort to call residents directly to schedule appointments. Mississippi is working with local organizations to bring vaccinations directly to homebound elderly people. Alabama's health agency surveyed vaccine reluctance to determine how it should craft messaging to appeal to the hesitant.

Dr. Catherine O'Neal, chief medical officer of Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Louisiana's capital, Baton Rouge, said she's hearing from people who believe vaccine misinformation from social media, but also from those who simply don't have a sense of urgency about getting a shot. Others worry about side effects.

"We have enough vaccine. ... If you want an appointment, you can get it within a week," O'Neal said. But for many "there's no driving force on when they'll get it."

Nearly 31% of the state's population has received at least one dose of a vaccine that can require two doses, according to state data. More than 22% have been fully immunized.

Shane Pizani, a former Marine who lives in a New Orleans suburb, contracted COVID-19 shortly after Thanksgiving, with lingering symptoms for more than a month. Still, he was jittery about the vaccine.

To alleviate his worries, he did research and discussed it with his doctor, gaining information he said put him more at ease. When he got his first shot in mid-February, he had a panic attack.

Still, he got the second dose and then went to work to persuade his mom — who repeated anti-vaccine conspiracy theories she saw on social media.

"I just kept on, kept on, kept on. I told her, 'We're going to stop coming around with the kids, because I cannot live with myself if I gave you COVID and something happened to you,'" Pizani said. "So, she finally went and got her appointment."

Kerri Tobin, an education professor at Louisiana State University, initially worried the vaccine came together too quickly to be safe. Then, she watched as more friends in the health care industry and others she trusted posted on social media about receiving their doses.

"I see someone else doing it and they are OK. And that keeps happening," she said.

Tobin received her second dose of the Pfizer vaccine at the end of March.

Health officials believe that sort of word-of-mouth among friends and family will help boost vaccinations.

Surveys show those who are reticent or don't want the vaccine cross racial groups and regions. A recent LSU survey showed greater uninterest from Republicans than Democrats. State officials have particular concern about southwest Louisiana, where people are struggling with recovery from back-to-back hurricanes and appear less focused on the pandemic.

In each instance, Louisiana's health department and state officials are trying to find a persuasive approach. For example, data shows Black people have gotten vaccinated at lower rates so the state reached out to African American pastors and is hosting immunization events at their churches. The state's historically Black college system is doing its own targeted outreach enlisting alumni, and faith-based and social organizations to encourage people to get vaccinated.

Some parishes have started delivering vaccines to seniors who are disabled at home and worked out deals with rideshare services to offer free transportation to vaccination events.

Such vaccine outreach may be further complicated by this week's pause of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine after reports of rare blood clots in six women who received it. Experts say it's too early to tell whether that will increase reluctance in Louisiana and elsewhere.

Mike Bayham, secretary of the Republican Party of Louisiana, had a rough battle with COVID-19 in March 2020. He was bedridden for a week and dealing with symptoms for weeks longer.

He's now received his first shot — and he's encouraging fellow Republicans to do the same. Bayham tells friends and colleagues the vaccine is one of the greatest achievements of Donald Trump's presidency, and he shares details of what it feels like to have COVID-19.

"You don't want this virus. Whatever the vaccine can do to you, the virus is far worse," Bayham said.

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US says Russia was given Trump campaign polling data in 2016

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was one of the more tantalizing, yet unresolved, questions of the investigation into possible connections between Russia and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign: Why was a business associate of campaign chairman Paul Manafort given internal polling data — and what did he do with it?

A Treasury Department statement Thursday offered a potentially significant clue, asserting that Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian and Ukrainian political consultant, had shared sensitive campaign and polling information with Russian intelligence services.

Kilimnik has long been alleged by U.S. officials as having ties to Russian intelligence. But the statement in a broader Treasury Department sanctions announcement was the first time the U.S. government had so directly drawn a connection from the Trump campaign to the Kremlin's intelligence services. The revelation was all the more startling because it went beyond any allegation made in either special counsel Robert Mueller's 2019 report or in an even more damning and detailed document released last year by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Both those investigations were unable to determine what Kilimnik did with the data and whether he shared it further.

The issue resurfaced Thursday because Kilimnik was one of 32 people and entities sanctioned by the U.S. government for interference in the 2020 election. Officials say Kilimnik sought to promote the bogus narrative that Ukraine, not Russia, had interfered in the 2016 election.

Kilimnik was a key but mysterious figure in Mueller's investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign. A business associate of Manafort's who worked closely with him, even managing his firm's office in Kyiv, Kilimnik is mentioned by name 156 times in the Mueller report. He was also indicted alongside Manafort on witness tampering allegations, but has not appeared in the U.S. to face those charges. The FBI has issued a \$250,000 award for information leading to his arrest.

A key episode examined by Mueller involved Manafort's decision to share campaign polling data with Kilimnik — something prosecutors say Manafort lied about when questioned about it. Investigators scrutinized a series of secretive encounters between the men, including one August 2016 session at the Grand Havana Club in New York.

There, according to statements provided by Mueller, Manafort briefed Kilimnik on internal campaign data and messaging and they discussed battleground states.

The exchange of polling data was an eye-catching data point, especially since it raised questions that perhaps Russia could have exploited such inside information to target influence campaigns aimed at boosting Trump's election bid in 2016.

But Mueller's team said it couldn't "reliably determine" Manafort's purpose in sharing it, nor assess what Kilimnik may have done with it — in part due to questions over Manafort's credibility. The Senate committee also came up empty, though its report drew attention for its characterization of Kilimnik as a Russian intelligence officer.

It was not clear what new information, if any, led to the Treasury Department's assessment that Kilimnik had "provided the Russian Intelligence Services with sensitive information on polling and campaign strategy." A Treasury Department spokesman did not return an email seeking comment.

China's growth surges to 18.3% but rebound leveling off

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China's economy grew by double digits in the latest quarter but an explosive rebound from the coronavirus pandemic is slowing abruptly as manufacturing and consumer spending return to normal.

The economy grew by 18.3% over a year ago, official data showed Friday, a figure that was magnified by comparison with early 2020, when factories and shops were closed and activity plunged. Growth com-

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pared with 2020's final quarter, when a recovery was under way, slowed to 0.6%, among the weakest of the past decade.

The latest figures "mask a sharp slowdown" in the world's second-largest economy as stimulus spending and easy credit are wound down, Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report.

"China's post-COVID rebound is leveling off," Evans-Pritchard said.

Manufacturing, auto sales and consumer spending have recovered to above pre-pandemic levels since the ruling Communist Party declared victory over the coronavirus last March and allowed factories and stores to reopen. Restaurants and shopping malls are filling up, though visitors still are checked for the virus's telltale fever.

The economy "delivered a stable performance with a consolidated foundation and good momentum of growth," the National Bureau of Statistics said in a report.

Forecasters expect economic growth of at least 7% this year but say China's outlook is clouded by trade tension with Washington and disruptions in global supplies of processor chips needed by smartphone makers and other tech industries the ruling party is counting on to propel a self-sustaining economy and reduce reliance on trade.

The latest figures are in line with expectations due to the low basis for comparison in early 2020. The economy shrank by 6.8% in the first quarter, the worst performance since at least the mid-1960s.

Activity started to recover in the second quarter of 2020, when the economy expanded by 3.2% over a year earlier. That accelerated to 4.9% in the third quarter and 6.5% in the final three months of the year.

For the full year, China eked out 2.3% growth, becoming the only major economy to expand while United States, Europe and Japan struggled with renewed disease outbreaks.

This year, the International Monetary Fund and private sector forecasters expect growth to rise to above 8%. The ruling party's official target is "above 6%."

Government data indicate consumer spending, a pillar of the ruling party's plan to reduce reliance on exports, is accelerating while growth in factory output and investment are slowing.

Retail spending rose 34.2% in March, up from 33.9% for the full first quarter, according to the NBS. Factory output rose 24.5% in the first quarter while investment in real estate, factories and other fixed assets increased 25.6%.

"The focus should be on consumption data, which kept improving," Chaoping Zhu of JP Morgan Asset Management said in a report.

Quarterly growth compared with the previous quarter should stabilize at 1%-2%, according to Iris Pang of ING. Pang raised her full-year growth forecast to 8.2% from 7%.

Still, some warn a Chinese recovery still isn't certain because global demand is weak as some governments re-impose anti-disease curbs that are disrupting business and trade.

Tech industries are hampered by U.S. sanctions that block access to chips and other technology for Chinese tech giant Huawei and other companies in a feud with Beijing over technology and security.

President Joe Biden says he wants better relations with Beijing but has yet to indicate whether he will roll back sanctions or tariff hikes imposed on Chinese goods by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

"China-U.S. relations will be critical for China's economic growth, mostly in technology development," said Pang in a report. "It is likely that the U.S. will continue to put more pressure on China."

Spending on restaurants jumped 75.8% in the first quarter over a year ago, a period when most were closed for weeks. E-commerce rose 29.9%.

Overall growth shrugged off the impact of a government appeal to China's public to avoid travel during February's Lunar New Year holiday, usually the busiest travel and consumer spending period.

March exports, reported earlier, rose 30.6% over a year earlier as global consumer demand revived. Exports to the United States jumped 53.6% despite tariff hikes still in place on Chinese goods in a trade war launched by Trump.

Wright family demands more severe charges for Minn. ex-cop

By MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — Daunte Wright's family joined community leaders in demanding more severe charges against the white former police officer who fatally shot the young Black man in a Minneapolis suburb, where hundreds of protesters again filled the streets in front of the police station.

The protesters — shouting obscenities, shaking the police station's security fence and occasionally lobbing water bottles — began thinning out as the 10 p.m. curfew approached in Brooklyn Center.

Former Brooklyn Center police Officer Kim Potter was charged with second-degree manslaughter in Sunday's shooting of Wright, 20, during a traffic stop. The former police chief of Brooklyn Center, a majority nonwhite suburb, said Potter mistakenly fired her handgun when she meant to use her Taser. Both the chief and Potter resigned Tuesday.

Potter — who was released on \$100,000 bond hours after her Wednesday arrest — appeared alongside her attorney, Earl Gray, at her initial appearance Thursday over Zoom, saying little. Gray kept his camera on himself for most of the hearing, swiveling it only briefly to show Potter. Her next court appearance was set for May 17.

Wright's death has been followed by protests every night this week outside the city's police station, with demonstrators sometimes clashing with officers who have driven them away with gas grenades, rubber bullets and long lines of riot police.

While the Thursday night protest in Brooklyn Center focused largely on Wright's death, some in the crowds noted it came hours after police in Chicago released graphic body camera video of an officer fatally shooting 13-year-old Adam Toledo, a Hispanic boy, in March.

"It is happening in every single city, every single day across the country," Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told protesters early in the evening, before leading them in a chant of "Say his name! Adam Toledo!"

Protesters also tied air fresheners to the fencing at the police station, a nod to Wright's mother saying that her son told her he had been pulled over for an air freshener dangling from his mirror. Police say Wright was stopped for expired registration.

Wright's family members, like the protesters, say there's no justification for the shooting.

"Unfortunately, there's never going to be justice for us," Wright's mother, Katie Wright, said at a news conference Thursday. "Justice isn't even a word to me. I do want accountability."

Wright family attorney Ben Crump and others point to the 2017 case of Mohamed Noor. The Black former Minneapolis police officer fatally shot Justine Ruszczyk Damond, a white woman, in the alley behind her home after she called 911 to report what she thought was a woman being assaulted.

Noor was convicted of third-degree murder in addition to second-degree manslaughter and sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison. Potter's charge carries a maximum 10-year prison sentence. Intent isn't a necessary component of either charge. A key difference is that third-degree murder requires someone to act with a "depraved mind," a term that has been the subject of legal disputes, but includes an act eminently dangerous to others, performed without regard for human life.

Noor testified that he fired to protect his partner's life after hearing a loud bang on the squad car and seeing a woman at his partner's window raising her arm. Prosecutors criticized Noor for shooting without seeing a weapon or Damond's hands.

Many critics of the police believe the race of those involved in the Wright shooting played a role in which charges were brought.

"If the officer was Black, perhaps even a minority man, and the victim was a young, white female affluent kid, the chief would have fired him immediately and the county prosecutor would have charged him with murder, without a doubt," Hussein said earlier Thursday.

Potter could have been charged with third-degree murder, which carries a 25-year maximum sentence, said Rachel Moran, a law professor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. But she noted that Potter will likely argue that using the gun was a mistake, while Noor never said he didn't intend to

use his weapon.

"This is kind of the compromise charge, which isn't to say it's not serious. It is," Moran said. "But they're not reaching for the most serious charge they could theoretically file. They're also not washing their hands and saying she has no criminal liability."

The prosecutor who brought the case, Washington County Attorney Pete Orput, did not return messages seeking comment.

Wright's death came as the broader Minneapolis area awaits the outcome of the trial of Derek Chauvin, one of four officers charged in George Floyd's death last May. Crump pointed to that trial as having the potential to set a precedent for "police officers being held accountable and sent to prison for killing Black people."

Police say Wright was pulled over for expired tags, but they sought to arrest him after discovering he had 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 video shows Wright struggling with police after they say they're going to arrest him. Potter, a 26-year veteran, pulls her service pistol and is heard repeatedly yelling "Taser!" before firing. She then says, "Holy (expletive), I shot him."

Experts say cases of officers mistakenly firing their gun instead of a Taser are rare, usually less than once a year nationwide.

US expels Russian diplomats, imposes sanctions for hacking

By ERIC TUCKER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration has announced the U.S. is expelling 10 Russian diplomats and imposing sanctions against dozens of people and companies, holding the Kremlin accountable for interference in last year's presidential election and the hacking of federal agencies.

The sweeping measures announced Thursday are meant to punish Russia for actions that U.S. officials say cut to the core of American democracy and to deter future acts by imposing economic costs on Moscow, including by targeting its ability to borrow money. The sanctions are certain to exacerbate tensions with Russia, which promised a response, even as President Joe Biden said the administration could have taken even more punitive measures but chose not to in the interests of maintaining stability.

"We cannot allow a foreign power to interfere in our democratic process with impunity," Biden said at the White House.

Sanctions against six Russian companies that support the country's cyber efforts represent the first retaliatory measures against the Kremlin for the hack familiarly known as the SolarWinds breach, with the U.S. explicitly linking the intrusion to the SVR, a Russian intelligence agency. Though such intelligence-gathering missions are not uncommon, officials said they were determined to respond because of the operation's broad scope and the high cost of the intrusion on private companies.

The U.S. also announced sanctions on 32 individuals and entities accused of attempting to interfere in last year's presidential election, including by spreading disinformation. U.S. officials alleged in a declassified report last month that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized influence operations to help Donald Trump in his unsuccessful bid for reelection as president, though there's no evidence Russia or anyone else changed votes.

The actions, foreshadowed by the administration for weeks, signal a harder line against Putin, whom Trump was reluctant to criticize even as his administration pursued sanctions against Moscow. They are the administration's second major foreign policy move in two days, following the announcement of troop withdrawals from Afghanistan. Until now, Biden has largely focused on the coronavirus pandemic and economy in his first months in office.

Biden said Thursday that when he advised Putin days earlier of the forthcoming measures — which included expulsion of the 10 diplomats, some of them representatives of Russian intelligence services — he told the Russian leader "that we could have gone further but I chose not to do so. I chose to be

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proportionate.”

“We want,” he said, “a stable, predictable relationship.”

Even so, Russian officials spoke of a swift response, with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warning that “a series of retaliatory measures will come in the nearest time.”

Other American measures are expected as well, though the administration is not likely to announce them. Officials have been advising that their response to Russia would be in ways both seen and unseen.

The sanctions announced Thursday are the latest in a series of actions that successive presidential administrations have taken to counter Russian behavior seen as antagonistic. It is unclear whether the new U.S. actions will result in changed behavior, especially since past measures by the U.S. — both Trump and Barack Obama expelled individual diplomats during their presidencies — have failed to bring an end to Russian hacking.

