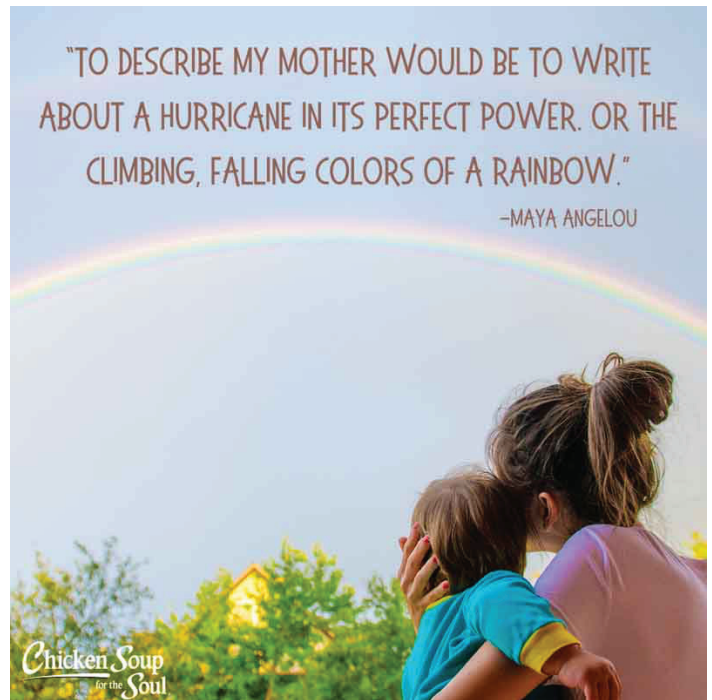


Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 1 of 72

- [1- MJ's Help Wanted Ad](#)
- [2- Weber Landscaping Garden Center Ad](#)
- [3- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [4- City Council Agenda](#)
- [5- Upcoming Events](#)
- [6- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [7- Weather Pages](#)
- [10- Daily Devotional](#)
- [11- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [12- News from the Associated Press](#)



"TO DESCRIBE MY MOTHER WOULD BE TO WRITE ABOUT A HURRICANE IN ITS PERFECT POWER. OR THE CLIMBING, FALLING COLORS OF A RAINBOW."

—MAYA ANGELOU

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.

**Weber
Landscaping
Greenhouse
IS NOW
OPEN!**



**We have a full greenhouse of
beautiful annuals and vegetables!!**

Open

M-F: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Saturday: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Sunday: Noon to 4 p.m.

602 West Third Ave., Groton

LET US HELP YOU BRIGHTEN UP YOUR YARD!

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 3 of 72

**City Council
Meeting
Wednesday,
May 5, 2021**



7 p.m.

**New City Hall
120 N Main**

D.A.R.E.

GRADUATION

On GDILIVE.COM

**Thursday, May 6, 2021, 10 a.m..
Groton Area High School Arena**

The service of

Dolores Baily

Thursday, May 6, 10:30 a.m.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton
Catholic Church



GDILIVE.COM

HIGH SCHOOL SPRING CONCERT

On GDILIVE.COM

**Thursday, May 6, 2021, 7:00 p.m..
Groton Area High School Gym**

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

May 5, 2021 – 7:00pm

120 N Main Street

(NOTICE ADDRESS)

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
2. Bills
3. Minutes
4. Department reports
5. Appoint Library Board
6. Police Department location
7. Airport Repairs – Darrell Hillestad
8. May 12th – Hit a Home Run with doTERRA Spring Tour
9. Pool Prices
10. 2020 Annual Report
11. Pole Agreement with Midco
12. Council Committee Representatives
13. Change order #2 AB Contracting
14. Second Reading of the Supplemental Appropriation Ordinance #746
15. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
16. Adjournment

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 5 of 72

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, May 5

Noon: Groton Chamber Meeting at Groton Community Center

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting at New City Hall (120 N Main)

Thursday, May 6

Elementary Track and Field Day

10 a.m.: 5th Grade DARE Graduation, GHS Arena

10:30 a.m.: Funeral Service for Dolores Baily at SEAS Church

7 p.m.: High School Spring Concert & Awards Night

Friday, May 7

Last Day of School

3 p.m.: Track: Varsity at Sisseton

Monday, May 10

4 p.m.: Track: 7th/8th at Aberdeen Roncalli (Swisher Field)

7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Thursday, May 13

11 a.m.: Track: Northeast Conference Meet in Groton

12:30 p.m.: Scholarship Meet and Greet, GHS Library

Friday, May 14

3:30 p.m.: Track: 7th/8th @ Groton

Sunday, May 16

2 p.m.: GHS Graduation, GHS Arena

Monday, May 17

10 a.m.: Track: 7th/8th Northeast Conference Track Meet at Swisher Field

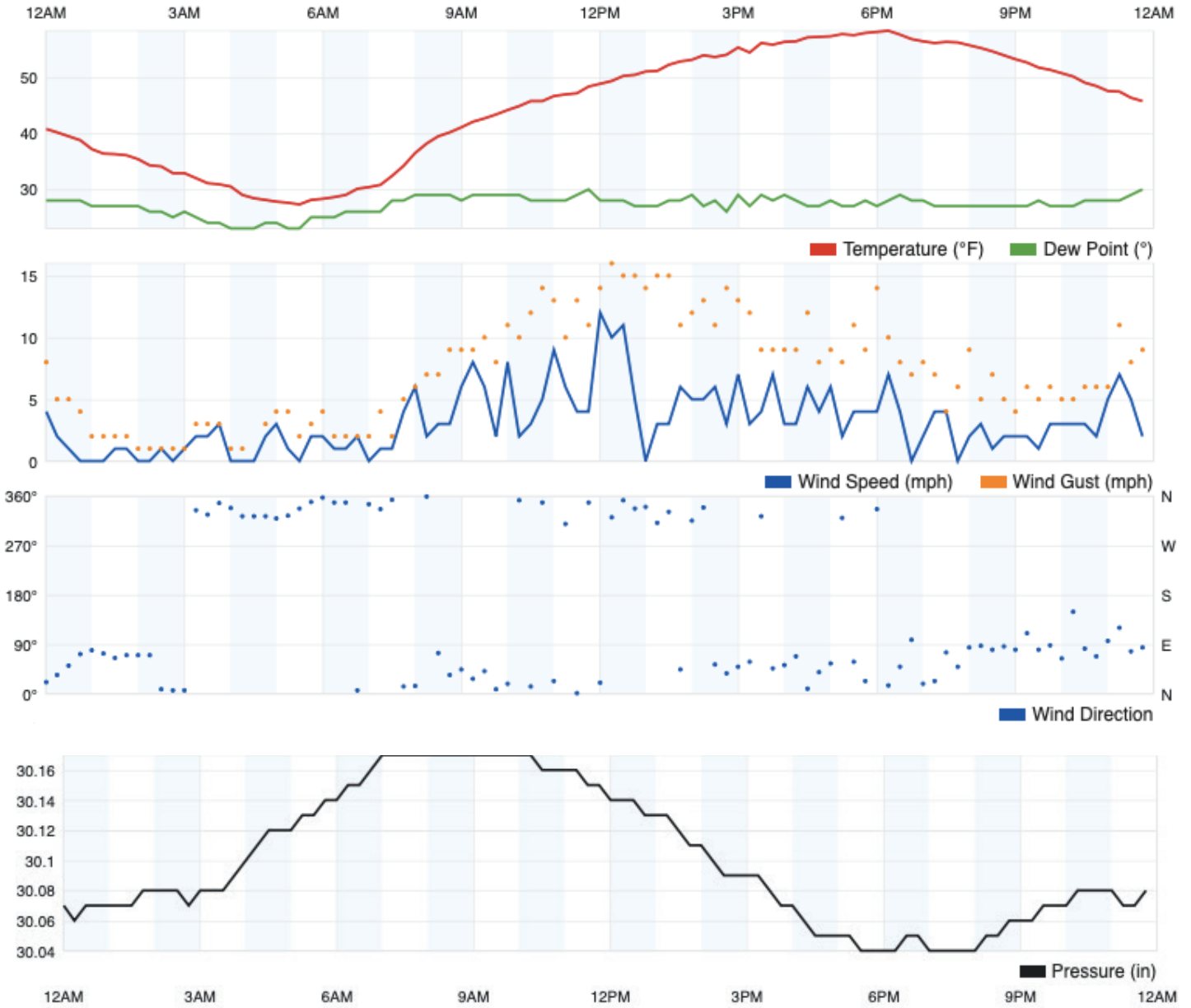
Thursday, May 20

Noon: Region 1A Track Meet at Sisseton

Groton Daily Independent

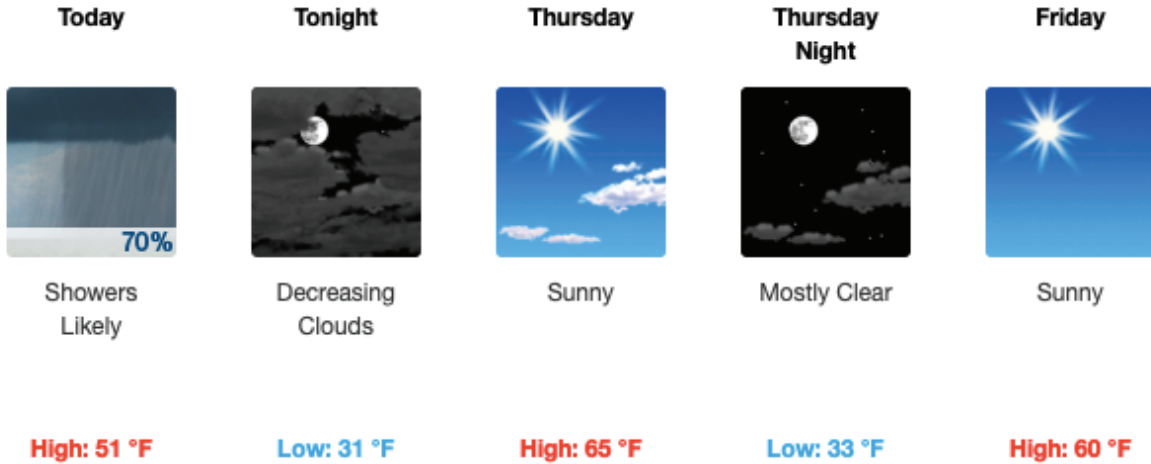
Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 6 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 7 of 72



Precipitation Chances Increasing Over Northeast South Dakota Through Early Afternoon

Today

- Mostly rain chances during the day.
- Snow may mix with the rain at times today.

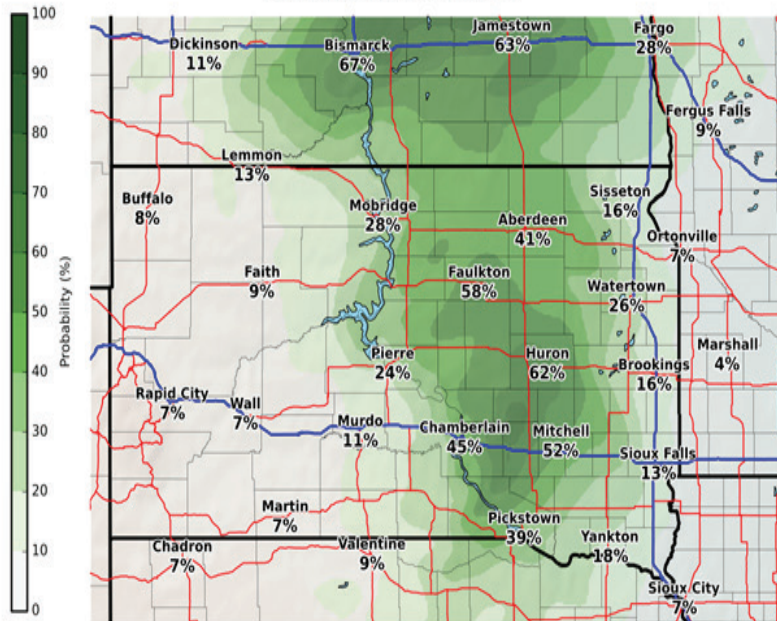
Thursday

- Warmer, with highs mainly 60-70°F
- Mostly Sunny
- Breezy with winds gusting 25-40mph
- **Elevated fire danger as relative humidity drops to 25 percent or lower**

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Updated: 5/5/2021 5:56 AM Central

Timing Precipitation Chances Today
Valid: May 05, 2021 at 06:00 AM



  National Weather Service
Aberdeen SD
05/05/2021 05:26 AM CDT

Follow Us:   
weather.gov/Aberdeen

It's going to be rather cool today with, mainly, rain chances on the increase during the day today. Conditions should dry out tonight and remain so on Thursday. Thursday also looks breezy to windy on northwest winds. Elevated fire weather conditions are expected on Thursday, as relative humidity values decrease to less than 25 percent across much of the region.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 8 of 72

Today in Weather History

May 5, 1964: A two-state, F3 tornado moved northeast from 4 miles WNW of Herreid to the south of Streeter, North Dakota, a distance of about 55 miles. Blacktop was ripped for 400 yards on Highway 10, five miles north of Herreid, South Dakota. Two barns were destroyed northeast of Hague, North Dakota, with a dozen cattle killed on one farm. The F3 damage occurred at one farm about midway between Wishek and Hogue. Other barns were destroyed south of Burnstad.

May 5, 1986: A tight pressure gradient produced winds over 60 mph in west central Minnesota. City officials in Browns Valley estimated a quarter of the city suffered damage. The roof of a grandstand was blown off and landed a quarter of a block away. Seventy-five homes and six businesses sustained roof damage. In nearby Dumont, Minnesota, the wind ripped a large grain bin off its foundation and tore open the top of another.

May 5, 2007: A north to south frontal boundary, powerful low-level winds, and abundant gulf moisture resulted in training thunderstorms across parts of central and northeast South Dakota. The training thunderstorms produced torrential rains from 3 to over 10 inches resulting in widespread flash flooding across Brown, Buffalo, Hand, Spink, Clark, Day, Marshall, and Roberts Counties. The counties of Brown, Buffalo, Clark, Day, Marshall, and Spink were declared disaster areas by President Bush. The Governor also declared a state of emergency for the flooded counties with Senator John Thune and Representative Stephanie Herseth surveying the flood damage. Eight damage assessment teams from local, state, and FEMA came to Brown and other counties.

Dozens of cities were affected by the flooding with several hundred homes, businesses, and countless roads affected and damaged or destroyed by the flooding. Aberdeen received the most extensive damage, especially the north side of Aberdeen. Seventy-five percent of the homes in Aberdeen received some water in their basements. Basement water levels ranged from a few inches to very deep water all the way up to the first floor of homes. Many homes had the basement walls collapse. The overwhelming load on the drainage systems caused sewage to back up into many homes across the region. Also, many vehicles stalled on the roads with many others damaged by the flooding. Power outages also occurred across the area. Many families were displaced from their homes with many living in emergency shelters. Countless homes were condemned across the region with many considered unlivable. Thousands of acres of crops were also flooded and damaged with many seeds, and large quantities of fertilizer washed away.

Rainfall amounts from this historic event included 3.65 inches in Miller, 3.82 inches in Britton, 4 inches in Eden, 4.47 inches in Andover, 4.90 inches in Webster, 5.68 inches west of Britton, 5.7 inches in Garden City, and 5.82 inches in Conde. Locations with 6 or more inches of rain included, 6 inches in Langford, 6.33 inches in Gann Valley, 6.72 inches in Clark, 7.41 inches in Ashton, 7.49 inches in Stratford, 7.55 inches near Mellette, 7.97 inches in Aberdeen, 8.02 inches in Redfield, 8.73 inches in Columbia, and 8.74 inches in Groton. The 8.74 inches of rainfall in Groton set a new 24-hour state rainfall record. Adding in the rainfall for the previous day, Aberdeen received a total of 9.00 inches; Columbia received a total of 10.19 inches; Groton received an astonishing two-day total rainfall of 10.74 inches.

1933: An estimated F4 tornado cut a 35-mile path from near Brent into Shelby County, Alabama. The town of Helena, AL was especially hard hit, as 14 people died. The tornado roared through Helena at 2:30 am.

1987: Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in the western U.S. A dozen cities in California reported record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 93 degrees at San Francisco, 98 degrees at San Jose, 100 degrees at Sacramento, and 101 degrees at Redding were the warmest on record for so early in the season. The high of 94 degrees at Medford, Oregon was also the warmest on record for so early in the season.

1995: A supercell thunderstorms brought torrential rains and large hail up to four inches in diameter to Fort Worth, Texas. This storm also struck a local outdoor festival known as the Fort Worth Mayfest. At the time the storm was the costliest hailstorm in the history of the US, causing more than \$2 billion in damage.

Groton Daily Independent

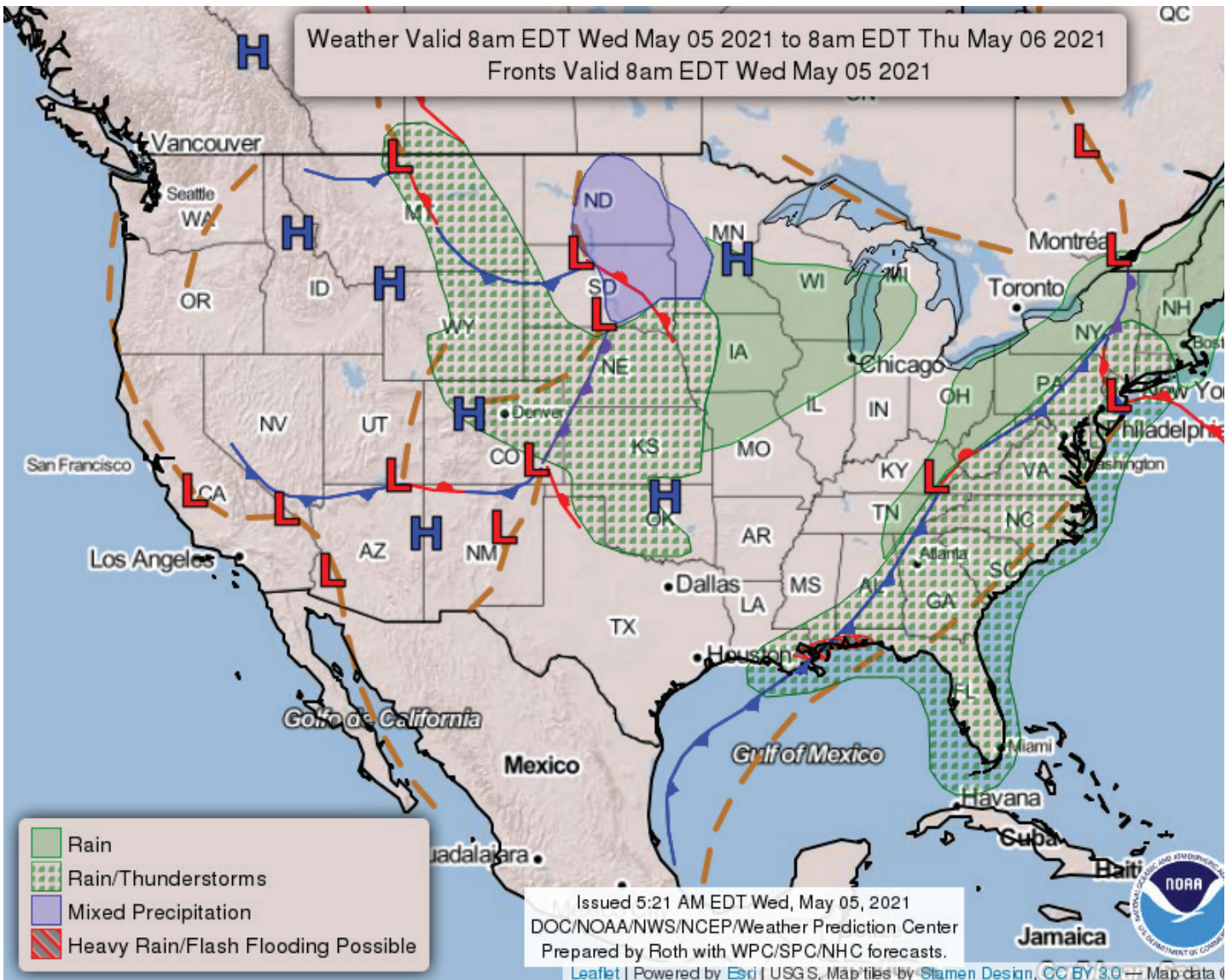
Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 9 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 58.4 °F at 6:15 PM
Low Temp: 27.3 °F at 5:30 AM
Wind: 16.0 mph at 12:15 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 92° in 1918, 2000
Record Low: 24° in 1929, 1968
Average High: 66°F
Average Low: 39°F
Average Precip in May.: 0.44
Precip to date in May.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 5.41
Precip Year to Date: 2.77
Sunset Tonight: 8:46 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:14 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 10 of 72



WHAT SIZE GOD DO YOU WORSHIP?

"Is your God a great God or a little God?" asked a well-known skeptic of an elderly gentleman known for his deep love for God.

"Well," he said after a moment's thought, "He's both. He's so great that the heavens cannot contain Him, and He's so little that He can live within my heart!"

This is the identical way that the writer of Psalm 46 spoke of his God: "The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

We often have questions about God's involvement in our everyday affairs and concerns. "Are my personal problems, even though they are small and only matter to me, important to Him? When I have the flu and feel horrible, does it make any difference to Him? What about the threat of violence, terrorism, children being gunned down at school? What about the preacher being tried in Iran as a heretic? What about the war in Afghanistan?"

"The Lord who is Almighty," said the Psalmist, "is with us" – not may be or should be or will be later on – but is with us this very moment. Wherever we are – He is. From our smallest need to our greatest problem He is with us and is always ready, willing, and able to accomplish His plan for us and through us.

Yet, there is more: He is not only with us, but He is our fortress – He surrounds us as a fortified city. When this Psalm was written, a fortress was a place of security and safety. It was built on an isolated, elevated place to provide protection from the enemy. It was the place to go if an enemy was approaching.

What powerful thoughts: Our God is an Almighty God who cares for each of us- even though we feel undeserving of His gifts - and protects us from any threat in life.

Prayer: Lord, we marvel at Your greatness and grace and are humbled by Your goodness. May we open our eyes to recognize Your presence. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Psalm 46:7

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 11 of 72

2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. May 4, 2021.

Editorial: COVID Vaccines For Kids And Teens

What's the next step in America's COVID-19 vaccination efforts?

There are at least two directions this could go.

One direction involves getting those adults ages 16 and older who haven't received the vaccine yet to finally decide to get the jab. This one seems quite problematic, of course, with many adults either holding off or resisting the vaccine for their own particular reasons.

The other direction looks more promising, at least at this moment, as it was reported Monday that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is preparing to authorize the Pfizer vaccine for kids between the ages of 12-15 years old. According to the New York Times, the green light for this may come as early as next week.

This could be a huge boost in this country's COVID-19 battle, and it could also provide a tremendous sense of relief to parents who fear that their children may become exposed to the coronavirus or its variants.

Contrary to what some have proclaimed since practically the beginning of the pandemic, children and young adults are susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infections. According to a report published in January by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "COVID-19 cases in children, adolescents and young adults have increased since summer 2020, with weekly incidence higher in each successively increasing age group. Trends among children and adolescents aged 0-17 years paralleled those among adults."

On Monday, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that while the number of children getting infected by COVID has dropped since the start of 2021, kids now account for more than 20% of all new COVID-19 cases in the U.S. According to some health experts, the reason for the rise may be relative: Kids are making up a greater share of new infections because more adults are becoming vaccinated. However, another possibility may be that more schools are loosening up their restrictions, which is causing an erosion of the social distancing and other defensive measures that have been utilized the past several months.

Kids don't possess a special protection from COVID, nor are they immune from the worst effects that the virus. Last week, a child under age 10 in Marshall, Minnesota, passed away from COVID-related illness. The victim, who was a first-grade student, was the third pediatric COVID death Minnesota has recorded during the pandemic. The other deaths were an infant last summer and a 7-year-old in February.

Deaths among younger ages may indeed be rare, but such incidents reinforce the fact that kids are not necessarily safe from the virus.

The vaccines look promising on this front, too. In March, Pfizer said a clinical trial involving more than 2,200 adolescents between ages 12-15 showed 100% efficacy and indicated no abnormal (at least, as far as COVID vaccines go) side effects.

So, if the pool for vaccine eligibility can be expanded, it figures to be another hopeful ray of light in the increasingly brightening pandemic outlook.

END

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

04-27-32-57-63, Mega Ball: 22, Megaplier: 3

(four, twenty-seven, thirty-two, fifty-seven, sixty-three; Mega Ball: twenty-two; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$345 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$142 million

Treasury: Some tribes will get more money from CARES Act

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Some Native American tribes will receive more money from a federal virus relief package approved last year after the U.S. Treasury Department revised its methodology that tribal nations contend was badly skewed.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act set aside \$8 billion for tribes. The Treasury Department distributed 60% of it, or \$4.8 billion, based on population data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Three tribes sued over the methodology, alleging they were shortchanged by millions because tribal enrollment figures were higher than those reflected in federal data.

It's unclear exactly how many tribes, aside from the trio of plaintiffs, will benefit from the revised calculation or how much they'll get.

The Shawnee Tribe in Oklahoma and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians in Florida were among those given the minimum \$100,000 because the HUD data showed they had a population of zero. The Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas argued it should have received \$7.65 million more than it got.

Pilar Thomas, who is representing the Shawnee Tribe, said Tuesday that she's still reviewing the methodology to determine the impact.

Meanwhile, the U.S. District Court judge overseeing the case from Washington set a hearing next week in light of the Treasury Department saying it will start making payments to plaintiffs this week.

About \$530 million remains for tribes from the CARES Act funding, most of which is tied up in a U.S. Supreme Court case that centers on whether Alaska Native corporations are eligible for a share. The high court held oral arguments last month and seemed inclined to rule in favor of the corporations but hasn't issued a final decision.

In the case involving the Shawnee, Miccosukee and Prairie Band Potawatomi tribes, a federal court has said the tribes are likely to succeed in their challenges over the Treasury Department's population-based disbursements and ordered \$21 million from the remaining funds withheld.

The Treasury Department said it will look at the difference between the federal data and the enrollment data provided by tribes and rank them, so the top 15% get an additional payment. The higher the ratio between the two data sets, the larger the percentage of funding a tribe will get, the department said.

"The funds available for reallocation are limited and, therefore, only the most substantial disparities can be addressed," the department wrote in a briefing paper.

The Treasury Department acknowledged a request for additional information Tuesday but did not immediately respond to questions.

Not all of the 574 federally recognized tribes across the United States have provided their own enrollment figures to the federal government, the Treasury Department said.

