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NOW HIRING

MJ's Sinclair of Groton is looking for someone to work weekends and nights. Stop out and see Jeff for an application.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



Gretchen Dinger has qualified for Middle School All State Band for three years

Congratulations Gretchen! She was presented an award Thursday night for being the first Groton student to ever make it to middle school all state band all 3 eligible years! (Photo Weston Dinger Facebook page)

**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!**



March Students of the Month

From back Left: Hannah Gustafson (11th), Dillon Abeln (9th), Jacob Lewandowski (10th), Alexa Herr (12th)
From Front Left: Jeslyn Kosel (8th), Logan Warrington (7th), Blake Lord (6th)

We are so proud of the above named students for being selected as the March Student of the Month for their grade!

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.

Congratulations students! Well done!

- MS/HS Principal Kiersten Sombke

Viability of rural ambulance services in S.D. at risk due to staffing and funding shortages

Danielle Ferguson
South Dakota News Watch

Rural ambulance services in South Dakota are having an increasingly hard time recruiting volunteers and generating revenues, putting the stability of the services at risk and making it more likely that rural residents will endure longer response times in emergencies or possibly lose ambulance service altogether.

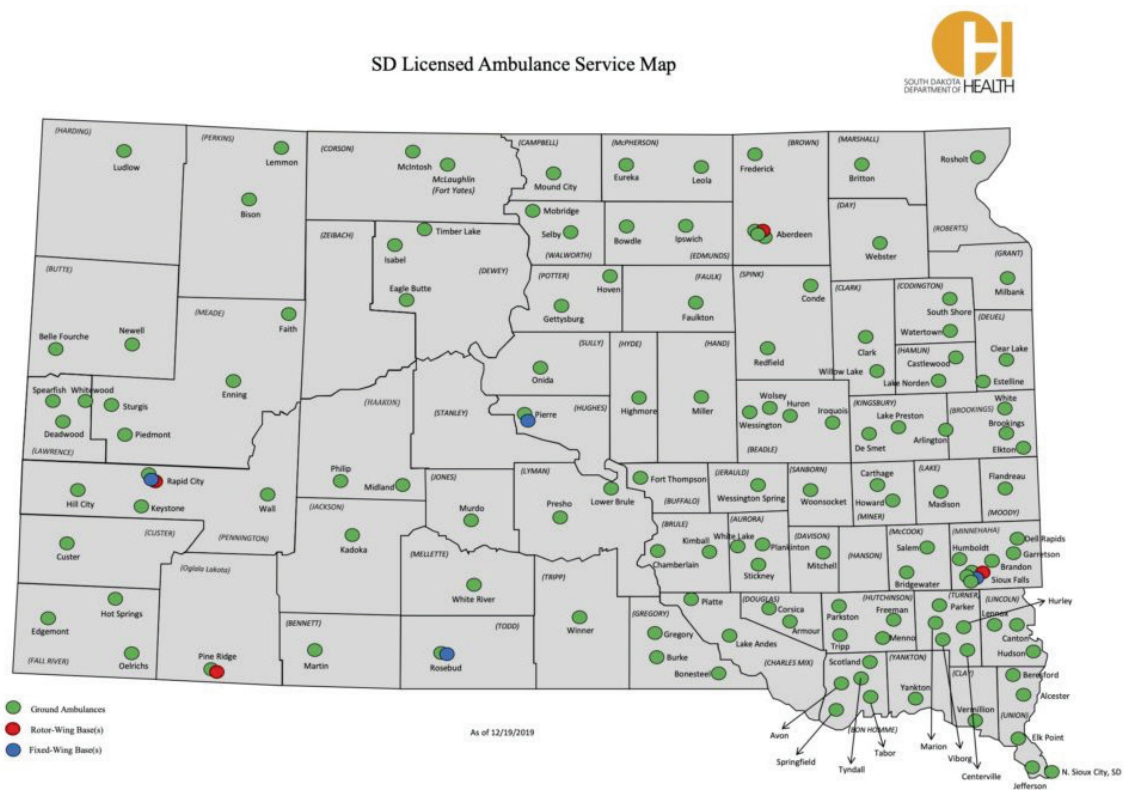
While most larger cities in South Dakota have professional ambulance services or fire departments with paid staff members, rural services rely

mostly on volunteers. In recent years, those rural providers have seen fewer people willing to volunteer and those who do volunteer are older residents who are aging out of the workforce.

About a third of rural ambulance directors in South Dakota said they couldn't respond to a call because of staffing shortages, according to a 2016 survey. Roughly a third more said response times were delayed due to lack of staffing.

Paying the bills is also a growing challenge for ambulance services, which see limited patient billings and high levels of non-payment write-offs. Patient billing is the main funding source, and it usually does not cover the costs of responding to an emergency or transporting a patient, let alone covering overhead for the service.

Rural ambulance services sometimes do not see the call volume needed to cover costs such as equipment,



This map from the South Dakota Department of Health shows the location of ambulance services across the state and reveals how some rural areas -- especially in West River regions -- have limited access to emergency transportation services.

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insurance, training or staff. Budgets are often supplemented by millions of dollars a year in volunteer labor.

Ninety-five of South Dakota's 126 ambulance services are staffed with at least some volunteer labor, according to a state-funded survey from SafeTech Solutions. The majority of rural ambulance directors said they think they can function financially for the next five to 10 years, but just one-third were confident they would be able to fully staff a 24/7 service in the future, according to the survey.

To run a 24/7 ambulance service in South Dakota, a provider needs at least 14 workers, yet almost half of the state's volunteer ambulance services reported having fewer than 10 people on the roster, according to the survey.

The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the dwindling volunteer pool even further. The active EMS workforce decreased by almost 30% in the last year because volunteers worried about contracting the virus, according to the South Dakota Department of Health.

Ambulance volunteers and directors said the decline in volunteerism has been a concern for years. Younger people are moving into more urban areas or don't want to volunteer for a medical job they think should be a paid position.

"The major concern is that an ambulance will be needed and no one is available, and we will see an increase in morbidity and mortality," said John Becknell, an analyst for SafeTech Solutions, a consulting firm that studies and provides guidance to emergency medical services. "I'm really concerned because fewer and fewer South Dakotans are bearing the brunt of carrying this load."

Staffing shortages caused a volunteer ambulance service in rural Meade County to shut down last year, suddenly putting residents of the area an hour of travel time from any ambulance coverage.

The Rural Meade County Ambulance Service in Enning, about 50 miles east of Sturgis, closed in April 2020. The service responded to about 30 calls each year, and volunteers from Enning also assisted other agencies and transported patients in major emergencies.

After the closure, ambulance services in Faith, Wall and Newell agreed to cover most of the more than 1,200 square miles previously serviced by the Rural Meade County Ambulance Service. In extreme emergencies, air ambulances can respond to calls in the small swath still considered uncovered by the other ground ambulances.

In a subsequent election, Meade County voters approved a new ambulance tax district last year. Households in the county outside of Sturgis will contribute about \$75 a year for the service, and county commissioners agreed to give the Rural Meade County Ambulance \$5,000 to re-open. About 10 people are taking the 180-hour class required to become emergency medical technicians. County leaders hope these efforts bring back the service.

The uncertainty in Enning is a possible harbinger of future problems for other rural ambulance services, said Jerry Derr, assistant for the Meade County Commission office.

"What's happened in central Meade County is going to be replicated statewide," said Derr, who has had conversations with the South Dakota DOH about the issue. "You've got people doing this for decades but want to get out of it, having that responsibility and trying to get younger people in the community and pick up that mantle, you're just not getting in the rural areas."

Ambulance services critical to rural areas

Long response times for ambulance services are commonplace in rural South Dakota, and could get worse if rural service providers are unable to stay in operation.

Kathy Chesney and her crew in Philip recently drove 47 miles north of their station to help a patient too weak to get out of his house. While the ambulance team was there, that patient went into cardiac arrest and was saved by the responding EMTs.

The Philip Ambulance Service, located in sparsely populated Haakon County, was the closest to the

"The major concern is that an ambulance will be needed and no one is available, and we will see an increase in morbidity and mortality."

John Becknell, analyst at SafeTech Solutions

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rancher's home.

"If we hadn't been there, he would not have survived," said Chesney, 55. "Anything else would've been too late."

The Philip Ambulance Service responds to about 230 calls each year in its service area that covers more than 1,200 square miles. About 15 volunteers are on the roster, but only three people are typically available to take calls during the day, said Chesney, who has been a paramedic in the area for 24 years.

The long service distances and response times are more common in West River regions. East River services can sometimes be found 10 miles apart, while services in the western side of the state may cover portions of multiple counties and be located many miles from one another.

A 2017 report on the Sturgis Emergency Ambulance Service said the lack of certified paramedics is "a serious problem in the state and especially west river."

Nationally, rural ambulance systems are critical to the 60 million people who live in rural America and some services are on the verge of collapse, according to a January report from the Rural Policy Research Institute.

The ambulance service struggles are tied to the continuing closure of rural hospitals across the country, adding to a growing dearth of healthcare in rural areas. Since 2005, 176 rural hospitals have closed nationwide, according to the Rural Policy Research Institute. In the same timeframe, the average transport time to rural hospitals increased from 14 minutes to more than 25 minutes.

Severe trauma patients are most likely to benefit from medical care within the first hour of an injury, and urban patients are three times more likely than rural patients to reach severe trauma care within an hour after a car crash, according to the study.

Emergencies such as skiing accidents or hiker injuries that require crews to ride snowmobiles or hike to an injured person can easily push response times to an hour, said Brian Hambek, director of the Spearfish Emergency Ambulance Service.

South Dakota urges that 90% of all 911 calls lead to a dispatch of help within 10 minutes, Hambek said, though there is no state requirement for service times.

Ambulance services in far western South Dakota sometimes need to transfer patients to Montana or Colorado when closer South Dakota hospitals can't take a patient, which could put a crew out of service for up to 14 hours. If another emergency occurs in their coverage area while they're gone, other volunteers or services must be called upon.

States across the country on average decreased state allocations to EMS offices by 10% between 2014 and 2018, according to the Rural Policy Research Institute.

The EMS program within the South Dakota Department of Health Office of Rural Health received about \$422,000 from the state general fund, EMS agency licensure fees and EMS professional licensing fees, according to a 2020 report from the National Association of EMS Officials. The state received about \$115,000 in federal funding, according to the same report. The health department did not respond to follow-up questions about state funding for EMS and a spokesman said the director for EMS was not available for an interview.

The estimated cost of operating and staffing a single rural ambulance in South Dakota is about \$484,000 each year, according to SafeTech Solutions survey. About \$384,000 of that is estimated to be volunteer work.

Statewide, that reaches about \$30 million in unpaid labor from volunteers each year.

"South Dakota communities have been getting a bargain with volunteer ambulance services," said Becknell, the analyst at SafeTech Solutions.

EMS is the only component of the U.S. medical system that uses a significant volunteer workforce, and local governments aren't required to provide an ambulance. Ambulances in South Dakota, much like the rest of the country, were mostly formed about 50 years ago by communities who saw a need and created a service.

"My board of directors could say, 'Let's shut down right now' and cities would have to decide, but what's it going to cost?" Hambek said. "People do not think about EMS until they need us. It's kind of a com-

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Rachael Gartner

"It's a good knowledge base to have even if right away you're not jumping onto taking a bunch of calls. Right now we have five or six people who take calls. They've got to be getting burned out."

- Rachael Gartner, a new volunteer EMT in Philip

munity's choice in determining if we're an essential service or not."

The majority of EMS patients are on Medicaid and Medicare, which doesn't reimburse the full cost of providing transport. Private insurance sometimes pays the patient rather than the ambulance service, and those patients sometimes do not pay their ambulance bills, Hambek said.

Ambulance services need about 650 calls each year to stay out of debt, according to the health department. More than 80% of ambulances in South Dakota do not have enough billable patients to cover all of their expenses, Hambek said.

"When I write my budget, I figure 30% is going to collections or forced write-offs through Medicare or Medicaid and insurance," he said. "We are probably one of the only healthcare functions out there that can bill \$500 for a call, but Medicare is going to say, 'We'll pay you \$300 and you write off the rest.'"

During his 40 years as an emergency medical technician, Hambek has delivered eight babies in the field and stood with the family of his first-grade teacher as she took her last breath.

EMS workers have to be ready for it all, said Hambek, who in addition to overseeing the Spearfish Emergency Ambulance Service is also president of the South Dakota

Ambulance Association, an organization that formed in 2015 to help rural ambulance leaders with the challenges of running an emergency service.

When Hambek went through emergency medical technician training in 1981, he spent about 80 hours in class. Now, EMTs spend twice as long in training and may have to pay up to \$1,000 to get certified, all with the possibility of not seeing a paycheck if they join a volunteer service.

The rural population is declining and aging, and a new generation of potential volunteers doesn't want to work in a healthcare and public safety service that can't always pay its workers, said Becknell of SafeTech Solutions.

"Young people see law enforcement is paid, snow-plowing is paid, garbage is paid, why should transferring a patient from a local hospital be volunteer?" he said. "We're expecting more out of them, more accountability out of them in terms of reliability and education."

According to a 2018 Department of Health study, there are about 3,000 EMTs and paramedics in South Dakota, or about 11% of the healthcare workforce. Sixty percent of South Dakota's EMTs or paramedics are older than 45 and a third of those workers are older than 60.

"Young people are saying, 'I'm not going to do it,'" said Becknell, who helped survey ambulance leaders and volunteers across the state. "And volunteers are saying, 'I can't retire. I can't leave the service because nobody else will do it.'"

Nicole Neugebauer, 48, director of the Douglas County Ambulance Service, said the ambulance service needs more EMTs. Not enough people are interested in taking the class to volunteer for a service for which they would have to leave their full-time jobs, she said. The service is volunteer, but even services that pay workers per call struggle to find enough people, she said.

"Locally we are down EMTs," Neugebauer said. "We can't find people who want to take the classes. It's a lot of work, but you have to have the skills to save a life."

She and other volunteers stay because they love the job.

"We do it because it's a need in the community," said Neugebauer, who has on multiple occasions left a cart full of groceries at the local market to respond to calls. "But if we keep going at the rate we're going without changes, we're going to have longer response times. You're going to have services close, and other people have to pick that up."

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Rachael Gartner, a 30-year-old mother, banker, church volunteer and community band member, notices the strain on the half dozen or so EMTs who regularly handle calls in and around Philip.

Gartner has been an EMT for only about five months, and she's already learned there is more to the job than what's often shown on television. The crew wants to do community education and does standby for events like football games or the local rodeo. She said she enjoys the work and has encouraged people to join their local service.

"It's not all about trauma," she said. "It's a good knowledge base to have even if right away you're not jumping onto taking a bunch of calls. I'd say definitely go for it. Right now we have five or six people who take calls. They've got to be getting burned out."

Developing plans for a viable future

The South Dakota health department is working on an EMS Agenda for 2040, which would include "strategic plans for the future," said spokesman Daniel Bucheli.

"EMS needs to be recognized — increased engagement with informing/communicating with public officials on the role of EMS," Bucheli said in an email. "We have worked on this extensively."

The biggest need in South Dakota is developing a concerted effort to plan how EMS will be funded and staffed in the future, Becknell said.

"It's not complex, but nothing will happen as long as local, county and state people want to just push the current system to its absolute limit. Each community will be different," Becknell said. "They can do it in a way that allows lots of local autonomy and does not do it in a manner of big government."

Hambek is part of a task force that is studying state laws involving EMS. The group is also looking into possible opportunities to combine forces and for more sustainable methods of funding.

"This isn't about raising tax dollars," Hambek said. "This is about finding ways to financially sustain our services in a community."

Online courses and traveling hands-on teams have made education and continuing training more accessible to EMS workers. An online course from the University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine is cheaper than EMT certification in neighboring states. Participants pay \$850 for the course and the textbook; it could cost up to \$1,500 plus a \$350 textbook in other states. Online attendance increased during the pandemic, with viewers tuning in from all over the country, and even as far as Antarctica, said Travis Spier, director of simulation and pre-hospital care at Sanford.

"We want to do anything we can do to increase the workforce," Spier said. "It's convenient, the cost is reasonable, they don't have to drive every day. A lot of volunteers have full time jobs and can't drive hours to get to a course after they have work."

Corolla Lauck, a paramedic and program director of EMS for Children of South Dakota, said educating the public about preventing injury is important for emergency healthcare workers. EMS for Children of South Dakota educates emergency services and communities on the unique healthcare needs of children. Statewide, ambulance services can see up to 8,000 pediatric calls each year; however, rural services that could go years without a pediatric call don't feel as comfortable treating or transporting a child.

Program coordinators for EMS for Children of South Dakota travel around the state to provide hands-on training on how to prevent common injuries such as bicycle or pedestrian crashes or accidental poisoning. Education and preparation can prevent injuries, Lauck said, and can therefore limit ambulance calls.

"Safety and prevention are vitally important to a community," Lauck said. "Awareness helps EMS providers because we may not have to respond to something if people prepare."

#431 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Still not much to see here. There were 58,730 new cases reported today. Our total is now at 32,316,340, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. Fourteen-day average hospitalization is down slightly to 43,284. And Deaths are up to 574,791, which is 0.1% more than yesterday's total. There were 840 deaths reported today.

On April 29, 2020, one year ago today, we had 1,045,033 cases and 60,731 deaths. It should be noted that the method for designating deaths changed on this day, so the increase in deaths reported on the day (over 7000—yikes!) included some “catch-up” numbers—those folks didn't all die on that day. Treatments were evolving for the blood clotting issues that were surfacing in Covid-19 patients. There were reports on animal testing of a heat-inactivated-virus vaccine in China and also some preliminary data from laboratory and animal testing of what became the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine; that vaccine had already moved into phase 1 testing in humans. The first case in a dog in the US had showed up in a pug named Winston. Worldwide, the number of cases was up to 3.1 million and the number of deaths was over 227,000. The WHO was recognizing a small number of cases of a mysterious inflammatory syndrome in children that had turned up in the UK.

Hard to even know what to say: India reported 379,257 new cases today—another record for anywhere in the world. Over 3500 deaths too. This is simply so far beyond awful. Please spare a thought for the people there; whether you're inclined to prayer or other kinds of good wishes, this would be a phenomenal time to send them winging across the globe. These folks must be suffering enormously, and I don't see any real hope this is going to slow down any time soon.

Brazil is also in serious trouble. They passed 400,000 total deaths today, a milestone only the US has reached before them. They're looking at around 3000 deaths per day, close to our worst days over the winter. (I really, really hate it that we are the benchmark for terrible things, but here we are.) The country is victim to a president who wants to pretend this is not a crisis, resisting mitigation measures and doing a poor job of rolling out vaccines. Young people are showing up as a greater and greater share of deaths in the country; deaths in the 20 to 29 age group grew by 1081 percent from January to the second week of April. That is shocking. I want to be clear that we don't know whether this increase in deaths among young people is because there's something different about the prevalent variant there, P.1, or it's a matter that young people are not taking precautions and are being exposed more. There is little data on which to base any kind of conclusion on the matter.

The CDC has sent a letter to cruise line executives describing new parameters for cruises to resume from the US by mid-July. While the agency's conditional sailing order (CSO) requires simulated test voyages, the letter says these can be skipped if 98 percent of crew and 95 percent of passengers are fully vaccinated—and that would mean an earlier return to business. The letter said, “We acknowledge that cruising will never be a zero-risk activity and that the goal of the CSO's phased approach is to resume passenger operations in a way that mitigates the risk of covid-19 transmission onboard cruise ships and across port communities.”

There will still be testing upon embarkation, but fully vaccinated people can take an antigen test instead of a PCR test. Also the agency agreed to respond to applications for sailings after simulated voyages within five days. Industry sources told the Washington Post that they are encouraged by the “constructive discussions” they've had with the agency and by this letter. I'm not one for unregulated resumption of cruising, but I'm going to place a small bet that the industry is not too eager to cut corners on their return either. I'd guess they never again want to go through what they had last winter—ships wandering the world full of sick people, trying to find a port that would accept them. There's plenty of motivation on all sides to get this thing right.

A lot of people—and I was among them—anticipated the resumption of Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccinations would be met with some reluctance on the part of recipients; turns out there's another thing I was wrong about. Polling seemed to support that line of thinking; but on the ground, there doesn't seem to be much of an effect, after all. There are plenty of folks who still prefer the convenience of one-

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and-done vaccination. This one-dose vaccine is expected to be important particularly when vaccinating people it's hard to get to or who have difficulty making their way to a vaccination site—elderly, rural, and homebound people, also homeless people. There is also the concern of getting college and university students vaccinated before they go home for the summer; with the remaining weeks in the academic year waning, a one-dose vaccine is a good choice in these situations, although the push to permit people to receive a second dose in a different site from the place they received their first dose is easing that concern somewhat. The fact that this vaccine is stable under refrigeration, so doesn't require freezing, and comes in five-dose vials which are easier to use up before it expires after opening makes it an attractive option for use in more remote or sparsely-populated areas. Some of the people doing vaccination report they have a waiting list of folks who want only this vaccine. The supply is still much smaller than the supplies for the two mRNA vaccines, so we don't need huge numbers of people accepting it to use up the available supply. I am feeling somewhat more hopeful that the messaging about the overall safety of the vaccines as opposed to the dangers of going it unvaccinated is finally penetrating at least some of the market.

The CDC now estimates that 35 percent of the US population has been infected with this coronavirus. The agency is placing the number of infected at 114.6 million; of these 97.1 million would have been symptomatic. They're reporting 5.6 million hospitalizations between February, 2020, and March, 2021, which is an incredible burden on our health care system. I've been using their 4.6 as a multiplier to estimate real cases from identified cases; this puts us nearer 4.0 as a multiplier. The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) is estimating 30 percent of us have been infected, so the CDC number isn't wildly off from that.

I read a paper today published in the journal *Science* from a team at Johns Hopkins University. They were looking at risk from in-person schooling. They analyzed data from November 24, 2020, to December 23, 2020, and from January 11, 2021, to February 10, 2021, collected from a survey of 2,143,887 people in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Over a half-million of these reported at least one child in pre-K through high school in their households, 49 percent of which had a child engaged in in-person schooling. The study did not address infection among school children, who we know show very low rates of infection, but infections in contacts and the community.

Households where at least one child was in school full-time were 38 percent more likely to report someone with Covid-19. Risks were reduced in schools imposing mitigation measures. The reduction in risk was around nine percent for each measure, and schools imposing seven or more of them showed that the risk disappeared. The measures most helpful were student mask mandates, teacher mask mandates, restricted entry, extra space between desks, no supply sharing, student cohorting (bubbles), reduced class size, and daily symptom screening. The report says, "The results presented here show a clear association between in-person schooling and the risk of Covid-19-related outcomes in adult household members, and that this association disappears when more than seven school-based mitigation measures are reported." That's pretty definitive.

Mitigation measures that were not particularly associated with significant risk reductions include closing cafeterias, closing playgrounds, and using desk shields. They also found that part-time in-person schooling was not helpful compared with full-time in-person schooling. The researchers noted that, even if transmission in classrooms is rare, activities surrounding in-person schooling led to increases in community transmission. "One of the main reasons for a focus on schools is not the risk to students, but the risk that in-person schooling poses to teachers and family members, and its impact on the overall epidemic." We should also note that school may not be the only determining factor on community transmission since for the most part communities which have returned to in-person schooling are also those which are free to visit bars and restaurants. We've been saying all along that you can have your schools or you can have your bars, but when you try to have both, you're going to see trouble. So for those who cry about how important schooling is, don't cry to me if you insist on your Saturday nights out. I'm not listening.

The CDC's new ensemble forecast is out; it now projects up to 595,000 deaths by May 22. The previous forecast published April 21 projected 596,000 by May 15, so considering there's an extra week tacked on,

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this is an improvement. I'm going to guess the decreased number of new cases plays a role in this revision. Let's hope our luck holds as we continue to vaccinate more and more people.

To return to our door-to-door flyer that we were discussing last night, the next issue up is the problem outlined by former University College Dublin lecturer, Dolores Cahill, that "people will start dying a few months after the first mRNA vaccinations." For starters, you should know that Cahill has also claimed that children who wear face masks are being "starved" of oxygen and will suffer from lowered IQ (which is—surprise!—totally false) and claiming mask mandates have been pushed because "globalists" want "oxygen-deprived people [who] are easy to manipulate." There is zero evidence that face masks deprive the wearer of oxygen in the long or short term; there is also zero evidence of brain damage or lowered IQ resulting from wearing masks. Be aware that Cahill is also a member of a fringe political party in Ireland and has set forth a number of other "strongly-rejected" claims about the coronavirus, for example, that most of the world is already immune. She is also no longer lecturing at the UCD school of medicine after teaching one first-year course; the University has declined to comment on her status. The school of medicine has, further, disassociated itself from her views which, in their words, "do not reflect the position of the school, college, institute or university." That seems sort of definite, yes?

Cahill has made claims that "Covid-19 vaccines and face masks are unsafe; that several official facts about Covid-19 are wrong; that Covid-19 does not spread as easily as official sources state; and that lockdowns will cause everyone to die an early death." All of these claims have been debunked as untrue, misrepresenting the facts, and inimical to public health advice. The "data" she cites in her claims have no basis in evidence anyone who's looking can find. That's usually a bad sign for the credibility of the claimant. She is pushing also various nutritional supplements as remedies, none of which have any supporting evidence for their effectiveness.

Additionally, her claims regarding this particular coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, seem to be predicated on a paper that purports to deal with a different coronavirus, SARS-CoV, the one that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome, the disease we dealt with on a much more limited basis some 15 years ago. At that, I can find no evidence this paper is accurate anyhow. And she seems to be confusing antibody-dependent enhancement (ADE) and cytokine storms, which are two different things. For a discussion of antibody-dependent enhancement, see my Update #19 posted March 15, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3430525026963879>, and for a description of cytokine storms, see my Update #25 posted March 20, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3443290772353971>.

So I watched another interview video (and I really do deserve a trophy, at least, for sacrificing further IQ points on the altar of informing the public). She also seems to equate these two phenomena, ADE and cytokine storms to a third phenomenon, immunologic priming, which has been seen with some coronaviruses, specifically SARS-CoV that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and MERS-CoV that causes Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). Immunologic (or pathogenic) priming occurs when prior exposure to one of these viruses causes the development of autoimmunity (an immune response to your own tissues) which then stimulates destructive processes in response to a vaccine. This is not an unknown possibility; in fact, I read a discussion of it in an April, 2020, paper from the NIH. If this was a thing with these vaccines, we'd know it by now. It's not a thing. At all.

There was a lot of weird science-word salad. Here's an example: "When you put RNA genes, you know, mRNA, injected into your body, you bypass all of the natural immune responses which would build up an immune response to prevent the vaccine actually entering your body, OK? So that then the mRNA from the virus gets into your body, and it uses the human machinery in the cells to express the human proteins so that somehow the virus that has been injected into your body, and then your immune system sees the virus in your body as something that should not be there, and it mounts an immune response. And the shocking thing is that, normally you can get rid of the virus particles, and you know, it's a slow thing, but when you inject it, this mRNA, it's so deadly is that it goes into your genes and starts expressing and it starts stimulating the immune response from inside your body and literally you can't get rid of it because like the source of the protein, you become like a genetically modified organism, and your body is express-

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ing the virus protein, and so your immune system slowly tries to get rid of it, but you're mounting this super—you know, beautiful, exquisite antibodies to get rid of it, but you never can because it's now part of who you are—it's integrated—and we now, the people getting this, will become this genetically modified organism that will be making a virus protein as well as their own human ones. So then when you naturally come across, say, the coronavirus naturally—or the RSV as these children did—the virus you breathe in and it goes on to your mucosal system and your bronchi, and then normally you would just get rid of those virus particles—you would mount an immune response, but those one or two virus particles you would breathe in would suddenly trigger an antibody response which normally happens over two weeks, but suddenly the antibody response will now activate and realize, oh my God, this viral protein is in every cell of my body, so then the antibodies start attacking your cells and your organs, and so what I've been saying since May is that people will die. They will go into like septic shock, you know, and then they will go into organ failure within three, four, or five days, and they will die if they don't get vitamin C, potentially within seven to 10 days." This is layer upon layer of pseudo-scientific bamboozlement. It is incoherent, incomprehensible, and divorced from reality, and it would take longer than my remaining natural lifespan to untangle and refute. You can choose to believe me on this or not; but if you can't untangle it either, then you shouldn't buy it.

So we'll move on to the next frightening set of "facts" about these vaccines, these from Dr. Sherri TenPenny, who is a long-time anti-vaxxer, a physician who also must have skipped some study sessions in med school. If you're into that sort of thing, for the low, low price of just \$623, you can sign up for a course she teaches on how to "sow seeds of doubt" about public health information. There was another video; the brain drain is getting very serious on my end. She explained "how the depopulation mRNA vaccines will start working in 3-6 months." She refers to vaccination as "giving all these poisons." The general mechanism of action she describes, while using actual sentences and complete thoughts, which was refreshing after the last video, is also bogus as hell. More ADE. A lot of description of the shape of antibody molecules accompanied by totally unsupported claims that the antibodies produced in response to vaccines are non-neutralizing antibodies (that is, don't work to prevent infections), but later will kill you by destroying your lung tissue next time you're exposed to the coronavirus. She also had quite a list of injuries and illnesses purportedly caused by the vaccines. No evidence, but a very nice list.

Next up is "Dr. Michael Yeady." The dude means Yeadon, but what's a typo between friends, right? We've already discussed Yeadon back in the infertility-in-women portion of our program last night. Well, he's back. This time, the subject is "global crimes against humanity being perpetuated against a large proportion of the world population." Sigh. At least there wasn't a video with this one—accepting small blessings where offered. This is a guy who puts the word, vaccines, inside quotation marks to let us know he doesn't think they're real vaccines at all. We know that drill. His schtick is that we should vaccinate only the old people because they're enough at risk from infection that it's worth risking their lives with these "novel" agents "for which the potential for unwanted effects after a few months is completely uncharacterized." He thinks the only reason for the development and promotion of these vaccines is so pharmaceutical companies can make money and that giving them to children would be an "evil act." Like Cahill and TenPenny, he thinks our cells will forevermore express viral spike protein, setting us up for harmful effects. He has a different set of harmful effects in mind, not ADE, but blood coagulation and activation of something called the complement system (which, by the way, is a real thing we have, just not a thing that is trying to kill us after we're vaccinated).

Beyond nebulous claims that our cells will "express spike protein," he never specifies just what the harmful effects of the vaccines will be, just that they were never safety tested (which is false). But he thinks vast swaths of the population are already protected against this virus by virtue of prior exposure to other coronaviruses (a theory in which there was some interest early on, but for which there is zero evidence) so that most of us don't need vaccination anyhow. He also claims that those without symptoms are "never a health threat to others," so he's not just misinformed, but dangerously misinformed. He also contends that vaccination makes the virus more deadly to the unvaccinated, another zero-evidence proposal un-

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accompanied by any plausible mechanism of action or even an implausible one—just the claim. He also proposes that new variants will be less dangerous, not more; I would really like to believe that, but I don't. And he offers a list of therapeutics which are so effective in treatment that there is no need for vaccines; that list includes hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, budesonide, Vitamin D, zinc, and azithromycin.

I've written about all of these at one time or another. Here are the links:

Hydroxychloroquine: I believe the last study I reported on, which discussion summarizes the early ones too, is Update #113 posted June 15 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3684593851556994>.