But experts suggest this latest round, even while not guaranteed to curb cyberattacks, might have more resonance because of its financial impact: The order makes it more difficult for Russia to borrow money by barring U.S. banks from buying Russian bonds directly from the Russian Central Bank, Russian National Wealth Fund and Finance Ministry. It could complicate Russian efforts to raise capital and give companies pause about doing business in Russia.

The impact of the sanctions and the U.S. willingness to impose costs will be weighed by Putin as he evaluates his next steps, though he is unlikely to make “a 180” degree pivot in his behavior, said Daniel Fried, a former assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs.

“The issue is, how can we push back against Putin’s aggression, while at the same time keeping open channels of communication and continuing to cooperate with Russia in areas of mutual interest,” Fried said. “And it seems to me the Biden administration has done a pretty good job framing up the relationship in exactly this way.”

Eric Lorber, a former Treasury Department official now with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said the administration, is “surely trying to balance putting pressure on Russia, pushing back on Russia, while at the same time, not engaging in full-fledged economic warfare.”

The White House did not impose sanctions related to separate reports that Russia encouraged the Taliban to attack U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan, saying instead that Biden was using diplomatic, military and intelligence channels to respond.

Reports of alleged “bounties” surfaced last year, with the Trump administration coming under fire for not raising the issue directly with Russia. Administration officials said Thursday they had only low to moderate confidence in that intelligence, in part because of the ways in which the information was obtained, including from interrogations of Afghan detainees.

Among the companies sanctioned are websites that U.S. officials say operate as fronts for Russian intelligence agencies and spread disinformation, including articles alleging widespread voter fraud in 2020. The individuals who were targeted include Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian and Ukrainian political consultant who worked with former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and who was indicted in special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation.

The Treasury Department said on Thursday that Kilimnik had provided “sensitive information on polling and campaign strategy” to Russian intelligence services. That went further than Mueller’s office, which said in its 2019 report that it had been unable to determine what Kilimnik had done with the polling data after getting it from the Trump campaign.

Also on the sanctions list was the Kremlin’s first deputy chief of staff, Alexei Gromov, several individuals linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with close ties to Russia’s president, nicknamed “Putin’s chef” for serving Kremlin functions, and several front companies the U.S. says helped Prigozhin evade sanctions imposed earlier.

The U.S. also sanctioned eight individuals and entities tied to Russia’s occupation in Crimea.

Biden informed Putin that the sanctions were coming earlier this week. Administration officials have made clear in their contacts with the Russia side that they are hoping to avoid a “downward spiral” in the rela-

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tionship, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity following the sanctions announcement.

The two leaders had a tense call in which Biden told Putin to “de-escalate tensions” following a Russian military buildup on Ukraine’s border, and said the U.S. would “act firmly in defense of its national interests” regarding Russian intrusions and election interference.

In a television interview last month, Biden replied “I do” when asked if he thought Putin was a “killer.” He said the days of the U.S. “rolling over” to Putin were done. Putin later 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.

U.S. officials are still grappling with the aftereffects of the SolarWinds intrusion, which affected agencies including the Treasury, Justice and Homeland Security departments. The breach exposed vulnerabilities in the supply chain as well as weaknesses in the federal government’s own cyber defenses.

China ramps up vaccination drive with free eggs, other goods

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China’s success at controlling the coronavirus outbreak has resulted in a population that has seemed almost reluctant to get vaccinated. So it is accelerating its inoculation campaign by offering incentives — free eggs, store coupons and discounts on groceries and merchandise — to those getting a shot.

After a slow start, China is now giving millions of shots a day. On March 26 alone, it administered 6.1 million shots. A top government doctor, Zhong Nanshan, has announced a June goal of vaccinating 560 million of the country’s 1.4 billion people.

The challenge lies partly in the sheer scale of the effort and the need to convince a population that currently feels safe from infections.

When patients first showed up at hospitals in Wuhan in late 2019 with fevers, coughs and breathing difficulties, the government locked down the city and others in Hubei province for more than two months starting in January 2020. Wuhan later became known as the epicenter of the outbreak.

Since then, China has controlled the virus through stringent border controls and quick lockdowns whenever new outbreaks crop up. People can dine out in restaurants and the risk of infection is low, so many don’t seem to be in a hurry to get the vaccine.

“I think everyone has a sense of security and comfort, and there’s no big rush to get vaccinated unless you are asked to do so,” said Helen Chen, a health care specialist at a market research firm in Shanghai.

But China also wants to open up as the world seeks to return to pre-pandemic normalcy and Beijing readies to welcome tens of thousands of visitors as host of the Winter Olympics in February 2022. While successful with swift lockdowns and a robust contact tracing system via smartphones, the government is also weighing those measures in balance with an eventual return to normalcy.

For now, in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the government has relied mostly on sustained messaging and freebies to convince people to get vaccinated.

Shopping malls have offered points at stores or coupons. A temple in Beijing offered free entry to anyone showing proof of vaccination. Shanghai is using buses in its campaign to set up mobile vaccination points.

And then there are the free eggs.

“Good news. Starting from today, residents 60 years old and above who have gotten their first shot are eligible for five ‘jin’ (2.5 kilograms or 5 1/2 pounds) of eggs. First come, first serve,” said a poster by a city-run health center in Beijing.

Wang Feng was too young for the eggs from the clinic, but the 25-year-old chef said he got the vaccine anyway because he could not go to work without it.

“I thought if it worked, then might as well,” he added.

Some people have expressed doubts about how good the existing vaccines are, Chinese or not, given how quickly they were developed.

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"I don't think such an effective vaccine can be made so quickly," said Amy Lu, who works in a university in Shanghai.

The five vaccines currently being used in China have an efficacy range of 50.7% to 79.3%, based on what the companies have said. That doesn't mean they have no value — most experts say that anything above 50% is useful getting the pandemic under control, along with preventing hospitalizations and deaths.

"Even if everyone gets two doses, you may not be able to achieve herd immunity," said Wang Chenguang, a former professor at Peking Union Medical College and an immunology expert. Herd immunity occurs when enough of the population has immunity, either from vaccinations or past infection, to stop the uncontrolled spread of an infectious disease.

China may need to vaccinate at least 1 billion people to achieve that, said Wang Huaqing, a top immunology official with China's Center for Disease Control, in an interview with state media this week. As of early April, roughly 34 million people had received two shots and about 65 million got one dose.

Gao Fu, the head of the CDC, said last weekend that China is considering various strategies such as mixing different vaccines to try to increase effectiveness. Outside experts say China could eventually deploy other, more effective vaccines, such as the Pfizer or Moderna shots.

"The best thing to do is to actually allow the use of other better vaccines and make them to be available to the Chinese people, but that's probably very challenging politically," said Jin Dong-yan, an expert on vaccines at the University of Hong Kong's medical school.

Chinese drugmaker Fosun Pharmaceutical Group has partnered with Germany's BioNTech to sell the Pfizer vaccine in China. However, it has only been approved in Hong Kong and Macao, special territories in China with their own regulatory agencies. A clinical trial for mainland approval is underway.

Vaccination is supposed to be voluntary, but overzealous efforts by some local governments and companies prompted health officials to issue a warning this week against forced vaccinations.

A hospital in Danzhou on the southern island province of Hainan issued an apology after it issued a notice to staff saying, "Those who are not vaccinated could be fired."

In Zhejiang province, an April 2 announcement said all government departments, Communist Party cadres and people working in universities would be required to take the lead in getting shots.

The national government also required vaccination for all residents in Ruili, a border town with Myanmar, because of a recent outbreak.

Getting vaccinated can also mean being able to avoid some of the more onerous obstacles that some local institutions have set up in the name of pandemic control.

Beijing student Bright Li said he got vaccinated so he would no longer need approval to leave campus. Although barely enforced, Li became concerned after the university put up posters publicly denouncing a student who left campus without permission last winter after that student had gone to an area with a confirmed COVID-19 case.

The vaccine drive has run into scattered shortages and delays.

In Haikou, the capital of Hainan, health authorities issued a temporary stay on providing a second shot to those not involved with two major upcoming events, "owing to relative tightness" in the vaccine supply. Shortages were also reported in two southern cities, Foshan in Guangdong Province and the port of Xiamen in Fujian province.

China's vaccine makers have expanded production capacity massively, and health officials say they are confident demand can be met by the end of the year.

Shortage of intubation drugs threatens Brazil health sector

By DIANE JEANTET and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Reports are emerging of Brazilian health workers forced to intubate patients without the aid of sedatives, after weeks of warnings that hospitals and state governments risked running out of critical medicines.

One doctor at the Albert Schweitzer municipal hospital in Rio de Janeiro told the Associated Press that

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for days health workers diluted sedatives to make their stock last longer. Once it ran out, nurses and doctors had to begin using neuromuscular blockers and tying patients to their beds, the doctor said.

"You relax the muscles and do the procedure easily, but we don't have sedation," said the doctor, who agreed to discuss the sensitive situation only if not quoted by name. "Some try to talk, resist. They're conscious."

Lack of required medicines is the latest pandemic problem to befall Brazil, which is experiencing a brutal COVID-19 outbreak that has flooded the nation's intensive care units. The daily death count is averaging about 3,000, accounting for a quarter of deaths globally and making Brazil the epicenter of the pandemic.

"Intubation kits" include anesthetics, sedatives and other medications used to put severely ill patients on ventilators. The press office of Rio city's health secretariat said in an email that occasional shortages at the Albert Schweitzer facility are due to difficulties obtaining supplies on the global market and that "substitutions are made so that there is no damage to the assistance provided." It didn't comment on the need to tie patients to beds.

The newspaper O Globo on Thursday reported similar ordeals in several other hospitals in the Rio metropolitan region, with people desperately calling other facilities seeking sedatives for their loved ones.

It's unclear whether the problem seen in Rio remains an isolated case, but others are sounding the alarm about impending shortages.

Sao Paulo state's health secretary, Jean Carlo Gorinchteyn, said at a news conference Wednesday that the situation was dire in the hospitals of Brazil's most-populous state. On Thursday, more than 640 hospitals were on the verge of collapse, with shortages possible within days, officials said.

"We need the federal government's support," Gorinchteyn said. "This is not a necessity for Sao Paulo; it is a necessity for the whole country."

His state's health officials sent nine requests for intubation medication to the Health Ministry over the past 40 days, according to a statement Wednesday. Its last delivery was enough to cover just 6% of monthly needs in the state's public health network, officials told AP.

Federal Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga, who took over the post last month, said Wednesday that a shipment of sedatives was expected to arrive in Brazil "in the next ten days." It is the result of a contract signed with the Pan American Health Organization.

He said two separate efforts to acquire medications on the international market are underway "to end this day-to-day struggle."

For many weeks, the ministry has also been facing logistical constraints on getting oxygen delivered to hospitals across the country. Queiroga said it remains "a daily concern."

A more contagious coronavirus variant, known as P.1, has been spreading across Brazil this year. It may also be more aggressive than the original strain, and health workers have reported patients requiring far more oxygen than last year.

The private sector has stepped up to help address some of the supply shortfall. A group of seven large companies donated 3.4 million doses of intubation drugs — enough for the management of 500 beds for six weeks — to the Health Ministry.

A first batch of 2.3 million was scheduled to arrive from China late Thursday at Sao Paulo's international airport and would be distributed to states with critical shortages, the ministry said in an emailed response to AP questions about supply bottlenecks.

Last month, the Health Ministry requisitioned intubation medications from laboratories, reportedly as a means to distribute to the neediest hospitals. That has caused others facilities' stocks to dwindle, said Edson Rogatti, director of an association of more than 2,000 hospitals nationwide.

"If we run out, the health sector will be in chaos," Rogatti said on Globo News TV.

Shortages aren't limited to the public sector. Brazil's private hospital association published a survey Thursday in which nine of 71 institutions reported having supplies for five days or less. About half said they had enough for a week.

Private facilities are looking to import medications from India, but still need regulatory approval, the association told AP.

The city of Itaiopolis in southern Santa Catarina state this week reported shortages of both sedatives and oxygen. Neighboring Rio Grande do Sul state also reported supplies running out.

"The situation is desperate," Rio Grande do Sul's health secretary, Arita Bergmann, said in a statement Thursday. "We urgently need the Health Ministry to replenish hospitals' stocks, or else intubated patients can wake up without medication, and that would be terrible."

Chauvin skips testifying as trial in Floyd death nears end

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Former Officer Derek Chauvin's trial in George Floyd's death will be in a jury's hands by early next week, after his brief defense wrapped up with Chauvin passing on a chance to take the stand and tell the public for the first time what he was thinking when he pressed his knee against Floyd's neck.

Closing arguments are set to begin Monday, after which a racially diverse jury will begin deliberating at a barbed-wire-ringed courthouse in a city on edge — not just because of the Chauvin case but because of the deadly police shooting of a 20-year-old Black man in a Minneapolis suburb last weekend.

Before the jury was brought in Thursday, Chauvin, his COVID-19 mask removed in a rare courtroom moment, ended weeks of speculation by informing the judge he would invoke his Fifth Amendment right not to testify.

Shortly afterward, the defense rested its case, after a total of two days of testimony, compared with two weeks for the prosecution.

Judge Peter Cahill reminded the jurors they will be sequestered starting Monday and said: "If I were you, I would plan for long and hope for short."

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death after the 46-year-old Black man was arrested on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market last May.

Bystander video of Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe as bystanders yelled at Chauvin to get off him triggered worldwide protests, violence and a furious examination of racism and policing in the U.S.

The most serious charge against the now-fired white officer, second-degree murder, carries up to 40 years in prison, though state guidelines call for about 12.

Prosecutors say Floyd died because the officer's knee was pressed against Floyd's neck or close to it for 9 1/2 minutes as he lay on the pavement on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind him and his face jammed against the ground.

Law enforcement veterans inside and outside the Minneapolis department testified for the prosecution that Chauvin used excessive force and went against his training, while medical experts said Floyd died of asphyxia, or lack of oxygen, because his breathing was constricted by the way he was held down.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson called a police use-of-force expert and a forensic pathologist to help make the case that Chauvin acted reasonably against a struggling suspect and that Floyd died because of an underlying heart condition and his illegal drug use. Floyd had high blood pressure and narrowed arteries, and fentanyl and methamphetamine were found in his system.

The only time Chauvin has been heard defending himself was when the jury listened to body-camera footage from the scene. After an ambulance had taken Floyd away, Chauvin told a bystander: "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy... and it looks like he's probably on something."

The decision of whether Chauvin should testify carried risks either way.

Taking the stand could have opened him up to devastating cross-examination, with prosecutors replaying the video of the arrest and forcing Chauvin to explain, one frame at a time, why he kept pressing down on Floyd.

But testifying could have also given the jury the opportunity to look at his unmasked face and see or hear any remorse or sympathy he might feel.

Also, what was going through Chauvin's mind could be crucial: Legal experts say that an officer who believes his or her life was at risk can be found to have acted legally even if, in hindsight, it turns out there

was no such danger.

In one final bit of testimony on Thursday, the prosecution briefly recalled a lung and critical care expert to knock down a defense witness' theory that carbon monoxide poisoning from a squad car's exhaust might have contributed to Floyd's death. Dr. Martin Tobin noted hospital tests that showed Floyd's level was at most 2%, within the normal range.

With the trial in session, Minneapolis has been bracing for a possible repeat of the protests and violence that broke out last spring over Floyd's death.

The case has unfolded amid days of protests in the adjoining suburb of Brooklyn Center, after Officer Kim Potter, who is white, apparently mistook her gun for a Taser and fatally shot Daunte Wright. She resigned and was charged with manslaughter.

No response as divers knock on capsized ship hull

By STACEY PLAISANCE, KEVIN MCGILL and JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

PORT FOURCHON, La. (AP) — Families anxiously awaited news of the 12 people missing from a capsized oil industry vessel Thursday while divers searching for survivors knocked on the ship's hull without response.

