

# Groton Daily Independent

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"The path from dreams to success does exist. May you have the vision to find it, the courage to get on to it, and the perseverance to follow it."

-Kalpana Chawla

Chicken Soup  
for the Soul

## 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.**

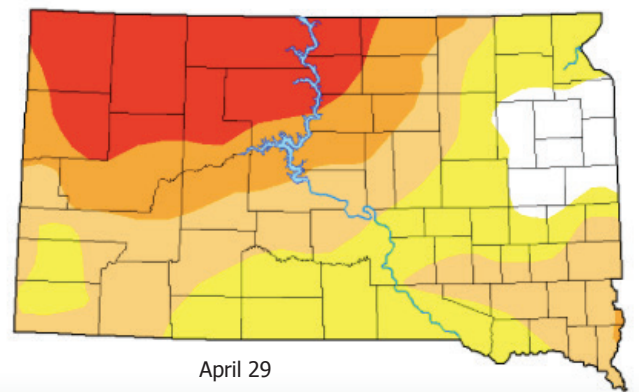
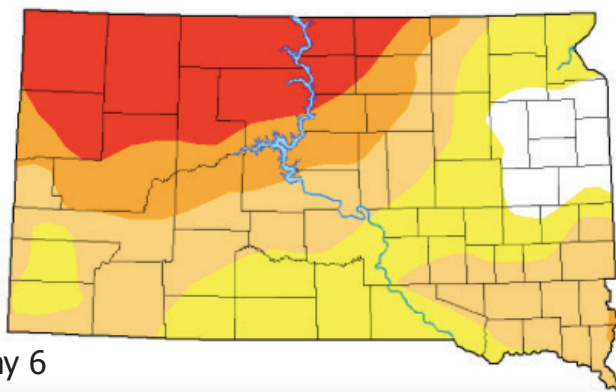
**602 West Third Ave., Groton**

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

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## Drought Classification



### High Plains

On this week's map, areas of the region—including Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming—saw improvements, including a reduction in areas of Severe Drought (D2) in southwestern Nebraska and northwestern Kansas as well as in areas of Moderate Drought (D1) in northeastern Colorado and southeastern Wyoming. In northeastern Colorado, 2 to 4+ inches of rainfall were observed during the past week, which provided a timely boost in soil moisture conditions for recently planted crops. Elsewhere, areas of Extreme Drought (D3) expanded in northern South Dakota and southern North Dakota. In northwestern South Dakota, the town of Lemmon saw its driest January through April period on record with only 0.71 inches of precipitation observed. The South Dakota State Extension and the North Dakota State Climate Office are both reporting drought-related impacts in their respective states, including poor water quality for livestock and dry stock ponds. In western North Dakota, dry conditions and strong winds have been exacerbating fire-related conditions as firefighters are battling two wildfires in the Dakota Prairie Grasslands. Average temperatures for the week were above normal across the region with positive temperature anomalies ranging from 2 to 9 deg F above normal.

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## Upcoming Events

### **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

## #436 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I've been tracking numbers since we last talked: We had 40,505 new cases on May 4; we had 45,278 new cases on May 5, and there were 47,643 new cases reported today. At the moment, we've reported a total of 32,632,099 cases, 0.1% more than yesterday. Average hospitalizations are at 39,908, below 40,000 today for the first time since March 24 when they were at 38,505. Deaths on May 4 were 632, on May 5 were 794, and today were 830. We have lost 579,634 lives to this virus in the US so far, 0.1% more than yesterday

On May 6, 2020, one year ago today, we were up to 1,234,700 cases and 73,482 deaths in the US. There was a lot of discussion of this problem of asymptomatic infections, not because we wanted those folks to be sicker, but because asymptomatic people running around exposing folks without even realizing they're infected are a problem; by now we realize just how big that problem is. The first experimental doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine were going into volunteers—in Germany the prior week and in the US during this week. That brought the number of vaccines worldwide in human trials to eight. This was also the week that awful "Plandemic" video circulated with its false claims and conspiracy-mongering. Fortunately, I was unable to find a copy online today when I looked—which is totally as it should be, although I'd guess if you know where to look, you could still find it. I did some work on that video last year, and if you're interested, you can find that in my Update #73 posted May 6, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3570415312974849>. Additionally, the comments on that particular post included a huge amount of further information on this particular piece of misinformation. A year ago we were over 3.7 million cases and 263,000 deaths worldwide.

One thing that's been happening since we last talked amid the steady decline in new cases across the country is that a few states are seeing just the opposite—no spikes, but some steady increases in new cases. Arizona and Wyoming have both showed 21 percent increases over two weeks, and three other states, Washington, Oregon, and Missouri, are also over 10 percent. For comparison, the country as a whole has had a 26 percent decline in new cases in two weeks. It appears increased travel, new variants, slow vaccine uptake in some areas, and abandonment of mitigation measures are accounting for these increases. Most experts expect localized outbreaks to continue for some time yet—perhaps just a county or two here and there. As we've seen across the country, new cases trend toward younger people, largely because older people have been vaccinated in such large numbers; even with this lower age profile, there has been an uptick in hospital and ICU bed utilization. It isn't panic time yet, but the trend is troubling.

We should note that we're not out of this thing yet this spring. And Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and a member of the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biologic Products Advisory Committee who has not been particularly alarmist, is suggesting we may face one more surge in cases over the upcoming winter. He thinks the magic number to prevent this scenario is 80 percent immunity in the population. That immunity can come from a combination of immunity from natural infection and from vaccination, but without that, he thinks we could have more trouble ahead. The preventive is more vaccinations and maintaining mitigation measures. I am not confident we're going to do that. I guess we'll see how it works out.

The situation in India has not improved since we last talked; it has, in fact, grown more dire. They set a new single-day new-case record today, one that completely eclipses our very worst days: 412,262 new cases. In 24 hours. Which means they're adding a million cases about every 58 hours—less than two and a half days. Think about that. It's been over two weeks since their new-case count was below 300,000, a figure we reached only twice. They're over 21 million cases now. Deaths are running almost 4000 a day; they've lost over 230,000 so far in this pandemic. No signs of abatement. This is simply awful.

The CDC has now declared B.1.617, the variant which first emerged in India, as a variant of interest. You may recall from our earlier conversation on variant designations that a variant of interest is one that has a mutation(s) that poses additional concerns about transmissibility, severity of disease, or vaccine efficacy, but one for which we do not yet have evidence in any of these categories. Once such evidence

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is available, the designation would be raised to a variant of concern; there are currently five such, B.1.1.7 (UK), P.1 (Brazil), B.1.351 (South Africa), and B.1.427 and B.1.429 (California). B.1.617 is the dominant variant in India and has also been detected in the UK, the US, and Israel, so it needs attention to determine just what characteristics it carries. If you missed our earlier discussion about classifying variants and are curious, have a look at my Update #388 posted March 17, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4531713686845002>.

We have plenty more news from Pfizer, who is currently waiting for the FDA's word on its application to extend its vaccine emergency use authorization (EUA) to children down the age of 12. They announced yesterday that they expect to apply by September for a further extension to the EUA for children down to the age of 2. I haven't seen anything on the data read-out from its pediatric clinical trials in this 2 to 11 age group, but the biggest trick is figuring out a dosage. The vaccination plan for 12- to 15-year-olds uses the same dose as for adults, but for the younger children, they are planning some adjustment to that. This is why the process is taking longer. I have to assume they're getting this sorted out, or they wouldn't be speaking so confidently about a timeline. The company also announced it plans to apply to the FDA in the next few weeks for a biologics license for its vaccine. This is the real-deal full FDA approval which would extend beyond the current emergency. EUAs are good only as long as the agency determines the emergency that precipitated the EUA in the first place still exists; a biologics license is a more permanent approval that would outlive the current emergency. This would certainly knock one more peg out from under the anti-vaxxer argument that these vaccines are "experimental" (they're not, even today) and "unproven" (they're not that either); they'd be as fully approved as all of the other medications people take every day in this country. This would make it much more viable for employers or schools and the military to require the vaccination; in fact, it seems likely the military would be one of the first organizations to do so. And that license might also help the hesitant to feel more confident of the vaccine's safety and efficacy. Understand that this final approval process would not happen fast, no matter how brilliant the product; a biologics license review is exacting and onerous, as it should be. I'm not sure how much preliminary data the FDA might have now; if they've been fed data all along, that might well speed things up in the end.

In addition to all of that, the company has also offered the FDA more data regarding storage of its vaccine. You may recall this is the one that requires those extreme low temperatures you can achieve only with an ultra-low temperature freezer, not your garden-variety (or even lab-variety) freezer that is in more common use, and can be stored under refrigerator temperatures for a maximum of five days. They are asking the FDA to approve storage under refrigeration for up to four weeks and informed reporters they are working on a modification that could be stored under refrigerator for as long as 10 weeks. That would also be a help; they're hoping to have enough data on this modified vaccine late this summer. And their phase 2 study in pregnant people is also proceeding; there should be some data some time this summer.

There is also new information arising from data out of Qatar about the performance of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine against two new variants, B.1.351 which first emerged in South Africa and P.1 which first emerged in Brazil. A paper published as a letter in the New England Journal of Medicine found it was around 75 percent effective against B.1.351, the most challenging variant to emerge thus far, especially against severe, critical, or fatal cases. While protection drops after six to eight months, there was still effectiveness at that point.

And we have a paper published yesterday in The Lancet from Israel that deals with effectiveness of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in a population. This arises from a nationwide study of vaccination in a country that has vaccinated most of its population, and shows that two doses are, as expected, far more effective than one, yielding 95.3 percent protection from infection, severe illness, hospitalization, and death. Here's the breakdown: asymptomatic infection – 97.0%; symptomatic infection – 97.2%; Covid-19-related hospitalization – 97.5%; severe or critical Covid-19-related hospitalization – 96.7%; Covid-19-related death – 96.7%. Additionally, they reported that "[i]n all age groups, as vaccine coverage increased, the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 outcomes declined." I read all of this to mean the vaccine substantially reduces transmission; that is most excellent news.

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I see that Pfizer and BioNTech announced today that they are donating vaccine doses to any Olympics and Paralympics athlete or staff member who needs them before the Games open in July. They said they will deliver the initial doses at the end of this month with a goal of getting second doses into people before they arrive in Tokyo. The International Olympic Committee has agreed to work with national Olympic committees to distribute vaccines. With cases on the rise in Japan, there has been a great deal of resistance among its population to going on with the Games this summer; in polling, something like 80 percent say they should be cancelled or postponed. Since no foreign guests will be permitted to attend, this may substantially reduce the threat created by an event like this. I guess we'll see.

Moderna also has some news for us. Still in preprint, so not peer-reviewed, they have initial data from laboratory tests of both booster shots of their original vaccine and boosters of a new modified-for-variants version, and things look good. The booster of the original vaccine increased neutralizing antibodies effective against variants, but the modified vaccine produced even higher titers of neutralizing antibodies against B.1.351 and P.1. They are also running a trial with a mixture of the two, but those data are not yet in. As we've discussed before, these new mRNA vaccines lend themselves to rapid modification to meet emerging needs, and that is what this new booster represents. We should note that a single dose of this two-dose vaccine showed only 30 percent protection against B.1.1.7, the highly-transmissible variant first identified in the UK and only 17 percent against B.1.351. That second dose is really going to matter. The FDA has indicated that a full review process will not be necessary for use of these vaccines, either in their original form or with minor modifications, as boosters. I'm not sure exactly how the process will be abbreviated, but it apparently will be abbreviated.

Moderna has also released preliminary figures from its pediatric trial in children 12 to 17 years of age. The statement says, "An initial interim analysis of our Phase 2/3 TeenCOVE study of mRNA-1273 [their name for the vaccine] showed vaccine efficacy against Covid-19 of 96% and mRNA-1273 was generally well tolerated with no serious safety concerns identified to date." This is excellent news. I would expect that, once they have the final data and analysis finished up, they'll be forwarding an application for an extension of their EUA too. More vaccines are better, and protecting children is going to be key to protecting our population as well as reducing educational disruption in this age group in the upcoming school year.

And there's a new RNA kid on the block: CureVac. This German Company has been working on RNA vaccines for years and got out of the gate early in this pandemic too, but was hampered by a lack of funding. It is enormously expensive—on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars—to develop a candidate, produce enough for study, and run clinical trials. BioNTech partnered with pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, getting the needed infusion of cash from them, and Moderna received a billion dollars from the US NIH; but CureVac took a whole lot longer to line up sufficient funding to take its vaccine to trials. They've done so now, and their candidate has an advantage over the others in that it is stable for at least three months at refrigeration temperatures and at room temperature for 24 hours. There have also been difficulties acquiring materials needed to build the vaccine; the US has invoked the Defense Production Act to prevent export of these ingredients, and CureVac doesn't have a US affiliation. They say they now have an adequate supply chain to go forward. The candidate is in phase 3 trials in Europe with a data read-out expected some time this month, as soon as the needed number of infections occurs in their trial participants. The question, of course, is whether this candidate works. We can't know until we see these data, but experts have every expectation it will be as effective as the two mRNA vaccines currently on the market. John Moore, virologist at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York who has collaborated with the company on its HIV vaccine, told the New York Times, "I would just be really surprised if it didn't work well." That seems to be the general feeling. I hope they're right; we could use another good vaccine—and another and another too. We also need the increased supply each new vaccine represents. Time will tell.

Although the pace of vaccination has slowed in the US, we're still getting a lot of vaccine into a lot of arms. We have now administered 251,973,752 of the 324,610,185 doses delivered. Around 149.5 million people, 45 percent of our population, has received at least one dose, and almost 109 million, about 33 percent, are fully vaccinated. This is a remarkable accomplishment in less than five months. We all know the hard part is still ahead, but let's stop for a moment to appreciate what has been achieved so quickly.

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We talked nearly a year ago about a company called SAB Biotherapeutics. Situated in my own South Dakota, they are using transgenic cows—cows modified with genes that permit them to make human antibodies—to produce human antibodies to SARS-CoV-2. These are polyclonal antibodies, that is, not purified all-one-kind antibodies, but the more complex mix you find in a person who's been infected. They started out on this project having already successfully induced their cows to make what are called high-neutralizing antibodies to MERS-CoV, the related virus that causes Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS); so they were working on figuring out whether antibodies to this new virus would contribute in any way to antibody-dependent enhancement (ADE), that situation where the antibodies produced actually help the virus make you sick instead of stopping it from making you sick. If you're curious about the state of things back then, check out my Update #119 posted June 21 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3702936556389390>.

At any rate, the ADE question has apparently been resolved because the company is now working with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) who is sponsoring clinical trials in Covid-19 patients. The polyclonal antibodies are viewed here as a bonus because they target more than one antigenic site on the virus which should provide some pretty good cover against emerging variants because a mutation that escapes one antibody likely wouldn't also escape all of the others being produced. By repeated administration of what is essentially a polyvalent vaccine, they have these cows producing antibody titers as much as 40 times the titers seen in convalescent serum (the treatment which was recently determined not to offer any benefit) and higher even than the already-excellent titers we're seeing in vaccinated patients. That seems quite promising.

The first doses were given a couple of weeks ago in these trials. There are two trial sites and, at each, the antibody therapy will be administered to 110 patients while other patients receive placebo. I'm thinking we should have some sort of read-out relatively soon. Because no vaccine is going to be 100 percent effective and we don't look likely to see enough people vaccinated to extinguish this virus entirely, having effective therapeutics available will continue to be important. Additionally, once we have proof of concept, this is the sort of approach which would lend itself to rather rapid modification to accommodate any emerging viruses in the future. Since we're pretty sure there will be emerging viruses in our future, this is a good thing if it proves to offer patients a benefit. The work looks promising; I'll keep an ear to the ground on this one.

A new CDC order permits cruise ship operators to begin trial voyages with volunteer passengers now. These voyages must have a minimum of 10 percent of a full cruise and must be vaccinated or certified by a physician to be not at high risk from Covid-19 and willing to be tested for the virus three to five days after the voyage ends. While I am not clear on just how these trial voyages will do so, the purpose is to do a test-run on procedures to prevent transmission, including surveillance, testing, masking, distancing, and procedures for passenger interactions, embarkation, and disembarkation.

I read a piece today from Holly Yan at CNN, one of those 10-item listicles giving 10 reasons young people should receive Covid-19 vaccine. Given well over a third of people under 35 say they don't plan to be vaccinated, I thought this might be apropos at the moment. Here's the condensed version:

(1) "Covid-19 doesn't have to kill you to wreck your life," according to Dr. Jonathan Reiner, professor of medicine and surgery at George Washington University. We're seeing long-hauler syndrome, even in young people who didn't show many symptoms when they were infected; it can last as long as a year—maybe longer. Their symptoms include respiratory difficulty, loss of taste and smell, and brain fog. We should also note that the chance of dying is low, but not zero: Almost 2400 people under 30 have died from Covid-19 in the US.