Ivermectin: This one hasn't been ruled out yet, although there is still no strong evidence for its efficacy. You'll find my latest report on it in my Update #375 posted March 4, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3684593851556994>.

Budesonide: This one also has some promise. Last report was in Update #356 posted February 13 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4433398520009853>.

Vitamin D and zinc: There is some indication vitamin D may be of benefit, but not enough evidence, and zero evidence on zinc. Check out Update #310 posted December 29 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4300903866592653>.

Azithromycin: Most of the work done with this antibiotic was in conjunction with hydroxychloroquine. The most recent information can be found in Update #89 posted March 18, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4534943739855330>.

Bottom line for Yeadon is that all of this is an evil plot to make Big Pharma rich and, on a massive scale, depopulate the country—not that we've heard that before, right? (See Cahill, above.) He claims falsely that no safety testing has been done and that, "if someone wished to harm or kill a significant proportion of the world's (sic) population over the next few years, the systems being put in place right now will enable it." That's probably enough said.

And so we come to Geert Vanden Bossche, a veterinarian with a degree in virology, touted by this author as "one of the top virologists and vaccine 'designers' in the world" (spoiler: He is neither, although he once worked for the Gates Foundation) who also weighs in rather publicly on the subject of vaccines for Covid-19. And yes, there is (dammit!) another video full of garbage. His angle is that vaccines will "breed highly infectious variants" by exerting "suboptimal immune pressure" on the virus whereas natural infection will not do this. Here's the problem with that: The way to exert selection (not immune) pressure on an organism is to make things tough for it without destroying it entirely; this means a not quite effective campaign to get rid of it in the body makes the emergence of variants a greater possibility while an effective one will not. He says as much (in a carefully-edited piece), "that under conditions (sic) of natural infection (sic), adaptation (sic) of S-selective (sic) immune escape variants does not usually occur." Except that he has things just backward. The immune response to vaccines has been pretty overwhelming whereas the immune response to natural infection has been somewhat weaker and less broad. That would mean natural infection is more likely to be the way to "breed highly infectious variants," not vaccination. This is borne out by the fact that variants began emerging before we had vaccines and continue to emerge mostly in places where there isn't much vaccination being done. The way out of the variant problem is not less vaccine, but rather more vaccine sooner.

Stay with me; we're (finally!) almost finished. There is a page on the CDC website, posted in 2011, about general emergency preparedness, done in what is clearly a light-hearted style using the analogy of preparing for a zombie apocalypse. Although I am not a horror movie aficionado, I thought it was clever and sort of charming. (Here's a link, if you're interested: <https://blogs.cdc.gov/.../preparedness-101-zombie.../>.) This web page is treated here as a warning to the gullible of some sort of mental breakdown at the CDC: What? They believe in zombies??? Horrors! "Why would the CDC post this? Could this be a Covid-vaccine inspired pandemic the CDC is referring to?" I kind of doubt it: Even great scientists did not know in 2011 that we were going to have Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021.

And finally we come to what I think is the real point on page 2 of the flyer: "Might you want to wait before you get vaccinated? Might you consider other options to combat Covid if you contract it?" Other options??? The answer: ivermectin. The entirety of page 2 is an advertisement for ivermectin, the anthelmintic (para-

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site treatment) that has quite the little fan club. This reminds me in many ways of the Hydroxychloroquine Fan Club whose antics we all suffered through last year before the final clinical trials put this one to bed. The folks flogging this one are a group called the Front Line Covid-19 Critical Care Alliance (FLCCC), a group who purport to be doctors treating the infection; I have no idea whether this is so, but it could well be. I've been encountering them all over the place for the past year or so, and I'll be genuinely pleased when I never have to think about them again. The latest from NIH on ivermectin is that there is still some chance it will be beneficial, not a miracle cure, but a therapeutic with some possibility of offering benefit to people with Covid-19. Problem (see link above) is that we still don't have enough evidence this is so and the dosage that appears to be needed is some 100 times the currently established safe dosage. There are trials underway, but these folks are not prepared to wait for the science. I don't know if they own stock in the company or they're just off the deep end, but they are fervent and persistent.

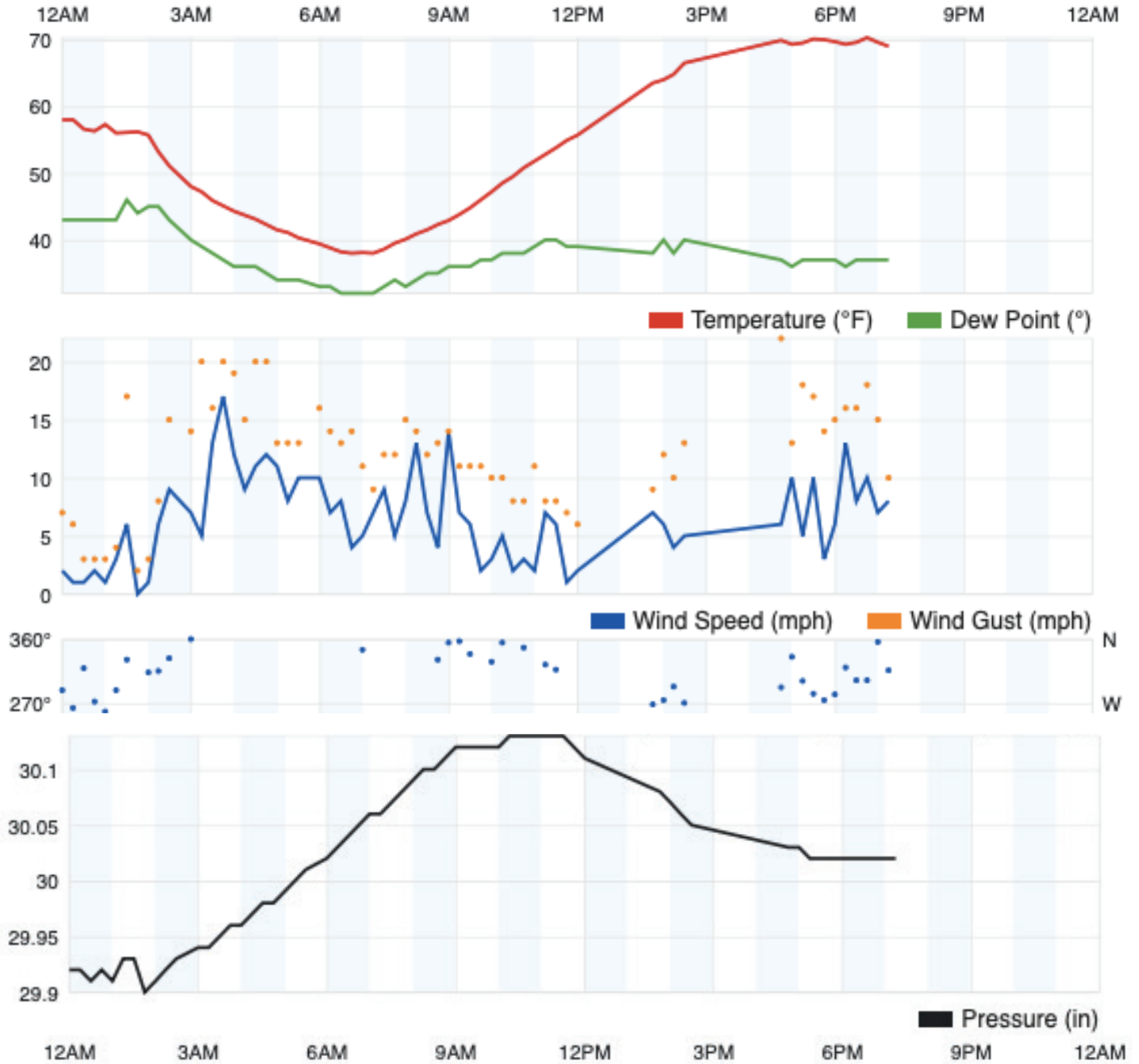
Well, that's it. I'm finished with this one—at long last. It will be a while before I watch another YouTube video. About anything.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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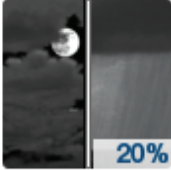

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graph



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Showers	Chance Showers
High: 73 °F	Low: 49 °F	High: 87 °F	Low: 53 °F	High: 70 °F

Today, Fri Apr 30th: High to Very High Fire Danger

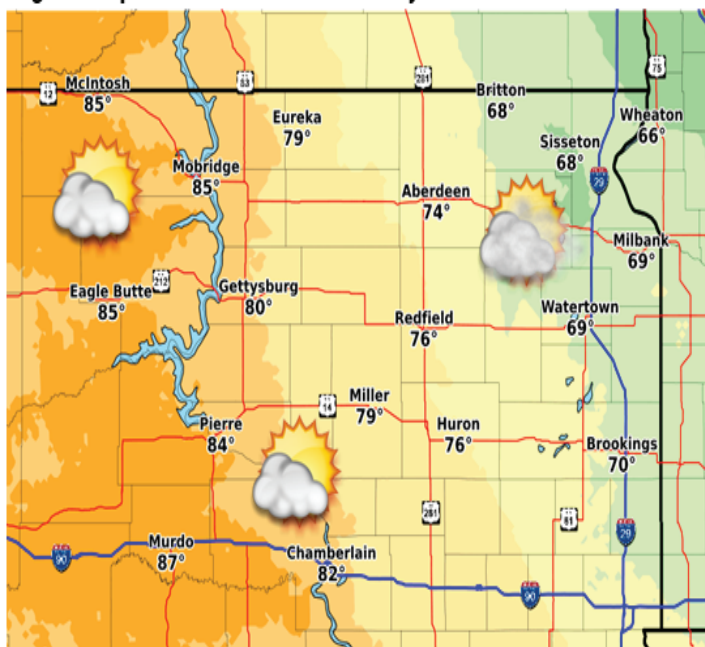
Forecast

- High temps of 15 to 25 F above average across central SD
- Low relative humidity and dry fuels
- Southerly breezes, strongest across northern SD (15-25 mph with 30+ gusts)
- **Red Flag Warning across north central South Dakota from 1 to 9 pm**

Impacts

- Fires may easily ignite from any spark, cigarette, flying ember (including from burning barrels/pits), etc.
- Any fire that begins will spread easily

High Temperature Forecast Friday



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD



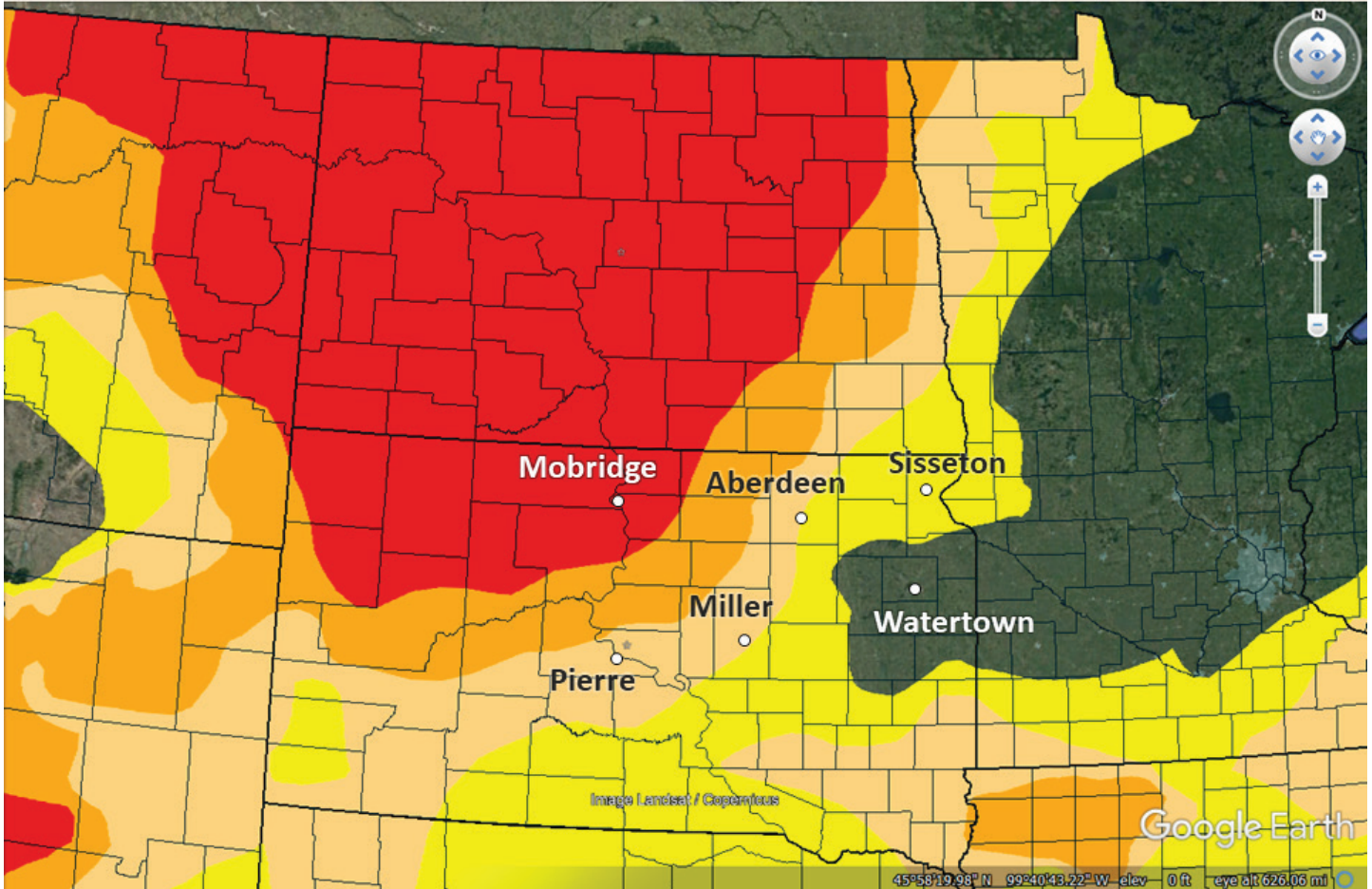
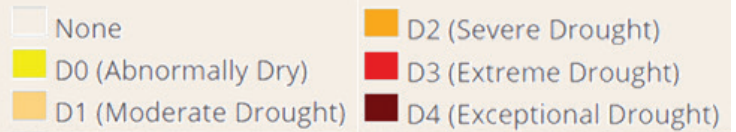
Updated: 4/30/2021 5:30 AM Central

Warm, dry and breezy conditions will lead to elevated grassland fire danger today, particularly across north central South Dakota where a Red Flag Warning will be in effect this afternoon. Very warm and dry conditions continue on Saturday as well, with widespread highs in the 80s anticipated.

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US Drought Monitor Released Thursday, 4-29-2021



The main change in the latest US Drought Monitor since last week is an expansion of D3/Extreme Drought (red shading) eastward across portions of North Dakota. Find more information at <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/Maps/CompareTwoWeeks.aspx>.

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Today in Weather History

April 30, 1942: A tornado hit three farms near the northeastern edge of Castlewood. One barn was blown apart, and debris was swept into the house, killing one person. Damage from the estimated F2 tornado was \$20,000.

April 30, 2011: An unyielding low-pressure system moving across North Dakota brought high winds to much of central into parts of northeast South Dakota. Northwest winds of 35 to 50 mph with gusts to over 60 mph occurred from the morning to the late evening of the 30th. The high winds did cause some property damage across the region. A semi was tipped over on Highway 50 in Buffalo County; a large sign was brought down in Highmore, with some damage to security lights and twisted traffic signals in Pierre. Some of the highest wind gusts included 59 mph at Eagle Butte, 61 mph at Oacoma, 66 mph in Corson County, and 69 mph at Hayes in Stanley County.

1888: 246 people died in the world's deadliest hailstorm in India. Hailstones were reportedly the size of baseballs. 1600 domesticated animals at Moradabad perished.

1924: A significant tornado outbreak occurred from Alabama to Virginia on the 29 through the 30th. 26 tornadoes were of F2 intensity or greater. A total of 111 people were killed, and over 1,100 injured. An estimated F4 tornado tore through Steedman and Horrell Hill, SC. This tornado killed 55 people.

1953: An F4 tornado 300 yards in width leveled homes on the north side of Warner-Robins Georgia, and barracks on the south side of the Warner-Robins Air Force Base. 19 people were killed and were 300 injured. Estimated damage was \$15 million.

1852 - A tornado, following the same track as the famous "Tri-state Tornado" of 1925, struck the town of New Harmony IND. Just sixteen persons were killed by the twister, due to the sparse settlement. The "Tri-state Tornado" killed 695 persons. (David Ludlum)

1953 - A tornado 300 yards in width leveled homes on the north side of Warner-Robins GA, and barracks on the south side of the Warner-Robins Air Force Base. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and Montana. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 100 mph in Lincoln, Mineral and Sanders counties. Twenty-three cities in the central and southeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Memphis TN was the hot spot in the nation with a record high of 94 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front produced high winds in the southwestern U.S. Winds gusting to 90 mph in southwestern Utah downed power lines, and damaged trees and outbuildings. The high winds also downed power lines in Nevada, completely knocking out power in the town of Henderson. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in central and eastern Texas. Hail three inches in diameter was reported at Cool, and thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 mph at Hillsboro. For the first time of record Oklahoma City went through the entire month of April without a single thunderstorm. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) (The Weather Channel)

1990 - Late afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in southern Virginia and the Carolinas, with tennis ball size hail reported southeast of Chesnee SC. Thunderstorms moving over the Chesapeake Bay flooded U.S. Highway 50 on Kent Island MD with several inches of water resulting in a seventeen-mile long traffic jam. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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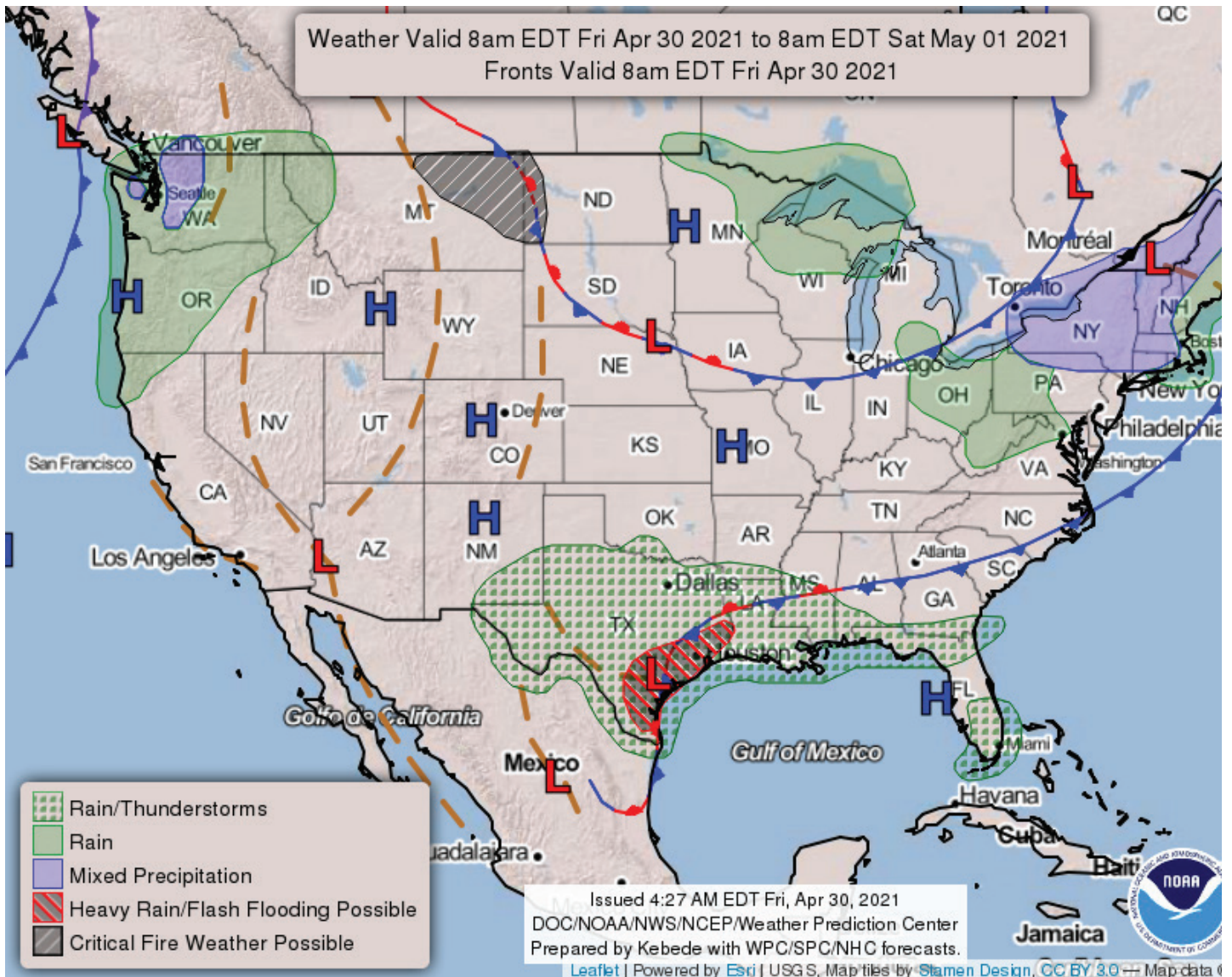
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 71 °F at 5:09 PM
Low Temp: 38 °F at 7:08 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 3:33 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 98° in 1992
Record Low: 5° in 1966
Average High: 64°F
Average Low: 38°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 1.76
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.59
Average Precip to date: 3.94
Precip Year to Date: 2.77
Sunset Tonight: 8:40 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:22 a.m.



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RECOGNIZING REALITY

"People do not learn from mistakes," said the professor. The class was confused. Most of them had been taught all of their lives that the best way to learn was from one's mistakes.

As he looked into their puzzled faces, he continued his lecture by asking a question, "How many of you have made the same mistake twice?" Hands went up all over the classroom. "That is precisely my point. If we learned from our mistakes, we would never make the same mistake twice. We seem to learn best when someone provides us feedback. We are not honest enough with ourselves to point out our own mistakes or failures. We do not want to admit them – especially to ourselves even if we recognize them."

The author of this Psalm recalled two important facts: When the Israelites acknowledged God as their leader and followed Him, they were victorious. "Our fathers advised us," they said, "that it was not our swords or plans that brought victory." God spoke to them and they realized what brought about their defeat: they trusted in their own strength! It was their defeat that caused them to be open to God's "feedback."

When "we pushed back our enemies in Your name," he continued, "we trampled on our foes!" What a testimony to the power and victory that is available to us through our God!

Like Israel, we must come to the same conclusion and make the same confession with the same amount of conviction: "In Your name, Heavenly Father, we can trample on our foes." When we read God's Word and use it as the standard for our lives, He will give us His "feedback" and provide a path for us to renew our relationship with Him. If we allow His Word to do its work, we will discover our failings and can call on Him for His grace and forgiveness, courage and restoration.

Prayer: We pray, Almighty Lord, for a willingness to realize that apart from You there is no victory over our foes. Lead us in Your strength! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Only by your power can we push back our enemies; only in your name can we trample our foes. Psalm 44:5

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

White farmers sue seeking government loan forgiveness

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A group of Midwestern farmers sued the federal government Thursday alleging they can't participate in a COVID-19 loan forgiveness program because they're white.

The group of plaintiffs includes farmers from Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota and Ohio. According to the lawsuit, the Biden administration's COVID-19 stimulus plan provides \$4 billion to forgive loans for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers who are Black, American Indian, Hispanic, Alaskan native, Asian American or Pacific Islander.

White farmers aren't eligible, amounting to a violation of the plaintiffs' constitutional rights, the lawsuit contends.

"Were plaintiffs eligible for the loan forgiveness benefit, they would have the opportunity to make additional investments in their property, expand their farms, purchase equipment and supplies, and otherwise support their families and local communities," the lawsuit said. "Because plaintiffs are ineligible to even apply for the program solely due to their race, they have been denied the equal protection of the law and therefore suffered harm."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a statement saying it was reviewing the lawsuit with the U.S. Department of Justice, but that the USDA plans to continue to offer loan forgiveness to "socially disadvantaged" farmers.

Attorneys for the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty filed the action on the white farmers' behalf in federal court in Green Bay.

The filing seeks a court order prohibiting the USDA from applying racial classifications when determining eligibility for loan modifications and payments under the stimulus plan. It also seeks unspecified damages.

Minority farmers have maintained for decades that they have been unfairly denied farm loans and other government assistance.

The USDA in 1999 and 2010 settled lawsuits from Black farmers accusing the agency of discriminating against them.

Still, less than 2% of direct loans from the Trump administration in 2020 went to Black farmers. And some Black farmers have criticized Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack for failing to address a backlog of discrimination complaints and failing to hire minorities for high-level positions.

Vilsack, who served under President Barack Obama and returned to the role after President Joe Biden took office, said in a statement last month that generations of socially disadvantaged farmers have suffered due to systemic discrimination and a cycle of debt. He has been trying to assure minority farming groups that he will work to stem racism within the USDA.

Civil rights advocates have hailed Biden's stimulus plan as a means of finally helping farmers of color.

Dakota Access pipeline wants review from US Supreme Court

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The owners of the Dakota Access pipeline said Thursday they want the U.S. Supreme Court to review lower court opinions confirming that the project deserves a thorough environmental review and is currently operating without a key federal permit.

A Washington, D.C., Circuit Court of Appeals panel earlier this year supported the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and other tribes on those two issues. That has left open the possibility that the pipeline will be shut down while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducts the environmental study.

Texas-based Energy Transfer, which operates the \$3.8 billion, 1,172-mile (1,886 kilometer) pipeline, said in a filing to the circuit court that it hopes the Supreme Court will take up one or both of the questions on the environmental review and federal permit for an easement.

Standing Rock, which straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota border and gets its water from the river,

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fears pollution from the pipeline.

"The courts have ordered a full environmental review of the pipeline's risks and potential impacts on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, nothing more," said Earthjustice attorney Jan Hasselman, who represents Standing Rock. "Energy Transfer's increasingly desperate opposition to carrying out such a review tells us everything we need to know."

Sioux Falls police chief announces retirement

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The police chief of Sioux Falls will retire in July after six years in the position. Police Chief Matt Burns will leave his post on July 23, the Argus Leader reported. His 25-year career at the department started as a patrol officer and included roles as a SWAT team member, detective and assistant chief. He was appointed police chief in 2015.

"I have been privileged to serve the Sioux Falls community alongside the incredible men and women of the Sioux Falls Police Department," Burns said in a statement.

Europe's economy shrinks in first quarter as US rolls ahead

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe's economy shrank 0.6% in the first three months of the year as slow vaccine rollouts and extended lockdowns delayed a hoped-for recovery - and underlined how the region is lagging other major economies in rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic.

The fall in output for the 19 countries that use the euro currency was smaller than the 1% contraction expected by economists but still far short of the rebound underway in the United States and China, two other pillars of the global economy.

Figures announced Thursday showed the U.S. economy grew 1.6% during the first quarter, with business supported by strong consumer demand. On an annualized basis, the U.S. grew 6.4%.

In Europe, the second straight quarter of falling output confirms the region is in a double-dip pandemic recession after a rebound in growth in the third quarter. Two quarters of falling output is one definition of a recession.

France showed unexpected growth of 0.4% compared to the quarter before, while the main negative surprise came in Germany, the continent's largest economy. Activity there shrank by a larger-than-expected 1.7% as the manufacturing sector was hit by disruption of parts supplies on top of the hit to services and travel from pandemic-related restrictions on activity.

French authorities are anticipating the COVID-19 outlook in the country to be better next month, when a greater proportion of the population will be vaccinated. The government is slowly starting to lift partial lockdowns, despite still-high numbers of coronavirus cases and hospitalized COVID-19 patients. President Emmanuel Macron said Thursday that the outdoor terraces of France's cafes and restaurants will be allowed to reopen on May 19 along with museums, cinemas, theaters and concert halls under certain conditions.

Worry about a potential second straight lost vacation season has clouded the outlook for Mediterranean countries Italy, Spain and Greece, which rely heavily on tourism. Greece has lifted quarantine restrictions on visitors from EU countries and will allow restaurants and cafes to reopen for outdoor service from May 3. Travel receipts there sank 75% last year.

Economists said they expected an upturn in the coming weeks as vaccinations accelerate. The International Monetary Fund forecasts growth of 4.4% for the eurozone for all of this year. Thus far, Europe's unemployment rate has increased only gradually to 8.1% in March, thanks to extensive furlough support programs that help companies keep workers on. The US saw its jobless rate fall to 6.0% after spiking as high as 14.8% during the worst of the pandemic.

A major factor holding back the recovery in Europe is the slow vaccine rollout, which has led to prolonged lockdowns. Another is less fiscal support for the economy from new government spending. U.S. President Joe Biden's \$1.9 billion relief package, coupled with spending from earlier support efforts, will mean additional cash support of about 11-12% of annual economic output for this year, according to economists at

UniCredit bank. By contrast, the European fiscal stimulus amounts to about 6% of gross domestic product, even after Europe's more extensive social safety net is factored in.

China was hit first by the pandemic but got it under control through strict public health measures and was the only major economy to grow in 2020. The U.S. was hard hit by the virus but has rolled out vaccinations at a rapid pace.

All aboard! Biden to help Amtrak mark 50 years on the rails

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden, once a regular Amtrak rider, is set on Friday to help the nation's passenger rail system celebrate 50 years of service.

As a U.S. senator, Biden was a fixture on Amtrak trains between his home in Wilmington, Delaware, and Washington, D.C., when the Senate was in session. He continued riding Amtrak as vice president. He has sometimes been referred to as "Amtrak Joe."

But with a presidential train trip unlikely because of security concerns, Biden instead will fly to Philadelphia for Amtrak's celebration at its busy 30th Street Station. He is to be introduced by a conductor who worked the route when Biden was a regular passenger, while the next generation of Amtrak's high-speed Acela train, scheduled to enter service next year, will be on display.

"He knew just about everybody that worked in the station and the conductors and other people and Amtrak folks who were on the train for those many, many years that he rode the rail," Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn said of the president.

"He regularly engaged with them and knew quite a bit about them, and I think that's why he was anxious or willing to be part of our 50th anniversary," Flynn said.

Biden's appearance in Philadelphia, his third visit to Pennsylvania while in office, comes as he marks his first 100 days as president. It also follows his speech to Congress on Wednesday, when he outlined his \$2.3 trillion jobs and infrastructure plan and previewed some \$1.8 trillion in proposed spending on education, child care and other family needs.

The Amtrak party will be Biden's latest stop in a post-speech tour to sell the infrastructure, jobs and families plans. He campaigned in Atlanta on Thursday and plans a stop in Yorktown, Virginia, on Monday.

The infrastructure proposal would devote \$621 billion to improving roads, bridges, public transit and other transportation infrastructure. Of that, \$80 billion would go toward tackling Amtrak's repair backlog, improving service along the Northeast Corridor and expanding service across the U.S.

Amtrak said after Biden announced the plan that the corporation would upgrade and expand service, including by adding 30 new routes and adding trains on 20 existing routes across the U.S. by 2035. New service would begin in portions of northeast Pennsylvania including Scranton, where Biden was born, as well as Nashville, Tennessee; Columbus, Ohio; Phoenix; Las Vegas; Houston; Dallas; and Austin, Texas, if approved by Congress.