Rescuers don't know whether any of the missing might be caught inside the lift boat called the Seacor Power that flipped over Tuesday in hurricane-force winds and high seas about 8 miles (13 kilometers) off the coast of Louisiana, Coast Guard spokesmen said.

"There is the potential they are still there, but we don't know," Petty Officer 2nd Class Jonathan Lally said Thursday. "We're still searching for 12 people because there are 12 still missing."

The Coast Guard said on Twitter that divers were able to conduct operations Thursday but didn't hear anything when they knocked on the ship's hull. The Guard said dive operations were over and would resume Friday. They will continue to search overnight by air and sea.

A handful of the missing workers' family gathered at a two-story fire station at Port Fourchon, a sprawling port where much of the industry that services the oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico is based.

Workers from across Louisiana and other parts of the country arrive at the port to load up on the fleet of helicopters and ships that take them to the oil rigs miles out for long stretches of work. The flat landscape is punctuated by cranes where cargo can be loaded or unloaded and docks or hangers to make repairs.

In a nearby harbor, shrimping boats were docked, and fishing camps stood raised on stilts to protect them from incoming storms.

Marion Cuyler, who is engaged to crane operator Chaz Morales, spoke to reporters Thursday outside the fire station after briefings by executives with boat owner Seacor and the Coast Guard. She said she believes all 12 missing people are on the vessel.

Cuyler wavered between optimism and fear as she spoke but held out hope that Morales was in a part of the ship that had air after the accident and would be rescued alive.

"Hopefully, they are all in one room, and they can just rescue them all in one day," she said.

She said she and other family members are frustrated and want answers about why the boat went out in the first place.

"I asked, 'Who gave the orders' and of course — silence," she said. Cuyler said she'd told her husband-to-be that he shouldn't be going out in such weather. "And he knew they shouldn't have been going out."

A total of six people were rescued Tuesday when the ship capsized, and the Coast Guard Thursday released new details of how the rescue unfolded. The crew of a Coast Guard ship that answered the ship's distress signal, arriving about 5:10 p.m. Tuesday, saw five men clinging to the hull, said Petty Officer 3rd Class Carlos Galarza.

A helicopter crew from Bristow, a marine company, lowered life vests and VHF radios to them, he said. Two of the men dropped into the water and were picked up by the Coast Guard. About the same time, Good Samaritan vessels rescued four other people, he said. The Coast Guard was also able to talk to the three people still on the ship's hull using the radios that had been dropped. Later Tuesday night the Coast Guard was notified that one person had fallen in the water and wasn't seen again.

Shortly before 10 p.m., the two remaining people told the Coast Guard they were going back inside, and

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that was the last time the Coast Guard spoke with them, Galarza said.

On Thursday, Coast Guard members in a boat made their way to within a few yards of the capsized vessel and tried throwing a hammer at the hull in an attempt to make contact with potential survivors, the agency said.

One person's body was recovered from the water Wednesday as searchers scanned an area roughly the size of Hawaii, the Coast Guard said. The Coast Guard said it had been classified as a "major marine casualty" with the National Transportation Safety Board joining the investigation.

The Lafourche Parish Coroner's Office identified the dead man as David Ledet, 63, of Thibodaux — a town in southeastern Louisiana where many people work in the oil industry.

"Capt. Dave was awesome," Joshua Segura, a mate and crane operator, said on Facebook. He said he had worked with Ledet before moving to another offshore company, describing him as one of the nicest and most humble people he's met.

"Captain David has been on that boat over 15 years and is one of the most experienced captains I've ever worked with," he wrote.

Part of the overturned ship's hull and one of its legs were still visible, leaving most of the bulky vessel underwater, in an area 50 to 55 feet (15 to 17 meters) deep, according to the Coast Guard. The ship has three long legs designed to reach the sea floor and lift the boat out of water as an offshore platform.

The vulnerabilities of lift boats in storms have been known for years, and federal authorities have investigated multiple deaths on them. Four people on board the Trinity II died in September 2011 in the Gulf of Mexico when large waves struck its hull. Then in July 1989 a lift boat sank off the coast of Louisiana in storms associated with Hurricane Chantal. Ten of the 14 people on board died.

Coast Guard Capt. Will Watson said winds were 80 to 90 mph (130 to 145 kph) and waves rose 7 to 9 feet high (2.1 to 2.7 meters) when the Seacor Power overturned.

US opens more distance in worldwide race against coronavirus

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

The United States opened more distance between itself and much of the rest of the world Thursday, nearing the 200 millionth vaccine administered in a race to protect the population against COVID-19, even as other countries, rich and poor, struggle with stubbornly high infection rates and deaths.

Nearly half of American adults have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine, and about 30% of adults in the U.S. have been fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But the picture is still relentlessly grim in parts of Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia as variants of the virus fuel an increase in new cases and the worldwide death toll closes in on 3 million.

France on Thursday passed 100,000 virus deaths, becoming only the eighth country to do so.

India's two largest cities, New Delhi and Mumbai, imposed business shutdowns and stringent restrictions on movement as new infections shot past 200,000. Some hotels and banquet halls were ordered to convert their space into wards for treating virus patients, and the surge forced India — a major vaccine producer — to delay exports of doses to other countries.

Japan also saw a rapid resurgence of infections just three months before it's scheduled to host the Olympics. The country's western metropolis of Osaka reported over 1,200 new infections Thursday, its highest since the pandemic began. A top ruling party official suggested the possibility of canceling the games if the infections make them impossible.

Troubling signs also emerged in the U.S., despite the good news that more than 198 million coronavirus shots have been administered nationwide. The seven-day average of daily shots given hit 2.9 million last week.

New daily infections in the U.S. have increased 11% in the past two weeks. Many U.S. states have lifted mask mandates and restrictions on businesses and public gatherings. But more sick people are being admitted to hospitals in some states, including Michigan, which leads the nation with nearly 8,000 new infections per day.

In suburban Detroit, Dr. Nick Gilpin of Beaumont Health likened a rising crush of coronavirus patients

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to a "runaway train." Staff were using tents to handle the flow of people seeking emergency care from Michigan's largest hospital system, which on Thursday was treating more than 800 patients for COVID-19. That's up from about 500 two weeks ago.

"Our COVID-19 numbers are climbing higher and faster, and it's very troubling and alarming to see this," said John Fox, chief executive of Beaumont Health, which operates eight hospitals.

Coronavirus patients statewide were near record numbers in Michigan, which had 3,960 people with confirmed infections hospitalized Wednesday.

Even though half of U.S. adults are still completely unvaccinated, dwindling demand for coronavirus shots was reported by some hospitals in Alabama and Missouri. Both states already lag the nation overall in vaccinating their populations.

In Alabama, only 37% of adults have received even one vaccine dose. Yet East Alabama Medical Center near Auburn University said it was preparing to wind down its vaccination program in a county where fewer than 18% are fully vaccinated.

"The number of vaccine requests has reached a plateau," hospital spokesman John Atkinson said in a statement.

Cullman Regional Medical Center north of Birmingham also cited declining demand in a statement announcing that its vaccine clinic was being moved to an urgent care center. Hospital spokeswoman Lindsey Dossey later said the drop in demand was because of "more access to the vaccine" at other sites.

Health care officials in Missouri are also worried that not enough people are seeking shots. A large federally operated vaccination site in downtown St. Louis is administering less than half its capacity of 3,000 shots per day. Missouri health department spokeswoman Lisa Cox said the number of public health agencies requesting vaccine last week was down half compared to a week earlier.

"Some of them do feel like they have really hit a wall as far as who is interested," Cox said, adding that the state plans to start a public awareness campaign soon.

In other developments, the U.S. government reported Thursday that some vaccinated people, as expected, have become sick from the coronavirus, though such cases are rare. The CDC said about 5,800 of the "breakthrough" infections have been confirmed. That's out of about 75 million Americans who have been fully vaccinated, but the agency warned that reporting of such cases is uneven and incomplete.

Serious illness among vaccinated Americans is even more rare, with fewer than 400 who were hospitalized and 74 who died. As with the flu, people who get COVID-19 after being vaccinated are more likely to have a milder illness than unvaccinated people, the CDC has said.

More than a third of the world's deaths have occurred in three countries — the United States, Mexico and Brazil, where a total of more than 1.1 million have perished. The virus is claiming about 12,000 lives each day.

The recent decision to suspend the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine due to preliminary reports of rare blood clots left South Africa without any shots in its battle against an aggressive coronavirus variant. South Africa has more than 1.5 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including at least 53,000 deaths, representing more than 30% of all the confirmed cases in Africa's 54 countries.

Meanwhile, Germany's health ministry announced that the country administered a national record of more than 738,000 vaccine shots Wednesday, though authorities also warned that hospitals were seeing a dramatic rise in coronavirus patients.

Shy podcaster helped police crack California cold case

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Chris Lambert would like to get back to making music but he can't seem to stop chasing a ghost that has haunted him for nearly 25 years.

A billboard on the side of the road on California's Central Coast led him on a detour three years ago from his career as a singer-songwriter and recording engineer. He created a podcast about the 1996 disappearance of college freshman Kristin Smart and it's taken over his life.

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"I can't step away from it for more than a few days," Lambert said. "I just get sucked right back in because I want to be resolving things."

It was an unlikely turn for someone who refers to himself as a shy, "random boy with a beard" and it has produced results he never imagined.

On Tuesday, as San Luis Obispo County Sheriff Ian Parkinson announced arrests, he credited Lambert with helping draw worldwide attention to the case and bringing forward several key witnesses.

The longtime suspect, Paul Flores, and Smart were fellow freshmen at the California Polytechnic State University campus in San Luis Obispo. Now 44, Flores was charged with murder in the killing of the 19-year-old while trying to rape her in his dorm room, prosecutors said.

His father, Ruben Flores, 80, was charged as an accessory after authorities said he helped hide the body, which has never been located.

Paul Flores' lawyer has declined to comment on the criminal charge. A lawyer for Ruben Flores said his client is innocent.

Lambert has been thrust into the spotlight with the arrests. His eight-part series, "Your Own Backyard," hit 7.5 million downloads Thursday and it was the No. 2 podcast on iTunes. Lambert's phone has been blowing up with messages — from fans, tipsters and news reporters. He appreciates the attention but has been overwhelmed.

"It's driving me insane," he said, yet he remained focused, patient and polite during a 45-minute interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday.

All the attention isn't leading to any money — Lambert takes no advertising for the podcast, relying on donations.

His is the latest in a line of true-crime podcasts to play a role in an arrest, a court appeal or even an exoneration.

"Up and Vanished" led a man to confess to killing a Georgia beauty queen, while "Serial" helped a convicted murderer win a new trial in Maryland. "In the Dark" unearthed new evidence in a case prosecutors dropped instead of seeking a seventh trial against a Mississippi man who spent decades on death row.

Lambert, 33, was just 8 when Smart vanished a short drive up the coast from his own home in the small town of Orcutt, about 140 miles (225 kilometers) northwest of Los Angeles. It scared him that someone had gone missing and no one knew what happened.

For more than two decades, a billboard featuring a photo of a grinning Smart advertised a \$75,000 reward. It's located in the town of Arroyo Grande, where Paul Flores grew up and his parents still live.

Lambert passed it many times and it ultimately motivated him to start investigating.

"I thought I'd give it a shot and see if I could get a few people talking," Lambert said. "All I have to do is get over my shyness and start calling these people out of the blue and start asking really personal questions."

He bought some high-quality recording equipment and began making calls. He located overlooked or reluctant witnesses who hadn't spoken with police, he said.

People opened up to Lambert and he encouraged them to contact investigators with relevant information. Deputies started calling him to connect them with people he interviewed.

"What Chris did with the podcast was put it out nationally to bring in new information," Parkinson said without elaborating on the new evidence. "It did produce some information that I believe was valuable."

A former colleague of Paul Flores' mother, Susan Flores, told him Mrs. Flores came into work after Memorial Day weekend 1996 — when Smart went missing — saying she didn't sleep well because her husband had gotten a phone call in the middle of the night and left in his car.

"The speculation has been all along that Paul called his dad in the middle of the night and his dad came up and helped him get rid of Kristin's body," Lambert said.

A tenant who lived for a year at Susan Flores' home told him she heard a watch alarm every morning at 4:20 a.m. Smart had worked as a lifeguard at 5 a.m. at the Cal Poly pool, so it's possible she set her watch to wake up at that early hour.

"That seems to be the moment in the podcast series that most people have been just completely shaken," he said. "This may be the piece of evidence that points to the fact that Kristin was buried in that backyard or that her belongings were buried in that backyard."

Susan Flores, who hung up when called by the AP, told KSBY-TV in March in the only interview she's granted that she could "shoot a lot of holes into a lot of (Lambert's) lies."

She said Lambert never contacted her. He said he sent an intermediary to her house and Susan Flores threatened to call the police. His efforts to speak with Paul Flores were also fruitless, he said.

Lambert spoke with a former Australian exchange student at Cal Poly who said he saw Flores and Smart struggling near where Smart was last seen. Lambert said investigators had dismissed that account in the early years of the probe.

Lambert has developed a close relationship with the Smart family, who issued a statement after the arrest, praising his skills and "unselfish dedication."

He is grateful to have grown close to the family. He feels like he's gotten to know Kristin Smart, but wishes he had the chance to meet her.

"For most of my life, Kristin Smart has been a face on a billboard," he wrote on Instagram. "I've learned about Kristin the daughter, Kristin the big sister, Kristin the friend, the neighbor, the roommate. Kristin the swimmer. Kristin the dreamer. And I've learned that you can miss a person you never even got to meet."

Honduran woman exits Utah church after 3 years in sanctuary

By SOPHIA EPPOLITO Associated Press/Report for America

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — After over three years living in a Salt Lake City church to avoid being deported, Honduran immigrant Vicky Chavez stepped outside Thursday with tears in her eyes as church congregants and friends cheered, celebrating her newfound freedom.

Chavez and her two young daughters took sanctuary in First Unitarian Church in January 2018 after she said she fled an abusive boyfriend in Honduras and sought asylum in the United States but was denied.

Chavez entered the United States illegally in June 2014 and was ordered deported by a federal immigration judge in December 2016. After exhausting her appeals in January 2018, Chavez had a plane ticket home to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. She instead accepted an offer of sanctuary from the church.

Chavez said she received a notice from Immigration and Customs Enforcement on Monday that she had been granted a so-called a stay of removal, which limits her risk of being deported for a year.

"Vicky's life is no longer on hold," Rev. Tom Goldsmith, the church's minister, told reporters. "She leaves this church with a full grasp of the English language, a couple of hundred friends and the confidence to pursue her dreams."

Chavez thanked her community in the church for helping keep her and her daughters safe over the past 1,168 days and said she plans to remain in Utah.

"I have no words to thank them for giving me a safe home for over three years," Chavez said. "Today I can say that I'm full of love and happy to have arrived here."

Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson had tears in her eyes as she congratulated Chavez and called on citizens and elected leaders to have "more compassion" for members of their communities.

Chavez and her daughters were the first known immigrants to take sanctuary in Utah, according to local immigration advocates and the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

She and her daughters slept in a converted Sunday school room and spent most of their time in another room with a TV, an easel and games.

Skylar Anderson, Chavez's attorney, said he was overjoyed for his client and her family but urged elected officials in Congress to prioritize changes for the nation's immigration system and to make the process easier for those seeking asylum.

"There are millions of Vicky's in this country — I've represented many of them," Anderson said. "There aren't enough churches to give sanctuary to all the Vicky's of this country. This country needs to be that sanctuary."

Alethea Smock, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, had no comment Thursday about Chavez' case.

In his first weeks in office, President Joe Biden signed several executive orders on immigration issues that undo his predecessor's policies, though several Republican members of Congress are pushing legal challenges.

Others who have emerged from sanctuary since Biden took office include Jose Chicas, a 55-year-old El Salvador native, who left a church-owned house in Durham, North Carolina, on Jan. 22.

Alex Garcia, a father of five from Honduras, left a Mapplewood, Missouri church in February. Edith Espinal, a native of Mexico, left an Ohio church after more than three years.