(2) Young, healthy immune systems are the sort that engage in cytokine storms. You may recall from early in the pandemic we've been talking about these events that damage tissue and can kill. A fairly frequent sequela of these storms is cardiomyopathy, damage to the heart muscle—talk about a fun-killer in a young life. (If you missed that early discussion on cytokine storms, you can check it out at my Update #39 posted April 2, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3479312205418494>.)

(3) There's no way we can stop the transmission of this virus if a third of under-35s refuse vaccine, and that leaves the entire population vulnerable. As long as this virus is circulating, it's mutating; and as long as it's



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mutating, there's a chance a variant will emerge that our vaccines don't cover. That imposes the perhaps-fatal consequences of your choice not to be vaccinated on everyone else, which is way not OK. (If you need a refresher on the linkage from transmissions to mutations to immune escape variants, see my Update #377 posted March 6, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4500262516656786>.)

(4) Getting vaccinated helps the economy. Many places have linked looser restrictions with vaccination rates and/or community transmission (which is reduced by vaccination). If you want businesses to fully reopen without disruption from outbreaks, do what you can to limit transmissions, that is, go get vaccinated.

(5) Covid-19 is expensive—medical bills, lost days at work, lingering illness costing more medical bills and lost work days. Vaccine's free.

(6) Dating apps are reporting people who are indicating they're vaccinated are getting more "likes" than people who aren't or won't say. Tinder has had over a 250 percent increase in mentions of vaccine on profiles; that would seem to indicate it's important to folks using the app.

(7) One-third of people between 18 and 25 have at least one risk factor for severe disease with Covid-19. Conditions that operate as risk factors include asthma, diabetes, heart disease, overweight or obesity, substance abuse disorder, and smoking, even e-cigarettes. Healthy folks in that age group who have no risk factors have died from Covid-19—odds are low, but it happens.

(☐ It's easier to get infected now than ever before, so even if you've been lucky so far, your streak could end. B.1.1.7 is really good at transmitting.

(9) You can give this disease to your friends and relatives, even if you never feel sick. Vaccines are not 100 percent effective, so there is a possibility you could bring it to Grandpa when you see him, even if he's been vaccinated, and if he gets it, his chance of dying is many, many times yours. Consider how it would feel to have to wonder about that at the funeral. Also, there are folks who can't get vaccinated—or who we know they're unlikely to protect: people with cancer, people with dysfunctional immune systems, people taking immunosuppressive medications. You could kill one of them too.

(10) Children cannot be protected right now. You can transmit the virus to them. Something like 11 to 15 percent of children who are infected develop long Covid with lingering, maybe permanent, health issues. You don't want to be responsible for that, do you?

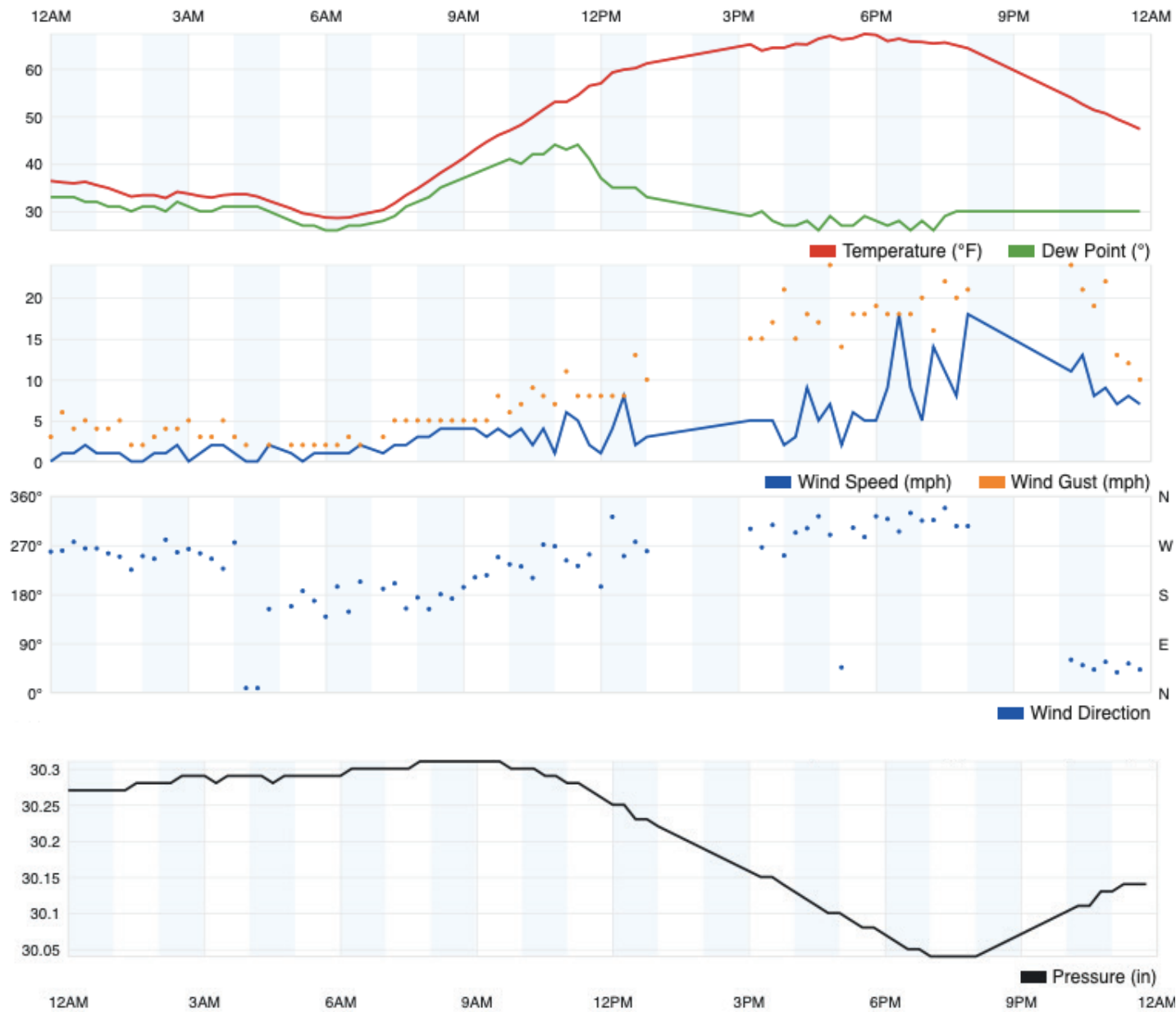
Vaccination isn't just about you; if you're young, it isn't even mostly about you. Vaccination is about all of us. This is an excellent test of our commitment to our fellow humans. I consider it a test of character. Character is important.

Be well. I'll be back in a few days.

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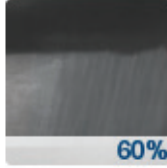

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs









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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Chance Showers then Showers	Showers Likely	Slight Chance Showers
High: 60 °F	Low: 36 °F	High: 51 °F	Low: 36 °F	High: 55 °F

## Forecast Through the Weekend

Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Windy West-River	Increasing Clouds & Windy West	Widespread Rain Showers & Windy	Scattered Rain Showers	Slow Clearing
High: 57 to 66 F	Low: 34 to 42 F	High: 43 to 55 F	Low: 33 to 38 F	High: 50 to 56 F

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Updated: 5/7/2021 3:49 AM Central

Cool temperatures are expected today, as well as for the weekend, with the opportunity for moisture mainly across western and central South Dakota.

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## Today in Weather History

May 7, 1896: A strong, estimated F3 tornado moved northeast from 12 miles SSW of Clark to 3 miles west of Watertown, to beyond Lake Kampeska. It was estimated to be on the ground for a distance of 30 miles. Near the start of the path, a woman was killed, and ten people were injured in one home. Parts of a house were found up to two miles away. The tornado also leveled barns near Watertown.

1840: A powerful tornado wrecked many boats at the Natchez Landing in Mississippi then plowed through the city on the bluff. The tornado killed 317 people and injured 109 others. The storm is currently the second deadliest tornado on record. The actual death toll could be higher as slaves were not counted.

1993: Serious flooding occurred in central Oklahoma following torrential rain and hail on this date through the 8th. Rainfall amounts on this date were generally around one inch. Oklahoma City, OK then recorded 6.64 inches of rain on the 8th, the third greatest daily rainfall amount ever observed in the city. Extensive flooding resulted, which killed four people, and the fire department had to rescue 183 others. More than 2,000 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed. Damages were estimated at \$8 million.

1989: Thirty-two cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, and 24-hour snowfall totals of 7.2 inches at Buffalo and 10.7 inches at Rochester New York were records for May.

1964 - The temperature at White Mountain 2, located in California, dipped to 15 degrees below zero to set a record for May for the continental U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thirty-one cities in the western U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Highs of 93 degrees at Portland OR and San Jose CA were the warmest of record for so early in the season. The high of 92 degrees at Quillayute WA was a record for the month of May. The temperature at Sacramento CA hit 105 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A powerful storm in the north central U.S. produced up to three feet of snow in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming and the mountains of south central Montana. Up to five inches of rain drenched central Montana in less than 24 hours, and flash flooding in Wyoming caused a million dollars damage. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thirty-two cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, and 24 hour snowfall totals of 7.2 inches at Buffalo NY and 10.7 inches at Rochester NY were records for the month of May. While northerly winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the eastern U.S., temperatures warmed rapidly in the Great Plains Region, reaching the 90s in Kansas. The temperature at Manhattan KS soared from a low of 30 degrees to a high of 88 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Gale force winds lashed the northern and central Pacific coast. A wind gust of 52 mph at Eureka CA established a record for the month of May. Strong winds over northeastern Colorado, associated with a fast moving Pacific cold front, gusted to 63 mph at Peetz. Snow developed over the northwest mountains of Wyoming late in the day, and Yellowstone National Park was whitened with 6 to 14 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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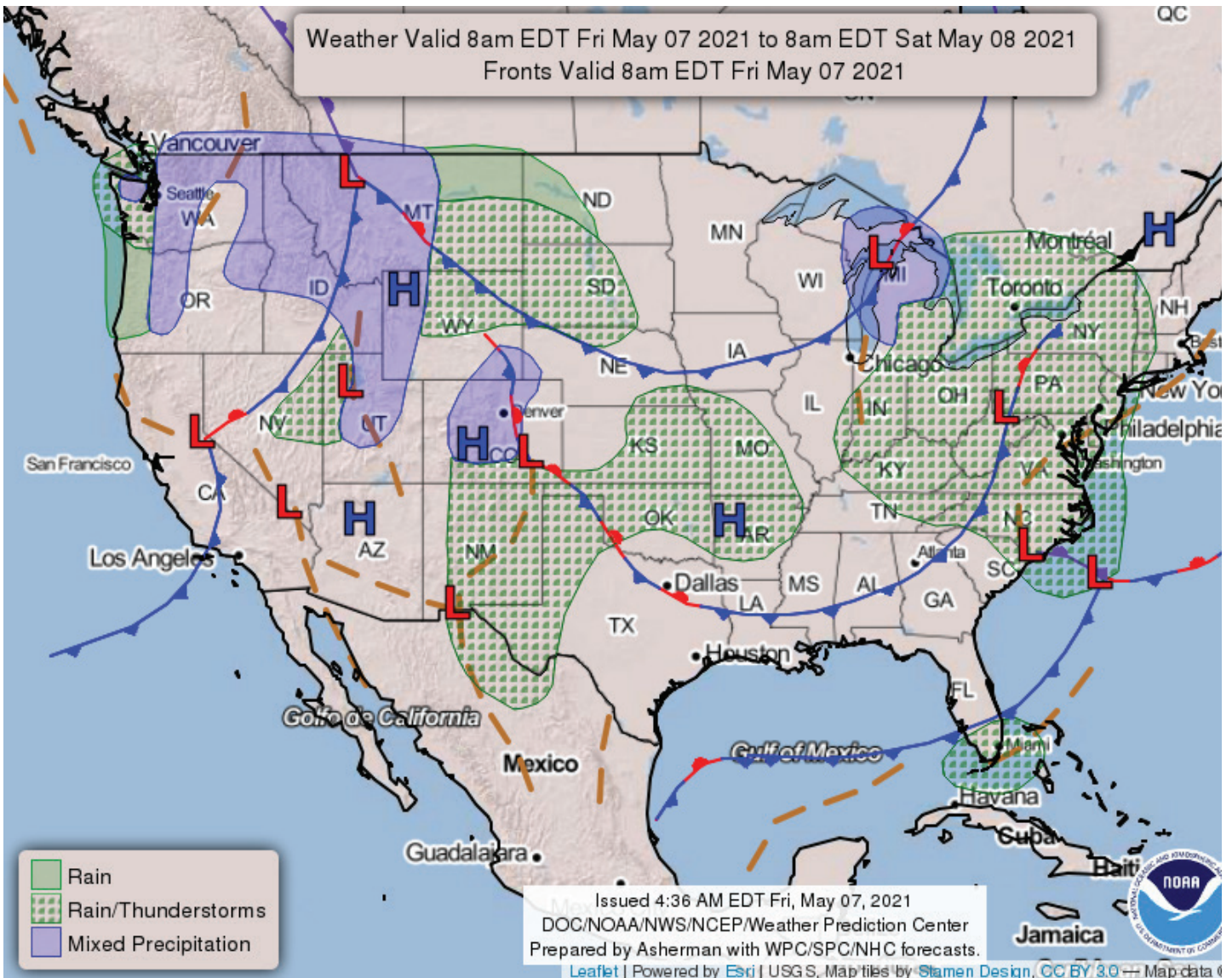
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 67.3 °F at 5:45 PM**  
**Low Temp: 28.6 °F at 6:15 AM**  
**Wind: 25 mph at 5:00 PM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 94° in 1928**  
**Record Low: 24° in 1982, 2019**  
**Average High: 67°F**  
**Average Low: 40°F**  
**Average Precip in May.: 0.65**  
**Precip to date in May.: 0.12**  
**Average Precip to date: 5.62**  
**Precip Year to Date: 2.89**  
**Sunset Tonight: 8:48 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:12 a.m.**



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## **PRAISE THE CREATOR!**

Years ago a rural farmer was driving his Model "T" into town when it stopped in the middle of a cross-road. He lifted the hood and was amazed at the wires and strange parts he had never bothered to look at previously. Confused, he walked around the car several times then got inside and tried to start it. Again and again he stepped on the starter. The engine would start, run a few seconds, and then stop. In frustration he got out once again. This time, however, he slammed the door with all his strength.

A gentleman approached him in an expertly tailored suit, white shirt and tie and said, "Sir, your carburetor is out of adjustment. May I help you?"

Puzzled at the man's appearance and offer to help, he said quickly, "What do you know about this car?"

"Oh, I know very much about it," came the reply. "I am Henry Ford, and I made your car. Since I made it, I can fix it."

God created the universe from "nothing." Man came from His creative power. Yet, when things go wrong in God's universe among those He created, we generally look to other people to fix the problem or problems. Research is initiated, heads of state meet and negotiate, and conferences are held with resolutions that only last for a short time.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will, Father, is to be done on earth as it is in heaven." It was God's plan that the planet He created would reflect His will and bring glory to His name. We know, however, that the first man and woman He created refused to follow His plan. Because of their decision all of us are affected by its results – suffering, wars, and rumors of wars.

One day we know that He will return to earth, restore His creation, and reign over His Kingdom. He will be exalted, His will done, and His purposes accomplished!

Prayer: May our hearts be encouraged, Lord, as we look forward to the day You will return and become our exalted King and You "repair" Your work. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world. Psalm

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## 2021 Community Events

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

## News from the Associated Press

### **Drought shows no signs of easing up throughout Dakotas**

By BLAKE NICHOLSON The Bismarck Tribune  
BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Extreme drought shows no signs of releasing its grip on North Dakota, despite recent cooler weather and widespread rainfall.

The latest U.S. Drought Monitor map, released Thursday, shows 85% percent of North Dakota in extreme drought, the second-worst of four categories. That's up slightly from 83% last week. Extreme drought blankets the western and central portions of the state, with most of the Red River Valley in moderate or severe drought.

"Areas of extreme drought expanded in northern South Dakota and southern North Dakota," wrote Western Regional Climate Center Associate Research Scientist David Simeral and Climate Prediction Center Meteorologist Richard Tinker.