But while the \$80 billion represents a significant investment, the money would not go far in terms of funding high-speed rail. Amtrak has estimated that it has a \$31 billion repair backlog for its trains in the Northeast Corridor alone, and transportation analysts say adding new lines in that region could easily use up the funds that remain.

A Senate Republican counteroffer to Biden's plan, totaling \$568 billion, would devote a much slimmer \$20 billion to U.S. rail service.

Amtrak was formed after President Richard Nixon signed the Rail Passenger Service Act in 1970.

Biden's lifelong association with Amtrak began soon after rail service began in May 1971.

His first wife and baby daughter were killed in a car accident in Delaware, weeks after he was elected to the Senate. His young sons Beau and Hunter were seriously injured.

Biden considered not taking his Senate seat, but ultimately took office. He then decided to return home every night from Washington to be with his sons — and Amtrak was the vehicle. He made the round trip every day the Senate was in session, for the 36 years he held the seat, through his remarriage to current

wife, Jill, and the birth of their daughter, Ashley.

He also rode the train when he was President Barack Obama's vice president. After he and Obama were elected, they rode an Amtrak train together into Washington for the inauguration.

Biden also rode Amtrak during the 2020 campaign. He had wanted to recreate the 2009 train ride for his own inauguration in January, but those plans were shelved after the insurrection at the Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump.

When he returned to Delaware after the Obama administration ended, Biden estimated to CNN that he had taken more than 8,200 round trips and had traveled more than 2 million miles on Amtrak.

Amtrak renamed its Wilmington, Delaware, train station after Biden in 2011.

Virus surge, vaccine shortages spread beyond India's borders

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — India has tried to fight skyrocketing coronavirus infections by increasing its production of vaccines and banning their export, cutting off supplies to neighbors such as Bangladesh and Nepal as they struggle with infection surges of their own.

These nations have imposed lockdowns as residents of big cities flee to the countryside seeking safety. They are also turning to China and Russia for vaccines in a desperate effort to deal with a pandemic that is becoming bigger and deadlier across South Asia.

Although new, more transmissible variants appear to be partly behind the surge, experts say other factors are contributing, including large holiday gatherings and growing fatigue with social distancing and mask wearing.

Here is a look at the situation in parts of South Asia, a region with about one-fourth of the world's population:

BANGLADESH

The surge in India has created huge worries for Bangladesh, which shares a land border stretching 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) with India and where infections and deaths have surged in recent weeks.

The Muslim-majority country of 160 million people is under a lockdown lasting through May 5, which authorities say could be extended.

Bangladesh officials fear that new variants circulating in India could bring devastation.

"This is a matter of serious concern for us," said Dr. A.S.M. Alamgir, principal scientific officer of the government's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research. "That concern has prompted the government to suspend all cross-border movement of people."

With India imposing a ban on the export of AstraZeneca vaccines made by its Serum Institute of India, Bangladesh is attempting to obtain technology from Russia and China to produce their vaccines locally.

NEPAL

An infection surge in Nepal has prompted the government to impose new lockdowns in major cities and towns, restricting the movement of people and vehicles and shuttering markets, offices and schools.

Hospital beds were already scarce and medical resources stretched as the country entered the new wave trying to recover from an economic hit from a nearly four-month lockdown last year.

Nepal's latest concern has been the 1,800-kilometer (1,125-mile) open border the Himalayan nation shares with India. Tens of thousands of Nepalese migrant workers have been returning to Nepal across this border as India's health system breaks down.

The government has ordered tests and quarantines for those arriving, but in practice many people slip through undetected and travel to their villages.

Nepal began a vaccination campaign in January with 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine donated by India, but it was suspended because of India's refusal to allow exports as its domestic situation worsened.

Nepal has also paid for an additional 1 million doses from India, but has been waiting for the delivery since March. This shipment is needed for elderly people scheduled for a second dose in May.

The campaign was resumed with 800,000 vaccine doses donated by China, and now Nepal is negotiating

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with Russian authorities for supplies of Russian vaccines.

SRI LANKA

For many weeks, the number of daily COVID-19 infections in the island nation of Sri Lanka stood below 200. But last week, the figure suddenly surged and reached 1,466 on Thursday, the highest amount in a single day since the start of the pandemic.

Government and health officials say the rising numbers are partly driven by celebrations and shopping surrounding the traditional New Year's festival that fell on April 14 — and they warn the worst is yet to come.

Dr. Padma Gunarathne, president of the Sri Lanka Medical Association, said the country is at the early stages of another spike in infections and "this is a very risky situation for Sri Lanka."

The country, with a population of nearly 22 million, has recorded 104,953 coronavirus infections and 655 deaths.

Dr. Chandima Jeewandara, director of the Department of Immunology and Molecular Medicine at Sri Jayewardenepura University, said a more transmissible variant circulating now is contributing to the surge.

The government reacted by imposing restrictions, including suspending schools and state functions and banning private meetings and parties. Yet media show some people ignoring social distancing and failing to wear face masks.

Chief Epidemiologist Dr. Sudath Samaraweera warned that the number of patients "could go up very decisively within the next two weeks."

BHUTAN

The tiny nation of Bhutan is a success story in the region despite being poor and sharing land borders with China, where the virus was first detected, and India, which is facing a disaster now.

The nation of about 800,000 people has registered only one death and 1,059 infections.

Its success is based on the early adoption of lockdowns, quarantines, contact tracing and other measures, as well as a fast vaccination program this year. More than 480,000 vaccine doses were administered by April 26, according to government statistics.

'We did it!': Minnesota exults at Census win at NY's expense

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minnesotans spent 18 months worrying over whether the 2020 census would finally cost them a precious seat in Congress, expecting to lose one to faster-growing competitors in the South and West even if they found and counted every last soul in the state.

Turns out they could have spared the concern. In Minnesota — a state that's long seen itself as above average — residents voluntarily returned their census forms at the highest rate in the nation. Their dedication likely saved the day.

Even sweeter for some here: Mighty New York was the state on the outs, clipped by Minnesota for the 435th and final House seat by a mind-bogglingly narrow margin. If Minnesota had counted 26 fewer people — or New York just 89 more — the seat would have switched states.

"Census nerds! We did it!" Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan tweeted. Others took to Twitter to exult in the news: "Minnesota finally beats New York at something," one user said, alluding to the Twins' recent years of postseason baseball futility against the Yankees.

Just over 75% of Minnesotans responded to the census questionnaire, tops in the nation but also in step with generally strong participation rates in the Midwest. Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Michigan all made the top 10 in self-response rates — boasting rates of more than 71% — but slow population growth in the latter two states still cost them a congressional seat.

Minnesota has a history of seat stealing. It took the 435th seat from North Carolina during the last census in 2010.

Minnesota's embrace of the census is in line with strong civic engagement in elections, where the state every two years ranks at or near the top in turnout, including 80% in last fall's general election.

"We vote more, we volunteer more, we donate more," said Morgan Baum, a small-business owner in

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Hutchinson who was among those responding to the questionnaire without prodding.

"I think we're just a really participatory community. All Minnesotans are and that comes across again in the census."

Minneapolis social worker Jennifer Bertram calls herself a self-described "census nerd," in part because of a previous job for a nonprofit whose programs depended on census data for funding. She felt so strongly about the census' importance that she took a job doing the door-knocking necessary to get non-respondents.

"To me, it's almost more important than voting because of the billions of dollars that get allocated by the federal government back to Minnesota every year," she said.

She estimated she recorded at least 26 people who wouldn't have been counted otherwise. She recalled one home in particular — a group of six or seven Spanish-speaking brothers living in a duplex — and working across a language barrier to get them counted.

Several states lost a congressional seat due to the census, including California despite spending \$187 million on census outreach, according to data from the National Council of State Legislatures.

The state of New York allotted up to \$60 million on census outreach, on top of New York City's \$40 million effort, dwarfing Minnesota's \$2.1 million. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said this week that he is considering "legal options" to challenge the state's narrow loss, though the governor didn't specify what legal actions.

Texas was the lone state to gain two seats. Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina and Oregon gained one seat each.

Census figures showed Minnesota's overall growth rate was 7.6% — a shade higher than the overall nationwide rate of 7.4% as its population grew to 5.7 million from 5.3 million a decade ago.

In addition to keeping all eight U.S. House seats and 10 electoral votes, Minnesota's high response rate may affect the state's share in federal aid. Census Bureau data play a role in determining how to allot hundreds of billions of dollars annually through Medicaid, food stamps and about 130 other federal programs.

Brett Buckner, 49, of Minneapolis, a former president of the Minneapolis NAACP in the early 2000s, worked for the Census Bureau on the 2010 count. This time around, he was active in groups working together to get people of color to respond to the census — something they combined with voter turnout efforts.

"We said we need you to count both ways," Buckner said, describing door-knocking, phone calls, Zoom meetings and more.

"We got lucky here in Minnesota," he said.

Some of the people who joined in the victory lap on Twitter, however, said the win involved more than luck.

Explained one: "Never try and defeat Minnesota in a paperwork contest."

Key piece of Biden's \$1.8T families plan expires after 2025

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden couldn't get everything he wanted into his own \$1.8 trillion families plan.

His proposed child tax credit is set to expire after 2025. It would provide parents with \$300 a month for each child under age 6 and \$250 a month for older children. Democratic lawmakers are pushing hard to make the credit a permanent policy, but the administration told them that the annual costs of roughly \$100 billion were too high.

Biden is embracing a dramatic shift from four decades of politics in which presidents from both parties focused more on containing government than expanding it. But the resistance to making the child tax credit permanent is a sign that even in a White House that embraces big government, there are some limits.

"This is a very expensive policy, probably another \$500 billion-plus to extend this for the rest of the decade," said Shai Akabas, director of economic policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center. "According to the principles they've laid out, they would want to show they're paying for it, and the current 'pay-fors' would be insufficient even on a 15-year basis."

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Still, the tax credit is integral to the administration's goal of reducing child poverty to the single digits and improving the well-being, education and earnings of America's next generation. It was first introduced in part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus package as a yearlong benefit that increased the size of the existing credit, opened it up to almost every family and enabled it to be paid out monthly.

"With two parents, two kids, that's up to \$7,200 in your pocket to help take care of your family," Biden said in his joint address to Congress on Wednesday night.

The policy gets at the essence of Biden's belief that people should feel that government policies are bettering their lives. That philosophy is a fundamental difference from the response to the 2008 financial crisis where the focus was on regulation and buttressing major banks as millions lost their homes to foreclosure.

For the child tax credit, the challenge is that it is part of an already colossal series of spending packages that, along with infrastructure, totals \$4 trillion and would be paid for by tax hikes on corporations and the wealthy. Biden has proposed a permanent change to the child tax credits so that parents with no income tax burden can qualify. But the payments would drop down to \$1,000 annually — or \$83 monthly — in 2026.

This choice by Biden reflects a political calculation about who controls Congress and the White House after the 2024 elections. There is a belief that no lawmaker would favor an increase in child poverty, yet there is a risk that Democrats could fall out of power or have to make deep sacrifices to Republicans in order to preserve the payments.

The credit could also get caught up in negotiations as parts of the 2017 tax cuts by former President Donald Trump are also expiring at the same time. It's all part of a pattern as other presidents — most notably George W. Bush with his tax cuts — eventually saw their expiring policies become bargaining table grist.

"I've been around here long enough to know that bad things happened in the middle of the night during fiscal cliffs," Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., who has championed the tax credit expansion, said on a call with reporters. "We shouldn't take that chance with our kids."

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, asked Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen about making the expanded payments permanent, only to be told the cost was too great, according to people familiar with the conversation who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the talks. That echoes remarks Tuesday by White House press secretary Jen Psaki that she expects cost to be a discussion with lawmakers going forward.

There is also the possibility that it would be cheaper to make the child tax credit permanent now, since renewing it might simply mean financing it with debt later or making additional concessions that would increase the cost, said Chuck Marr, senior director of federal tax policy at the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

While the upfront price is expensive, the potential benefits suggest a high return.

Researchers at Columbia University estimated in February that the \$100 billion annual expense would generate \$810 billion in current and future benefits for society. Half of the yearly costs would be recouped by the government because of the increased economic activity.

Over the long run, the money would help reduce crime while improving education, health and earnings, said Chris Swanson, director of the IDEALS Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

"This will have tangible benefits for society," he said, adding that if the increased benefits expire, "it would put us back to square one."

Haunting the choice is the knowledge by lawmakers that progress can disappear when policies have expiration dates.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., ticked through a list of programs that were never extended as she explained her fears over what could happen to the child tax credit and why she will try in the coming months to make the increased payments permanent.

"We've watched voting rights expire," she said. "We've watched the ban on assault weapons expire. We watched federal child care efforts expire, and we know that they have not come around again."

Religious festival stampede in Israel kills 44, hurts dozens

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

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JERUSALEM (AP) — A stampede at a religious festival attended by tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews in northern Israel killed at least 44 people and injured about 150 early Friday, medical officials said. It was one of the country's deadliest civilian disasters.

The stampede began when large numbers of people thronged a narrow tunnel-like passage during the event, according to witnesses and video footage. People began falling on top of each other near the end of the walkway, as they descended slippery metal stairs, witnesses said.

One of the injured, Avraham Leibe, told Israeli public broadcaster Kan that a crush of people trying to descend the mountain caused a "general bedlam" on a slippery metal slope followed by stairs. "Nobody managed to halt," he said from a hospital bed. "I saw one after the other fall."

Video footage showed large numbers of people, most of them black-clad ultra-Orthodox men, squeezed in the tunnel. Initial reports said police barricades had prevented people from exiting quickly.

The stampede occurred during the celebrations of Lag BaOmer at Mount Meron, the first mass religious gathering to be held legally since Israel lifted nearly all restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic. The country has seen cases plummet since launching one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns late last year.

Lag BaOmer draws tens of thousands of people, most of them ultra-Orthodox Jews, each year to honor Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a 2nd century sage and mystic who is believed to be buried there. Large crowds traditionally light bonfires, pray and dance as part of the celebrations.

This year, media estimated the crowd at about 100,000 people.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who briefly visited Mount Meron around midday Friday, said it was "one of the worst disasters that has befallen the state of Israel" and offered condolences to the families. He said Sunday would be a day of national mourning.

At least 44 people were killed, according to health and rescue officials. In the immediate aftermath of the stampede, rescue workers collected the bodies, wrapped them in white covers and laid them side by side on the ground at the site. Bodies were later taken to Israel's central forensic pathology institute.

By mid-morning Friday, efforts were still under way to identify some of the victims and connect families with missing relatives. In the night from Thursday to Friday, cell phone coverage around Mount Meron had collapsed for hours and emergency hotlines were overwhelmed with phone calls.

In the overwhelmingly ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv, officials were working with health-care workers to connect the families of the missing. "The picture is slowly becoming clearer," Kivi Hess, a municipal spokesman, told Channel 13 TV.

In a race against time, funerals were to be held before sundown Friday, the start of the Jewish Sabbath when burials do not take place.

The death toll at Mount Meron was on par with the number of people killed in a 2010 forest fire, which is believed to be the deadliest civilian tragedy in the country's history.

Zaki Heller, spokesman for the Magen David Adom rescue service, said 150 people had been hurt in the stampede, with six hospitalized in critical condition.

Heller told Israel Army Radio that "no one had ever dreamed" something like this could happen. "In one moment, we went from a happy event to an immense tragedy," he said.

The Justice Ministry said the police's internal investigations department was launching a probe into possible criminal misconduct by officers.

The deadly stampede was also bound to have political reverberations at a time of great uncertainty following an inconclusive March election, the fourth in two years. Netanyahu has so far been unsuccessful in forming a governing coalition, and his time for doing so runs out early next week. His political rivals, including former allies bent on ending his 12-year rule, will then get a chance to try to cobble together an alliance from a patchwork of left-wing, centrist and hawkish parties.

Netanyahu needs the continued support of ultra-Orthodox parties, his long-time allies, if he wants to keep faint hopes alive of staying in power.

Israeli media reported Friday that earlier this month, Netanyahu assured ultra-Orthodox politicians in a meeting that the Lag BaOmer celebrations would take place with few limitations. The reports said this

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decision was supported by Cabinet ministers and police, despite objections by health officials who warned of a risk of renewed coronavirus infections.

Last year, observances on Mount Meron were limited due to the pandemic.

At the start of this year's celebrations, Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, police chief Yaakov Shabtai and other top officials visited the event and met with police, who had deployed 5,000 extra forces to maintain order.

Condolences were sent by foreign leaders and diplomats, including the U.S. charge d'affaires. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote on Twitter that his "thoughts are with the Israeli people and those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy."

The European Union said in a statement that it conveyed "deepest condolences to families and friends of the victims" and wished a speedy recovery to the injured. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said his country stands by Israel after the "terrifying news from Mount Meron."

Carper urges tough US rules barring gas-powered cars by 2035

By HOPE YEN and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top Senate Democrat is urging U.S. anti-pollution standards that would follow a deal brokered by California with five automakers and then set targets to end sales of new gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035, a goal that reaches farther than President Joe Biden's climate plan.

In a letter sent late Thursday to the Environmental Protection Agency, Delaware Sen. Tom Carper, who chairs the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, says the administration must move forcefully in the auto sector to achieve Biden's plan of slashing America's greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030.

Carper notes that the industry is already moving in the direction of zero-emission electric vehicles and that it's critical to lay markers now to ensure that the U.S. positions itself as a top player in auto manufacturing over foreign competitors such as China.

"Strong policies in the United States will encourage those investments to be made here," Carper wrote in the letter to EPA Administrator Michael Regan, which was obtained by The Associated Press. He cited likely U.S. gains in "research and development, manufacturing and ultimately export opportunities in automotive technology."

Under Carper's proposal, the EPA would apply California's 2019 framework agreement on emissions standards reached between Ford, Volkswagen, Honda, BMW and Volvo. That deal would cut greenhouse gas emissions by 3.7% per year from 2022 through 2026 and raise fuel economy requirements by a like amount.

After that, the administration would have to have much stricter standards to meet goals spelled out in Carper's plan. Half of all new vehicles sold would be electric by 2030, and sales of new gasoline-powered passenger vehicles would be banned by 2035. Under the deal with California, automakers would get credits toward meeting the requirements for selling zero-emissions battery electric and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles.

"If the U.S. does not establish a robust policy that leads to zero emission vehicle deployment, combined with appropriate incentives, we will be at risk of losing our automotive jobs and industry leadership to other nations, as well as enduring unnecessary public health impacts from pollution," Carper wrote.

Carper's push comes as the Biden administration takes steps to reverse former President Donald Trump's bid to end California's ability to set its own automobile tailpipe pollution standards. That move could pave the way for the U.S. to broker an industrywide deal that follows California's agreement, although reaching such an agreement faces challenges.

Most of the rest of the auto industry, for instance, opposed the California deal and sided with Trump in rolling back the standards to a 1.5% increase in fuel economy per year through 2026. In early talks with the Biden administration last month, a coalition of automakers said it wanted mileage standards lower than those brokered by California.

Biden has said he wants stronger standards to deal with the effects of climate change, and in his ad-

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dress to Congress on Wednesday he said the U.S. "can own the electric car market." His climate proposal, however, does not detail the greenhouse gas reductions that his administration envisions for each sector of the economy. Biden's top climate adviser, Gina McCarthy, appeared to signal that deeper cuts in emissions would have to come from sectors other than the auto industry to reach the goals.

To increase sales of electric vehicles, the administration plans to spend \$15 billion to build a half-million charging stations by 2030 as well as offer unspecified tax credits and rebates to cut the cost.

However, experts say it will be difficult to replace the 279 million passenger vehicles now on U.S. roads — most of which burn gasoline — with electric vehicles in less than 15 years. The average U.S. vehicle is now nearly 12 years old, so they stay on the roads longer than in the past. And without an immediate change, the number of gasoline-powered vehicles will continue to grow. IHS Markit predicts it will be 284 million by 2025.

Each year, automakers sell about 17 million new vehicles in the U.S., most of them running on gasoline. If every new vehicle sold were electric starting today, it would take more than 16 years to replace all the gasoline vehicles.

EXPLAINER: What remains as US ends Afghan 'forever war'

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — After 20 years, America is ending its "forever war" in Afghanistan.

Announcing a firm withdrawal deadline, President Joe Biden cut through the long debate, even within the U.S. military, over whether the time was right. Starting Saturday, the last remaining 2,500 to 3,500 American troops will begin leaving, to be fully out by Sept. 11 at the latest.

Another debate will likely go on far longer: Was it worth it?

Since 2001, tens of thousands of Afghans and 2,442 American soldiers have been killed, millions of Afghans driven from their homes, and billions of dollars spent on war and reconstruction. As the departure begins, The Associated Press takes a look at the mission and what it accomplished.

FIGHTING TERROR

In the early days after the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks in the U.S., the mission seemed clear: Hunt down and punish the perpetrators.

The U.S. determined that al-Qaida and its leader, Osama bin Laden, had plotted the attack from the safety of Afghanistan, protected by its radical Taliban rulers. At the time the Taliban were a pariah government, under U.N. sanctions and vilified in the West for their rule by a harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

Until 9/11, the U.S. had watched Afghanistan from a distance, occasionally requesting the Taliban to hand over bin Laden and once in 1998 firing a couple of cruise missiles at an al-Qaida base in eastern Afghanistan.

Now America was leading an invasion, dubbed Operation Enduring Freedom, with the mission of removing the Taliban and destroying al-Qaida.

Washington turned to the only allies in Afghanistan it could — a collection of warlords, most of whom were former mujahedeen backed by the U.S. in the 1980s in the fight against the invading Soviet Union. Rallying around the U.S. after 9/11, NATO joined the coalition.

Within weeks of the invasion and aerial bombardment, the U.S.-led coalition had pounded the Taliban into submission and driven them from power. Its leadership fled, its fighters lost control of the entire nation. Al-Qaida as well fled underground, crossing into neighboring Pakistan.

The hunt for bin Laden took 10 years. Finally, he was tracked to his hideout in Pakistan, barely 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Islamabad. A U.S. Navy Seals team went in under cover of darkness and killed him.

But in the interceding decade, America and NATO had been dragged into a dramatically expanded mission. Then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at first said America was not in Afghanistan to nation-build. That would change.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, it took its eye off Afghanistan. It left it to the former warlords, preoccupied with wealth and power. The first post-Taliban president, Hamid Karzai, raised the idea of talks

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with the Taliban to work out a peace, and the crushed militants put out signals they wanted to reach an accommodation.

But American officials blocked any negotiations with the Taliban, convinced the insurgents could be militarily destroyed.

Instead, the militants re-emerged in a long insurgency, and the U.S. found itself pouring in money and manpower to help the Afghan government fight and to rebuild the war-shattered nation. With the flood of billions of dollars, corruption only grew in the U.S.-backed government, only growing worse as the years went on.

Meanwhile, al-Qaida's ability to strike the U.S. and the West has been severely damaged. But the group has spread in branches in multiple countries fighting in insurgencies.

Biden explained his decision to pull out the last 2,500-3,500 American soldiers from Afghanistan, saying America's security concerns had evolved.

"Bin Laden is dead, and al-Qaida is degraded in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said, arguing that the terror threat has "metastasized" into a global phenomenon, not to be fought with thousands of troops on the ground in one country but with new technology. The U.S., he said, must be freed to fight the 21st century's more sophisticated challenges, including competition from Russia and China.

For the situation in Afghanistan, he said he didn't see how continued American military presence would bring a turnaround. "When will it be the right moment to leave? One more year, two more years, ten more years?" he said.

"Not now" — that's how we got here."

WHAT NOW FOR AFGHANISTAN?

The U.S. and NATO leave behind an Afghanistan that is at least half run directly or indirectly by the Taliban — despite billions poured into training and arming Afghan forces to fight them. Riddled with corruption and tied to regional warlords, the U.S.-backed government is widely distrusted by many Afghans.

Washington and its international allies are putting heavy pressure on the government and the Taliban to reach a peace deal. The hope is that both sides realize military victory is impossible and that peace together is the only way forward.

The best case scenario is some sort of government including the Taliban that can pave the way for a drawing up a new constitutional system for the future, including some form of elections.

The very possible worst case scenario is that peace talks fail, and Afghanistan is plunged into a new chapter of its decades of civil war. That new phase could be more brutal than ever, with not only the Taliban but the country's other, multiple warlords and armed factions battling it out for power.

The past 20 years since the Taliban were ousted have unquestionably seen gains for the Afghans. But they are fragile and risk being wiped away as the Americans step away — whether frittered away under a new government or crushed by continued war.

Girls are allowed an education, which had been banned under the Taliban. Still, at least 3.6 million children, the majority of them girls, are not in school, according to UNICEF.

Women are working and are in Parliament. Their voices are strong yet still Afghanistan's Parliament has been unable to pass The Violence Against Women bill because religious conservatives dominate. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security has consistently ranked Afghanistan as one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman.

Before the war in 2001, the Taliban had eradicated opium production in Afghanistan, according to United Nations figures. Today, it produces more opium than every other opium-producing country combined, despite the U.S. spending millions to eradicate drug production.

The opium industry in 2019, the latest available figures show, earned between \$1.2 billion and \$2.1 billion, outstripping the value of the country's legal exports, according to John Sopko, the U.S. government's watchdog on Afghan reconstruction. More than \$14 million of that went into the coffers of the Taliban, who tax drug movement throughout the country.

Despite billions in U.S. humanitarian and reconstruction aid, more than half the population of 36 million

lives under the World Bank-set poverty line of \$1.90 a day — and millions more live not much above that level. Unemployment is at 40%. The U.N. and Red Cross say nearly half of all Afghan children face the danger of hunger.

The majority of Afghans hold out little hope for their future according to a 2018 Gallup poll.

"Afghanistan is bordering a failed state status and is sure to enter the category immediately after the withdrawal of the foreign forces absent a better political arrangement," said Torek Farhadi, a political analyst and former government adviser. "That is the reality of Afghanistan."

India cases up as scientists appeal to Modi to release data

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian scientists appealed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to publicly release virus data that would allow them to save lives as coronavirus cases climbed again Friday, prompting the army to open its hospitals in a desperate bid to control a massive humanitarian crisis.

With 386,452 new cases, India now has reported more than 18.7 million since the pandemic began, second only to the United States. The Health Ministry on Friday also reported 3,498 deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing the total to 208,330. Experts believe both figures are an undercount, but it's unclear by how much.

India's pandemic response has been marred by insufficient data and the online appeal — signed by over 350 scientists Friday afternoon — asks government to release data about the sequencing of virus variants, testing, recovered patients and how people were responding to vaccines.

The appeal says that "granular" data on testing was inaccessible to non-government experts and some government experts too. Modeling work to predict future surges was being done by government-appointed experts with insufficient information. Similarly, scientists had failed to get information that would allow them predict how many beds, oxygen or intensive care facilities would be needed, it said.

The appeal urged the government to widen the number of organizations sequencing the virus to study its evolution, and also increase the number of samples being studied. It added that restrictions on importing scientific raw materials — to make India 'self reliant' is a key goal for Modi and his government — was an obstacle. "Such restrictions, at this time, only serve to impede our ability to deal with COVID-19," it said.

Meanwhile, families continued to flood social media and messaging apps with pleas for help: oxygen, beds, medicines, intensive care units and wood for funeral pyres.

India's army chief M.M. Naravane met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday to discuss the crisis.

Naravane said the sick can approach their nearest army hospitals for help. Troops were also assisting with imported oxygen tankers and vehicles where specialized skills are required, a government statement said.

India has set a daily global record for more than a week with an average of nearly 350,000 infections. Daily deaths have nearly tripled in the past three weeks, reflecting the intensity of the latest surge.

In the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, a school teachers' organization said that more than 550 members have died after they were infected with COVID-19 while helping conduct local council elections this month, the Times of India newspaper reported.

Experts have blamed the surge on new, more contagious virus variants and mass public gatherings such as political rallies and religious events that were allowed to continue. On Thursday, millions voted in state elections in West Bengal with little or no regard to social distancing.

In the southern state of Karnataka, Revenue Minister R. Ashoka said nearly 2,000 coronavirus patients under home care have switched off their phones and cannot be traced. Police were trying to track them as they might be seeking hospitalization on their own, he said.

In central Madhya Pradesh state, three villages in Balaghat district have pooled money to convert buildings into COVID-19 care centers. They have purchased oxygen concentrators and started admitting patients. Government doctors are visiting the facilities twice a day.

India plans to step up a faltering vaccination drive by allowing all adults 18 and older to get their jabs from Saturday. It has so far administered 150 million vaccine doses, according to the Health Ministry.

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Since January, nearly 10% of Indians have received one dose, but only around 1.5% have received both, though India is one of the world's biggest producers of vaccines.

Health Minister Harash Vardhan expressed hope that assistance being sent by over 40 countries will plug the shortage in medical supplies. The United States is sending more than \$100 million worth of items, including 1,000 oxygen cylinders, 15 million N95 masks and 1 million rapid diagnostic tests.

Japan said Friday it will send 300 ventilators and 300 oxygen concentrators in response to the Indian government request. "Japan stands with India, our friend and partner," the Foreign Ministry said.

France, Germany, Ireland and Australia have also promised help, and Russia sent two aircraft carrying oxygen generating equipment. The Indian air force also airlifted oxygen containers from Singapore, Dubai and Bangkok.

Chinese state media said the first batch of 25,000 oxygen concentrators pledged by Beijing to India also arrived Friday. There was no immediate comment by India but it could be a step in thawing tensions between the two countries.

The reports said China has already sent 5,000 ventilators and 21,000 oxygen generators to India.

Beyond the pandemic: London votes for a mayor during crisis

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Not long ago, London was booming. Now it fears a bust.

Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic have hit Britain's capital in a perfect storm. In 2021, the city has fewer people, fewer businesses, starker divisions and tougher choices than anyone could have expected.

On May 6, Londoners will elect a mayor whose performance will help determine whether this is a period of decline for Europe's biggest city — or a chance to do things better.

"It's going to be rough, definitely," said Jack Brown, lecturer in London studies at King's College London. "Those two quite seismic changes" — Brexit and the virus — "will be a lot to cope with."

Plagues, fires, war — London has survived them all. But it has never had a year like this. The coronavirus has killed more than 15,000 Londoners and shaken the foundations of one of the world's great cities. As a fast-moving mass vaccination campaign holds the promise of a wider reopening, The Associated Press looks at the pandemic's impact on London's people and institutions and asks what the future might hold.

London's newly elected mayor will lead a city of more than 8 million that is facing the usual big-city troubles — too little affordable housing and transit, too much crime and pollution — as well as a host of unprecedented problems.

A year of coronavirus lockdowns and travel restrictions have emptied the city's office towers, shut down its nightlife, shuttered its pubs and restaurants and banished international tourists. Returning to normal will take a long time.

"We've lost about 300,000 jobs already, and more than a million Londoners are currently furloughed," said Mayor Sadiq Khan, who is seeking re-election. "So the challenge is how we avoid (the) mass unemployment of the 1980s.

"It's really important to have the same ambition that our forefathers and foremothers had after the Second World War, because that's scale of the challenge," said Khan, whose priorities include coaxing people back into the city center and easing the economic inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.

If opinion polls are right, Khan, 50, is likely to win a second term in Thursday's election, which has been delayed by a year because of the pandemic. Both he and his main challenger are made-in-London success stories.

Khan, a lawyer and member of the center-left Labour Party, is the son of Pakistani immigrants. His father was a bus driver, his mother a seamstress.