Defense rests without Chauvin testimony at murder trial

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Former Officer Derek Chauvin chose not to take the stand as testimony at his murder trial ended Thursday, passing up the chance to explain to the jury and the public for the first time what he was thinking when he pressed his knee against George Floyd's neck.

Closing arguments are set to begin Monday, after which a racially diverse jury will begin deliberating at a barbed-wire-ringed courthouse in a city on edge — not just because of the Chauvin case but because of the deadly police shooting of a 20-year-old Black man in a Minneapolis suburb last weekend.

Before the jury was brought in Thursday morning, Chauvin, his COVID-19 mask removed in a rare courtroom moment, ended weeks of speculation by informing the judge he would invoke his Fifth Amendment right not to testify.

Shortly afterward, the defense rested its case, after a total of two days of testimony, compared with two weeks for the prosecution.

Judge Peter Cahill reminded the jurors they will be sequestered starting Monday and said: "If I were you, I would plan for long and hope for short."

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death after the 46-year-old Black man was arrested on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market last May.

Bystander video of Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe as bystanders yelled at Chauvin to get off him triggered worldwide protests, violence and a furious examination of racism and policing in the U.S.

The most serious charge against the now-fired white officer, second-degree murder, carries up to 40 years in prison, though state guidelines call for about 12.

Prosecutors say Floyd died because the officer's knee was pressed against Floyd's neck or close to it for 9 1/2 minutes as he lay on the pavement on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind him and his face jammed against the ground.

Law enforcement veterans inside and outside the Minneapolis department testified for the prosecution that Chauvin used excessive force and went against his training, while medical experts said Floyd died of asphyxia, or lack of oxygen, because his breathing was constricted by the way he was held down.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson called a police use-of-force expert and a forensic pathologist to help make the case that Chauvin acted reasonably against a struggling suspect and that Floyd died because of an underlying heart condition and his illegal drug use. Floyd had high blood pressure and narrowed arteries, and fentanyl and methamphetamine were found in his system.

The only time Chauvin has been heard defending himself was when the jury listened to body-camera footage from the scene. After an ambulance had taken Floyd away, Chauvin told a bystander: "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy ... and it looks like he's probably on something."

The decision of whether Chauvin should testify carried risks either way.

Taking the stand could have opened him up to devastating cross-examination, with prosecutors replaying the video of the arrest and forcing Chauvin to explain, one frame at a time, why he kept pressing down on Floyd.

But testifying could have also given the jury the opportunity to look at his unmasked face and see or

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hear any remorse or sympathy he might feel.

Also, what was going through Chauvin's mind could be crucial: Legal experts say that an officer who believes his or her life was at risk can be found to have acted legally even if, in hindsight, it turns out there was no such danger.

In one final bit of testimony on Thursday, the prosecution briefly recalled a lung and critical care expert to knock down a defense witness' theory that carbon monoxide poisoning from a squad car's exhaust might have contributed to Floyd's death. Dr. Martin Tobin noted hospital tests that showed Floyd's level was at most 2%, within the normal range.

With the trial in session, Minneapolis has been bracing for a possible repeat of the protests and violence that broke out last spring over Floyd's death.

The case has unfolded amid days of protests in the adjoining suburb of Brooklyn Center, after Officer Kim Potter, who is white, apparently mistook her gun for a Taser and fatally shot Daunte Wright. She resigned and was charged with manslaughter.

Shortage of intubation drugs threatens Brazil health sector

By DIANE JEANTET and DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Reports are emerging of Brazilian health workers forced to intubate patients without the aid of sedatives, after weeks of warnings that hospitals and state governments risked running out of critical medicines.

One doctor at the Albert Schweitzer municipal hospital in Rio de Janeiro told the Associated Press that for days health workers diluted sedatives to make their stock last longer. Once it ran out, nurses and doctors had to begin using neuromuscular blockers and tying patients to their beds, the doctor said.

"You relax the muscles and do the procedure easily, but we don't have sedation," said the doctor, who agreed to discuss the sensitive situation only if not quoted by name. "Some try to talk, resist. They're conscious."

Lack of required medicines is the latest pandemic problem to befall Brazil, which is experiencing a brutal COVID-19 outbreak that has flooded the nation's intensive care units. The daily death count is averaging about 3,000, accounting for a quarter of deaths globally and making Brazil the epicenter of the pandemic.

"Intubation kits" include anesthetics, sedatives and other medications used to put severely ill patients on ventilators. The press office of Rio city's health secretariat said in an email that occasional shortages at the Albert Schweitzer facility are due to difficulties obtaining supplies on the global market and that "substitutions are made so that there is no damage to the assistance provided." It didn't comment on the need to tie patients to beds.

The newspaper O Globo on Thursday reported similar ordeals in several other hospitals in the Rio metropolitan region, with people desperately calling other facilities seeking sedatives for their loved ones.

It's unclear whether the problem seen in Rio remains an isolated case, but others are sounding the alarm about impending shortages.

Sao Paulo state's health secretary, Jean Carlo Gorinchteyn, said at a news conference Wednesday that the situation was dire in the hospitals of Brazil's most-populous state. On Thursday, more than 640 hospitals were on the verge of collapse, with shortages possible within days, officials said.

"We need the federal government's support," Gorinchteyn said. "This is not a necessity for Sao Paulo; it is a necessity for the whole country."

His state's health officials sent nine requests for intubation medication to the Health Ministry over the past 40 days, according to a statement Wednesday. Its last delivery was enough to cover just 6% of monthly needs in the state's public health network, officials told AP.

Federal Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga, who took over the post last month, said Wednesday that a shipment of sedatives was expected to arrive in Brazil "in the next ten days." It is the result of a contract signed with the Pan American Health Organization.

He said two separate efforts to acquire medications on the international market are underway "to end

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this day-to-day struggle.”

For many weeks, the ministry has also been facing logistical constraints on getting oxygen delivered to hospitals across the country. Queiroga said it remains “a daily concern.”

A more contagious coronavirus variant, known as P.1, has been spreading across Brazil this year. It may also be more aggressive than the original strain, and health workers have reported patients requiring far more oxygen than last year.

The private sector has stepped up to help address some of the supply shortfall. A group of seven large companies donated 3.4 million doses of intubation drugs — enough for the management of 500 beds for six weeks — to the Health Ministry.

A first batch of 2.3 million was scheduled to arrive from China late Thursday at Sao Paulo’s international airport and would be distributed to states with critical shortages, the ministry said in an emailed response to AP questions about supply bottlenecks.

Last month, the Health Ministry requisitioned intubation medications from laboratories, reportedly as a means to distribute to the neediest hospitals. That has caused others facilities’ stocks to dwindle, said Edson Rogatti, director of an association of more than 2,000 hospitals nationwide.

“If we run out, the health sector will be in chaos,” Rogatti said on Globo News TV.

Shortages aren’t limited to the public sector. Brazil’s private hospital association published a survey Thursday in which nine of 71 institutions reported having supplies for five days or less. About half said they had enough for a week.

Private facilities are looking to import medications from India, but still need regulatory approval, the association told AP.

The city of Itaipolis in southern Santa Catarina state this week reported shortages of both sedatives and oxygen. Neighboring Rio Grande do Sul state also reported supplies running out.

“The situation is desperate,” Rio Grande do Sul’s health secretary, Arita Bergmann, said in a statement Thursday. “We urgently need the Health Ministry to replenish hospitals’ stocks, or else intubated patients can wake up without medication, and that would be terrible.”

Equal pay bill passed by House but faces long odds in Senate

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats approved legislation Thursday that they say would help close the gap between what men and women are paid in the workplace, though the measure faces little chance of overcoming Republican opposition in the Senate.

The bill, which is supported by President Joe Biden’s administration, passed 217-210 on a mostly party-line vote. It is the latest salvo in a long-running debate about equality of pay and the government’s role in ensuring it.

Despite their past efforts, including the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 signed into law by President Barack Obama, Democrats say there is still more that needs to be done to close a gap in pay, where white women make on average 82 cents to every dollar earned by men.

“Sadly, equal pay is not yet a reality in America,” said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. “It’s almost sinful.”

The bill would make it easier to sue employers over pay discrimination, curb the ability of companies to retaliate and beef up enforcement of existing laws, including a new requirement that businesses submit detailed pay data to the federal government for use in policing pay discrimination laws. It would also ban employers from prohibiting employees from discussing their salaries.

Republicans say laws already on the books outlaw pay discrimination. And they counter that the bill would largely be a boon for trial lawyers looking to sue companies while miring employers in burdensome new reporting requirements that would require them to submit detailed pay information to the federal government.

Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Texas, said that “wage discrimination has no place in any society.” But he said

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the Democrats' bill wasn't the right way to go about correcting those wrongs.

"The path Congress must take is to not increase opportunities for trial lawyers, but to continue its focus on strong economic policy that actually expands opportunities for all Americans," he said.

Democrats counter, however, that existing protections have proved insufficient, including those offered under the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which requires that men and women in the same workplace be given equal pay for equal work.

The U.S. is hardly alone in having such disparities. But the gap is larger here than in many other countries, with only Mexico, Finland, Israel, Japan and Korea having larger differentials, according to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an international group based in Paris.

Democrats also note that the disparity is particularly acute for women of color, with Black women making about 63 cents for every dollar earned by a white male counterpart and Hispanic women making even less.

Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., said many women choose jobs that offer more flexibility to balance home and work.

"Democrats aren't giving the full story when they talk about pay differences," Foxx said. "Women are making career choices that are best for themselves and their families."

The measure is widely opposed by business, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which argued in a letter to members of Congress that there are often legitimate reasons for differences in pay between men and women.

"Increasing the opportunity for frivolous litigation would only further serve to undermine our nation's civil rights laws," the Chamber wrote.

Capitol Police watchdog says force needs 'cultural change'

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Capitol Police force needs "cultural change" after the broad failures of the Jan. 6 insurrection, the top watchdog for the department testified Thursday, pointing to inadequate training and outdated weaponry as among several urgent problems facing the force.

Capitol Police Inspector General Michael A. Bolton has issued confidential monthly reports on the force's missteps since the siege, when hundreds of President Donald Trump's supporters broke into the building and sent lawmakers fleeing for their lives. In a 104-page report obtained by The Associated Press, he casts serious doubt on the force's ability to respond to future threats and another large-scale attack.

Bolton told the House Administration Committee that the Capitol Police needs to improve its intelligence gathering, training, and operational planning. The way the force views its mission also needs to change, he said.

"A police department is geared to be a reactive force, for the most part," Bolton said. "Whereas a protective agency is postured, in their training and planning, to be proactive to prevent events such as January 6th."

The Capitol Police have so far refused to publicly release Bolton's report — prepared in March and marked as "law enforcement sensitive." But lawmakers discussed many of its findings at the hearing and agreed that there need to be major improvements. House Administration Committee Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren said the department needs to be stronger and more effective "not just to keep the Capitol and those work here safer, but to keep the men and women who wear its uniform safe."

Bolton found that the department's deficiencies were, and remain, widespread: Equipment was old and stored badly; officers didn't complete required training; and there was a lack of direction at the Civil Disturbance Unit, which exists to ensure that legislative functions of Congress are not disrupted by civil unrest. That was exactly what happened on Jan. 6 when Trump supporters violently pushed past police and broke into the Capitol as Congress counted the Electoral College votes that certified Joe Biden's victory.

Bolton's report also focuses on several pieces of missed intelligence, including the force's inconsistent information gathering and an FBI memo sent the day before the insurrection that then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund told lawmakers he never saw. That memo, included in the report's appendix, warned of threatening online postings by Trump backers, including one that said Congress "needs to hear glass

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breaking, doors being kicked in" and blood being spilled.

The Capitol Police said in a statement Wednesday that officials had already made some of the recommended improvements. The siege was "a pivotal moment" in history, they said, that showed the need for "major changes" in how the department operates.

Still, they said, "nearly all of the recommendations require significant resources the department does not have."

House lawmakers are hoping to provide some of those resources in spending legislation that could be proposed as soon as this month. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday that the money would not only go to "hardening" the Capitol's windows and doors but also to hiring and training officers.

Bolton told the panel that more money for training should be the highest priority.

"If you want to invest dollars, that's the place to invest in, training," Bolton said. "Training deficiencies put officers, our brave men and women, in a position not to succeed."

His report describes in detail how department equipment was substandard, including at least 11 different types of munitions that appeared to have expired. Other weapons that could have fired tear gas were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them. Some riot shields shattered upon impact. Bolton found that those shields had been improperly stored.

In other cases, weapons weren't used by the Capitol Police because of "orders from leadership," the investigation found. Some of those heavier weapons — called "less lethal" because they are designed to disperse rather than kill — could have helped the police repel the rioters as they moved toward the Capitol after Trump's speech, Bolton said.

Asked by Lofgren why those weapons weren't used, Bolton said leaders were concerned that at least one of them, a "stinger" ball grenade, could have resulted in "life-altering injury or death." Bolton said the weapons, which disperse stinging rubber pellets, could be deadly if misused but officers who are properly trained can use them safely.

"It certainly would have provided the department a better posture to repel these attackers" if they had used those grenades, Bolton said.

The committee also discussed reforming the Capitol Police Board, an antiquated command structure that puts the Capitol Police Chief in the position of seeking approval from House and Senate security officials, even in emergencies.

The board was initially hesitant to approve a National Guard presence when Sund requested it ahead of the 6th, and Democrats and Republicans in both chambers have since said the process needs to be overhauled. Bolton suggested the possibility of installing a director above the chief of police who is responsible for all security in the Capitol complex.

Lofgren said she thinks the board needs to be reviewed. "What replaces it is the challenge," she said. "Something that is professional and accountable and apolitical, that's what we all want."

The riot has pushed the Capitol Police force toward a state of crisis, with officers working extra shifts and forced overtime to protect the Capitol. The acting chief, Yogananda Pittman, received a vote of no confidence from the union in February, reflecting widespread distrust among the rank and file who were left exposed and injured as the violent mob descended on the building. Morale has plummeted.

The force is also grieving the deaths of three of their own. Officer Brian Sicknick collapsed and died after engaging with protesters on Jan. 6. Officer William "Billy" Evans was killed April 2 when he was hit by a car that rammed into a barricade outside the Senate. A third officer, Howard Liebengood, died by suicide in the days after the insurrection.

Former VP Pence undergoes surgery to implant pacemaker

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Vice President Mike Pence has undergone surgery to have a pacemaker implanted.

His office says that Wednesday's procedure went well and that Pence "is expected to fully recover and

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return to normal activity in the coming days.”

The 61-year-old Pence, who recently launched a new advocacy group and signed a book deal, had previously been diagnosed with a heart condition called asymptomatic left bundle branch block.

His office says that, over the past two weeks, he experienced symptoms associated with a slow heart rate and underwent the procedure in Virginia in response.

Pence is considered a likely 2024 presidential candidate if former President Donald Trump declines to run again.

He is expected to deliver his first public speech since leaving office later this month in South Carolina.

Coronavirus hug image named World Press Photo of the Year

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — A photo symbolizing “love and compassion” of an 85-year-old Brazilian woman getting her first embrace in five months from a nurse through a transparent “hug curtain” was named the World Press Photo of the Year on Thursday.

It was the second time the Danish photographer who shot the image has won the prestigious award.

The choice of a winning photo portraying the global pandemic was almost inevitable for the contest covering a year in which news around the globe was dominated by the virus that has killed nearly 3 million people, including more than 360,000 in hard-hit Brazil.

The image by Mads Nissen captured the moment Rosa Luzia Lunardi was hugged by nurse Adriana Silva da Costa Souza at the Viva Bem care home in Sao Paulo on Aug. 5.

A curtain of clear plastic — its yellow edges folded into a shape resembling a pair of butterfly wings — offers protection, as does the nurse’s face mask.

“This iconic image of COVID-19 memorializes the most extraordinary moment of our lives, everywhere,” jury member Kevin WY Lee said of the hug image. “I read vulnerability, loved ones, loss and separation, demise, but, importantly, also survival — all rolled into one graphic image. If you look at the image long enough, you’ll see wings: a symbol of flight and hope.”