Eric Henson, an adjunct lecturer at Harvard University who has studied the tribal disbursements, said that points to a need for a certified enrollment data set for tribes, with either the federal government reaching out to tribes or the tribes keeping updated figures.

"That's one foundational part of this proposed solution that kind of makes my head spin with questions," said Henson, who is Chickasaw.

The Treasury Department has said it used HUD data because it would correlate with the amount of money tribal governments have spent responding to the coronavirus pandemic. Tribal enrollment figures don't distinguish between members or citizens who live on and off reservations.

U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta in Washington initially ruled the Treasury Department had discretion in how it distributes CARES Act funding to tribes and the methodology wasn't subject to court review.

A federal appeals court revived the tribes' claims and sent them back to Mehta for a decision on the merits.

Mask requirement ending at South Dakota public universities

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's six public universities will no longer require people to wear masks beginning next week, the state Board of Regents announced Tuesday.

Regents last July mandated that masks be worn in all public indoor spaces on campuses, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic showed steep growth in South Dakota and other Midwest states. At the suggestion of college presidents, facemasks will be optional starting on Monday.

"Our system has continuously responded to changing circumstances caused by the pandemic," Board of Regents executive director and CEO Brian Maher said. "With vaccines now widely available, our institutions are eager to adjust as we look forward to the fall semester."

Administrators will continue to monitor conditions and make "the best decisions possible" with information available to them, Maher said.

Regents announced earlier that campus operations should return to normal in the fall.

Groups sue over US program allowing pipelines on wetlands

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Environmentalists have filed a new legal challenge to a U.S. government program that allows oil and gas pipelines to be built across wetlands, rivers and other bodies of water.

The lawsuit filed Monday in U.S. District Court in Great Falls, Montana, alleges that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has let companies skirt environmental reviews of potential spills by granting a blanket construction permit to the industry.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club and other groups behind the litigation won a court order last year that temporarily blocked the program, known as Nationwide Permit 12. U.S. District Judge Brian Morris said officials did not adequately consult with wildlife agencies about pipelines' potential harm to drinking water supplies and imperiled plants and animals.

The Army Corps issued a new permit in January, saying it expects the permit to be used more than 8,000 times a year and affect 615 acres (249 hectares) annually of wetlands and other bodies of water.

The groups behind Monday's lawsuit said the agency failed to consider how that work could affect endangered sturgeon, whooping cranes and other wildlife that depend on wetlands.

The permit can be used only for pipeline crossings that disturb a half-acre or less of streams or wetlands. Critics say that ignores the cumulative effects from hundreds of individual water crossings along a major pipeline's route.

The Army Corps has issued nationwide permits since the mid-1970s, and they were put into law in 1977 under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, according to the Congressional Research Service.

But opposition to pipelines has grown more intense in recent years as the industry has been pulled into a broader debate over climate-changing greenhouse gases that come from burning the fossil fuels the lines carry.

Sierra Club attorney Doug Hayes said the permit program has become "a tool for corporate polluters to fast-track climate-destroying oil and gas pipelines and exempt them from critical environmental reviews."

The permit has been used to advance major projects, including the Dakota Access Pipeline in the Midwest, the Mountain Valley Pipeline in the Southeast and the Keystone XL pipeline from Canada to the U.S. that has since been blocked by President Joe Biden, according to the lawsuit.

Industry representatives argue the permit program has been used for more than four decades without major environmental harm.

"Presidents on both sides of the aisle have used the program," said John Stoodly, vice president of the Association of Oil Pipe Lines. "Not until the modern era — when we have activists trying to use pipelines for their climate goals — has there been any controversy."

The Army Corps does not comment on pending litigation but will be closely tracking developments in the case, spokesperson Michael Iazard-Carroll said.

Noem touts \$100 million broadband subsidy program

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

BRANDON, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem on Tuesday lauded her efforts to spend millions of dollars in government funds on providing broadband internet access to revitalize South Dakota's rural communities.

The Republican governor toured a site near the city of Brandon where a \$700,000 state program subsidy helped to complete a \$1.7 million project to get high-speed internet to 170 homes. Although the area is close to the state's largest city, Sioux Falls, a resident said the previously spotty internet coverage had been a headache.

"We can live life normally," said Jessica Schaap, whose family had previously trekked to parking lots with high-speed internet access to work on homework.

Schaap said the most immediate impact was that she and her husband could now both stream Netflix in separate rooms. But for Noem, who hopes a \$100 million subsidy program will spur projects like that statewide, the subsidies represent the potential to revitalize rural communities by connecting people to work and health care over the internet.

"For years, they've needed this kind of service and they just didn't have the ability to access it for their families, and it's really changed their way of life," the governor said. "It's changed their ability to live where they want to live and work from there."

About 95% of the state's population has access to high-speed internet, according to a report this year from the Federal Communications Commission. That's slightly below the national rate and ranks South Dakota 32nd among U.S. states. In the state's rural areas, the percentage goes down to 89%. During Noem's first months in office, she made it a goal to get high-speed internet access statewide by the end of her term next year.

It's not clear that will happen by 2022, but the pandemic gave her a big boost. Noem said there's an increased demand for education, doctor's consultations and jobs to be conducted over the internet.

The \$1.25 billion of federal relief money the state government received for coronavirus relief also helped. Noem had struggled to get a \$10 million allotment for the broadband subsidy program in 2020, but this year, with the state budget flush with federal funds, her proposal to allot \$100 million for the program sailed through the Legislature. It was the largest project lawmakers approved this year.

Noem hopes high-speed internet will attract new residents who can work remotely in rural areas. For a state that has at times struggled to keep small towns viable, it could be a turn in fortune.

"We saw this brain drain out of rural communities, and now you have an option," said Brendan Carr, an FCC commissioner who joined Noem at the event. "That's the power of an internet connection."

Military blocks promotion of South Dakota attorney general

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The U.S. Army Reserve has blocked the promotion of South Dakota's attorney general because of his role in the death of a man who was struck while walking along a rural highway last year.

Jason Ravensborg last month announced on social media that he was being promoted to the rank of full colonel.

However, the Army Reserve told the Argus Leader on Monday that the promotion has been flagged and won't be submitted to the U.S. Senate for confirmation until charges against Ravensborg are resolved.

A message left at Ravensborg's office was not immediately returned Tuesday.

Ravensborg is facing three misdemeanor charges and calls for his resignation after he struck and killed Joe Boever, who was walking on the side of Highway 14 near Highmore in September. Charges include distracted driving and driving on the shoulder of the road.

"In this case, relevant Army Reserve leaders will monitor the ongoing civilian proceedings and make further decisions at the appropriate time," said Army Reserve spokesman Lt. Col. Simon Blake.

Boever's body was found in a ditch the day after he was struck and killed. Ravensborg told authorities during a 911 call that he believed he'd struck a deer. He has pleaded not guilty and is due in court May 12.

Israeli coalition talks resume after PM misses deadline

By MOSHE EDRI Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's president on Wednesday signaled he would move quickly to task a new candidate with forming a government after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to do so ahead of a midnight deadline.

Netanyahu's political future was thrown into question when he failed to assemble a ruling coalition in the four weeks allotted to him, raising the possibility that his 12-year run as prime minister — the longest in Israeli history — could soon come to an end following more than two years of political paralysis.

"It looks like, perhaps within a few days or a few weeks, we might have a functioning coalition that will not include Mr. Netanyahu. This will be a groundbreaking change," said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank.

He acknowledged, however, that "a fifth consecutive election is still, unfortunately, a real possibility."

President Reuven Rivlin, who occupies a mostly ceremonial role, is expected in the coming days to give one of Netanyahu's opponents a chance to form an alternative coalition government. He also could ask the parliament to select one of its own members as prime minister. If all else fails, the country would be forced into another election this fall — the fifth in just over two years.

Rivlin met with the two main candidates for forming a government — opposition leader Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally — and asked parties to make their positions known before 2 p.m. (1100 GMT).

Lapid, who heads the centrist Yesh Atid party, received the backing of four smaller parties from across the political spectrum, while Bennett, head of the small nationalist and religious Yamina party, recommended himself to form the next government.

Rivlin was expected to make a decision by the end of the day.

Elections held March 23 ended in deadlock for the fourth consecutive time in the past two years. Despite repeated meetings with many of his rivals and unprecedented outreach to the leader of a small Islamist Arab party, Netanyahu was unable to close a deal.

Rivlin gave Netanyahu the first chance to form a coalition after 52 members of parliament endorsed him as prime minister last month. That was short of a majority, but the highest number for any party leader.

Lapid, who received the backing of 45 lawmakers, now seems to be the most likely candidate to get a chance to form a government. Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally turned rival, controls just seven seats in parliament, but he has emerged as a kingmaker of sorts by carrying the votes Lapid would need to secure a parliamentary majority.

Lapid has said he is ready to share the prime minister's job with Bennett, with Bennett serving first in a rotation. But they have not reached any firm agreements. The parties opposed to Netanyahu represent a wide range of conflicting ideologies, making it unclear whether they will be able to unite.

"Players from the right wing, from the center, from the left will have to build a common agenda," Plesner said. "Their strong driving force would be to stay in government to ensure that Netanyahu is out and that the affairs of state are properly run."

Netanyahu has become a divisive figure in Israeli politics, with the last four elections all seen as a referendum on his rule. He has been desperate to remain in office while he stands trial, using his position to lash out at prosecutors and seek possible immunity from prosecution.

Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and bribery in a series of scandals. The trial has moved into the witness phase, with embarrassing testimony accusing him of trading favors with a powerful media mogul. Netanyahu denies the charges, accusing law enforcement, the judiciary and the media of waging a "witch hunt" against him.

Flood threats persist as storms continue to drench South

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 17 of 72

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Relentless wind and rain keeps pummeling much of the southeastern United States, spawning tornadoes, sparking a flash flood emergency in Alabama and damaging homes from Texas to Virginia. The storms have prompted boat rescues and toppled trees and power lines.

Crews were preparing to continue cleaning up debris and assessing destruction across the region early Wednesday, as some schools canceled classes or moved them online due to damage on campuses and surrounding areas.

The National Weather Service's prediction center warned Wednesday morning that flash flooding could also now affect the Central Gulf Coast with storms shifting southeast and rain continuing to soak much of the region.

The storms have been responsible for at least three deaths and dozens of injuries this week, and more than 242,500 customers were without power from Texas to Maryland early Wednesday, including about 90,000 in Alabama, about 80,900 in Mississippi, about 28,800 in Georgia and about 25,700 in Virginia, according to poweroutage.us.

Torrential rains near Birmingham, Alabama, on Tuesday, dumped at least 5 inches (13 centimeters) of water as another 2 inches (5 centimeters) were possible before the storm system continued eastward, according to the National Weather Service there.

Jefferson County Emergency Management officials in the Birmingham area urged residents to stay off the roads because so many were flooded. In the Birmingham suburb of Homewood, fire department rescuers in a small boat paddled past submerged cars in a parking lot, slowly removing more than a dozen people from the waters surrounding an apartment complex.

Strong winds blowing behind a line of storms were toppling trees across central Alabama, where soil was saturated with water. The National Weather Service in Birmingham said late Tuesday it planned to send two crews to Greene and Tuscaloosa Counties to assess wind and possible tornado damage from storms that started Sunday.

Strong winds and heavy rain whipped through Mississippi's capital city of Jackson late Tuesday while thunder rattled windows. The high winds cracked some limbs off trees and sent them onto nearby houses. The storms left streets littered with branches and leaves.

At least eight people were injured when storms that brought tornadoes to Texas flipped tractor-trailers on an interstate and damaged structures.

In Tennessee, at least 11 counties were hit by possible EF-0 tornadoes, according to an official with the National Weather Service in Nashville. A tornado that struck Virginia's Northumberland County near the Chesapeake Bay destroyed one home and severely damaged a few others Monday.

On Monday, tornadoes also touched down in South Carolina and southern Kentucky while a possible tornado hit West Virginia.

In Mississippi, forecasters confirmed 12 tornadoes Sunday evening and night, including the Yazoo City twister, which stretched for 30 miles (50 kilometers), and another tornado that moved through suburbs south of Jackson, producing a damage track 1,000 yards (910 meters) wide.

Biden aims to vaccinate 70% of American adults by July 4

By ZEKE MILLER and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden set a new vaccination goal to deliver at least one shot to 70% of adult Americans by July Fourth as he tackles the vexing problem of winning over the "doubters" and those unmotivated to get inoculated.

Demand for vaccines has dropped off markedly nationwide, with some states leaving more than half their available doses unorderd. Aiming to make it easier to get shots, Biden on Tuesday called for states to make vaccines available on a walk-in basis and he will direct many pharmacies to do likewise.

His administration for the first time also is moving to shift doses from states with weaker demand to areas with stronger interest in the shots.

"You do need to get vaccinated," Biden said from the White House. "Even if your chance of getting seri-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 18 of 72

ously ill is low, why take the risk? It could save your life or the lives of somebody you love.”

Biden’s goal equates to delivering at least the first shot to 181 million adults and fully vaccinating 160 million. It’s a tacit acknowledgment of the declining interest in shots.

Already more than 56% of American adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and nearly 105 million are fully vaccinated. The U.S. is currently administering first doses at a rate of about 965,000 per day — half the rate of three weeks ago, but almost twice as fast as needed to meet Biden’s target.

“I’d like to get it 100%, but I think realistically we can get to that place between now and July Fourth,” Biden said of his new goal.

He said the administration would focus on three areas as it tries to ramp up the pace of vaccinations:

- Adults who need more convincing to take the vaccine.
- Those who have struggled or are in no hurry to obtain a shot.
- Adolescents aged 12-15, once federal authorities approve vaccination for that age group.

Acknowledging that “the pace of vaccination is slowing,” Biden predicted the inoculation effort is “going to be harder” when it comes to convincing “doubters” of the need to get their shots.

He said the most effective argument to those people would be to protect those they love. “This is your choice: It’s life and death.”

Biden’s push comes as his administration has shifted away from setting a target for the U.S. to reach “herd immunity,” instead focusing on delivering as many shots into arms as possible. Officials said Biden’s vaccination target would result in a significant reduction in COVID-19 cases heading into the summer.

To that end, the Biden administration is shifting the government’s focus toward expanding smaller and mobile vaccination clinics to deliver doses to harder-to-reach communities. It is also spending hundreds of millions of dollars to try to boost interest in vaccines through education campaigns and greater access to shots through community organizations that can help bring people to clinics.

Biden touted creative efforts to make it “easier and more fun” to get vaccinated, such as grocery stores offering discounts to shoppers who come to get shots and sports leagues that hold promotions to get shots for their fans.

Ahead of the Food and Drug Administration’s expected authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for kids aged 12-15, the White House is developing plans to speed vaccinations for that age group. Biden urged states to administer at least one dose to adolescents by July Fourth and work to deliver doses to pediatricians’ offices and other trusted locations, with the aim of getting many of them fully vaccinated by the start of the next school year.

While younger people are at dramatically lower risk of serious complications from COVID-19, they have made up a larger share of new virus cases as a majority of U.S. adults have been at least partially vaccinated and as higher-risk activities like indoor dining and contact sports have resumed in most of the country.

Officials hope that extending vaccinations to teens — who could get the first dose in one location and the second elsewhere, if necessary — will further accelerate the nation’s reduced virus caseload and allow schools to reopen with minimal disruptions this fall.

The urgency to expand the pool of those getting the shots is rooted in hopes of stamping out the development of new variants that could emerge from unchecked outbreaks and helping the country further reopen by the symbolic moment of Independence Day, exactly two months away. Though White House officials privately acknowledge the steep challenge, Biden sounded an optimistic note.

“The light at the end of the tunnel is actually growing brighter and brighter,” Biden said.

Biden’s speech comes as the White House announced a shift away from a strict allocation of vaccines by state population. The administration says that when states decline to take all the vaccine they have been allocated, that surplus will shift to states still awaiting doses to meet demand.

Governors were informed of the change by the White House on Tuesday morning.

This week, Iowa turned down nearly three quarters of the vaccine doses available to the state for next week from the federal government because demand for the shots remains weak. Louisiana, meanwhile,

hasn't drawn down its full vaccine allocation from the federal government for the last few weeks.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows Louisiana's coronavirus vaccination rate is well behind most states. About 27% of state residents are fully vaccinated while 32% have received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the state health department.

The White House previously resisted efforts to distribute vaccine by metrics other than population. Biden rebuffed Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer last month when she requested more doses as her state was experiencing a surge in virus cases. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at the time nearly all states were ordering at or near their population allocations, which is no longer the case.

Individual states have made similar shifts internally to account for changing demand. Last week, Washington state changed the way it allocates coronavirus vaccine to its counties. Previously the state doled out supplies to counties proportionate to their populations. But now amounts will be based on requests from health care providers.

Italy jury deliberates fate of 2 Americans in police slaying

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — A jury in Rome on Wednesday began deliberating the fates of two young American men who are charged with killing an Italian police officer near the hotel where they were staying while on summer vacation in 2019.

Finnegan Lee Elder, 21, and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, 20, were indicted on charges of homicide, attempted extortion, assault, resisting a public official and carrying an attack-style knife without just cause.

Judge Marina Finiti indicated the verdicts could come later Wednesday or on Thursday.

Prosecutors alleged that Elder stabbed Vice Bridgadier Mario Cerciello Rega 11 times with a knife he brought with him on his trip to Europe from California and that Natale-Hjorth helped him hide the knife in their hotel room.

The July 26, 2019 slaying of the officer from the storied Carabinieri paramilitary police corps shocked Italy. Cerciello Rega, 35, was mourned as a national hero.

The two Californians on trial were allowed out of steel-barred defendant cages inside the courtroom to sit with their lawyers before the case went to the jury, which consists of presiding judge Finiti, a second judge and six civilian jurors.

"I'm stressed," Elder said to one of his lawyers. At another point during Wednesday's brief court hearing, Elder took a crucifix he wears on a chain around his neck and kissed it.

Cerciello Rega had recently returned from a honeymoon when he was assigned along with a plainclothes police partner, officer Andrea Varriale, to follow up on a reported extortion attempt.

Prosecutors contend the young Americans concocted a plot involving a stolen bag and cellphone after their attempt to buy cocaine with 80 euros (\$96) in Rome's Trastevere nightlife district didn't pan out. Natale-Hjorth and Elder testified they had paid for the cocaine but didn't receive it.

Both defendants contended they acted in self-defense. During the trial, which began on Feb. 26, 2020, the Americans told the court they thought that Cerciello Rega and Varriale were thugs or mobsters out to assault them on a dark, deserted street. The officers wore casual summer clothes and not uniforms, and the defendants insisted the officers never showed police badges.

Under Italian law, an accomplice in an alleged murder can also be charged with murder even without materially doing the slaying.

Varriale, who suffered a back injury in a scuffle with Natale-Hjorth while his partner was grappling with Elder, testified that the officers did identify themselves as Carabinieri.

Prosecutor Maria Sabina Calabretta has asked the court to convict both defendants and to mete out Italy's stiffest punishment, life imprisonment.

At the time of the slaying, Elder was 19 and traveling through Europe without his family, while Natale-Hjorth, then 18, was spending the summer vacation with his Italian grandparents, who live near Rome. Former classmates from the San Francisco Bay area, the two had met up in Rome for what was supposed

to be couple of days of sightseeing and nights out.

Blinken takes anti-graft message, old Russia foe to Ukraine

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Secretary of State Antony Blinken travels to Ukraine this week he'll be carrying a tough anti-graft message and strong U.S. backing for the country's response to Russian aggression. He'll also be taking along a familiar face in the Washington-Moscow tug-of-war over the former Soviet republic: Victoria Nuland.

The one-day stop is intended to demonstrate America's continued commitment to Ukraine as it copes with Russia's support for separatists and a buildup of troops along its eastern border, as well as to press Kyiv on corruption. It comes at a time of heightened U.S. tensions with Russia not only on Ukraine but also because of U.S. criticism of Russia over human rights, hacking and interference in elections. Both countries recently ordered tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions.

Yet beyond these major issues, the mere presence in Kyiv of Nuland, now the No. 3 State Department official, is likely to irritate Russia. A Russia hawk, Nuland is reviled by the Kremlin and was a main target of Moscow's attacks on the U.S. during Ukraine's 2013-14 revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea when she served as assistant secretary of state for Europe during the Obama administration.

Blinken said Monday in London that he would use the visit to show "our unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine." Other officials have said he would also press on institutional reform and anti-corruption measures. "There is a lot of hard work to be done to ensure a brighter future for all Ukrainians," the top U.S. diplomat for Europe, Phillip Reeker, said last week.

But Blinken's trip also comes on the heels of a Ukraine-related FBI raid on former President Donald Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and renewed questions about the Trump administration's dealings with Ukraine that led to the firing of a U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, and laid the foundation for GOP attacks against President Joe Biden.

The East-West battle for influence and standing in Ukraine has been a recurrent theme since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Nuland's advocacy for reform-minded, pro-Western Ukrainian politicians incurred the Kremlin's wrath.

A career diplomat who retired from the foreign service rather than serve in the Trump administration, Nuland drew Moscow's ire and accusations of meddling for appearing at an opposition rally in Kyiv's Maidan square during the uprising that eventually overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia leader Viktor Yanukovich.

But even while serving as State Department spokeswoman under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Nuland, who goes by her nickname "Toria," was a frequent thorn in Moscow's side, regularly chiding Russia for its policies. That prompted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to remark on her departure from the spokeswoman's role after John Kerry took over as President Barack Obama's top diplomat in 2013.

"My first trip after Toria left her post as spokesperson, Foreign Minister Lavrov looked at my staff, and he said to me, 'John, I see you finally fired that Toria Nuland,'" Kerry said to laughter at her swearing-in ceremony for assistant secretary of state for Europe. "And I took great pleasure in looking at him and saying, 'No, I promoted her.'"

Then came the infamous phone call, a recording of which was leaked by Russian intelligence services, in which Nuland derided the European Union's hesitancy in attempts to mediate a resolution to the Ukraine crisis. "F - - - the EU," Nuland said in the call with then-U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt.

The leak of the call went viral and was widely seen as a Russian attempt to split the U.S. from its European partners on Ukraine. But, while it did cause a media stir, the U.S. and Europe remained generally united in their positions, Russia found a new target for its hostility, Nuland's successor as spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, who is now Biden's press secretary, and she carried on in her position until Trump's election in 2016.

Now, after an absence of four years, and eight years after Kerry teased Lavrov about Nuland's elevation

in the ranks, she's been promoted again: undersecretary of state for political affairs, where she'll enjoy considerable influence in policy decisions about Europe and elsewhere.

US parents excited over prospect of virus shots for children

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — After more than a year of fretting over her 13-year son with a rare liver disease, Heather Ousley broke into tears when she learned that he and millions of other youngsters could soon be eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine.

"This day is the best day in the history of days!!! I love this day!!!" she texted, joining other parents and educators in welcoming the news that the Food and Drug Administration is expected to authorize Pfizer's vaccine by next week for children ages 12 to 15.

Ousley, who is president of the school board for the 27,000-student Shawnee Mission School District in Kansas, plans to get her 13- and 15-year-olds promptly vaccinated and then celebrate with ice cream. They have been learning from home with their younger brother since the start of the outbreak.

Pfizer is also anticipating the FDA will endorse use of its vaccine in even younger children sometime this fall. And results are expected by the middle of this year from a U.S. study of Moderna's shots in 12- to 17-year-olds.

Officials are hoping that extending vaccinations to children will drive down the nation's caseload even further and allow schools to reopen with minimal disruption this fall.

It could also reassure parents and teachers alike. While children rarely get seriously ill from the coronavirus, then can still get sick and spread it to others.

"I don't even think we realized how much energy is spent on worrying until we are able to set aside the worry, and then thinking about what this means for all of our kids in the district," Ousley said.

Pfizer in March released preliminary results from a study of 2,260 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15, showing there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated children compared with 18 among those given dummy shots.

That is welcome news for Robin and Aaron Perry of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, who have five boys, ages 5 to 17. Their oldest, Cooper, has been battling leukemia and contracted COVID-19 in November, in what his mother described as a "terrifying" time for the family. The disease spread to the rest of the family.

They all pulled through, and Cooper and his parents have all since been vaccinated. But his mother can't wait for her 15-year-old, Reece, and 12-year-old, Tucker, to get their shots so their brother is as protected as possible.

"Our personal situation, it feels like more security around Cooper with a compromised immune system," Robin Perry said. "It's just being part of the solution. That's what excites me the most. It's an added level of protection. Maybe you can take a deeper breath."

Educators have already embraced vaccines for students 16 and up, with some scheduling vaccine clinics during school hours and dangling prize drawings and other incentives.

In New York's Erie County, a prom-themed vaccine clinics were held this past weekend, including one with a tropical feel where health care workers wore grass skirts and 16- and 17-year-olds went home with gift bags of masks and hand sanitizer. Similar efforts are expected to draw in 12- to 15-year-olds.

Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, said the anticipated authorization to vaccinate younger students would help make parents feel more comfortable to send their children back to classrooms and ease concerns among some teachers.

"Say you have a class where every student is vaccinated and so is the teacher. That becomes a very different environment," Domenech said.

"Schools were very pleased when the CDC came out with the 3-foot spacing as opposed to the 6-foot spacing, because that immediately allowed them to have more students in school at one time. This will have a similar effect," he said. "If now you can have a significant population of your students in middle schools and high schools vaccinated, that makes it even safer for greater numbers of students to be in school."

Seventy-four-year-old Pat Shepard, a retired Spanish teacher from Lincoln, Nebraska, who has worked as a substitute during the outbreak, is eager to see eligibility expand, saying students are increasingly resisting wearing masks.

"You are starting to see more and more of them wearing them down below their nose because they are just tired of it," she said. "And then, too, they want to get out and do more things."

Keri Rodrigues, a co-founder of the education advocacy group the National Parents Union, said she rushed out to get vaccinated after becoming eligible but has more trepidation about immunizing her oldest son, who is 13.

She plans to go ahead with it, though, in part because he is demanding it.

"He has cabin fever and he wants to get out," explained Rodrigues, who lives near Boston.

The group's survey from March of 1,100 parents around the country found that others are also conflicted. Forty percent planned to get their children vaccinated immediately, 21% eventually and 24% never, and the remaining 15% were unsure.

"Obviously parents are torn right now because you are watching your kids really go through an emotional struggle, especially our teens," she said. "I think we are all taking a leap of faith, but I think what we have to do is trust science in this moment."

President Joe Biden said Tuesday that if the FDA authorizes the use of Pfizer's vaccine in children as young as 12, the administration is prepared to ship doses to 20,000 pharmacies around the country and directly to pediatricians.