Conservative candidate Shaun Bailey's grandparents, meanwhile, are part of the "Windrush generation" of post-World War II immigrants to Britain from the Caribbean. He was raised by a single mother in public

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housing in Ladbroke Grove, an area where pricey Victorian houses sit near run-down social housing blocks. The 49-year-old former youth worker is a passionate advocate of the city that he says gave him chances to thrive.

"More than any other place in the world, if you come from a working-class background, London offers opportunities like no other," said Bailey, who believes London's biggest challenge is crime.

Bailey wants to see more youth workers, more police officers on the beat and greater use of stop-and-search powers to take knives and other weapons off the street. Stop-and-search is a hugely contentious policy because young Black men have been disproportionately targeted, and this has been the focus of anti-racism protests around policing.

But Bailey says it's essential.

"The thing that's making the Black community angry above all things is the rate at which our young people are dying," he said.

Both Khan and Bailey — and more than a dozen other candidates, from Liberal Democrat and Green contenders to anti-lockdown activists and a bucket-headed comedian called Count Binface — know they are running in a city transformed by the virus and by Britain's exit from the European Union.

Brexit poses a challenge to London by ending the free flow of people from the continent and imperiling the city's status as Europe's financial hub. The pandemic, meanwhile, has challenged the very existence of megacities and the crowded spaces in which people live, work and travel.

After three decades of growth, London's population fell in 2020 as people moved out in search of more space during lockdown or returned to their regions or home countries. It remains to be seen whether they will ever come back.

Three lockdowns, now gradually being lifted, kept office workers at home and turned the center of London into a ghost town. Millions no longer commute downtown to work or play, as coronavirus restrictions forced people to stay local.

Across London — a "city of villages" whose neighborhoods retain distinct characters — the pandemic has led people to reassess their priorities.

"If you go into central London ... there's nobody there, almost," said Mark Burton, who runs a community arts venue in Walthamstow, a once-gritty, now-gentrifying area in the city's northeast. "Whereas out here, there's a vibrancy around the cafes."

Burton thinks Khan has done a pretty good job as mayor, though he wants more support for cycling and community ventures.

Across town in Ladbroke Grove, resident Nicholas Olajide likes rival Bailey's pledge to cut crime. He, too, thinks the pandemic has given the city a new sense of itself.

"I think it has awakened a sense of community in people," Olajide said. "Before, London was going the way whereby we were no longer a community, no longer our neighbors' keeper. But I think that has brought us back together. People staying home and caring about their neighbors, working from home — it has brought families closer together."

Sian Berry, the Green Party candidate for mayor, says the pandemic has exposed the yawning gaps in London society and left people wanting "a new start."

"It's a very exciting place to live, London, but it's polluted, it can be a strain, and living costs are far too high," she said. "Each neighborhood in London has its own spirit, too, and we need to be nurturing that."

Brown, the London historian, is optimistic about London's ability to bounce back. It has been through tough times before in its 2,000 years of existence.

"London's ancient history really is one of getting set on fire every now and then — the whole city burns down — and then everybody gets the plague," he said. "This happens in a cycle for years and years and people keep coming back."

"The very long history of London is one of incredible resilience. It's even a little uncaring sometimes. It doesn't always take everyone with it. But the place itself, its economy, its appeal, kind of endures," he said.

Growth in Burkina Faso gold mining fuels human trafficking

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

SECACO, Burkina Faso (AP) — For months, human traffickers beat and drugged Blessing, hauling the 27-year-old from one gold mine encampment to the next, where each night she was forced to sleep with dozens of men for less than \$2 a person.

The madam who lured Blessing to the landlocked West African nation of Burkina Faso with promises of a hair salon job, threatened to kill her if she tried to run away.

"Nobody comes to your rescue," said Blessing, wiping tears from her cheeks during a recent interview.

In December 2019, while the madam was away, Blessing finally got the courage to escape. With the help of local residents, she and six other women left the encampment and walked to safety, ultimately ending up in a United Nations transit center for migrants in the capital city of Ouagadougou.

Blessing's experience in the gold mining encampments is not unique.

As part of a months-long investigation into sex trafficking and the gold mining industry, The Associated Press met with nearly 20 Nigerian women who said they had been brought to Burkina Faso under false pretenses, then forced into prostitution. Some of the women, who like Blessing spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear for their safety, said they knew hundreds of others with similar stories. To protect their safety, AP is identifying the women by the names they used for sex work.

The AP verified the women's stories through interviews with aid workers, lawyers, police, local anti-trafficking activists, health workers, a trafficker, and members of the Nigerian community in several towns throughout Burkina Faso.

People with knowledge of the trafficking say most of the women come from Nigeria's Edo state, where promises of jobs in shops or salons in Burkina Faso sounded like a good way to support their families. Once here, they were sent to work off debts in squalid conditions at or near small-scale gold mines.

While both Burkina Faso and Nigeria have signed the U.N. Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, neither has finalized a joint plan on how to combat trafficking.

Burkina Faso's security sector, already struggling to stem a violent jihadist insurgency, is undertrained and ill-equipped to disrupt the expansive network of recruiters, traffickers, and pimps.

As a result, the country not only struggles with trafficking within its borders but has also been identified as a transfer point for trafficking women into other countries, according to reports from the US State Department.

One man arrested and detained by local authorities for trying to traffic three women across the Burkina Faso border into neighboring Mali told the AP he didn't consider it human trafficking because he said the women knew they'd be working as prostitutes.

"I feel somehow bad because it's not a good job for them to do. They say it's just a voluntary decision," said the 48-year-old car parts salesman from Nigeria, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared retaliation.

He told the AP that he had bought the women for \$270 each in Benin and was planning to sell them for more than twice that to a Nigerian madam in Mali. He'd done the same with two other women back in 2019.

Burkina Faso is likely to be downgraded in this year's Trafficking in Persons Report, an annual report issued by the U.S. State Department, according to two people familiar with the discussions who were not authorized to speak on the record. Generally, countries are downgraded if they haven't made significant steps to curb trafficking. Downgraded countries could also risk US economic and diplomatic penalties.

Burkina Faso's gold mining industry is relatively new. The first of its 15 industrial mines, all but one of which is for gold, started production in 2007, a few years after the government changed the mining law to attract commercial investors.

Today, Burkina Faso is the fastest-growing gold producer in Africa, and currently the fifth largest on the continent after South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, and Mali. Gold is the nation's most important export, according to a February report by the German-based research group GLOCON. The industry employs about

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1.5 million people and was worth about \$2 billion in 2019.

More than 70% of the industrial gold mined is sent to Switzerland, according to 2019 data from the United Nations Comtrade Database, and the vast majority of it is processed by Metalor Technologies, a Swiss-based refinery of precious metal and one of the largest in the world.

Metalor Technologies said its suppliers are owned and managed by listed companies with a high sense and respect of corporate social responsibility standards.

"In Burkina, as in all other countries we do work with, our suppliers have followed a thorough due diligence and compliance process to make sure that the way they operate do respect human rights and environmental standards," the company said in a statement, adding that it follows guidelines set by groups such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an international organization composed of 37 member countries established to stimulate economic progress and world trade.

Gold from Burkina Faso is also likely used to make products sold by companies in a number of industries, including the technology sector, according to conflict mineral reports filed with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

In the filings, companies say they perform due diligence to make sure that the gold used in their products is not being mined or processed by forced labor or exploited workers. But many companies admit that they are unable to verify with absolute certainty the source and chain of custody of gold used in their products.

The SEC reports are designed to cover human rights abuses and trafficking that are directly tied to the supply chains, not the trafficking of women for sex work that occurs near operations that mine the gold.

"These kinds of exploitation (can) take place outside of the mining areas, so stakeholders don't see it as their responsibility. However, the product is being produced in an ecosystem of human rights violations/sex trafficking," said Livia Wagner, senior expert at the Geneva-based Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, in a message via WhatsApp.

Experts and local officials say most documented human trafficking cases of women appear at small-scale gold mines, not the larger industrial mines.

The gold from the country's approximately 800 small-scale mines is hard to track. Much of it, particularly from the east, is smuggled across Burkina Faso's borders with Togo, Benin, Niger, and Ghana, according to the Institute for Security Studies, based in South Africa. Industry experts said this gold likely ends up in Dubai. The government of Burkina Faso estimates the illicit market produces more than \$400 million worth of gold a year.

Salofou Trahore, general director for Burkina Faso's regulatory body for small-scale mines, said he was unaware that women were being exploited at the sites. The government is in the process of regulating small-scale mines more strictly, he said. Trahore added that this would provide better oversight of the mines, as well as tracking environmental and human rights abuses.

In one now-vibrant mining community, the southwestern town of Hounde, the opening of an industrial gold mine four years ago led to an increase in brothels from one to six, according to Jean-Paul Ramde, whose organization, Responsibility Hope Life Solidarity Plus, gives women HIV/AIDS tests and condoms.

"Where there are gold mines, there are many evils that develop around it, including prostitution," said Oumarou Dicko, the head of the government's Department for Family and Children in the region that serves Hounde.

Prostitution exists in a legal gray area in Burkina Faso — it's not illegal, but soliciting it is. Police say it's hard to prove if someone has been trafficked into sex work because women fear retaliation from criminal networks.

The limited available figures show an increase in reported trafficking cases in recent years. The U.N. International Organization for Migration helped over 35 people trafficked last year in Burkina Faso, compared with 12 for all of 2018, said Claire Laroche, the organization's protection officer.

AP's investigation showed the problem is far larger.

In Secaco, a makeshift mining town tucked behind uneven dirt roads deep in the brush, trafficked women

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live and work in tiny, ragged tents with plastic sheeting. Here they have sex on thin mattresses on the dirt floor with 30 men a night, trying to earn their freedom.

A 27-year-old called Mimi said recruiters told her she'd have a job to support her three children when she arrived in Burkina Faso. Two months later, she still owed her madam \$1,200.

"It's a jungle and I want to survive," she said.

Like many others, Love thought a steady income awaited her in Burkina — in the 35-year-old's case, to support her 13-year-old daughter.

"In Nigeria, there are a lot of graduates but no jobs," Love said. She was told she'd be working in a boutique but was instead forced into sex work with miners.

Joy, a divorced mother of four, said she arrived early in 2020 because she couldn't make enough money in Nigeria to support her children. The 31-year-old was told she'd work in a shop. Upon arrival, she was given a condom and taken to a mining site for prostitution, she said.

The clients, mostly local miners or men from neighboring Mali or Ivory Coast, often refuse to pay and become physically abusive, the women said.

Nigerian women are usually taken to the western city of Bobo-Dioulasso and sold for upward of \$700 to different Nigerian madams, according to interviews with several women, a trafficker, and local authorities.

The madams confiscate the women's passports, phones, and money, then force them into sex work in brothels in makeshift mining towns adjacent to the small-scale mines or in larger towns near the mines. Few of the women speak the local language or know the area.

Boukary Ouedraogo, the police commissioner in Bobo-Dioulasso, said that on many occasions when a trafficker or madam was arrested, community leaders have tried to negotiate for their release, which points to complicity within the Nigerian community, he said.

"When the (Nigerian) representatives in Bobo-Dioulasso come, what they want is that we release the person," he said. "If someone's in breach of the law and you ask us to release him, it means that you defend him," he said.

Women are bound to the madams until they pay off their debts — which often approach \$2,700. Madams often threaten to kill them with juju, a form of witchcraft, if they try to escape.

Some of the women were recruited by the madams themselves, approached randomly on a bus or in the market in Nigeria, and asked if they wanted to earn a better living. Others were referred by friends or acquaintances, usually young boys paid to recruit women.

Once recruited, the women travel for approximately three days with the traffickers. The typical route is through Cotonou, a large port city in Benin, and then north, sometimes passing through Togo, into Burkina Faso.

They travel on public buses with the traffickers or in private cars. They may tell border police they are the traffickers' wives. Underage girls are given fake identification cards made in Benin, according to the women, one who showed an AP reporter the forgery.

In some cases, a family sells a girl. Natasha, 17, said she was told nearly two years ago she'd be going to school but was sold to traffickers by her aunt for approximately \$700.

"I was like, 'Oh God, is this how my life's going to be?' This isn't my dream. I didn't dream of coming to this place for prostitution. I was thinking of better things, like school," she said.

The traumas these women have suffered are clear, according to local activists who help them.

"When you try to dig deeper, they change the subject and don't want to talk about it," said Stephanie Benao-Ouedraogo, a social worker for Association Tie, a local organization focused on child protection.

Human trafficking experts said abuses will continue until the mining industry — including buyers atop the supply chain, such as jewelers and electronics makers — take responsibility for where the gold originates.

"There's a lot of focus on conflict minerals, but people have to be aware that gold is also being produced in a context of exploitation," said Wagner. "People are being bought and sold, that's basically putting a price tag on a person."

In January, a new European Union law came into effect aimed at stemming the import of conflict minerals and metals. The law, the Union's first, requires that gold imports be sourced responsibly, including due

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diligence on human rights abuses and forced labor.

Burkina Faso is one of several countries mentioned in the legislation as being high-risk, and therefore requiring extra oversight. The new law says gold mining has been a source of conflict in the region since the late 2000s, usually between local communities, artisanal miners, the state and private security forces.

Meanwhile, the women whose lives have been upended are pleading with the traffickers to stop.

Blessing wants to start a business selling sugar and flour with her mother in Nigeria, where she has returned. She knows others have lost hope.

"Many girls that had good dreams of becoming something meaningful in life. (The traffickers) use this stuff to damage their thinking, to damage their hopes," she said.

As virus engulfs India, diaspora watches with despair

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bad news, knowing no time zones, arrives in a jarring burst of messages, calls and posts informing millions of members of India's worldwide diaspora that yet another loved one has been sickened or lost to the coronavirus.

Sometimes it comes in a barrage of WhatsApp messages first thing in the morning, and sometimes it lands in the middle of the night, as it did for Mohini Gadré's father. A 3 a.m. call at his San Francisco Bay Area home let him know that his octogenarian mother — who had tested positive in Mumbai — was too weak to say her morning prayers, setting off a mad scramble to find her the hospital bed where she remained for days.

In the U.S., where half of the adult population has gotten at least one COVID-19 shot, the talk has been of reopening, moving forward and healing. But for Indian Americans, the daily crush of dark news from "desh," the homeland, is a stark reminder that the pandemic is far from over.

"We're seeing life slowly start to get back to normal in small ways, and you're feeling like a bit of hope — like with spring. You know that things are improving, it's been a year," Gadré, 27, said. "And meanwhile there's this tinderbox that's been ignited in India."

The more than 4.2 million people like Gadré who make up the Indian diaspora in the U.S., according to census estimates, have watched in horror as the latest coronavirus surge burns through India, killing thousands of people a day and catapulting the death toll to more than 200,000 — the fourth-highest in the world.

In a culture that generally makes no distinctions between cousin and sibling, biological aunt or close friend, family is family. Many Indian Americans are wracked with guilt over emerging from more than a year of isolation as relatives overseas struggle to find vaccines, hospital beds and, fatefully, their breath.

Like India itself, the diaspora is striated by religion, caste, class, mother tongue and other factors that continue to divide. But now many of its members are united in frustration and helplessness with little recourse. The State Department has issued a "do not travel" advisory for India, citing COVID-19. That leaves families few options except to try to arrange resources from afar and persuade relatives to keep safe.

In the U.K. — home to about 1.4 million Indians — the government has added India to its "red list" of countries, banning arrivals for anyone from India except for U.K. citizens and residents. That adds to a sense of isolation and helplessness for many who feel cut off from loved ones.

"Apart from raising funds, being generous with donations and going to offer prayers, there's not much else we can do at the moment," said Yogesh Patel, a spokesperson at one of the U.K.'s largest Hindu temples. "We can't go and console family and friends, everything is happening online."

Compounding the frustration is the struggle by many in the diaspora to convince family and friends in India to abide by basic social distancing and masking protocols.

The problem is twofold and cultural: A certain generational hierarchy means elders are not inclined to heed the advice of their children, grandchildren or outsiders. And misinformation spreads widely through the same social channels that are vital to coordinating help and bridging the gap across oceans.

"My dad, he was all over the place, and I told him: 'You've got to stay at home, you've got to wear masks,'

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but, you know, they don't listen," said Ankur Chandra, 38, a New York-based consultant whose father is now recovering from COVID-19, alone in an apartment in India's national capital region of Gurugram.

Shivani Nath, a Manhattan-based interior designer for hotels who was born and raised in New Delhi, offended relatives when she expressed horror instead of congratulations at pictures of a "complete five-day, traditional Indian Hindu wedding" in the family — no masks in sight.

"My cousin was like, 'You Americans are so arrogant and look at your own country and you have over 500,000 people who have died.' And she actually told me — she's like, 'Indians have herd immunity. We are born with herd immunity,'" Nath recounted.

Her cousin later apologized, after several wedding attendees were diagnosed with COVID-19.

Vijaya Subrahmanyam, 58, typically travels to India every six months to see her family, including her older sister and 91-year-old mother in Hyderabad, in the southern state of Telangana. Because of the pandemic, she hasn't been back in almost two years, and her summer plans to visit were scrapped at her own mother's advisement.

The same week that the Atlanta-based college professor received her second dose of the vaccine, her mother and sister both tested positive for COVID-19. Her mother had not left her home, but her sister took a two-minute diversion to the mall to purchase a handbag after picking up some medicine, and that's where Subrahmanyam suspects she got infected.

"Initially, we were like, 'What's wrong with you?'" she said. But Subrahmanyam realized her sister probably felt worse about it than anyone else — and recognized that she was the one still in India, tasked with taking care of their mother.

Some of those who feel similarly helpless are channeling their energies into mutual aid projects.

Anand Chaturvedi, 23, is from Mumbai but now works in New York. Coming from a tech background, he volunteered to help the same websites he himself has used, including an open-source site that helps search for virus-related resources.

In Seattle, Sanjay Jejurikar, 58, is leveraging his connections and using his familiarity with India to connect people to assistance, everyone from a 75-year-old mentor to young employees of his India-based education technology startup.

"In India, things are a little bit chaotic, right?" said Jejurikar, whose mother died of COVID-19 in July in India. "I mean, on one hand, they're very bureaucratic and rule-based, and all that stuff, which is good. But on the other hand, quite a few people are left on their own devices, like they don't have any support."

After losing her grandmother to COVID-19 at the start of the pandemic, 23-year-old Farheen Ali, a grad student from Texas, moved back to Hyderabad in August to help her parents.

Having experienced a pandemic peak and a Ramadan in each country, Ali thinks one of the biggest differences is the confidence she had that "it won't get that bad or the system won't break as bad" in the U.S. She also believes she would have been vaccinated by this point if she had stayed in Texas.

While she doesn't necessarily regret coming to India, the embers of hope are dying out: "I don't think there's any trust in the government or the public that they're going to try to get this down because I still know people that don't want to take the vaccine because of stupid WhatsApp messages or don't believe that corona is still a thing, even though people are dying at this rate."

Biden's agenda: What can pass and what faces steep odds

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden laid out a long list of policy priorities in his speech to Congress — and some are more politically plausible than others.

The two parties are working together in some areas, including on changes to policing and confronting the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans. But Republicans are likely to block other Democratic initiatives on immigration and voting rights.

On some of Biden's top priorities, Democrats may choose to find ways to cut out Republicans entirely. The president told lawmakers that "doing nothing is not an option" when it comes to his two massive

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infrastructure proposals, which would cost \$4.1 trillion.

A look at what's possible, and what's unlikely, when it comes to action in Congress:

GO IT ALONE?

Biden won an early victory in March when he signed the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package into law. Democrats passed that bill over unanimous Republican opposition, using special budget rules that bypass the Senate filibuster.

While they can't use that tactic on every piece of legislation, Democrats might return to the same procedure for Biden's two signature proposals — his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure jobs plan, which would rebuild roads and bridges, boost broadband access and make other improvements; and his \$1.8 trillion families plan, which would expand preschool and college opportunities, create a national family and medical leave program, distribute child care subsidies and make other similar investments.

Republicans have proposed a much smaller \$568 billion infrastructure package, and both sides have shown a willingness to negotiate. But their differences are broad — including on how they would pay for the plans and whether to raise taxes — and Democrats are intent on passing a major infrastructure boost this year, with or without GOP support.

"We've talked about it long enough — Democrats and Republicans," Biden said in his speech. "Let's get it done this year."

GO IT TOGETHER?

Democrats and Republicans have fallen out of the habit of working together, as President Donald Trump's tenure was mostly dominated by partisan division. But they have edged a bit closer to bipartisanship on some topics since Biden took office, including on police reform, gun control and efforts to reduce violence against women.

All of those bills are still heavy lifts in the evenly divided, 50-50 Senate. But negotiations are underway, and members of both parties have signaled that they want legislation passed.

Both parties say they were encouraged last week by the Senate approval of a bill to combat the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The legislation passed 94-1 after Democratic Sen. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii worked with Republicans to reach a compromise. In his speech, Biden thanked the Senate and urged the House "to do the same and send that legislation to my desk as soon as possible."

Compromise on the other bills, such as the policing overhaul, will not come as easily. Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina is negotiating with Democrats to change some of the nation's policing laws following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year and the conviction this month of the officer who killed him. A Democratic bill passed by the House would allow police officers to be sued, would ban chokeholds and would create national databases of police misconduct. Scott's GOP proposal doesn't go as far but does have some similar provisions.

Democrats have pushed to finish the negotiations by the anniversary of Floyd's death at the end of May, and Biden endorsed that timeline in Wednesday night's speech. But Scott has not made a similar commitment.

Changes to gun laws — long one of the most divisive issues in Congress — could be even more difficult, even though there's widespread public support for some measures. Democrats hope to expand background checks, especially in the wake of several mass shootings in recent weeks. Many Republicans would back an expansion of background checks, as well, but would not go as far as Democratic legislation passed in the House in March. Bipartisan Senate talks have so far failed to yield a compromise.

Senators in both parties have also expressed interest in finding agreement on a House-passed bill that aims to reduce domestic and sexual violence against women, but they have disagreed on provisions in the legislation that could keep guns out of the hands of abusers, among other matters.

Biden introduced the original Violence Against Women Act in June 1990 when serving as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and the legislation has since been passed four times. "It's estimated that more than 50 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner every month in America," Biden said Wednesday. "Pass it and save lives."

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GOING NOWHERE?

The list of long-shot bills on Biden's agenda is much longer.

At the top of that list is Democrats' wide-ranging effort to overhaul U.S. elections, legislation that would create automatic voter registration nationwide, promote early voting, require more disclosure from political donors and restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, among other changes. Senate Republicans are unanimously opposed to the measure, which has already passed the House, arguing it is designed to help Democrats win elections.

Democrats' eagerness to pass the legislation — which Biden said in his speech would "restore the soul of America" by protecting the sacred right to vote — could eventually prompt them to change filibuster rules in the Senate. But the party is not yet united on such a move, and a decision isn't expected soon.

Immigration is another intractable matter.

The Democratic-led House approved a pair of bills creating a pathway to citizenship for young "Dreamers" in the U.S. since childhood, immigrants who fled wars or natural disasters, and migrant farm workers. Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., have introduced legislation giving "Dreamers" a chance for citizenship, and there have been some bipartisan talks among senators.

But Republicans have latched onto the huge numbers of migrants seeking to cross the southwest border as a fertile campaign issue. And many in the GOP are demanding tough border security restrictions as their price for cooperation.

Several other policy priorities appear stalled, for now, including legislation to enshrine LGBTQ protections in the nation's labor and civil rights laws and bills to protect unions and raise the minimum wage.

NFL draft: No suspense as 3 QBs dominate early picks

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

The themes for the 2021 NFL draft were many, starting with the quarterbacks.

Then, of course, was an actual live draft with players and fans on hand.

And there was Alabama dominating the selections the way it overpowered college football, carrying its conference with it.

No suspense at the top: quarterback, quarterback and, yep, quarterback.

With Commissioner Roger Goodell dispensing greetings to players Thursday night, Clemson's Trevor Lawrence went to the Jacksonville Jaguars to get things started. Next was BYU's Zach Wilson going to the New York Jets, and North Dakota State's Trey Lance landing with the San Francisco 49ers.

That matched 1971 (Jim Plunkett, Archie Manning, Dan Pastorini) and 1999 (Tim Couch, Donovan McNabb, Akili Smith) as the only drafts with quarterbacks taken with the top three picks. Only Plunkett won a Super Bowl among those QBs, and he didn't do it with New England, which drafted him.

Two more passers went in the top 15: Ohio State's Justin Fields to Chicago, which traded up to the 11th slot with the Giants, and Alabama's Mac Jones to New England.

Lawrence, a junior who led Clemson to a national title, generally is considered the best prospect at the position since Andrew Luck in 2012. He joins new coach Urban Meyer, himself a major success in the college ranks, in trying to turn around a franchise that went 1-15 last season.

"I'm just pumped," Lawrence said. "The best is yet to come.

"I don't what the point is ... if you don't expect to win every week. I'm going to bring the same mindset."

The mindset in Cleveland was positive simply because there were 12 prospects (not Lawrence) and thousands of fans — including, according to the league, fully vaccinated folks near the stage — joining Goodell on the shore of Lake Erie. Last year's draft, scheduled for Las Vegas, was instead a totally remote affair because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perhaps emboldened by successfully finishing the 2020 season on time and then staging the playoffs and Super Bowl without a hitch during the pandemic, the NFL targeted the draft as an opportunity to embrace some normalcy in America's biggest sport. It also has used the event to support vaccinations for COVID-19 and, for the second consecutive spring, as a Draft-a-Thon raising money for a variety of causes.

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Goodell received plenty of kudos for his hosting of last year's draft in casual wear from his home. On Thursday night, dressed in a suit, he lauded the folks who sit in the seats.

"We all agree over the past season, one thing we missed the most was all our fans," Goodell said. "And we can't wait to have all of you back in First Energy Stadium and every stadium across the league this season."

Wilson was expected to go to New York, which hasn't had a franchise QB since Joe Namath and traded incumbent Sam Darnold to Carolina this month to clear a path for Wilson.

"When a team isn't doing super well and you can go in there and actually be a key piece to actually flip that organization around, I think that's so special," Wilson said. "I'm so excited, along with this new coaching staff, to go in there and try and do the best that we can to flip this thing around."

Lance was something of a surprise at No. 3. He played only 17 games for his FCS school, but his off-season workouts sold San Francisco.

"It was awesome getting to know coach Shanahan a little bit," Lance said. "He is an awesome dude and what he has done on the field speaks for itself."

Florida tight end Kyle Pitts, considered by many the best athlete in this draft, went fourth to Atlanta, followed by wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase of LSU, who sat out last season, to Cincinnati. The first player from Alabama off the board, on the Crimson Tide's way to tying a first-round record, was wideout Jaylen Waddle to Miami, where he will be reunited with quarterback Tua Tagovailoa.

"J-Dub. Yessir!" Tagovailoa said with a laugh.

"We're going to do our best to try to make plays," Waddle said, "and hopefully we can make it happen and try to be part of something special."

The first offensive lineman was tackle Penei Sewell of Oregon, taken by Detroit.

The SEC and, naturally, the Crimson Tide, were particularly popular. Of the six SEC players chosen in the top 10, three were from Alabama: Waddle, cornerback Patrick Surtain II to Denver, and Heisman Trophy-winning receiver DeVonta Smith to Philadelphia, which traded up with division rival Dallas, of all teams. The others were Pitts, Chase and cornerback Jaycee Horn of South Carolina to the Panthers.

By the 17th slot, Alabama had five players chosen, with tackle Alex Leatherwood headed to Las Vegas. And when running back Najee Harris was selected by Pittsburgh, the Tide had, uh, tied the Miami Hurricanes' mark of six first-rounders set in 2004.

The SEC finished with 12 first-rounders.

After the Eagles-Cowboys deal, Chicago moved up from No. 20 and thrilled its fans by choosing Fields.

"I feel like I know myself, I know how much work I've put in the game," Fields said. "I know how much I love the game. I know how much I want to be great. It just comes a point in time when you have to cut all that criticism out."

Dallas got some needed defensive help with Penn State linebacker Micah Parsons, and a third straight Big Ten player went 13th when the Chargers took Northwestern tackle Rashawn Slater. Offensive Rookie of the Year Justin Herbert has to be smiling at the added protection he will receive.

The Jets became the first club with a second selection when they traded up from No. 23 to Minnesota's 14th spot for USC offensive lineman Alijah Vera-Tucker. He played tackle for the Trojans, but figures to switch to guard in the pros.

The first school other than 'Bama with more than one player chosen was Florida when wideout Kadarius Toney wound up with the Giants 16 spots after Pitts went fourth. Virginia Tech joined that group with cornerback Caleb Farley at No. 22 to Tennessee and teammate Christian Darrisaw, a tackle taken by Minnesota. Both fit major needs.

So did Harris to the Steelers, who traditionally have been a run-oriented team, but not recently.

For the first time in school history, Northwestern had more than one first-rounder when the Chargers' Slater was joined in the NFL by cornerback Greg Newsome to the Browns.

In all, 18 offensive players were taken, including the first seven. The final five were on defense for a total of 14.

Rounds 2 and 3 will be held Friday night next to the Browns' stadium and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Texas special election poses test for anti-Trump Republicans

By STEVE PEOPLES and PAUL WEBER Associated Press

MANSFIELD, Texas (AP) — Adam Kinzinger came to Texas this week to hunt unicorns.

The Illinois congressman was looking for Republicans who, like him, see former President Donald Trump as a scourge on their party and a threat to democracy. Kinzinger met privately with one sympathetic Republican, former President George W. Bush, on his first day in the state. And on the second, he had lunch with Michael Wood, the only openly anti-Trump Republican competing on Saturday in a crowded special election for a seat in Congress.

Kinzinger, a 43-year-old Air Force pilot who flew missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, is positioning himself as a leading antagonist to Trump in a party that is largely refusing to move on from the former president. The congressman's nascent political organization, Country First, has endorsed every House Republican who voted to impeach Trump for inciting the deadly Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. And as Kinzinger eyes a potential run for higher office himself, he came to Texas to test how many other Republicans share his outlook.

Kinzinger's hope lies in Wood, another fresh-faced combat veteran, who is fighting to stand out in a field of 23. If none of the candidates on Saturday's ballot earns 50% of the vote, the top two will compete in a runoff election later in the spring.

"The Trump thing, it's got nowhere to go but down. It's not growing," Kinzinger said during his lunch with Wood at the Fork in the Road cafe in the Dallas suburbs. "But it took a lot of time for the Republican Party to be what it is today. It may take a lot of time to bring it back."

The contest to replace Republican Rep. Ron Wright, who died of COVID-19 in February, has gone virtually unnoticed outside this north Texas district. But it offers a window into the forces tearing at the fabric of today's GOP. There are 10 Republicans among 23 candidates on the ballot, and with the exception of Wood, they are all desperate to win over Trump and his supporters.

Republican Brian Harrison, former chief of staff of the Department of Health and Human Services, has played up his role in the Trump administration. So, too, has Sery Kim, who worked in the Small Business Administration and directly implored Trump for his endorsement during an appearance on Newsmax, where she gave out her phone number. Dan Rodimer, a former professional wrestler, has flashed the endorsement Trump gave him last year during a failed run for a congressional seat in Nevada. His new slogan: "Make America Texas Again."

Trump waited until five days before Election Day to give his formal endorsement to the congressman's widow, Susan Wright, who is widely seen as a favorite.

Trump's team scoffed at Wood's chances and Kinzinger's broader ambitions.