The image taken by Nissen for the Panos Pictures agency and the Danish daily Politiken also won first prize in the contest’s General News Singles category. Nissen also won World Press Photo of the Year in 2015 with an intimate photo of a gay couple in Russia.

“The main message of this image is empathy. It’s love and compassion,” Nissen said in a comment released by contest organizers.

“It’s a really, really hard, grim situation and then in that horror, in that suffering, I think this picture also brings some light,” Nissen said at an online awards ceremony after being told he had won the award and the 5,000-euro (\$6,000) prize that goes with it.

Second place in the category was a far more grim COVID-19 image — the body of a suspected coronavirus victim tightly wrapped in plastic in a hospital in Indonesia on April 18 by Indonesian photographer Joshua Irwandi.

The pandemic even reached the Environment Singles category, with U.S. photographer Ralph Pace winning for his image of a curious California sea lion swimming toward a face mask drifting underwater at the Breakwater dive site in Monterey.

Judges looked at 74,470 photographs by 4,315 photographers before selecting winners in eight categories including general news, sports, the environment and portraits.

The World Press Photo Story of the Year was awarded to Italian documentary photographer Antonio Faccilongo, working for Getty Reportage, for a series titled “Habibi” about Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons who smuggle their semen out of detention facilities in the hopes of raising a family.

Winner in the Spot News Singles category was an image embodying the debate on race in the United States. The photo by Evelyn Hockstein for The Washington Post shows a white man and a Black woman disagreeing about the removal of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, D.C., which depicts a freed slave kneeling at Abraham Lincoln’s feet.

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The Black Lives Matter movement also featured, with Associated Press photographer John Minchillo's series about the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd taking third prize in the Spot News Stories category that was won by Italian Lorenzo Tugnoli working for Contrasto for a series of images documenting the devastating port blast in Beirut.

The Contemporary Issues Story category was won by Russian photographer Alexey Vasilyev with a series about the film industry in the northeast Russian region of Sakha. Associated Press photographer Maya Alleruzzo took second place in the category with a story about the Islamic State group enslaving Yazidi women in Iraq.

Study: 2.5 billion T. rex roamed Earth, but not all at once

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

One Tyrannosaurus rex seems scary enough. Now picture 2.5 billion of them. That's how many of the fierce dinosaur king probably roamed Earth over the course of a couple million years, a new study finds.

Using calculations based on body size, sexual maturity and the creatures' energy needs, a team at the University of California, Berkeley figured out just how many T. rex lived over 127,000 generations, according to a study in Thursday's journal Science. It's a first-of-its-kind number, but just an estimate with a margin of error that is the size of a T. rex.

"That's a lot of jaws," said study lead author Charles Marshall, director of the University of California Museum of Paleontology. "That's a lot of teeth. That's a lot of claws."

The species roamed North America for about 1.2 million to 3.6 million years, meaning the T. rex population density was small at any one moment. There would be about two in a place the size of the Washington, D.C., or 3,800 in California, the study said.

"Probably like a lot of people, I literally did a double-take to make sure that my eyes hadn't deceived me when I first read that 2.5 billion T. rexes have ever lived," said Macalester College paleobiologist Kristi Curry Rogers, who wasn't part of the study.

Marshall said the estimate helps scientists figure the preservation rate of T. rex fossils and underscores how lucky the world is to know about them at all. About 100 or so T. rex fossils have been found — 32 of them with enough material to figure they are adults. If there were 2.5 million T. rex instead of 2.5 billion, we would probably have never known they existed, he said.

Marshall's team calculated the population by using a general biology rule of thumb that says the bigger the animal, the less dense its population. Then they added estimates of how much energy the carnivorous T. rex needed to stay alive — somewhere between a Komodo dragon and a lion. The more energy required, the less dense the population. They also factored in that the T. rex reached sexual maturity somewhere around 14 to 17 years old and lived at most 28 years.

Given uncertainties in the creatures' generation length, range and how long they roamed, the Berkeley team said the total population could be as little as 140 million or as much as 42 billion with 2.4 billion as the middle value.

The science about the biggest land-living carnivores of all time is important, "but the truth, as I see it, is that this kind of thing is just very cool," said Purdue University geology professor James Farlow.

With layoffs down and spending up, US rebound gains momentum

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and JOSEPH PISANI AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — A much-awaited economic boom coming off the pandemic recession appeared to edge closer to reality Thursday with fresh data showing the pace of layoffs dwindling, consumers spending freely and manufacturing rebounding.

The latest barometers point to a U.S. economy that's steadily regaining its health as vaccinations accelerate, business curbs are lifted in many states and more people are willing to travel, shop, eat out and otherwise resume their spending habits. Though many Americans who have lost jobs or income are still suffering, hopes are rising that the benefits of the recovery will spread further in the coming months to

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groups of people who have yet to benefit.

The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits tumbled last week to 576,000, the Labor Department said Thursday, a post-COVID low and a sign that layoffs are easing.

And sales at retail stores and restaurants jumped 9.8% in March, the biggest gain since last May, when the economy first started to rebound from the virus' initial blow. With U.S. household savings high, economists are optimistic that the faster spending is sustainable.

"We are really kicking into that next gear now," said Adam Kamins, senior regional economist at Moody's Analytics. "Things are moving more decisively in the right direction than at any time in the past year."

The pace of weekly applications for unemployment aid is now down significantly from a peak of 900,000 in early January and has dropped below the 700,000-plus level where it had been stuck for months.

A total of 16.9 million people are continuing to collect unemployment benefits, down from 18.2 million in the previous week. That decline suggests that some of the unemployed are being called back to jobs. But the large number of ongoing recipients also points to the harsh impact of the pandemic on tens of millions of households.

Trillions of dollars of government stimulus, including \$1,400 checks that have gone to most adults, as well as higher savings that many households have managed to build, have fueled more spending. Auto sales soared 15% in March, according to the government's retail sales report. Purchases at electronics and appliance stores jumped more than 10%. Sales at clothing stores soared 18%.

Warm weather in March, after ice storms in some states had held back consumers in February, likely drove more retail spending. Restaurants and bars reported a 13% increase in sales, the most since last June. Most states have allowed more indoor dining, and outdoor dining likely picked up as well.

Among the consumers who are stepping up their spending is Teresa Golden of Renton, Washington state, who said she used her first two federal stimulus checks to catch up on rent and bill payments. With the most recent check, she said she spent \$500 on Levi's jeans, Old Navy clothing and shoes from Finish Line. An additional \$500 went to restocking her pantry with items that will last a while — ketchup, sugar, spices and Clorox wipes, among other things.

"I finally caught up on my bills and could go on a bit of a spending spree," said Golden, 49, who works in accounts receivable at a school system.

At the same time, factories are humming again. In March, the Federal Reserve said Thursday, manufacturing output increased 2.7%. Many economists expected a larger gain after output had fallen in the midst of February's unseasonably cold weather. But shortages of raw materials and parts, from lumber to semiconductor chips, probably slowed factory production.

Still, manufacturing in the New York and mid-Atlantic regions is recovering strongly, according to separate surveys by the Federal Reserve Banks of New York and Philadelphia, with both reports showing more hiring, growing shipments and rising orders.

Thursday's encouraging news follows a report earlier this month that employers added a healthy 916,000 jobs, the most since August, during March. The unemployment rate fell to 6%, less than half the pandemic peak of 14.8% in April of last year.

Kamins, the Moody's economist, noted that data from Google's mobility tracking service shows that Americans are increasingly venturing out to shop, visit restaurants and go to movie theaters and other entertainment venues.

Even so, travel to worksites hasn't picked up as much, a sign that many people — mostly in white-collar professions — are still working from home. A result is that lower-income workers in large cities are likely still struggling, because many downtown restaurants and coffee shops haven't yet reopened or, if they have, are seeing far fewer customers.

Most analysts have grown bullish about the economy's prospects for the coming months. They include Fed Chair Jerome Powell, who expressed his belief in an appearance last Sunday on "60 Minutes" that the economy is at "an inflection point" and appears poised for a boom.

"We feel like we're at a place where the economy's about to start growing much more quickly and job creation coming in much more quickly," Powell said. "This growth that we're expecting in the second half

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of this year is going to be very strong. And job creation, I would expect to be very strong.”

Many economists, in fact, are concerned more about a potential burst of inflation stemming from the unleashing of pent-up consumer demand. Prices for lumber, copper, oil and other raw materials have already risen as demand for gas, homes and electronic equipment has jumped.

Consumer prices rose 0.6% in March, the most since 2012, the government reported Tuesday, and are up 2.6% in the past year. Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, though, prices rose by a more benign 1.6% year over year.

Powell has said that while inflation will likely pick up in the coming months, the price increases will probably ease as the pandemic-induced disruptions in many industries’ supply chains are worked out.

Democrats begin long-shot push to expand the Supreme Court

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A group of congressional Democrats introduced legislation Thursday to add four seats to the Supreme Court, a long-shot bid designed to counter the court’s rightward tilt during the Trump administration and criticized by Republicans as a potential power grab that would reduce the public’s trust in the judiciary.

President Joe Biden last week created a commission to spend the next six months examining the politically incendiary issues of expanding the court and instituting term limits for justices.

The fight over the composition of the nine-member court has become increasingly contentious over the past two decades, with fierce battles over nominees and acrimonious debates about the politicization of the judicial branch.

But the bill’s introduction had an inauspicious start. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said she might not bring it up for a vote if it advanced out of committee and Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, was noncommittal as well.

Democratic lawmakers and groups supporting the court expansion bill gathered on the steps of the Supreme Court to make their case.

“Some people say we’re packing the court. We’re not packing it. We’re unpacking it,” said the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. He said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and the GOP had “packed the court over the last couple of years. This is a reaction to that. It’s a necessary step in the evolution of the court.”

Inside the Capitol, Durbin, made clear that he wanted to wait for the White House’s 36-member commission to report its findings before deciding on a course of action.

“I’m not ready to sign on yet,” Durbin said. “I think this commission of Biden’s is the right move. Let’s think this through carefully. This is historic.”

Pelosi was even more dismissive. The prospect of an expanded Supreme Court is a campaign issue that Republicans will focus on as they target swing districts in their bid to retake the majority. Even before the bill’s introduction, state GOP parties were drawing attention to the effort in an attempt to link vulnerable Democratic members to it.

“I have no plans to bring it to the floor,” Pelosi told reporters.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden would wait for the commission’s work to “play out,” before taking a position on the matter.

Republicans quickly jumped in to the debate. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said in a SiriusXM radio interview that no matter what issue comes up this Congress, “this has got to be the most important because, remember, it’s taking over an entire branch of government.”

McConnell quoted the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who warned before her death that adding justices to the Supreme Court would make it appear partisan and that “nine seems to be a good number.”

“But the farthest-left activists aren’t interested in the common good. They want power,” McConnell said.

Supporters of expanding the court say Republicans gained an unfair advantage by blocking President Barack Obama’s 2016 nomination of Merrick Garland, a federal appeals judge at the time who is now Biden’s attorney general, under the rationale that it was a presidential election year and the voters should

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decide. McConnell refused to hold hearings on filling the vacancy after Justice Antonin Scalia's death, even though the November election was months away.

Last year, McConnell and the Republican-controlled Senate confirmed President Donald Trump's nominee, Judge Amy Coney Barrett, to fill Ginsburg's seat just days before the presidential election, securing a likely conservative majority for years to come.

In their news conference on the Supreme Court steps, the authors and co-sponsors of the legislation framed the proposed expansion as a necessary progression to keep up with a growing nation and a growing case workload. Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga., said the court expanded on seven occasions prior to the Civil War, "leaving us today with the historical oddity of 13 circuit courts of appeal and only nine justices."

Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., went right to the anger and frustration that so many Democrats have with the judicial conformation process under Trump and McConnell's stewardship.

"The Republicans stole two seats on the Supreme Court and now it is up to us to repair that damage," Markey said.

France hits unwanted milestone: Over 100,000 virus deaths

By SYLVIE CORBET and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France on Thursday became the third country in Europe after the U.K. and Italy to reach the unwanted milestone of 100,000 COVID-19-related deaths as new infections and deaths surged due to virus variants.

The country of 67 million is the eighth nation in the world to reach the mark after a year of overwhelmed hospitals, on-and-off coronavirus lockdowns and enormous personal losses that have left families nationwide grieving the pandemic's impact.

The moment prompted a message of solidarity from French President Emmanuel Macron.

"Since the start of the pandemic, 100,000 French women and men have succumbed to the virus. We all have a thought for their families, their loved ones, for the children who have lost a parent or a grandparent, the bereaved siblings, the broken friendships," Macron said on Twitter. "We will not forget a face, a name," he added.

France added 300 new deaths Thursday to the previous day's tally of 99,777, bringing the total to 100,077 deaths.

Lionel Petitpas, president of the group Victims of COVID-19 told The Associated Press that the number was "an important threshold."

After months of people getting accustomed to the virus, the figure "is piercing a lot of minds. It is a figure we thought would never be reached," he said.

Petitpas, who lost his wife Joelle on March 29 last year from the virus, said families of victims "want the government to make a collective gesture to recognize our collective loss."

Macron told Le Parisien newspaper he thinks about all of the people who died in the pandemic and their families.

The pandemic was "so cruel" to individuals "who sometimes were not able to accompany, during the last moments and in death, a father, a mother, a loved one, a friend," Macron said. Yet the crisis also shows "the ability of the French people to unite."

French government spokesperson Gabriel Attal suggested it is too soon to set a specific date to honor those who died as France is now fighting another rapid rise in confirmed cases.

"There will be an homage for sure, a national mourning for the victims of COVID-19," Attal said Wednesday. "That time will come. ... today, we throw all our forces in the battle against the epidemic."

Experts say the 100,000 mark is an underestimate by thousands. An analysis of death certificates shows that some COVID-19 cases were not reported or patients were not tested when people died at home, or in psychiatric units or chronic care facilities.

Petitpas started a Facebook group last year for families of victims to share memories of their loved ones. Nearly every day, new testimonies appear.

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"My wife, like so many others, was just put in a body bag," he recalled. "It was like a luxury garbage bag. And then she was put in a coffin and sent to cremation." He was not allowed to see her.

Petitpas said despite a decree in January allowing people in France to see their deceased loved ones, many places still aren't allowing it.

"All these people who left us (are) like people with the plague, without human dignity, with nothing at all," he said.

Celia Prioux-Schwab, a social services worker, lost her 82-year-old grandmother in January, four days after she was sent home from the Reims hospital — even though her family had no home-care option and she still had COVID-19.

She is now pushing for a change in French law to guarantee the right of families to visit hospitalized patients even during a pandemic, "to offer support, or even just to say goodbye."

Corine Maysounabe, a journalist in western France, has been involved in a group advising officials on a future protocols for deaths during pandemics. She lost her 88-year-old father last year to the virus. She described the "enormous trauma" of mourning rites being trampled on and bodies "treated at the level of objects."

"When you're told your father was put in a bag and covered in bleach: imagine the image you get in your head," she said.

Maysounabe feels families and victims "are forgotten" still today. "We have gotten accustomed to 300, 400 deaths a day."

Since Macron declared "war" on the virus while announcing the country's first lockdown on March 17, 2020, the French have faced domestic and international travel restrictions that have weighed heavily on everyday life.

France plunged into a third, partial lockdown at the beginning of April, as new infections were surging and hospitals getting close to saturation. The total number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in France surged past 5,900 this week. Measures include closing schools, a domestic travel ban and shutting most nonessential shops.

An overnight nationwide curfew has been in place since mid-December, and all France's restaurants, bars, gyms, cinemas and museums have been closed since October.

Schools are set to gradually reopen starting April 26. The government is anticipating that other restrictions will start being lifted around mid-May.

Macron was meeting Thursday with officials to get the nation prepared for the gradual reopening. Authorities expects that 20 million people, about 38% of France's adult population, will have received at least one vaccine shot by that time — up from 11 million now.