"In northwestern South Dakota, the town of Lemmon saw its driest January-through-April period on record with only 0.71 inches of precipitation observed," they said. "The South Dakota State Extension and the North Dakota State Climate Office are both reporting drought-related impacts in their respective states, including poor water quality for livestock and dry stock ponds."

The U.S. Drought Monitor is a partnership of USDA, the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

April climate statistics from the National Weather Service show that precipitation for the Bismarck area was more than half an inch below normal. In Dickinson it was even worse -- more than an inch below normal. Temperatures for the month were just under normal, after a hot March.

The state has received widespread precipitation over the past two weeks, The Bismarck Tribune reported. "Combined with recent cooler temperatures, it has been enough to slow down drought degradation," the National Weather Service said in a drought update issued Wednesday. "However, soil moisture remains well below average across the majority of the state."

The weekly crop report from the National Agricultural Statistics Service rates 83% of topsoil in North Dakota as being short or very short of moisture, and 81% of subsoil as being in those two categories -- both up from the previous week. Ranchers' hay supplies were rated 54% short or very short, and stock water supplies were 74% in those categories, also higher over the week.

Gov. Doug Burgum earlier this month declared a statewide disaster. The State Water Commission has reactivated the Drought Disaster Livestock Water Supply Project Assistance Program. The state Agriculture Department has reactivated the Drought Hotline and interactive hay map. For more information, go to [www.swc.nd.gov](http://www.swc.nd.gov) and [www.nd.gov/ndda](http://www.nd.gov/ndda).

The tinder-dry conditions across the state have led to more than 800 wildfires scorching nearly 80,000 acres -- 8 1/2 times the number of acres that burned in all of 2020, according to Beth Hill, acting outreach and education manager for the North Dakota Forest Service. Burned areas total four times the square mileage of Bismarck.

All but four of North Dakota's 53 counties have some form of outdoors burning restrictions in place. Much of central and eastern North Dakota was in the "very high" fire danger category on Thursday, with the eastern half of the state under a red flag warning from the National Weather Service for "critical" fire weather conditions -- warm temperatures, low humidity and wind gusting to 40 mph.

The overly dry conditions are likely to persist or worsen through the summer, according to the National Weather Service. The agency's precipitation outlook for the May-July period shows a low probability of even normal precipitation in North Dakota, and the three-month outlook for late summer shows a high probability of below-normal precipitation for the entire state.

"At this point it would take an extended period of above-normal rainfall to bring the region back to near-normal hydrologic conditions," the weather service said. "Crops across the region face greater-than-



normal uncertainty as normal to below-normal rains may still see crops struggle, as there is not enough soil moisture to allow crops to thrive in the absence of regular rainfall.”

## Medicaid expansion group loses ballot timeline challenge

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Supreme Court has rejected an effort by Medicaid supporters to challenge a constitutional amendment that would make it more difficult to expand the federal program to more people in need.

The ruling Wednesday is the latest setback for the Medicaid expansion group, Dakotans for Health, in a series of back-and-forth tussles with the Legislature. The group wants South Dakota voters to pass a constitutional amendment in November 2022 to make Medicaid health insurance available to people who live below 133% of the federal poverty level.

But the Legislature this year proposed its own constitutional amendment that would require ballot initiatives such as the proposed Medicaid expansion to meet a 60% vote requirement if they introduce or adjust taxes, or spend more than \$10 million in any of the five years after enactment.

Constitutional amendments must be approved by a majority of voters and ordinarily would appear in the November general election. But lawmakers, with an eye on the Medicaid expansion vote, pushed their constitutional amendment proposal onto next June’s primary election ballot, when fewer voters are expected to take part.

Democrats and some Republicans have criticized the resolution as an “unfair” move to head off ballot initiative campaigns already in progress. Nonetheless, the resolution passed.

Dakotans for Health filed a petition in March with the Secretary of State to challenge the Legislature’s action through a popular vote in the November 2022 election — a move that would have postponed the vote on the proposed constitutional amendment and ensured Medicaid expansion needed a simple majority to pass. But the Secretary of State rejected the petition, reasoning that the Legislature’s proposal — known as House Joint Resolution 5003 — cannot be challenged at the ballot as if it was a law.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday unanimously ruled in support of that decision.

“HJR 5003 is not a law enacted by the Legislature, and as a result, there is nothing in HJR 5003 to refer to the electors at the November 2022 general election,” wrote Chief Justice Steven Jensen.

The ruling means voters will consider the Legislature’s constitutional amendment in the June 2022 primary election. If it is approved, the Medicaid expansion ballot initiative will face a 60% vote threshold to pass later that year.

Rick Weiland, the co-founder of Dakotans for Health, said the Legislature’s resolution was a political maneuver that sets a poor precedent, but given the legal defeat, the group will focus its efforts on mounting an opposition campaign in the June 2022 primary election.

“We’re not going to disarm and call it good,” he said. “We’re just going to double down and move forward.”

Weiland said the Medicaid expansion proposal would help up to 42,500 people who often scrape by, struggling to pay for health care. It would also make the state eligible to receive more federal funds for Medicaid. But conservative lawmakers have argued that voters who want to pass laws that spend government funds should face a similar hurdle for approval to what the Legislature faces. They are required to get a two-thirds majority for bills that spend funds or raise taxes.

## Charges upgraded for defendants in Christmas Eve slaying

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Charges have been upgraded for the defendants accused in a Christmas Eve slaying in Rapid City.

Court documents say 31-year-old Vernall Marshall was shot twice in the back on Dec. 24, 2020 after the defendants set up a fake drug buy so they could attack Marshall for allegedly sending inappropriate text messages to a teen related to one of the four accused in the crime.

The alleged shooter, Elias Richard, was originally charged with second-degree murder and is now charged

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with first-degree murder.

Kaleb Lukkes, Clint Marshall, who is not related to the victim, and Masheka Barnett were originally charged with aiding and abetting first-degree robbery.

Lukkes and Clint Marshall are now charged with aiding and abetting the murder, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Richard and Lukkes are both 21-year-olds from Rapid City while Clint is a 20-year-old from Sioux Falls. If convicted, they will face the death penalty or life in prison without the chance of parole.

Barnett, a 42-year-old Rapid City woman, is now charged with aiding and aggravated assault and faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted.

All of the robbery-related charges have been dismissed.

The four defendants, who are all in jail, are scheduled to be arraigned on their new charges on May 17. It was not clear if each had an attorney who could speak on their behalf.

## FullSpeed Automotive® Completes Five New Acquisitions in April

GREENWOOD VILLAGE, Colo.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--May 6, 2021--

FullSpeed Automotive, one of the nation's largest franchisors and operators of automotive aftermarket repair facilities, announced today that it completed five separate acquisitions in April, adding a total of 10 new automotive maintenance and repair centers to its portfolio. Since being acquired by MidOcean Partners in November 2020, FullSpeed Automotive has acquired 17 new centers and now has over 650 franchised and company-owned locations.

The five acquisitions were completed in five different states as part of the company's overall strategy to expand by acquiring strong performing independent automotive service centers. Centers were acquired and will be rebranded as Grease Monkey® centers in Rapid City, SD, Eau Claire, WI, Chippewa Falls, WI, Roy, UT, Locust Grove, GA, and Montgomery, TX.

"We are excited to bring these centers into the FullSpeed Automotive family, as the previous owners did a tremendous job in building strong businesses with a loyal guest following," said Kevin Kormondy, Chief Executive Officer of FullSpeed Automotive. "We welcome the opportunity to speak with other independent shop owners who may be evaluating the current economic and tax uncertainty and are considering a sale, as FullSpeed Automotive has the resources and expertise to move quickly to close transactions."

Billy Cannon, previous owner of four Super Lube Plus centers in Rapid City, SD, complimented FullSpeed Automotive on its acquisition process.

"Working with the FullSpeed team was a very efficient and smooth process," Cannon said. "They moved quickly, and kept their word as we finalized terms."

## Pressure rises for India lockdown; surge breaks record again

By NEHA MEHROTRA and ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faced growing pressure Friday to impose a strict nationwide lockdown, despite the economic pain it will exact, as a startling surge in coronavirus cases that has pummeled the country's health system shows no signs of abating.

Many medical experts, opposition leaders and even Supreme Court judges are calling for national restrictions, arguing that a patchwork of state rules is insufficient to quell the rise in infections.

Indian television stations broadcast images of patients lying on stretchers outside hospitals waiting to be admitted, with hospital beds and critical oxygen in short supply. People infected with COVID-19 in villages are being treated in makeshift outdoor clinics, with IV drips hanging from trees.

As deaths soar, crematoriums and burial grounds have been swamped with bodies, and relatives often wait hours to perform the last rites for their loved ones.

The situation is so dramatic that among those calling for a strict lockdown are merchants who know their businesses will be affected but see no other way out.

"Only if our health is good, will we be able to earn," said Aruna Ramjee, a florist in the southern Indian

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city of Bengaluru. "The lockdown will help everyone, and coronavirus spread will also come down."

The alarming picture has gripped the world's attention, just as many developed countries are seeing vaccinations drive down infections and are beginning to open up. India's surge has served as a warning to other countries with fragile health systems — and also has weighed heavily on global efforts to end the pandemic since the country is a major vaccine producer but has been forced to delay exports of shots.

Infections have swelled in India since February in a disastrous turn blamed on more contagious variants as well as government decisions to allow massive crowds to gather for religious festivals and political rallies. On Friday India reported a new daily record of 414,188 confirmed cases and 3,915 additional deaths. The official daily death count has stayed over 3,000 for the past 10 days.

That brings the total to more than 21.4 million COVID-19 infections and over 234,000 deaths. Experts say even those dramatic tolls are undercounts.

Over the past month, nearly a dozen of India's 28 federal states have announced some restrictions, but they fall short of a nationwide lockdown imposed last year that experts credit with helping to contain the virus for a time. Those measures, which lasted two months, included stay-at-home orders, a ban on international and domestic flights and a suspension of passenger service on the nation's extensive rail system.

The government provided free wheat, rice and lentils to the poorest for nearly a year and also small cash payments, while Modi also vowed an economic relief package of more than \$260 billion. But the lockdown, imposed on four hours' notice, also stranded tens of millions of migrant workers who were left jobless and fled to villages, with many dying along the way.

The national restrictions caused the economy to contract by a staggering 23% in the second quarter last year, though a strong recovery was under way before infections skyrocketed recently.

Some who remember last year's ordeal remain against a full lockdown.

"If I had to choose between dying of the virus and dying of hunger, I would choose the virus," said Shyam Mishra, a construction worker who was already forced to change jobs and start selling vegetables when a lockdown was imposed on the capital, New Delhi.

Modi has so far left the responsibility for fighting the virus in this current surge to poorly equipped state governments and faced accusations of doing too little. His government has countered that it is doing everything it can, amid a "once-in-a-century crisis."

Amid a shortage of oxygen, the Supreme Court has stepped in. It ordered the federal government to increase the supply of medical oxygen to New Delhi after 12 COVID-19 patients died last week after a hospital ran out of supplies for 80 minutes.

Three justices called on the government this week to impose a lockdown, including a ban on mass gatherings, in the "interest of public welfare."

Dr. Randeep Guleria, a government health expert, said he believes that a total lockdown is needed like last year, especially in areas where more than 10% of those tested have contracted COVID-19.

Rahul Gandhi, an opposition Congress party leader, in a letter to Modi on Friday, also demanded a total lockdown and government support to feed the poor, warning "the human cost will result in many more tragic consequences for our people."

As the world watches India with alarm, some outside of its borders have joined the calls. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States' top infectious disease expert, suggested that a complete shutdown in India may be needed for two to four weeks.

"As soon as the cases start coming down, you can vaccinate more people and get ahead of the trajectory of the outbreak of the pandemic," Fauci said in an interview with the Indian news channel CNN News18 on Thursday.

Still, Modi's policy of selected lockdowns is supported by some experts, including Vineeta Bal, a scientist at the National Institute of Immunology. She said different states have different needs, and local particularities need to be taken into account for any policy to work.

In most instances, in places where health infrastructure and expertise are good, localized restrictions at the level of a state, or even a district, are a better way to curb the spread of infections, said Bal. "A

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centrally mandated lockdown will just be inappropriate," she said.

Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, a public-private consultancy, acknowledged that the intensity of the pandemic was different in each state, but said a "coordinated countrywide strategy" was still needed.

According to Reddy, decisions need to be based on local conditions but should be closely coordinated, "like an orchestra which plays the same sheet music but with different instruments."

## Red meat politics: GOP turns culture war into a food fight

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Conservatives last week gobbled up a false news story claiming President Joe Biden planned to ration red meat. Colorado Rep. Rep. Lauren Boebert suggested Biden "stay out of my kitchen." Texas Gov. Greg Abbott tweeted out a headline warning Biden was getting "Up in your grill."

The news was wrong — Biden is planning no such thing — but it was hardly the first time the right has recognized the political power of a juicy steak. Republican politicians in recent months have increasingly used food — especially beef — as a cudgel in a culture war, accusing climate-minded Democrats of trying to change Americans' diets and, therefore, their lives.

"That is a direct attack on our way of life here in Nebraska," Gov. Pete Ricketts, a Republican, said recently.

The pitched rhetoric is likely a sign of the future. As more Americans acknowledge the link between food production and climate change, food choices are likely to become increasingly political. Already, in farm states, meat eating has joined abortion, gun control and transgender rights as an issue that quickly sends partisans to their corners.

"On the right, they are just going for the easiest applause line, which is accusing the left of declaring war on meat. And it's a pretty good applause line," said Mike Murphy, a Republican consultant. "It's politically effective, if intellectually dishonest."

Ricketts was among the first to seize on the issue in recent months. In March, the governor — whose state generated \$12 billion from livestock and meat products last year — slammed his Colorado counterpart, Democratic Gov. Jared Polis, for suggesting Coloradans lay off the red meat one day as a way of cutting back on greenhouse gas emissions.

Republican Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds followed Ricketts' comments quickly, claiming in a campaign fund-raising email, "Democrats and liberal special interest groups are trying to cancel our meat industry."

In her weekly column a few weeks later, Republican Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa blasted "everyone from out-of-touch politicians to Hollywood elites" as leading the left's "war on meat."

But the issue blew up last week after a Daily Mail news story — debunked within 24 hours — suggested the Biden administration could ration how much red meat Americans can consume as part of its goal to slash greenhouse gas pollution.

During the story's short life, conservative figures pilloried Biden's apparent invasion into America's dining room.

While the story was false, there's little doubt the livestock industry is a contributor to climate change.

A 2019 Environmental Protection Agency report noted agriculture was responsible for 10% of all greenhouse gas emissions, a quarter of which is emitted by livestock before they are butchered.

There are signs that Americans may be adjusting their diets out of concern for climate change. About a quarter of Americans reported eating less meat than they had a year earlier, according to a 2019 Gallup poll, chiefly for health reasons but also out of environmental concerns. About 30% of Democrats polled said they were eating less meat, compared to 12% of Republicans.

For some, it's hard to imagine Americans abandoning beef and easy to see its power as a political symbol, said Chad Hart, an Iowa State University agriculture economist.

Americans don't get overly sentimental about barns crammed with chickens or thousands of hogs, but few images are as quintessentially American as cattle grazing over rolling hills.

"When you think about American food, beef is what is in the center of that plate," Hart said. "And that's

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likely to remain a national identity when it comes to what an American food plate looks like.”

To be sure, food isn't new to culture war politics.

First lady Michelle Obama was attacked as intrusive by conservatives for championing higher nutritional standards in school lunches.

As a presidential candidate in 2007, Barack Obama was accused of food elitism when he asked a group of Iowa farmers whether they had seen the price of arugula at Whole Foods, an upscale grocery chain that had not yet made it to Iowa. Obama still won the state's caucuses.

Even more famously, Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was pilloried by Republicans as far out of touch with rural America in the midst of the 1980s farm crisis when he suggested Iowa farmers consider diversifying crops by planting Belgian endive.

That prompted GOP vice presidential nominee Dan Quayle to hold up a head of endive, a green used in salads, to show a crowd in Omaha “just how the man from Massachusetts thinks he can rebuild the farm economy.”

In the past, food was a way of painting Democrats as out of touch with rural America. Today, the message is about climate and the economy.

There is a growing movement to discourage meat-eating and a massive market for meat replacement foods. The Green New Deal, a sweeping environmental outline championed by liberal New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, calls for a sharp reduction in livestock production.

Biden has called the plan an “important framework” but has not endorsed it.

As these policies remain only plans for now, Republicans complaining about them have offered little substance with their claims of a war on meat.

Still, Republicans have looked for ways to signal which side they're on. In April, Ernst introduced a bill that would bar federal agencies from setting policies that ban serving meat to employees.