Coy Marquardt, associate executive director of Iowa's teachers union, said his 14-year-old son is excited to get vaccinated and has been asking for months when he would be eligible. Marquardt said that because of vaccine hesitancy, it doesn't look as if herd immunity is going to be achieved anytime soon.

"That makes it even more important to expand the use to 12- to 15-year-olds, including my son, just to protect him," he said.

Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association, which accredits 3,200 camps and works with about 12,000 others, said he has been deluged with messages since the news broke.

Last year, 40% of day camps and 82% of overnight camps didn't operate, but many were gearing up to reopen this summer, with masks and socially distancing, he said. He said the vaccine would offer another layer of protection and might persuade some hesitant parents to sign up their children.

"It could be a game changer," said Rosenberg, who plans to get his own 13-year-old vaccinated.

Iraq pushes vaccine rollout amid widespread apathy, distrust

By ABDULRAHMAN ZEYAD Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's vaccine roll-out had been faltering for weeks. Apathy, fear and rumors kept many from getting vaccinated despite a serious surge in coronavirus infections and calls by the government for people to register for shots.

It took a populist Shiite cleric's public endorsement of vaccinations — and images of him getting the shot last week — to turn things around.

Hundreds of followers of Muqtada al-Sadr are now heading to clinics to follow his example, underscoring the power of sectarian loyalties in Iraq and deep mistrust of the state.

"I was against the idea of being vaccinated. I was afraid, I didn't believe in it," said Manhil Alshabli, a 30-year-old Iraqi from the holy city of Najaf. "But all this has changed now."

"Seeing him getting the vaccine has motivated me," said Alshabli, speaking by phone from Najaf where he and many other al-Sadr loyalists got their shots, Alshabli compared it to soldiers being energized when they see their leader on the front line.

Iraq has grappled with a severe second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. New case numbers spiked to over 8,000 per day last month, the highest they have ever been. The surge was driven largely by public apathy toward the virus. Many routinely flout virus-related restrictions, refusing to wear face masks and continuing to hold large public gatherings.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 23 of 72

Daily rates have decreased in the last week, with 5,068 new cases reported on Monday.

Iraq's Health Ministry has repeatedly tried to reassure Iraqis that the vaccines are not harmful, but this has not convinced many who harbor long-standing distrust of the health care system.

Iraq's centralized system, largely unchanged since the 1970s, has been ground down by decades of war, sanctions and prolonged unrest since the 2003 U.S. invasion. Successive governments have invested little in the sector.

Many avoid going to public hospitals altogether. Last month, a massive blaze tore through the coronavirus ward in a Baghdad hospital, killing more than 80 people and injuring dozens. Iraq's Health Minister Hasan al-Tamimi was suspended for alleged negligence, and resigned Tuesday over the incident.

So far, fewer than 380,000 people have been fully vaccinated in the country of 40 million.

Last week, as sluggish vaccination efforts continued, pictures of the black-turbaned al-Sadr, wearing a black mask and getting jabbed in the arm, began circulating on social media.

Shortly after, his followers launched a vaccination campaign, calling on supporters to join them and posting photos of themselves carrying his posters while seated at medical centers receiving the vaccine.

The Health Ministry has cashed in on the campaign, publishing on its Facebook page the photo of al-Sadr getting the shot, saying his vaccination was meant to encourage all citizens to do the same.

Faris Al-Lami, assistant professor of community medicine at the University of Baghdad, said the government is widely viewed as corrupt and that its actions since the start of the pandemic only deepened the public's mistrust.

He cited certain early practices, such as using security forces to take patients from their homes as if they were criminals, and holding up the burials of those who died of the virus for several weeks.

Al-Lami also pointed to what he said are current problematic policies. For example, he said high-risk patients, such as those with chronic or immunodeficiency diseases, have to wait inside hospitals to get their shots, putting them at high risk of infection. Meanwhile, people with personal connections can get them easily.

He said it's a positive development when the vaccination of a political or religious figure encourages people to get their shots. "But the ideology that is based upon blindly following anyone's decision is a disaster in itself," he said.

Iraq received 336,000 new doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in late March and Iraqis above the age of 18 are qualified to get the jab. Last month, the first shipment of Pfizer doses arrived in the country, with 49,000 shots.

"All the vaccines that arrived in Iraq are safe and effective ... but until this moment, there are some citizens who are afraid of taking the vaccine as a result of malicious rumors," said Ruba Hassan, a Health Ministry official.

The Health Ministry has introduced measures to push Iraqis to get the shots. They include travel restrictions for those unable to produce a vaccination card and dismissals of employees at shops, malls and restaurants. While the measures have led more people to seek out vaccinations, they have also confused and angered a still largely reticent public.

Restaurant owners said they were blindsided by the measures, uncertain if it meant they would face closure if they refused them.

"There is no clear law to follow," said Rami Amir, 30, who owns a fast food restaurant in Baghdad. "I don't want all my staff to be vaccinated because they might have severe side effects or complications," he said, echoing widespread skepticism.

Omer Mohammed, another restaurant owner, said applicants for a new job at his eatery dropped out when he said vaccination cards were a necessary prerequisite.

Medical professionals were prioritized to receive the vaccine and were able to pre-register in January when Iraq received its first shipment of 50,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine.

When recent medical school graduate Mohammed al-Sudani, 24, went to get vaccinated this month he said the process was "bittersweet." He showed up with no previous registration for the AstraZeneca vac-

ciné. He didn't need it. There was barely anyone there.

The next week he brought two of his aunts to the same center. There were only two other people in the waiting room.

"The nurse came in and asked them to call their relatives and friends to come to raise the number to at least 10 people because the jabs inside the vaccine kits were only valid for 6 hours," he said.

It was a different scene in hospitals that carry Pfizer shots. Tabark Rashad, 27, headed to Baghdad's al-Kindi hospital last week. The waiting room was crowded with dozens of people, sparking infection concerns.

"I went to protect myself against COVID-19, not get it in this room," she said. "It was chaos."

Facebook board's Trump decision could have wider impacts

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Since the day after the deadly Jan. 6 riots on the U.S. Capitol, former President Donald Trump's social media accounts have been silent — muzzled for inciting violence using the platforms as online megaphones.

On Wednesday, his fate on Facebook, the biggest social platform around, will be decided. The company's quasi-independent Oversight Board will announce its ruling around 9 a.m. ET. If it rules in Trump's favor, Facebook has seven days to reinstate the account. If the board upholds Facebook's decision, Trump will remain "indefinitely" suspended.

Politicians, free speech experts and activists around the world are watching the decision closely. It has implications not only for Trump but for tech companies, world leaders and people across the political spectrum — many of whom have wildly conflicting views of the proper role for technology companies when it comes to regulating online speech and protecting people from abuse and misinformation.

After years of handling Trump's inflammatory rhetoric with a light touch, Facebook and Instagram took the drastic step of silencing his accounts in January. In announcing the unprecedented move, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the risk of allowing Trump to continue using the platform was too great.

"The shocking events of the last 24 hours clearly demonstrate that President Donald Trump intends to use his remaining time in office to undermine the peaceful and lawful transition of power to his elected successor, Joe Biden," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page on Jan. 7.

A day before the announcement, Trump unveiled a new blog on his personal website, "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump." While the page includes a dramatic video claiming, "A BEACON OF FREEDOM ARISES" and hailing "A PLACE TO SPEAK FREELY AND SAFELY," the page is little more than a display of Trump's recent statements — available elsewhere on the website — that can be easily shared on Facebook and Twitter, the platforms that banished him after the riot.

While Trump aides have spent months teasing his plans to launch his own social media platform, his spokesman Jason Miller said the blog was something separate.

"President Trump's website is a great resource to find his latest statements and highlights from his first term in office, but this is not a new social media platform," he tweeted. "We'll have additional information coming on that front in the very near future."

Barred from social media, Trump has embraced other platforms for getting his message out. He does frequent interviews with friendly news outlets and has emailed a flurry of statements to reporters through his official office and political group.

Trump has even said he prefers the statements to his old tweets, often describing them as more "elegant."

Facebook created the oversight panel to rule on thorny content on its platforms following widespread criticism of its difficulty responding swiftly and effectively to misinformation, hate speech and nefarious influence campaigns. Its decisions so far — all nine of them — have tended to favor free expression over the restriction of content.

In its first rulings, the panel overturned four out of five decisions by the social network to take down questionable material. It ordered Facebook to restore posts by users that the company said broke standards on adult nudity, hate speech, or dangerous individuals.

Critics of Facebook, however, worry that the Oversight Board is a mere distraction from the company's

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 25 of 72

deeper problems — ones that can't be addressed in a handful of high-profile cases by a semi-independent body of experts.

"Facebook set the rules, are judge, jury and executioner and control their own appeals court and their own Supreme Court. The decisions they make have an impact on our democracies, national security and biosecurity and cannot be left to their own in house theatre of the absurd," said Imran Ahmed, CEO Center for Countering Digital Hate, a nonprofit critical of Facebook. "Whatever the judgement tomorrow, this whole fiasco shows why we need democratic regulation of Big Tech."

Gautam Hans, a technology law and free speech expert and professor at Vanderbilt University, said he finds the Oversight Board structure to be "frustrating and a bit of a sideshow from the larger policy and social questions that we have about these companies."

"To some degree, Facebook is trying to create an accountability mechanism that I think undermines efforts to have government regulation and legislation," Hans said. "If any other company decided, well, we're just going to outsource our decision-making to some quasi-independent body, that would be thought of as ridiculous."

60 years since 1st American in space: Tourists lining up

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Sixty years after Alan Shepard became the first American in space, everyday people are on the verge of following in his cosmic footsteps.

Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company is finally opening ticket sales for short hops from Texas launched by a rocket named New Shepard. Details are coming Wednesday, the 60th anniversary of Shepard's Mercury flight.

Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic aims to kick off tourist flights next year, just as soon as he straps into his space-skimming, plane-launched rocketship for a test run from the New Mexico base.

And Elon Musk's SpaceX will launch a billionaire and his sweepstakes winners in September. That will be followed by a flight by three businessmen to the International Space Station in January.

"It's a huge leap, right?" said NASA astronaut Shane Kimbrough, commander of SpaceX's most recent flight to the space station. "But it's pretty cool ... citizens will be able to have the chance to go to space and experience what we get to."

It's all rooted in Shepard's 15-minute flight on May 5, 1961.

Shepard was actually the second person in space — the Soviet Union launched cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin three weeks earlier, to Shepard's everlasting dismay.

The 37-year-old Mercury astronaut and Navy test pilot cut a slick sci-fi figure in his silver spacesuit as he stood in the predawn darkness at Cape Canaveral, looking up at his Redstone rocket. Impatient with all the delays, including another hold in the countdown just minutes before launch, he famously growled into his mic: "Why don't you fix your little problem and light this candle?"

His capsule, Freedom 7, soared to an altitude of 116 miles (186 kilometers) before parachuting into the Atlantic.

Twenty days later, President John F. Kennedy committed to landing a man on the moon and returning him safely by decade's end, a promise made good in July 1969 by Apollo 11's Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin.

Shepard, who died in 1998, went on to command Apollo 14 in 1971, becoming the fifth moonwalker — and lone lunar golfer.

Since Gagarin and Shepard's pioneering flights, 579 people have rocketed into space or reached its fringes, according to NASA. Nearly two-thirds are American and just over 20% Soviet or Russian. About 90% are male and most are white, although NASA's crews have been more diverse in recent decades.

A Black community college educator from Tempe, Arizona, sees her spot on SpaceX's upcoming private flight as a symbol. Sian Proctor uses the acronym J.E.D.I. for "a just, equitable, diverse and inclusive space."

NASA wasn't always on board with space tourism, but is today.

"Our goal is one day that everyone's a space person," NASA's human spaceflight chief, Kathy Lueders

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 26 of 72

said following Sunday's splashdown of a SpaceX capsule with four astronauts. "We're very excited to see it starting to take off."

Twenty years ago, NASA clashed with Russian space officials over the flight of the world's first space tourist.

California businessman Dennis Tito paid \$20 million to visit the space station, launching atop a Russian rocket. Virginia-based Space Adventures arranged Tito's weeklong trip, which ended May 6, 2001, as well as seven more tourist flights that followed.

"By opening up his checkbook, he kicked off an industry 20 yrs ago," Space Adventures co-founder Eric Anderson tweeted last week. "Space is opening up more than it ever has, and for all."

There's already a line.

A Russian actress and movie director are supposed to launch from Kazakhstan in the fall. They'll be followed in December by Space Adventures' two newest clients, also launching on a Russian Soyuz rocket. SpaceX will be next up in January with the three businessmen; the flight from Florida's Kennedy Space Center was arranged by Axiom Space, a Houston company run by former NASA employees. And as early as 2023, SpaceX is supposed to take a Japanese entrepreneur and his guests around the moon and back.

While no fan of human spaceflight — he prefers robotic explorers — Duke University emeritus history professor Alex Roland acknowledges the emergence of spaceflight companies might be "the most significant change in the last 60 years." Yet he wonders whether there will be much interest once the novelty wears off and the inevitable fatalities occur.

Then there's the high price of admission.

The U.S., Canadian and Israeli entrepreneurs flying SpaceX early next year are paying \$55 million — each — for their 1 1/2-week mission.

Virgin Galactic's tickets cost considerably less for minutes versus days of weightlessness. Initially \$250,000, the price is expected to go up once Branson's company starts accepting reservations again.

As for SpaceX's private flight on a fully automated Dragon capsule, tech entrepreneur Jared Isaacman won't say what he's paying. He considers his three-day flight a "great responsibility" and is taking no shortcuts in training; he took his crewmates hiking up Mount Rainier last weekend to toughen them up.

"If something does go wrong, it will set back every other person's ambition to go and become a commercial astronaut," Isaacman said recently.

John Logsdon, professor emeritus at George Washington University, where he founded the Space Policy Institute, has mixed feelings about this shift from space exploration to adventure tourism.

"It takes the romance and excitement out of going to space," Logsdon said in an email this week. Instead of the dawn of a new era like so many have proclaimed, it's "more like the end of the era when space flight was special. I guess that is progress."

Cheney could be 'toast' in fight with Trump over GOP future

By LISA MASCARO, ALAN FRAM and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy wants his party to stand firmly with Donald Trump, despite the former president's false claims about the election being stolen from him.

No. 3 GOP leader Liz Cheney is trying to steer the party far from Trump's claims about his defeat, charting a future without him.

The party, it became more apparent Tuesday, does not have room for both.

Cheney's political future was increasingly in peril as McCarthy signaled he would no longer protect his lieutenant from those seeking her ouster from House GOP leadership, opening the possibility of a vote to remove her from the job as soon as next week. One Republican aide granted anonymity to discuss the situation said simply, "She's toast."

What could be seen as a skirmish between minority party leaders trying to find a way back to the majority has become a more politically profound moment for Republicans and the country. The party of Abraham Lincoln is deciding whether to let Trump's false claims about the election of Democrat Joe Biden

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 27 of 72

go unchecked — or to hold him accountable, as Cheney does, by arguing the country cannot “whitewash” the former president’s role in the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

“This is a much bigger issue than the future of the Republican Party,” said Timothy Naftali, an associate professor at New York University and founding director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. “This is about the future of our democracy.”

The standoff has been intensifying ever since Cheney led a group of 10 House Republicans voting with Democrats to impeach Trump on a charge of incitement of insurrection over the Jan. 6 siege, the worst domestic mob attack on the Capitol in the nation’s history.

Not only was her effort an affront to Trump, still president at the time, but it was out of step with most House Republicans, including the 138 who voted against certifying the Electoral College vote for Biden’s victory. However, others, including Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., who voted to impeach Trump, see Cheney as the “truth-telling” GOP leader the nation needs.

Some fellow Republicans tried to oust her from her leadership position, but they failed in February in a secret party ballot, 145-61, in part because McCarthy urged his troops to remain unified against Democrats.

But the divisions have now widened into a fight for the party’s future as it navigates a post-Trump world. McCarthy and Cheney are offering their colleagues two theories of the path forward.

McCarthy, who would be in line for the speaker’s gavel if the GOP wins House control, wants to keep Trump voters active in the party and attract new supporters. He believes this is accomplished by keeping Trump engaged, dashing down to the former president’s private club in Florida for support and drawing on his connection with the man who referred to him as “My Kevin.”

Cheney takes the opposite approach, arguing the GOP must rid itself of Trump’s brand of politics with its nationalist, authoritarian overtones if it hopes to return to its conservative roots and attract the voters who fled the party for Biden.

“We can’t embrace the notion the election is stolen. It’s a poison in the bloodstream of our democracy,” Cheney said at a fundraising event with the conservative American Enterprise Institute at Sea Island, Georgia, according to a person familiar with the event and granted anonymity to discuss it.

“We can’t whitewash what happened on Jan. 6 or perpetuate Trump’s big lie. It is a threat to democracy. What he did on Jan. 6 is a line that cannot be crossed.”

Then, as lawmakers often do when they hope to speak indirectly to Trump, McCarthy appeared on Fox News Channel early Tuesday, and spoke of Cheney a day after Trump leveled fresh claims of voter fraud.

“I have heard from members concerned about her ability to carry out her job as conference chair, to carry out the message,” he said. “We all need to be working as one if we’re able to win the majority.”

Trump himself issued a fresh statement Monday renewing his desire to see Cheney defeated by another Republican in next year’s Wyoming GOP primary.

Meanwhile, the fight between the two is viewed by other GOP leaders as a distraction, and many rank-and-file Republicans blame her for prolonging it rather than simply letting the former president’s claims go unanswered.

One top Republican congressional aide said McCarthy had weeks ago urged Cheney to stop talking about Trump, and her failure to do so has boosted frustration with her.

McCarthy, who delivered a speech supporting her when House Republicans privately voted to keep her in February, will not do that this time, said the aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe internal conversations. A vote on whether to remove her could occur as early as next Wednesday, when House Republicans are next scheduled to meet.

Interviews with a half dozen lawmakers and aides from across the party’s ideological spectrum found none saying it’s likely she will survive the challenge. They cited her abandonment by McCarthy and her persistence in criticizing Trump.

Cheney isn’t backing down.

Asked about McCarthy’s comments on Tuesday, spokesperson Jeremy Adler said in a written statement, “This is about whether the Republican Party is going to perpetuate lies about the 2020 election and at-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 28 of 72

tempt to whitewash what happened on Jan 6. Liz will not do that. That is the issue.”

A potential vote on her leadership puts the GOP in the awkward position of seeking to oust its highest-ranking woman from her post at a time when the party is trying to erode Democrats’ decisive advantage among female voters.

Potential contenders to replace her include Reps. Elise Stefanik of New York and Jackie Walorski of Indiana, the aide said. Rep. Jim Banks of Indiana, head of the powerful Republican Study Committee, is also seen as in the running.

In Wyoming, far from riding out the criticism, Cheney, the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, is on the defensive.

She already has four Republican primary opponents for next year’s election. Among them, two state legislators are giving her grief for fist-bumping Biden after he spoke to Congress in a joint address last week.

“Liz, fist bump your way right out of Wyoming,” tweeted Chuck Gray, a state representative from Casper. Cheney responded to the criticism by saying she “will always respond in a civil, respectful and dignified way” when greeted by the president.

She does have allies in Congress, some prominent. However, many House Republicans are unwilling to stand up to Trump, who says he is considering a run to return to the White House in 2024.

Illinois Rep. Kinzinger supports Cheney, and “will continue to fight for the soul of the GOP, no matter how long it takes,” his spokesman Maura Gillespie said.

And Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, the party’s 2012 presidential nominee and another Trump adversary, leapt to Cheney’s defense.

“Every person of conscience draws a line beyond which they will not go: Liz Cheney refuses to lie,” Romney tweeted. “As one of my Republican Senate colleagues said to me following my impeachment vote: ‘I wouldn’t want to be a member of a group that punished someone for following their conscience.’”

Nature at its craziest: Trillions of cicadas about to emerge

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

COLUMBIA, Md. (AP) — Sifting through a shovel load of dirt in a suburban backyard, Michael Raupp and Paula Shrewsbury find their quarry: a cicada nymph.

And then another. And another. And four more.

In maybe a third of a square foot of dirt, the University of Maryland entomologists find at least seven cicadas -- a rate just shy of a million per acre. A nearby yard yielded a rate closer to 1.5 million.

And there’s much more afoot. Trillions of the red-eyed black bugs are coming, scientists say.

Within days, a couple weeks at most, the cicadas of Brood X (the X is the Roman numeral for 10) will emerge after 17 years underground. There are many broods of periodic cicadas that appear on rigid schedules in different years, but this is one of the largest and most noticeable. They’ll be in 15 states from Indiana to Georgia to New York; they’re coming out now in mass numbers in Tennessee and North Carolina.

When the entire brood emerges, backyards can look like undulating waves, and the bug chorus is lawnmower loud.

The cicadas will mostly come out at dusk to try to avoid everything that wants to eat them, squiggling out of holes in the ground. They’ll try to climb up trees or anything vertical, including Raupp and Shrewsbury. Once off the ground, they shed their skins and try to survive that vulnerable stage before they become dinner to a host of critters including ants, birds, dogs, cats and Raupp.

It’s one of nature’s weirdest events, featuring sex, a race against death, evolution and what can sound like a bad science fiction movie soundtrack.

Some people may be repulsed. Psychiatrists are calling entomologists worrying about their patients, Shrewsbury said. But scientists say the arrival of Brood X is a sign that despite pollution, climate change and dramatic biodiversity loss, something is still right with nature. And it’s quite a show.

Raupp presents the narrative of cicada’s lifespan with all the verve of a Hollywood blockbuster:

“You’ve got a creature that spends 17 years in a COVID-like existence, isolated underground sucking on

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 29 of 72

plant sap, right? In the 17th year these teenagers are going to come out of the earth by the billions if not trillions. They're going to try to best everything on the planet that wants to eat them during this critical period of the nighttime when they're just trying to grow up, they're just trying to be adults, shed that skin, get their wings, go up into the treetops, escape their predators," he says.

"Once in the treetops, hey, it's all going to be about romance. It's only the males that sing. It's going to be a big boy band up there as the males try to woo those females, try to convince that special someone that she should be the mother of his nymphs. He's going to perform, sing songs. If she likes it, she's going to click her wings. They're going to have some wild sex in the treetop.

"Then she's going to move out to the small branches, lay their eggs. Then it's all going to be over in a matter of weeks. They're going to tumble down. They're going to basically fertilize the very plants from which they were spawned. Six weeks later the tiny nymphs are going to tumble 80 feet from the treetops, bounce twice, burrow down into the soil, go back underground for another 17 years."

"This," Raupp says, "is one of the craziest life cycles of any creature on the planet."

America is the only place in the world that has periodic cicadas that stay underground for either 13 or 17 years, says entomologist John Cooley of the University of Connecticut.

The bugs only emerge in large numbers when the ground temperature reaches 64 degrees. That's happening earlier in the calendar in recent years because of climate change, says entomologist Gene Kritsky. Before 1950 they used to emerge at the end of May; now they're coming out weeks earlier.

Though there have been some early bugs in Maryland and Ohio, soil temperatures have been in the low 60s. So Raupp and other scientists believe the big emergence is days away -- a week or two, max.

Cicadas who come out early don't survive. They're quickly eaten by predators. Cicadas evolved a key survival technique: overwhelming numbers. There's just too many of them to all get eaten when they all emerge at once, so some will survive and reproduce, Raupp says.

This is not an invasion. The cicadas have been here the entire time, quietly feeding off tree roots underground, not asleep, just moving slowly waiting for their body clocks tell them it is time to come out and breed. They've been in America for millions of years, far longer than people.

When they emerge, it gets noisy -- 105 decibels noisy, like "a singles bar gone horribly, horribly wrong," Cooley says. There are three distinct cicada species and each has its own mating song.

They aren't locusts and the only plants they damage are young trees, which can be netted. The year after a big batch of cicadas, trees actually do better because dead bugs serve as fertilizer, Kritsky says.

People tend to be scared of the wrong insects, says University of Illinois entomologist May Berenbaum. The mosquito kills more people than any other animals because of malaria and other diseases. Yet some people really dread the cicada emergence, she said.

"I think it's the fact that they're an inconvenience. Also, when they die in mass numbers they smell bad," Berenbaum says. "They really disrupt our sense of order."

But others are fond of cicadas -- and even munch on them, using recipes like those in a University of Maryland cookbook. And for scientists like Cooley, there is a real beauty in their life cycle.

"This is a feel-good story, folks. It really is and it's in a year we need more," he says. "When they come out, it's a great sign that forests are in good shape. All is as it is supposed to be."

Myanmar's military disappearing young men to crush uprising

By VICTORIA MILKO and KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Myanmar's security forces moved in and the street lamps went black. In house after house, people shut off their lights. Darkness swallowed the block.

Huddled inside her home in this neighborhood of Yangon, 19-year-old Shwe dared to peek out her window into the inky night. A flashlight shone back, and a man's voice ordered her not to look.

Two gunshots rang out. Then a man's scream: "HELP!" When the military's trucks finally rolled away, Shwe and her family emerged to look for her 15-year-old brother, worried about frequent abductions by security forces.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 30 of 72

"I could feel my blood thumping," she says. "I had a feeling that he might be taken."

Across the country, Myanmar's security forces are arresting and forcibly disappearing thousands of people, especially boys and young men, in a sweeping bid to break the back of a three-month uprising against a military takeover. In most cases, the families of those taken do not know where they are, according to an Associated Press analysis of more than 3,500 arrests since February.

UNICEF, the U.N. children's agency, is aware of around 1,000 cases of children or young people who have been arbitrarily arrested and detained, many without access to lawyers or their families. Though it is difficult to get exact data, UNICEF says the majority are boys.

It is a technique the military has long used to instill fear and to crush pro-democracy movements. The boys and young men are taken from homes, businesses and streets, under the cover of night and sometimes in the brightness of day.

Some end up dead. Many are imprisoned and sometimes tortured. Many more are missing.

"We've definitely moved into a situation of mass enforced disappearances," says Matthew Smith, co-founder of the human rights group Fortify Rights, which has collected evidence of detainees being killed in custody. "We're documenting and seeing widespread and systematic arbitrary arrests."

The AP is withholding Shwe's full name, along with those of several others, to protect them from retaliation by the military.

The autobody shop in Shwe's neighborhood was a regular hangout for local boys. On the night of March 21, her brother had gone there to chill out like he usually did.

As Shwe approached the shop, she saw it had been ransacked. Frantic, she and her father scoured the building for any sign of their beloved boy.

But he was gone, and the floor was covered in blood.

Ever since the military seized control in February, the conflict in Myanmar has become increasingly bloody. Security forces have killed more than 700 people, including a boy as young as 9.