In his campaign to reject Trumpism, the Illinois congressman is outmatched by every measurable metric. Polls suggest that as many as 8 in 10 Republicans continue to support Trump. And while Kinzinger's political team celebrated raising \$2.2 million last quarter, Trump's political operation is sitting on at least \$85 million.

When asked about Kinzinger, Trump spokesperson Jason Miller dismissed him as "a future MSNBC contributor."

Yet Wood has also drawn financial and moral support from a handful of other Trump critics in Congress, including Reps. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.; David Valadao, R-Calif.; and Peter Meijer, R-Mich. Like Kinzinger, all three voted to impeach Trump.

Kinzinger said he was drawn to Wood by the 34-year-old former Marine infantry officer's political courage. Wood has been booed at Republican campaign events for saying that the GOP has devolved into a "cult of personality." The first line of campaign literature he hands to voters declares, "The Republican Party has lost its way..."

In an interview, Wood, who earned two Purple Hearts for his service in Afghanistan and now runs a small business, compared Trump to a "less intelligent, lazy and disorganized" autocrat like Roman emperor Julius Caesar. He warned that freedom itself is at risk if Trump and what he stands for aren't soundly rejected.

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"I don't want to go to Congress if I have to lick Donald Trump's boots to get there," he said.

Still, Kinzinger knows more than most just how difficult it will be to persuade Republican voters anywhere — never mind Texas — to turn against Trump. The congressman's political operation recently commissioned polling that found the most sympathetic voters are what one aide called "unicorns" — Republicans who are moderate politically, don't regularly watch Fox News, reject conspiracy theories and are highly educated.

It's a pool of voters Kinzinger needs to grow if his effort will be successful in Texas and beyond as he eyes an aggressive role in the 2022 midterms.

Wood estimated that such voters may represent as many as 35% of those who decide Saturday's special election. Sympathetic strategists suggest the number is probably much lower.

That's not to say there aren't warning signs for Trump and his supporters.

Trump won the north Texas district by double digits in 2016, but by just 3 points last fall, reflecting the trend of Texas' booming suburbs shifting to purple and, in some places, outright blue.

But outside the Mansfield Municipal Courthouse this week, there was little sign of support for Wood among the Republicans waiting in line to cast early ballots. One said Wood was betraying his country; another called him an embarrassment.

"There's no such thing as an anti-Trump Republican. He should find another party," said 71-year-old white retiree Gordon Powell of Mansfield. "I doubt that he could run for dog catcher as a Republican and get elected around here."

Yvette Williams, a 54-year-old African American transplant from California, said she'd consider Wood if she didn't vote for a Democrat. She applauded his effort regardless.

"I'm like, 'Who in the Republican Party can stand up to Trump?' It takes one person to make a difference," she said.

For their part, there are 10 Democrats running in the special election. But after high expectations and heavy spending failed to produce a single significant victory last year, the national party is largely steering clear of the race.

And while many rank-and-file Texas Republicans remain loyal to Trump, Kinzinger has won the respect of one of Texas' most prominent Republican officials.

Kinzinger and his wife met privately with former President Bush and former first lady Laura Bush for roughly an hour Monday evening at Bush's office at Southern Methodist University. Kinzinger said they discussed foreign policy, the support among evangelical Christians for Trump and shared concerns about the direction of the party.

"He's obviously, as he's expressed, concerned with where we're at and knows it's a slog to kind of bring it back," Kinzinger said of Bush. "But it's like, if you don't fight, it's done."

A Bush spokesperson declined to comment on the meeting.

Meanwhile, Wood said it's past time for more people in his party's leadership to stand up to Trump publicly.

"I hope that, win or lose, I at least show the rest of the country there are people willing to stand up and say these things. Frankly, I'm a little upset it's someone like me who's saying them. It should be shouted from the rooftop by leaders in the House, Republicans in Senate, Republicans across the country."

Census Bureau: 70% of voters cast ballots early or by mail

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — More than two-thirds of all U.S. citizens of the voting age population participated in the 2020 presidential election, according to a new U.S. Census Bureau report, and 69% of those cast ballots by mail or early in-person voting — methods that Republicans in some states are curtailing.

That's an explosion in the use of mail and early voting compared to four years earlier, when just 40% of voters cast ballots that way. The change was in part a result of the pandemic, which prompted health officials to urge voters to stay away from crowded in-person polling places.

The figures are part of a Census Bureau survey of voters, released Thursday, that offers new details about the extraordinary turnout in the 2020 presidential race between Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. In some experts' estimates, the election posted the highest turnout rate since 1900,

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before women had the right to vote.

Trump pointed to the high mail voting and early voting numbers to suggest that the election was rife with fraud and irregularities. Those false claims are now driving a GOP effort in several states to make mail voting harder and to trim the number of early voting days.

The Census Bureau survey found turnout rose the most among Latinos, up 6.1 percentage points, and white voters, who saw a 5.6 percentage point increase from 2016. Black voters saw the smallest increase, with their turnout rate rising 3.2 percentage points over four years ago.

While 63% of African Americans voted, that rate did not match the record high of 65% that cast ballots in 2008, when the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, was first elected. In 2020, 71% of white citizens and 59% of Latino citizens voted, the Census Bureau found.

White people made up 71% of the people who voted, a 2% drop from four years earlier. Still, because white voters are the demographic with the highest rate of turnout, they had disproportionate power in the election — they are only 67% of U.S. citizens 18 and older, according to the Census.

The Census Bureau estimates confirm what many election analysts have long known about the 2020 turnout surge.

"We knew it was a high-turnout election and the Census is finding something similar," said Michael McDonald, a political science professor at the University of Florida who runs ElectProject.org, which tracks turnout back to the 18th century.

McDonald found the 2020 election featured the highest turnout since 1900, while the Census Bureau reports a higher turnout rate as recently as the 1992 presidential election. The Census' turnout estimates are based on a survey with a margin of error, while McDonald uses the numbers of votes cast, which accounts for some of the discrepancy.

The Census did find that the 2020 election featured the largest increase in voting between two presidential elections, with 17 million more people voting on whether to reelect Trump than the number who voted whether to make him president in 2016.

'I'm still exhaling': Swing-state voters on Biden's 100 days

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

ELM GROVE, Wis. (AP) — Standing on the sidelines of her son's soccer practice in this upscale suburb, Laura Hahn looked skyward for answers when asked how she would rate President Joe Biden's first 100 days in office.

Overall, Biden is doing well, she said after a few minutes of thought. But she acknowledged her judgment is as much a feeling of relief as an analysis of accomplishments.

"I'm still exhaling," Hahn said, referencing the tumultuous tenure of President Donald Trump. "It's been exhausting."

At the 100-day marker, polls show most Americans are like Hahn, giving the new president positive marks for his early performance.

But in this pocket of swing-state Wisconsin, where a surge in suburban Milwaukee helped put Biden in the White House, interviews with voters show that support for the Democratic president often falls short of adulation. Biden continues to get credit for bringing stability to the coronavirus crisis — and for not being Trump — but there are signs that goodwill only goes so far.

As voters here start to look past the pandemic, some worry about Biden's tax proposals to pay for massive spending plans and their impact on the economy. Some Democrats are disappointed Biden has not yet taken action on social priorities such as a policing overhaul. There are scant signs that Republicans were won over; several accused Biden of using a public health crisis to push a liberal agenda.

Despite these concerns, many voters said they were just enjoying the reprieve from the jaw-dropping headlines of the Trump era, now that Biden is in the White House.

"I'm not surprised or shocked by anything he's done," said Jana Elkadri, a 40-year-old chief financial officer for a nonprofit group, as she watched the soccer practice from the parking lot.

Biden's handling of pandemic has been strong, she said, although she worries he's a tad optimistic. She

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supports his proposed big spending on social programs, but wishes he had have pressed for universal health care. All in all, she said. "So far, OK."

This village of about 6,000 is hardly representative of America. It is whiter and wealthier than most communities and has a larger population of residents with college degrees. But it is places like this where Biden found a swell of support that helped him carry the pivotal trio of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. This suburban lift is something Democrats will need to continue if they want to hold control of the U.S. House next year or the White House in 2024.

Women such as Hahn and Elkadri were an important part of Biden's strength in the suburbs. Hahn is a full-time financial consultant and married mother of two young children who lives in adjacent Brookfield. She said she keeps up with headlines, but has had little time to thoroughly process all of Biden's earliest moves.

She was particularly pleased by Biden's plans to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan. When she read the news, she was floored at the reminder that troops were deployed there the year after she graduated high school. "If we haven't fixed anything in 20 years, bring them home," she said.

Hahn isn't the only one having trouble keeping track of Biden's initiatives, which include a barrage of executive actions revoking many of his predecessor's policies on immigration and the environment. In February, the narrowly Democratic-controlled Congress passed Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, with its \$1,400 checks for millions of Americans.

Biden has since proposed an additional \$4-plus trillion in spending, including a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan to upgrade highways, bridges and tunnels, as well as energy systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and a \$1.8 trillion proposal for free preschool, family leave, child tax credits and other family and education programs.

For some in Elm Grove, particularly Republicans, Biden's "go-big" approach wasn't expected.

"The November election wasn't a mandate for this kind of sweeping change," said former state Rep. Rob Hutton, a Republican who lost his seat representing Elm Grove and Brookfield in November.

Yet for some Democrats, Biden isn't thinking big enough, particularly on some issues that were fundamental to his candidacy.

Chris Alexander, a Democrat moved with his wife to nearby Wauwatosa two years ago, said Biden "is doing an OK job," but hasn't been aggressive enough about action on stemming police violence against Black people.

Biden declared in a speech to Congress on Wednesday night that "we have to come together" to root out systemic racism in policing. It was an echo of his remarks last week after ex-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder conviction in the death of George Floyd. Although he has not endorsed a specific policing plan, the president called on Congress to pass one by May 25, the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death.

"Nothing's still been done," Alexander said of Biden's new goal. "We can talk about what we want until we're blue in the face. But if nothing is put in place, what happens in the weeks leading up, when people continue to go through police brutality? I still feel as if he hasn't done anything on that front."

Alexander is part of a political shift sweeping through the once Republican-dominant suburbs of Milwaukee, including the village of Elm Grove. Families have poured across the Milwaukee County line seeking its enviable schools and stately homes, many done in Milwaukee's signature "Cream City" limestone brick.

Health care professionals and medical business representatives have replaced executives with the Milwaukee area's once-thriving farm machinery sector. The economic draw, a mile away, is the state's largest medical complex, anchored by Froedtert Hospital, Milwaukee Children's Hospital and the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Elkadri and her husband, who are of Lebanese descent, are among the increasing number of Muslims in the area. Many attend a mosque built four years ago, not far from a Sikh temple that once housed Wisconsin's largest evangelical megachurch in Brookfield.

Just blocks from Elm Grove's quiet downtown — once a train stop, now shops and an upscale grocery

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store — sits a park where purebreds vastly outnumber mutts on the walking trail. The police station keeps watch on one end.

No Democrat has come close to winning Waukesha County. President Barack Obama won just 32% of the vote here in 2012, when he was reelected. But Biden received almost 40%, more than any of his party's predecessors. He even nearly tied Trump in the village of Elm Grove, where Obama won just 30% of the vote eight years ago.

In all, Biden pulled 7,500 more votes out of Waukesha County than did Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton did in 2016. That was a good chunk of his 20,682-vote winning margin in Wisconsin last year.

Biden's Wisconsin victory was also powered by overwhelming turnout in liberal Madison and strong performance in Democratic-heavy Milwaukee. Similar boosts over 2016 in Detroit and Atlanta helped carry Biden over the line in Michigan and Georgia.

In the 2022 fight for control of the U.S. House, these suburban areas will be critical. Of the 47 Democratic seats Republicans are targeting, more than two-thirds are in suburban districts.

In a late March Associated Press-NORC poll, 65% percent of Americans living in suburban areas approved of Biden's job performance, a figure on par with Biden's approval with Americans overall. The poll found only one-quarter of Republicans approve of his early days in office.

Republican Neil Palmer, Elm Grove's longtime village president, counts himself among the disapprovers. He's frustrated by Biden's moves on immigration and called the increase of migrants trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border a "self-inflicted crisis."

Like many other Republicans, Palmer chafed at the price tag on the spending Biden has proposed, and predicted higher taxes would slow an economic rebound.

"I not only have children, but grandchildren and they can't afford this government," the 70-year-old said. Yet as the area changes, Palmer's view on government's role is less dominant.

On a quiet cul-de-sac, 35-year-old lawyer Patrick Proctor Brown applauded Biden's infrastructure plan, not simply as overdue, but as a potential economic boon akin to the interstate highway system enacted in 1956.

The married father of three wanted Biden to be just as bold on taxes and was disappointed when the Democrat walked away from a proposal to tax fortunes greater than \$50 million.

"Billionaires who have doubled their wealth in the last year, they are not going to have to pay for that at some point?" Brown asked.

Several parents who rate Biden positively said they wish he would have already confronted more directly gun violence.

Katie Rasoul, a 38-year-old leadership coach in Brookfield with two children, said she is "pleased, all things considered" with Biden, but would like him to press harder for a gun control bill.

"We've had so many things happen around gun violence," Rasoul said. "It cannot be ignored."

The White House says it is working with congressional leaders behind the scenes on a gun measure.

While Biden's supporters here say they are relieved with what they call decency returning to the White House, Elkadri said it will take more for Biden to be viewed as a successful president. When her son recently asked whether she thought Biden was doing a good job, she said it was too soon to know.

"I told him it would be up to his generation to judge," she said.

Disneyland opening highlights California's COVID turnaround

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — Four months ago, America's most populous state was struggling to combat a surge in coronavirus hospitalizations that packed patients into outdoor tents and killed hundreds of people each day.

On Friday, Disneyland, California's world-famous theme park, will reopen to visitors after an unprecedented 13-month closure in what tourism officials hope is a sign of the state's rebound from the pandemic. For now, the park is allowing only in-state visitors and operating at limited capacity.

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"It has such a symbolic nature to really quantifying that we're finally rolling out of COVID," said Caroline Beteta, president and CEO of the state tourism agency Visit California.

The news comes as California boasts the country's lowest rate of confirmed coronavirus infections and more than half of the population eligible for vaccination has received at least one dose of the shots. It's a dramatic turnaround from December, when hospitals across the state were running out of ICU beds and treating patients at overflow locations.

Now, children are returning to school, shops and restaurants are expanding business, and Gov. Gavin Newsom set June 15 as a target date to further reopen the economy, albeit with some health-related restrictions.

Theme parks were among the last businesses allowed to reopen in California, and Universal Studios and others have already thrown open the gates. That's a contrast to states with fewer restrictions such as Florida, where Disney World's Magic Kingdom resort has been up and running, though at lower-than-usual capacity, since last July.

Another major U.S. amusement park, Ohio's Cedar Point, opened last summer and will do so again for the upcoming season — only this time, it won't require masks on rides or outdoors where crowds can be avoided.

While California continues to "strongly discourage" anyone from visiting the state as tourists, the travel industry is banking on pent-up demand from its own 40 million residents for a comeback. An advertising campaign encourages Californians to travel within the state, mirroring a pitch made after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"We're back to that playbook," Beteta said. "It was very successful for us then, and we're hoping it will be for us now."

Disneyland is a major economic engine in California, drawing nearly 19 million in attendance the year before the coronavirus struck, according to the Themed Entertainment Association. It and other such attractions were shuttered in March 2020 as Newsom imposed the nation's first statewide shutdown order.

The park and neighboring Disney California Adventure will reopen with a capacity that is currently capped at 25% under state health rules. Reservations are required, hugs and handshakes with Mickey and other characters are off limits, and the famous parades and fireworks shows have been shelved to limit crowding.

California currently allows state residents and fully vaccinated out-of-state visitors to attend theme parks. The state could open its economy more fully on June 15 provided vaccine supply is sufficient and hospitalizations remain stable and low.

But in a state with so many people shut in for so long, even in-state tourism could be a huge boost. Plus, Disney's California parks have long had a loyal local fan base while its Florida locations rely more heavily on international tourists, said Carissa Baker, assistant professor of theme park and attraction management at University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

"When they reopen, they're probably going to be pretty instantly at whatever the allowable capacity is just because there's so many locals who go to the California parks," Baker said.

Zach Bolger, 35, is among them. Before the closure, he took the half-hour drive down from Los Angeles County two or three times a week with his girlfriend, whom he met trading collectible pins at Disneyland.

"Just walking down Main Street and looking at the bricks on Main Street and looking at the stores or up at Walt's window with the candle in it, all those things bring us a lot of happiness," said Bolger, who has opening tickets for the park. "We're definitely looking forward to the rides, but if Disneyland opened up and said, 'All rides are closed, you can only walk around,' we still would have bought tickets."

The reopening is also good news for theme park employees eager to get back to work and owners of hotels and shops in the surrounding city of Anaheim, which is running a \$109 million deficit due to pandemic-related closures, said Mike Lyster, a city spokesman.

Visit Anaheim President Jay Burress said the city's convention center saw more than 300 cancellations since the pandemic and so far has rebooked about a quarter. Some events might not be due to return to the West Coast for years or could get moved to states with fewer restrictions, Burress said, but added he

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believes the reopening of Disneyland and other attractions is promising.

"We're not out of the woods, but at least we're seeing some light for future," he said.

Disneyland is expected to reopen popular rides such as Space Mountain and Dumbo the Flying Elephant. But there will be changes to the park, with masks required and no live theater performances scheduled. This is how Disney started out at its Florida theme park and gradually phased back in entertainment, Baker said.

Earlier this week, Disneyland lit up its hallmark Sleeping Beauty castle and released a video tribute to employees. "There's a great big beautiful tomorrow ahead for all of us," said Ken Potrock, president of Disneyland Resort.

Brazil backs away from the virus brink, but remains at risk

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — For most of this month, intensive care units across Brazil were at or near capacity amid a crush of COVID-19 patients, and sedatives needed to intubate patients dwindled. The nation's biggest cemetery had so many corpses to bury that gravediggers worked hours past sundown.

But Brazil has stepped back from the edge — at least for now — as burial and hospital services no longer face collapse. It has ceased to be the virus' global epicenter, as its death toll ebbed and was overtaken by India's surge. Experts warn, however, that the situation remains precarious, and caution is warranted.

The number of states with ICU capacity above 90% has slipped to 10, from 17 a month ago, according to data from the state-run Fiocruz medical research institute. And nighttime burials at Vila Formosa and three other cemeteries in Sao Paulo were suspended Thursday, after two weeks of declining deaths.

That comes as cold comfort in a country where some 2,400 people died every day over the past week, more than triple the number in the U.S. Brazil surpassed the grim milestone of 400,000 confirmed deaths on Thursday — a number considered by experts to be a significant undercount, in part because many cases were overlooked, especially early in the pandemic. The seven-day average has retreated from more than 3,100 deaths in mid-April, but Fiocruz warned in a bulletin Wednesday that it may plateau — and at an even higher level than it did last year.

"Our goal now is to make the numbers keep going down instead of stabilizing. That's the most crucial thing," said Pedro Hallal, an epidemiologist and coordinator of Brazil's largest COVID-19 testing program. "It's good that they're going down, but let's not assume that this will be the last wave. There is hope that it will be the last wave, because of the vaccine, but that needs to be confirmed."

Given the slow vaccine rollout, there are millions more Brazilians vulnerable to infection, Hallal added, and the threshold scientists believe is needed to stop uncontrolled spread — 70% or higher of the population with immunity through vaccination or past infection — remains distant.

Brazil's death toll of 401,186 is the world's second-highest, with the majority recorded in just the last four months as a more contagious variant swept the nation. In the thick of the Southern Hemisphere's summer, crowds gathered and people boarded public transport in droves as mayors and governors relaxed the restrictions on activity that Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro fervently opposes.

Some mayors and governors tightened such measures over the last month, helping to revert the surge of infections, Fiocruz said. However, they have begun reopening again amid the early, encouraging data.

Valter Gomes, a 33-year-old textile worker in central Sao Paulo, has noted more people riding trains and reopening shops.

"Often the pandemic gets worse because a lot of people who have the opportunity to stay home don't. They go out instead," he said. "If everyone contributed, I don't think there would be such a big crisis of having to stop work, having these lockdowns."

Researchers at Imperial College London this week said Brazil's transmission rate has reached its lowest rate in months.

But the rate remains high, said Domingos Alves, an epidemiologist tracking COVID-19 data, and he argues it's too soon to roll back restrictions. Brazil risks repeating the errors of European countries that have seen

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third surges, because the country's decline in infections isn't yet sustained, he said.

"The situation in all Brazilian states requires adoption of more drastic measures to contain the virus," said Alves, an adjunct professor of social medicine at the University of Sao Paulo. "The number of cases is very high and we aren't doing anything to contain the virus."

Brazil's number of confirmed cases is widely believed to be an undercount, and the virus is also gaining ground among its neighbors. The ICUs in Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, have been pushed to critical levels. Peru, Venezuela, Uruguay and Colombia have seen cases jump in recent weeks. Health experts have cited the circulation of variants, including a strain believed to have originated in Brazil's Amazon, as a contributing factor.

"It's no surprise that many countries in our region have tightened public health measures by extending curfews, limiting re-openings and imposing new stay-at-home orders," said Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization. "These decisions are never easy, but based on how infections are surging, this is exactly what needs to happen."

Such recommendations remain anathema to Bolsonaro; last weekend he called lockdown measures "absurd" and suggested he could order the army into the streets to restore order.

The president has consistently downplayed the disease and dispensed false hope by touting unproven drugs, which critics say only added to the nation's death toll. This week the Senate began an investigation into the government's alleged failures in managing the pandemic.

The troubled response has been reflected in health minister turnover; the fourth man to occupy the post during the pandemic, Dr. Marcelo Queiroga, took over last month. He has spoken of the need to boost vaccine supply, personally consults with scientists and has so far displayed the autonomy to promote mask use and social distancing. That marks a shift from his predecessor, an active-duty general who made explicit his deference to Bolsonaro's wishes on health policy.

Queiroga told reporters this week that the decrease in hospitalizations has eased demand for oxygen and sedatives for intubation. Stopgap donations from big businesses and the governments of Canada and Spain also shored up supply. The Health Ministry is also preparing a tender for the acquisition of more sedatives.

The minister has stopped short of embracing public health experts' calls for lockdowns and restrictions on activity, and hasn't ruled out use of drugs that rigorous testing has shown to be ineffective. But he is showing recognition that Brazil isn't yet free and clear.

"We are still in a very serious moment of the pandemic," Queiroga said. "Deaths are falling, but there are still a very high number." ___ AP videojournalist Tatiana Pollastri contributed from Sao Paulo

Stampede at Israeli religious festival kills nearly 40

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A stampede broke out early Friday at a Jewish religious festival attended by tens of thousands of people in northern Israel, killing nearly 40 people and leaving some 150 hospitalized, medical officials said.

The stampede, one of the deadliest civilian disasters in Israeli history, occurred during the celebrations of Lag BaOmer at Mount Meron. Tens of thousands of people, mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews, gather each year to honor Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a 2nd century sage and mystic who is buried there. Large crowds traditionally light bonfires, pray and dance as part of the celebrations.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a "great tragedy," and said everyone was praying for the victims.

Media estimated the crowd at about 100,000 people.

Eli Beer, director of the Hatzalah rescue service, said he was horrified by how crowded the event was, saying the site was equipped to handle perhaps a quarter of the number who were there.

"Close to 40 people died as a result of this tragedy," he told the station.

The incident happened after midnight, and the cause of the stampede was not immediately clear. Videos circulating on social media showed large numbers of ultra-Orthodox Jews packed together in tight spaces.

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A 24-year-old witness, identified only by his first name Dvir, told the Army Radio station that "masses of people were pushed into the same corner and a vortex was created." He said a first row of people fell down, and then a second row, where he was standing, also began to fall down from the pressure of the stampede.

"I felt like I was about to die," he said.

Zaki Heller, spokesman for the Magen David Adom rescue service, said 150 people had been hospitalized, several dozen in serious or critical condition. Army Radio, citing anonymous medical officials, said the death toll had risen to 44.

That would match the death toll of a 2010 forest fire, which is believed to be the deadliest civilian tragedy in the country's history.

Heller told the station "no one had ever dreamed" something like this could happen. "In one moment, we went from a happy event to an immense tragedy," he said.

Photos from the scene showed rows of wrapped bodies.

The Israeli military said it had dispatched medics and search and rescue teams along with helicopters to assist with a "mass casualty incident" in the area. It did not provide details on the nature of the disaster.

It was the first huge religious gathering to be held legally since Israel lifted nearly all restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic. The country has seen cases plummet since launching one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns late last year.

Health authorities had nevertheless warned against holding such a large gathering.

But when the celebrations started, the Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, police chief Yaakov Shabtai and other top officials visited the event and met with police, who had deployed 5,000 extra forces to maintain order.

Ohana, a close ally of Netanyahu, thanked police for their hard work and dedication "for protecting the well-being and security for the many participants" as he wished the country a happy holiday.

Netanyahu is struggling to form a governing coalition ahead of a Tuesday deadline, and the national tragedy is sure to complicate those efforts.

Rudy Giuliani defiant, a day after FBI raid of home, office

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Rudy Giuliani sought to discredit the federal investigation into his dealings in Ukraine on Thursday, a day after agents raided his home and office.

Giuliani said the 6 a.m. search, which he said involved seven FBI agents, was unnecessary because he offered for two years to provide federal prosecutors his electronic devices and to "talk it over with them."

"They won't explain to me what they're looking into for two years," Giuliani said in an evening appearance on Tucker Carlson Tonight.

Giuliani's lawyer, Robert Costello, has previously said proposed meetings between investigators and Giuliani's legal team didn't take place because prosecutors wouldn't agree to a precondition that they first disclose more about the probe.

It would be rare for prosecutors to give up detailed information to a potential criminal defendant before charges are filed, or to rely on that person to voluntarily produce electronic files thought to contain incriminating evidence.

The federal probe is examining Giuliani's interactions with Ukrainian figures and whether he violated a federal law that governs lobbying on behalf of foreign countries or entities.

Giuliani, the Republican former mayor of New York City, has insisted that all of his activities in Ukraine were conducted on behalf of former President Donald Trump. At the time, Giuliani was leading a campaign to press Ukraine for an investigation into President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter.

But some Ukrainians who were in contact with Giuliani have said in interviews that they also hoped he could help them on matters in the U.S., including arranging meetings with the U.S. attorney general and ousting the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch.

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The search warrants for Giuliani's electronic devices were approved by a federal judge. The agents who banged on his door this week took "seven or eight electronic items of mine and two of someone else's," Giuliani said.

Giuliani said Thursday that federal prosecutors told his attorney they had accessed materials from his iCloud as early as 2019.

"In the middle of the impeachment defense, they invaded, without telling me, my iCloud," he told Carlson, without providing details.

Earlier in the day, Giuliani made his first public comments since the raid on his daily talk show on WABC Radio. On the air, he referred to prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, which he used to run, as unaccomplished "bullies."

"You're not going to stop me," he said on the program. "And you're not going to convict me of some phony crime."

He then ticked off a list of his own accomplishments as the U.S. attorney in Manhattan in the 1980s, including prosecutions of mob figures and Wall Street fraudsters, and bashed the current prosecution team as having done nothing comparable.

"What have they done? Nothing, except come after me ... at six o'clock in the morning with a piece of nonsense. No wonder they're jealous," Giuliani said.

The U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan declined to comment.

In the decades since Giuliani left, the office has handled some of the nation's most high-profile prosecutions, convicting global drug traffickers, corrupt politicians, Wall Street scammers and terrorists including the men behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday on CNN that the White House was given no heads' up on the fact the raid was coming. The Justice Department, she said, "is independent now. They're gonna make their own decisions, take their own actions. That's how the president wants it."

Trump told Fox Business on Thursday that Giuliani was "the greatest mayor in the history of New York" and "a great patriot."

"It's very, very unfair," he said of what happened Wednesday. "Rudy loves this country so much, it is so terrible when you see things that are going on in our country with the corruption and the problems and then they go after Rudy Giuliani."

Water bill may open spigot for Biden infrastructure plan

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rarely has a routine water resources bill generated so much political buzz, but as senators hoisted the measure to passage Thursday the bipartisan infrastructure legislation served as a potential template for building consensus around President Joe Biden's ambitious American Jobs Plan.

The Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Act of 2021 authorizes about \$35 billion over five years to improve leaky pipes and upgrade facilities, and is widely supported by lawmakers and their states back home. This time, though, it could be so much more — a building block in Biden's broader \$2.3 trillion proposal to invest in roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

Senators overwhelmingly approved the measure, 89-2, in what Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., called "a great example" of what's possible in Congress.

Still, the day after Biden's address to a joint session of Congress outlining his sweeping proposals to reinvest in America infrastructure the path ahead is expected to be long and politically daunting.

With Congress essentially split, and Democrats holding only slim majorities in the House and Senate, Biden and the congressional leaders will soon have to decide how they plan to muscle his priority legislation into law.

The White House is reaching out to Republicans, as Biden courts GOP lawmakers for their input on the package and to win over their votes.

Biden spoke by phone Thursday with Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., a leader on the water bill who

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is also working on a Republican alternative to Biden's infrastructure plan.

They had a warm, friendly conversation, reiterating their willingness to negotiate, the White House said. They also discussed having another potential in-person meeting in the near future.

"We both expressed our mutual desire to work together and find common ground," said Capito, the top Republican on the Environment and Public Works Committee, in a statement.

Capito called it "a constructive and substantive call" and said she stands ready to "be a partner in advancing infrastructure legislation in a bipartisan way—just as we've done in the past."

But most Republicans are opposing Biden's overall agenda as big government overreach. Together the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan, a robust investment in free pre-school, community college and child tax breaks, sum an eye-popping \$4 trillion.

The water bill is an example of what's possible, but also the gaping divide.

The \$35 billion effort falls far short of what the president has proposed, \$111 billion over eight years, for water projects in his big infrastructure plan. But it is in line with what Capito and the Republican senators proposed last week as their counter offer to Biden's package, and could serve as a piece of that or starting point in talks.

"We know the next couple of weeks and months are going to be tough," said Capito, in a speech before the vote. But she said she was hopeful colleagues would "remember this moment."

The water bill is the kind of routine legislation that has been a mainstay on Capitol Hill, but that lawmakers have struggled to pass in recent years amid the partisanship and gridlock, and the power that party leaders exert over the legislative process.

Part of the exuberance among senators this week was over the very act of legislating, carrying the bill through the give-and-take of the committee process and onto the Senate floor for amendments and debate.

"I say, the more of these we can do, the better," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va.

"Maybe we can take the Biden infrastructure plan and do the pieces of it," he said. "Where we can get some agreement, do those together. And then the remaining things that we think need to be done, that price tag shrinks a little bit, because we've done some other stuff."

One reason the water bill easily passed was because it's routine government spending. Another reason is that the price tag was tiny compared to typical congressional budget spats. Few expect such harmony to last when the stakes get bigger in the months ahead.

Biden's infrastructure plan proposes a tax hike on corporations, reverting the rate from 21% to 28%, as it was before the 2017 GOP tax cuts. That is a nonstarter for Republicans, who are unwilling to undo the signature Trump-era achievement.

Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, a member of GOP leadership, said the water bill could certainly become part of a bigger infrastructure package, "one of the building blocks going forward."

But he cautioned, "It's apples and oranges compared to the President's infrastructure bill."