Ricketts declared “Meat on the Menu Day” in March and came back Wednesday to name all of May “Beef Month.”

These efforts do little to address the beef industry's substantial problems, including a backlog in slaughterhouses stemming from the pandemic, drought and the high cost of feed.

And a spokesperson for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association kept her distance from the food fight.

“When emotions and rhetoric run high on either side of the political aisle, NCBA remains focused on achieving lasting results,” said spokesperson Sigrid Johannes.

## **Packed trains, drinking: Japanese impatient over virus steps**

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Trains packed with commuters returning to work after a weeklong national holiday. Frustrated young people drinking in the streets because bars are closed. Protests planned over a possible visit by the Olympics chief.

As the coronavirus spreads in Japan ahead of the Tokyo Olympics starting in 11 weeks, one of the world's least vaccinated nations is showing signs of strain, both societal and political.

The government — desperate to show a worried public it is in control of virus efforts even as it pushes a massive sporting event that a growing number of Japanese oppose hosting in a pandemic — on Friday announced a decision to expand and extend a state of emergency in Tokyo and other areas through May 31.

For Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, the emergency declaration is both a health measure and a political tightrope walk as domestic criticism rises of Japan's seeming determination to hold the Olympics, at any cost.

A speculated mid-May visit by International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach has become “extremely difficult” because of the extension of the emergency, Olympic Minister Seiko Hashimoto admitted at a news conference Friday.

Japan has avoided implementing a hard lockdown to curb infections, and past states of emergency have had little teeth, with people and businesses free to ignore the provisions. These measures have since been

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toughened, but they come as citizens show increased impatience and less desire to cooperate, making it possible that the emergency declaration will be less effective.

The current state of emergency in Tokyo and Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures in the west was scheduled to end Tuesday. Suga said his government has decided to extend it in those areas and expand it to Aichi in central Japan and Fukuoka in the south.

On Friday, two days after "Golden Week" holiday makers returned to their daily routine, Tokyo logged 907 new cases of coronavirus infections, up sharply from 635 when the state of emergency began in the capital last month, but far above the target of 100 that some experts recommend.

Officials and experts say significantly fewer people may have been tested for the virus during the holiday, when many testing centers and hospitals were closed, and caution the numbers during and right after the holiday period may not reflect reality.

During the holidays, significantly more people than last year were seen at tourist spots in Kyoto and Nara despite stay-at-home requests. With drinking places closed, younger people carrying canned beer and snacks gathered in parks and streets in downtown Tokyo. When the holiday ended, many defied requests for remote work and returned to their offices on packed trains.

The extension deepens uncertainties over a speculated May 17 visit by International Olympics Committee President Thomas Bach, and whether Japan can safely host the Olympics postponed from last year and currently scheduled for July 23-Aug. 8.

Despite criticism for being slow to take virus measures, Suga has been reluctant to hurt the already pandemic-damaged economy and pledged to keep the state of emergency "short and intensive," though experts said just over two weeks would be too short to effectively slow the infections.

The ongoing emergency is Japan's third and came only a month after an earlier measure ended in the Tokyo area.

Less stringent, quasi-emergency measures will be expanded to eight prefectures from the current six, where bars and restaurants are required to close early.

Japan has had about 616,000 cases including about 10,500 deaths since the pandemic began.

Medical systems in hardest-hit Osaka have been under severe pressure from a COVID-19 outbreak there that is hampering ordinary health care, experts say. A number of patients died at home recently after their conditions worsened while waiting for vacancies at hospitals.

Past emergency measures authorized only non-mandatory requests. The government in February toughened a law on anti-virus measures to allow authorities to issue binding orders for nonessential businesses to shorten their hours or close, in exchange for compensation for those who comply and penalties for violators.

Shutdown requirements will be eased somewhat. Bars, karaoke studios and most other entertainment facilities will be required to remain closed until the end of May, but department stores will be able to operate for shorter hours and stadiums and concert halls will be allowed to have up to 5,000 people or half their capacity.

Wearing masks, staying home and other measures for the general public remain non-mandatory requests.

The government has also been criticized over its snail-paced vaccination rollout, which has fully covered less than 1% of the population since inoculations began in mid-February.

## Doctors in Nepal warn of major crisis as virus cases surge

By BINAJ GURUBACHARYA Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — Across the border from a devastating surge in India, doctors in Nepal warned Friday of a major crisis as daily coronavirus cases hit a record and hospitals were running out of beds and oxygen.

Nepal reported 9,070 new confirmed cases on Thursday, compared to 298 a month ago. The number of fatalities also reached its highest with 58 on Wednesday and 54 on Thursday, for a total of 3,529.

"Right now there are no beds available today in any hospital that is treating COVID patients," said Dr.

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Jyotindra Sharma, chief of Hospital for Advanced Medicine & Surgery in Kathmandu. "Even if any beds were made available, there is a huge scarcity of oxygen and we are not at the peak of this crisis."

At the hospital, one of the leading facilities in Nepal for treating COVID-19 patients, extra beds were crammed to accommodate more people. They've all been taken and the only way to get admitted is through a waiting list.

"In the extreme situation, people could be dying in the streets," Sharma said, adding it's "just not possible to immediately increase the capacity of the hospitals."

At the government-run Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital, several COVID-19 patients were lying in beds set up on the veranda and hooked to oxygen cylinder. They're the lucky ones. Others were turned away because there's not enough space or equipment.

"We are under-prepared, under-resourced, and under-capacitated to perform any thing that is expected," said Dr. Bishal Dhakal, who has been working with coronavirus patients since the beginning of the pandemic.

A lockdown was imposed last month in major cities and towns, and Nepal this week stopped both domestic and international flights.

The government has pledged several times to increase the number of hospital beds and boost the treatment and preventive measures. However, there has not been any significant change.

Nepal began its vaccination campaign in January with 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca shots donated by India, but it had been suspended because of India's refusal to allow exports as its crisis worsened.

The vaccination resumed when China donated 800,000 doses, and Nepal is negotiating with Russia for supplies of the Sputnik V shots.

## Big US job gain expected, if employers found enough workers

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — With viral cases declining, consumers spending again and more businesses easing restrictions, America's employers likely delivered another month of robust hiring in April, reinforcing the economy's steady rebound from the pandemic recession.

Economists have forecast that the nation added 975,000 jobs last month, according to a survey by FactSet, after adding 916,000 in March, and that the unemployment rate slipped from 6% to 5.8%. The size of such job gains was essentially unheard-of before the pandemic.

The government will issue the April jobs report at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time Friday.

Yet most of the hiring represents a bounce-back after tens of millions of jobs were lost when the pandemic flattened the economy 14 months ago. Even if economists' estimate for April hiring proves accurate, the economy would remain about 7 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level.

At the same time, optimism about a sustained recovery is rising. Americans are, on average, flush with cash, thanks in part to \$1,400 stimulus checks that have gone to most adults and to savings that many affluent households managed to build up during the pandemic. Fueled by that extra money, Americans are buying more homes and cars, boosting restaurant and retail sales and filling more airline seats.

And most economists expect outside job growth to continue in the coming months as vaccinations are widely administered and trillions in government aid spreads through the economy. Even if another uptick in COVID-19 cases were to occur, analysts don't expect most states and cities to reimpose tough business restrictions. Oxford Economics, a consulting firm, predicts that a total of 8 million jobs will be added this year, reducing the unemployment rate to a low 4.3% by the final three months of 2021.

"We do believe that the jobs recovery will remain robust throughout the rest of this year," said Nela Richardson, chief economist for payroll provider ADP.

Some economists say they think last month's hiring gain may turn out even stronger than forecasts suggest. The number of people seeking unemployment aid each week declined by roughly 200,000 from mid-March to mid-April, when the government collected its data for the April jobs report. That's a larger drop than occurred in March. And a survey of executives in services firms, such as health care, financial services and restaurants, found that hiring picked up last month from March's already-strong level.

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The Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion rescue package, approved in early March, has helped maintain Americans' incomes and purchasing power, much more so than in previous recessions. The economy expanded at a vigorous 6.4% annual rate in the first three months of the year. That pace could accelerate to as high as 13% in the April-June quarter, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

Still, one unusual factor might have kept a lid on job growth in April: Some employers would have hired more workers, if only they could find them. There have been complaints from businesses — notably restaurants, bars and hotels as well as some manufacturing and construction companies — that the economy is recovering so fast that there aren't enough applicants to fill their open jobs. One government report last week showed that wages and benefits rose at a solid pace in the first quarter, suggesting that some companies are having to pay more to attract and keep employees.

The number of open jobs is now significantly above pre-pandemic levels, though the size of the labor force — the number of Americans either working or looking for work — is still smaller by about 4 million people.

At the same time, the recovery remains sharply uneven: Most college-educated and white collar employees have been able to work from home over the past year. Many have not only built up savings but have also expanded their wealth as a result of rising home values and a record-setting stock market.

By contrast, job cuts have fallen heavily on low-wage workers, racial minorities and people without college educations. In addition, many women, especially working mothers, have had to leave the workforce to care for children.

Michelle Meyer, an economist at Bank of America, said that about 1.5 million people are still avoiding the job market because they fear becoming infected by the coronavirus, according to government data. As vaccinations continue to be administered, that number should keep falling.

Biden's relief package also added \$300 to weekly unemployment benefits. Meyer calculated that for people who earned under \$32,000 a year at their previous job, current unemployment aid pays more than their former job did — a reality that could keep up to 1 million people out of the workforce. In addition, higher stock prices and home values might have led up to 1.2 million older Americans to retire earlier than they otherwise would have.

Still, some economists say employers will have to offer higher pay to draw more people back into the job market.

"It's really all about what wages will entice or lure people back," Richardson said.

## Personal ties: Harris' family in India where COVID rages

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — G. Balachandran turned 80 this spring — a milestone of a birthday in India, where he lives. If not for the coronavirus pandemic, he would have been surrounded by family members who gathered to celebrate with him.

But with the virus ravaging his homeland, Balachandran had to settle for congratulatory phone calls. Including one from his rather famous niece: Vice President Kamala Harris.

The retired academic said he cannot have such an elaborate function during a Zoom interview Thursday from his home in New Delhi.

Harris' uncle says he spoke with the vice president and her husband, Doug Emhoff, for quite a while. To close out the conversation, Harris assured him she'd take care of his daughter — her cousin — who lives in Washington.

"Don't worry, Uncle. I'll take care of your daughter. I talk to her quite a lot," Balachandran recalls Harris telling him in their March conversation.

It was the last time they had a chance to speak. Since then, the coronavirus has raged out of control in India, overwhelming the nation's health care system and killing hundreds of thousands of people.

While the crisis in India has created diplomatic and humanitarian challenges for the Biden administra-



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tion, for Harris it is also personal: Her mother was born there, and she's spoken emotionally throughout her political career about the influence of her many visits to India as a child.

On Friday, she's set to deliver remarks at a State Department event focused on the effort to combat COVID-19 in India, and she's expected to express U.S. solidarity with the nation.

Speaking at a fundraiser for the Indian nongovernmental organization Pratham in 2018, Harris talked about walking hand-in-hand with her grandfather, P.V. Gopalan, and listening to him speak with friends about the importance of a free and equal democracy.

"It was those walks on the beach with my grandfather on Besant Nagar that have had a profound impact on who I am today," she said.

She spoke often on the campaign trail about her late mother, Shyamala Gopalan, a headstrong and resilient woman who bucked tradition and decided to leave India to pursue a career as a scientist at the University of California, Berkeley.

And during her acceptance speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Harris opened her speech with a shout-out to her "chithis" — a Tamil word for aunt. One of those chithis, Sarala Gopalan, is a retired obstetrician who lives in Chennai.

As a child, Harris used to visit India every other year. Now all that remains of her extended family there are her aunt and uncle. Another Indian-born aunt lives in Canada.

Balachandran said that while he used to hear about friends of friends getting the virus, now it's hitting close to home. Those he knows personally or worked with are getting the virus, and some are dying.

"The conditions are pretty bad in India," he said.

Balachandran considers himself one of the lucky ones, as he's retired and largely stays home alone, leaving only occasionally for groceries, so that "nobody can infect me other than myself."

His sister Sarala is the same, he says, and has largely isolated herself in her apartment in Chennai to avoid exposure. Both are fully vaccinated, something he knows is a luxury in India, which has suffered from a severe vaccine shortage.

That shortage is part of what prompted criticism in India of what many saw as an initially lackluster U.S. response to a humanitarian crisis unfolding in the nation over the past month. The U.S. initially refused to lift a ban on exports of vaccine manufacturing supplies, drawing sharp criticism from some Indian leaders.

When COVID-19 cases in India started to spin out of control in April, there were calls for other countries — particularly the U.S. — to get involved. While a number of countries, including Germany, Saudi Arabia and even India's traditional foe Pakistan, offered support and supplies, U.S. leaders were seen as dragging their feet on the issue.

The White House had previously emphasized the \$1.4 billion in health assistance provided to India to help with pandemic preparedness and said when asked that it was in discussions about offering aid.

The delay in offering further aid was seen as putting a strain on long-standing close diplomatic relations between the two nations, and on April 25, after receiving scrutiny over the U.S. response, a number of top U.S. officials publicly offered further support and supplies to the nation — including a tweet and a call to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi from President Joe Biden himself.

Harris' niece in California, Meena Harris, has retweeted a half-dozen accounts calling for more aid to India, including one from climate activist Greta Thunberg admonishing the global community to "step up and immediately offer assistance."

Harris' office declined to comment for this article.

The U.S. announced it would lift the export ban on vaccine manufacturing supplies and said it would send personal protective equipment, oxygen supplies, antivirals and other aid to India to help the nation combat the virus.

The administration gets no criticism from S.V. Ramanan, a temple administrator of the Shri Dharma Sastha Temple in Harris' Indian grandfather's hometown Thulasendrapuram in Southern Tamil Nadu state, 215 miles (350 kilometers) from the coastal city of Chennai.

"Everyone has their priorities. America also passed through something similar and we helped then. Now they are helping us," he said.

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Ramanan added that he didn't expect that having Harris as vice president fast-tracked aid to India or that it somehow meant help should have come earlier, adding: "I think in general all other countries should help, and I'm glad the U.S. has stepped up."

He hopes Harris can make a visit to her ancestral village when things are better.

While Harris has embraced her Indian heritage as part of her political profile, in responding to the crisis there she's been careful to speak from the perspective of a vice president rather than an Indian American worried about her family's safety.

"We are all part of a world community. And to the extent that any of us, as human beings who have any level of compassion, see suffering anywhere around the world, it impacts all of us. You know, it impacts us all," she told reporters last week in Ohio.

A ban on travel to and from the country was announced that day. Harris said only that she hadn't spoken to her family since the ban was announced.

And G. Balachandran, Harris' uncle, doesn't fault his niece for how the U.S. response has played out.

He said that, knowing Kamala, "she would have done all that she can in order to expedite the matter."

For now, he's content with the occasional phone call from his niece. When the two talk, it's mostly about family; he doesn't share much about current affairs in India because, he joked, "she's got a whole embassy that's sending her cables every hour on all of India!"

But he does hope to visit the vice president's residence in Washington at the Naval Observatory when he can travel again. Balachandran said he'd like to meet Biden again and remind him that the last time they met was when Biden was vice president and swore in Harris as a U.S. senator.

"I wish we could all be together at the same time," he said of the extended family, "but that's a big wish to look for at this moment."

## India's disaster hangs over countries facing COVID-19 surges

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SOHAG, Egypt (AP) — Countries worldwide wrestling with new coronavirus surges are trying to ensure they aren't hit by an India-style disaster. They face many of the same risks, including large populations that have shirked restrictions and fragile health systems shaken under the strain.

In a province along the Nile in southern Egypt, hospitals have been flooded with COVID-19 patients, a main hot spot in a third spike swelling across the country. Doctors in Sohag province warn the health system there could collapse, even as the government rushes in new supplies.

"My estimate is that there is no family in Sohag that does not have a corona case," said Dr. Mahmoud Fahmy Mansour, head of the province's doctors' union. "We lost five physicians in one week."

He said a scenario like India was a possibility, but "God willing, it is a very far possibility."

Long reluctant to impose new lockdowns, Egypt's government announced its strictest restrictions in months on Wednesday. It ordered cafés, restaurants, stores and malls to close at 9 p.m. and banned large gatherings for two weeks, as well as shutting down beaches and parks during the upcoming Eid el-Fitr holiday at the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Egypt isn't alone in seeing mounting new infections. Worldwide, more cases have been reported in the past two weeks than in the entire first six months of the pandemic, World Health Organization director general Tedros Adhanom said.