In the meantime, the faces of the missing have flooded the Internet in growing numbers. Online videos show soldiers and police beating and kicking young men as they're shoved into vans, even forcing captives to crawl on all fours and hop like frogs.

Recently, photos of young people detained by security forces also have begun circulating online and on military-controlled Myawaddy TV, their faces bloodied, with clear markings of beatings and possible torture. The military's openness in broadcasting such photos and brutalizing people in daylight is one more sign that its goal is to intimidate.

At least 3,500 people have been detained since the military takeover began, more than three-quarters of whom are male, according to an analysis of data collected by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors deaths and arrests. Of the 419 men whose ages were recorded in the group's database, nearly two-thirds are under age 30, and 78 are teenagers.

Nearly 2,700 of the detainees are being held at undisclosed locations, according to an AAPP spokesman. The group says its numbers are likely an undercount.

"The military are trying to turn civilians, striking workers, and children into enemies," says Ko Bo Kyi, AAPP's joint secretary. "They think if they can kill off the boys and young men, then they can kill off the revolution."

After receiving questions from The Associated Press, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, called a Zoom press conference, during which it dubbed the AAPP a "baseless organization," suggested its data was inaccurate, and denied security forces are targeting young men.

"The security forces are not arresting based on genders and ages," said Capt. Aye Thazin Myint, a military spokeswoman. "They are only detaining anyone who is rioting, protesting, causing unrest, or any actions along those lines."

Some of those snatched by security forces were protesting. Some have links to the military's rival political party, most notably Aung San Suu Kyi, who led the elected government that the military toppled and is now

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 31 of 72

under house arrest. Others are taken for no discernable reason. They are typically charged with Section 505(A) of the Penal Code, which, in part, criminalizes comments that "cause fear" or spread "false news."

Both the military and police — who fall under the Tatmadaw's command via the Ministry of Home Affairs — have been involved in the arrests and disappearances, sometimes working in tandem, according to interviews with detainees and families. Experts believe that suggests a coordinated strategy.

"The Myanmar police force and the Tatmadaw moved in in a very deliberate way, in a coordinated way, in similar ways, in disparate locations, which to us would indicate that they were working according to orders," says Smith of Fortify Rights. "It would appear as though there was ... some national level communication and coordination taking place."

Manny Maung, a Myanmar researcher for Human Rights Watch, says one woman she spoke with described being viciously beaten by police until what looked like a senior military official told them to stop.

"They're definitely following orders from military officials," Maung says. "And whether they're coordinating — they're certainly turning up to places together."

So desperate for information are the loved ones of the lost that some families have resorted to a grim experiment: They send food into the prisons and hope if it isn't sent back out, that means their relatives are still inside.

Myanmar human rights activist Wai Hnin Pwint Thon is intimately acquainted with the Tatmadaw's tactics. Her father, famed political activist Mya Aye, was arrested during a 1988 uprising against military rule, and the family waited months before they learned he was in prison.

He was arrested again on the first day of this year's military takeover. For two months, the military gave Wai Hnin Pwint Thon's family no information on his whereabouts. On April 1, the family learned he was being held at Yangon's notorious Insein prison.

"I can't imagine families of young people who are 19, 20, 21, in prison... We are this worried and we're used to this situation," she says. "I'm trying to hold onto hope, but the situation is getting worse every day."

Mee, a 27-year-old villager in the northern region of Mandalay, watched as children on motorbikes raced past her house toward the woods. Not long after, the village elders arrived with a dire warning: All the boys must leave and get somewhere safe. The soldiers might be coming.

Just two hours later, Mee says, the elders asked the girls to hide, too.

The military's scare tactics have proven enormously effective. In villages and cities across the country, residents regularly take turns holding night watches, banging pots and pans or yelling to neighbors from the street if soldiers or police are spotted.

"I am more afraid of being arrested than getting shot," says one 29-year-old man who was arrested, beaten and later released, and who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retribution. "I have a chance of dying on the spot with just one shot. But being arrested, I am afraid that they would torture me."

Fearing for her life on that March afternoon, Mee and hundreds of fellow villagers fled to pineapple farms in the surrounding hills. When she arrived, she saw scores of people from other villages hiding in the forest.

That night, as mosquitos swarmed and sounds from the forest haunted them, the women stayed inside a small bamboo tent while the boys took turns standing guard. No one slept.

Mee was terrified but not surprised. Many of the villagers had run from the military and hidden in the woods before.

"It's heartbreaking," she says.

For decades, the Tatmadaw has used arbitrary arrests, disappearances, forced labor and other abuses to crush pro-democracy movements and suppress minorities, including its notoriously brutal 2017 campaign of persecution against Rohingya Muslims.

"Sometimes communities are asked to provide a number of young men on a 'voluntary' basis; sometimes they are taken," Laetitia van den Assum, a former diplomat and a member of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, said in an e-mail.

Arbitrary arrests continue across the country daily. Just two weeks earlier, a few minutes away from

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 32 of 72

Mee's village, 24-year-old philosophy student Ko Ko was walking home from a protest with a friend when they were arrested. His parents learned of their imprisonment from friends of friends, not officials.

More than a month later, his parents still haven't heard from their only son, says Han, a neighbor. He's part of an unlucky cohort: at least 44 people taken from the town are yet to be released, Han says.

While many of the young men in Mee's village returned home after two nights in the pineapple fields, some continue to sleep there. Mee has since gone back to her village.

Whenever she sees a soldier, she runs. But her fear has largely given way to fury.

"I was angry that night, and I am still angry," she says. "It's so frustrating that the people who are supposed to be protecting our lives, our safety, our livelihoods and our homes are the people who are chasing us and killing us. ... We are helpless."

The glass was shattering, and there was nowhere left for the 21-year-old university student to run. The soldiers were smashing through the front doors of the house in Mandalay.

The chaos of such raids is usually followed by a sinister silence, with the families of the taken rarely hearing from officials. But the accounts of some survivors who dare to speak about their ordeals help fill the void of what often happens next.

The student, who asked that his name be withheld out of fear of retaliation, had taken refuge in the house along with around 100 others after security forces stormed a rally they were attending. The soldiers had thrown tear gas at them, forcing them to flee.

Now he and a half dozen others were cornered in a bathroom on the home's second level. Downstairs, the security forces used a slingshot and the butt of a gun to break through the doors.

The soldiers began beating the boys they found inside, so viciously that a few of their heads cracked open. They urinated on one young man.

The student watched as the glass above the bathroom door imploded. "They are here!" the soldiers yelled, then burst in, guns drawn.

He bowed his head, since anyone who looked at the soldiers was kicked. The soldiers kicked him anyway, twice in the waist, and hit him twice in the head. As he was marched down the stairs, he saw a soldier with a gun standing on nearly every step.

He and around 30 other young men were arrested and ushered into a prison van. Both the military and police were there. The soldiers threatened to burn the van and tauntingly offered the detainees juice before throwing it at them.

When they arrived at the prison, the young man saw 400 to 500 people in the temporary holding area. The next day, he was charged with Section 505(A) of the penal code. He and around 50 others spent nine days jammed into one room.

There were only two toilets. They were allowed out of the cell twice a day to clean themselves. The same water was used for showering, drinking, washing dishes and using the toilet.

When the young man learned he was being transferred to the main prison, he wanted to cry. A few days before his arrest, he had been looking at missing persons posts on social media. Now he realized most of those people were probably in prison like him.

The young man had good reason to be frightened.

"People are disappearing and turning up dead," says Maung, of Human Rights Watch. "We have had primary reports, also, of torture while they're in custody."

The group found that some people detained inside Insein prison were subjected to beatings, stress positions and severe interrogation tactics, up until March 4, Maung says. After that, guards began taking prisoners to second locations and torturing them, then returning them to Insein.

In Mandalay, the young man's family was sick with worry. Some of his friends told them he had been arrested; the authorities never called them.

His family sent food into the prison for him. But even when it wasn't returned, they couldn't be sure he was inside. They heard reports about protesters being tortured. His sisters cried constantly.

Thirteen days after his arrest, the young man was allowed ten minutes to speak with his sister.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 33 of 72

A week later, an official ordered him to pack his things. In shock, he realized he was being released. There was no time to say goodbye to his friends. The officials took videos and photos of him and around 20 others, and told them to sign statements promising they wouldn't break the law again. Then they were set free.

He didn't feel lucky — he felt horrible. He didn't understand why he'd been singled out for release while his friends were still stuck inside.

"None of us really feel safe living our normal lives now. For me now, I have reservations walking alone outside even in my neighborhood," he says. "And also, I feel worried to see the parents of my friends in the neighborhood, because I am out — and their children are not."

Back in Yangon, Shwe stared at the puddles of blood on the floor of the shop where her baby brother had been. It looked as if the security forces had half-heartedly tried to wash it away, but red pools remained.

Maybe the blood wasn't his, she told herself.

Shwe's brother and three other young men from the shop had been hauled away. Neighbors told the family that both police and soldiers were there. The neighbors said the security forces may have targeted the boys because they spotted someone inside the shop with a steel dart slingshot.

At 2 a.m., a police officer called to say Shwe's brother was at a military hospital and had been shot in the hand. They later learned security forces had shot another young man's finger during the raid.

Shwe says her family told the police that her brother was underage. The officer, she says, reassured them that because he was a minor, he probably wouldn't be charged.

Around 7 a.m., the family went to the hospital to bring him food. But their pleas to see him were rejected. Shwe and her family were later told that he was being moved to a prison hospital.

Then, on the night of March 27, came the news that stunned them: Her brother and the three others had been charged with possession of weapons, and sentenced to three years in prison.

They were allowed one brief phone call with him when he was first in the hospital, and nothing since. Shwe remembers hearing her brother tell their anguished mother, "Thar ah sin pyay tal." I am OK.

Shwe has no idea if that is still true. She worries for her brother, a quiet boy who loves playing games. She worries, too, for their mother, who cries and cries, and for their father, who aches for his only son.

For now, they can do little more than wait and hope: That he won't be beaten. That he will get a pardon. That the people of Myanmar will soon feel safe again.

"Even though we are all in distress, we try to look on the bright side that at least we know where he is," she says. "We are lucky that he was only abducted."

Montana tribe gifts vaccines to neighbors across the border

By IRIS SAMUELS Associated Press/Report for America

BABB, Mont. (AP) — On a cloudy spring day, hundreds lined up in their cars on the Canadian side of the border crossing that separates Alberta and Montana. They had driven for hours and camped out in their vehicles in hopes of receiving the season's hottest commodity — a COVID-19 vaccine — from a Native American tribe that was giving out its excess doses.

The Blackfoot tribe in northern Montana provided about 1,000 surplus vaccines last month to its First Nations relatives and others from across the border, in an illustration of the disparity in speed at which the United States and Canada are distributing doses. While more than 30% of adults in the U.S. are fully vaccinated, in Canada that figure is about 3%.

Among those who received the vaccine at the Piegan-Carway border crossing were Sherry Cross Child and Shane Little Bear, of Stand Off, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of the border.

They recited a prayer in the Blackfoot language before nurses began administering shots, with Chief Mountain — sacred to the Blackfoot people — rising in the distance. The prayer was dedicated to people seeking refuge from the virus, Cross Child said.

Cross Child and her husband have family and friends in Montana but have not been able to visit them

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 34 of 72

since the border closed last spring to all but essential travel.

"It's been stressful because we had some deaths in the family, and they couldn't come," she said. "Just for the support – they rely on us, and we rely on them. It's been tough."

More than 95% of the Blackfeet reservation's roughly 10,000 residents who are eligible for the vaccine are fully immunized, after the state prioritized Native American communities — among the most vulnerable U.S. populations — in the early stages of its vaccination campaign.

The tribe received vaccine allotments both from the Montana health department and the federal Indian Health Service, leaving some doses unused. With an expiration date fast approaching, it turned to other nations in the Blackfoot Confederacy, which includes the Blackfeet and three tribes in southern Alberta that share a language and culture.

"The idea was to get to our brothers and sisters that live in Canada," said Robert DesRosier, emergency services manager for the Blackfeet tribe. "And then the question came up – what if a nontribal member wants a vaccine? Well, this is about saving lives. We're not going to turn anybody away."

The tribe distributed the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines over four days in late April at the remote Piegan Port of Entry, amid a backdrop of rolling grasslands to the east and Glacier National Park's snow-covered peaks to the west.

As news of the effort spread in Canada, first by word of mouth, then through social platforms and media reports, people traveled from farther away. Some drove five hours from the city of Edmonton.

The effort was particularly timely as Alberta sees a surge in new cases of the respiratory virus, with a caseload record reached this month.

Bonnie Healy, Blackfoot Confederacy health administrator, said she was glad the vaccination effort reached both First Nations and other communities in the province.

"We have family members that live in those areas," she said. "If we can get these places safe, then it's safe for our children to go to school there. It's safe for our elders to go shopping in their stores."

Canadians who got the vaccines were not allowed to linger in the U.S. They returned home with letters from health officials exempting them from the mandatory 14-day quarantine imposed on all those entering the country.

The tribe's initiative is one of a few partnerships that have cropped up between communities in the U.S. and Canada, where residents might otherwise have to wait weeks or months for a shot. Canada has lagged in vaccinating its population because it lacks the ability to manufacture the vaccine and has had to rely on the global supply chain for the lifesaving shots, like many other countries.

In Alaska, Gov. Mike Dunleavy has offered COVID-19 vaccines to residents of Stewart, British Columbia, with hopes it could lead the Canadian government to ease restrictions between that town and the Alaska border community of Hyder, a couple of miles away. In North Dakota, Gov. Doug Burgum and Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister unveiled a plan last month to administer vaccinations to Manitoba-based truck drivers transporting goods to and from the U.S.

On the Montana side of the border, vaccine recipients were often emotional, shedding tears, shouting words of gratitude through car windows as they drove away, and handing the nurses gifts such as chocolate and clothing. Some shared stories about what the vaccine meant to them – the possibility of safely caring for vulnerable loved ones, reuniting with grandparents or traveling again.

Recipients included 17-year-olds who are low on the country's priority list and parents who camped out with their young children in the backseat.

Maxwell Stein, 25, who plays the horn with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, arrived at the border crossing at 6 p.m. Wednesday and spent the night in his car, finally reaching the front of the line around 10 a.m. Thursday.

"It wasn't awesome, but you do what you need to to get a vaccine," he said. He predicted that if he had waited in Canada, he'd likely get his first dose sometime in late June, and it would be months before he would be fully vaccinated.

The Canadian government has recommended extending the interval between the two doses of the

Moderna and Pfizer vaccines from around three weeks to four months, with the goal of quickly inoculating more people amid the shortage. Some who attended the Blackfeet clinics had already gotten their first shot in Canada. More than 30% of Canada's population has received at least one dose of the vaccine, but around 3% have received both doses recommended by the drug manufacturers to reach full immunity. Canadian officials say partial immunity is better than none.

"It's unfortunate because one shot only protects you slightly," Stein said. "With vaccines, I think it's really important to get the correct dosage in the right time period, so your body builds up the full resistance."

When Stein heard about the vaccine clinic on the border, he didn't hesitate about the long drive, particularly as a professional musician who has a lot of free time with many concerts canceled.

"Really, I have no excuse. If I had to drive 10 hours to get the Pfizer or Moderna, I probably would have done it," he said.

Facebook board's Trump decision could have wider impacts

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Since the day after the deadly Jan. 6 riots on the U.S. Capitol, former President Donald Trump's social media accounts have been silent — muzzled for inciting violence using the platforms as online megaphones.

On Wednesday, his fate on Facebook, the biggest social platform around, will be decided. The company's quasi-independent Oversight Board will announce its ruling around 9 a.m. ET. If it rules in Trump's favor, Facebook has seven days to reinstate the account. If the board upholds Facebook's decision, Trump will remain "indefinitely" suspended.

Politicians, free speech experts and activists around the world are watching the decision closely. It has implications not only for Trump but for tech companies, world leaders and people across the political spectrum — many of whom have wildly conflicting views of the proper role for technology companies when it comes to regulating online speech and protecting people from abuse and misinformation.

After years of handling Trump's inflammatory rhetoric with a light touch, Facebook and Instagram took the drastic step of silencing his accounts in January. In announcing the unprecedented move, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the risk of allowing Trump to continue using the platform was too great.

"The shocking events of the last 24 hours clearly demonstrate that President Donald Trump intends to use his remaining time in office to undermine the peaceful and lawful transition of power to his elected successor, Joe Biden," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page on Jan. 7.

A day before the announcement, Trump unveiled a new blog on his personal website, "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump." While the page includes a dramatic video claiming, "A BEACON OF FREEDOM ARISES" and hailing "A PLACE TO SPEAK FREELY AND SAFELY," the page is little more than a displays of Trump's recent statements — available elsewhere on the website — that can be easily shared on Facebook and Twitter, the platforms that banished him after the riot.

While Trump aides have spent months teasing his plans to launch his own social media platform, his spokesman Jason Miller said the blog was something separate.

"President Trump's website is a great resource to find his latest statements and highlights from his first term in office, but this is not a new social media platform," he tweeted. "We'll have additional information coming on that front in the very near future."

Barred from social media, Trump has embraced other platforms for getting his message out. He does frequent interviews with friendly news outlets and has emailed a flurry of statements to reporters through his official office and political group.

Trump has even said he prefers the statements to his old tweets, often describing them as more "elegant."

Facebook created the oversight panel to rule on thorny content on its platforms following widespread criticism of its difficulty responding swiftly and effectively to misinformation, hate speech and nefarious influence campaigns. Its decisions so far — all nine of them — have tended to favor free expression over the restriction of content.

In its first rulings, the panel overturned four out of five decisions by the social network to take down questionable material. It ordered Facebook to restore posts by users that the company said broke stan-

dards on adult nudity, hate speech, or dangerous individuals.

Critics of Facebook, however, worry that the Oversight Board is a mere distraction from the company's deeper problems — ones that can't be addressed in a handful of high-profile cases by a semi-independent body of experts.

"Facebook set the rules, are judge, jury and executioner and control their own appeals court and their own Supreme Court. The decisions they make have an impact on our democracies, national security and biosecurity and cannot be left to their own in house theatre of the absurd," said Imran Ahmed, CEO Center for Countering Digital Hate, a nonprofit critical of Facebook. "Whatever the judgement tomorrow, this whole fiasco shows why we need democratic regulation of Big Tech."

Gautam Hans, a technology law and free speech expert and professor at Vanderbilt University, said he finds the Oversight Board structure to be "frustrating and a bit of a sideshow from the larger policy and social questions that we have about these companies."

"To some degree, Facebook is trying to create an accountability mechanism that I think undermines efforts to have government regulation and legislation," Hans said. "If any other company decided, well, we're just going to outsource our decision-making to some quasi-independent body, that would be thought of as ridiculous."

Caitlyn Jenner campaign makes next stop on Fox Hannity show

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The slow unfolding of Caitlyn Jenner's campaign for California governor will continue with an interview with Fox News host Sean Hannity, as the Republican who calls herself a "compassionate disrupter" begins to sketch a rough outline of how she would manage the nation's most populous state.

The 71-year-old Jenner — a reality TV personality, transgender rights activist and 1976 Olympics hero — announced her campaign last month in a written statement on Twitter. Jenner, who came out as a woman in 2015, followed up Monday with a three-minute video posted on her website in which she criticizes career politicians and promises to restore California's luster amid a pandemic and homeless crisis.

The written statements and video released so far, which include shots of her Olympic competition and gold medal, appear intended to introduce Jenner's story to voters who might be only glancingly familiar with her, if at all.

The taped interview with Hannity set to air Wednesday will represent some of the first words voters will hear from Jenner since her campaign launch last month, beyond Twitter posts and materials posted on her website. Jenner told a TMZ reporter on Saturday that she opposes transgender girls competing in girls' sports at school, calling it "a question of fairness."

Her cautious steps into the campaign highlight the risks for a political newcomer who could be tripped up by a vast array of complex subjects, from immigration to tax policy to vaccine distribution.

Hannity's show is likely to prove a welcoming stage for a critic of California's Democratic-led government. It was a favored venue for former President Donald Trump.

"For a candidate like Caitlyn Jenner to win, it has to be like a layered cake. The bottom layer has to be Trump supporters," said Bill Whalen, a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution who was a speechwriter for former Republican Gov. Pete Wilson.

"Where do you go to get Trump supporters? Simple: Sean Hannity," Whalen said.

Jenner made headlines in recent years with her ties to Trump, who lost to Joe Biden in the state by over 5 million votes.

Jenner supported Trump in 2016 but later criticized his administration's reversal of a directive on transgender access to public school bathrooms. She also split with Trump after he said transgender people would not be allowed to serve in the U.S. military.

Jenner would be a longshot to win in a recall, but her threat to other Republicans — as well as Newsom — is her ability to lure the media spotlight, he said.

"She is the shiny article in this recall right now," Whalen added. "She can make news anytime she wants."

The challenge she faces is getting past what Whalen called the "giggle factor" that comes with being a

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 37 of 72

reality TV figure looking to run the largest state government in the country and the fifth largest economy in the world.

"Will there be policy behind the polish?" he asked. "She's going to need to produce serious ideas."

Jenner took a small first step to answering those questions Tuesday, saying on her website that she would establish a working group to review state regulations, including those that could block development of affordable housing, and promising to veto any tax increases.

With Jenner bringing celebrity sparkle to the race, it was no surprise Tuesday when Republican rival John Cox trotted out a Kodiak bear named Tag to relaunch his campaign in Sacramento.

The 65-year-old businessman who lost to Newsom in a 2018 landslide also released a video calling himself "the beast," and resorted to name-calling reminiscent of Trump, repeatedly labeling Newsom a "pretty boy" who lacks the substance to run state government.

Cox spent \$5 million to air a 30-second version on television statewide, his campaign said, underscoring his need to raise his profile.

The stunt was aimed at drawing eyes to his campaign, but he promised to discuss "serious issues" — like bringing down the cost of housing, boosting the state's water resources and preventing special interests from influencing government.

Animal rights group PETA and state Sen. Ben Hueso, who authored a state law banning use of most animals in circuses, condemned his use of a bear as a campaign prop. The bear, which Cox said was born in captivity, is trained and has appeared in movies and commercials.

Jenner, meanwhile, has held no campaign events since announcing her candidacy nearly two weeks ago. Her video cast her as a champion of those forgotten by Sacramento.

"I'm running to be governor for all Californians, to reclaim our true identity, to bring back the gold to the Golden State," Jenner said in the ad.

Kim Nalder, a professor of political science at California State University, Sacramento, noted both candidates never mentioned their Republican political affiliation in their ads, which could be smart given that registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in California by nearly 2-to-1.

Newsom campaigned with firefighters Tuesday while accepting union endorsements. "This is a big day as we really kick off our efforts to defeat this recall," the governor said.

Newsom wasn't expected to face an election until 2022 but critics of his coronavirus response and liberal policies succeeded in collecting more than the 1.5 million signatures needed for a recall election.

There are still several steps remaining before the election is certified, but the signature collection and verification were the biggest hurdles. The election will likely be scheduled for the fall.

Other Republicans in the race include former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer and former Congressman Doug Ose.

Cox won less than 40% of the vote against Newsom in 2018 and has never won elected office despite a string of attempts. He said that his prior run gives him a statewide base to expand this time around. Faulconer has not run a statewide campaign and Ose briefly ran for governor in 2018 before dropping out.

Cox twice declined to answer whether he'd welcome Trump to campaign for him. Trump endorsed Cox in 2018 but is broadly unpopular in the state, outside his GOP base.

India's virus surge damages Modi's image of competence

By KRUTIKA PATHI, SHEIKH SAALIQ and RAVI NESSMAN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's hospitals were packed with coronavirus patients, relatives of the sick scrambled to find supplies of oxygen, and crematoriums were running near full capacity to handle the dead.

Yet despite those clear signs of an overwhelming health crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pressed ahead with a densely packed campaign rally.

"I have never seen such a huge crowd before!" he roared to his supporters in West Bengal state on April 17, before key local elections. "Wherever I can see, I can only see people. I can see nothing else."

As another deadly wave of COVID-19 infections was swamping India, Modi's government refused to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 38 of 72

cancel a giant Hindu festival. Cricket matches, attended by tens of thousands, carried on, too.

The catastrophic surge has badly dented Modi's political image after he drew praise last year for moving quickly to lock down India's nearly 1.4 billion people. Now, he's been called a "super-spreader" by the vice president of the Indian Medical Association, Dr. Navjot Dahiya.

With deaths mounting and a touted vaccine rollout faltering badly, Modi has pushed much of the responsibility for fighting the virus onto poorly equipped and unprepared state governments and even onto patients themselves, critics say.

"It is a crime against humanity," author and activist Arundhati Roy said of Modi's handling of the virus. "Foreign governments are rushing to help. But as long as decision-making remains with Modi, who has shown himself to be incapable of working with experts or looking beyond securing narrow political gain, it will be like pouring aid into a sieve."

The 70-year-old, whose image as a technocrat brought him deep approval from a middle class weary of corruption and bureaucratic dysfunction, has been accused of stifling dissent and choosing politics over public health.

When the official COVID-19 death toll crossed 200,000 — a number experts say is a severe undercount — Modi was silent.

His government says it is on a "war footing," ramping up hospital capacity, supplies of oxygen and drugs.

"The present COVID pandemic is a once-in-a-century crisis," Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar told The Associated Press. "All efforts are being made to overcome the situation by the central government in close coordination with the state governments and society at large."

When Modi won national elections in 2014, he presented himself as someone who could unlock economic growth by merging business-friendly policies with a Hindu nationalist ideology.

Critics saw him as craving power over the national welfare and catering to his Hindu nationalist base. They blamed him — although courts exonerated him — in the bloody 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat state, where he was chief minister.

The economy tumbled after his government overhauled India's cash supply and introduced a goods and services tax. Yet, he easily won reelection in 2019 on a wave of nationalism following clashes with archrival Pakistan.

Despite a second term marred by a souring economy, widening social strife, and deadly clashes with neighboring China, "Modi has proven to be incredibly politically resilient," said Milan Vaishnav, director of the South Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

When the coronavirus hit, Vaishnav said Modi took an approach different from former President Donald Trump and current Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.

"He never called the virus a hoax. He took it seriously. He encouraged mask-wearing, social distancing. He encouraged the sorts of things health authorities everywhere have been calling for," he added.

The strict lockdown, imposed on four hours' notice, stranded tens of millions of migrant workers who were left jobless and fled to villages with many dying along the way. But experts say the decision helped contain the virus and bought time for the government.

Cases rose when the country started reopening in June 2020, and the government developed emergency infrastructure plans. When the wave receded and reported cases plummeted over the winter, many officials saw it as a triumph. States dismantled makeshift hospitals and delayed adding ICU beds and ventilators.