France has reported the most confirmed coronavirus infections in Europe, more than 5.2 million.

Barbers, artists help defy vaccine myths for people of color

By JULIE WATSON and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — In a Washington, D.C., suburb, Black and Latino barbers are busting myths about the coronavirus vaccine while clipping hair.

Across the country, a university researcher in Phoenix teamed up with a company behind comic books fighting Islamic extremism to produce dance-inducing animated stories in Spanish that aim to smash conspiracy theories hindering Latinos from getting inoculated.

And in San Diego, former refugees, Latinos and Black activists initially hired by health officials as contact tracers are calling back the people they reached about COVID-19 exposure to talk about the shots.

A new wave of public health advocacy that is multilingual, culturally sensitive, entertaining and personal is rapidly replacing mundane public service announcements on TV, radio and online in the battle to stamp out vaccine disinformation circulating in communities of color and get more people vaccinated.

"With the way disinformation is spreading over social media, a stale piece with information to counter that — that doesn't work anymore," said Mustafa Hasnain, who co-founded Creative Frontiers to make

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comic books fighting Islamic extremism.

The innovative messaging has grown out of urgency: The virus has hit Black and Latino people disproportionately hard, yet their vaccination rates are less than half that of white people.

The Biden administration this month launched a multimillion-dollar promotional campaign targeting communities where vaccine hesitancy is high and asked 275 organizations — from the NAACP to Ciencia Puerto Rico — to spread the word about vaccine safety and effectiveness. One ad is in Spanish and another aimed at Black Americans is narrated by the historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Rumors that the vaccines could cause infertility or the shots could inject a government tracking chip are commonly heard in the Black and Latino communities. They have a long history of facing racism in the health care system, eroding their trust.

"I see a lot of similarities in how violent radicalization takes place and the current bout of disinformation around the pandemic and vaccination," Hasnain said. "Similar to how radicalization works, there is an echo chamber created where distrust of authority figures is inculcated."

Adding to it is concerns about the safety of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The U.S. government paused the shots to investigate reports of rare but potentially dangerous blood clots.

Millions of doses of the J&J vaccine have been given in the U.S., the vast majority with no or mild side effects. But the questions stemming from six cases could complicate efforts to win over people who are already hesitant, and it was unclear how pro-vaccine advocates would respond to the latest challenge.

Hasnain's company is pressing forward with releasing Tuesday its latest Spanish-language animation targeting young Latinos. The animated stories are produced with Gilberto Lopez, a researcher and associate professor at Arizona State University's School of Transborder Studies. Lopez said young Latino men are especially reluctant to get vaccinated.

The latest animation is set to hip-hop rhythms and features a know-it-all Uncle Rigo who spouts unfounded claims that a cool female doctor dispels.

"The silver lining of the lessons from the pandemic is this is a chance to reimagine the delivery of health care to our communities," said Dr. Stephen B. Thomas, who runs the Maryland Center for Health Equity at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

He works with Black and Latino barbershops and beauty salons to talk about vaccine safety. The program recently licensed three barbers as community health advocates.

"Black barbershops and beauty salons can be places of conspiracy theories that grow and thrive, or places where evidence-based science and referrals are done," said Thomas, who initially launched the Health Advocates In-Reach and Research initiative — or HAIR — to educate people about chronic diseases like diabetes.

At the Shop Hair Spa in Hyattsville, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., a colorful box asking, "What is your health question?" is posted next to the prices for cuts. COVID-19 vaccine information is displayed on a red wall behind a salon chair.

Barber Wallace Wilson said he understands people's reservations about getting vaccinated.

"I'm still skeptical about it, you know, because of the simple fact that I'm an African American male, and when you look at history, we've been used as guinea pigs," Wilson said.

He was referring to a 40-year study by the U.S. government that tracked Black men infected with syphilis without treating them so scientists could observe the disease take its course.

Customer James McRae shared his skepticism. But Wilson told McRae that this time is different because it's not just the U.S. government vaccinating people, it's the world, and everyone needs to do their part.

"I want everybody to be safe," Wilson said, carefully maneuvering a razor near the straps of McRae's red polka-dot mask.

McRae agreed but was still leery, vowing to let God decide.

Experts say any trust will evaporate if people decide to get a shot and then can't. Wilson has been on a wait list for more than a month.

Dr. Fermin Leguen, head of the Southern Nevada Health District in Las Vegas, knows how much words matter.

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With information about the virus rapidly changing, the agency resorted to an automated translator to keep up. One slogan "Mask Up, Back Up, Wash Up" was translated in Spanish to say, "To Mask, Support, To Wash Oneself."

Leguen, who was born in Cuba, meets with Spanish-language media outlets after his weekly briefings as a way to get better information to people.

In San Diego, Ana Castro was among the ethnically and racially diverse contact tracers with no prior health training hired last summer to help immigrants, refugees and racial minorities who may have been exposed to COVID-19.

Castro knew the difficulties of the people she called. She was caring for her Mexican mother, who was bedridden with COVID-19.

Now, she and others are calling back 10,000 people to talk about the vaccine and line up appointments.

"It allows for a conversation, which is missing doing broad messaging," said Corinne McDaniels-Davidson, director of the Institute for Public Health at San Diego State University, which created the program with the county health department. "People need to feel they have reasonable and valid concerns that are addressed in their own language from people from their same culture."

Among Castro's first callbacks was to a man she found had died of COVID-19. Castro and his 81-year-old wife spoke for half an hour as the woman shared memories about her husband.

"I'm not just calling to sign people up to get the vaccine," she said. "I'm also making sure their emotional and physical well-being is being taken care of."

Health experts hope credible messengers will get more shots in arms.

Bertha Morales was hesitant even though she works for a health clinic in Phoenix. Her relatives insisted the vaccine would insert a tracking chip into her body or cause her to get sick and die.

Then her employer offered a Spanish-language online talk that knocked down those rumors. She's now fully vaccinated.

"I think the thing that really made me change was that I wanted to see my grandma but I didn't want to cause her to get sick," Morales said. "It had been so long."

Alaska denied benefits to gay couples despite court rulings

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Alaska wrongly denied some same-sex spouses benefits for years by claiming their unions were not recognized even after courts struck down gay marriage bans, court documents obtained by The Associated Press show.

The agency that determines eligibility for a yearly oil wealth check paid to nearly all Alaska residents denied a payout for same-sex spouses or dependents of military members stationed in other states for five years after a federal court invalidated Alaska's ban on same-sex marriage in 2014, the documents show. The practice also persisted after the Supreme Court legalized the unions nationwide in 2015.

In one email from July 2019, a same-sex spouse living out of state with his military husband was denied a check because "unfortunately the state of Alaska doesn't recognize same sex marriage yet," employee Marissa Requa wrote to a colleague, ending the sentence with a frowning face emoji.

The practice by the Permanent Fund Dividend Division continued until several people questioned or appealed being denied checks in 2019. Denali Smith, who was denied benefits, sued the state that November, seeking an order declaring that Alaska officials violated the federal court ruling and Smith's constitutional rights to equal protection and due process.

Smith and the state settled the lawsuit Wednesday. Alaska admitted denying benefits to same-sex military spouses and dependents for five years in violation of a permanent injunction put in place by the 2014 U.S. District Court decision. The state also vowed to no longer use the outdated state law, stop denying military spouses and dependents oil checks going forward and update enforcement regulations.

There were no financial terms to the settlement. In fact, Smith had to pay \$400 out of pocket to file the lawsuit to get her oil check, and her attorney worked pro bono.

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In Alaska, the oil wealth check is seen as an entitlement that people use to buy things like new TVs or snowmobiles, fund college savings accounts or, in rural areas, pay for high heating and food costs. The payouts come from a fund seeded with oil money. Last year, nearly every resident received \$992. The year before, the amount was \$1,606.

About 800 pages of emails provided by the state for the lawsuit show a clear misunderstanding or outright disregard of the 2014 court precedent and reluctance to reach out to the attorney general's office for guidance.

The emails, redacted of identifying information about oil check applicants, show that as late as 2019, division employees were claiming Alaska did not recognize same-sex marriages, often pointing to an outdated and unenforceable section of state law still on the books as justification.

"It seems like none of them, all the way up to the director, understood that this was a permanent injunction, meaning if you enforce the law after this date, you're in violation of a court order and you're violating people's rights," said Anchorage attorney Caitlin Shortell, one of the lawyers who successfully sued to overturn the state's ban on gay marriage and later filed the lawsuit on behalf of Smith.

The state Department of Law released a statement saying the unenforceable law will remain part of the state's statutes until lawmakers remove it.

"As for the application of that law which led to the recently settled lawsuit, that policy has been corrected by the Department of Revenue," the statement said. It added that it's ensuring every eligible Alaskan receives an oil check as the governor directed after hearing about the issue in 2019.

The department did not respond to other questions from the AP, including how many spouses were improperly denied checks and how many of those were retroactively paid, whether the attorney general's office advised the Permanent Fund Dividend Division on the changes stemming from the court decisions or if the division decided for itself what the law meant.

The emails show employees disregarded a 2017 order from a deputy revenue commissioner to stop denying checks to same-sex spouses, that efforts were made to keep incorrect language about the state not recognizing gay marriage in its literature and that its computer system was programmed to reference the unenforceable state law in form denial letters.

Smith, who accompanied her wife out of state, was denied a check in 2019. Shortell also represented another woman whose wife was stationed out of state, and the woman and the couple's two children were denied benefits.

Division staff listed about 40 people who were denied. Four were marked for further review, but the emails don't reference what came of those applications.

"Based on their ignorance of and disregard for the law throughout the disclosures, I do not trust their analysis was correct," Shortell said, adding that the number of people denied benefits could be higher.

Of the settlement, Shortell said she was pleased the state would follow court orders that same-sex couples "are entitled to have their marriages recognized and to receive all of the benefits attendant on marriage," including the oil checks.

"It is disturbing that it took five years and a federal lawsuit to force the state to follow the law and stop its discriminatory policy," she added.

According to the emails, the first indication that the law was not being followed came on Feb. 26, 2015, when someone emailed employee Bradley Johnson about whether gay marriage was legal, and he sought clarification from Kimberly Lane, the division's eligibility manager.

That same day, another employee, Jennifer Cason, told Lane she knew that same-sex marriage was legal in Alaska. "I just want to make sure that everyone knows what the law is here so it can be followed," an email said.

On March 9, 2015, Lane asked appeals manager Robert Pearson for clarification. Pearson writes back, "1st thought – punt to AG," followed by a smiley face.

"I don't think the law has been officially struck down, as yet, but I could be wrong," he continued. "So, 2nd thought, let's wait until the Supreme Court decision and then we won't have to take anything back that we've already done."

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Lynne Church, another employee, emailed Lane and Pearson on Aug. 8, 2016, about an applicant who would most likely be denied the following year because they would be accompanying their military spouse out of state. "Federal law and Alaska law are not aligned at this time," Church wrongly stated.

On Jan. 26, 2017, Pearson emailed Sara Race, then the division's director, and Anne Weske, then the division's operations manager, summarizing the appeal by a woman who was denied a check when her wife was stationed out of state. The 2016 denial, Pearson wrote, "is based solely on her not qualifying as a military spouse. If she were male she would be eligible."

The most definitive directive about approving such claims for same-sex spouses and dependents was given March 9, 2017, by Jerry Burnett, then the deputy revenue commissioner. He left little doubt in an email to Race and Weske, saying the U.S. Supreme Court decision invalidated all opposing laws at the state or local level. Since the ruling, the division "has not been able to use the definition of marriage found in the Alaska Statutes or Constitution," he wrote.

Any oil checks denied for that reason must be paid immediately, and staff need to use a definition of marriage that doesn't conflict with the legal decisions, he wrote.

Race responded that the denial had been overturned and the person paid. "Also, 110% understood that future eligibility decisions would need to follow suit."

Two years later, emails show same-sex couples were still being denied. In April 2019, emails show a woman who was denied a dividend was given a supervisor's contact information to appeal.

After another applicant who had been denied complained to their lawmaker, the issue was escalated to Weske, who by then was the division's director and who had received Burnett's 2017 directive to recognize same-sex marriages.

"I seem to recall possible guidance from the prior administration in stating that we COULD allow them," Weske wrote Sept. 23, 2019, noting that she'd check, but "if they were denied there is law stating that we don't recognize same sex marriage."

By Oct. 7, 2019, over a month before Smith's lawsuit was filed, the policy had changed. Lane emailed staff to treat same-sex marriages the same as opposite-sex couples.

In that email, Lane said Alaska's definition of marriage "has been struck down as unconstitutional by U.S. District Court and U.S. Supreme Court in two separate cases," without mentioning those cases had been decided several years earlier.

Princes William, Harry won't walk side-by-side at funeral

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince William and Prince Harry won't walk side-by-side Saturday as they follow their grandfather's coffin into the church ahead of Prince Philip's funeral, minimizing the chances of any awkward moments between the brothers who are grappling with strained relations since Harry's decision to step away from royal duties last year.

Buckingham Palace on Thursday released the broad outlines of the funeral program for Queen Elizabeth II's husband, who died April 9 at 99. The palace revealed that William and Harry's cousin, Peter Phillips, will walk between the princes as they escort the coffin to St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, west of London.

Prince Charles, the heir to the throne and the father of the princes, together with his sister, Princess Anne, will lead the 15-member procession.

The brothers had been closely watched as Saturday's funeral will almost certainly remind the pair of their shared grief at another royal funeral more than two decades ago. As young boys, both walked behind their mother Princess Diana's coffin in 1997 in London in a ceremony watched around the world.

Palace officials refused to comment when asked whether the positioning of William and Harry was an effort to minimize family tensions, which have grown after Harry and his wife Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, gave an explosive interview to Oprah Winfrey that suggested an unnamed member of the royal family had made a racist comment to Harry before the birth of their child Archie.

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Meghan, who is pregnant and living in California with Harry, is not coming to the funeral on the advice of her doctor.

"We're not going to be drawn into those perceptions of drama or anything like that," a palace spokesman said while speaking on condition of anonymity in line with policy. "This is a funeral and the arrangements have been agreed and they represent Her Majesty's wishes."

In another effort to preserve family unity, the palace said senior royals would wear civilian clothes to the funeral. The decision, signed off by the queen, means that Harry won't risk being the only member of the royal family not in uniform during the funeral.

Members of the royal family often wear uniforms to public events by virtue of their honorary roles with the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, but Harry lost his honorary military titles when he decided to give up frontline royal duties last year. As a result, protocol suggests that Harry, an army veteran who served two tours of duty in Afghanistan, would only wear a suit with medals at royal functions.

The decision also sidesteps another potential controversy after reports that Prince Andrew, the queen's second-oldest son, considered wearing an admiral's uniform to his father's funeral. Andrew retains his military titles even though he was forced to step away from royal duties after a disastrous interview with the BBC about his acquaintance with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Attendance at the funeral will be limited to 30 people because of the coronavirus restrictions in England. The list will include several of Philip's relatives from Germany, together with immediate members of the royal family. The children in the family will not attend.

Guests will wear masks inside the chapel and observe social distancing. The queen, always the first to set an example, will also wear a mask.

In other details released about the funeral, Royal Marine buglers will play "Action Stations," an alarm that alerts sailors to prepare for battle.

Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, served in the Royal Navy for 12 years and maintained close ties to the armed forces throughout his life. Military personnel will have a large role in honoring him Saturday despite the attendance limit.

Members of the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, the Royal Air Force and the British Army will take part in the funeral procession. Philip's coffin will be carried to St. George's Chapel on a specially adapted Land Rover that he designed himself.

On Thursday, Charles and his wife Camilla visited Marlborough House in central London to see a sea of floral tributes for Philip, which have been moved there from the gates of Buckingham Palace.

The couple spent some time looking at the cards and notes with the flowers. The items left in tribute included a model of a Land Rover similar to the one that will bear Philip's coffin on Saturday, with the words "The Duke R.I.P" on the roof.