India and Brazil accounted for a large part of that, "but there are many other countries all over the world that face a very fragile situation," he said. "What is happening in India and Brazil could happen elsewhere unless we all take these public health precautions."

India has been hit by a catastrophic surge of COVID-19 infections after its prime minister boasted of vanquishing the pandemic and following multiple massive crowding events. New cases and deaths skyrocketed nearly 30-fold during March and April. The health system has been overwhelmed, leaving patients desperate for oxygen and other supplies.

Wealthier nations, as they immunize more of their populations, are finding room to open up. But countries

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where vaccination has been slow or minimal face grimmer prospects. They must grapple with whether to lock down to thwart new surges and risk damaging their economies — all with the possibility of an India-style tragedy looming.

In Turkey, new cases surged nearly six-fold from the beginning of March, reaching a peak of more than 60,000 a day. The government imposed a three-week national lockdown on April 29 but exempted many sectors, allowing millions to keep going to work.

Numbers have fallen, but medical experts are calling for a 28-day full closure of all non-essential services, while only some 10 million of its more than 80 million people have been fully vaccinated.

"These restrictions were not the restrictions we called for," said Vedat Bulut, secretary-general of the independent Turkish Medical Association.

In Egypt, average daily new cases have doubled since early February to just over 1,000 a day and continue to rise, compared to earlier peaks of 1,400 to 1,600 a day last summer and in December, according to official numbers.

The scope of the pandemic has been difficult to judge in the country of 100 million, most of whom live in densely packed cities along the Nile. Official figures report 234,015 cases, including 13,714 dead — considered a significant undercount like elsewhere in the world.

In Sohag province, health workers have grown desperate. One doctor who chairs a major hospital there said the real figures are likely 10 times the Health Ministry rate of 400-450 new cases a week.

"The ministry is like an ostrich burying its head in the sand," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

Mustafa Salem, a Sohag lawmaker, said he has received dozens of calls from people desperate to find ventilators or intensive care unit beds.

When Ismail Abdallah fell ill last month, his family rushed him to a clinic, where without being tested he was told it was pneumonia.

Two days later, the 50-year-old farmer and father of seven had trouble breathing. At the hospital, he was confirmed with COVID-19, and his family scrambled to find a bed in packed ICUs.

"There were no available beds in the free ward," said a relative, Amr Mahrous. "We struggled to find a bed in the paid ward."

After two weeks in isolation at a hospital, Abdullah died last week.

The Health Ministry has beefed up facilities in the province, sending oxygen generators and ventilators and increasing the number of ICUs. It deployed more physicians and doubled medical teams to follow up with those isolated at home. Two vaccination centers have been set up and more are planned, and 100 teams mobilized to raise awareness.

The Health Ministry listed Sohag among five hot spots in the country — including Cairo, a metropolis of some 20 million people.

Health officials attribute the new spike to widespread ignoring of precautions. Throughout Egypt, mask wearing and social distancing are rare. Some cafes still serve waterpipes, shared among customers, despite government bans. Wedding parties and funerals still take place, and people crowd into marketplaces.

In Islamic Cairo, the capital's historic center, families go to communal prayers during the holy month of Ramadan. Tens of thousands gather at night in the bazaar's narrow streets, shopping or sitting in cafes. Few wear face masks.

Hajah Fatima, 57, came from the southern province of Beni Sueif with her family and had "iftar," the meal ending the daytime fast, in a café next to the revered Al-Hussein Shrine.

"It's a custom," she said. "Corona? Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed."

So far, more than 1 million people, or just 1% of Egypt's population, have been vaccinated, Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouly said Wednesday.

In the crowded Palestinian enclave of the Gaza Strip, home to 2 million people, cases have risen swiftly. In March and April, infection rates surpassed 1,000 a day — the number Gaza previously recorded weekly. Daily deaths have doubled to a high of 20. The virus has killed more than 900 Gazans and sickened over

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102,000, more than half of them this year.

"Hospitals are struggling to cope," the international aid group Doctors Without Borders warned this week. The territory's Hamas rulers closed mosques and restaurants and imposed a nighttime curfew at the beginning of Ramadan to slow the outbreak. But it decided to lift those restrictions for the final 10 days of the holy month, alarming health officials.

"We are concerned by the large-scale easing of the measures," said Rami Abadllah, head of epidemiology at the Health Ministry.

Amid concerns over India, Kenya, which is coming down from a recent peak, halted flights with the country for two weeks, while Nigeria suspended flights with India, Brazil and Turkey, fearing new virus strains could come in as it tries to bring down cases, particularly in Lagos, home to some 20 million people.

In South Africa, with by far the largest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Africa, officials warn of a new surge as the Southern Hemisphere's winter approaches.

Pakistan is in the midst of a third wave, with single-day fatalities hitting their highest of the entire pandemic on April 28, with 201 deaths.

Health officials added hundreds more hospital beds. Oxygen production had already been nearly doubled to 800 tons a day compared to last year. Still, at the surge's peak in recent weeks, it was using 90% of that production.

New cases have eased slightly this week from a running average of around 6,000 a day.

"Thank God, we have so far managed to cope with this huge increase because of proactively building capacity of the entire system," Planning and Development Minister Asad Umar said.

But he warned the country of more than 200 million could face an India-level disaster unless people adhere to precautions that have been widely ignored. The government has rejected calls for a lockdown but warns that could change.

"Be careful. For yourself, and your loved ones," he said in a tweet.

## EU leaders attend summit in person for 1st time this year

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

LISBON, Portugal (AP) — On the list of things not to do during a pandemic, holding big international gatherings is close to the top.

But European Union leaders and their large following of diplomats and advisers are meeting in Portugal on Friday for two days of talks, sending a signal that they see the threat from COVID-19 on their continent as waning, amid a quickening vaccine rollout.

Their talks hope to repair some of the damage the coronavirus has caused in the bloc, in such areas as welfare and employment. In a late addition to their agenda, EU leaders will also discuss Thursday's U.S. proposal to share the technology behind COVID-19 vaccines to help speed the end of the pandemic.

The leaders will also take part in an unprecedented meeting, via videoconference, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose country needs more help with a devastating virus surge — and who can smooth the path to an elusive bilateral trade deal.

Like across much of the world, COVID-19 forced high-level political talks to move online over the past year in Europe. This is the 27-nation bloc's first face-to-face summit in five months, after an exceptional meeting in Brussels last December to discuss post-pandemic spending. Another in-person summit, in Brussels, is planned for later this month.

EU leaders appear keen to "try and convey a sense of normalcy, of slowly returning to normal," says Antonio Barroso, a political analyst at Teneo, a global advisory firm.

That is a key consideration for southern EU countries like Portugal, Spain and Greece, where tourism is an economic mainstay.

Despite a slow start to its inoculation drive, the EU this week passed the milestone of 150 million vaccinations and reckons it can reach what it calls "sufficient community immunity" in two months' time. The European Commission proposes relaxing restrictions on travel to the bloc this summer.

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Who can move around, when and where remains a sensitive question for Europeans, however. Pandemic improvements have been uneven across the continent, and many Europeans remain subject to irksome restrictions. In a political nod to those concerns, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte won't travel to Portugal.

And as a reminder of the risks, Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela won't be attending because he is in quarantine after his wife tested positive on Wednesday.

Pandemic fundamentals remain unchanged: those attending the summit must show negative PCR tests for COVID-19, while social distancing and mask-wearing are required.

The summit will make a splash in the picturesque Atlantic coast city of Porto, with a population of just over 200,000. Most of the city's hotels have been shut since last spring due to COVID-19, and local gripes about streets being overcrowded with tourists now seem a distant memory.

With the pandemic exposing inequalities and bringing greater hardship in the bloc, the talks in Porto will initially look at how to ensure EU citizens are guaranteed their rights in such areas as employment support, gender equality and social services.

"COVID has taken the covers off and shown the gaps" in care, says Laura Rayner, a policy analyst at the European Policy Centre, a Brussels-based think tank.

"So many people, through no fault of their own, have found themselves requiring some support," she said.

"There's certainly more awareness on the street" of the need for a social safety net and "it would be naïve of politicians to ignore that," she added.

The EU is looking for endorsement in Porto of three headline targets: an EU employment rate of at least 78%, at least 60% of adults attending training courses every year, and reducing the number of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million people, including 5 million children.

The push for social safeguards, largely led by center-left EU governments, has caused some tension within the bloc. Last month, 11 governments welcomed the Porto effort but warned central EU authorities against meddling in national policies — a clash of interests that has long dogged the bloc.

On Saturday, the leaders will hold an online summit with India's Modi covering trade, climate change and help with India's COVID-19 surge. Some EU countries have already sent medicine and equipment to India.

India and the EU spent six years trying to negotiate a free trade deal before giving up in 2013. Among the thorny issues were vehicle parts and digital privacy.

Plans for a face-to-face EU-India summit in Porto fell through after Modi canceled his trip due to the pandemic, but it is the first time an Indian leader will participate in a meeting with all the EU's leaders.

## Some Republicans worry voting limits will hurt the GOP, too

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

As Republicans march ahead with their campaign to tighten voting laws in political battlegrounds, some in their party are worried the restrictions will backfire by making it harder for GOP voters to cast ballots.

The restrictions backed by Republicans in Georgia, Florida, Iowa, Texas and Arizona often take aim at mail voting, a method embraced by voters from both parties but particularly popular with older voters. The new rules, concerned Republicans note, may be billed as adding security or trust in elections but ultimately could add hurdles for key parts of the GOP coalition.

"The suppression tactics included in this bill would hurt the Republican Party as much or more than its opposition," Texas state Rep. Lyle Larson, a Republican, said in an opinion column this week. "One can only wonder — are the bill authors trying to make it harder for Republican voters to vote?"

On Thursday, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a wide-ranging voting bill, making his state the latest to tighten its election rules, while lawmakers in GOP-controlled Texas debated new limits on voting well into the night. The push for new restrictions comes even though former President Donald Trump won both states last year and Republican officials touted their elections as fair and efficient. Critics charge the effort is meant to make it harder for Democrats to vote.

But some of the impact is likely to be bipartisan. The Texas proposals add new restrictions on early

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voting and prohibit county officials from sending ballot request forms to all registered voters. Until last year, it was Republicans who were more likely to cast mail ballots than Democrats were. In 2016, 40% of mail ballots were cast by people who had voted in a GOP primary, compared to 27% cast by Democratic primary voters.

In Arizona, thousands of GOP voters could find themselves no longer automatically receiving ballots in the mail under a proposal that would remove infrequent voters from a permanent voting list.

Florida's new law requires voters to request their mail ballots every two years, rather than every four. Critics of the idea argue that could lower voter turnout in off-year elections, when already far fewer voters cast ballots.

Any changes to mail voting in Florida is certain to affect older voters.

"Anything that makes it harder for people to cast their vote will have an oversized impact on seniors," said Florida state Sen. Jeff Brandes, a Republican who voted against the bill.

He noted that many older adults live in his Pinellas County district: "I don't think many of them understand the broader implications of this legislation yet. I don't think many legislators understood it as it was going through the process."

Republicans in other states are pressing ahead. In Ohio, another Republican-dominated state, a bill introduced Thursday would restrict placement of drop boxes, eliminate a day of early voting and tighten voter ID requirements.

In general, Republican supporters argue the changes will have minimal impact on voters and are aimed at boosting public confidence.

"It's going to remain really easy to vote after this legislation is signed into law," Iowa state Rep. Bobby Kauffman told colleagues in urging them to support his proposal that was signed into law in March. "This bill protects Iowans' right to vote, and it adds certainty and security to it."

Republican lawmakers have zeroed in on mail voting rules this year after a notable shift in voting patterns in the November election resulted in more Democrats casting mail ballots in a few key states.

That followed a year in which Republican voters heard repeatedly from Trump that mail voting was insecure and rife with fraud despite any evidence. The pandemic also drove core Democratic constituencies to mail voting to avoid crowded polling places.

It remains to be seen whether this trend will hold as pandemic restrictions ease and people return to pre-pandemic voting behaviors. In the past, especially in places like Florida, that's meant more Republicans voting by mail.

"When you restrict access by reducing opportunities for voters, you are suppressing the vote for all voters," said Adrian Fontes, a Democratic former chief elections official in Maricopa County, Arizona. "Many of the restrictions being proposed by Republicans are effectively a product of their ignorance of the voting habits of their own constituents."

In Iowa, 76% of eligible voters cast ballots last November, among the highest rates in the nation, as Republicans swept races up and down the ballot. Trump easily won the state in what had been expected to be a close race, Republican Joni Ernst won reelection to the U.S. Senate, and Republicans flipped two U.S. House seats with no major problems or fraud reported.

And yet state lawmakers approved several changes to election laws, including a new statewide deadline for mail ballots that could mean an increase in the number of ballots rejected for arriving late. Previously, mail ballots were counted in Iowa as long as they were postmarked the day before the election and received by noon the following Monday.

If the new Election Day deadline had been in effect last November, it would have meant more ballots from registered Republicans tossed out: at least 689 compared to 649 Democratic ballots and 616 unaffiliated ones, according to a review of state data.

That combined with a new shortened period of just 20 days for when clerks can send out ballots means rural residents who prefer to vote by mail will have a narrow window to receive their ballots, fill them out and send them back. In 2020, this period spanned 29 days — a reduction from 40 days in 2016.

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All this will undoubtedly affect rural parts of the state, where mail service is typically slower.

"Smaller rural counties have a large elderly population who typically choose to vote absentee because of weather or health concerns. Why are we making it harder for them to vote?" Rebecca Bissell, a Republican and the county elections commissioner in Adams County, asked lawmakers in February.

In Florida, Republicans have long held an advantage in mail voting. In 2016, about 940,000 more Republicans voted by mail. But last November, Florida Democrats outvoted Republicans by about 680,000 mail ballots amid a record 4.8 million total mail ballots cast. Trump still ended up carrying the state by about 3 percentage points.

DeSantis, in signing the bill during a live broadcast of "Fox & Friends," praised it as "the strongest election integrity measures in the country" and said tighter restrictions were needed on drop boxes to protect the security of the votes.

Voting rights groups say Republicans are counting on the motivation and privilege of their own voters to overcome any hurdles they may face, leaving poor and minority voters to bear the brunt of these restrictions.

Mac Stipanovich, a longtime Republican operative who has since left the party, said there's a risk that new elections rules in Florida could end up having other, unintended consequences.

"There's also the possibility that by appearing to intentionally try to keep poor people of color from voting, you will incense them, and you'll get exactly the reaction you didn't want," Stipanovich said.

## China trade surges as global demand recovers from pandemic

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China's trade with the United States and the rest of the world surged by double digits in April as consumer demand recovered, but growth appeared to be slowing.

Global exports rose 32.3% over a year ago to \$263.9 billion, in line with March but down from the explosive 60.6% rise in the first two months of 2021, customs data showed Friday. Imports increased 43.1% to \$221.1 billion, accelerating from March's 38.1% expansion.

China's trade gains look especially dramatic due to comparison with a year ago, when global economies shut down to fight the coronavirus. Forecasters say growth is flattening out once that distortion and seasonal fluctuations are taken into account.

Despite the jump in April's headline figures, exports are leveling off "and the rebound in imports stalled," Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report. "Demand is probably close to a cyclical peak."

The trade outlook is overshadowed by a tariff war with Washington and surveys that show April growth in export orders weakened. President Joe Biden has yet to say what he might do about reviving talks aimed at ending the trade war.

On the domestic front, economic output in the three months ending in March grew only 0.6% from the previous quarter, showing China's explosive rebound was abruptly slowing. That suggests growth in Chinese demand for iron ore, consumer goods and other imports will cool.

Chinese manufacturers of smartphones, cars, consumer electronics and other goods also are hampered by global shortages of processor chips as industries revive following the pandemic.

April exports to the United States rose 30.8% over a year ago to \$42 billion despite tariff hikes that stayed in place after Beijing and Washington agreed to a truce in their trade war last year. Imports of American goods rose 23.5% to \$13.9 billion despite Chinese tariff hikes.

China's global trade surplus narrowed by 5% to \$42.8 billion, a sign Chinese demand is recovering faster than in the rest of the world. Its politically volatile surplus with the United States widened by 33.4% to \$28.1 billion.

Exports to the 27-nation European Union rose 23.9% over a year ago to \$39.9 billion while imports gained \$43.3% to \$26.8 billion. China's trade surplus with Europe narrowed by 3% to \$13.1 billion.

Exporters benefited from the early reopening of China's economy and demand for masks and other medical supplies while some governments are re-imposing anti-virus curbs that limit business and trade.