The government had sought to create 162 oxygen plants earlier, but has only built 38. It says 105 more will be built this month.

The fragile health care system was not upgraded enough, said Gautam Menon, a science professor at Ashoka University, "and with the current surge, we're seeing precisely the consequences of not doing this."

When cases ebbed in January, Modi crowed about India's success, telling the World Economic Forum that the country "has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively."

His ruling Bharatiya Janata Party hailed his "visionary leadership," making India a "proud and victorious nation in the fight against COVID."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 39 of 72

In mid-March, tens of thousands attended cricket matches against England at Narendra Modi stadium in Gujarat, an event that swelled national pride even amid warnings that infections were climbing.

On March 21, advertisements on the front pages of newspapers read, "Beautiful Clean Safe," as Modi and a political ally welcomed Hindu devotees to the Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage to the Ganges River that drew millions throughout April.

By contrast, in March 2020, his government blamed a Muslim gathering of 3,000 for an initial spike in infections in a move that triggered violence and boycotts, even as courts dismissed the accusations.

Critics have blasted the BJP for holding election rallies packed with tens of thousands of unmasked supporters, particularly in West Bengal. Other parties also campaigned to large crowds. Bowing to criticism, Modi began appearing over video instead of live, but the crowds remained.

Though his party was defeated in the state, analysts say he still enjoys popularity nationwide.

Meanwhile, India's vaccination campaign begun in January has sputtered amid perceptions the virus was defeated. Only 10% of the population has received one shot and fewer than 2% have gotten both since it began in January.

The latest effort to inoculate those between 18 and 44 has been left to states and the private sector — an approach that critics say will make it easier for the government to pass blame when problems arise. Already, several states have said they don't have enough vaccine to even start.

The surge has sparked assistance from overseas, a reversal of India's earlier success at "vaccine diplomacy" when it exported 64 million doses. Some say Modi's flagship self-sufficiency campaign, known as "Make in India," is being undermined.

"India has long sought to project itself as a strong nation that need not be dependent on any other. Its immediate need for international assistance flies in the face of that image," said Michael Kugelman of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center.

Some Modi supporters are lashing out. When BJP lawmaker Kesar Singh Gangwar died of the virus in Uttar Pradesh state, his son said Modi's office didn't help.

"What kind of government is this? What kind of PM is Modi?" said Vishal Gangwar. "If he cannot provide treatment to a lawmaker of his own party, what is happening to a common man is anybody's guess."

To circumvent such criticism, the government ordered Twitter to remove posts criticizing his pandemic response. In BJP-run Uttar Pradesh, authorities recently charged a man over a tweet pleading for oxygen for his dying grandfather, accusing him of "circulating a rumor," as top officials deny widespread oxygen shortages.

"To blame social media or users for either critiquing or begging for help is just — I mean, what are their priorities? To help people or silence criticism?" said digital rights activist Nikhil Pahwa.

The level of urban and middle class anger at Modi is unprecedented, political analyst Vaishnav said, although it is blunted by supporters who believe he can do no wrong.

"He shouldn't be expected to solve all problems by himself. The government machinery which existed before him, full of corruption, is to blame," said Sunil Saini, a driver in New Delhi. "My vote will go to Modi the next time too."

Families, advocates mark day of awareness for Native victims

By FELICIA FONSECA and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — From the nation's capitol to Indigenous communities across the American Southwest, top government officials, family members and advocates are gathering Wednesday as part of a call to action to address the ongoing problem of violence against Indigenous women and children.

U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and other federal officials are expected to commemorate the annual day of awareness as a caravan of female motorcycle riders hits the streets in Phoenix, advocates take to social media, and families prepare for a night of candlelight and prayer vigils.

Haaland, the first Native American to lead a U.S. cabinet agency, called May 5 an unfortunate tradition.

The former Democratic U.S. representative from New Mexico remembers hearing families testify about

searching for loved ones on their own and bringing clothing to congressional hearings that represented missing and slain Native Americans.

Haaland will display a red shawl on an empty chair in her office Wednesday to symbolize those who have disappeared and honor the movement that rang the alarm. She said she believes the nation has reached an inflection point.

"This year more than any, I feel we are ready to solve this crisis," she told reporters Tuesday. "Everyone deserves to feel safe in their communities, but the missing and murdered Indigenous peoples crisis is one that Native communities have faced since the dawn of colonization. For too long, this issue has been swept under the rug with the lack of urgency, attention and funding."

Haaland cited studies and federal statistics that show at least 1,500 Native Americans and Alaska Natives are missing and Native women are at an increased risk of violence.

Indigenous women have been victimized at astonishing rates, with federal figures showing that they — along with non-Hispanic Black women — have experienced the highest homicide rates. Yet an Associated Press investigation in 2018 found that nobody knows the precise number of cases of missing and murdered Native Americans nationwide because many go unreported, others aren't well documented, and no government database specifically tracks them.

Over the past year, advocacy groups report that cases of domestic violence against Indigenous women and children and instances of sexual assault increased as nonprofit groups and social workers scrambled to meet the added challenges that stemmed from the coronavirus pandemic.

President Joe Biden issued a proclamation Tuesday on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day. He has promised to bolster resources to address the crisis and better consult with tribes to hold perpetrators accountable and keep communities safe. Haaland said that includes more staffing in a U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs unit dedicated to solving cold cases and coordinating with Mexico and Canada to combat human trafficking.

The administration's work will build on some of the initiatives started during former President Donald Trump's tenure. That included a task force made up of the Interior Department, the Justice Department and other federal agencies to address violent crime in Indian Country.

Advocates have said a lack of resources and complex jurisdictional issues have exacerbated efforts to locate those who are missing and solve other crimes in Indian Country. They also have pointed to the need for more culturally appropriate services.

Bryan Newland, principal assistant secretary for Indian Affairs at the Interior Department, said staffing at the Bureau of Indian Affairs unit will go from a team of 10 to more than 20 officers and special agents with administrative and support staff it previously didn't have.

He also said the federal government has started distributing funding under the American Rescue Plan Act, including \$60 million for public safety and law enforcement in Indian Country.

"We're really looking to build upon many of the things that have been done, to expand them and bring focus to them," Newland said.

Haaland said success would be measured by solving cold cases.

"Right now there are people in this country who don't know where their loved ones are. They haven't been found," she said. "We want to be able to answer that question. We want to make sure that folks can have some closure about their missing loved ones."

Families mourn victims of Mexico City subway collapse

By FABIOLA SÁNCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — José Luis Hernández Martínez crossed Mexico City every day on subway Line 12 between his home on the city's south side and the body shop where he worked repairing mangled cars.

The 61-year-old's train had emerged from beneath the city and was jostling along the elevated portion far from downtown late Monday night when two of its bright orange cars suddenly fell into a void.

Hernández Martínez was killed instantly, his son Luis Adrian Hernández Juárez said, one of 24 people

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 41 of 72

who died in one of the world's largest subway system's worst accidents. More than 70 others were injured.

"My father was recovered without vital signs, with trauma to his thorax, his brain, his feet, his knees," Hernández Juárez said, gripping the death certificate. He said emergency personnel told him his father was crushed beneath other passengers. "It's really terrible to see your father that way for the last time."

Hernández Juárez planned to bury his father Wednesday as a string of funerals began across the city of more than 9 million people.

Anger and frustration boiled among the victims' families and those who ride the sprawling subway daily. "No one is going to give me my father back, even if they give me 10 million pesos," Hernández Juárez said, while expressing concern that his mother had been left without a source of income.

A preliminary review suggested a failure in the horizontal support beams caused the accident, authorities said.

Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum urged the public to avoid speculation and promised a thorough and independent investigation. Authorities expected to present a preliminary report on the accident Friday.

Line 12 is Mexico City's longest and newest, but has been plagued with problems since it began operating in 2012. At its farthest point, it carries commuters from the capital's still semi-rural south side to jobs across the city. Some 220,000 riders use Line 12 every day.

Early targets for the public's ire were already emerging, among them the subway's director, Florencia Serranía. Sheinbaum said she had not received any report about problems on Line 12 that suggested the possibility of a failure like the one Monday night.

Serranía said Tuesday that the line received a "very rigorous" daily inspection. It was also reviewed in June 2020 after an earthquake that was strong but did not cause significant damage in the city, she said. A city report in 2017 noted significant damage to a portion of the line after a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that year.

Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, who was Mexico City's mayor from 2006 to 2012 when the line was constructed, was also feeling the heat. Widely viewed as a possible successor to President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Ebrard said those responsible should be identified and he would make himself available to authorities.

While conclusions on what caused the accident could take months and assigning blame longer, many victims' families were faced with the immediate needs brought on by the loss of their primary breadwinners.

Gisela Rioja also spent Monday night and Tuesday morning scouring the city's hospitals for information on her husband, 42-year-old Miguel Angel Espinosa Flores, who worked in a department store at a mall a few stops from where the accident occurred.

Rioja finally found him Tuesday at a morgue in the Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa. She described him as a hard worker, responsible and happy. She and their two children depended on him.

"I want justice for my husband because a simple apology is not going to bring him back to us," she said. "He was my love; he was everything to me. It hurts so much, so much, so much because of the way it ended."

Luisa Martínez sat outside city government offices in Iztapalapa on Tuesday afternoon awaiting the release of the body of her niece's husband, Carlos Pineda, a 38-year-old dentist. Pineda leaves behind his wife and their two children ages 7 and 13.

"He was the one who supported the family. Now they are left without income," Martínez said. "They have to compensate us now. I don't want it in a year or two years like all bureaucratic procedures."

Judge orders Justice Dept. to release Trump obstruction memo

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge has ordered the release of a legal memorandum the Trump-era Justice Department prepared for then-Attorney General William Barr before he announced his conclusion that President Donald Trump had not obstructed justice during the Russia investigation.

The Justice Department had refused to give the March 24, 2019, memorandum to a government transpar-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 42 of 72

ency group that requested it under the Freedom of Information Act, saying the document represented the private advice of lawyers and was produced before any formal decision had been made and was therefore exempt from disclosure under public records law.

But U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson, in a sharp rebuke of Barr, said the Justice Department had obscured "the true purpose of the memorandum" when it withheld the document.

She said the memo from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel contained "strategic, as opposed to legal advice" and that both the writers and the recipients already understood that Trump would not be prosecuted. Though government agencies may withhold from disclosure documents that reflect internal deliberations before a decision is made, that protection does not apply in this case since a conclusion had already been reached, the judge wrote.

"In other words, the review of the document reveals that the Attorney General was not then engaged in making a decision about whether the President should be charged with obstruction of justice; the fact that he would not be prosecuted was a given," Jackson said in an order dated Monday.

The decision by Barr and senior Justice Department leaders to clear Trump of obstruction, even though special counsel Robert Mueller and his team pointedly did not reach that conclusion, was a significant moment for the president that he touted as vindication.

Barr issued a summary of Mueller's report a full month before the entire 448-page document was released, helping shape the public perception of the investigation's conclusions in a way that was favorable to Trump. Mueller subsequently complained to Barr that his summary had not fully captured the investigation's findings and had caused "public confusion."

In her order this week, Jackson chastised Barr for his general handling of the Mueller report, saying his "characterization of what he'd hardly had time to skim, much less, study closely, prompted an immediate reaction, as politicians and pundits took to their microphones and Twitter feeds to decry what they feared was an attempt to hide the ball."

She also noted that another judge had rebuked Barr last year for what he said were misleading public statements that spun Mueller's findings in the president's favor.

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington filed a public records request seeking communications about the obstruction decision after Barr said that he and other senior officials had reached that conclusion in consultation with the Office of Legal Counsel, which provides legal opinions to executive branch agencies.

At issue in a lawsuit pending before the judge were two particular documents the group wanted.

Jackson ruled that one of the documents, described by a Justice Department official as an "untitled, undated draft legal analysis" that was submitted to the attorney general as part of his decision-making, was properly withheld from the group.

But she ordered the release of the other memo, which concludes that the evidence assembled by Mueller's team would not support an obstruction prosecution of Trump.

In her order, Jackson noted that the legal memo prepared for Barr, and the letter from Barr to Congress that describes the special counsel's report, were "being written by the very same people at the very same time.

"The emails show not only that the authors and the recipients of the memorandum are working hand in hand to craft the advice that is supposedly being delivered by OLC, but that the letter to Congress is the priority, and it is getting completed first," the judge wrote.

The judge said the Justice Department has until May 17 to file any motion to stay the order.

Cheney could be 'toast' in fight with Trump over GOP future

By LISA MASCARO, ALAN FRAM and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy wants his party to stand firmly with Donald Trump, despite the former president's false claims about the election being stolen from him.

No. 3 GOP leader Liz Cheney is trying to steer the party far from Trump's claims about his defeat, chart-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 43 of 72

ing a future without him.

The party, it became more apparent Tuesday, does not have room for both.

Cheney's political future was increasingly in peril as McCarthy signaled he would no longer protect his lieutenant from those seeking her ouster from House GOP leadership, opening the possibility of a vote to remove her from the job as soon as next week. One Republican aide granted anonymity to discuss the situation said simply, "She's toast."

What could be seen as a skirmish between minority party leaders trying to find a way back to the majority has become a more politically profound moment for Republicans and the country. The party of Abraham Lincoln is deciding whether to let Trump's false claims about the election of Democrat Joe Biden go unchecked — or to hold him accountable, as Cheney does, by arguing the country cannot "whitewash" the former president's role in the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

"This is a much bigger issue than the future of the Republican Party," said Timothy Naftali, an associate professor at New York University and founding director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. "This is about the future of our democracy."

The standoff has been intensifying ever since Cheney led a group of 10 House Republicans voting with Democrats to impeach Trump on a charge of incitement of insurrection over the Jan. 6 siege, the worst domestic mob attack on the Capitol in the nation's history.

Not only was her effort an affront to Trump, still president at the time, but it was out of step with most House Republicans, including the 138 who voted against certifying the Electoral College vote for Biden's victory. However, others, including Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., who voted to impeach Trump, see Cheney as the "truth-telling" GOP leader the nation needs.

Some fellow Republicans tried to oust her from her leadership position, but they failed in February in a secret party ballot, 145-61, in part because McCarthy urged his troops to remain unified against Democrats.

But the divisions have now widened into a fight for the party's future as it navigates a post-Trump world.

McCarthy and Cheney are offering their colleagues two theories of the path forward.

McCarthy, who would be in line for the speaker's gavel if the GOP wins House control, wants to keep Trump voters active in the party and attract new supporters. He believes this is accomplished by keeping Trump engaged, dashing down to the former president's private club in Florida for support and drawing on his connection with the man who referred to him as "My Kevin."

Cheney takes the opposite approach, arguing the GOP must rid itself of Trump's brand of politics with its nationalist, authoritarian overtones if it hopes to return to its conservative roots and attract the voters who fled the party for Biden.

"We can't embrace the notion the election is stolen. It's a poison in the bloodstream of our democracy," Cheney said at a fundraising event with the conservative American Enterprise Institute at Sea Island, Georgia, according to a person familiar with the event and granted anonymity to discuss it.

"We can't whitewash what happened on Jan. 6 or perpetuate Trump's big lie. It is a threat to democracy. What he did on Jan. 6 is a line that cannot be crossed."

Then, as lawmakers often do when they hope to speak indirectly to Trump, McCarthy appeared on Fox News Channel early Tuesday, and spoke of Cheney a day after Trump leveled fresh claims of voter fraud.

"I have heard from members concerned about her ability to carry out her job as conference chair, to carry out the message," he said. "We all need to be working as one if we're able to win the majority."

Trump himself issued a fresh statement Monday renewing his desire to see Cheney defeated by another Republican in next year's Wyoming GOP primary.

Meanwhile, the fight between the two is viewed by other GOP leaders as a distraction, and many rank-and-file Republicans blame her for prolonging it rather than simply letting the former president's claims go unanswered.

One top Republican congressional aide said McCarthy had weeks ago urged Cheney to stop talking about Trump, and her failure to do so has boosted frustration with her.

McCarthy, who delivered a speech supporting her when House Republicans privately voted to keep her

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 44 of 72

in February, will not do that this time, said the aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe internal conversations. A vote on whether to remove her could occur as early as next Wednesday, when House Republicans are next scheduled to meet.

Interviews with a half dozen lawmakers and aides from across the party's ideological spectrum found none saying it's likely she will survive the challenge. They cited her abandonment by McCarthy and her persistence in criticizing Trump.

Cheney isn't backing down.

Asked about McCarthy's comments on Tuesday, spokesperson Jeremy Adler said in a written statement, "This is about whether the Republican Party is going to perpetuate lies about the 2020 election and attempt to whitewash what happened on Jan 6. Liz will not do that. That is the issue."

A potential vote on her leadership puts the GOP in the awkward position of seeking to oust its highest-ranking woman from her post at a time when the party is trying to erode Democrats' decisive advantage among female voters.

Potential contenders to replace her include Reps. Elise Stefanik of New York and Jackie Walorski of Indiana, the aide said. Rep. Jim Banks of Indiana, head of the powerful Republican Study Committee, is also seen as in the running.

In Wyoming, far from riding out the criticism, Cheney, the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, is on the defensive.

She already has four Republican primary opponents for next year's election. Among them, two state legislators are giving her grief for fist-bumping Biden after he spoke to Congress in a joint address last week.

"Liz, fist bump your way right out of Wyoming," tweeted Chuck Gray, a state representative from Casper.

Cheney responded to the criticism by saying she "will always respond in a civil, respectful and dignified way" when greeted by the president.

She does have allies in Congress, some prominent. However, many House Republicans are unwilling to stand up to Trump, who says he is considering a run to return to the White House in 2024.

Illinois Rep. Kinzinger supports Cheney, and "will continue to fight for the soul of the GOP, no matter how long it takes," his spokesman Maura Gillespie said.

And Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, the party's 2012 presidential nominee and another Trump adversary, leapt to Cheney's defense.

"Every person of conscience draws a line beyond which they will not go: Liz Cheney refuses to lie," Romney tweeted. "As one of my Republican Senate colleagues said to me following my impeachment vote: 'I wouldn't want to be a member of a group that punished someone for following their conscience.'"

Wind, rain pound South amid flood fears and water rescues

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Relentless winds and rain pummeled large swaths of the South on Tuesday, causing tornadoes, sparking a flash flood emergency in Alabama and damaging homes from Texas to Virginia. The storms prompted boat rescues, toppled trees and power lines and raised the threat of flash floods elsewhere in the region.

The National Weather Service issued the flash flood emergency for the Birmingham, Alabama, area at the start of rush hour, warning that torrential rains — as much as 5 inches (13 centimeters) in some areas — had already fallen and another 2 inches (5 centimeters) were possible before the storm system continued eastward.

Jefferson County Emergency Management officials in the Birmingham area urged residents to stay off the roads because so many were flooded.

In the Birmingham suburb of Homewood, residents huddled on the second-floor balcony of an apartment complex that became flooded. Fire department rescuers in a small boat paddled through the parking lot past submerged cars, slowly removing at least 13 people from the flooding. Some were taken out with their pets.

Strong winds blowing behind a line of storms were toppling trees across central Alabama, where soil

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 45 of 72

was saturated with water.

Parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee, as well as corners of Arkansas and Georgia were at enhanced risk for the worst weather, according to the national Storm Prediction Center. That zone is home to more than 11 million people and includes the cities of Nashville, Tennessee; Birmingham, Alabama; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Jackson, Mississippi, forecasters said.

"We'll see all three threats as far as hail, wind and tornadoes on Tuesday," said Mike Edmonston, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Mississippi.

The storms have been responsible for three deaths this week and, as of Tuesday evening, more than 350,000 customers were without power from Texas to Maryland, including 143,000 in Mississippi and 76,000 in Virginia, according to poweroutage.us. Alabama Power Co. reported some 93,000 homes and businesses without electricity statewide.

With warnings about possible tornadoes stretching from Louisiana eastward, dozens of school systems in Mississippi and Alabama dismissed students early so buses and cars would not have to be on the road during potentially violent weather.

A Tennessee woman died when a tree fell on her home as storms moved through the state Tuesday, Weakley County Emergency Management Director Ray Wiggington told WKRN-TV. He said at least six mobile homes were damaged by the falling tree around 4 a.m.

At least eight people were injured when storms that brought tornadoes to Texas flipped tractor-trailers on an interstate and damaged structures. Three drivers were hospitalized, one with serious injuries, after their tractor-trailers overturned in the storms Monday night along Interstate 35 near Waxahachie, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of Dallas, officials said.

In addition to the injured tractor-trailer drivers, five others in Texas were hospitalized after the storm came through Ellis County, an official said. County Judge Todd Little told KXAS between 25 to 50 structures were damaged, but they had no fatalities.

At least 11 Tennessee counties were hit by possible EF-0 tornadoes Tuesday, said Faith Borden, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Nashville.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency said one weather-related death was reported in Weakley County, but spokesman Dean Flener did not have details about the manner of death or exactly when it occurred.

Strong winds and heavy rain whipped through Mississippi's capital city of Jackson late Tuesday while thunder rattled windows. The high winds knocked out electricity in many neighborhoods while it cracked some limbs off trees and sent them onto nearby houses. The storms left streets littered with branches and leaves.

On Monday, a falling tree brought power lines onto his vehicle in Douglasville, Georgia, west of Atlanta, Douglas County spokesman Rick Martin said. And in middle Georgia, Carla Harris, 55, was killed after a tree fell onto her Bonaire home Monday, Houston County emergency officials said.

A tornado that struck Virginia's Northumberland County near the Chesapeake Bay destroyed one home and severely damaged a few others Monday. But no one was injured, according to weather service officials.

The tornado tracked for about 5 miles (8 kilometers) and carried winds of up to 120 mph.

The weather first turned rough in Mississippi on Sunday, where just south of Yazoo City, Vickie Savell was left with only scraps of the brand-new mobile home where she and her husband had moved in just eight days ago. It had been lifted off its foundation and moved about 25 feet (8 meters).

"Oh my God, my first new house in 40 years and it's gone," she said Monday, amid tree tops strewn about the neighborhood and the roar of chainsaws as people worked to clear roads.

In Mississippi, forecasters confirmed 12 tornadoes Sunday evening and night, including the Yazoo City twister, which stretched for 30 miles (50 kilometers), and another tornado that moved through suburbs of Byram and Terry south of Jackson that produced a damage track 1,000 yards (910 meters) wide. On Monday, tornadoes also touched down in South Carolina and southern Kentucky while a possible tornado hit West Virginia.

After years, court hands tax win to Michael Jackson heirs

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A U.S. tax court has handed a major victory to the estate of Michael Jackson in a years-long battle, finding that the IRS wildly inflated the value at the time of his death of Jackson's assets and image, leading to an estate tax bill for his heirs that was far too high.

The IRS had put the value of three disputed aspects of Jackson's worth at the time of his 2009 death at about \$482 million. In his decision issued Monday, Judge Mark Holmes put that figure at \$111 million, far closer to the estate's own estimates.

The estate's executors said it was a huge and unambiguous victory for Jackson's children.

"We're pleased," co-executor John Branca told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "We always try to do the right thing. We tried from the beginning to follow the IRS rules and regulations, and relied on the best experts possible. It's unfortunate that we were forced to litigate to protect ourselves."

The judge most disagreed with the IRS over the value of Jackson's image and likeness. While the IRS put it at \$161 million, Holmes ruled it was just \$4.15 million. He noted that despite Jackson's acquittal on all counts at his 2005 trial for child molestation, the allegations continued to dog him, and while Jackson was selling out dates for a planned world tour when he died, he could not find a sponsor or merchandise partner.

"The fact that he earned not a penny from his image and likeness in 2006, 2007, or 2008 shows the effect those allegations had, and continued to have, until his death," Holmes wrote in the sprawling 271-page decision that tracks Jackson's fame and finances through most of his life.

The tax fight had led to a bill of about \$700 million after an audit of the 2013 taxes on the estate, whose heirs are Jackson's mother and three children, about \$200 million of it a penalty for underpaying.

A new tax bill will now be calculated using Holmes' figures, and it will include no penalties.

Also in dispute were Jackson's 50% stake in Sony/ATV Music Publishing, a catalog that includes 175 Beatles songs; and his interest in another catalog that includes the songs he wrote.

The IRS expert had put those assets at a combined total of about \$320 million. The judge found that with Jackson's debts, both combined were worth only \$107 million at the time of his death.

The ruling, awaited for years, resolves one of the few disputes that still hovered over Jackson's estate nearly a dozen years after his unexpected death on June 25, 2009, after a lethal dose of the anesthetic propofol.

Another was resolved a week earlier when a judge dismissed a lawsuit brought by choreographer Wade Robson, one of two men featured in the 2019 documentary "Leaving Neverland," who alleged Jackson sexually abused him as a child. The similar lawsuit of James Safechuck, the other man featured in the documentary, was dismissed in October. The men's attorney called the decisions a dangerous precedent for protecting children, and said they plan to appeal.

With years of disputes cleared and a pandemic-forced delay on projects lifting, the estate's leaders feel like they are in an excellent spot to again start promoting Jackson's legacy.

"We're at an absolute turning point," Branca said. "I think people have come to realize that Michael was innocent of any charges and unable to protect himself. We've got a wonderful Broadway play coming, we'll be reopening our Cirque du Soleil show soon and we've got some surprises coming."

The judge noted the huge success that the estate has seen since Jackson's death through such shows, a hit concert film, and several strategic decisions to sell assets.

However, he said, the IRS appeared to be factoring those successes into its decisions rather than considering only the circumstances at the moment of Jackson's death, when things were considerably more grim after several years of waning popularity, poor management and reckless spending from Jackson.

The judge mocked the estate's initial valuing of Jackson's image and likeness at only \$2,000, however, saying it was putting "one of the best known celebrities in the world — the King of Pop — at the price of a heavily used 20-year-old Honda Civic."

Chauvin's lawyer seeks new trial, hearing to impeach verdict

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The defense attorney for the former Minneapolis police officer convicted of killing George Floyd has requested a new trial, saying the court abused its discretion, and he wants a hearing to have the verdict impeached because of what he says is jury misconduct, according to a court document filed Tuesday.

Derek Chauvin, who is white, was convicted last month of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the May 25 death of Floyd. Evidence at trial showed Chauvin pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes as the Black man said he couldn't breathe and went motionless.

Defense attorney Eric Nelson said he is requesting a new trial in the interests of justice. He said there were abuses of discretion that deprived Chauvin of a fair trial, prosecutorial and jury misconduct and that the verdict was contrary to law.

A request for a new trial is routine following a guilty verdict and often mirrors issues that will be raised on appeal, said Mike Brandt, a Minneapolis defense attorney who has been closely following the case. If this request is denied, it can add another layer of decisions for Nelson to appeal. Brandt and others have said Chauvin's convictions are unlikely to be overturned.