The increased spending called for in the water bill goes to two longstanding programs that work like infrastructure banks — one for drinking water and the other for wastewater. Each program is set to get up to \$14.65 billion over five years under the bill. It is expected to be paid for with routine government funding.

Supported by a broad range of interest groups, the bill enables water and wastewater systems around the country use the money to fix leaky pipes, construct storage tanks and improve water treatment plants, to name just a few uses.

The bill also includes an array of grant programs, including to reduce lead in drinking water, turn waste to energy and make water systems more resilient to flooding and other extreme weather events. More than 40% of the bill's investments are targeted to low-income and rural communities.

The bill's chief sponsor, Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., said she remembers a House hearing a few years ago, when a mother from Flint, Mich., held up a baby bottle filled with murky brown water from her tap.

"While Flint was a tragedy, it was not an anomaly," she said. Lead-service water lines were banned decades ago, but more than 6 million homes across the country get water from lead service lines, including Illinois.

"We can't only pour money into fixing our roads while failing to repair the pipes beneath them," Duck-

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worth said.

The federal government plays a small role compared to states and local governments when it comes to public spending on drinking water and wastewater facilities — less than 5%.

But, in hearings, local utility officials testified that the pandemic has exacerbated the financial strains they face in replacing aging pipes and other infrastructure. They called for more federal investment to prevent rate increases down the road for communities that can least afford such hikes.

Meanwhile, House Democrats are pursuing water infrastructure bills with price tags that go beyond what the White House has proposed, making clear that a compromise just on a relatively narrow public works upgrade focused on water is still a ways away.

Biden sells economic plan in GA, calls for rich to pay more

By ZEKE MILLER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

DULUTH, Ga. (AP) — President Joe Biden took his pitch to Georgia Thursday night for \$4 trillion in spending to rebuild the nation's aged infrastructure and vastly expand the federal social safety net, choosing a new political battleground to make his case that Americans want a more activist government.

With his visit to a state he won by fewer than 12,000 votes, Biden set out to build public support for his plan and try to persuade resistant Republicans that his massive proposal is an investment that the country can't afford to pass up.

"We need to invest in things our families care about and need the most," Biden told hundreds of supporters who showed up for a socially distanced car rally in the Atlanta suburb of Duluth.

The Georgia trip is part of an effort to gain momentum for the massive — and expensive — agenda Biden articulated during his first address to a joint session of Congress one night earlier. It's a dramatic shift from nearly four decades of politics in which leaders from both parties have spoken of a need to contain government.

There's special significance in Biden's decision to make Georgia his first stop after the address. He was the first Democratic presidential contender to carry the state since Bill Clinton in 1992.

The state, long a Republican stronghold, is now a political battleground that will feature closely watched races for Senate and governor next year. It will almost certainly be one of the most competitive states during the 2024 presidential campaign.

Before the evening car rally in Duluth, Biden and his wife, Jill Biden, first visited former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn Carter, at their home in Plains, Georgia.

Carter's defeat to Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980 ushered in an era in which calls for smaller government and lower taxes for big business and the wealthy were embraced as a tonic for economic growth.

Biden, who established himself as moderate during his decades in elected office but has moved to a more progressive approach to governing in the early days of his presidency, offered a rebuttal Wednesday that Reagan's "trickle-down economics has never worked."

He renewed his call for the wealthiest Americans to pay more in taxes to help pay for a wide array of proposals, including universal pre-kindergarten, tuition-free community college, expanded childcare benefits and more. Biden says his proposal for about \$1.5 trillion in tax hikes will only target households making \$400,000 or more.

"It's about time the very wealthy and corporations start paying their fair share," Biden said. "It's as simple as that."

For their part, Republicans are resisting Biden's calls for more spending but are still fine-tuning their argument and steering clear of attacking him personally.

"I think the president is hard to vilify. I think he's well intentioned. I think he was warmly received in a personal way," said Sen. Roy Blunt, a member of the Republican leadership. "But the proposals he made are overwhelming in terms of a new footprint for the government, and a new level of government spending."

Biden spoke by phone Thursday with Sen. Shelley Moore Capito to discuss infrastructure and jobs, according to the White House. The West Virginia Republican has publicly expressed interest in finding

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common ground with Biden on an infrastructure bill. The White House said both Biden and Moore Capito reiterated "their willingness to negotiate."

It's no accident Biden chose Gwinnett County to serve as the backdrop to begin making his case for his spending plan. A fast-growing suburban Atlanta county northeast of downtown, Gwinnett has become a source of Democratic support in the state.

Gwinnett stands out for its racial and ethnic diversity, with fast-growing Asian American and Hispanic populations and a thriving business community of immigrants and first-generation citizens. The county anchors Georgia's 7th Congressional District, which freshman Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux flipped in 2020 to give Democrats control of both suburban House districts along metro Atlanta's northern ring.

During Thursday's visit, Biden met with a group of "Dreamers" — young immigrants who were brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents — to discuss reforms to the immigration system.

Biden is also scheduled to travel to Pennsylvania and Virginia in the days ahead to promote his spending plan.

The push for \$4 trillion in federal spending is a considerable gamble. Biden is governing with the most slender of majorities in Congress, and even some in his own party have blanched at the price tag of his proposals.

Biden has repeatedly pressed his contention that his plans would put Americans back to work, restoring the millions of jobs lost to the virus. In his speech to Congress, he laid out an extensive proposal for universal preschool, two years of free community college, \$225 billion for child care and monthly payments of at least \$250 to parents. His ideas target frailties that were uncovered by the pandemic, and he argues that economic growth will best come from taxing the rich to help the middle class and the poor.

In his first three months in office, Biden has signed a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill — passed without a single GOP vote — and has shepherded direct payments of \$1,400 per person to more than 160 million households. Hundreds of billions of dollars in aid will soon arrive for state and local governments, enough money that overall U.S. growth this year could eclipse 6% — a level not seen since 1984.

A significant amount proposed just Wednesday would ensure that eligible families receive at least \$250 monthly per child through 2025, extending the enhanced tax credit that was part of Biden's COVID-19 aid. There would be more than \$400 billion for subsidized child care and free preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

An additional combined \$425 billion would go to permanently reduce health insurance premiums for people who receive coverage through the Affordable Care Act, as well as a national paid family and medical leave program. Further spending would be directed toward Pell Grants, historically Black and tribal institutions and to allow people to attend community college tuition-free for two years.

Abbas delays Palestinian elections; Hamas slams 'coup'

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — President Mahmoud Abbas announced early Friday that the first Palestinian elections in 15 years will be delayed, citing a dispute with Israel to call off a vote in which his fractured Fatah party was expected to suffer another embarrassing defeat to the Hamas militant group.

Hamas slammed the move as a "coup." But the indefinite postponement will be quietly welcomed by Israel and Western countries, which view the Islamic militant group as a terrorist organization and are concerned about its growing strength.

For ordinary Palestinians, the delay leaves a long-entrenched political leadership in place that has failed to advance their hopes for statehood, heal the bitter rift between Fatah and Hamas or lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip, and which is seen as increasingly corrupt and authoritarian. Presidential elections planned for July also appeared to be on hold.

Abbas insisted elections could not be held without the full participation of Palestinians in east Jerusalem. Israel has yet to say whether it would allow voting by mail there as in past elections and has enforced a ban on Palestinian Authority activities, including campaign events.

"Faced with this difficult situation, we decided to postpone the date of holding legislative elections until

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the participation of Jerusalem and its people in these elections is guaranteed," Abbas said. "There will be no concession on Jerusalem and no concession on our people in Jerusalem exercising their democratic rights."

The fate of east Jerusalem, home to holy sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, is one of the most sensitive issues in the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But delaying the elections over Jerusalem could also be seen as a pretext, because only a small number of voters in the city would actually require Israel's permission. Abbas' rivals had suggested workarounds so as not to give Israel an effective veto over elections.

Abbas said the Palestinian Authority has repeatedly sought assurances from Israel and has called on the European Union to exert pressure, to no avail. He said it received a letter from Israel on Thursday saying it could not take a position on the elections because it does not yet have a government following its own elections last month — the fourth in two years.

Hamas had been expected to perform well in the May 22 parliamentary elections because of widening divisions within Fatah, which split into three rival lists. The militant group condemned the delay, saying the decision "doesn't agree with the national consensus and popular support and is a coup."

Prior to the announcement, Hamas had issued a statement saying the Palestinians should explore ways of "forcing the elections in Jerusalem without the permission of or coordination with the occupation."

Israel has not said whether it will allow voting in east Jerusalem but has expressed concern about Hamas' growing strength. Israel and Western countries would likely boycott any Palestinian government that includes the group.

The day after President Joe Biden exhorted Americans to "prove that democracy still works" in an address to Congress, his State Department distanced itself from the Palestinian vote.

"The exercise of democratic elections is a matter for the Palestinian people and for the Palestinian leadership to determine," spokesman Ned Price told reporters in Washington. "We believe in an inclusive political process."

Israel captured east Jerusalem, along with the West Bank and Gaza, in the 1967 war, territories the Palestinians want for their future state. Israel annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized internationally and views the entire city as its capital, barring the Palestinian Authority from operating there. The Palestinians consider east Jerusalem their capital.

According to interim peace agreements reached in the 1990s — which were rejected by Hamas — some 6,000 Palestinians in east Jerusalem submit their ballots through Israeli post offices. The other 150,000 can vote with or without Israel's permission.

Fatah says the elections cannot be held without Israel giving express permission for east Jerusalem residents to vote. Its opponents have called for creative solutions, such as setting up ballot boxes in schools or religious sites.

But Abbas appeared to rule that out, joking that the Palestinians would not vote in "the Hungarian Embassy."

The dispute has taken on greater import since the start of the holy month of Ramadan, as Muslim protesters have clashed with Israeli police over restrictions on gatherings.

The elections, and a presidential vote planned for July 31, offered a rare opportunity for the Palestinians to empower a new leadership and potentially chart a different course in their long, stalled struggle for independence.

The 85-year-old Abbas and his inner circle of Fatah figures, now in their 60s and 70s, have dominated the Palestinian Authority for nearly two decades and have made little effort to empower a new generation of leaders.

The last elections, held in 2006 with international support and Israeli cooperation, saw Hamas win a landslide victory after campaigning as a scrappy underdog untainted by corruption. That sparked an internal crisis culminating in Hamas' seizure of Gaza the following year, which confined Abbas' authority to parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Hamas' popularity has fallen in the years since, as conditions in Gaza have steadily deteriorated. But it has remained unified and disciplined even as Fatah has split into three rival parliamentary lists.

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Hamas does not recognize Israel's right to exist and has fought three wars with it since seizing control of Gaza. It has also carried out scores of attacks over the past three decades that have killed hundreds of Israeli civilians.

Free rides and beer: Incentives are added to vaccine drive

By CARLA K. JOHNSON and MICHELLE R. SMITH Associated Press

Free beer, pot and doughnuts. Savings bonds. A chance to win an all-terrain vehicle. Places around the U.S. are offering incentives to try to energize the nation's slowing vaccination drive and get Americans to roll up their sleeves.

These relatively small, mostly corporate, promotion efforts have been accompanied by more serious and far-reaching attempts by officials in cities such as Chicago, which is sending specially equipped buses into neighborhoods to deliver vaccines. Detroit is offering \$50 to people who give others a ride to vaccination sites, and starting Monday will send workers to knock on every door in the city to help residents sign up for shots.

Public health officials say the efforts are crucial to reach people who haven't been immunized yet, whether because they are hesitant or because they have had trouble making an appointment or getting to a vaccination site.

"This is the way we put this pandemic in the rearview mirror and move on with our lives," said Dr. Steven Stack, Kentucky's public health commissioner.

Meanwhile, more activities are resuming around the U.S. as case numbers come down. Disneyland is set to open Friday after being closed for over a year, while Indianapolis is planning to welcome 135,000 spectators for the Indy 500 at the end of May.

Still, rising hospitalizations and caseloads in the Pacific Northwest prompted Oregon's governor to impose restrictions in several counties, and her Washington counterpart was expected to follow suit.

Demand for vaccines has started to fall around the country, something health officials expected would happen once the most vulnerable and most eager to get the shot had the opportunity to do so. Now the vaccination drive is moving into a new, more targeted phase.

"This will be much more of an intense ground game where we have to focus on smaller events, more tailored to address the needs and concerns of focused communities," Stack said.

Nationally, 82% of people over 65 and more than half of all adults have received at least one dose of vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But while vaccinations hit a high in mid-April at 3.2 million shots per day on average, the number had fallen to 2.5 million as of last week.

As demand slows to a trickle at mass vaccination sites such as stadiums, some state and local governments are no longer asking for their full allotment of vaccine from Washington. And many large vaccination sites and pharmacies are letting people walk in, no appointment necessary.

With the shift away from larger sites to pharmacies and medical providers, Pfizer on Thursday said that at the end of May, it will start shipping its two-dose COVID-19 vaccine in smaller packages. The new packages will hold 25 vials with six doses each, rather than trays of 195 vials.

The slowdown in the U.S. stands in stark contrast to the situation in the many poorer corners of the world that are desperate for vaccine.

Demand has dropped precipitously in the rugged timberland of northeastern Washington state, where Matt Schanz of Northeast Tri County Health District is at a loss for what to try next.

Seventy-six percent of residents remain unvaccinated in Pend Oreille County and 78% in Ferry County, and a whopping 80% in Stevens County have not had even one shot. On Wednesday, only 35 people in all three counties booked a first dose through the health agency, down from a peak of 500 daily appointments a few weeks ago.

Schanz ticks off the efforts so far in the three counties where he is the health agency's administrator: Newspaper ads, signs and mailers sent with utility bills. Drive-thru vaccination sites at fairgrounds and fire stations. A call center and online scheduling. Outreach to pastors, Republican elected leaders, employers

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in the lumber industry and an aluminum boat manufacturer. TV and radio interviews.

"Have we reached that point of saturation?" Schanz asked. "How many people do we have who are going to be the hard no's, and how many are the hesitators and the wait-and-see folks?"

Uncertainty about the vaccine is the biggest barrier, he said: "People say, 'Jeez, I don't want to be a government experiment.'"

Chicago officials are planning vaccination sites at festivals and block parties and are working with barber shops and hair and nail salons to pair free services with vaccination.

"The idea here is to bring the party, bring the vaccine and really have this be a convenient way for people to get vaccinated," Chicago Health Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady said.

Several companies have announced that employees can take paid time off to get vaccinated. In Houston, 31-year-old Elissa Hanc works for one of them, 3 Men Movers.

Her employer started offering the benefit before President Joe Biden announced a tax credit for small businesses to provide paid time off for those getting vaccinated or recovering from the side effects.

"I have a few friends who work where management is not making it a priority to get the vaccine," Hanc said. "They've let me know in no uncertain terms how lucky I am to work where I do."

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said that employers should give paid time off and that other incentives are needed to boost vaccinations. He pointed to West Virginia, which is giving \$100 savings bonds to young adults who get their shot.

"We also need health systems and universities to mandate vaccination — that no one can be employed or on campus/medical facilities without having been vaccinated," Topol said in an email. He also said the nation needs to mount a "counteroffensive" against anti-vaccination websites and activists.

Other companies are getting into the spirit with marketing pitches.

Krispy Kreme began offering a free doughnut a day to anyone showing proof of having been vaccinated. In Cleveland, a movie theater is supplying free popcorn through the end of this month.

Several marijuana dispensaries around the country are giving out cannabis treats or free rolled joints. On April 20, marijuana advocates offered "joints for jabs" to encourage people to get vaccinated in New York City and Washington.

Some breweries around the country are offering "shots and a chaser."

In Alaska, which traditionally has low vaccine confidence, the Norton Sound Health Corp., with a hospital in Nome and 15 clinics across western Alaska, has given away prizes, including airline tickets, money toward the purchase of an all-terrain vehicle, and \$500 for groceries or fuel.

'I'm still exhaling': Swing-state voters on Biden's 100 days

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

ELM GROVE, Wis. (AP) — Standing on the sidelines of her son's soccer practice in this upscale suburb, Laura Hahn looked skyward for answers when asked how she would rate President Joe Biden's first 100 days in office.

Overall, Biden is doing well, she said after a few minutes of thought. But she acknowledged her judgment is as much a feeling of relief as an analysis of accomplishments.

"I'm still exhaling," Hahn said, referencing the tumultuous tenure of President Donald Trump. "It's been exhausting."

At the 100-day marker, polls show most Americans are like Hahn, giving the new president positive marks for his early performance.

But in this pocket of swing-state Wisconsin, where a surge in suburban Milwaukee helped put Biden in the White House, interviews with voters show that support for the Democratic president often falls short of adulation. Biden continues to get credit for bringing stability to the coronavirus crisis — and for not being Trump — but there are signs that goodwill only goes so far.

As voters here start to look past the pandemic, some worry about Biden's tax proposals to pay for massive spending plans and their impact on the economy. Some Democrats are disappointed Biden has not

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yet taken action on social priorities such as a policing overhaul. There are scant signs that Republicans were won over; several accused Biden of using a public health crisis to push a liberal agenda.

Despite these concerns, many voters said they were just enjoying the reprieve from the jaw-dropping headlines of the Trump era, now that Biden is in the White House.

"I'm not surprised or shocked by anything he's done," said Jana Elkadri, a 40-year-old chief financial officer for a nonprofit group, as she watched the soccer practice from the parking lot.

Biden's handling of pandemic has been strong, she said, although she worries he's a tad optimistic. She supports his proposed big spending on social programs, but wishes he had have pressed for universal health care. All in all, she said. "So far, OK."

This village of about 6,000 is hardly representative of America. It is whiter and wealthier than most communities and has a larger population of residents with college degrees. But it is places like this where Biden found a swell of support that helped him carry the pivotal trio of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. This suburban lift is something Democrats will need to continue if they want to hold control of the U.S. House next year or the White House in 2024.

Women such as Hahn and Elkadri were an important part of Biden's strength in the suburbs. Hahn is a full-time financial consultant and married mother of two young children who lives in adjacent Brookfield. She said she keeps up with headlines, but has had little time to thoroughly process all of Biden's earliest moves.

She was particularly pleased by Biden's plans to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan. When she read the news, she was floored at the reminder that troops were deployed there the year after she graduated high school. "If we haven't fixed anything in 20 years, bring them home," she said.

Hahn isn't the only one having trouble keeping track of Biden's initiatives, which include a barrage of executive actions revoking many of his predecessor's policies on immigration and the environment. In February, the narrowly Democratic-controlled Congress passed Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, with its \$1,400 checks for millions of Americans.

Biden has since proposed an additional \$4-plus trillion in spending, including a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan to upgrade highways, bridges and tunnels, as well as energy systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and a \$1.8 trillion proposal for free preschool, family leave, child tax credits and other family and education programs.

For some in Elm Grove, particularly Republicans, Biden's "go-big" approach wasn't expected.

"The November election wasn't a mandate for this kind of sweeping change," said former state Rep. Rob Hutton, a Republican who lost his seat representing Elm Grove and Brookfield in November.

Yet for some Democrats, Biden isn't thinking big enough, particularly on some issues that were fundamental to his candidacy.

Chris Alexander, a Democrat moved with his wife to nearby Wauwatosa two years ago, said Biden "is doing an OK job," but hasn't been aggressive enough about action on stemming police violence against Black people.

Biden declared in a speech to Congress on Wednesday night that "we have to come together" to root out systemic racism in policing. It was an echo of his remarks last week after ex-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder conviction in the death of George Floyd. Although he has not endorsed a specific policing plan, the president called on Congress to pass one by May 25, the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death.

"Nothing's still been done," Alexander said of Biden's new goal. "We can talk about what we want until we're blue in the face. But if nothing is put in place, what happens in the weeks leading up, when people continue to go through police brutality? I still feel as if he hasn't done anything on that front."

Alexander is part of a political shift sweeping through the once Republican-dominant suburbs of Milwaukee, including the village of Elm Grove. Families have poured across the Milwaukee County line seeking its enviable schools and stately homes, many done in Milwaukee's signature "Cream City" limestone brick.

Health care professionals and medical business representatives have replaced executives with the Mil-

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waukee area's once-thriving farm machinery sector. The economic draw, a mile away, is the state's largest medical complex, anchored by Froedtert Hospital, Milwaukee Children's Hospital and the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Elkadri and her husband, who are of Lebanese descent, are among the increasing number of Muslims in the area. Many attend a mosque built four years ago, not far from a Sikh temple that once housed Wisconsin's largest evangelical megachurch in Brookfield.

Just blocks from Elm Grove's quiet downtown — once a train stop, now shops and an upscale grocery store — sits a park where purebreds vastly outnumber mutts on the walking trail. The police station keeps watch on one end.

No Democrat has come close to winning Waukesha County. President Barack Obama won just 32% of the vote here in 2012, when he was reelected. But Biden received almost 40%, more than any of his party's predecessors. He even nearly tied Trump in the village of Elm Grove, where Obama won just 30% of the vote eight years ago.

In all, Biden pulled 7,500 more votes out of Waukesha County than did Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton did in 2016. That was a good chunk of his 20,682-vote winning margin in Wisconsin last year.

Biden's Wisconsin victory was also powered by overwhelming turnout in liberal Madison and strong performance in Democratic-heavy Milwaukee. Similar boosts over 2016 in Detroit and Atlanta helped carry Biden over the line in Michigan and Georgia.

In the 2022 fight for control of the U.S. House, these suburban areas will be critical. Of the 47 Democratic seats Republicans are targeting, more than two-thirds are in suburban districts.

In a late March Associated Press-NORC poll, 65% percent of Americans living in suburban areas approved of Biden's job performance, a figure on par with Biden's approval with Americans overall. The poll found only one-quarter of Republicans approve of his early days in office.

Republican Neil Palmer, Elm Grove's longtime village president, counts himself among the disapprovers. He's frustrated by Biden's moves on immigration and called the increase of migrants trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border a "self-inflicted crisis."

Like many other Republicans, Palmer chafed at the price tag on the spending Biden has proposed, and predicted higher taxes would slow an economic rebound.

"I not only have children, but grandchildren and they can't afford this government," the 70-year-old said. Yet as the area changes, Palmer's view on government's role is less dominant.

On a quiet cul-de-sac, 35-year-old lawyer Patrick Proctor Brown applauded Biden's infrastructure plan, not simply as overdue, but as a potential economic boon akin to the interstate highway system enacted in 1956.

The married father of three wanted Biden to be just as bold on taxes and was disappointed when the Democrat walked away from a proposal to tax fortunes greater than \$50 million.

"Billionaires who have doubled their wealth in the last year, they are not going to have to pay for that at some point?" Brown asked.

Several parents who rate Biden positively said they wish he would have already confronted more directly gun violence.

Katie Rasoul, a 38-year-old leadership coach in Brookfield with two children, said she is "pleased, all things considered" with Biden, but would like him to press harder for a gun control bill.

"We've had so many things happen around gun violence," Rasoul said. "It cannot be ignored."

The White House says it is working with congressional leaders behind the scenes on a gun measure.

While Biden's supporters here say they are relieved with what they call decency returning to the White House, Elkadri said it will take more for Biden to be viewed as a successful president. When her son recently asked whether she thought Biden was doing a good job, she said it was too soon to know.

"I told him it would be up to his generation to judge," she said.

Brazil tops 400,000 virus deaths amid fears of renewed surge

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By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil on Thursday became the second country to officially top 400,000 COVID-19 deaths, losing another 100,000 lives in just one month, as some health experts warn there may be gruesome days ahead when the Southern Hemisphere enters winter.

April was Brazil's deadliest month of the pandemic, with thousands of people losing their lives daily at crowded hospitals.

The country's Health Ministry registered more than 4,000 deaths on two days early in the month, and its seven-day average topped out at above 3,100. That figure has tilted downward in the last two weeks, to less than 2,400 deaths per day, though on Thursday the Health Ministry announced another 3,001 deaths, bringing Brazil's total to 401,186.

Local health experts have celebrated the recent decline of cases and deaths, plus the eased pressure on the Brazilian health care system — but only modestly. They are apprehensive of another wave of the disease, like those seen in some European nations, due to a premature resumption of activity in states and cities combined with slow vaccination rollout.

Less than 6% of Brazilians have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to Our World in Data, an online research site. President Jair Bolsonaro, who is now being investigated by a Senate panel over his administration's handling of the crisis, has repeated he will be the last to get a shot and he has attacked mayors and governors who enforce restrictions to control the virus' spread.

Shortly after the grim landmark was published, Bolsonaro said in a live broadcast on his social media channels that "a big number of deaths has been announced," adding that he is "sorry for every death." But he repeated his stance against social distancing measures.

"I pray to God so there is not a third wave" of the coronavirus, the president said. "But if the lockdown policies continue this country will be dragged to extreme poverty."

Epidemiologist Wanderson Oliveira, one of the Health Ministry's top officials at the start of the pandemic, said he expects a third wave to hit by mid-June. He told radio station CBN on Tuesday that the country's immunization effort won't prevent a new surge because many people won't receive shots before winter, when indoor gatherings and activities are more common even in the tropical nation.

"Our vaccination is such that in 2022 maybe we will have a much less tragic summer than we did now," he said, referring to the last few months.

He added he expects limited help from local leaders' partial shutdowns, which have yielded weaker results than European-style lockdowns. Many Brazilians flouted social distancing recommendations and partial shutdowns even in the throes of the pandemic's peak.

Brazil's vaccination program, though a far cry from its triumphant campaigns of decades past, has slowed the pace of deaths among the nation's elderly, according to death certificate data published on Monday. Younger people remain unprotected, and have begun falling ill in far greater numbers as a more transmissible variant circulates in Brazil.

Adding to concerns, Brazil's Health Ministry has repeatedly cut its outlook for vaccines in the short term. The country's two biggest laboratories are facing supply constraints for imports from producers in China and India, which has become the pandemic's global epicenter.

5 arrested in violent robbery of Lady Gaga's dogs

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The woman who returned Lady Gaga's stolen French bulldogs was among five people arrested in connection with the theft and shooting of the music superstar's dog walker, Los Angeles police said Thursday.

Detectives do not believe that the thieves initially knew the dogs belonged to the pop star, the Los Angeles Police Department said in a statement. The motive for the Feb. 24 robbery, investigators believe, was the value of the French bulldogs — which can run into the thousands of dollars.

The dog walker, Ryan Fischer, is recovering from a gunshot wound and has called the violence "a very

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close call with death" in social media posts. He was walking Lady Gaga's three dogs — named Asia, Koji and Gustav — in Hollywood just off the famed Sunset Boulevard when he was attacked.

Video from the doorbell camera of a nearby home shows a white sedan pulling up and two men jumping out. They struggled with Fischer and one pulled a gun and fired a single shot before fleeing with two of the dogs, Koji and Gustav.

The video captured Fischer's screams of, "Oh, my God! I've been shot!" and "Help me!" and "I'm bleeding out from my chest!"

Lady Gaga offered a \$500,000 reward — "no questions asked" — to be reunited with the dogs. The singer had been in Rome at the time filming a movie.

The dogs were returned two days later to an LAPD station by a woman who originally appeared to be "uninvolved and unassociated" with the crime, police initially said. The woman, identified Thursday as 50-year-old Jennifer McBride, had reported that she'd found the dogs and responded to an email address associated with the reward, police said.

McBride turned out to be in a relationship with the father of one of the suspects, the LAPD said Thursday. It was not immediately clear if she had received the reward.

Police arrested James Jackson, 18; Jaylin White, 19; and Lafayette Whaley, 27, in connection with the violence. They are charged with attempted murder, conspiracy to commit robbery and second-degree robbery, according to the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.

Jackson, who authorities say was the shooter, also faces charges of assault with a semiautomatic firearm and a felon carrying a concealed firearm in a vehicle. White faces one count of assault by means of force likely to produce great bodily injury.

White's father, 40-year-old Harold White, and McBride were arrested and accused of being accessories to the attack. The elder White also was charged with one count of possession of a firearm and McBride faces a charge of receiving stolen property.

Jackson, Whaley and the Whites are all documented gang members, according to the LAPD.

The five suspects were scheduled to be arraigned Thursday, according to the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. It was not immediately clear if they had attorneys who could speak on their behalf.

All five were being held on \$1 million bail each, online jail records show.

Lady Gaga did not immediately address the arrests on her social media accounts Thursday afternoon. Fischer and Lady Gaga's representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

Idaho lawmaker accused of rape resigns after ethics ruling

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — An Idaho lawmaker accused of rape by a 19-year-old legislative intern has resigned after an ethics committee found he should be formally censured.

The investigation into Rep. Aaron von Ehlinger began in March after a young staffer reported he raped her in his apartment after the two had dinner at a Boise restaurant. Von Ehlinger has denied all wrongdoing and maintains he had consensual sexual contact with the young woman. He resigned Thursday after an ethics committee unanimously agreed that he engaged in "behavior unbecoming" and recommended that he be suspended without pay for the rest of the legislative session.

The Boise Police Department is investigating the rape allegations, and von Ehlinger has not been charged.

The Republican from Lewiston wrote in his resignation letter that he hoped stepping down would spare his colleagues from having to deal with the ethics committee's recommendation, which he disagreed with.

"After careful deliberation and prayer I have determined that I will not be able to effectively represent my constituents and ... have decided to resign my seat effective immediately," von Ehlinger wrote. " ... I maintain my innocence of any wrongdoing of which I have been accused in this matter."

The ethics panel had also recommend that von Ehlinger be held in contempt for refusing to answer some questions during his testimony on Wednesday. The lawmaker invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself on the advice of his attorney, but Idaho law states that testimony given in a legislative

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ethics panel can't be used in criminal court cases. That means the Fifth Amendment doesn't apply, the committee said.

The investigation into von Ehlinger began in March after a young staffer reported he raped her in his apartment after the two had dinner at a Boise restaurant. Von Ehlinger has denied all wrongdoing and maintains they had consensual sexual contact. The Boise Police Department is investigating, and von Ehlinger has not been charged.

The five-member ethics panel also agreed that they would throw unanimous support behind a motion to expel von Ehlinger if any House lawmaker decides to make one.

The decision came the day after the panel heard hours of testimony, including from the teen who first brought the allegations. She was shielded from public view by a black screen and used the name Jane Doe during the proceedings, but some far-right blogs and at least one lawmaker, Rep. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, has revealed the teen's identity in a social media post and in a link embedded in a newsletter to her constituents. At least one of the blogs was edited days later to remove the teen's photo and name.

The Associated Press generally does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted.

After the teen testified, some of von Ehlinger's supporters and one television news reporter pursued her out of the building, attempting to film her as she rushed to her car. The Capitol Correspondents Association, the credentialing entity for news reporters covering the Idaho Legislature, convened an emergency meeting of its Standing Committee after hearing of the reporter's involvement and revoked the reporter's credentials for violating the established press rules for coverage of the hearing.

Rep. John McCrostie, a Democrat from Garden City, lauded the intern for her bravery in coming forward.

"Sexual assault survivors are seldom subjected to having their testimony publicly broadcast. But she knew that her truth enabled others to not suffer as she has," McCrostie said.

"We owe it to Jane Doe and to future Jane Does" to ensure that the work of the House of Representatives is conducted with integrity, he said.

Idaho Falls Republican Rep. Wendy Horman said von Ehlinger was inconsistent in his testimony and wrongly refused to answer pertinent questions, and the evidence showed he maintained a pattern of hitting on subordinates at the Statehouse despite repeated warnings.

She rejected his argument that because there was no written rule against dating staffers, there was nothing wrong with the behavior.