The latest Chinese import figures also are inflated by the rise in global prices for iron ore and other

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commodities. That can make imports look bigger while the amount of goods holds steady or declines.

In the four months through April, Chinese exports jumped 44% over a year earlier to \$973.7 billion. Imports rose \$31.9 billion to \$815.8 billion.

## Asian American health workers fight virus and racist attacks

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Medical student Natty Jumreornvong has a vaccine and protective gear to shield her from the coronavirus. But she couldn't avoid exposure to the anti-Asian bigotry that pulsed to the surface after the pathogen was first identified in China.

Psychiatry patients have called her by a racist slur for the disease, she said. A bystander spat at the Thai-born student to "go back to China" as she left a New York City hospital where she's training.

And as she walked there in scrubs Feb. 15, a man came up to her, snarled "Chinese virus," took her cellphone and dragged her on a sidewalk, said Jumreornvong, who reported the attack to police. The investigation is ongoing.

For health care workers of Asian and Pacific Islander descent, "it seems like we're fighting multiple battles at the same time — not just COVID-19, but also racism," says Jumreornvong, a student at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have faced a tide of harassment and attacks in many settings during the pandemic. But those in health care are feeling the particular, jarring anguish of being racially targeted because of the virus while toiling to keep people from dying of it.

"People in my community have gone from being a health care hero to, somehow, a scapegoat," said Dr. Michelle Lee, a radiology resident in New York. She rallied 100 white-coat-clad medical workers in March to denounce anti-Asian hate crimes.

"We're not bringing you the virus," said Lee, who recalls strangers on the street spitting on her twice in the last year. "We are literally trying to help you get rid of the virus."

People of Asian and Pacific Islander descent make up about 6% to 8% of the U.S. population but a greater share of some health care professions, including around 20% of non-surgeon physicians and pharmacists and 12% to 15% of surgeons, physical therapists and physician assistants, according to federal statistics.

Before the pandemic, studies found that 31% to 50% of doctors of Asian heritage experienced on-the-job discrimination ranging from patients refusing their care to difficulty finding mentors. That's a lower proportion than Black physicians, but higher than Hispanic and white doctors, according to a 2020 study that reviewed existing research. In a separate 2020 study of medical residents, all those of Asian heritage said patients had quizzed them about their ethnicity.

Columbia University medical student Hueyjong "Huey" Shih recalls being confronted with "a lot of assumptions, all boiled into one very inappropriate question" from a colleague in a hospital: Was Shih an only child because of China's former one-child policy?

The Maryland-born Shih, whose family hails from Taiwan, said the colleague apologized after being set straight. Writing in the health news site Stat, he and medical students Jesper Ke and Kate E. Lee implored health institutions to include Asian Americans' and Pacific Islanders' experiences in anti-racism training.

For generations, Asian Americans have contended with being perceived as "perpetual foreigners" in a country with a history of treating them as threats. Officials wrongly blamed San Francisco's Chinatown for an 1870s smallpox outbreak, barred many Chinese immigrants under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and forced Japanese Americans into internment camps even as tens of thousands of their relatives served in the U.S. military during World War II.

During the pandemic, former President Donald Trump repeatedly called COVID-19 the "China virus" and by other terms that activists say fanned anger at Asian Americans.

Police reports of anti-Asian hate crimes in 26 big U.S. cities and counties shot up 146% last year, while hate crimes overall rose 2%, according to California State University, San Bernardino's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. The advocacy group Stop AAPI Hate fielded nearly 3,800 reports of assault, ha-



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rassment and discrimination from mid-March 2020 through the end of February — before a gunman killed eight people, including six of Asian heritage, at Atlanta-area massage businesses in March.

The statistics don't break out health care workers among the victims.

The escalation "makes racism seem a lot scarier than the virus" to Dr. Amy Zhang, an anesthesiology resident at the University of Washington's hospitals.

"It's a constant fear. You never know when you're going to get targeted," she says.

Early in the pandemic, she came face-to-face with the risk of COVID-19 while intubating patients. And face-to-face with racism when a white man on the street muttered a vulgarity at her about China and "giving us smallpox," then started following her while yelling racial epithets and sexual threats until she got inside the hospital, she said.

"Despite the fact that I clawed myself out of poverty to chase the American dream, despite the fact that I can and have saved lives under stressful conditions, none of this protects me from racist vitriol," Zhang wrote in Crosscut, a Pacific Northwest news site. She's a daughter of Chinese immigrants who worked long hours for low wages.

These days, New York physician assistant student Ida Chen carries pepper spray all the time, sets her cellphone to let all her friends know her location and doesn't roam far alone. For a time, she hid the roots of her dark brown hair under a hat so only the dyed blonde ends would show.

She started taking those precautions after a man biked up to her on a Manhattan street in March 2020 and sneered that he'd be "into you, but I don't want to get the coronavirus," then followed her while hollering slurs until she called 911, she said.

"I went into medicine thinking: I treat people with the best intention possible," said Chen, who has Chinese heritage. "It hurts that someone's not reciprocating that kind of empathy and good intentions."

Chen and some others say the Georgia shootings propelled them to speak out about what they see as longtime minimization of anti-Asian racism.

"The whole reason I became a doctor is to help my community," says Lee, a daughter of South Korean immigrants with no other physicians in the family. "If I don't speak up for my community, what have they sacrificed — done everything they've done — for?"

Jumreornvong, who identifies as queer, said she had experienced discrimination before. But it felt different to be targeted because of her race, and in a country where she pictured the American dream as trying "to make it a better place for everyone and yourself."

"For a moment, I was a little pessimistic about whether or not the people want me here," she said. But she focused on how colleagues rallied around her, how the hospital expressed support, how patients have shown appreciation for her work.

"I still do believe in the best of America," she said.

## Sheriff: Girl shoots 3 at Idaho school; teacher disarms her

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A sixth-grade girl brought a gun to her Idaho middle school, shot and wounded two students and a custodian and then was disarmed by a teacher Thursday, authorities said.

The three victims were shot in their limbs and expected to survive, officials said at a news conference. Jefferson County Sheriff Steve Anderson says the girl pulled a handgun from her backpack and fired multiple rounds inside and outside Rigby Middle School in the small city of Rigby, about 95 miles (145 kilometers) southwest of Yellowstone National Park.

A female teacher disarmed the girl and held her until law enforcement arrived and took her into custody, authorities said, without giving other details. Authorities say they're investigating the motive for the attack and where the girl got the gun.

"We don't have a lot of details at this time of 'why' — that is being investigated," Anderson said. "We're following all leads."

The girl is from the nearby city of Idaho Falls, Anderson said. He didn't release her name.

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Police were called to the school around 9:15 a.m. after students and staffers heard gunfire. Multiple law enforcement agencies responded, and students were evacuated to a nearby high school to be reunited with their parents.

"Me and my classmate were just in class with our teacher — we were doing work — and then all of a sudden, here was a loud noise and then there were two more loud noises. Then there was screaming," 12-year-old Yandel Rodriguez said. "Our teacher went to check it out, and he found blood."

Yandel's mom, Adela Rodriguez, said they were OK but "still a little shaky" from the shooting as they left the campus.

Both of the students who were shot were being held at the hospital, and one of them might need surgery, said Dr. Michael Lemon, trauma medical director at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center.

Still, both students were in fair condition and could be released as early as Friday. One of the students had wounds in two limbs and might have been shot twice, he said.

"It's an absolute blessing" that they weren't hurt worse, Lemon said. The adult was treated and released for a bullet wound that went through an extremity, the doctor said.

Schools would be closed districtwide to give students time to be with their families, and counselors would be available starting Friday, said Jefferson School District Superintendent Chad Martin.

"This is the worst nightmare a school district could ever face. We prepare for it," Martin said, "but you're never truly prepared."

Police tape surrounded the school, which has about 1,500 students in sixth through eighth grades, and small evidence markers were placed next to spots of blood on the ground.

"I am praying for the lives and safety of those involved in today's tragic events," Gov. Brad Little said in a statement. "Thank you to our law enforcement agencies and school leaders for their efforts in responding to the incident."

Lucy Long, a sixth-grader at Rigby Middle School, told the Post Register newspaper in Idaho Falls that her classroom went into lockdown after they heard gunshots, with lights and computers turned off and students lined up against the wall.

Lucy comforted her friends and began recording on her phone, so police would know what happened if the shooter came in. The audio contained mostly whispers, with one sentence audible: "It's real," one student said.

Lucy said she saw blood on the hallway floor when police escorted them out of the classroom.

Jefferson County Prosecutor Mark Taylor said decisions about criminal charges wouldn't be made until the investigation is complete but that they might include three counts of attempted murder.

The attack appears to be Idaho's second school shooting. In 1999, a student at a high school in Notus fired a shotgun several times. No one was struck by the gunfire, but one student was injured by ricocheting debris from the first shell.

In 1989, a student at Rigby Junior High pulled a gun, threatened a teacher and students, and took a 14-year-old girl hostage, according to a Deseret News report. Police safely rescued the hostage from a nearby church about an hour later and took the teen into custody. No one was shot in that incident.

## With ambassador picks, Biden faces donor vs. diversity test

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

President Joe Biden is facing a fresh challenge to his oft-repeated commitment to diversity in his administration: assembling a diplomatic corps that gives a nod to key political allies and donors while staying true to a campaign pledge to appoint ambassadors who look like America.

More than three months into his administration, Biden has put forward just 11 ambassador nominations and has more than 80 such slots to fill around the globe. Administration officials this week signaled that Biden is ready to ramp up ambassador nominations as the president prepares for foreign travel and turns greater attention to global efforts to fight the coronavirus.

Lobbying has intensified for more sought-after ambassadorial postings — including dozens of assignments

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that past presidents often dispensed as rewards to political allies and top donors. Those appointments often come with an expectation that the appointees can foot the bill for entertaining on behalf of the United States in pricey, high-profile capitals.

But as he did with the assembling of his Cabinet and hiring top advisers, Biden is putting a premium on broadening representation in what historically has been one of the least diverse areas of government, White House officials say.

"The president looks to ensuring that the people representing him — not just in the United States, but around the world — represent the diversity of the country," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters this week.

Presidents on both sides of the aisle have rewarded donors and key supporters with a significant slice of sought-after ambassadorships. About 44% of Donald Trump's ambassadorial appointments were political appointees, compared with 31% for Barack Obama and 32% for George W. Bush, according to the American Foreign Service Association. Biden hopes to keep political appointments to about 30% of ambassador picks, according to an administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk about internal discussions.

Most political appointees from the donor class, a small population that's made up of predominantly white men, have little impact on foreign policy. Occasionally, they have been the source of presidential headaches.

Trump's appointees included hotelier and \$1 million inaugural contributor Gordon Sondland, who served as chief envoy to the European Union. Sondland provided unflattering testimony about Trump during his first impeachment, which centered on allegations Trump sought help from Ukrainian authorities to undermine Biden ahead of the 2020 presidential election. Sondland was later fired by Trump.

Trump donor-turned-envoy Jeffrey Ross Gunter left locals in relatively crime-free Reykjavik, Iceland, aghast over his request to hire armed bodyguards. In Britain, Ambassador Robert "Woody" Johnson faced accusations he tried to steer golf's British Open toward a Trump resort in Scotland and made racist and sexist comments.

In 2014, the American Foreign Service Association called for new guidelines to ensure that ambassadors meet certain qualifications for top diplomatic posts after a series of embarrassing confirmation hearings involving top Obama fundraisers. At least three of Obama's nominees — for Norway, Argentina and Iceland — acknowledged during confirmation hearings that they had never been to the nations where they would serve.

Another big Obama donor, Cynthia Stroum, had a one-year tour in Luxembourg that was fraught with personality conflicts, verbal abuse and questionable expenditures on travel, wine and liquor, according to an internal State Department report.

So far, Biden has made two political appointments — retired career foreign service officer Linda Thomas-Greenfield for U.N. ambassador and Obama-era Deputy Labor Secretary Christopher Lu for another ambassadorial-ranked position at the U.N. Thomas-Greenfield is Black, and Lu, who is awaiting Senate confirmation, is Asian American.

His other nine nominees are all longtime career foreign service officers, picked to head up diplomatic missions in Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Cameroon, Lesotho, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Somalia and Vietnam.

Jockeying for ambassadorial positions started soon after Biden was elected and has only heated up as administration officials have signaled that the president is looking to begin filling vacancies ahead of his first overseas travel next month.

Cindy McCain, the widow of Republican Sen. John McCain and a longtime friend of the president and first lady Jill Biden, is under consideration for an ambassadorial position, including leading the U.N. World Food Program. Rahm Emanuel, the former Chicago mayor, Illinois congressman and Obama chief of staff, is in contention to serve as ambassador to Japan after being passed up for the role of transportation secretary, according to people familiar with the ongoing deliberations who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters.

Biden is also giving close consideration to former career foreign service officer Nicholas Burns, who

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served as undersecretary of state under George W. Bush and as U.S. envoy to Greece and NATO, to become ambassador to China. Thomas Nides, a former deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration, and Robert Wexler, a former Democratic congressman from Florida, are under consideration for ambassador to Israel.

The White House declined to comment about any of the potential picks.

Of the 104 diplomats currently serving or nominated for ambassador-level positions, 39 are women and 10 are people of color, according to the Leadership Council for Women in National Security, a bipartisan group of national security experts.

A group of more than 30 former female U.S. ambassadors, in an open letter organized by the Leadership Council and Women Ambassadors Serving America, urged Biden to prioritize gender parity in his selections for ambassadorships and other high-level national security positions.

"As you build out your diplomatic leadership, we hope you will pay attention to growing allies within the U.S. government who will also focus upon the diversity America's representatives to the world should demonstrate," the former ambassadors told Biden.

During the transition, Reps. Veronica Escobar and Joaquin Castro, both Texas Democrats, wrote a joint letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging the administration to address the "persistence of grave disparities in racial and ethnic minority representation in the Foreign Service."

To that end, the State Department last month appointed veteran diplomat Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley as its first chief diversity and inclusion officer. Abercrombie-Winstanley will be the point person in a department-wide effort to bolster recruitment, retention and promotion of minority foreign service officers.

Blinken, in announcing her appointment, noted "the alarming lack of diversity at the highest levels of the State Department" during the Trump administration, but said the issue runs much deeper.

"The truth is this problem is as old as the department itself," he said.

As a candidate, Biden declined to rule out appointing political donors to ambassadorships or other posts if he was elected. But he pledged his nominees would be the "best people" for their posts.

"Nobody, in fact, will be appointed by me based on anything they contributed," Biden promised.

Ronald Neumann, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, Algeria and Bahrain, said Biden's team has made progress in the early going in diversifying the upper ranks of the State Department.

He pointed to the nomination of Donald Lu, a career foreign service officer, as the next assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia and Brian A. Nichols to be the top envoy for Latin America. Nichols would be the first Black assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs since the late 1970s; Lu is Asian American.

In addition, the State Department's chief spokesperson, Ned Price, is the first openly gay man to serve in that role. His principal deputy, Jalina Porter, is the first Black woman in that job.

"I think the administration is finding a good balance of experienced, accomplished career foreign service officers coming from diverse backgrounds," said Neumann, who heads the American Academy of Diplomacy.

Finding good picks from Biden's donor class, however, might be trickier, Neumann said, adding, "I don't know how you go about finding competent, big donors from a pool that might be limited in diversity."

## In booting Cheney, 'My Kevin' leads GOP back to Trump

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Kevin McCarthy is leading his party to an inflection point, preparing to dump Rep. Liz Cheney from the No. 3 House leadership position and transform what's left of the party of Lincoln more decisively into the party of Trump.

The GOP leader argues that ousting Cheney has less to do with her very public criticism of the former president's lies about his 2020 election loss to President Joe Biden than her inability to set aside personal convictions and do her job. As conference chair responsible for communicating a unified party message, Cheney has lost the confidence of rank-and-file lawmakers, he said this week.

But in tossing aside Cheney, the daughter of the former vice president and as close as it gets to GOP

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royalty, and promising a “big tent” to win back power, McCarthy is hollowing out a cadre of lawmakers intent on governing while he is elevating the people and personalities most loyal to Donald Trump. In one stroke, he is amplifying the former president’s false claims about the election and seeking to mend his own tattered relationship with Trump, reasserting himself as Trump’s man in the House.

It’s a transformational moment for McCarthy, who resurrected his political career by attaching himself to Trump — who called him “My Kevin” — and is now on a glidepath to become House speaker, second in line to the presidency, if Republicans win control in next year’s elections.

“There’s a complete changing of the guard here,” said Adam Brandon, president of the conservative FreedomWorks, a tea party group aligned with Trump’s rise.