EXPLAINER: What's behind the conflict in eastern Ukraine?

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Tensions are rising over the conflict in eastern Ukraine, with growing violations of a cease-fire and a massive Russian military buildup near its border with the region.

Ukraine and the West have become worried about the Russian troops' concentration and have urged Moscow to pull them back. Russia has argued that it's free to deploy its forces on its territory and sternly warned the government in Kyiv against using force to reclaim control of the rebel-held territory east where more than 14,000 people have died in seven years of fighting.

Here's a look at some of the issues involving the conflict in eastern Ukraine:

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT?

Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union until its 1991 collapse, and since then Russia has sought to keep the neighbor in its orbit. The separatist conflict in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, known as the Donbas, short for Donetsk Basin, erupted in April 2014. That came a few weeks after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula following the ouster of a Moscow-friendly president by a popular uprising in

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the capital of Kyiv.

Armed rebels in the mostly Russian-speaking eastern region seized government buildings and proclaimed "people's republics" in the Donetsk and the Luhansk regions, and the Ukrainian military and volunteer battalions moved to put down the unrest.

Ukraine and the West said Russia sent troops and weapons to the east to support the separatists. Moscow has denied those claims and insisted that Russians fighting alongside the rebels went there on their own.

Amid the hostilities, a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet traveling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down on July 17, 2014, over eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. Dutch prosecutors allege it was shot by a Russian Buk missile from an area controlled by the Russia-backed separatists. Russia denied any involvement.

The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on Moscow for its annexation of Crimea, which wasn't recognized by most of the world, and its support for the separatists. The restrictions have halted the transfer of Western technology and blocked Russia's access to global capital markets. Russia retaliated by banning most Western food imports.

The Kremlin has repeatedly vowed that no Western sanctions will ever force it to change its course on Ukraine.

HAVE THERE BEEN EFFORTS AT A PEACE DEAL?

After a series of Ukraine's military defeats, France and Germany helped broker a peace deal that was signed in February 2015 in the Belarusian capital of Minsk.

The agreement was a diplomatic coup for Russia, obliging Ukraine to grant broad autonomy to the rebel regions and declare an amnesty for the rebels. It stipulated that Ukraine would regain full control of its border with Russia in the rebel-held territories only after they elect local leaders and legislatures. Many in Ukraine saw the deal as a betrayal of national interests and opposed it.

The Minsk agreement helped end large-scale hostilities, but sporadic skirmishes have continued and efforts at a political settlement have stalled.

Ukrainian officials have repeatedly pushed for revising the Minsk deal, calls that Russia has rejected.

HOW IS THE PEACE DEAL FARING?

While the separatists have asked Russia to incorporate the rebel territories, Moscow has ignored the demand — apparently figuring that those eastern regions would eventually help draw Ukraine back into Russia's orbit and thwart Kyiv's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Russia has granted its citizenship to more than 600,000 people in the rebel-controlled regions.

Political novice Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected president of Ukraine by a landslide in April 2019 on promises to end the fighting and root out the country's endemic corruption. He pushed successfully for a series of prisoner exchanges and sought to secure a lasting truce by pulling back troops and heavy weapons from the line of contact.

In December 2019, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met in Paris and reaffirmed their commitment to the 2015 peace deal, but no progress has been reached on a political settlement.

WHY HAVE TENSIONS ESCALATED NOW?

The lack of a lasting resolution to the conflict has fomented new tensions. Ukrainian authorities say cease-fire violations have become more frequent in recent weeks, with nearly 30 troops killed this year.

They accused Russia of fueling tensions by deploying 41,000 troops near the border with eastern Ukraine and 42,000 to Crimea, where Russia maintains a large naval base.

The U.S. and NATO say the Russian troops' concentration is the largest since 2014. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the buildup in the past three weeks was part of readiness drills in response to what he described as threats from NATO.

Russia also has cast it as a necessary security precaution amid what it described as Ukraine's provocations along the line of control. Kremlin officials have strongly warned Kyiv against trying to use force to retake the east, saying Russia could be forced to intervene to protect civilians if they face a threat of massacre.

WHAT'S THE U.S. ROLE?

The United States has provided political, financial and military assistance to Ukraine, conducted joint

military drills and regularly sent its ships into the Black Sea in a show of support.

In a call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, new U.S. President Joe Biden voiced concern over the Russian buildup near Ukraine and "called on Russia to de-escalate tensions." The White House said Biden "emphasized the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The Biden administration on Thursday raised the pressure on Russia, announcing an array of new sanctions, including a ban for U.S. financial institutions to buy Russian government bonds directly from Russian state institutions. Washington also ordered the expulsion of 10 Russian diplomats and targeted six Russian companies and 32 individuals with sanctions for trying to interfere in last year's U.S. presidential election, the massive SolarWinds hack and other activities.

Russia warned that it will respond with a series of retaliatory moves.

Global warming's extreme rains threaten Hawaii's coral reefs

By CALEB JONES Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — As muddy rainwater surged from Hawaii's steep seaside mountains and inundated residential communities last month, the damage caused by flooding was obvious — houses were destroyed and businesses swamped, landslides covered highways and raging rivers and streams were clogged with debris.

But extreme rain events predicted to become more common with human-caused global warming not only wreak havoc on land — the runoff from these increasingly severe storms also threatens Hawaii's coral reefs.

"These big events are the ones that have the greatest damage because they are the ones that put the most sediment and nutrients out onto the reef," said C. Mark Eakin, senior coral advisor to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the former director of the agency's Coral Reef Watch program.

A warmer climate tends to amplify existing weather patterns, said Hawaii's state climatologist, Pao-Shin Chu, noting the islands have an overall wet climate and that powerful storms are expected to become more frequent.

"Given this climate change or global warming, as we have seen over the last hundred years, the atmospheric water vapor pressure is increasing," said Chu. "We have some evidence showing that we already have some increasing, very intense rain."

Coral reefs make up much of Hawaii's nearshore ocean ecosystem and are critical to the state's economy.

Hawaii's reefs protect populated shorelines from massive ocean swells and storm surges from tropical storms — a benefit the U.S. Geological Survey valued at more than \$860 million a year.

Adding tourism, fishing, cultural value and other factors, the state's reefs are worth more than \$33 billion, according to a NOAA-funded study.

March's flooding was caused by a weather system that stalled over the islands and brought two weeks of rain, much extremely heavy.

On Oahu's North Shore, "a very large flood wave" rushed down from the mountains and flooded the town of Haleiwa, said National Weather Service hydrologist Kevin Kodama.

"That's a big challenge in Hawaii, where we have small, steep watersheds," Kodama said. "Most of the basins in the state will produce flash flooding."

Last month had 11 flash flood events and was the wettest March in 15 years, he said.

The runoff problem is multifaceted. Deforestation and grading on construction sites and farms lead to increased runoff. Feral animals such as goats, pigs and deer clear vegetation, causing erosion and excessive sedimentation on reefs. And constant, low-level runoff carries gasoline and oil from roadways, household chemicals, trash and pesticides into the ocean.

Any significant change in ocean conditions, such as an influx of fresh water alone, can harm coral health. Contaminants and soil from land accumulate on reefs and can smother and kill the coral. Scientists say suspension of material in the water can also block sunlight coral needs to survive.

One of the biggest problems for Hawaii reefs is sewage. There are about 88,000 cesspools throughout the islands, many in coastal areas.

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"Cesspools are essentially a hole in the ground where there is no treatment prior to wastewater entering the environment," said Jamison Gove, a research oceanographer with NOAA who lives on Oahu's North Shore.

Cesspools leak into groundwater — and with heavy rains, they overflow and send pathogens and other harmful contaminants into the ocean.

In the town of Pupukeya, where professional surfers compete at the famed Banzai Pipeline reef break, more than 330 million gallons (1.25 billion liters) of wastewater enters the ocean each year — enough to fill hundreds of Olympic size swimming pools.

On the North Shore during the recent flood, "brown, polluted water just blanketed the entire town," Gove said. "You could just smell it everywhere."

More than half the state's cesspools are on the Big Island, home to some of the state's most expansive and pristine coral reefs. And Gove said some areas have shown a clear decrease in coral cover where sewage routinely enters the ocean.

A reef off the town of Puako — an extensively monitored location — has seen significant losses, he said. Coral cover there has declined by about 70% since 1975.

"This is probably one of the more dramatic examples since coral cover is not this high in a lot of places," he said. "But since we don't have this type of data everywhere, we can't say for sure this isn't a more common story."

NOAA is providing data on the issue to the state, and efforts to remove cesspools and change infrastructure to slow and distribute floodwater could help Hawaii's reefs.

The state has banned cesspools in new construction and is attempting to remove the existing ones by 2050.

Although coral reefs worldwide face threats from global warming, including marine heatwaves that bleach and kill coral, storm runoff could prove a more serious and immediate threat to reefs in Hawaii.

"In Hawaii, I would rate runoff much higher than marine heatwaves in driving coral decline," said Greg Asner, director of the Center for Global Discovery and Conservation Science at Arizona State University.

In 2019, Asner and his team used imaging technology on aircraft coupled with satellite data to create new detailed maps of all living coral in the Hawaiian Islands. The data, now being used by federal and state scientists, shows a correlation between land-based pollutants from runoff and coral health.

"More runoff impacts reefs, mostly by mobilizing more chemicals and sediment on land," Asner said. "Increased chemical pollution and sedimentation is a major driver of coral decline."

March's floods were not the first of their kind.

A 2018 rainstorm on Kauai caused widespread flooding that cut off a community for weeks. The storm set a new U.S. record for rainfall in a single day with nearly 50 inches (127 centimeters).

Ku'ulei Rodgers, a coral reef ecologist at the University of Hawaii's Institute of Marine Biology, studied that 2018 flood as well as a 2002 flood in the same area. The 2002 rains swept earth from a construction site into the sea and "killed almost an entire reef," Rodgers said.

After the 2018 flood, a review found fish abundance on a nearby reef had been reduced by 20% and urchins, which help clean reefs and keep coral healthy, were reduced by 40%.

When making policy decisions about how to safeguard reefs, Rodgers said, it's important to understand that land and oceans are intertwined.

"(Native) Hawaiians knew there was a connection between the two because whatever they did upland would affect their fishing downstream," she said. "The better the watershed, the better the reef and vice versa."

Gucci heirs worry over family depiction in Ridley Scott film

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — The great-grandchildren of Guccio Gucci, who founded the luxury fashion house that bears his name a century ago in Florence, are appealing to filmmaker Ridley Scott to respect their family's legacy in a new film that focuses on a sensational murder.

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"The House of Gucci," starring Lady Gaga and Adam Driver, is based on a book about the 1995 murder-for-hire of one of Gucci's grandchildren, Maurizio, and the subsequent trial and conviction of his ex-wife. Patrizia Reggiani, portrayed by Lady Gaga, served 16 years in prison for contracting the murder.

One of Maurizio's second cousins, Patrizia Gucci, is worried that the film goes beyond the headline-grabbing true-crime story and pries into the private lives of the Guccio Gucci heirs.

"We are truly disappointed. I speak on behalf of the family," Gucci told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "They are stealing the identity of a family to make a profit, to increase the income of the Hollywood system....Our family has an identity, privacy. We can talk about everything. but there is a borderline that cannot be crossed."

Patrizia Gucci said she reached out to Ridley Scott's wife, Giannina Facio, for clarification on the scope of the film, but has not received any reply. Facio met with members of the Gucci family in the early 2000s to discuss another project that was to have focused on the roles of Patrizia Gucci's father, Paolo, and grandfather, Aldo, in expanding the brand into a global luxury player. The fact that the production company did not reach out for the new film only heightens the family's concerns, she said.

Ridley Scott's production company did not respond to requests for comment, made also through their Italian counterpart.

The Guccis are not the first Italian fashion family to wrestle with onscreen depictions about tragic events. The Versace family put out a statement in 2018 about the season of Ryan Murphy's "American Crime Story" that dealt with the murder of fashion house founder Gianni Versace, saying the TV series was not authorized and should be considered "a work of fiction."

Patrizia Gucci said her family will decide what further action they might take after seeing the film. Their concerns stem from the casting of top actors to play family members whose stories intersect little with Maurizio Gucci's murder, the lack of current contact with Scott's production company and inaccuracies they see in the book on which the film is based.

Al Pacino plays Aldo Gucci, whom his granddaughter remembers as an expert salesman who opened Gucci stores on Rome's via Condotti and in New York, bringing in VIP clientele and expanding the brand's global reach. And Jared Leto plays Paolo Gucci, whose creative contributions included the idea to create the Gucci brand's famed double-G logo as well as its trademark plasticized bags and moccasins.

It is this story that she recounts in her own book, "Gucci, The True Story of a Successful Dynasty," which was published in Italian in 2015.

Patrizia Gucci said paparazzi photos from the "House of Gucci" set have not been at all reassuring.

"My grandfather was a very handsome man, like all the Guccis, and very tall, blue eyes and very elegant. He is being played by Al Pacino, who is not very tall already, and this photo shows him as fat, short, with sideburns, really ugly. Shameful, because he doesn't resemble him at all," Patrizia Gucci said.

Leto's Paolo Gucci, meanwhile, is shown with unkempt hair, and a lilac corduroy suit not at all in line with his daughter's recollections. "Horrible, horrible. I still feel offended," she said.

The Gucci family has not been involved with the Gucci fashion house since 1993, when Maurizio sold his remaining stake to the Bahrain-based company, Investcorp. It was later bought by the French group PPR, which is now Kering.

The fashion house is cooperating with the "The House of Gucci," opening its archives to the film company for wardrobe and props. Salma Hayek, the wife of Kering CEO Francois-Henri Pinault, appears in the film. Leto is a close friend of creative director Alessandro Michele.

The problem within: Biden targets lead pipes, pushes equity

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — In the modest bungalows and two-flats of Chicago's Little Village neighborhood, there's never a shortage of needed home repairs staring residents in the face. And then there is the less obvious but more ominous problem lurking in their pipes.

"There are so many issues that seem more immediate, whether it's the roof, the windows, siding, insula-

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tion," said 51-year-old Enrique Nieto, who has lived in the predominantly Latino neighborhood all his life. "The lead issue is not the one that's right in front of you."

Given short shrift by public officials for decades, the lead pipes snaking through Chicago and communities of every size from rural Maine to suburban California are in the national spotlight now as President Joe Biden pushes to spend \$45 billion to replace every lead water pipe in the country as part of his big infrastructure package.

The moon-shot plan could have huge ramifications for this city and others where a swath of Black, Latino and low-income residents have been left effectively drinking from a lead straw decades after scientists established that lead consumption is unsafe at any level.

The White House holds out its lead-pipe proposal as a generation-changing opportunity to reduce brain-damaging exposure to lead in 400,000 schools and child care centers and 6 million to 10 million homes. It's also an effort that the administration says can help create plenty of good-paying union jobs around the country.

There are few, if any, cities where the issue is more salient than Chicago. The nation's third-largest city is still estimated to have some 380,000 lead pipes bringing water into homes, schools and businesses. The city required their use until a 1986 federal ban that came long after most other American cities had phased out their use in the face of an avalanche of research on lead's toxicity.

Biden's plan "would be enormous if it comes through," said Troy Hernandez, an environmental activist in the city's predominantly Latino Pilsen neighborhood. Hernandez recently spent \$15,000 to replace the lead service lines bringing water into his home. "I question whether \$45 billion is enough, but it's a really important step."

Since announcing his infrastructure plan, Biden has tried to frame his ambitious effort on lead pipes as advancing the cause of racial equity. The problem has long had a disproportionate impact on communities of color, according to environmental advocates and research.

Biden claims there are "hundreds of Flints all across America" -- a reference to the public health crisis that erupted in the predominantly Black Michigan city after the government switched to a new water supply in 2014 but failed to properly treat the water with chemicals to prevent lead pipes from disintegrating.

The problem nationally would not have been neglected so long if it hit closer to home for politicians, the president suggested.