"There is no House rule against poisoning another person, yet his behavior has poisoned all of us," Horman said. "Conduct unbecoming is an undefined term for a reason per our rules."

Rep. Brent Crane, a Republican from Nampa, said the public's perception of the entire legislative body will be measured by the incident and that the panel needed to ensure that constituents are served by those with the highest moral standards. He said von Ehlinger engaged in a "predatory pattern" of behavior.

"The Idaho House of Representatives existed long before we arrived, and it will be here long after we leave, but history will judge us by our actions today," Crane said. "I want our actions to provide a clear directive."

The attorneys who are representing the intern, Erika Birch and Annie Hightower, released a statement thanking the committee for recommending that von Ehlinger be censured and "taking the first steps to hold him accountable for raping a teen intern."

The attorneys also noted it has been incredibly difficult for their client, especially when she was accosted by the onlookers after testifying. A television news reporter also followed the teen, the attorneys said, filming her distress. The news station later destroyed the footage and did not broadcast it.

"The unrelenting harm that has occurred as a part of this process, and as a result of her being doxxed in blogs and by Rep. Priscilla Giddings, is exactly why two-thirds of Idaho survivors of sexual assault never choose to report the crimes against them," the attorneys said. "Every time a system fails to protect survivors it reinforces why survivors of sexual violence choose not to report and to suffer in silence."

Von Ehlinger and his attorney Edward Dindinger did not respond to requests for comment.

US recovery from pandemic recession is showing momentum

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER and PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Powered by consumers and fueled by government aid, the U.S. economy is achieving a remarkably fast recovery from the recession that ripped through the nation last year on the heels of the coronavirus and cost tens of millions of Americans their jobs and businesses.

The economy grew last quarter at a vigorous 6.4% annual rate, the government said Thursday, and expectations are that the current quarter will be even better. The number of people seeking unemployment aid — a rough reflection of layoffs — last week reached its lowest point since the pandemic struck. And the National Association of Realtors said Thursday that more Americans signed contracts to buy homes in March, reflecting a strong housing market as summer approaches.

Economists say that widespread vaccinations and declining viral cases, the reopening of more businesses, a huge infusion of federal aid and healthy job gains should help sustain steady growth. For 2021 as a whole, they expect the economy to expand around 7%, which would mark the fastest calendar-year growth since 1984.

As American consumers have stepped up their spending in recent months, they have consumed physical goods far more than they have services, like haircuts, airline tickets and restaurant meals: Spending on goods accelerated at an annual pace of nearly 24% last quarter; services spending rose at a rate below 5%.

But now, that disparity will likely shift as more restaurants and entertainment venues reopen and people look to spend more on experiences and less on tangible items. On Friday, for example, Disneyland will reopen, with limited capacity, to California residents.

Andrew Song, whose family owns Kwan's Deli across from Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park, is finally feeling hopeful after having lost most of his business last year as office workers stayed home. The deli should be able to sustain itself, Song said, from a rise in hotel guests, convention goers and tourists, even if office workers don't all return. Recently, he called a laid-off employee back to work.

Song credited the rebound, at least in part, to the rise in vaccinations, which he thinks has made Americans more comfortable about venturing out.

"More tourists are coming," he said. "We're seeing some familiar faces back inside the restaurant."

Online sites that have capitalized on goods purchases during the pandemic — from Amazon to Etsy to eBay — are under pressure to show they can sustain accelerating growth even as consumers look more toward services and less on goods. So far, Amazon, the dominant site by far, is hardly showing signs of slowing down. On Thursday, it reported that its first-quarter profit more than tripled from a year ago, fueled by online shopping.

The speed of the rebounding U.S. economy has been particularly striking given the depth of damage the pandemic inflicted on it beginning last year. With businesses all but shut down, the economy contracted at a record annual pace of 31% in the April-June quarter of last year before rebounding sharply in the subsequent months.

The bounce-back has been swift. In March, employers added 916,000 jobs — the biggest burst of hiring since August. Meantime, retail spending has surged, manufacturing output is up and consumer confidence has reached its highest point since the pandemic began.

"We are seeing all the engines of the economy rev up," said Gregory Daco, chief economist at Oxford Economics. "We have an improving health environment, fiscal stimulus remains abundant and we are starting to see rebounding employment."

The renewed strength in the United States — the largest economy — is helping lead the developed world out of recession. In Europe, for instance, a recovery has lagged because of smaller government aid and slower vaccination rollouts that have prolonged lockdowns. Economists at Berenberg Bank estimate that the 19 countries that use the euro currency actually contracted in the first quarter.

For all the U.S. economy's gains, it still has a long way to go. More than 8 million jobs remain lost to the pandemic. And the recovery remains sharply uneven: Most college-educated and white collar employees have been able to work from home over the past year. Many have even built up savings and expanded

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their wealth from rising home values and a record-setting stock market, which has rocketed more than 80% from March of last year.

By contrast, job cuts have fallen heavily on low-wage workers, racial minorities and people without college educations. In addition, many women, especially working mothers, have had to leave the workforce to care for children.

In its report Thursday, the government said the nation's gross domestic product — its total output of goods and services — accelerated in the January-March quarter from a 4.3% annual gain in the last quarter of 2020. Some economists say growth in the current April-June period could reach a 10% annual pace or more, driven by a surge in people traveling, shopping, dining out and otherwise resuming their spending habits.

A major reason for the brightening expectations is the record-level federal spending that is poised to flow into the economy. A \$1.9 trillion package that President Joe Biden got through Congress in March provided, among other rescue aid, \$1,400 stimulus payments to most adults. On top of that, Biden is proposing two additional huge spending plans: a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package and a \$1.8 trillion investment in children, families and education that the president promoted Wednesday night in his first address to a joint session of Congress.

The Federal Reserve's ultra-low interest-rate policy, designed to encourage borrowing and spending, has provided significant support, too. In fact, the economy is expected to expand so fast that some economists have raised concerns that it could ignite inflation. In part, this is because rising demand has caused supply bottlenecks and shortages of some components, notably semiconductors, which are critical to the auto, technology and medical device industries, among others.

At a news conference Wednesday, though, Chair Jerome Powell reiterated his confidence that any jump in inflation would prove temporary. And he said the Fed wants to see a substantial and sustained recovery before it would consider withdrawing its economic support. In the meantime, Powell made clear, the central bank isn't even close to beginning a pullback in its ultra-low rate policies.

As more business restrictions are lifted and more people venture out to shop and eat out, companies that serve them are benefiting. McDonald's, for example, posted a sharp jump in revenue last quarter — even surpassing the same period in 2019, long before the pandemic flattened the economy. Likewise, most major tech companies have reported impressive earnings. At Apple, for instance, demand for the iPhone and other company products drove profits to more than double in the January-March period.

In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio said he expects to expects the city to "fully reopen" by July 1. "We are ready for stores to open, for businesses to open, offices, theaters, full strength," he said.

On Thursday, Biden left Washington on a trip to promote his spending proposals, which the White House cast as key to continued growth.

"This economic recovery is the result of a robust vaccination program that has helped us get the pandemic under control and an economic strategy that puts American's hardworking families first," Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Air Force One.

Thursday's GDP report showed that consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of the economy, surged at a 10.7% annual rate in the January-March quarter, a significant acceleration after spending had slowed to a 2.3% annual gain in the final three months of 2020. As consumers spend more freely, employers are likely to keep hiring to keep up with customer demand. Daco said he thinks job growth in some months this year will surpass the nearly 1 million that were added in March.

Consumers weren't alone in driving last month's growth. Business investment rose at a strong rate of nearly 10%, reflecting a burst of spending on equipment. And government spending grew at a 6.3% annual rate after two straight declines that had reflected weakness at the state and local level as the recession shrank tax revenue.

Businesses did slow their pace of inventory restocking, which shaved 2.6 percentage points from the quarter's growth. And a rising trade deficit diminished growth by 0.8 percentage point.

But Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, suggested that even that weakness masked evidence of strength: With the U.S. recovery ahead of much of the rest of the world's, Americans are

spending more than consumers overseas are.

"The GDP number was robust and signals that the economy is off and running," Zandi said. "Consumers are out buying aggressively."

Biden's agenda: What can pass and what faces steep odds

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden laid out a long list of policy priorities in his speech to Congress — and some are more politically plausible than others.

The two parties are working together in some areas, including on changes to policing and confronting the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans. But Republicans are likely to block other Democratic initiatives on immigration and voting rights.

On some of Biden's top priorities, Democrats may choose to find ways to cut out Republicans entirely. The president told lawmakers that "doing nothing is not an option" when it comes to his two massive infrastructure proposals, which would cost \$4.1 trillion.

A look at what's possible, and what's unlikely, when it comes to action in Congress:

GO IT ALONE?

Biden won an early victory in March when he signed the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package into law. Democrats passed that bill over unanimous Republican opposition, using special budget rules that bypass the Senate filibuster.

While they can't use that tactic on every piece of legislation, Democrats might return to the same procedure for Biden's two signature proposals — his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure jobs plan, which would rebuild roads and bridges, boost broadband access and make other improvements; and his \$1.8 trillion families plan, which would expand preschool and college opportunities, create a national family and medical leave program, distribute child care subsidies and make other similar investments.

Republicans have proposed a much smaller \$568 billion infrastructure package, and both sides have shown a willingness to negotiate. But their differences are broad — including on how they would pay for the plans and whether to raise taxes — and Democrats are intent on passing a major infrastructure boost this year, with or without GOP support.

"We've talked about it long enough — Democrats and Republicans," Biden said in his speech. "Let's get it done this year."

GO IT TOGETHER?

Democrats and Republicans have fallen out of the habit of working together, as President Donald Trump's tenure was mostly dominated by partisan division. But they have edged a bit closer to bipartisanship on some topics since Biden took office, including on police reform, gun control and efforts to reduce violence against women.

All of those bills are still heavy lifts in the evenly divided, 50-50 Senate. But negotiations are underway, and members of both parties have signaled that they want legislation passed.

Both parties say they were encouraged last week by the Senate approval of a bill to combat the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The legislation passed 94-1 after Democratic Sen. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii worked with Republicans to reach a compromise. In his speech, Biden thanked the Senate and urged the House "to do the same and send that legislation to my desk as soon as possible."

Compromise on the other bills, such as the policing overhaul, will not come as easily. Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina is negotiating with Democrats to change some of the nation's policing laws following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year and the conviction this month of the officer who killed him. A Democratic bill passed by the House would allow police officers to be sued, would ban chokeholds and would create national databases of police misconduct. Scott's GOP proposal doesn't go as far but does have some similar provisions.

Democrats have pushed to finish the negotiations by the anniversary of Floyd's death at the end of May, and Biden endorsed that timeline in Wednesday night's speech. But Scott has not made a similar

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commitment.

Changes to gun laws — long one of the most divisive issues in Congress — could be even more difficult, even though there's widespread public support for some measures. Democrats hope to expand background checks, especially in the wake of several mass shootings in recent weeks. Many Republicans would back an expansion of background checks, as well, but would not go as far as Democratic legislation passed in the House in March. Bipartisan Senate talks have so far failed to yield a compromise.

Senators in both parties have also expressed interest in finding agreement on a House-passed bill that aims to reduce domestic and sexual violence against women, but they have disagreed on provisions in the legislation that could keep guns out of the hands of abusers, among other matters.

Biden introduced the original Violence Against Women Act in June 1990 when serving as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and the legislation has since been passed four times. "It's estimated that more than 50 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner every month in America," Biden said Wednesday. "Pass it and save lives."

GOING NOWHERE?

The list of long-shot bills on Biden's agenda is much longer.

At the top of that list is Democrats' wide-ranging effort to overhaul U.S. elections, legislation that would create automatic voter registration nationwide, promote early voting, require more disclosure from political donors and restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, among other changes. Senate Republicans are unanimously opposed to the measure, which has already passed the House, arguing it is designed to help Democrats win elections.

Democrats' eagerness to pass the legislation — which Biden said in his speech would "restore the soul of America" by protecting the sacred right to vote — could eventually prompt them to change filibuster rules in the Senate. But the party is not yet united on such a move, and a decision isn't expected soon.

Immigration is another intractable matter.

The Democratic-led House approved a pair of bills creating a pathway to citizenship for young "Dreamers" in the U.S. since childhood, immigrants who fled wars or natural disasters, and migrant farm workers. Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., have introduced legislation giving "Dreamers" a chance for citizenship, and there have been some bipartisan talks among senators.

But Republicans have latched onto the huge numbers of migrants seeking to cross the southwest border as a fertile campaign issue. And many in the GOP are demanding tough border security restrictions as their price for cooperation.

Several other policy priorities appear stalled, for now, including legislation to enshrine LGBTQ protections in the nation's labor and civil rights laws and bills to protect unions and raise the minimum wage.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan trade blame for cross-border shelling

MOSCOW (AP) — Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan traded blame Thursday for cross-border shelling and clashes that left at least four people dead and dozens injured in a conflict over water, the latest outburst of tensions between the two ex-Soviet Central Asian neighbors.

Troops from the two countries exchanged gunfire for most of the day around a water supply facility near the village of Kok-Tash in western Kyrgyzstan on the border with Tajikistan. More than 800 Kyrgyz residents were evacuated from several villages engulfed by the clashes.

Officials from the two countries declared a cease-fire late Thursday and agreed to pull back troops from the area. But a Kyrgyz police spokeswoman in Batken, Damira Yusupova, said heavy firing broke out again before dawn on Friday, according to the Interfax news agency.

Kyrgyzstan's Health Ministry said one person died and 45 others were injured in the clashes, according to the Tass news agency.

In Tajikistan, the mayor's office in the nearby city of Isfara said three Tajiks were killed and 31 were injured, including the mayor who received a gunshot wound, the RIA-Novosti news agency reported.

Kyrgyzstan's border guard service said Tajik troops shelled several Kyrgyz border checkpoints, setting one ablaze. In retaliation, Kyrgyz troops seized a Tajik checkpoint, it said. Kyrgyz media released video

showing Kyrgyz men taking cover as automatic gunfire rang out.

Amid the clashes, Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Zhaparov met with top officials to discuss the situation.

A large part of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border has remained unmarked, fueling fierce disputes over water, land and pastures. Kyrgyz and Tajik delegations have held several rounds of talks in recent years but have failed to end the border controversy.

Tajikistan's National Security Committee said Kyrgyz troops opened fire on Tajik border guards first and accused Kyrgyzstan of trying to forcefully take over the area, which Tajikistan sees as part of its territory.

Kyrgyz authorities said the conflict erupted Wednesday, when Tajik officials attempted to mount surveillance cameras to monitor the water supply facility and the Kyrgyz side opposed the move.

Both nations have claimed the area around the water reservoir, a dispute dating back decades to when they were both part of the Soviet Union.

Court: Germany must share climate burden between young, old

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — In a ruling hailed as groundbreaking, Germany's top court said Thursday the government must set clear goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions after 2030, arguing that existing legislation risks placing too much of a burden for curbing climate change on younger generations.

The verdict was a victory for climate activists from Germany and elsewhere who — with the support of environmental groups — had filed four complaints to the Constitutional Court arguing that their rights were at risk by the lack of sufficient targets beyond the next decade.

Like other European Union countries, Germany aims to cut emissions 55% below 1990 levels by 2030. Legislation passed two years ago set specific targets for sectors such as heating and transport over that period, but not for the long-term goal of cutting emissions to "net zero" by 2050.

The 2019 regulations "irreversibly pushed a very high burden of emissions reduction into the period after 2030," judges said in their ruling.

The court backed the argument that the 2015 Paris climate accord's goal of keeping global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), ideally no more than 1.5 C (2.7 F), by the end of the century compared with pre-industrial times should be a benchmark for policymakers. It ordered the German government to come up with new targets from 2030 onward by the end of next year.

In a striking precedent, the court also acknowledged the idea that Germany has a finite emissions "budget" before the Paris goal becomes impossible. While it didn't specify what Germany's share of the global carbon budget is, scientists have said at current rates of emission it could be used up in less than a decade.

Lawyer Felix Ekardt, who brought one of the cases, called the verdict "groundbreaking" for Germany.

"Germany's climate policy will need to be massively adjusted," he told reporters.

Fellow lawyer Roda Verheyen said the decision would likely mean Germany's plans to phase out coal use by 2038 would need to be brought forward, in order to realistically achieve the country's long-term emissions target.

"A simple calculator shows that this will be necessary," she said.

Germany has managed to cut its annual emissions from the equivalent of 1.25 billion tons of carbon dioxide in 1990 to about 740 million tons last year — a reduction of more than 40%.

The current target would require cuts of 178 million tons by 2030, but a reduction of 281 million tons in each of the following decades.

Judges said it would be wrong to allow one generation "to use up large parts of the CO2 budget with a comparatively mild reduction burden, if that simultaneously means following generations are left with a radical reduction burden and their lives are exposed to comprehensive limits to freedom."

Climate activists expressed delight at the verdict.

"With today's decision, generational justice has been achieved," said plaintiff Luisa Neubauer, a member of the Fridays for Future group. "Because our future freedoms and rights aren't less important than the rights and freedoms of today's generation."

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Germany's main industry lobby group, BDI, called for transparent and feasible targets to give companies the certainty needed to plan and develop new technologies and make the necessary investments required to shift from fossil fuels to carbon-free alternatives.

Environment Minister Svenja Schulze said after the verdict that she would propose new measures for Europe's biggest economy in the coming months.

The court's unanimous ruling plays into the hands of the environmentalist Greens party, which is leading in several polls ahead of Germany's national election on Sept. 26.

Annalena Baerbock, the Greens' candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor, called for "concrete action, here and now."

She said the Greens want to double the rate by which wind parks, solar farms and other sources of renewable energy sources are expanded over the next five years, ban the sale of new combustion engine vehicles starting in 2030, bring forward the deadline to end coal use and set additional emissions targets after 2030.

Britain earlier this month announced it will aim to cut its emissions 78% from 1990 levels by 2035, the most ambitious target of any industrialized nation. The U.K. hosts this year's international climate summit in Glasgow in November.

Christiana Figueres, who as U.N. climate chief was instrumental in negotiating the Paris accord, said the German court's unanimous verdict made clear the need to speed up efforts to reduce emissions.

"We need to focus on shorter-term mitigation and emission reductions," she said, adding that this urgency was reflected in last week's climate summit organized by President Joe Biden, who announced a doubling of the U.S. target for 2030, now aiming to cut emissions 52% from 2005 levels.

The legal cases in Germany are part of a global effort by climate activists to force governments to take urgent action to tackle climate change.

One of the first successful cases was brought in the Netherlands, where the Supreme Court two years ago confirmed a ruling requiring the government to cut emissions at least 25% by the end of 2020 from benchmark 1990 levels.

In February, a Paris court ruled that the French government had failed to take sufficient action to fight climate change in a case brought by four nongovernmental organizations.

For Dave Grohl, what drives musicians is more than van

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Dave Grohl thought he was making a nostalgic film about the formative days of famous musicians. But then the pandemic happened.

Partly by design and partly by circumstance, "What Drives Us" became a surprisingly emotional documentary about the power of live music and the pain of its absence.

The Foo Fighters leader has become an effective storyteller on film, making the "Sound City" documentary on a legendary California music studio and the HBO series "Sonic Highways." His latest is available for streaming Friday through the Coda Collection, a subscription streaming service, and Amazon Prime Video outside the U.S.

It centers on an experience common to most musicians, certainly rock bands. At some point they take the figurative leap of getting into a van with band members and bringing their music on the road.

"You've got to get in a van if you want to make it in this business," said Ringo Starr, who told of the Beatles stacking themselves like firewood to keep warm after their windshield blew out on a frigid night.

Grohl started by swapping van stories with more than two dozen musicians. But the interviews grew deeper as they talked about why they got into these lives, hence the double meaning of the "What Drives Us" title. He started editing the interviews after the pandemic struck, and realized how much the need to share music onstage was a common theme.

"It was part of the conversation," Grohl said. "But as time went on and we were starved for it, I realized that it was the most important part of the conversation. It's why we do it. No musician wants to stay in

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their basement for the rest of their life practicing scales.”

Their stories are funny and at times poignant; the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ Flea talks about music as an escape from an abusive childhood. “Here’s your golden ticket to Oz — go around in a van and play music with friends,” he said.

U2’s The Edge grew up in a small town north of Dublin with nothing to do. “That’s why we got into explosives,” he said, until watching “A Hard Day’s Night” set him and his friends on a more productive path.

St. Vincent, Metallica’s Lars Ulrich and AC/DC’s Brian Johnson are particularly eloquent subjects.

In a touring van, “you get to be really, really close with people — close in a way that people in a bank could never know,” St. Vincent said.

Grohl even finds, and drives around, the red van that Foo Fighters used in their formative days. His 15-year-old daughter is an aspiring musician, and the film made her more enthusiastic about following dad’s line of work, he said.

Grohl has a rapport with his fellow musicians that a conventional filmmaker or journalist can’t match. They’ve been in the same seat, or cargo hold.

“Musicians have a type of ESP with each other, which is usually shared when the instruments are on,” he said. “I’ve had great conversations with musicians where we haven’t said a word. You just play instruments together, and sometimes those can be the most revealing.”

He’s also gregarious and open-hearted to a startling extent; it’s hard not to get swept up in the 52-year-old songwriter’s enthusiasm. The former Nirvana drummer’s pandemic activities have included online “drum-off” contests with a 10-year-old British girl, Nandi Bushell, and writing and recording a song with Mick Jagger. He’s writing a book about some of his life’s adventures and finished making a TV series about rock stars and their mothers with his own mom.

From his days in the underground punk rock scene around Washington, D.C., music has always meant community to him.

He recalls being backstage at music festivals, with all sorts of acts playing a variety of styles.

“I would go walking from dressing room to dressing room, knocking on the door with a bottle of whiskey in my hand and say, ‘dude, let’s hang out, we’re musicians,’” he said. “We should be hanging out. It’s what we do.”

He’s lost track of all the colleagues he’s shared a whiskey with.

“I just love being with musicians,” he said. “Musicians can be really fun. In some ways, we’re like aliens. In some ways, we’re electricians. But put us all together and we’re like a convention of weirdos. I love being in the middle of it.”

If there’s a theme that runs through his film work, it’s to humanize a life that may seem distant or exotic to outsiders. Grohl is knocking on your door, essentially.

Live music is starting again, at least trickles of it. Grohl said he’s constantly asked by people on the street when it will be fully back; he’d love to know himself. He has dreams about it, stepping onstage and soaking up applause before hitting that first guitar chord.

He expects it will be an overwhelming experience.

“You can open up your laptop and go to YouTube and watch live performances by bands,” he said. “It can be entertaining. It can almost be exciting. But the tangible, communal experience of actually being there while it’s happening is something else.”

EXPLAINER: What to know about the Giuliani investigation

NEW YORK (AP) — The long-running federal investigation into Rudy Giuliani’s dealings in Ukraine moved back into public view Wednesday when federal agents seized electronic devices from the former mayor’s home and office.

The search was the latest development in an inquiry that overlapped with the first impeachment trial of Donald Trump, who was accused of pressuring the leaders of Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden and his son.

The probe involves a complex web of international characters who dealt with Giuliani as he tried to stir

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up support for a Ukrainian investigation of the Bidens.

Federal prosecutors haven't disclosed which elements of Giuliani's work are the focus of their probe, currently being led by Audrey Strauss, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York.

But at least one part is an examination of whether Giuliani failed to disclose to the U.S. government work he did on behalf of foreign entities.

WHY IS GIULIANI UNDER INVESTIGATION?

Giuliani's lawyer, Robert Costello, said the search warrants involved an allegation that Giuliani failed to register as a foreign agent.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act, originally passed before World War II to expose Nazi propaganda, requires people to disclose to the Justice Department when they have been hired to lobby in the U.S. on behalf of foreign governments, figures or political entities.

Criminal prosecutions under the law were once rare, but there have been a number of high-profile cases in recent years, including during special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian election interference. Trump's campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, was convicted of failing to register work he'd done for a political party in Ukraine. Trump's first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, admitted making false statements about work he'd done for Turkey.

In addition, Imaad Zuberi, a political fundraiser who attracted attention for large donations to Trump's inaugural committee, was sentenced in February to 12 years in prison for a violation of the foreign agents' act and other crimes.

WHAT WORK DID GIULIANI DO ON BEHALF OF UKRANIAN INTERESTS?

In numerous interviews, Giuliani has said that his work in Ukraine was intended to benefit only one person: Trump.

His goal, he has said, was to get the Ukrainian government to investigate Biden's son, Hunter, who had served on the board of a Ukrainian gas company.

However, at least some of the Ukrainian characters dealing with Giuliani as he tried to dig up dirt on the Bidens have said they also wanted his help with matters related to the U.S. government.

They included Ukraine's then-prosecutor general, Yuriy Lutsenko. In interviews, Lutsenko has said he asked for Giuliani's help arranging a meeting with the U.S. attorney general to discuss efforts to recover looted national assets. He also spoke with Giuliani about his clashes with the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch. The Trump administration later removed Yovanovitch from her post.

If Giuliani lobbied the Trump administration on behalf of Ukrainian figures, he might have been obligated to disclose that work.

WHAT HAS GIULIANI SAID?

Costello, Giuliani's lawyer, castigated Wednesday's FBI raid as corrupt and said he can demonstrate that the former New York mayor did no work as a foreign agent.

Giuliani previously told The Associated Press he "never represented a foreign anything before the U.S. government."

In the past, Giuliani has acknowledged that he considered taking on some Ukrainian figures and the Ukrainian government as paying clients, including Lutsenko, but said he ultimately decided not to do so.

That included deals that would have paid him hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to a New York Times report in 2019.

"I thought that would be too complicated," Giuliani told the newspaper at the time. "I never received a penny."

HAVE GIULIANI OR HIS ASSOCIATES BEEN CHARGED WITH ANYTHING?

Giuliani has not been charged with any crime and federal prosecutors have not publicly accused him of any misconduct.

Some of Giuliani's associates in his campaign to dig up dirt on the Bidens have, however, been indicted.

Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, who helped arrange Giuliani's meetings with Ukrainian figures, face federal charges that they helped foreigners make illegal campaign contributions to American politicians, including

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a pro-Trump political action committee, while trying to gain influence in government.

Initially, prosecutors had accused them of also secretly working on behalf of an unnamed Ukrainian official who wanted the removal of the U.S. ambassador, but that allegation was subsequently quietly erased from a superseding indictment.

It isn't part of the criminal case, but Parnas in 2019 also helped arrange for an Ukrainian tycoon, Dmitry Firtash, to hire lawyers to lobby the U.S. Justice Department to drop an international bribery charge pending against him in Chicago.

Firtash has said in interviews that at one time he was paying \$300,000 per month to those lawyers, Victoria Toensing and Joseph diGenova, who were also involved in Giuliani's campaign to pressure Ukraine to investigate the Bidens.

The FBI also executed a search warrant Wednesday on a phone belonging to Toensing, who has said she is not a target of the investigation.

Some documents that Toensing or diGenova gathered, ostensibly as part of Firtash's attempts to fight extradition from Austria, wound up being the basis of conservative media reports that Joe Biden had tried to block a Ukrainian prosecutor from investigating the gas company that had put Hunter Biden on its board.

Biden did press for the prosecutor's firing, but that's because he was reflecting the official position of not only the Obama administration but many Western countries that the prosecutor was perceived as soft on corruption.

People of color more exposed than whites to air pollution

DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

Across America, people of color are exposed to more air pollution than whites from industry, vehicles, construction and many other sources, a new study has found.

Using government air pollution and census data, researchers found that disproportionate numbers of non-white people were exposed to potentially hazardous fine particle pollution from nearly all major U.S. emission sources, regardless of where they live or how much money they make.

The study, published Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*, also found that Blacks were the only group disproportionately exposed to each of the pollution sources examined.

Researchers found that on average Black, Hispanic and Asian people were exposed to higher than average levels of fine particle pollution, while white people were subjected to lower than average levels.

"It doesn't matter how poor, it doesn't matter how wealthy, the racial disparities exist for all African-Americans and other people of color," said Paul Mohai, a professor of environmental justice at the University of Michigan who was not involved with the study. He's researched racial disparities in the distribution of hazardous waste dumps, industrial facilities and air pollution at schools — and why and how these disparities exist.

"When you look at the impact of air pollution in the U.S. from all the sources that contribute to fine particulate matter in the atmosphere, there is an overall systemic bias against people of color," said study co-author Jason Hill, a biosystems engineering professor at the University of Minnesota.

Fine particulate matter comes from a variety of sources, including coal-fired power plants, diesel trucks and farms. Past research shows associations between exposure to particulate matter and health problems such as premature death in people with heart or lung disease, heart attacks, irregular heartbeat and asthma.

While other studies have shown that non-white people are exposed to more air pollution compared to white people, and that Blacks and Hispanics breathe far more air pollution than they make, this new study breaks it down by source of pollution.

The researchers sorted the Environmental Protection Agency's emissions inventory of over 5,000 types of fine particulate matter into 14 sources such as industry, passenger cars, diesel trucks, construction and agriculture. Then they modeled exposure to those pollution sources by calculating average ambient air quality levels for racial groups based on their residential locations in 2014.

"Given that we have this national inequity in pollution exposure, what (sources are) actually driving that?"

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Hill said. "What this paper shows is that it's pretty much everything."

When looking at exposure disparities in urban areas, researchers found a notable exception: Asians are less exposed to particulate matter than average in urban areas in California such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Jose. The study didn't examine the cause of this, said lead author Christopher Tessum, an environmental engineering professor at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

This study appeared days after President Joe Biden convened a summit of world leaders to discuss emissions reductions, as well as shaping policy to protect vulnerable communities like ones disproportionately exposed to air pollution.

Hill said policymakers can use the study's findings to help make the case for tougher federal and state standards for regulating air pollution. "This is something that needs to be done at a national level," he said in an interview.

Said University of Virginia Economics Professor Jonathan Colmer: "By decomposing disparities in fine particulate matter into their component sources, their research shines a light on where researchers, policymakers, and communities might focus efforts going forward." Colmer, lead author on a 2020 paper about disparities in air pollution, was not part of the new study.

Other researchers said the study illustrates racial disparities in air pollution exposure that can't be explained by income level. Mohai said studies have shown race was a greater predictor of exposure than income, but he's unaware of any others that show racial disparities at each income level.

He said the disparities in air pollution exposure are part of "a long history of slavery and racial discrimination in the U.S."

"We started to see a pattern with the history of racial discrimination and segregation of industry being located where people of color are concentrated," Mohai said. "Racism isn't just about racial animus. It's about not caring about the welfare of people of other races and I think that's been a factor."

An unusual coalition as Supreme Court rules for immigrant

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An unusual coalition of Supreme Court justices joined Thursday to rule in favor of an immigrant fighting deportation in a case that the court said turned on the meaning of the shortest word, "a."

By a 6-3 vote, the court sided with Augusto Niz-Chavez, a Guatemalan immigrant who has been in the United States since 2005. Eight years later, he received a notice to appear at a deportation hearing but this notice did not include a date or time. Two months after that, a second notice instructed him when and where to show up.

By sending notice of a deportation hearing, the government can stop the clock on immigrants hoping to show they have been in the United States for at least 10 straight years. The 10-year mark makes it easier under federal law to ask to be allowed to remain in the country.

The court was deciding whether immigration officials had to include all the relevant information in a single notice.

Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in his majority opinion that they do, criticizing the government's "notice by installment."