“This started as one thing and morphed into something else: It’s about the future.”

The vote as soon as next week is expected to be decisive, showing the power of Trump’s reach, particularly on McCarthy. The GOP leader initially criticized Trump’s actions after the 2020 election, saying he “bears responsibility” for the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, the most serious domestic assault on the building in its history.

Five people died after Trump encouraged loyalists to “fight like hell” as Congress was certifying his defeat to Biden. In a private call during the insurrection, McCarthy had urged Trump to call off the rioters, only to face the president’s rebuke.

“The saddest day I have ever had” in Congress, McCarthy said that night, even as he joined 138 other House Republicans in voting to overturn Biden’s win.

McCarthy stood by Cheney when she faced a February challenge for leading 10 House Republicans to vote to impeach Trump for his role in the insurrection. McCarthy argued that the House GOP needed to stay united against newly empowered Democrats, and she easily survived.

But in between the lines, McCarthy was also considering the optics of the moment, according to Republicans who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private vote. Booting Cheney so soon after the riot would be a bad look for the party, especially when House Republican leaders were also encouraging a unified vote of support for newly elected Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Trump ally who faced reprimand from Democrats over her conspiracy-laden social media rants.

The GOP leader counseled Cheney to stay on message, but as she continued to warn the party off Trump’s falsehoods, he groomed a newly transformed Trump acolyte, Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., as her replacement. Like McCarthy, she is raising millions of dollars for the GOP as a Trump defender.

A last straw was Cheney’s press conference at the House GOP’s retreat in Florida last month when Cheney criticized Trump anew and broke with McCarthy to back a bipartisan commission fully focused on investigating the Capitol attack.

“The American people need to know how we got to Jan. 6 — people need to be held accountable,” she said.

In an essay in Wednesday’s Washington Post, she warned colleagues, “History is watching.”

McCarthy, who has jetted to Trump’s private club at Mar-a-Lago to win back the former president’s support, had already changed his own tune, now saying he did not believe the former president had provoked the Jan. 6 insurrection.

Trump has made clear he wants Cheney out. During an event with the conservative Freedom Caucus at Mar-a-Lago ahead of the House GOP retreat, Trump told lawmakers that Cheney and other “RINOs,” including Senate leader Mitch McConnell and Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, must go, according to two Republicans who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private remarks. RINO refers to those considered insufficiently loyal or conservative — Republicans in name only.

In private calls with lawmakers, Trump had expressed similar displeasure with McCarthy, too, according to one of the Republicans.

“It’s not like the ‘My Kevin’ days,” the Republican aide said.

Never fully supported by GOP’s far right flank, the California Republican has labored to win over the party’s conservatives by embracing Trump and giving the former president’s allies a seat at the table in House leadership.

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McCarthy was among the first Republicans in Congress to endorse Trump's presidential campaign and quickly became a close confidant and late-night telephone buddy, often fielding his calls in view of reporters in the Capitol.

In many ways, McCarthy had bridged the party's path to the Trump era years earlier. He recruited the tea party class of Republicans who seized control of the House in the 2010 midterm elections, newcomers who shut down the government during hardball fiscal fights with then-President Barack Obama.

Underestimated by Democrats as a legislative lightweight, without a House Speaker Nancy Pelosi-style resume of committee work and policy chops to pass bills, McCarthy revels in outperforming expectations, steadily rising to the top GOP leadership position.

But McCarthy has always had other would-be leaders on his heels. After the Freedom Caucus led by Mark Meadows forced former Speaker John Boehner into early retirement, McCarthy withdrew his own bid to become speaker in 2015. The gavel slipped away again after Speaker Paul Ryan retired and Republicans lost House control in 2018.

McCarthy has faced potential challenges from conservative Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., the GOP whip in charge of counting votes, though the two are more friendly rivals now, as well as from Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, the de facto leader of the swelling conservative ranks and another Trump confidant.

Jordan said McCarthy has done what the others failed to do — bring the Freedom Caucus and conservatives into the fold. While Boehner punished what he sometimes called the "knuckleheads," and Ryan simply ignored them, McCarthy showers the far right with face time and rank. He made Jordan the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, the perch he used to defend Trump from impeachment.

"He's going to become the speaker if we take back the House," Jordan said in an interview Thursday.

McCarthy, who declined to respond to an interview request, has said he wants House Republicans to focus their attention against Democrats, not on internal party rifts.

Without Cheney, he may have fewer dissenters to contend with.

"The frustrating thing about this is that they're both right," said Michael Steel, a former top Boehner aide.

"Cheney is correct that President Trump lost the presidential election ... and McCarthy is also right — the job of the Republican leader is to gain the majority and become speaker of the House."

## Rio's deadly police shootout prompts claims of abuse

By DAVID BILLER and MARCELO SILVA DE SOUSA Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — A bloody, hourslong gunbattle in a Rio de Janeiro slum echoed into Friday, with authorities saying the police mission successfully eliminated two dozen criminals, while residents and activists claimed human rights abuses.

It was just after sunrise Thursday when dozens of officers from Rio de Janeiro state's civil police stormed Jacarezinho, a working-class favela in the city's northern zone. They were targeting drug traffickers from one of Brazil's most notorious criminal organizations, Comando Vermelho, and the bodies piled up quickly.

When the fighting stopped, there were 25 dead — one police officer and 24 people described by the police as "criminals."

Rio's moniker of "Marvelous City" can often seem a cruel irony in the favelas, given their stark poverty, violent crime and subjugation to drug traffickers or militias. But even here, Thursday's clash was a jarring anomaly that analysts declared one of the city's deadliest police operations ever.

The bloodshed also laid bare Brazil's perennial divide over whether, as a common local saying goes, "a good criminal is a dead criminal." Fervent law-and-order sentiment fueled the successful presidential run in 2018 by Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain whose home is in Rio. He drew support from much of society with his calls to diminish legal constraints on officers' use of lethal force against criminals.

The administration of Rio state's Gov. Cláudio Castro, a Bolsonaro ally, said in an emailed statement that it lamented the deaths, but that the operation was "oriented by long and detailed investigative and intelligence work that took months."

The raid sought to rout gang recruitment of teenagers, police said in an earlier statement, which also

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cited Comando Vermelho's "warlike structure of soldiers equipped with rifles, grenades, bulletproof vests."

Television images showed a police helicopter flying low over the Jacarezinho favela as men with high-powered rifles hopped from roof to roof to evade officers.

Others didn't escape.

One resident told The Associated Press how a man barged into her humble home around 8 a.m. bleeding from a gunshot wound. He hid in her daughter's room, but police came rushing in right behind him.

She said that she and her family saw officers shoot the unarmed man.

Hours later, his blood was still pooled on her tile floor and soaked into a blanket decorated with hearts.

About 50 residents of Jacarezinho poured into a narrow street to follow members of the state legislature's human rights commission who conducted an inspection following the shootouts. They shouted "Justice!" while clapping their hands. Some raised their right fists into the air.

Felipe Curi, a detective in Rio's civil police, denied there were any executions.

"There were no suspects killed. They were all traffickers or criminals who tried to take the lives of our police officers and there was no other alternative," he said at a news conference.

Curi said some suspects had sought refuge in residents' homes, and six of them were arrested. Police also seized 16 pistols, six rifles, a submachine gun, 12 grenades and a shotgun, he said.

Bolsonaro's son Carlos, a Rio city councilman who is influential on social media, supported police. He expressed condolences to the family of the fallen officer on Twitter, while skipping any mention of the other 24 dead or their families. The president didn't refer to the incident at all Thursday night in his weekly live broadcast on Facebook.

Bolsonaro's political rival, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said any operation that produces two dozen deaths doesn't qualify as public security.

"That is the absence of the government that offers education and jobs, the cause of a great deal of violence," said da Silva, who is widely expected to mount a challenge to Bolsonaro's reelection bid next year.

The Brazilian divisions of international advocacy groups Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International urged public prosecutors to thoroughly investigate the operation.

"Even if the victims were suspected of criminal association, which has not been proven, summary executions of this kind are entirely unjustifiable," said Jurema Werneck, Amnesty's executive director in Brazil.

The Rio state prosecutors' office said in a statement to the newspaper Folha de S.Paulo that it would investigate accusations of violence, adding that the case required a probe that is independent from police.

Brazil's Supreme Court issued a ruling last year prohibiting police operations in Rio's favelas during the pandemic unless "absolutely exceptional."

The order came after police fatally shot a 14-year-old in a home where there was no indication of any illegal activity. The teen's death sparked a Brazilian iteration of Black Lives Matter protests held across the city's metropolitan area for weeks.

The ruling, which remains in force, caused a decline in police operations throughout the middle of last year, as reflected by a plunge in the number of shootouts reported by Crossfire, a non-governmental group that monitors violence, and in official state data on deaths resulting from police intervention. But both indicators have crept back up to around pre-pandemic levels.

The Candido Mendes University's Public Safety Observatory said Rio police killed an average of more than five people a day during the first quarter of 2021, the most lethal start of a year since the state government began regularly releasing such data more than two decades ago.

## Survivor of subway crash reflects on decision to change cars

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and MARIA VERZA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — A decision to change cars to get closer to a station exit may have saved Erik Bravo, a 34-year-old financial adviser who survived the collapse of an elevated line in Mexico City's subway system that killed 25 people and injured around 80.

Bravo said Thursday that he and two colleagues from work were accustomed to taking the Number 12 line home from their jobs. His two friends got off late Monday, as usual, at their stops.

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Alone, Bravo decided to put on his headphones and use the time before his stop at the Olivos station to walk forward through a couple of subway cars, to be closer to the exit at the end of the platform when he arrived.

The move likely kept him from disaster.

"You realize that, in some way, you got a second chance, because that could have been you," Bravo said.

As his car pulled next to the platform, he felt the train jerk, as if pulled from behind, and shudder to a stop as smoke filled the cabin. A male passenger shouted for people to lie on the floor for safety.

"People were desperate, they tried to break the glass, they wanted to open the windows to escape," Bravo recalled.

The automatic doors wouldn't open, but a police officer told them that a door was open farther back.

Bravo walked toward the back not knowing the last two cars of the subway train had fallen into the rubble of the collapsed elevated rail bed.

In one of the last cars still standing on the track, two people lay unconscious on the floor. A little girl was crying. "I saw a man with his two little girls," Bravo said, but he doesn't know what happened to them.

Stunned, he walked home.

"When I got home ... we began to look at everything that was coming out on the internet," Bravo said. "It was a shock, I had been there. We began to see that people had died, people were missing, wounded, and here I was, unhurt, still here."

Authorities say the collapse occurred after a steel beam that held up the elevated line broke. Investigators are now trying to figure out how and why.

The line, the subway's newest, stretches far into the city's south side. Like many of the system's dozen subway lines, it runs underground through more central areas of the city of 9 million people but is on elevated concrete structures on the outskirts.

Allegations of poor design and construction on the Number 12 line emerged soon after it was inaugurated in 2012, and the line had to be partly closed in 2014 so tracks could be repaired.

The city's magnitude 7.1 earthquake in 2017 revealed some structural defects that experts say should have resulted in a total closure and complete inspection of the line. Instead, authorities applied some patchwork fixes and re-opened it.

While Bravo knew there were cracks and defects, it never occurred to him that it might collapse.

"Yes, you knew there were defects, but not that kind of defect that would cause what happened to occur," he said.

Most think the tragedy was preventable.

"They could have avoided this, if the government had paid attention to the services they provide us," said another regular passenger on the line, Ana María Luna. "But they didn't pay attention to all the reports" of defects, she said.

Even with the subway, Luna had to travel for hours to get to her job as a security guard. Since the disaster, her commute has stretched to three hours.

The collapse has temporarily closed the subway line, leaving thousands of residents on the south side dependent on bus service. People waited in long lines to board buses Thursday.

"Politicians don't care if they do things right or not," said Victor Luna, who was trying to get to his job as a watchman.

María Isabel Fuentes, a domestic worker, said the subway's defects had long worried her. "Ever since it opened, it was scary," she said.

Because it serves low-income neighborhoods, the line seldom seemed a priority, she said. "We're the same ones who always pay."

Bravo has kept busy since his near miss, fixing up an old motorcycle he owns so he can get to work now that the line is out of service. His nights have been sleepless, though, as he reflects on what might have been.

"In some way, I feel thankful grateful to someone, something up there, that for some reason decided it wasn't my time," Bravo said.



## Survivor of subway crash reflects on decision to change cars

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and MARIA VERZA Associated Press

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"People were desperate, they tried to break the glass, they wanted to open the windows to escape," Bravo recalled.

The automatic doors wouldn't open, but a police officer told them that a door was open farther back.

Bravo walked toward the back not knowing the last two cars of the subway train had fallen into the rubble of the collapsed elevated rail bed.

In one of the last cars still standing on the track, two people lay unconscious on the floor. A little girl was crying. "I saw a man with his two little girls," Bravo said, but he doesn't know what happened to them.

Stunned, he walked home.

"When I got home ... we began to look at everything that was coming out on the internet," Bravo said. "It was a shock, I had been there. We began to see that people had died, people were missing, wounded, and here I was, unhurt, still here."

Authorities say the collapse occurred after a steel beam that held up the elevated line broke. Investigators are now trying to figure out how and why.

The line, the subway's newest, stretches far into the city's south side. Like many of the system's dozen subway lines, it runs underground through more central areas of the city of 9 million people but is on elevated concrete structures on the outskirts.

Allegations of poor design and construction on the Number 12 line emerged soon after it was inaugurated in 2012, and the line had to be partly closed in 2014 so tracks could be repaired.

The city's magnitude 7.1 earthquake in 2017 revealed some structural defects that experts say should have resulted in a total closure and complete inspection of the line. Instead, authorities applied some patchwork fixes and re-opened it.

While Bravo knew there were cracks and defects, it never occurred to him that it might collapse.

"Yes, you knew there were defects, but not that kind of defect that would cause what happened to occur," he said.

Most think the tragedy was preventable.

"They could have avoided this, if the government had paid attention to the services they provide us," said another regular passenger on the line, Ana María Luna. "But they didn't pay attention to all the reports" of defects, she said.

Even with the subway, Luna had to travel for hours to get to her job as a security guard. Since the disaster, her commute has stretched to three hours.

The collapse has temporarily closed the subway line, leaving thousands of residents on the south side dependent on bus service. People waited in long lines to board buses Thursday.

"Politicians don't care if they do things right or not," said Victor Luna, who was trying to get to his job as a watchman.

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María Isabel Fuentes, a domestic worker, said the subway's defects had long worried her. "Ever since it opened, it was scary," she said.

Because it serves low-income neighborhoods, the line seldom seemed a priority, she said. "We're the same ones who always pay."

Bravo has kept busy since his near miss, fixing up an old motorcycle he owns so he can get to work now that the line is out of service. His nights have been sleepless, though, as he reflects on what might have been.

"In some way, I feel thankful grateful to someone, something up there, that for some reason decided it wasn't my time," Bravo said.

## Slumping slugger Pujols cut by Angels, still wants to play

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — Albert Pujols was cut by the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday, abruptly ending the 41-year-old superstar slugger's decade with his second major league team.

The Angels surprisingly announced the move to designate Pujols for assignment one day after he wasn't in the lineup for the slumping club's fourth consecutive loss. The decision was made after Pujols, dissatisfied with irregular playing time, had a late-night meeting with general manager Perry Minasian and team president John Carpino.

Pujols, who is batting .198 this season, is determined to play first base regularly for another team after he clears waivers, Angels manager Joe Maddon said. Pujols is fifth in major league history with 667 career homers and 13th with 3,253 hits.

"He wants to play, and he wants to be in the field," Maddon said. "Hopefully he's going to get that opportunity somewhere else, and believe me, we're all going to be rooting for him."

The three-time NL MVP for St. Louis was in the final season of a 10-year, \$240 million contract with Los Angeles, but Pujols' determination was incompatible with the Angels' desire to make everyday players out of first baseman Jared Walsh and designated hitter Shohei Ohtani, who have both significantly outperformed Pujols as two of the American League's top hitters.

"Albert is not a bench player," said Minasian, the club's first-year GM. "Him being on the bench would not do him any good, and would not do the team any good. He's as motivated as he's ever been. If the situation was different and there were at-bats for him to play here, it would be different."

A 10-time All-Star and the oldest active player in the majors, Pujols had five homers and 12 RBIs this year while playing in 24 of the Angels' 29 games. After a decent start to the season, Pujols had been in a 7-for-43 slump since April 20, hitting three homers in that stretch.

Minasian said the decision to cut ties with Pujols was "really difficult. These are never easy, especially with a guy like this who loves the game as much as anybody I've ever met, who works as hard as anybody I've ever met. But since I've taken this job, to me it's about what's best for the organization moving forward. It really weighed on me. I think it weighed on all of us."