Nelson cited many reasons in his request for a new trial. He said Judge Peter Cahill abused the discretion of the court and violated Chauvin's right to due process and a fair trial when he denied Nelson's request to move the trial to another county due to pretrial publicity.

He also said Cahill abused his discretion when he denied an earlier request for a new trial based on publicity during the proceedings, which Nelson said threatened the fairness of the trial. Nelson said that publicity included "intimidation" of the defense expert witness, which he said could have a "far-reaching chilling effect" on the ability of defendants to get expert witnesses in high-profile cases, including the upcoming cases of the three other former officers charged in Floyd's death.

"The publicity here was so pervasive and so prejudicial before and during this trial that it amounted to a structural defect in the proceedings," Nelson wrote.

Nelson also took issue with Cahill's refusal to sequester the jury for the trial or warn them to avoid all media, and with his refusal to allow a man who was with Floyd at the time of his arrest to testify.

Nelson said Cahill also abused his discretion when he submitted jury instructions that Nelson said failed to accurately reflect the law on the murder charges and use of force, permitted the state to present cumulative evidence on use of force, and ordered the state to lead witnesses on direct examination, among other things.

Nelson also asked the judge for a hearing to impeach the verdict on the grounds that the jury committed misconduct, felt race-based pressure, felt intimidated or threatened, and/or failed to adhere to jury instructions, though the filing did not include details about that assertion. To impeach a verdict is to question its validity.

The brief did not mention recent reports that one of the jurors participated in an Aug. 28 march in Washington, D.C., to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

That juror, Brandon Mitchell, has defended his actions, saying the event was to commemorate the 1963 March on Washington and was not a protest over Floyd's death. Floyd's brother and sister, Philonise and Bridgett Floyd, and relatives of others who had been shot by police addressed the crowd at the march last summer.

Nelson did not immediately return a message seeking details about his allegation of juror misconduct.

Brandt said Nelson will likely file more detailed written arguments on these issues. The purpose of holding a hearing to impeach the verdict would be to develop a factual record and present evidence that could determine whether the verdict was compromised. If a hearing is granted, it's likely Mitchell would be called in to answer questions, Brandt said.

AP source: Sheldon Silver released from prison on furlough

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former New York Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has been released from a federal prison on furlough while he awaits potential placement to home confinement, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

Silver, 77, began serving his more than six-year sentence at a prison in Otisville, New York, in August, after years of fending off going behind bars in a corruption case.

He has been released to his home while awaiting a final decision on whether he can serve the rest of his sentence there in home confinement, the person said. The person was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to the AP on Tuesday on the condition of anonymity.

The federal Bureau of Prisons didn't provide details or a reason for the transfer, but Congress gave the Justice Department expanded powers during the coronavirus pandemic to release inmates on furlough and home confinement to prevent them from catching the virus behind bars.

Later Tuesday, Silver was seen by media going into his Manhattan apartment building. Wearing a gray cap and blue face covering, he sat in a wheelchair as he was taken into the residence.

A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan, which prosecuted Silver, said it sent an email to the Bureau of Prisons on Monday opposing his furlough.

Lawyers who have represented Silver at trial and at the appeals court either said they no longer represent him or did not respond to email and voice messages.

Several other prisoners at Otisville, including former President Donald Trump's onetime lawyer Michael Cohen, have been serving their sentences at home because of the pandemic.

In a statement, the Bureau of Prisons noted it can transfer inmates to their home on furlough for periods of time while they are being considered for home confinement or placement in a halfway house.

Silver, a Manhattan Democrat, was once one of the three most powerful state officials in New York. He was the Assembly's leader for more than two decades before his abrupt ouster in 2015 after the corruption allegations emerged.

He was ultimately convicted in a scheme that involved a type of illegal back-scratching that has long plagued Albany. He supported legislation that benefited real estate developers he knew. In return, they referred tax business to a law firm that employed Silver, which then paid him fees.

Appeals kept Silver out of prison for years. His initial 2015 conviction was overturned on appeal before he was convicted again in 2018. Part of that conviction was then tossed out on another appeal, leading to yet another sentencing in July.

At his sentencing, Silver's lawyers had begged the court to allow him to serve his sentence under home confinement, rather than at a prison, because of the danger of contracting a fatal case of COVID-19. A judge turned him down.

The Bureau of Prisons has been moving some inmates to furlough in an effort to get those expected to transition to home confinement out of correctional facilities sooner.

More than 7,000 federal inmates remain on home confinement, according to Bureau of Prisons statistics. The agency had released nearly 25,000 prisoners to their homes since last March amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Under the bureau's guidelines, priority for home confinement is supposed to be given to those inmates who have served half of their sentence or inmates with 18 months or less left and who served at least 25% of their time. But the bureau has discretion about who can be released.

In January, the Justice Department issued a memo that said the Bureau of Prisons may have to return some inmates serving extended terms of home confinement to prison once the coronavirus emergency period that was established by Congress expires.

Silver's lawyers had been arguing that their client should be placed on home confinement because he was considered high risk for coronavirus because of his age and preexisting medical conditions.

Silver, who was elected to the Assembly in 1977 and became speaker in 1994, has a projected release date from federal custody in 2026.

Overpass collapse on Mexico City metro kills at least 24

By FABIOLA SANCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The death toll from the collapse of an overpass on the Mexico City metro rose to 24 Tuesday as crews untangled train carriages from the steel and concrete wreckage that fell onto a roadway.

Monday night's accident was one of the deadliest in the history of the subway, and questions quickly arose about the structural integrity of the mass transit system, among the world's busiest.

Another 27 people remained hospitalized of the more than 70 injured when the support beams collapsed about 10:30 p.m. as a train passed along the elevated section, Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum said.

On Tuesday, a crane carefully lowered a train car containing four bodies to the ground.

Of the 24 killed, 21 died at the scene, while the others died at hospitals. Only five have been identified so far. Children were among the fatalities, Sheinbaum said.

On Tuesday afternoon, Carlos Miramar waited under a tent on metal chairs with two other relatives to receive the body of his uncle. The 25-year-old student had been awake since beginning an "exasperating" odyssey the previous night that took them to seven hospitals and multiple prosecutor's offices in search of his uncle.

Now they had found 38-year-old Carlos Pineda, a man he described as a soccer fan and buoyant personality. Pineda is survived by his wife, two children ages 7 and 13, and his mother.

"I'm tired and unable to sleep," Miramar said. "He didn't deserve this end. He was a good father, good husband and good son."

Initial analysis pointed to a "presumed structural failure," Sheinbaum said, promising a thorough and independent inquiry. She added that a Norwegian firm had been hired to investigate.

"I did not have any report nor alert of any problem that could have led us to this situation," she said.

The overpass was about 5 meters (16 feet) above the road in the borough of Tlahuac, but the train ran above a concrete median strip, which apparently lessened the casualties among motorists.

Abelardo Sánchez, a 38-year-old cook, was just closing up his sandwich shop beside the metro line when he said the ground shook, a tremendous noise echoed, lights flickered and the air filled with dust and the smell of burning wires.

Stunned, Sánchez didn't initially react. "Then a guy in a white shirt with blood on his arms, his hands and chest came out and another guy came to help him here on the sidewalk, and he was there trembling," he said.

The Mexico City Metro — which is among the world's cheapest with tickets costing about 25 cents — has had at least three serious accidents since its inauguration half a century ago. In March 2020, a collision between two trains at the Tacubaya station left one passenger dead and injured 41. In 2015, a train that did not stop on time crashed into another at the Oceania station, injuring 12. In October 1975, at least 26 people were killed in another accident.

A magnitude 7.1 earthquake in 2017 exposed dangerous construction defects in the elevated line near where Monday's accident occurred. Authorities at the time had done patchwork repairs on the columns and horizontal beams.

Julio Yañez, a 67-year-old lawyer whose apartment overlooks the collapsed metro line, was working at his computer when he heard a loud noise and felt his building shake. He saw a cloud of dust and falling debris followed by an eerie silence until emergency vehicles began arriving. Helicopters landed at a nearby Walmart to ferry the injured to hospitals.

The scene shook him because he had exited the metro at that same station earlier in the day.

"That part there was already declared bad ... in the earthquake, and the authorities didn't pay attention," Yañez said, noting similar problems were reported at another nearby station, but nothing was done. "They are time bombs."

The collapse occurred on Line 12, the subway's newest, that stretches to the city's south side. Like many of the dozen subway lines, it runs underground through more central areas of the city of 9 million but is on elevated concrete structures on the outskirts.

A report issued by the subway system including photos in 2017 showed that the base of one vertical column supporting the tracks had cracked and shed layers of concrete because not enough steel rebar stirrups had been used when it was built around 2010. In 2017, authorities patched and widened the column by injecting resins, swathing it in carbon fiber, building a jacket of additional rebar around the base and pouring concrete around the collar.

Authorities also found that one of the horizontal beams had come loose from its support at the top of a vertical column and was sagging — the kind of failure that could have contributed to Monday's collapse. Authorities at the time welded steel diagonal braces to the bottom of the beam, chipped out and repoured fractured concrete elements.

Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard called the collapse "the most terrible accident we have ever had in mass transportation." Ebrard was Mexico City's mayor from 2006 to 2012, when the affected line was built.

Allegations of poor design and construction on the subway line emerged soon after the Ebrard left office as mayor. The line had to be partly closed in 2014 so tracks could be repaired.

Ebrard, who leads Mexico's efforts to obtain coronavirus vaccines, has been considered a potential presidential candidate in 2024.

"Of course, the causes should be investigated and those responsible should be identified," he wrote. "I repeat that I am entirely at the disposition of authorities to contribute in whatever way is necessary."

The line was closed Tuesday and hundreds of buses were called in. Thousands in surrounding neighborhoods lined up before dawn to catch the buses for work.

Biden aims to vaccinate 70% of American adults by July 4

By ZEKE MILLER and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Tuesday set a new vaccination goal to deliver at least one shot to 70% of adult Americans by July Fourth as he tackles the vexing problem of winning over the "doubters" and those unmotivated to get inoculated.

Demand for vaccines has dropped off markedly nationwide, with some states leaving more than half their available doses unordered. Aiming to make it easier to get shots, Biden called for states to make vaccines available on a walk-in basis and he will direct many pharmacies to do likewise.

His administration for the first time also is moving to shift doses from states with weaker demand to areas with stronger interest in the shots.

"You do need to get vaccinated," Biden said from the White House. "Even if your chance of getting seriously ill is low, why take the risk? It could save your life or the lives of somebody you love."

Biden's goal equates to delivering at least the first shot to 181 million adults and fully vaccinating 160 million. It's a tacit acknowledgment of the declining interest in shots.

Already more than 56% of American adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and nearly 105 million are fully vaccinated. The U.S. is currently administering first doses at a rate of about 965,000 per day — half the rate of three weeks ago, but almost twice as fast as needed to meet Biden's target.

"I'd like to get it 100%, but I think realistically we can get to that place between now and July Fourth," Biden said of his new goal.

He said the administration would focus on three areas as it tries to ramp up the pace of vaccinations:

—Adults who need more convincing to take the vaccine.

—Those who have struggled or are in no hurry to obtain a shot.

—Adolescents aged 12-15, once federal authorities approve vaccination for that age group.

Acknowledging that "the pace of vaccination is slowing," Biden predicted the inoculation effort is "going to be harder" when it comes to convincing "doubters" of the need to get their shots.

He said the most effective argument to those people would be to protect those they love. "This is your choice: It's life and death."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 51 of 72

Biden's push comes as his administration has shifted away from setting a target for the U.S. to reach "herd immunity," instead focusing on delivering as many shots into arms as possible. Officials said Biden's vaccination target would result in a significant reduction in COVID-19 cases heading into the summer.

To that end, the Biden administration is shifting the government's focus toward expanding smaller and mobile vaccination clinics to deliver doses to harder-to-reach communities. It is also spending hundreds of millions of dollars to try to boost interest in vaccines through education campaigns and greater access to shots through community organizations that can help bring people to clinics.

Biden touted creative efforts to make it "easier and more fun" to get vaccinated, such as grocery stores offering discounts to shoppers who come to get shots and sports leagues that hold promotions to get shots for their fans.

Ahead of the Food and Drug Administration's expected authorization of the Pfizer vaccine for kids aged 12-15, the White House is developing plans to speed vaccinations for that age group. Biden urged states to administer at least one dose to adolescents by July Fourth and work to deliver doses to pediatricians' offices and other trusted locations, with the aim of getting many of them fully vaccinated by the start of the next school year.

While younger people are at dramatically lower risk of serious complications from COVID-19, they have made up a larger share of new virus cases as a majority of U.S. adults have been at least partially vaccinated and as higher-risk activities like indoor dining and contact sports have resumed in most of the country.

Officials hope that extending vaccinations to teens — who could get the first dose in one location and the second elsewhere, if necessary — will further accelerate the nation's reduced virus caseload and allow schools to reopen with minimal disruptions this fall.

The urgency to expand the pool of those getting the shots is rooted in hopes of stamping out the development of new variants that could emerge from unchecked outbreaks and helping the country further reopen by the symbolic moment of Independence Day, exactly two months away. Though White House officials privately acknowledge the steep challenge, Biden sounded an optimistic note.

"The light at the end of the tunnel is actually growing brighter and brighter," Biden said.

Biden's speech comes as the White House announced a shift away from a strict allocation of vaccines by state population. The administration says that when states decline to take all the vaccine they have been allocated, that surplus will shift to states still awaiting doses to meet demand.

Governors were informed of the change by the White House on Tuesday morning.

This week, Iowa turned down nearly three quarters of the vaccine doses available to the state for next week from the federal government because demand for the shots remains weak. Louisiana, meanwhile, hasn't drawn down its full vaccine allocation from the federal government for the last few weeks.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows Louisiana's coronavirus vaccination rate is well behind most states. About 27% of state residents are fully vaccinated while 32% have received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the state health department.

The White House previously resisted efforts to distribute vaccine by metrics other than population. Biden rebuffed Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer last month when she requested more doses as her state was experiencing a surge in virus cases. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at the time nearly all states were ordering at or near their population allocations, which is no longer the case.

Individual states have made similar shifts internally to account for changing demand. Last week, Washington state changed the way it allocates coronavirus vaccine to its counties. Previously the state doled out supplies to counties proportionate to their populations. But now amounts will be based on requests from health care providers.

Madrid's champion of soft virus restrictions wins election

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Madrid's conservative leader, a champion of relaxed measures against the coronavirus and a scourge of the left-wing central government's handling of the pandemic, scored a solid win in a

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 52 of 72

regional election Tuesday.

Isabel Díaz Ayuso, who had campaigned under the slogan of "Freedom," was backed by 44% of voters, up from 22% in the last election two years ago, with 99% of the ballot counted. Three rival left-wing parties together had 41%.

The biggest blow was to Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's Socialists and the national leader's coalition's junior partner, the anti-austerity United We Can whose leader, Pablo Iglesias, announced an end to a political career that in many ways shaped Spain's politics for much of the past decade.

Díaz Ayuso said that results backed her policies of keeping bars, restaurants and other businesses opened even in the thick of the coronavirus pandemic to keep the economy up and running.

Speaking to hundreds of supporters waving Spanish flags outside of her Popular Party's headquarters in central Madrid, the incumbent also said the result was a rebuke of Sánchez's left-wing coalition.

"The way of governing, with opulence and hypocrisy from Moncloa, has its days counted," the winner said referring by name to the palace that hosts the prime minister's office.

The preliminary results gave the Popular Party 65 seats in the 136-seat regional assembly, more than double from 2019 but short of the 69-seat majority needed to form a government.

Vox, the far-right party that mixes Spanish patriotism and populism and is shaping up as Díaz Ayuso's new choice for legislative support, won one more regional lawmaker, rising from 12 seats to 13.

Referring to the upcoming term, Vox's regional leader Rocío Monasterio said that "our votes will be decisive for absolutely everything during the next two years."

In a sign that Díaz Ayuso's popularity traveled beyond Spanish borders, the leader of Italy's right-wing League Matteo Salvini praised the Madrid regional chief.

"Congratulations and good work to President Isabel Díaz Ayuso, winner of the Madrid elections, a woman of common sense and courage, who has combined protection of health, right to work and freedom," the tweet read.

Voters shunned the liberal center-right Citizens party that was Díaz Ayuso's junior coalition partner before she called the early election seeking to broaden her power base. The centrist party, which is trying to keep afloat also at the national level, lost all of its 26 regional lawmakers because it failed to reach the 5% vote threshold.

The preliminary results were a blow for Sánchez's regional Socialists, losing 13 assembly seats, from 37 to 24. Candidate Ángel Gabilondo conceded having failed in pushing for a "calm debate."

"We will continue working to avoid confrontation and tension. Madrid does not need it, it needs to be united because we have a very great challenge in the midst of the pandemic," Gabilondo said.

United We Can's charismatic founder, Pablo Iglesias, had quit his position in Sánchez's Cabinet to run in Madrid. Although his candidacy helped expand the number of the group's lawmakers from 7 to 10, Iglesias announced he was resigning from all positions in the far-left party born as a response to the 2008 financial crisis that dogged Spain's economy for years.

Naming Yolanda Díaz, the Labour Minister who replaced him as deputy prime minister, as the successor in charge of United We Can, Iglesias said he was "proud of having led a political project that has changed the history of our country."

"Nobody could have imagined what we have achieved in seven years," the 42-year-old politician said.

More Madrid, a new upstart regional party led by a staunch defender of public health and education against the conservatives' austerity and privatization record, grew from 20 to 24 seats.

Despite a persistent high infection rate that has recently plateaued, Madrid residents voted in droves, shooting the turnout to more than 69% of the 5 million eligible voters by 7 p.m., an hour before voting ended and up from 59% in the 2019 regional election.

Long queues of socially distanced voters formed outside polling stations in schools, sports centers and even a bullring. Authorities imposed strict voting requirements to prevent the spread of infections: double masks, separate entrance and exit paths for voters and plastic screens for election workers.

Older adults were encouraged to cast their ballots during a 2-hour period mid-morning and the hour

before polls close was reserved for people quarantining because of COVID-19.

The Madrid region is Spain's main economic engine and the country's busiest transportation hub. It's home to 14% of Spain's 47 million people but has recorded nearly one-fifth of the country's 3.5 million confirmed virus cases and of the national pandemic death toll of over 78,000.

The only incident reported was a brief semi-naked protest by the activist group Femen who held signs reading "It's not patriotism, it's fascism" outside where Vox's main candidate voted.

US report: Taliban will likely curtail Afghan women's rights

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies are warning that any gains in women's rights in Afghanistan made in the last two decades will be at risk after U.S. troops withdraw later this year.

An unclassified report released Tuesday by the Director of National Intelligence says the Taliban remain "broadly consistent in its restrictive approach to women's rights and would roll back much of the past two decades' progress if the group regained national power."

It's the latest U.S. warning of the consequences of the Afghan withdrawal now underway, two decades after an American-led coalition toppled the Taliban. Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Sunday that there would possibly be "some really dramatic, bad possible outcomes" for Afghan forces left on their own to counter the Taliban, but also noted, "We frankly don't know yet." And CIA Director William Burns told Congress in April that the American ability "to collect and act on threats will diminish."

President Joe Biden has set a September deadline for U.S. forces to withdraw. While Biden and his top officials have stressed that they will not end their engagement with Afghanistan or advocacy for human rights, the U.S. has also openly warned of gains for the Taliban, which has been locked in an insurgency with coalition and Afghan forces and already controls swaths throughout the country.

During the Taliban's rule in the 1990s, women were largely confined to their homes, and girls had no access to education. Despite protestations from the U.S. and Europe, the Taliban brutally enforced its extreme version of Islamic Sharia law with little consequence. It was only after the U.S.-led invasion toppled the group that had hosted Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network that democratic governance and respect for human rights in Afghanistan became a Western priority.

Two-thirds of Afghanistan's population is 25 years old or younger, with no memory of Taliban rule. While Afghanistan remains one of the world's worst countries for women, particularly in rural areas where little has changed in generations, Afghan women now serve in Parliament, go to school and run businesses.

But there are persistent fears that, as the U.S. has negotiated with the Taliban on an exit from Afghanistan, women will be stripped of rights or once again be forced to wear the burqa, the all-encompassing veils that became a symbol of Taliban rule.

The Taliban last month issued a statement promising that women could "serve their society in the education, business, health and social fields while maintaining correct Islamic hijab," referring to the Arabic word for veil.

But the report released Tuesday underscores American skepticism of those pledges.

"The Taliban has seen minimal leadership turnover, maintains inflexible negotiating positions, and enforces strict social constraints in areas that it already controls," the report says. Any progress in women's rights "probably owes more to external pressure than domestic support, suggesting it would be at risk after coalition withdrawal."

Technology and international pressure could improve the treatment of women under the Taliban, analysts found. Afghanistan has about 27 million cellphone accounts, about two-thirds of its estimated population, which could potentially increase the world's awareness of "extreme Taliban behavior," the report says. And in the aftermath of a two-decade fight, international attention on the Taliban's activities may be heightened.

"The Taliban's desires for foreign aid and legitimacy might marginally moderate its conduct over time," the report says. "However, in the early days of reestablishing its Emirate, the Taliban probably would focus on extending control on its own terms."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 54 of 72

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has acknowledged that a Taliban takeover of the country is possible after the withdrawal. But he has also maintained that the group does not want to be a pariah and will have to embrace or at least tolerate the rights of women, girls and minorities if it wants to be viewed as legitimate by the international community.

The trouble with that, critics say, is that the Taliban have never shown interest in being accepted by the international community and spent much of its time in power in the 1990s and 2000-01 being shunned by every almost every nation on Earth.

U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said in a statement that she would work with the Biden administration "however I can to ensure every effort is made to safeguard the progress made and support our partners on the ground to secure a stable and inclusive transitional government."

Netanyahu misses deadline, political future in question

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday failed to meet a midnight deadline to put together a new governing coalition, raising the possibility that his Likud party could be pushed into the opposition for the first time in 12 years.

The deadline closed a four-week window granted to Netanyahu by Israel's figurehead president. The matter now bounces back to President Reuven Rivlin, who announced just after midnight that he would contact on Wednesday the 13 parties with seats in parliament to discuss "the continuation of the process of forming a government."

Rivlin is expected in the coming days to give one of Netanyahu's opponents a chance to form an alternative coalition government. He also could ask the parliament to select one of its own members as prime minister. If all else fails, the country would be forced into another election this fall — the fifth in just over two years.

The turmoil does not mean that Netanyahu will immediately be forced out as prime minister. But he now faces a serious threat to his lengthy rule just as his corruption trial is kicking into high gear. His opponents, despite deep ideological differences, already have been holding informal talks in recent weeks in hopes of forging a power-sharing agreement.

Netanyahu had struggled to secure a parliamentary majority since March 23 — when elections ended in deadlock for the fourth consecutive time in the past two years. Despite repeated meetings with many of his rivals and unprecedented outreach to the leader of a small Islamist Arab party, Netanyahu was unable to close a deal.

Rivlin gave Netanyahu the first chance to form a coalition after 52 members of parliament endorsed him as prime minister last month. That was short of a majority, but the highest number for any party leader.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid, who received the backing of 45 lawmakers, now seems to be the most likely candidate to get a chance to form a government.

Naftali Bennett, head of the small religious, nationalist Yamina party, is also a possibility. Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally turned rival, controls just seven seats in parliament, but he has emerged as a kingmaker of sorts and appears to carry the votes that Lapid would need to secure a parliamentary majority.

Lapid already has said he is ready to share the prime minister's job with Bennett, with Bennett serving first in a rotation. So far, they have not reached any firm agreements.

In a brief statement, Netanyahu's Likud party blamed Bennett for the prime minister's failure.

"Because of Bennett's refusal to commit to a right-wing government, something that would have certainly lead to the formation of a government along with other members of Knesset, Prime Minister Netanyahu returned the mandate to the president," the statement said.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, leader of the centrist Blue and White party, called on Netanyahu's opponents to line up behind Lapid.

"The Israeli people have taken one blow after another: a pandemic, unemployment, ugly politics, loss of faith in leadership, and deep polarization," he said. "We can work everything out within a matter of

hours. It is our duty to form a government as swiftly as possible for the sake of the state of Israel and all of its citizens.”

Netanyahu has become a divisive figure in Israeli politics, with the last four elections all seen as a referendum on his rule. He has been desperate to remain in office while he stands trial, using his position to lash out at prosecutors and seek possible immunity from prosecution.

Most of his struggles stemmed from obstacles created by former allies in his own religious and nationalist base.

The New Hope party, led by a former Netanyahu aide, refused to serve under the prime minister because of deep personal differences. Religious Zionism, a far-right party that espouses an openly racist platform, supported Netanyahu but ruled out serving in a government with the Arab partners he has courted.

Bennett, who has had a strained relationship with Netanyahu, was unable to reach any agreements with his former mentor.

Looming over Netanyahu has been his corruption trial. Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and bribery in a series of scandals. The trial has moved into the witness phase, with embarrassing testimony accusing him of trading favors with a powerful media mogul. Netanyahu denies the charges.

In recent weeks, Netanyahu had appeared increasingly frustrated, coddling potential partners one day and then lashing out at them with vitriol the next.

Last week’s deadly stampede at a religious festival, in which 45 ultra-Orthodox Jews were killed, only complicated his task by creating an unwelcome diversion and calls for an official investigation into possible negligence on his watch.

Netanyahu has also suffered a series of embarrassing — and uncharacteristic — defeats in parliament. On Tuesday, Likud failed to push ahead a proposal calling for direct election of the prime minister. Opponents had panned the measure as a desperate attempt by Netanyahu to find a new way to hold on to power.

Despite all of Netanyahu’s vulnerabilities, it remains unclear whether his opponents can form an alternative government.

The opposition includes a vast spectrum of parties that have little in common except for their animosity toward Netanyahu. He is expected to do his utmost in the coming weeks to prevent his opponents from finalizing a deal.

If they fail, he would remain in office until the next election. That would give him several months to battle his corruption charges from the perch of the prime minister’s office and grant him yet another chance to win a new term, along with possible immunity.

Bill and Melinda Gates divorce could shake up philanthropy

By HALELUYA HADERO and GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writers

As much as Bill and Melinda Gates might want to keep their pending divorce private, the split between the billionaire co-founders of the world’s largest private foundation is sure to have very public consequences, with the breakup having already sent a wave of anxious uncertainty through the worlds of philanthropy and community health.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with an endowment of nearly \$50 billion, donates about \$5 billion annually to causes around the world. Last year, it donated \$1 billion to combat COVID-19 through the administering of vaccines.

In a statement after the Gateses’ announced their divorce on Twitter, the foundation said the two would remain co-chairs and trustees and that no changes in the organization were planned.