"What do you think would happen if they found out all the lead pipes are up in the Capitol?" Biden said recently as he defended his plan against GOP complaints that it's rife with wasteful spending.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced in September that the city was launching two programs to begin addressing the issue. But with limited dollars, the city's effort this year is expected to dig out about 650 lead water service lines — pipes under homes that connect to water mains.

"This is a problem that was decades in the making and it is likely to take many, many, many years to address, and a lot of funding," said the city's health commissioner, Dr. Allison Arwady.

Lead is unsafe to consume at any level for children, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Even low levels of lead in the blood can permanently damage the developing brains of children and result in slowed growth, hearing problems and anemia. The most common sources of lead in drinking water are lead pipes, faucets, and fixtures, according to the agency.

Biden's lead-pipe plan is in sync with an order he signed soon after he took office pledging to target 40% of new clean energy and environmental spending at disadvantaged communities.

The Metropolitan Planning Council, a nonprofit group promoting equitable and sustainable growth in the Chicago region, reported last year that 65% of Illinois' Black and Latino residents and 42% of its Asian American and Native American populations lived in communities containing 94% of the state's known lead service lines. Thirty percent of the state's white population lived in those same communities.

Even when the long-neglected problem gets attention, the help may not be evenly distributed.

In Washington, D.C., efforts by the city to give homeowners logistical help with lead service line replacements resulted in higher replacement rates for residents of high-income, white neighborhoods than for homeowners in low-income Black neighborhoods, according to a study by the Environmental Defense

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Fund advocacy group.

The scope of the problem nationally is massive, if not entirely documented. In some cities, including Chicago, the location of all the lead water pipes is not fully known.

The White House, which does not have a firm timeline on how long it would take to complete the project, says it intends to dedicate some of the money to identifying the scope of the issue.

Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech University civil and environmental engineer whose research helped expose Flint's water crisis, estimates it probably would take 10 years to 15 years to replace all the nation's lead pipes.

Estimated replacements costs vary widely, he said. Chicago, for example, has estimated the average cost of replacing a lead water service at \$27,000. Cities such as Denver, Detroit and Newark, New Jersey -- all of which launched replacement efforts in recent years -- have managed to do it for a fraction of that cost. The White House estimated \$4,000 to \$6,000 per pipe replacement in developing its proposal.

The White House says it would distribute the money to states and communities through two already established federal clean water programs.

"If it were done correctly, \$45 billion is enough," Edwards said. "And if it's not, it will still make an enormous dent."

In Little Village, concerns about lead levels have simmered for years.

Last year, Nieto said, residents became concerned after the implosion of a smoke stack at a decommissioned power plant left much of the neighborhood enveloped in dust. Some residents complained that their tap water was cloudy for some time after the implosion and feared that their old lead service lines may have been jarred, raising the level of lead particulates in the water. City officials tested the water and assured residents the water was safe, though some residents remained skeptical, Nieto said.

Most homeowners in the working-class neighborhood don't have the wherewithal to replace lead service lines on their own, Nieto said, adding that Biden's plan "would go a long way."

Some of his neighbors are skeptical.

Irma Morales, 59, another longtime resident of the working-class neighborhood, said what Biden is proposing sounds good but she's doubtful the federal government will actually deliver.

"They say but what do they do?" Morales said.

Brenda Santoyo, a policy associate at the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, said Biden's plan -- if it comes to fruition -- could help demonstrate to Latino communities they aren't forgotten.

"Replacing these lead lines would give our community members a sense of trust in government at a time when there hasn't been a lot of reason to have trust," she said.

List of guests attending the funeral of Prince Philip

LONDON (AP) — Here is the full list of guests who will attend the funeral of Prince Philip on Saturday at St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

1. Queen Elizabeth II
2. Prince Charles
3. Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall
4. Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge
5. Duchess of Cambridge
6. Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex
7. Prince Andrew, the Duke of York
8. Princess Beatrice
9. Edoardo Mapelli Mozzi
10. Princess Eugenie
11. Jack Brooksbank
12. Prince Edward
13. Countess of Wessex

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14. Lady Louise Windsor
15. Viscount Severn
16. Princess Anne
17. Vice Admiral Sir Timothy Laurence
18. Peter Phillips
19. Zara Phillips
20. Mike Tindall
21. Earl of Snowdon
22. Lady Sarah Chatto
23. Daniel Chatto
24. Duke of Gloucester
25. Duke of Kent
26. Princess Alexandra
27. Bernhard, Hereditary Prince of Baden
28. Prince Donatus, Landgrave of Hesse
29. Prince Philipp of Hohenlohe-Langenburg
30. The Countess Mountbatten of Burma

India's biggest cities shut down as new virus cases hit 200K

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's two largest cities imposed stringent restrictions on movement and one planned to use hotels and banquet halls to treat coronavirus patients as new infections in the country shot past 200,000 Thursday amid a devastating surge that is straining a fragile health system.

The soaring cases and deaths come just months after India thought it had seen the worst of the pandemic — and have forced the country to delay exports of vaccines abroad. India is a major producer of COVID-19 shots, and its pivot to focus on domestic demand has weighed heavily on global efforts to end the pandemic.

New Delhi announced stay-at-home orders for the weekend, though essential workers will be able to move about if they have a pass from local authorities. Restaurants, malls, gyms and spas will be shut down. Movie theaters will close on weekends, but can operate on weekdays at a third of their capacity.

Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's top elected official, said that despite rise in infections, 5,000 hospital beds are still available in the capital and more capacity is being added. But still, more than a dozen hotels and wedding banquet halls were ordered to be converted into COVID-19 centers where doctors from nearby hospitals will treat the moderately ill.

"The surge is alarming," said S.K. Sarin, a government health expert in New Delhi.

The moves in the capital came after similar measures were imposed in the worst-hit state of Maharashtra, home to financial capital, Mumbai. The bustle of India's biggest city ebbed after authorities closed most industries, businesses and public places Wednesday night and put limits on the movement of people for 15 days. Train and plane travel was still allowed, however.

In recent days, the city has seen an exodus of panic-stricken day laborers, hauling backpacks and flocking to overcrowded trains.

Dozens of other towns and cities have also imposed nighttime curfews.

The surge in cases was weighing on hospitals in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and several other states, where many reported a shortage of oxygen tanks. Imran Sheikh, a resident of the city of Pune in Maharashtra, said he was asked to supply his own oxygen tank for a relative undergoing COVID-19 treatment.

Cremation and burial grounds in the worst-hit areas were finding it difficult to cope with the increasing number of bodies arriving for last rites, according to Indian media reports.

Shahid Jamil, a virologist, said the recent local and state elections with massive political rallies and a

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major Hindu festival during which hundreds of thousands of devotees bathed in the Ganges river were super-spreader events.

The 200,739 new infections recorded Thursday are about twice the number of daily cases that were recorded during the last peak, in September. The Health Ministry also reported 1,038 deaths from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, pushing the toll over 173,000.

India's toll of 14 million cases puts it second behind the United States. It ranks fourth in deaths after the U.S., Brazil and Mexico — though, with nearly 1.4 billion people, it has a much larger population than any of those countries. Experts say even these figures are likely an undercount.

As it struggles with the caseload, India is ramping up its vaccination drive. The Health Ministry said the total vaccinations crossed 114 million with more than 3 million doses administered on Wednesday.

When infections began plummeting in India in September, many concluded the worst had passed. Masks and social distancing were abandoned. When cases began rising again in February, authorities were left scrambling.

Blinken in Afghanistan to sell Biden troop withdrawal

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on Thursday to sell Afghan leaders and a wary public on President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from the country and end America's longest war.

Blinken sought to assure senior Afghan politicians that the United States remains committed to the country despite Biden's announcement a day earlier that the 2,500 U.S. soldiers remaining in the country would be coming home by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that led to the U.S. invasion in 2001.

"I wanted to demonstrate with my visit the ongoing commitment of the United States to the Islamic Republic and the people of Afghanistan," Blinken told Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as they met at the presidential palace in Kabul. "The partnership is changing, but the partnership itself is enduring."

"We respect the decision and are adjusting our priorities," Ghani told Blinken, expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of US troops.

Later, in a meeting with Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the National Reconciliation Council, Blinken repeated his message, saying that "we have a new chapter, but it is a new chapter that we're writing together."

"We are grateful to your people, your country, your administration," Abdullah said.

NATO immediately followed Biden's lead on Wednesday, saying its roughly 7,000 non-American forces in Afghanistan would be departing within a few months, ending the foreign military presence that had been a fact of life for a generation of Afghans already reeling from more than 40 years of conflict.

Blinken arrived in the Afghan capital from Brussels, where he and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin briefed NATO officials on the U.S. decision and won quick approval from the allies to end their Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan.

Biden, Blinken, Austin have all tried to put a brave face on the pullout, maintaining that the U.S.- and NATO-led missions to Afghanistan had achieved their goal of decimating Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network that launched the 9/11 attacks and clearing the country of terrorist elements that could use Afghan soil to plot similar strikes.

However, that argument has faced pushback from some U.S. lawmakers and human rights advocates, who say the withdrawal will result in the loss of freedoms that Afghans enjoyed after the Taliban was ousted from power in late 2001.

"My views are very pessimistic," Naheed Farid, a member of parliament, told reporters when asked her thoughts about the future of her country. Farid was one of a half-dozen, mostly women, civic leaders who met with Blinken at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. She did not elaborate.

Despite billions of U.S. dollars in aid, 20 years after the invasion, more than half of Afghanistan's 36 million people live on less than \$1.90 a day, according to World Bank figures. Afghanistan is also considered one of the worst countries in the world for women's rights and wellbeing, according to the Georgetown

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Institute for Women Peace and Security.

For many Afghans the past two decades have been disappointing, as corruption has overtaken successive governments and powerful warlords have amassed wealth and loyal militias who are well armed. Many Afghans fear the chaos will worsen even more once America leaves.

At a news conference in the capital before leaving, Blinken said while America is drawing down its military force, it is stepping up its engagement with the Afghan government and people and would continue financial support for the Afghan National Security Forces. Washington pays a \$4 billion-a-year bill to maintain Afghanistan's security forces.

"Our partnership with Afghanistan is enduring. We will remain side by side going forward," Blinken promised.

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are at a stalemate but are supposed to resume later this month in Istanbul, though the Taliban have not said if they will participate.

Blinken had stern warnings for the religious militia, saying it would never gain the international recognition it wants if it drives Afghanistan toward a civil war rather than embracing the peace talks.

"It's important for the Taliban to recognize that it will never be legitimate and it will never be durable if it rejects the political process and tries to take the country by force," he said.

Under an agreement signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban last year, the U.S. was to have completed its military withdrawal by May 1. Although Biden is blowing through that deadline, angering the Taliban leadership, his plan calls for the pullout to begin on May 1. The NATO withdrawal will commence the same day.

The Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed warned Wednesday that "problems will be compounded," if the U.S. misses the May 1 withdrawal deadline. The insurgent movement has yet to respond to Biden's surprise announcement that the pullout would only start on that date.

In a meeting with staff at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Blinken said he understood this was a time of "real transition" for the entire U.S. mission in Afghanistan and that it was "particularly stressful" because of the uncertainties raised by Biden's announcement on top of the challenges they have already been facing, including the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Blinken also assured the mission's Afghan staff that a special U.S. visa program would be safeguarded. The program allows easier visa access for Afghans who have worked for the U.S. and as a result may have put themselves in danger.

In his announcement in Washington on Tuesday, Biden said it was "time to end America's longest war." But he added that the U.S. will "not conduct a hasty rush to the exit."

Biden, along with Blinken and Austin in Brussels, also vowed that the U.S. would remain committed to Afghanistan's people and development.

Austin said that the U.S. military, after withdrawing from Afghanistan, will keep counterterrorism "capabilities" in the region to keep pressure on extremist groups operating within Afghanistan. Asked for details, he declined to elaborate on where those U.S. forces would be positioned or in what numbers.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 16, the 106th day of 2021. There are 259 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 16, 2007, in one of America's worst school attacks, a college senior killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech before taking his own life.

On this date:

In 1789, President-elect George Washington left Mount Vernon, Virginia, for his inauguration in New York.

In 1862, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill ending slavery in the District of Columbia.

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In 1867, aviation pioneer Wilbur Wright was born in Millville, Indiana (his brother Orville was born five years later in Dayton, Ohio).

In 1912, American aviator Harriet Quimby became the first woman to fly across the English Channel, leaving Dover, England, and arriving near Calais, France, in 59 minutes.

In 1945, a Soviet submarine in the Baltic Sea torpedoed and sank the MV Goya, which Germany was using to transport civilian refugees and wounded soldiers; it's estimated that up to 7,000 people died.

In 1947, the cargo ship Grandcamp, carrying ammonium nitrate, blew up in the harbor in Texas City, Texas; a nearby ship, the High Flyer, which was carrying ammonium nitrate and sulfur, caught fire and exploded the following day; the blasts and fires killed nearly 600 people.

In 1962, New Orleans Archbishop Joseph Rummel excommunicated three local Roman Catholics for fighting racial integration of parochial schools. Bob Dylan debuted his song "Blowin' in the Wind" at Gerde's Folk City in New York.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in which the civil rights activist responded to a group of local clergymen who had criticized him for leading street protests; King defended his tactics, writing, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

In 1972, Apollo 16 blasted off on a voyage to the moon with astronauts John W. Young, Charles M. Duke Jr. and Ken Mattingly on board.

In 1977, Alex Haley, author of the best-seller "Roots," visited the Gambian village of Juffure, where, he believed, his ancestor Kunte Kinte was captured as a slave in 1767.

In 1996, Britain's Prince Andrew and his wife, Sarah, the Duchess of York, announced they were in the process of divorcing.

In 2010, the U.S government accused Wall Street's most powerful firm of fraud, saying Goldman Sachs & Co. had sold mortgage investments without telling buyers the securities were crafted with input from a client who was betting on them to fail. (In July 2010, Goldman agreed to pay \$550 million in a settlement with the Securities and Exchange Commission, but did not admit wrongdoing.)

Ten years ago: A Taliban sleeper agent walked into a meeting of NATO trainers and Afghan troops at Forward Operating Base Gamberi in the eastern Afghan province of Laghman and detonated a vest of explosives hidden underneath his uniform; six American troops, four Afghan soldiers and an interpreter were killed.

Five years ago: In an extraordinary gesture, Pope Francis brought 12 Syrian Muslims to Italy aboard his plane after an emotional visit to the Greek island of Lesbos, which was facing the brunt of Europe's migration crisis. A magnitude 7.8 earthquake on Ecuador's central coast near the town of Muisne (MWIHZ'-nee) killed more than 660 people.

One year ago: President Donald Trump gave governors a road map for easing coronavirus restrictions, laying out a "phased and deliberate approach" to restoring normal activity in places that had strong testing in place and were seeing a decrease in COVID-19 cases. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the state would extend stay-at-home restrictions for at least another month. The Labor Department said the wave of layoffs that had engulfed the economy since the virus struck had caused another 5.2 million people to seek unemployment benefits, raising the total number of laid-off workers to 22 million; it was the worst run of U.S. job losses on record. The Trump administration gutted an Obama-era rule that compelled the country's coal plants to cut back emissions of mercury and other human health hazards.

Today's Birthdays: Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI is 94. Singer Bobby Vinton is 86. Denmark's Queen Margrethe II is 81. Basketball Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is 74. Former Massachusetts first lady Ann Romney is 72. NFL coach Bill Belichick is 69. Rock singer and former politician Peter Garrett is 68. Actor Ellen Barkin is 67. Actor Michel Gill is 61. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is 59. Rock musician Jason Scheff (Chicago) is 59. Singer Jimmy Osmond is 58. Rock singer David Pirner (Soul Asylum) is 57. Actor-comedian Martin Lawrence is 56. Actor Jon Cryer is 56. Actor Peter Billingsley is 50. Actor Lukas Haas is 45. Actor-singer Kelli O'Hara is 45. Actor Claire Foy (TV: "The Crown") is 37. Figure skater Mirai Nagasu is 28. Actor Sadie Sink is 19.