Two other conservative justices, Clarence Thomas and Amy Coney Barrett, signed on, as did the court's three liberal members, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor. The case was argued in November during the Trump administration.

"Anyone who has applied for a passport, filed for Social Security benefits, or sought a license understands the government's affinity for forms. Make a mistake or skip a page? Go back and try again, sometimes with a penalty for the trouble. But it turns out the federal government finds some of its forms frustrating too," Gorsuch wrote.

A 1996 immigration law specifies "a notice to appear" for people the government wants to deport, Gorsuch said.

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"At first blush, a notice to appear might seem to be just that — a single document containing all the information an individual needs to know about his removal hearing. But, the government says, supplying so much information in a single form is too taxing. It needs more flexibility, allowing its officials to provide information in separate mailings (as many as they wish) over time (as long as they find convenient)," he wrote.

Gorsuch acknowledged that a lot seemed to be hanging on one word, but he said the court's role is to make sure the executive branch does not exceed the power Congress gave it.

"Interpreting the phrase 'a notice to appear' to require a single notice — rather than 2 or 20 documents — does just that," he wrote.

In dissent, Justice Brett Kavanaugh — an appointee of President Donald Trump along with Gorsuch and Barrett — called Gorsuch's conclusion "rather perplexing as a matter of statutory interpretation and common sense."

Kavanaugh pointed out that Niz-Chavez had adequate notice because he showed up at his hearing with a lawyer. "Niz-Chavez received written notice of the charges and all the required information, including the time and place of his hearing," Kavanaugh wrote, in an opinion that was joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito.

Receiving the first notice without a hearing date "affords the noncitizen more time to prepare a defense. And a noncitizen suffers no prejudice from receiving notice in two documents rather than one, as Niz-Chavez's case amply demonstrates," Kavanaugh wrote.

It wasn't the first time the two former law clerks to now-retired Justice Anthony Kennedy and alumni of Georgetown Preparatory School in suburban Maryland have been on opposite sides of a case.

Last year, Gorsuch wrote the court's opinion that held federal law bars workplace discrimination against LGBTQ people. Kavanaugh dissented.

'Clean out our insides': Ethiopia detains Tigrayans amid war

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopia has swept up thousands of ethnic Tigrayans into detention centers across the country on accusations that they are traitors, often holding them for months and without charges, the AP has found.

The detentions, mainly but not exclusively of military personnel, are an apparent attempt to purge state institutions of the Tigrayans who once dominated them, as the government enters its sixth month of fighting in the Tigray region. Detainees, families and visitors spoke of hundreds or even more than 1,000 people in at least nine individual locations, including military bases and an agricultural college.

The government of Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed acknowledges that it has locked up a small number of high-level military officials from the Tigrayan minority. But the AP is reporting for the first time that the detentions are far more sweeping in scope and more arbitrary, extending even to priests and office workers, sometimes with ethnic profiling as the sole reason.

A military detainee told the AP he is being held with more than 400 other Tigrayans, and lawyers are not allowed to contact them. Even families can't visit. The AP is not using his name for his safety but has seen his military ID.

"They can do what they want," he said on a smuggled phone. "They might kill us...We are in their hands, and we have no choice but to pray."

This story was funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Many of the military personnel were not combatants but held jobs such as teachers and nurses, according to interviews with 15 detainees and relatives, along with a lawyer and a camp visitor. Civilian employees of state-owned companies also have been held. The arbitrary locking up of non-combatants is against international law, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has met with family

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members of detainees but declined to answer questions.

Conditions vary, but some detainees are given just one meal a day and crowded dozens to a room in sweltering metal shelters, at a time when COVID-19 infections are rapidly rising in Ethiopia. Families worry that needed medications are withheld. Detainees and families the AP tracked down did not directly witness beatings or other such physical abuse, but almost all asked not to be identified out of fear for their lives.

Once detained, the Tigrayans often end up in Ethiopia's opaque military justice system. That means they can lose the right to private lawyers and face judges who one lawyer said tend to hand out the maximum penalty. With fewer means to challenge their detention, detainees say they feel helpless, their fate in the hands of the people who accuse them of treason.

One Tigrayan living in the United States said she could understand war between soldiers but objected to the detention of two cousins with non-combat roles in communications and peacekeeping. One hasn't been seen or heard from since November.

"Is the danger in their blood? In their DNA?" she asked. "I thought they were Ethiopians."

The mass detentions and house arrests are an extension of the war in the Tigray region marked by massacres, gang rapes, expulsions and forced starvation, which witnesses call a systematic effort to destroy the Tigrayan minority of more than 6 million. The detentions are all the more striking because Abiy was once praised for releasing thousands of political prisoners in a country long known for locking up people deemed a threat.

Tigrayans are further targeted by state media reports amplifying the government narrative of pursuing Tigray "criminals" and their supporters. Family members of detainees are sometimes stripped of their jobs, kicked out of military housing and subjected to frozen bank accounts.

Tigray leaders were prominent in Ethiopia's repressive government for nearly three decades and are blamed by Abiy and others for fostering sometimes deadly ethnic politics, but they were sidelined when he took office in 2018. After national elections were delayed last year, they held their own vote in Tigray and called Abiy's government illegitimate. Ethiopia then accused Tigray fighters of attacking a military base and launched an offensive, unleashing a war that has killed thousands.

Ethiopia's government is "only after the top leadership" of Tigray's former rulers, the minister for public diplomacy at the country's embassy in Britain, Mekonnen Amare, told the AP. "So there is no such thing as mass detention or mass abuse of rights."

But in a leaked video posted online earlier in the war and verified by the AP, a senior military official said of Tigrayans, "We had to clean out our insides. ... Even if there may be good people among them, we can't differentiate the good from the bad. To save the country, we made it so they were excluded from doing work." Now the security forces were "completely Ethiopian," Brig. Gen. Tesfaye Ayalew said in what appeared to be an internal briefing.

Ethiopia's attorney general's office, which has said it would set up a hotline to report ethnic profiling, did not respond to questions from the AP, and neither did a military spokesman. The U.S. State Department said it could not confirm reports of people detained in camps, but noted that it has paused most security assistance to Ethiopia because of concerns over the Tigray crisis.

Another Tigrayan who spoke to the AP from custody, his voice hushed on a borrowed phone, said he is being held without charges along with more than 30 pilots, technicians and other military personnel. He said families at times have no idea where relatives are, and his own mother still thinks he's working, just far away. He despairs of justice in military court.

"If peace comes, maybe they'll release us," he said. "If not, we don't have any future. I fear even they may kill us." Then he hurriedly ended the call.

Estimates of the number of detainees and camps vary. More than 17,000 Tigrayans were in the military alone when the war began and have been detained, according to an estimate given to a researcher by Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe, a former senior Ethiopian official and Tigrayan who founded the Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University.

Along with the at least nine centers cited by detainees, families and visitors, the AP obtained three

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separate lists that allege several others across the country. One detainee who escaped a center in Mirab Abaya in southern Ethiopia estimated that more than 1,500 people were held there alone.

A man who visited two other centers said detainees had counted 110 people in one, mostly military commanders, and 270 in the other, many of them commandos and air force officers. Some had served in the military for more than 30 years with no history of misconduct, he said.

The visitor described 40 to 50 people living in a room made of metal sheets. The detainees told him they were not allowed to speak in groups or have family visits or phone calls, and they didn't get enough food.

"The area is very hot, extremely hot....they don't look good," said the visitor, whom the AP is not identifying further to preserve his access to the centers. He said detainees alleged that people are held in at least 20 places across the country.

"It's scary, you know?" he said. "These people were serving their country as military personnel but were attacked by their own government....They have been identified as treasonous by the community, so they're seriously worried about their families."

Their families also are worried about them. A man in the capital, Addis Ababa, wept as he described not seeing or speaking to his brother, a human resources staffer with the military, for three months. His brother's family has been evicted from military housing, he said, sharing photos of their items strewn outdoors.

"He was serving his country honestly," the man said. "The situation is not good, not only for me but for all the Tigrayan people."

Another detainee had been serving in a neighboring country on a peacekeeping mission when he was called home to Ethiopia and seized, his son said. He was freed on bail, and the AP has seen the federal court document for his release. But then he was sent to a military camp, accused of creating instability although he wasn't in the country.

"I spoke with him yesterday. He sounded stressed," his son said. "People with the military gave him the phone in secret. He's a proud person. It's unsettling to hear him like that."

His father has lost about 10 kilograms (22 pounds) because of the lack of proper food, he said.

The transfer of people into the military system after being released on bail in the federal courts is illegal, said a lawyer in the capital, Tadele Gebremedhin, who has worked on more than 75 cases involving detained Tigrayans from the military and federal police. He said detainees at one center he visited on the outskirts of the capital sleep about 25 to a room, get food once a day and are denied family visits.

"They are innocent," the lawyer said. "The only thing is, they're Tigrayans."

Civilians have been held, too. One employee with state-owned Ethiopian Airlines said he fled the country after being released on bail.

"We need you very badly today," he recalled federal police saying as they took him from his home without explanation. He said he saw almost 100 high-ranking military officials during his two months in detention, from late November to late January.

Dozens of Tigrayan priests and deacons were detained in the capital, most for a month, according to Lisanewerk Desta, who leads the library and museum department of the Ethiopia Orthodox Church. He also said he has spoken with a detainee at a center near Harar who estimated that more than 2,000 military personnel were held there.

"I don't have words. How to explain this kind of hatred?" he asked.

Beyond the camps, an unknown number of Tigrayans are under house arrest. A man described how one parent, a nurse in the military, has been barred from work since the war began and is under a curfew.

The United Nations human rights office said it was aware of reports of arbitrary detention of Tigrayans but did not have reliable estimates "given the lack of transparency."

The government-created Ethiopian Human Rights Commission did not answer questions, instead sharing recent statements on Tigrayan detainees and ethnic profiling. In a statement this week, the commission said the denial of fair trials, family visits and medical treatment is "still rife" at several detention centers, and detainees are often unable to tell families where they are.

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The commission spoke earlier this year with 21 detainees at a federal police center in the capital, with some describing "lengthy pre-trial detention periods and being subjected to insults, threats, beatings and to physical injuries from shots fired at the time of their capture." However, the commission said detainees were in good health and the conditions of detention met acceptable standards.

Tigrayans dispute that. In neighboring South Sudan, more than a dozen members of the United Nations peacekeeping mission refused to board a flight home in February when their stay ended.

On Thursday, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq told the AP a number of Ethiopians in the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Sudan's Darfur region are "seeking international protection" as several hundred troops are being repatriated.

For detainees, it is unclear what happens next. Two people told the AP that a campaign to "re-educate" them has begun, including lectures promoting Abiy's political party. One person said their cousin had gone through the training, and another said their relative had been told it would start soon.

The risk for the government is that the detentions could turn Tigrayans who once swore their loyalty into active opponents.

Teklebrhan Weldeselassie, an air force pilot, said he and colleagues were accused of being in contact with Tigray's now-fugitive leaders. He escaped house arrest and fled Ethiopia, but he said colleagues have told him they are among an estimated 1,000 Tigrayans detained near the air force headquarters in Debre Zeit.

Once shocked by being suspected as a traitor, he is so horrified by Ethiopia's treatment of Tigrayans that he now says he would consider taking up arms.

"Before, I didn't plan to fight on the side of Tigray," Teklebrhan said. "At this time, if I get a chance, yeah, of course I would defend my people."

Watchdog: US aid to Venezuela driven by more than just need

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writer

MIAMI (AP) — It was billed as the beginning of the end for Nicolás Maduro. With foreign leaders in tow and the world watching, anti-Maduro activists gathered in Colombia in February 2019 with the aim of pushing entire warehouses worth of aid — flown in on U.S. military cargo planes — across the border into Venezuela.

Instead, the humanitarian convoy was violently blocked by security forces loyal to Maduro — the first in a series of miscalculations in the Trump administration's policy toward Venezuela.

More than two years later, the risky gambit is being questioned by a U.S. government watchdog. A new report by the inspector general at the U.S. Agency for International Development raises doubts about whether the deployment of aid was driven more by the U.S. pursuit of regime change than by technical analysis of needs and the best ways to help struggling Venezuelans.

The findings were published April 16 but have not been previously reported.

The report focuses on the frenzied few months after opposition leader Juan Guaidó rose up to challenge Maduro's rule, quickly winning recognition as Venezuela's rightful leader by the U.S. and dozens of allies.

As part of that effort, USAID between January and April 2019 spent \$2 million to position 368 tons of emergency supplies on the Caribbean island of Curacao and on the Colombia-Venezuela border.

Under Guaidó's orders, the aid was supposed to be delivered into Venezuela in defiance of Maduro, who condemned the effort as a veiled coup attempt. But when an opposition-organized caravan that tried to enter Venezuela was blocked at the border, at least one truck caught fire, destroying \$34,000 worth of U.S.-supplied aid.

As media attention turned away and Guaidó's fight to unseat Maduro unraveled in the months that followed, the U.S. assistance was quietly repurposed. In the end, only eight tons ever reached Venezuela, with the remaining 360 tons distributed inside Colombia or shipped to Somalia, the report found.

The report said the U.S. deployment of aid responded in part to the Trump administration's campaign to pressure Maduro rather than just coming to the aid of struggling Venezuelans.

For example, the assistance was needlessly delivered in giant Air Force C-17 cargo planes instead of

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cheaper commercial options that were available, the report said. Ready-to-use meals to fight child malnutrition were also sent even though USAID's own experts had decided the nutritional status of Venezuelan children didn't warrant its use at the time, investigators said.

To bolster Guaidó, USAID — believing U.N. agencies had been co-opted by Maduro — minimized funding to the United Nations even though some U.N. agencies had infrastructure inside Venezuela to distribute the aid. A Venezuelan nonprofit organization, which isn't identified by name in the report, was awarded funding partly based on its alignment with U.S. foreign policy interests even though doubts persisted about whether it could meet the agency's legal and financial requirements.

The "directive to pre-position humanitarian commodities was not driven by technical expertise or fully aligned with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and being based on needs assessments," the report says.

While international aid workers at the time issued similar warnings about the risks of assistance being politicized — the aid convoy in Colombia was preceded by a "Venezuela Live Aid" concert organized by billionaire Richard Branson — the findings of a U.S. agency tasked with auditing how U.S. tax dollars are spent carries additional weight.

The report, which was nearly two years in the making, was prepared to address challenges and "fraud risks" in USAID's response to the Venezuelan crisis. It contains six recommendations to improve coordination across the sprawling agency — the main vehicle for U.S. foreign assistance — and strengthen controls to avoid politicizing humanitarian action.

A USAID spokesperson said the agency welcomed the report's findings, which it is implementing, and all efforts to improve the effectiveness of USAID's work, especially in challenging environments.

Many of the decisions came from the office of then-USAID Administrator Mark Green, according to the report.

"The verbal direction did not establish clear accountability nor did it provide justification for decision-making," the report said.

A former Trump-era official disputed some of the report's findings, maintaining that the decision to send the aid on military planes was taken by the White House and State Department over objections from USAID. The former official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal decision making,

Green, in a statement, said he was proud of USAID's work to help Venezuelans in desperate need of assistance with bipartisan support from Congress.

"The Venezuelan crisis is one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world under the most challenging conditions where the illegitimate Maduro regime continues to place obstacles that prevent basic necessities for the Venezuelan people," said Green, who is now president of the Woodrow Wilson Center, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington. "The Venezuelan crisis is a destabilizing force that impacts the entire region and assistance continues to be needed to help save lives."

Whatever mistakes were made, the Trump administration's actions — coinciding with Venezuela's economic collapse — were key in pushing other governments and humanitarian groups to focus on the country's plight.

Shortly after Guaidó's aid delivery caravan failed, USAID started quietly working behind the scenes with U.N. agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other groups to get aid into Venezuela, where such goods are frequently distributed at government hospitals and agencies controlled by Maduro.

Those efforts have continued under President Joe Biden and recently saw the announcement that the World Food Program would soon begin distributing meals to 1.5 million Venezuelan children at a time of rising hunger in the oil-rich nation.

More than 5.1 million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2014, some of them by foot, to escape hyperinflation, widespread shortages of basic goods and a crumbling health care system.

Since 2017, the U.S. has provided more than \$500 million in humanitarian and development assistance to respond to the humanitarian crisis, much of it to countries like Colombia, Peru and Brazil that have absorbed the largest number of migrants.

Is it safe to go to big sporting events during the pandemic?

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Is it safe to go to big sporting events during the pandemic?

Not yet, but there are ways to make it safer if you go.

"Yelling, chanting, hugging and generally pouring out our sports enthusiasm is still not the safest activity," noted Jennifer Dowd, associate professor of population health at University of Oxford and chief scientific officer of Dear Pandemic, a website that offers expert opinions.

If you do decide to go to a game, outdoor stadiums are safer than indoor arenas, which won't be as well ventilated. Venues that limit attendance and require masks are safer as well. Some teams are requiring proof of vaccination or a negative test for the coronavirus.

Once at the stadium, avoid indoor bars, restaurants and box seating, Dowd said. "Spaces that are indoors with lots of people eating and drinking without masks are still among the riskiest," she said.

Going to a game is much safer if you're fully vaccinated, notes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But the agency advises wearing masks at crowded sports events regardless of whether you've had your shots.

Evidence on the safety of big games is mixed. The NFL says it safely hosted 1.2 million fans at 119 games during the 2020 season. Some studies that haven't yet been vetted by outside experts have reached differing conclusions about whether the football season led to more infections. The study findings can't be certain, since they were based on disease rates in counties, not on contact tracing investigations.

Dr. Peter Hotez, an infectious disease specialist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, said enough Americans will likely be fully vaccinated by June or July to see significant declines in transmission of the virus.

"The risk won't go to zero," Hotez said, but it will drop enough that sporting events, restaurants and larger gatherings may be much safer.

The CDC offers additional guidance to help sports fans make decisions as the pandemic continues, such as checking with event organizers about what safety measures are being taken. An important reminder: If you have symptoms, are waiting for a virus test result or have been exposed to someone who's infected, you should stay home, the CDC says.

Gone Fission: Controversial nuke plant near NYC shuts down

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

BUCHANAN, N.Y. (AP) — Indian Point will permanently stop producing nuclear power Friday, capping a decades-long battle over a key source of electricity in the heart of New York City's suburbs that opponents have called a threat to millions living in the densely packed region.

The retirement of the Indian Point Energy Center along the Hudson River could increase New York's short-term reliance on natural gas plants, despite the state's goal of reducing carbon emissions. But Gov. Andrew Cuomo and others who fought for its shutdown argue any benefits from the plant are eclipsed by the nightmare prospect of a major nuclear accident or a terror strike 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of the city.

"There are 20 million people living within 50 miles of Indian Point and there is no way to evacuate them in case of a radiological release. And the risk of that is quite real," said Paul Gallay, president of the environmental group Riverkeeper.

The actual shutdown will be straightforward: a control room operator for Indian Point's Unit 3 will push a red button to shut down the reactor Friday night. It will complete a contentious closing of the plant's two reactors years in the making.

The Unit 2 reactor shut down exactly a year ago under a 2017 agreement among the Cuomo administration, Riverkeeper and the plant's operator, Entergy Corp. Unit 3's shutdown under the same agreement paves the way for a decommissioning that is projected to cost \$2.3 billion and take at least 12 years. The tall twin domes visible from the river will eventually be demolished.

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The two reactors, which went online two years apart in the mid-'70s, had generated about a quarter of the electricity used in New York City and the lower Hudson Valley.

They also generated controversy.

Environmentalists faulted the plant for killing fish by taking in massive amounts of river water for cooling. Critics said the plant was antiquated and pointed to a safety history that included faulty reactor bolts and radioactive tritium detected in groundwater onsite.

Fears that Indian Point could be a terror target intensified after one of the planes hijacked for the Sept. 11 attacks flew by the plant on its way down the river to the World Trade Center.

"In theory, the plant was built to withstand an airplane crash in the '70s," Cuomo told reporters recently. "Who knows what would happen now with Indian Point?"

Entergy spokesperson Jerry Nappi said Indian Point has run reliably and safely virtually without interruption since 1962, when the first long-since-retired reactor went online at the site of an old amusement park.

Entergy says low wholesale energy prices and operating costs factored into its 2017 decision to close Indian Point. Nuclear plants have been closing in recent years amid low natural gas prices, slow growth in electricity demand and competition from renewables.

Village of Buchanan Mayor Theresa Knickerbocker, a lifetime resident, said the plant operators are good neighbors and it's sad to see them go. The village is among the local beneficiaries of annual payments from Entergy and there were still 750 workers employed there this month.

"We were always known as one of the smallest communities with a nuclear power plant. We were kind of proud of that," Knickerbocker said. "People would make fun of us, 'Oh, you glow in the dark?' and we're like, 'Yeah, we do.'"

Indian Point's exit is not expected create reliability problems for New York's electrical grid. But it comes as the Cuomo administration works to increase the share of electricity generated by clean renewables like wind and solar. The state aims to get 70% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030.

Indian Point proponents say its retirement will require New York to rely more heavily on fossil-fuel burning natural gas plants. They note that natural gas generation in New York already increased last year after Unit 2 closed.

"Now we're going to double the damage when Indian Point 3 shuts down, taking us even further backwards," said Keith Schue of New York Energy and Climate Advocates.

Backers of the closure say any potential bump up in New York natural gas generation needs to be considered in context of a decrease in fossil fuel generation since 2016, as well as progress in renewables and energy efficiency. New York has more than 20 large-scale renewable energy infrastructure projects that will be under construction this year with more planned.

Tom Congdon, chairman of Cuomo's Indian Point closure task force, said the state has been preparing for the retirement for years and the state remains on target for its clean air goals. He said a fluctuation in natural gas generation is possible.

"But whatever that change is, it's temporary in nature because of this tremendous pipeline of renewable energy projects that are all coming online over the next few years," Congdon said.

Pending state regulatory approval, Entergy will transfer Indian Point to New Jersey-based Holtec International for decommissioning. Spent fuel is being moved to gigantic onsite "dry casks" until it can go elsewhere.

Holtec said it will provide job opportunities more than 300 Indian Point employees, and local communities will have access to payments and assistance to ease their post-nuclear transition.

Knickerbocker hopes that some of the 240-acre site will eventually be used for residential and commercial development.

"It's the end of an era for us," she said.

Indians turn to black market, unproven drugs as virus surges

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and NEHA MEHROTRA Associated Press

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NEW DELHI (AP) — Ashish Poddar kept an ice pack on hand as he waited outside a New Delhi hospital for a black market dealer to deliver two drugs for his father, who was gasping for breath inside with COVID-19.

But the drugs never arrived, the ice that was intended to keep the medicines cool melted and his father died hours later.

As India faces a devastating surge of new coronavirus infections overwhelming its health care system, people are taking desperate measures to try to keep loved ones alive. In some cases they are turning to unproven medical treatments, in others to the black market for life-saving medications that are in short supply.

Poddar had been told by the private hospital treating his father, Raj Kumar Poddar, that remdesivir, an antiviral, and tocilizumab, a drug that blunts human immune responses, were needed to keep the 68-year-old man alive.

Like most hospitals and pharmacies in the Indian capital, stocks had run out. Desperate, Poddar turned to a dealer who promised the medicines after taking an advance of almost \$1,000.

"It's nearby" and "coming" read some of the texts that Ashish received as he waited.

"I wish he had at least told me that he isn't going to come. I could have searched elsewhere," the grieving son said.

India set another global record in new virus cases Thursday with more than 379,000 new infections, putting even more pressure on the country's overwhelmed hospitals. The country of nearly 1.4 billion people has now recorded over 18 million cases, behind only the U.S., and over 200,000 deaths — though the true number is believed to be higher.

Death is so omnipresent that burial grounds are running out of space in many cities and glowing funeral pyres blaze through the night.

The few medicines known to help treat COVID-19, such as remdesivir and steroids in hospitalized patients, are scarce. The most basic treatment — oxygen therapy — is also in short supply, leading to unnecessary deaths. Even hospital beds are scarce. There were just 14 free intensive care beds available in New Delhi, a city of 29 million people, on Thursday morning.

India's latest treatment guidelines mirror those of the World Health Organization and the United States with a key exception: India allows mildly ill patients to be given hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin, drugs used for certain tropical diseases.

There is little evidence they work against COVID-19, and the WHO strongly recommends against hydroxychloroquine's use for COVID-19 of any severity and against using ivermectin except in studies.

While India is a leading producer of medicine globally, its regulation of drugs was poor even before the pandemic. And mounting despair is driving people to try anything.

Dr. Amar Jesani, a medical ethics expert, said many prescription drugs can be bought over the counter, including emergency drugs greenlit by Indian authorities for COVID-19.

"Hospitals and doctors are so used to having a 'magic bullet' that will cure you," he said, explaining the use of unproven drugs as COVID-19 cases skyrocket.

When Suman Shrivastava, 57, was infected with the virus, her doctor in Kanpur city in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, prescribed ivermectin. When her symptoms worsened, her doctor then asked her to take favipiravir, an antiviral, though it is unproven against COVID-19.

Her nephew, Rajat Shrivastava, said that drug was hard to find but he eventually located it in a pharmacy which was rationing its supplies by giving a single strip daily to each patient. He eventually bought extra doses from an online volunteer on Twitter and now his aunt is doing well.

Dr. Anant Bhan, who researches public health and ethics in the city of Bhopal, warns there are risks in the do-it-yourself approach. Bhan said antivirals and steroids should be taken in a hospital setting due to the risk of side effects. And drugs that are life-saving at one point could be harmful at another, depending on timing and how severe the symptoms are.

"It's scary because these aren't vitamin pills," he said.

Black market prices for remdesivir, which is produced by several Indian companies, have increased up

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to 20-fold to about \$1,000 for a single vial, said Siddhant Sarang, a volunteer with Yuva Halla Bol, a youth activist group which is helping patients find medicines and hospital beds.

In September, federal data showed that Indian drug makers had made over 2.4 million vials of the drug. But when cases dipped in September, companies destroyed much of their expired stock and production declined.

India was then slow to respond to the uptick of infections in February, and production was only scaled up in March. Earlier this week, Merck announced a deal with five makers of generic drugs in India to produce molnupiravir, an experimental antiviral similar to remdesivir, which is given by IV, but in a more convenient pill form. It's unclear when that might become available.

With demand high, black market dealers are insisting on cash upfront, said Sarang.

"People are going to dealers with 200,000 to 300,000 rupees (\$2,700-\$4,000) in a suitcase," he said.

Authorities have started cracking down on the dealers. In New Delhi, for instance, raids are being carried out on shops or people suspected of hoarding oxygen cylinders and medicines.

Despite all the desperate efforts, medicines that work remain unavailable to many.

Virus-blocking antibody drugs, widely used elsewhere, aren't yet authorized in India. Roche, which works with Regeneron Pharmaceuticals on marketing one such treatment, said Wednesday it is negotiating with India to speed up emergency use. American drug maker Eli Lilly, which makes a similar treatment, said it is in discussions with the Indian government.

Stuti Bhardwaj, 37, went from one pharmacy to another in southern New Delhi this week. Her parents, both in their seventies, were not able to get tests but showed symptoms of COVID-19 and had dangerously low oxygen levels. A doctor advised a host of medications, including hydroxychloroquine.

She eventually found it and bought it, aware it was unlikely to work.

"My parents are dying," Bhardwaj said. "I am desperate."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 30, the 120th day of 2021. There are 245 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War ended as the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to Communist forces.

On this date:

In 1517, Londoners began attacking foreign residents in rioting that carried over into the next day; no deaths were reported from what came to be known as "Evil May Day," but about a dozen rioters, maybe more, ended up being executed.

In 1789, George Washington took the oath of office in New York as the first president of the United States.

In 1803, the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France for 60 million francs, the equivalent of about \$15 million.

In 1945, as Soviet troops approached his Berlin bunker, Adolf Hitler took his own life along with that of his wife of one day, Eva Braun.

In 1968, New York City police forcibly removed student demonstrators occupying five buildings at Columbia University.

In 1970, President Richard M. Nixon announced the U.S. was sending troops into Cambodia, an action that sparked widespread protest.

In 1973, President Richard Nixon announced the resignations of top aides H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst and White House counsel John Dean, who was actually fired.

In 1983, blues singer and guitarist Muddy Waters died in Westmont, Ill., at age 68.

In 1993, top-ranked women's tennis player Monica Seles was stabbed in the back during a match in

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Hamburg, Germany, by a man who described himself as a fan of second-ranked German player Steffi Graf. (The man, convicted of causing grievous bodily harm, was given a suspended sentence.)

In 2004, Arabs expressed outrage at graphic photographs of naked Iraqi prisoners being humiliated by U.S. military police; President George W. Bush condemned the mistreatment of prisoners, saying "that's not the way we do things in America."

In 2010, heavy winds and high tides complicated efforts to hold back oil from a blown-out BP-operated rig that threatened to coat bird and marine life in the Gulf of Mexico; President Barack Obama halted any new offshore projects pending safeguards to prevent more explosions like the one that unleashed the spill.

In 2019, Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó took to the streets to call for a military uprising against Nicolas Maduro; street battles erupted in the Venezuelan capital. The Trump administration quickly declared enthusiastic support for the Venezuelan opposition effort.

Ten years ago: A Libyan official said Moammar Gadhafi had escaped a NATO missile strike in Tripoli that killed one of his sons and three young grandchildren.

Five years ago: Anti-government protesters tore down walls and poured into the Iraqi capital's heavily fortified Green Zone, where they stormed parliament in a major escalation of a political crisis that had simmered for months. The Rev. Daniel Berrigan, 94, a Roman Catholic priest and peace activist who was imprisoned for burning draft files in a protest against the Vietnam War, died in New York.

One year ago: The number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits soared past 30 million in the six weeks since the virus outbreak took hold. The Republican-led Michigan legislature refused to extend the state's emergency declaration and voted to authorize a lawsuit challenging the authority of Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to deal with the pandemic; Whitmer responded by declaring a new 28-day state of emergency. Hundreds of conservative activists, some openly carrying assault rifles, returned to the Michigan state Capitol to denounce the governor's stay-home order. President Donald Trump continued to speculate on the origins of the coronavirus, saying China could have unleashed it on the world due to some kind of "mistake" or that it might have been released intentionally. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said New York City subways would be shut down from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. each day for cleaning of trains and stations.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Willie Nelson is 88. Actor Burt Young is 81. King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden is 75. Movie director Allan Arkush is 73. Actor Perry King is 73. Singer-musician Wayne Kramer is 73. Singer Merrill Osmond is 68. Movie director Jane Campion is 67. Movie director Lars von Trier is 65. Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper is 62. Actor Paul Gross is 62. Basketball Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas is 60. Actor Adrian Pasdar is 56. Rock singer J.R. Richards (Dishwalla) is 54. Rapper Turbo B (Snap) is 54. Rock musician Clark Vogeler is 52. R&B singer Chris "Choc" Dalrymple (Soul For Real) is 50. Rock musician Chris Henderson (3 Doors Down) is 50. Country singer Carolyn Dawn Johnson is 50. Actor Lisa Dean Ryan is 49. R&B singer Akon is 48. R&B singer Jeff Timmons (98 Degrees) is 48. Actor Johnny Galecki is 46. Actor Sam Heughan is 41. Actor Kunal Nayyar is 40. Rapper Lloyd Banks is 39. Actor Kirsten Dunst is 39. Actor Dianna Agron is 35. Country singer Brandon Lancaster is 32. Rapper/producer Travis Scott is 30.