“They will continue to work together to shape and approve foundation strategies, advocate for the foundation’s issues and set the organization’s overall direction,” the foundation said.

Despite such assurances, some say they worry that the split could shake up the foundation’s plans. According to a filing in King County Superior Court Monday, the Gateses had no prenuptial agreement but have signed a separation contract.

The couple pledged in 2010 to donate the vast bulk of their fortune — estimated by Forbes at around \$133

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 56 of 72

billion — to the foundation . Divorce attorneys say the committed money would no longer be considered marital property. Yet it remains unclear how the divorce might affect future donations to the foundation.

“There’s no precedent for this, for what the Gateses represent both in their wealth and their status,” said Benjamin Soskis, a historian of philanthropy and a senior researcher at the Urban Institute. “Even more importantly, this reflects this new era that we’re in which these engaged living donors really dominate the landscape in a way they haven’t for a century.”

Through their philanthropic efforts, the Gateses reshaped attitudes about the obligation of the uber-wealthy to leverage their vast fortunes for the public good in enduring ways. Years ago, they created the Giving Pledge, along with Warren Buffett, to persuade their fellow multi-billionaires to commit to give away the majority of their wealth.

Linsey McGoey, author of “No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy,” suggested that the philanthropy world is most likely concerned about the divorce in part because past such marital breakups have sometimes caused disruptive changes at foundations.

When the British hedge fund billionaire Chris Hohn and his wife, Jamie Cooper, divorced in 2013, it resulted in management problems at their charity, the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation. The breakup also triggered a prolonged legal fight over whether another member of the fund should vote to approve a \$360 million grant to a new charity founded by Cooper. The United Kingdom’s Supreme Court eventually ruled last year that the money should be given to Cooper’s initiative, Big Win Philanthropy.

“People do fear that when a divorce like this happens, it can really emphasize the volatility surrounding private giving and the fact that private giving is so contingent on the whims of a couple,” McGoey said. “The fact that we don’t really know the long term ramifications of this divorce on the foundation just highlights the fact that we are too reliant as a society on the whims of wealthy people when it comes to voluntarily distributing their excess wealth.”

At the same time, some experts note that for years the Gateses, who were married in Hawaii on New Year’s Day 1994, have each pursued their own interests within the foundation as well as their own separate investment funds. Since 2008, Bill Gates has had Gates Ventures. And, in 2015, Melinda Gates founded Pivotal Ventures, which focuses on helping women and families in the United States.

“In a sense, they’ve decoupled already,” Soskis said. “They have emerged as two distinct individuals with distinct approaches and focus areas already. And in some sense that might make the divorce easier in an institutional setting because they already have the distinct lines.”

One definite change, though, is that when Bill and Melinda Gates tackled an issue together as philanthropy’s ultimate power couple people naturally paid it significant attention. Especially in recent years, Soskis said, Melinda Gates’ impact on the foundation could be seen in its approach to education funding and gender equity issues.

“She’s done this not only behind closed doors but by being somebody who kind of tempers Bill Gates,” Soskis said. “It was actually a part of her public personality, her public identity and we all could see it sort of happening.”

A dominant player in development and global health, the foundation wields outside influence as the largest private donor to the World Health Organization. That’s why recent comments from Bill Gates about protecting intellectual rights for coronavirus vaccine manufacturers upset some global health experts. Gates has come out against sharing the intellectual patents for the COVID-19 vaccines, arguing that the manufacturing process for the shots needs scrutiny. Some critics faulted his sentiments as favoring profits over supply.

“It was a crushing disappointment to hear that,” said Lawrence O. Gostin, a professor of global health law at Georgetown University. “It’s not just a side issue; it’s the most consequential issue facing the world today.”

Because the foundation has been a long-established entity with a large professional staff, experts say any changes that might happen because of the divorce would likely be incremental and happen over an extended period.

A shakeup, McGoey argues, could even be beneficial for a foundation that is managed by three trust-

ees: the Gates and Buffett. She suggested that "having an organization so tightly run by a small group of people is not necessarily good for creating a diversity of ideas, and for ensuring that different ideological perspectives are widely represented."

Though questions have circulated about how the divorce might affect the couple's pledge to donate a majority of their wealth to the foundation, Susan Moss, a New York-based divorce attorney who has worked with high net-worth clients, says that shouldn't be a concern.

With philanthropic commitments, Moss says, there's usually a three-pronged test to determine how it's going to play out in divorce proceedings.

"Both spouses need to know about it, both spouses need to agree and the commitment needs to have happened prior, and not on the heels of the divorce," she said. "All three prongs have been met in this case."

"The money that has been committed to the foundation will stay going to the foundation," she added. It "likely will not be held up because there is so much evidence that each party knew, each party agreed and it's not on the heels of a divorce."

Professor overcomes loss to craft COVID-19 student brochures

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

When the coronavirus pandemic struck New York City, LaGuardia Community College professor Lucia Fuentes assigned students in her honors biology class to compile all the information they could find about COVID-19.

The result? An online multilingual brochure based on research from peer-reviewed journals, the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that has become a valuable resource for immigrants in the United States and their families abroad.

"Science is complicated and we have to make it more accessible," Fuentes said. "This is why ... I thought it would be a good thing for the students, and that it would be a contribution."

Nothing stopped the project — not even the death of Fuentes' husband on March 25, 2020 due to complications from COVID-19, or her own bout with the disease. In her grief, she remains committed to her students and determined to prevent others from getting sick.

"I wasn't going to drop my students, and I knew they were going through tons of really horrible stuff," she said. "I talked to some of them afterwards ... and they really appreciated that."

She also valued their support.

"Students gave me strength," she said. "Knowing that they expected me to be there, that's what propels me. It always has. I love my students."

The class brochures were also printed and distributed in her native Guatemala as well as in Colombia. Her most recent work involves information about COVID vaccines.

Students have already helped translate the latest brochures into their native languages, including Albanian, Korean and Portuguese.

Fuentes' project is rooted in her own life experiences. She fled Guatemala after her father — Alberto Fuentes Mohr, a respected political leader, economist and diplomat — was kidnapped in 1970 and killed in 1979. When she went into exile to Switzerland, she didn't know French, and she felt like she fell behind in class because of the language barrier.

"It was an eye-opener in every way in terms of how I realize the struggle and the questioning of the 'fairness' of those of us who get the possibility of having an education," she said.

When she became a college professor, she saw how her students faced a similar struggle.

"I realized that it was the language. They were smart, they knew the stuff, it was just the language."

Ruben Felipe Perez, a LaGuardia student from Colombia who hopes to attend medical school, called Fuentes an "amazing human being" who inspires many by overcoming great challenges in her quest to keep others safe.

"She just turned all that grief into giving to the rest of the community," he said.

Hyundai recalls over 390K vehicles for possible engine fires

DETROIT (AP) — Hyundai is recalling more than 390,000 vehicles in the U.S. and Canada for two problems that can cause engine fires. In one recall, owners are being told to park their vehicles outdoors until repairs are made.

The largest recall covers more than 203,000 Santa Fe Sport SUVs from 2013 through 2015. Some are being recalled a second time. Brake fluid can leak into the anti-lock brake computer, causing an electrical short that can lead to fires. Owners should park outdoors and away from structures until the problem is fixed, according to documents posted Tuesday by the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Dealers will replace a fuse and replace the computer if necessary. Owners will be notified in June.

The brake computer problem has caused 18 fires in the U.S., but no injuries, according to documents.

Hyundai says the recall “enhances the remedy” from one issued in September of 2020. The company says it kept investigating after the September recall and found that replacing the fuse would reduce the safety risk. “Hyundai is conducting this new recall to ensure the safety of its customers,” the company said in a statement.

The other recall covers nearly 187,000 2019 and 2020 Elantras, and 2019 through 2021 Konas and Velosters. All have 2-liter engines.

The piston rings may not have been properly heat-treated, which can cause engine damage, oil leaks and possible fires. Hyundai says the rings can be too hard and can be chipped, scuffing the engine cylinder. The piston problem has caused five fires but no injuries, according to documents.

Dealers will inspect and replace the engine if necessary. They’ll also install piston noise sensing software. Owners will be notified in late June.

Engine failure and fire problems at Hyundai and affiliated Korean automaker Kia have plagued the companies for more than five years, affecting the owners of more than 8 million vehicles.

Last month Kia recalled over 147,000 2020 and 2021 Soul and Seltos SUVs due to the piston ring problem. The automaker said it had four reports of fires potentially related to the issue.

DA: OK to test evidence from 1992 ‘Fatal Attraction’ trial

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. (AP) — Prosecutors in New York have consented to DNA testing of evidence from the 1992 trial of so-called “Fatal Attraction” killer Carolyn Warmus, who was paroled two years ago after serving 27 years in prison for the murder of her lover’s wife.

Westchester County District Attorney Mimi Rocah consented on Monday to the testing of three pieces of evidence used to convict Warmus in the 1989 death of Betty Jeanne Solomon, who was shot nine times in her home in suburban Greenburgh. The new development in the case was first reported in the Journal News.

Warmus and the victim’s husband, Paul Solomon, began an affair when both were teachers at a school in Scarsdale. Her first trial for the killing of Betty Jeanne Solomon ended in a hung jury in 1991, but she was found guilty of second-degree murder a year later.

Warmus, now 57, has always maintained her innocence and has sought to have three pieces of evidence tested to determine if they can exonerate her by pointing to another suspect.

Most significant is a glove found at the Solomons’ home that was a key piece of evidence in the second trial. Prosecutors said Warmus left the glove there at the time of the killing. Warmus’ lawyers have argued that testing of the glove could prove that someone other than Warmus was present when Solomon was killed.

The other evidence is semen recovered from the victim and blood found in a tote bag belonging to Paul Solomon.

The murder of Betty Jeanne Solomon attracted wide media attention and was dubbed the Fatal Attraction killing after the 1987 movie starring Glenn Close and Michael Douglas.

G7 foreign ministers meet face-to-face after pandemic pause

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 59 of 72

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Foreign ministers from the Group of Seven wealthy industrialized nations gathered Tuesday in London for their first face-to-face meeting in more than two years, with the issue of whether to challenge or coax a surging China high on the agenda.

Host nation Britain is keen to show that the rich countries' club still has clout in a fast-changing world, and has warned that the increasingly aggressive stances of Russia, China and Iran pose a challenge to democratic societies and the international rule of law.

U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the meeting "demonstrates diplomacy is back."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the United States' re-embrace of its international allies since President Joe Biden replaced his "America-first" predecessor, Donald Trump.

Blinken said engaging with China "from a position of strength ... means actually working with allies and partners, not disparaging them."

"It means leaning in and engaging in the vast array of multilateral and international organizations because that's where so many of the rules are made. That's where the norms are shaped," he said. "And if we're not leaning in, we know that Beijing is likely to be trying to do so in our place."

At the two-day meeting, top diplomats from the U.K., the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan also were to discuss the military coup in Myanmar, the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia and the precarious situation in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops and their NATO allies are winding down a two-decade deployment.

The U.K. Foreign Office said the group would also discuss "Russia's ongoing malign activity," including Moscow's earlier troop buildup on the border with Ukraine and the imprisonment of opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

While the G-7 members likely can agree in broad terms to condemn Navalny's imprisonment or Beijing's repression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, there are differences over how to relate to countries such as China and Russia that will have to be smoothed out in any final communique on Wednesday.

Asked what message the group would send to authoritarian regimes, Raab said the G-7 believed "in keeping trade open. We believe in standing up for open societies, for human rights and democracy. We believe in safeguarding and promoting public good."

The G-7 ministers will also try to agree on a way to make coronavirus vaccines available around the globe in the long term. But for now, wealthy countries are reluctant to give up precious stocks until they have inoculated their own people.

The ministers wore face masks and greeted one another with arm and elbow bumps as they arrived at Lancaster House, a grand former stately home in central London. Plastic screens between participants and on-site coronavirus tests were among measures intended to make the venue COVID-secure.

The British government, which holds the G-7 presidency this year, invited the foreign ministers of Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa to join parts of the meeting, including Tuesday evening's formal dinner. The guest list was intended to underline the G-7's support for democracies, as well as the U.K. government's attempts to build stronger ties with Asia in the wake of the country's departure from the European Union.

Britain's Conservative-led government hopes the resumption of in-person G-7 meetings — after more than a year of disruption by the coronavirus pandemic — will give the group a jolt of energy and bolster attempts to forge a post-Brexit "Global Britain" role for the U.K.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to host the other G-7 leaders at a summit in Cornwall, England, in June.

Opposition politicians and international aid organizations say the goal of Britain playing a bigger role in world affairs is undermined by the government's decision to slash its foreign aid budget from 0.7% of gross domestic product to 0.5% because of the economic hit from the pandemic.

Raab said the aid cuts were a "difficult decision" but insisted Britain would become "an even greater force for good in the world."

German far-right crime rises; police arrest alleged neo-Nazi

By FRANK JORDANS and DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Berlin police arrested a 53-year-old German man on suspicion of sending dozens of threatening letters to politicians, lawyers and journalists that were signed with the acronym of a neo-Nazi group, as officials warned Tuesday of a disturbing rise in far-right extremism across Germany.

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said far-right crimes rose 5.65% in 2020, accounting for more than half of all “politically motivated” crimes.

“This shows again that right-wing extremism is the biggest threat for our country,” Seehofer told reporters Tuesday.

In carrying out Monday’s arrest in Berlin, police seized an unencrypted hard drive with data that might help with an ongoing probe, said Holger Muench, the head of Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office.

“There was a lot of data, but it needs to be evaluated,” he said.

The suspect, whose name wasn’t released for privacy reasons, has previous convictions for “numerous crimes, including ones motivated by right-wing ideology,” said prosecutors in Frankfurt who are handling the case.

The letters were signed “NSU 2.0.” A German group called the National Socialist Underground was responsible for a string of violent crimes between 1998 and 2011, including the racially motivated killings of nine men with immigrant backgrounds and a police officer. The group’s name was derived from the full name of the Nazi, or National Socialist, party.

Police think the suspect sent almost 100 letters to dozens of people and organizations across Germany and Austria since 2018. German news agency dpa reported that investigators think the suspect may have obtained personal data on the people he targeted.

The case raised suspicions that suspect was connected with the police after it emerged that the personal data of three people who received threats had been accessed on police computers, dpa reported.

State Interior Minister Peter Beuth said, however, the man arrested had no connection to police.

Frankfurt attorney Seda Basay-Yildiz, who received one of the threats, was not convinced, however, saying the perpetrator had access to a new and confidential address for her.

“For me, there are still too many unanswered questions,” she told Der Spiegel magazine.

German security agencies have warned of the growing threat of violent far-right extremism. In July 2019, a regional politician from Chancellor Angela Merkel’s party was killed by a neo-Nazi; three months later, a gunman tried to force his way into a synagogue on Yom Kippur, killing two people.

Seehofer said antisemitic crimes in Germany were up 15.7% in 2020 over 2019 with 2,351 total incidents — 94.6% of which were committed by a far-right suspect.

Of the total, 62 were acts of violence while the majority were antisemitic hate speech and other related crimes, frequently on the internet or over social media, Seehofer said.

“This development in Germany is not only troubling, but in view of our history, deeply shameful,” he said.

Moshe Kantor, president of the European Jewish Congress, said the German numbers highlighted a broader issue.

“This is a wake-up call, not just for Germany, but for the whole world,” he said. “These figures should ring alarm bells, because we are seeing similar trends across the Western world.”

In 2020, Germany recorded a 72.4% increase in anti-immigrant crimes, up to 5,298 total cases, Seehofer said.

In the most deadly incident, nine people with immigrant backgrounds were shot dead in Hanau, near Frankfurt, in February by a gunman who had called for genocide.

Authorities have raised concerns about the role the far-right Alternative for Germany party allegedly played in stoking a climate of resentment toward immigrants and the government. The party, which placed third in Germany’s 2017 election, has moved steadily to the right in recent years, drawing increasing scrutiny from the country’s domestic intelligence agency.

On Tuesday, Alternative for Germany’s section in Berlin condemned a member who appeared to lament the absence of attacks on Merkel.

The website Business Insider reported that AfD's former chairman in Berlin, Guenter Brinker, forwarded a message stating that "either that piece of dirt is so well protected that nobody can get at her, or don't the Germans have any balls?"

Brinker said later he had mistakenly forwarded the message and regretted doing so and that he rejected "all forms of hatred and violence."

Many in the AfD have expressed support for, and participated in, the regular protests in Germany against lockdown measures, organized by the Querdenker movement. The demonstrations have become increasingly violent, and the country's domestic intelligence service last month said it had put some members of the movement under observation.

The protests have brought together a broad range of demonstrators, including people opposing vaccinations, those who deny the existence of the coronavirus, mask opponents, conspiracy theorists and others.

Seehofer said the protests have also attracted neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists, and have regularly become violent, targeting police and the media.

Seehofer said of the 260 reported crimes against journalists, 112 were related to protests against coronavirus restrictions.

"I want to say here very clearly: These acts of violence are no longer about exercising a constitutional right (to demonstrate), but are acts of violence of a criminal nature that I condemn in the strongest possible terms," he said.

National bail fund to expand in the Deep South

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

A national effort helping to bail poor and low-income people out of jail formally announced on Tuesday its expansion into the Deep South.

"Bail Out the South" is the next phase of The Bail Project's plans to secure freedom for thousands of people over the next few years, organizers told The Associated Press. Although larger criminal legal systems throughout the country have begun doing away with cash bail for certain low-level, nonviolent offenses, the South continues to have the highest jail incarceration rates and the starkest racial disparities among those imprisoned pretrial.

"When I think about our work around social justice and racial justice, you simply can't talk about those issues without dealing with what's happening in the South," said project CEO Robin Steinberg.

The project expansion includes opening offices in Mississippi, Florida, South Carolina and Alabama this year, which doubles its reach in the region through partnerships with local organizations. The bail fund will work in concert with advocacy campaigns to ultimately end the imposition of cash bail, Steinberg said.

"We, the bail fund, can't put ourselves out of business fast enough," Steinberg told the AP. "That is the ultimate goal here. But as we know, systems don't go down without a hell of a fight."

The national Bail Project, which helps low-income defendants get out of jail by bailing them out as their criminal cases progress through the courts, was founded three years ago, following a successful 10-year campaign led by Steinberg and the Bronx Defenders in New York City.

Data collected over that 10-year period show that 95% of people helped by the project returned to court for every appearance. It also showed that, when people could get out of jail, the majority were ultimately not convicted of a crime.

Since its launch in 2018, The Bail Project said it has paid \$41 million to bail out more than 15,500 people in more than 24 cities. That prevented more than 100,000 days of incarceration, and reduced the collateral consequences such as loss of jobs, housing and child custody.

According to The Bail Project, when ranked by state, seven of the 10 states with the highest incarceration rates in the U.S. are in the South. And Black Americans bear the brunt of incarceration in the region. Of all Black Americans in jail in the U.S., nearly half are in Southern jails, The Bail Project said. Many prisoners are also saddled with fines and court fees that can lead to reimprisonment if they go unpaid.

Letitia Sanabria still weeps when she thinks about the days last winter that she spent in a Louisiana jail

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 62 of 72

because she couldn't afford to post bond on \$5,000 bail. It was only recently, said the adult group home supervisor, who is Black, that marks left on her wrist and hands from the tightness of the arresting officers' handcuffs faded away.

But the trauma of the ordeal is still fresh.

"It caused chaos, and it was the worst experience ever," said Sanabria, who was arrested in Baton Rouge in December for allegedly interfering in a custody dispute involving her grandchild. Before that day, the 54-year-old had never been jailed in her life.

A Louisiana branch of The Bail Project bailed her out after three days. She would have been out earlier, but there was an outstanding traffic ticket on her record.

Sanabria said she didn't disclose to the child's father where her grandchild was because she felt it was unsafe. So she was taken into custody, even though she explained to police that she was the only person on shift at the group home. It was so abrupt, Sanabria said, that she wasn't allowed to finish passing out medication to group home residents before being led away.

The ordeal got worse at the East Baton Rouge Parish Jail, she said. Sanabria was denied the use of a toilet during jail intake, although she suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure, which she says require her to be near a restroom.

She had to relieve herself where she sat on the jail floor, she said. Sanabria also went without access to her own medications while in jail.

To top it all off, she said, one of the group homes that she works for put her on leave indefinitely while her case makes its way through the courts. She has been able to continue working for another group home but, four months since her arrest, Sanabria is struggling to stay afloat financially.

"We've got so many people going through the same situation that I went through," Sanabria said. "It makes you really wonder what kind of world we have, what kind of society we have, as far as our governments."

Collateral consequences of incarceration, often preventable and unnecessary, drive socioeconomic and racial disparities nationwide, advocates say. And according to recently published papers on criminal justice reform policies by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, both nonpartisan think tanks, pretrial release and sentencing policies continue to be root causes of mass incarceration in the U.S.

"Part of what's happening with the cash bail reform movement is to say that the system needs to change, and overall, there seems to be some bipartisan support on that," Rashawn Ray, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, told the AP.

"When we talk about the South, it is often a stronghold for preventing the type of reforms that people nationally think are really important," he said.

Support elsewhere for such reforms has been tempered with concerns that, amid rising crime rates in some jurisdictions, releasing more people pretrial will pose a broader threat to public safety and lead to a policy backlash.

However, Steinberg said, it's a common misconception that cash bail is a matter of public safety.

"What it currently does is criminalize poverty," she said. "It also feeds racial disparities because judges often assign higher bail to Black and brown people."

"What The Bail Project does is remove money from the criminal justice equation," she added. "We level the playing field, so the presumption of innocence actually means something and people can return to their families and get their day in court without pressure to plead guilty."

Bailouts are not the long-term solution to the problem, especially in the South, she added.

"Beyond the elimination of cash bail, we need to create alternatives to pretrial incarceration that are grounded in public health approaches to safety and investments in historically underserved communities," Steinberg said.

America's new normal: A degree hotter than two decades ago

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

America's new normal temperature is a degree hotter than it was just two decades ago.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 63 of 72

Scientists have long talked about climate change — hotter temperatures, changes in rain and snowfall and more extreme weather — being the “new normal.” Data released Tuesday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration put hard figures on the cliché.

The new United States normal is not just hotter, but wetter in the eastern and central parts of the nation and considerably drier in the West than just a decade earlier.

Meteorologists calculate climate normals based on 30 years of data to limit the random swings of daily weather. It's a standard set by the World Meteorological Organization. Every 10 years, NOAA updates normal for the country as a whole, states and cities — by year, month and season.

For the entire nation, the yearly normal temperature is now 53.3 degrees (11.8 degrees Celsius) based on weather station data from 1991 to 2020, nearly half a degree warmer than a decade ago. Twenty years ago, normal was 52.3 degrees (11.3 degrees Celsius) based on data from 1971 to 2000. The average U.S. temperature for the 20th century was 52 degrees (11.1 degrees Celsius).

The new normal annual U.S. temperature is 1.7 degrees (0.9 Celsius) hotter than the first normal calculated for 1901 to 1930.

“Almost every place in the U.S. has warmed from the 1981 to 2010 normal to the 1991 to 2020 normal,” said Michael Palecki, NOAA's normals project manager.

Fargo, North Dakota, where the new normal is a tenth of a degree cooler than the old one, is an exception, but more than 90% of the U.S. has warmer normal temperatures now than 10 years ago, Palecki said.

In Chicago and Asheville, North Carolina, the new yearly normal temperature jumped 1.5 degrees in a decade. Seattle, Atlanta, Boston and Phoenix had their normal annual temperature rise by at least half a degree in the last decade.

Charlottesville, Virginia, saw the biggest jump in normal temperatures among 739 major weather stations. Other large changes were in California, Texas, Virginia, Indiana, Arizona, Oregon, Arkansas, Maryland, Florida, North Carolina and Alaska.

New normals are warmer because the burning of fossil fuels is making the last decade “a much hotter time period for much of the globe than the decades” before, said Cornell University climate scientist Natalie Mahowald.

For Phoenix, the biggest change in normal came in precipitation. The normal annual rainfall for Phoenix dropped 10% down to 7.2 inches (18.2 centimeters). Rainfall in Los Angeles dropped 4.6%.

At the same time, Asheville saw a nearly 9% increase in rainfall, while New York City's rainfall rose 6%. Seattle's normal is 5% wetter than it used to be.

Climate scientists are split about how useful or misleading newly calculated normals are.

Mahowald and University of Oklahoma meteorology professor Jason Furtado said updating normal calculations helps city and regional planners to prepare for flooding and drought, farmers to decide what and when to plant, energy companies to meet changing demands and doctors to tackle public health issues arising from climate change.

But Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann said he prefers a constant baseline such as 1951 to 1980, which is what NASA uses. Adjusting normal every 10 years “perverts the meaning of ‘normal’ and ‘normalizes’ away climate change,” he said in an email.

North Carolina's state climatologist Kathie Dello said, “It seems odd to still call them normals because 1991-2020 was anything but normal climate-wise.”

Welcome to Top 10, Melo: Elite NBA scoring list adds Anthony

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Carmelo Anthony looked like he was all done just a couple of seasons ago.

Now, he's part of a truly exclusive club in the NBA.

Welcome to the Top 10, Melo.

Anthony scored 14 points Monday night in Portland's 123-114 loss to the Atlanta Hawks, moving him past Elvin Hayes for 10th place on the career scoring list with 27,318.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 64 of 72

"If you're in the top 10 of anything of all time, it's a special moment," said Anthony, who is in his 18th NBA season and turns 37 before the month is out.

Anthony cruised past Hayes early in the second quarter, hitting a 3-pointer while getting fouled by Danilo Gallinari and knocking down the free throw to complete a 4-point play.

Anthony was fully aware of how many points he needed to surpass Hayes.

"I knew this moment," he said. "I didn't know those other moments — 15, 13, 11. But 10 is something I knew."

It appeared Anthony was headed for a forced retirement after he played just 10 games during the 2018-19 season.

He parted ways with Houston, was waived by Chicago and didn't hook up with Portland until the next season was several weeks old.

Even though he went more than a year without playing a game, Anthony found new life and a new role with the Trail Blazers.

A starter his entire career, he is coming off the bench now, playing a supporting role to younger stars, players who still look up to him, such as Damian Lillard.

"Being in the top 10 in a really special accomplishment," Lillard said. "For him, it's probably a little more special. A lot of people counted him out and tried to finish him."

During his time with the Trail Blazers, Anthony has passed nine players on the career scoring list.

He knocked off Alex English, Kevin Garnett, John Havlicek and Paul Pierce last season. He has taken down Tim Duncan, Dominique Wilkins, Oscar Robertson, Hakeem Olajuwon and now Hayes this season.

Next up for Anthony: Moses Malone at 27,409 points.

Melo's got a good chance at catching him, too, by the end of the regular season.

"For Melo to be out a year and come back makes it even more remarkable," Portland coach Terry Stotts said. "I always appreciate greatness, whether it's a player I'm coaching or coaching against. Melo is a great player. He's a Hall of Fame player."

Lillard went on and on about what a pleasure it's been to have Anthony as a teammate, disputing those who have described him over the years as a selfish player who was never quite good enough to lead his teams — most notably, Denver and New York — to a championship.

"I appreciate him more as a friend than I do as a teammate, and I really appreciate him as a teammate," Lillard said. "I think that really speaks to the kind of person he is."

Afterward, Stotts presented Anthony with a game ball in the locker room.

"We need to acknowledge milestones," the coach said. "This is a big one. Top 10 of all time. That's big time."

After his teammates finished clapping, Anthony said: "A couple of years ago, I didn't think I was gonna be in this moment right now. I was out the league for whatever reason. I'm back. I persevered. I stayed strong, I stayed true to myself and now I'm here in the top 10."

He's not done yet.

"I'm still enjoying the game," Anthony said. "I'm still loving the game. I'm still approaching the game the same way."

'Horrible' weeks ahead as India's virus catastrophe worsens

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — COVID-19 infections and deaths are mounting with alarming speed in India with no end in sight to the crisis and a top expert warning that the coming weeks in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people will be "horrible."

India's official count of coronavirus cases surpassed 20 million Tuesday, nearly doubling in the past three months, while deaths officially have passed 220,000. Staggering as those numbers are, the true figures are believed to be far higher, the undercount an apparent reflection of the troubles in the health care system.

The country has witnessed scenes of people dying outside overwhelmed hospitals and funeral pyres

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 65 of 72

lighting up the night sky.

Infections have surged in India since February in a disastrous turn blamed on more contagious variants of the virus as well as government decisions to allow massive crowds to gather for Hindu religious festivals and political rallies before state elections.

The reported caseload is second only to that of the U.S., which has one-fourth the population of India but has recorded over 32 million confirmed infections. The U.S. has also reported more than 2 1/2 times as many deaths as India, at close to 580,000.

India's top health official, Rajesh Bhushan, refused to speculate last month as to why authorities weren't better prepared. But the cost is clear: Many people are dying because of shortages of bottled oxygen and hospital beds or because they couldn't get a COVID-19 test.

India's official average of newly confirmed cases per day has soared from over 65,000 on April 1 to about 370,000, and deaths per day have officially gone from over 300 to more than 3,000.

On Tuesday, the health ministry reported 357,229 new cases in the past 24 hours and 3,449 deaths from COVID-19.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's School of Public Health in the U.S., said he is concerned that Indian policymakers he has been in contact with believe things will improve in the next few days.

"I've been ... trying to say to them, 'If everything goes very well, things will be horrible for the next several weeks. And it may be much longer,'" he said.

Jha said the focus needs to be on "classic" public health measures: targeted shutdowns, more testing, universal mask-wearing and avoiding large gatherings.

"That is what's going to break the back of this surge," he said.

The death and infection figures are considered unreliable because testing is patchy and reporting incomplete. For example, government guidelines ask Indian states to include suspected COVID-19 cases when recording deaths from the outbreak, but many do not do so.

Municipal records for this past Sunday show 1,680 dead in the Indian capital were treated according to the procedures for handing the bodies of those infected with COVID-19. But in the same 24-hour period, only 407 deaths were added to the official toll from New Delhi.

The New Delhi High Court announced it will start punishing government officials if supplies of oxygen allocated to hospitals are not delivered. "Enough is enough," it said.

The deaths reflect the fragility of India's health system. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party has countered criticism by pointing out that the underfunding of health care has been chronic.

But this was all the more reason for authorities to use the several months when cases in India declined to shore up the system, said Dr. Vineeta Bal of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research.

"Only a patchwork improvement would've been possible," she said. But the country "didn't even do that."

Now authorities are scrambling to make up for lost time. Beds are being added in hospitals, more tests are being done, oxygen is being sent from one corner of the country to another, and manufacturing of the few drugs effective against COVID-19 is being scaled up.

The challenges are steep in states where elections were held and unmasked crowds probably worsened the spread of the virus. The average number of daily infections in West Bengal state has increased by a multiple of 32 to over 17,000 since the balloting began.

"It's a terrifying crisis," said Dr. Punyabrata Goon, convener of the West Bengal Doctors' Forum.

Goon added that the state also needs to hasten immunizations. But the world's largest maker of vaccines is short of shots, the result of lagging manufacturing and raw material shortages.

Experts are also worried the prices being charged for shots will make it harder for the poor to get vaccinated. On Monday, opposition parties urged the government make vaccinations free to all Indians.

India is vaccinating about 2.1 million people daily, or around 0.15% of its population.

"This is not going to end very soon," said Dr. Ravi Gupta, a virus expert at the University of Cambridge in England. "And really ... the soul of the country is at risk in a way."

Refugee doctor chronicles Tigray's pain as he treats it

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

HAMDAYET, Sudan (AP) — He is a surgeon and a father. Every morning, he wakes up under a plastic tarp and is reminded he's now a refugee, too.

Tewodros Tefera is one of more than 60,000 people who have fled ethnic violence in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, crossing the border into a remote corner of Sudan. Horrified by what he saw when the fighting between Ethiopian and Tigray forces began six months ago, and by the tales of new arrivals, the 44-year-old chronicles the pain even as he treats it.

"It's getting worse," he says of life back home.

Ethiopia says it is "deeply dismayed" by the deaths of civilians, blames the now-fugitive Tigray leaders and claims normalcy is returning. But Tewodros' patients tell him that killings, gang rapes and mass expulsions of ethnic Tigrayans continue as some 6 million civilians are targeted for their leaders' political past.

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For Tewodros, it has not been a comfortable transformation from cool, detached doctor at one of Tigray's largest hospitals to driven spokesman for his people. He used to write down reflections so emotional on the war and his new life that he later burned them.

"Ethiopia is dead to me," he says, then corrects himself: "Ethiopia is dying."

His wife and small children remain there, and he doesn't know when he'll see them again. They don't know how raw his experience has been, and he hesitates to tell them. Once well-off, he arrived in Sudan with only the clothes he wore — jogging pants and a polo shirt — and his wedding ring.

He slept in the market his first few days in Sudan before introducing himself as a doctor and being welcomed.

The stresses have shaped him. He has lost weight, 12 kilograms (26 pounds), in the past five months, enough to worry his mother still inside Tigray. At times he closes his eyes and knocks a fist against his forehead, trying to drive back anxiety.

Tewodros now fills a growing number of notebooks as he compiles a "dossier" on the Tigray conflict. Sometimes he dreams of taking it to the International Criminal Court in a quest for justice.

He works from dawn to well beyond dusk at a clinic run by the Sudanese Red Crescent Society in the border community of Hamdayet. With no running water or electricity, he and a handful of colleagues see well over 100 patients a day. Tewodros has delivered babies and treated gunshot wounds, despite a shortage of anesthesia.

"He feels it as if he has the same pain," one patient, Rahwa Haylay, says, her jaw still bandaged from an operation.

On a recent day, Tewodros examined the fresh welts on the back of a young man who had just walked in from Tigray. The man said he and his friends had been forced to lie in the hot sand and be beaten by soldiers from nearby Eritrea collaborating with Ethiopian forces. He heard one soldier call a superior and ask, "Should we kill them or let them go?"

Between patients, Tewodros is pulled aside by fellow refugees who seek his help with community matters, hushed confidences, legal questions. Meanwhile, he is picking up Arabic phrases to improve his treatment of local Sudanese. His exhaustion is kept at bay with cigarettes and coffee.

"This man, I think, is a special man," said Yagoub Mohamed, the director of the local Sudanese reception center for refugees. He and Tewodros meet daily to discuss their work but stray into the personal.

"When he talks about his wife and children, he's crying," Mohamed said.

At night, as Tewodros sits in the darkness outside the clinic and listens to the hum of thousands of refugees fade, he agonizes over the war. It troubles his sleep.

"It is definitely genocide," he says. "If someone is being attacked for their identity, if they're threatened to be vanished because of their identity, there is no other explanation for this."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 67 of 72

He believes that the killings are just the first step against the Tigrayans, with starvation the next. Already he has seen a number of severely malnourished people arrive.

Tigray remains largely cut off from the outside world by the Ethiopian government, with no internet access in most of the region.

"They are foolish to think the truth could be hidden forever," Tewodros says.

Despite his criticism, he treated wounded soldiers for the Ethiopian government in the early hours of the conflict.

"A doctor is a doctor," he says.

He would see 93 bodies in all, both combatants and civilians, before he fled, taking some wounded patients with him.

He plans to continue his work in Sudan. The high-rise buildings of his city in Tigray, Humera, can be seen on the horizon.

He could walk home, but he's not sure he will ever go there again.

Ethiopia 'at a crossroads' amid spiraling ethnic conflict

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

GONDAR, Ethiopia (AP) — Aba Yosief Desta preferred not to discuss the ethnicities of victims in the widening conflicts threatening Ethiopia's unity.

A wooden cross in hand, the Orthodox monk in yellow robes insisted that victims of massacres "have the same face."

Speaking to The Associated Press from the city of Gondar, where he manages a diocesan office, he reflected on the first known massacre of the conflict in the neighboring Tigray region. Ethiopia's government says ethnic Amhara were killed, but ethnic Tigrayan refugees have told the AP they were also targeted.

"It's better to say Ethiopians were killed," the bearded monk said. "If one Amhara is killed and one Tigrayan is killed, it means Ethiopians are killed." He hopes young people will shun ethnic-driven politics, which he calls "the source of all problems" in this country with more than 90 ethnic groups.

Africa's second-most populous country, with 110 million people, faces a crisis of ethnic nationalism that some fear could tear it apart as the federal government asserts its authority in regions such as Tigray, where a military operation launched in November to capture the fugitive regional leaders has escalated into a war in which widespread atrocities are reported and thousands have been killed.

As that war reaches the six-month mark on Tuesday, there is no sign of how it might be resolved for the Tigray region's estimated 6 million people. The United Nations human rights office has said all sides are accused of committing abuses against civilians, although far more of the killings, rapes, and mass expulsions are attributed to Ethiopian forces, allied Amhara regional forces, or, especially, troops from neighboring Eritrea.

Over the weekend, Ethiopia's Council of Ministers almost certainly ended hopes of negotiations for peace when it designated as a terrorist organization the Tigray People's Liberation Front, or TPLF, the regional party which dominated a coalition of groups that ruled Ethiopia from 1991 until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018.

The TPLF, like some others in Ethiopia, is an ethnic-based party that has long represented the people of Tigray in accordance with the 1995 constitution, which enshrines ethnic federalism. Under that constitution, regional leaders have been accused of asserting the rights of majority ethnic groups at the expense of minorities.

Tigrayans and the United States government allege ethnic cleansing in western Tigray, where Amhara authorities assert they are reclaiming land that Tigray leaders seized in the 1990s. The term "ethnic cleansing" refers to forcing a population from a region through expulsions and other violence, often including killings and rapes.

Members of other ethnic groups elsewhere say they have been targeted, too. Scores of people have been killed in clashes this year between the Amhara and the Oromo, Ethiopia's two largest ethnic groups.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 68 of 72

In the country's west, the Gumuz have been accused of massacring people from both the Amhara and Oromo groups.

With the rising violence, some in Ethiopia wonder how the government will pull off national elections on June 5. The decision to delay voting from last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic helped to spark the Tigray conflict when the region's leaders objected, asserted that Abiy's mandate had ended and held a regional vote of their own.

The European Union this week canceled its election observation mission, saying requirements for its independence and the import of communications equipment — also sought by humanitarian groups for work in Tigray — were not met. Ethiopia in a statement Tuesday replied that external observers "are neither essential nor necessary to certify the credibility of an election."

Abiy, who has vowed a free and fair vote, will keep his post as prime minister if his Prosperity Party wins a majority of seats in the national assembly.

But there will be no voting in Tigray, where witnesses say fighting persists and local authorities can reject decisions made by the federal government. An AP team that was granted permission to visit Mai Kadra was turned back in nearby Humera by soldiers who said they recognized the authority of Amhara leaders.

The winding road to western Tigray displays the ruins of war: the charred remains of armored personnel carriers, the mangled bed of a truck, the pockmarked walls of an industrial park. There is no phone or internet service. Humera looked deserted. A soldier with a gun slung over his shoulder crossed one street while a lone woman brewed coffee on her veranda.

Amhara authorities' annexation of a vast part of western Tigray has forced hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans to seek refuge elsewhere, including in nearby Sudan.

Some Ethiopians said they believe the country must overcome its ethnic politics by forging a new federation in which ethnicity is not the most important factor.

But there is no agreement on how this can be achieved as Abiy, who came to power as a reformist leader and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for making peace with Eritrea, moves to centralize power in ways that marginalized Tigray's now-fugitive leaders.

"No doubt Ethiopia is at a crossroads now," said Kassahun Berhanu, a professor of political science at Addis Ababa University.

While constitutional recognition of ethnic rights "isn't bad, it must be streamlined in a way that it does not exclude the need for nationhood. Because these two are not mutually exclusive," he said. "Ethnic rights can't be at the expense of essential common belonging. This can be corrected in the course of an amendment."

Others suggested the constitution may have to be jettisoned in favor of a U.S.-style "territorial federation," warning that attempts to centralize authority in a powerful prime minister could bring back harsh authoritarianism while attempts at ethnic homogeneity could lead to further atrocities.

Centralization under the military government that ruled Ethiopia violently from 1974 to 1991, as well as ethnic federalism under the successor coalition led by the TPLF, "have been discredited in practice," said Mahmood Mamdani, a professor of government at Columbia University. "The alternative to both is territorial federalism," in which all residents of an administrative unit have equal rights, he said.

In a country where the population of regional states is multi-ethnic, "to practice ethnic federalism is to disenfranchise ethnic minorities of rights resident in the unit. This is the root cause of ethnic conflict in most African states. The spreading conflict in today's Ethiopia is no different," Mamdani said.

In Gondar, set amid rocky hills, a man in civilian clothes but carrying a rifle described himself as a member of an Amhara militia.

Such militia members are accused of committing abuses in western Tigray. But Nega Wagaw disagreed, saying "militias are the keepers of the peace."

Another Gondar resident, 22-year-old trader Gashaw Asmare, said he is striving for the national unity that Ethiopia needs.

"Amhara means being Tigrayan. Being Tigrayan means Amhara," he said. "We Ethiopians are one."

Deaths at sea highlight failings in Europe migration policy

By RENATA BRITO and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — As the waves pounded the gray rubber boat carrying more than 100 Africans hoping to reach Europe from Libya, those aboard dialed the number for migrants in distress frantically. In the series of calls to the Alarm Phone hotline, passengers explained that the dinghy had run out of fuel while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea and was quickly filling up with water and panic.

On the other end of the line, activists tried to keep the migrants calm as they relayed the boat's GPS coordinates repeatedly to Italian, Maltese and Libyan authorities and later to Frontex, the European Union's border and coast guard agency, hoping authorities would launch a rescue operation as required under international maritime law.

An analysis of logs and emails from Alarm Phone and the NGO SOS Méditerranée as well as reports by the Libyan coast guard show that the national authorities contacted responded slowly, insufficiently or not at all to the pleas for help. In all, approximately 130 people are believed to have died between April 21 and April 22 as they waited in vain for someone to save them, roughly 45 kilometers (30 miles) from the Libyan coast.

It was the deadliest wreck so far this year in the Mediterranean Sea, where more than 20,000 migrants or asylum seekers have perished since 2014, and has renewed accusations that European countries are failing to help migrant boats in trouble.

Instead, human rights groups, the U.N.'s migration and refugee agencies and international law experts say European countries too often ignore their international obligations to rescue migrants at sea and outsource operations to the Libyan coast guard despite its limited capacity, reports of its ties to human traffickers, and the fact that those intercepted, including children, are placed in squalid, overcrowded detention centers where they face abuse, torture, rape and even death.

European nations, of course, routinely rescue migrants in distress. Since the April 21 wreck alone, the Italian coast guard and navy have rescued at least 149 people near its coasts. Spanish authorities, meanwhile, deployed military planes and helicopters as well as rescue ships to airlift three people and recover the bodies of 24 who had died in a wreck April 26 nearly 500 kilometers (310 miles) from the country's Canary Islands.

Still, 2021 is shaping up to be particularly deadly. According to the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants project, at least 612 people are known to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean so far this year. That's significantly higher than during the same time period last year, when 278 died or disappeared.

No rescue came April 21. A day later, merchant vessels sailing in the area and a humanitarian rescue ship, the Ocean Viking, found the boat's wreckage and reported seeing at least 10 bodies. One of the deceased was hunched over a ring buoy, face in the water.

"I was supposed to be one of the drowned," 27-year-old Mutawakel Ali said recently from Libya. He and five other Sudanese missed the boat's departure on April 20 from al-Khums by a few minutes because they had stopped on their way to the coast to break their daily Ramadan fast.

But his 23-year-old cousin Mubarak Jaber did not escape. Jaber, the oldest of seven brothers, had quit his economics studies at university and headed for Libya to look for a job a year and a half earlier. He worked in construction, sending money back to his relatives struggling in Sudan's deteriorating economic crisis.

But it still wasn't enough, so he contacted smugglers and boarded the migrant boat.

The rescue and coordination centers of Libya, Italy, Malta were first alerted by Alarm Phone that the boat needed help at 9:52 a.m. Central European Summer Time the next day, according to emails seen by The Associated Press.

Alarm Phone and SOS Méditerranée say they never received any response from Maltese authorities. The Armed Forces of Malta, responsible for maritime search-and-rescue operations, did not respond to several requests for comment from the AP.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 70 of 72

It was only at 2:11 p.m., more than four hours later, that Alarm Phone received a response from Italian authorities, asking the activists to inform the "competent authorities" without specifying who those were.

Alarm Phone was only able to reach a Libyan officer five hours after the first alert, at 2:44 p.m. They were told that the Libyan coast guard was indeed searching for three boats in the area — but with only one vessel, the Ubari.

A day after the wreck, Libyan coast guard spokesperson Masoud Ibrahim Masoud told the AP that his agency had found 106 migrants and two bodies from two other boats. Due to worsening weather and the poor health of those already found, they returned to port before locating the third boat, he said, adding that the support received from the EU was insufficient.

Frontex, which only patrols the Mediterranean by air, said it deployed two planes after being requested to do so by the Italians, one on April 21 that spotted the boat in distress and another one on April 22.

"Frontex did exactly what it had to do and above and beyond," the agency's spokesman, Chris Borowski, told the AP on April 24. "We alerted national rescue centers, we issued a mayday call to any vessel in the area to come to the rescue, and we stayed there as long as we could."

But that mayday message was only sent at 7:15 p.m. according to SOS Méditerranée, more than nine hours after Italian, Maltese and Libyan authorities were first alerted. It is unclear why those three rescue and coordination centers did not issue an alert to vessels in the region sooner.

Frontex blamed the deaths on smugglers and deteriorating weather. On the night of April 21, waves reached 2 to 3 meters (6 1/2 to 10 feet) high.

Questioned by the AP about its role, the Italian coast guard referred back to a statement issued following the initial wreck. "The event took place in the Libyan search-and-rescue responsibility area. The Libyan authorities took over the coordination of the event," read the statement from April 23.

Legal experts consulted by the AP, however, said that even though a boat in distress may be in one country's search-and-rescue zone of international waters, it does not relieve other authorities of responsibility.

"The manner in which each of the European actors contacted ... attempted to deflect or ignore responsibility can be constitutive of a violation by omission of the relevant obligations under international law," Violeta Moreno-Lax, founder of the immigration law program at Queen Mary University of London, explained in an email.

Earlier this year the independent Human Rights Committee, working with the United Nations, ruled that Italy failed to protect the "right to life" of over 200 migrants and refugees who died when the boat they were on sank in the Mediterranean in 2013. In that case, the boat was inside the Maltese search-and-rescue area — but the experts determined that Italian rescuers might have been able to prevent the tragedy if they had acted quickly. They have urged Italy to investigate and prosecute anyone responsible.

Still, Europeans rely heavily on the Libyans, who, with European encouragement, registered a massive search-and-rescue area in the Mediterranean with the International Maritime Organization in 2018, including an area where Italy previously conducted rescues.

Frontex also works closely with the Libyan coast guard to help them intercept migrants. According to a recently published investigation by media organizations Der Spiegel, Lighthouse Reports, ARD and Libération, European planes guided the Libyan coast guard to migrant boats in distress at least 20 times since January 2020. During those interceptions some 91 migrants and refugees died or are went missing, the investigation found.

When the Ocean Viking asked Frontex for aerial support on April 22 to find the boat in distress, it says it got no answer.

Frontex told the AP that the recent investigation "misrepresents" the agency's role in the central Mediterranean and that its priority in any potential search and rescue is to save lives.

"In the central Mediterranean region this means that any time a Frontex plane spots a boat in distress, it immediately alerts the national rescue centers in the region: Italy, Malta, Libya and Tunisia," the agency said. "Frontex does not coordinate search and rescue operations."

Questioned about the EU's role in responding to the April 21 wreck, European Commission spokesperson for home affairs, Adalbert Jahnz, lamented the deaths but said the commission could not comment be-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 71 of 72

cause "we have no competence or influence" on the matter and that search-and-rescue operations were conducted and coordinated by national authorities.

Compounding the April 21 tragedy, none of the European or Libyan authorities involved ever picked up the bodies found floating in the water. The crew of the Ocean Viking ultimately made the difficult decision not to pick up any of the bodies to allow the ship to continue to conduct rescues and because it was told the Libyans were on their way. It went on to save 236 people.

The families will never be able to bury their loved ones, and without bodies, it will be more difficult to investigate the deaths.

Setena Abdalla sobbed as she spoke from her home in Omdurman, Sudan, about the death of her only son: 24-year-old Mohammed Abdel-Khaliq.

"He was my whole life," said the 54-year-old single mother.

Abdel-Khaliq had already attempted the crossing once before but was intercepted and placed in a detention center for two months. On another two occasions, smugglers took his money and did not show up. Still, he was determined to try again. On April 19, he phoned his mother for the last time.

"I appealed to him not to travel," she said.

But Abdel-Khaliq went anyway and now remains forever in the Mediterranean Sea.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, May 5, the 125th day of 2021. There are 240 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 5, 1925, schoolteacher John T. Scopes was charged in Tennessee with violating a state law that prohibited teaching the theory of evolution. (Scopes was found guilty, but his conviction was later set aside.)

On this date:

In 1494, during his second voyage to the Western Hemisphere, Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica.

In 1818, political philosopher Karl Marx, co-author of "The Communist Manifesto" and author of "Das Kapital," was born in Prussia.

In 1891, New York's Carnegie Hall (then named "Music Hall") had its official opening night, featuring Russian composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky as a guest conductor.

In 1942, wartime sugar rationing began in the United States.

In 1945, in the only fatal attack of its kind during World War II, a Japanese balloon bomb exploded on Gearhart Mountain in Oregon, killing the pregnant wife of a minister and five children. Denmark and the Netherlands were liberated as a German surrender went into effect.

In 1961, astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. became America's first space traveler as he made a 15-minute suborbital flight aboard Mercury capsule Freedom 7.

In 1973, Secretariat won the Kentucky Derby, the first of his Triple Crown victories.

In 1978, Ben & Jerry's ice cream had its beginnings as Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield opened an ice cream parlor at a converted gas station in Burlington, Vermont.

In 1981, Irish Republican Army hunger-striker Bobby Sands died at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland on his 66th day without food.

In 1987, the congressional Iran-Contra hearings opened with former Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord (SEE'-kohrd) the lead-off witness.

In 1994, Singapore caned American teenager Michael Fay for vandalism, a day after the sentence was reduced from six lashes to four in response to an appeal by President Bill Clinton.

In 2009, Texas health officials confirmed the first death of a U.S. resident with swine flu.

Ten years ago: Solemnly honoring victims of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, President Barack Obama hugged survivors at ground zero in New York and declared that the killing of Osama bin Laden was an American message to the world: "When we say we will never forget, we mean what we say." Pakistan's army broke

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, May 05, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 302 ~ 72 of 72

its silence over the U.S. commando raid that killed bin Laden, acknowledging its "shortcomings" in finding him but threatening to review cooperation with Washington if there was another violation of Pakistani sovereignty. Director, playwright and screenwriter Arthur Laurents ("West Side Story") died in New York at age 93.

Five years ago: Former Los Angeles trash collector Lonnie Franklin Jr. was convicted of 10 counts of murder in the "Grim Sleeper" serial killings that targeted poor, young Black women over two decades. President Barack Obama commuted the prison sentences of 58 federal convicts, part of a broader push to ease punishments for nonviolent drug offenders. Londoners cast votes in an election that gave the city its first Muslim mayor, Labour lawmaker Sadiq Khan, who succeeded outgoing Conservative Boris Johnson.

One year ago: President Donald Trump visited a Honeywell mask factory in Arizona, but ignored guidelines to wear a mask. Tyson Foods said it would resume limited operation of its huge pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa, with enhanced safety measures, more than two weeks after closing the facility because of a coronavirus outbreak among workers. Even though Joe Biden had no remaining opponents, a judge ruled that New York's Democratic presidential primary would have to take place on June 23 because canceling it would be unconstitutional. Michigan communities saw record turnout for local elections, with votes cast largely by mail. Facebook said it had removed several accounts and pages linked to QAnon, taking action for the first time against the far-right conspiracy theory circulated among Trump supporters.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Pat Carroll is 94. Country singer-musician Roni Stoneman is 83. Actor Michael Murphy is 83. Actor Lance Henriksen is 81. Comedian-actor Michael Palin is 78. Actor John Rhys-Davies is 77. Rock correspondent Kurt Loder is 76. Rock musician Bill Ward (Black Sabbath) is 73. Actor Melinda Culea is 66. Actor Lisa Eilbacher is 64. Actor Richard E. Grant is 64. Former broadcast journalist John Miller is 63. Rock singer Ian McCulloch (Echo and the Bunnymen) is 62. NBC newsman Brian Williams is 62. Rock musician Shawn Drover (Megadeth) is 55. TV personality Kyan (KY'-ihn) Douglas is 51. Actor Tina Yothers is 48. R&B singer Raheem DeVaughn is 46. Actor Santiago Cabrera is 43. Actor Vincent Kartheiser is 42. Singer Craig David is 40. Actor Danielle Fishel is 40. Actor Henry Cavill is 38. Actor Clark Duke is 36. Soul singer Adele is 33. Rock singer Skye Sweetnam is 33. R&B singer Chris Brown is 32. Figure skater Nathan Chen is 22.