Pujols joined the Angels after 11 successful seasons with the Cardinals during which he won three league MVP awards, earned two World Series rings, received nine All-Star selections, won an NL batting title and hit 445 homers while establishing himself as one of the greatest sluggers of his generation.

Angels owner Arte Moreno persuaded Pujols to leave for the West Coast with a lavish contract, but the Angels have not won a playoff game during the concurrent tenures of Pujols and three-time AL MVP Mike Trout at the heart of their lineup.

And though Pujols has crossed several statistical milestones with the Angels, the contrast in the two halves of his career is stark.

He batted .328 with a 1.037 OPS in St. Louis, but hit .256 with a .758 OPS in Anaheim along with 222 homers — just under half his total for the Cards. Pujols also earned just one All-Star selection with the Halos, back in 2015.

The Angels made only one postseason appearance in Pujols' nine full seasons, winning the AL West title

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and promptly getting swept by Kansas City in 2014. The club is on skids of five straight losing seasons and six straight non-playoff campaigns since then.

Pujols' achievements with Los Angeles have been mostly numerical, including the 500th and 600th homers and the 3,000th hit of his career. Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Alex Rodriguez and Pujols are the only players in major league history with 3,000 hits and 600 homers.

"He's had a ton of historic milestones here as an Angel over the last 10 seasons, many that our fans really cherish," said Carpino, who hopes the franchise will be able to honor Pujols with a more appropriate farewell in the future. "All we have from Albert is positive memories from his time here."

But Pujols has been a below-average statistical player for the past half-decade, during which he is batting .240 with minus-2 wins above replacement. His career average even dipped under .300 last season for the first time in his two decades in the majors.

Pujols hasn't performed at a level commensurate with his pay for many years, although Moreno knew the near-certain consequences of such a long contract — and baseball's salary structure all but guarantees a great player will be grossly underpaid for the first half of his career and effectively overpaid for the rest.

Pujols is making \$30 million this season in the final year of his contract, which includes a 10-year personal services contract with the Angels after his retirement. Carpino didn't indicate any changes in the status of that portion of the agreement reached in late 2011.

Despite his age and declining production, Pujols said he wasn't ready to decide whether this season would be his last when he reported to spring training in February. Maddon acknowledged early on that Pujols' playing time could decline behind Ohtani and Walsh, two of Los Angeles' top hitters alongside Trout, Anthony Rendon and Justin Upton.

Pujols still was in the opening day lineup for the 21st consecutive season, joining Pete Rose and Eddie Murray as the only major leaguers to reach that milestone.

But Walsh has been even better than the Angels expected since he started getting consistent playing time last year, while Ohtani has increased his workload sharply this season, no longer taking days off from his hitting duties around his pitching starts. Walsh's .333 batting average and .988 OPS are both seventh in the AL, while Ohtani is second in the league with nine homers and eighth with 22 RBIs.

That combination of developments left little playing time for Pujols in the long term, although he had been still playing fairly regularly because an injury to right fielder Dexter Fowler had forced the Halos to play Walsh in the outfield.

"He came to the ballpark with the same zeal on a daily basis," Maddon said of Pujols. "The guy wants to be on the field. Doesn't want to be on the bench of any kind. There will be a void, but this is an opportunity to grow, and that's how the world works."

Pujols is second in major league history with 2,112 RBIs since they became an official statistic, trailing only Aaron. He is fifth in doubles (669), total bases (5,955) and extra-base hits (1,352) in major league annals. His doubles are the most ever by a right-handed hitter.

Moreno is no stranger to handing out lavish contracts to midcareer stars in transactions that eventually hamstrung his franchise and its series of inexperienced general managers.

A year after signing Pujols, Moreno gave a five-year, \$125 million deal to troubled slugger Josh Hamilton, only to trade him back to Texas two years later while eating most of the \$80 million still owed to Hamilton. Moreno also gave a five-year, \$50 million contract in 2007 to Gary Matthews Jr., who batted .248 with 30 homers in three seasons for Los Angeles.

If another team picks up Pujols after he clears waivers, the Angels still would owe him the rest of his \$30 million, minus a prorated portion of likely the major league minimum salary.

## **GOP seeks unity, even if that means embracing election lie**

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There's a new buzzword among Republicans in Washington: unity.

The House GOP, led by Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, is moving toward stripping Rep. Liz Cheney of

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her leadership post for her frequent criticism of former President Donald Trump. The unusual step, they say, is necessary to unify a party whose base still reveres the former president four months after he incited a deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol.

"We all need to be working as one if we're able to win the majority," McCarthy said this week.

With Republicans close to reclaiming control of the House next year, the treatment of Cheney suggests GOP leaders will do almost anything to rally the party's base, even if that means sweeping the events of Jan. 6 under the rug and embracing — or refusing to confront — Trump's ongoing lie that he won the 2020 election, a campaign that he actually lost by a wide margin.

Those backing Cheney's ouster argue she has become a distraction by continuing to criticize Trump, who remains the dominating force in the party. They want to move forward, they say, and focus on policy ideas and providing a clear contrast with Democrats. But critics see the fight as a larger distraction.

"My unsolicited advice would be: Talk about the future and what you offer to Americans," said Alyssa Farah, the former Trump White House communications director. "I do worry that this is sort of showing that we're going to continue more the politics of personality as opposed to the politics of policy and deliverables to the American public."

While a message about being "sufficiently pro-Trump" may work in certain districts, she noted Republicans' focus on election interference depressed GOP turnout in Georgia, where the party lost two runoff elections in January that gave Democrats control of the Senate. And she warned that aligning the party with lies about voter fraud could turn off suburban voters and older voters in key swing districts.

"Those are the ones where you have to win over moderates and independents, and that message does not resonate with them, fundamentally," she said.

The GOP's leadership turmoil could pose some risks for Democrats as well. While many Democrats are only too happy to let Republicans fight among themselves, the drama could distract from President Joe Biden's effort to promote his massive infrastructure package, a push he took on the road Thursday with a visit to Louisiana.

Still, Republicans are making a clear political calculation. Trump remains deeply popular among GOP voters, and many continue to believe the lies he continues to spread about what happened in November. A CNN poll in late April found that 70% of Republicans believe that Biden did not legitimately win the election, even though dozens of local Republican election officials, state audits and even Trump's former attorney general have said there was no evidence of widespread fraud.

Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik, who has Trump's backing to serve as Cheney's replacement, said Thursday that she was "sending a clear message that we are one team. And that means working with the (former) President and working with all of our excellent Republican members of Congress," even as she parroted election conspiracies on former Trump strategist Steve Bannon's podcast.

Cheney, meanwhile, has framed her fight as one over the soul of a party long associated with her family name.

"The Republican Party is at a turning point, and Republicans must decide whether we are going to choose truth and fidelity to the Constitution," she wrote in a Washington Post op-ed Wednesday. "The question before us now is whether we will join Trump's crusade to delegitimize and undo the legal outcome of the 2020 election, with all the consequences that might have."

Cheney has been under fire since she joined nine other Republican House members in impeaching Trump for his role in sparking the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. Trump's supporters stormed the building, trying to halt the certification of the vote.

McCarthy, who had originally defended Cheney against efforts to strip her title as House Republican Conference chair, has insisted his decision has nothing to do with Cheney's vote but is rather about her refusal to stop criticizing Trump in the weeks since.

"I have heard from members concerned about her ability to carry out her job as conference chair, to carry out the message," said McCarthy on Fox News.

But Arkansas Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson told CNN that the move was nonetheless "going to be

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perceived by the American body politic as an ouster because of one vote.”

“I don’t think this is healthy for our party — that perception. We’ve got to get back to talking about ideas and how to unify ourselves,” he said.

Those seeking her ouster see it differently.

Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, the chair of the conservative Republican Study Committee who has long argued the party should focus on policy to win in 2022, sees Cheney as distracting from that goal.

“The reason that we are having an internal discussion about a change in leadership is because of the distraction from the single mission and goal that the vast majority has in winning back the majority,” he said. “She’s focused on her animosity toward President Trump. She’s focused on Jan. 6 — the rest of us are focused on the midterms.”

Banks pushed back on the idea that Cheney and others with different views were being purged from the party. In her leadership role, he said, Cheney is tasked with speaking on behalf of the conference. “But you’re out of sync as the chief spokesperson of our party, that’s why a change is needed. ... The infighting and the distractions are not going to subside unless we make a change.”

Still, Neil Newhouse, a longtime Republican pollster, said he doubted the current drama would have any impact on an election that’s still 18 months away.

“While the GOP leadership controversy may be headlines on the national news and much talked about inside the Beltway, it is simply no more than a bump in the road for GOP efforts to win the majority in the ’22 midterm elections,” he said, adding: “This issue will be long forgotten by this time next year.”

Joe Gruters, the chair of the Florida Republican Party, agreed.

“What happens in the leadership race I think is almost irrelevant to the rank-and-file members on the ground,” he said. “I think people are concerned about what happens to them and their pocketbooks and less about who’s carrying what flag and who has a title within the structure of the party overall.”

Still, he made clear that Trump’s views matter.

“Once the former president speaks on something like that, I would say most rank-and-file members agree with whatever he is saying. And the fact that he said it ... I think it’s over.”

## US says fate of nuclear pact up to Iran as talks resume

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is signaling that Iran shouldn’t expect major new concessions from the United States as a new round of indirect nuclear talks is set to resume.

A senior administration official told reporters Thursday that the U.S. has laid out the concessions it’s prepared to make in order to rejoin the landmark 2015 nuclear deal that former President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018. The official said success or failure now depends on Iran making the political decision to accept those concessions and to return to compliance with the accord.

The official spoke to reporters in a State Department-organized conference call on the eve of the negotiations’ resumption in Vienna. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the U.S. position going into the fourth round of closed-door talks at which the remaining participants in the nuclear deal are passing messages between the American and Iranian delegations.

The comments came after Secretary of State Antony Blinken complained of Iranian intransigence in the talks during a visit to Ukraine.

“What we don’t know is whether Iran is actually prepared to make the decisions necessary to return to full compliance with the nuclear agreement,” Blinken said in an interview with NBC News in Kyiv. “They unfortunately have been continuing to take steps that are restarting dangerous parts of their program that the nuclear agreement stopped. And the jury is out on whether they’re prepared to do what’s necessary.”

Iran has thus far given no indication it will settle for anything less than a full lifting of all the Trump sanctions and has balked at suggestions it would have to reverse all of the steps it has taken that violate the deal. Iranian officials have in recent weeks said the U.S. has offered significant, but not sufficient sanctions relief, but they have not outlined exactly what they would do in return.

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The administration official said the United States is ready to return to the explicit terms of the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, as they were negotiated by the Obama administration, but only if Iran will do the same. The official said the United States will not accept doing more than required by the JCPOA to bring Iran back into compliance.

The deal gave Iran billions of dollars in sanctions relief in exchange for limits on its nuclear program. Much of that relief evaporated after Trump pulled out and re-imposed and expanded U.S. sanctions. Iran responded by breaking through the deal's limits on uranium enrichment, the use of advanced centrifuges and other activities such as heavy water production.

After previous rounds of talks in Vienna, the administration had said there was flexibility in what it might offer to Iran, including going beyond the letter of the deal to ease non-nuclear sanctions from the Trump era that nonetheless affected the relief the Iranians were entitled to for agreeing to the accord.

That is still the case, although the official's comments on Thursday suggested that the limits of that flexibility had been reached. The official would not describe the concessions the U.S. is prepared to make but said any that it finds to be "inconsistent" with the nuclear deal would be stricken.

The official declined to predict whether the fourth round would produce a breakthrough but said it remains possible to reach an agreement quickly and before Iran's June presidential elections that some believe are a complicating factor in the talks. The official said the outlines of what both sides need to do is clear. "We think it's doable," the official said. "This isn't rocket science;"

But, the official said success depends on Iran not demanding more than it is entitled to under the terms of the original deal and by verifiably reversing the steps it has taken that violate it.

The Biden administration has been coy about what specific sanctions it is willing to lift, although officials have acknowledged that some non-nuclear sanctions, such as those Trump imposed for terrorism, ballistic missile activity and human rights abuses, may have to be eased for Iran to get the relief it is entitled to. That's because the some entities that were removed from sanctions under the nuclear deal are now penalized under other authorities.

The official did say that the administration no longer believed that the Trump administration had improperly or illegitimately imposed some of the those non-nuclear sanctions with the sole purpose of trying to frustrate a potential return to the deal.

The official said the administration does not question the "evidentiary basis" of those sanctions. However, the official said the administration is looking to see if they are "consistent with a return" to the deal, which it has already determined to be in the U.S. national security interest if Iran comes back into compliance.

"If we think it is inconsistent with a return to the JCPOA to maintain a particular designation, then we are prepared to lift it," the official said.

## Florida gov signs GOP voting law critics call 'un-American'

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a wide-ranging list of new voting restrictions into law Thursday, staging a misleading, made-for-TV ceremony meant to tout his credentials on a top priority for the Republican Party's conservative base.

At a live bill-signing event aired exclusively on Fox News, DeSantis said the new law would prevent fraud and restore confidence in Florida's elections — although the state has found no evidence of widespread fraud. The move made Florida the latest GOP-led state to enact tighter voting rules over the objections of Democratic critics who charge the law only makes it harder for people, particularly the elderly and people of color, to vote.

But DeSantis' unusual promotion of the bill — on the GOP-friendly morning show Fox & Friends — demonstrated the rising Republican leader's confidence the new law would only boost his standing.

"Right now I have what we think is the strongest election integrity measures in the country," the governor said.

Florida's new law restricts when ballot drop boxes can be used, and who can collect ballots — and how

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many. It mandates that drop boxes must be guarded, and available only when elections offices and early voting sites are open. To protect against what Republicans call "ballot harvesting," someone can only collect and return the ballots of immediate family, and no more than two from unrelated people.

"I'm actually going to sign it right here," DeSantis said as he signed a piece of paper live on television.

A spokesperson for the governor, Taryn Fenske, said later that DeSantis did not sign the actual bill on camera and that the event was purely ceremonial. No other media outlets were advised of the bill signing or allowed in.

Even Fox News appeared taken aback by the stunt. It later issued a statement saying it had booked DeSantis' appearance on its program "as an interview and not as a live bill signing. Neither the network, nor the show, requested or mandated the event be exclusive to Fox News Media entities."

Fox News is clearly the network of choice for Republican politicians, as Donald Trump illustrated time and again during his presidency, but staging a semi-official event for Fox's cameras is highly unusual.

Still, it wasn't the first time the governor, who is up for reelection next year and is widely viewed as a potential presidential candidate in 2024, has used Fox for photo ops before.

In January, the governor found himself backtracking after a Fox appearance in which he claimed that a 100-year-old World War II veteran he invited with him would be the 1 millionth senior in his state to get a COVID-19 vaccine shot in the arm. In fact, it took several more days for the state to hit that milestone. DeSantis' office later said the event was meant to be symbolic of the achievement.

On Thursday, the governor did not acknowledge the theatrics. He celebrated "a wonderful bill signing for this great elections bill" that "millions" could watch, including Floridians.

DeSantis' critics pounced. Democratic U.S. Rep. Charlie Crist, a former Florida governor who announced this week that he is seeking to challenge DeSantis, tweeted, "This is the difference between @GovRonDeSantis and me. He locks out the public and caters to Fox News. When I was Governor, everyone was invited in — Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. And when I'm Governor again, this will be a Florida for all."

Another potential Democratic rival for the governor's mansion, Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried, blasted DeSantis for the staged signing.

"He is using Fox News as a state news source," she said during her own news conference.

In recent months, DeSantis has tried to burnish his credentials with his party's base. He pushed through an "anti-riot" bill, which he signed last month, that was clearly aimed at the Black Lives Matter movement that roiled the country over the summer. He is also expected to soon sign into law a measure that would punish social media companies that, he claims, censor conservatives.

The elections law clearly plays into that strategy.

It's the latest victory in the nationwide push by Republicans to restrict access to the polls, which party leaders say is necessary to deter fraud. The campaign has been fueled by former President Donald Trump's false claim that his reelection was stolen from him, an assertion widely repeated across the GOP. Florida's Republican legislators passed this law — without a single Democratic vote.

Voter advocates assailed the elections law as a blatant attempt to impede access to the polls so Republicans might retain an advantage.

"The legislation has a deliberate and disproportionate impact on elderly voters, voters with disabilities, students and communities of color. It's a despicable attempt by a one party ruled legislature to choose who can vote in our state and who cannot. It's undemocratic, unconstitutional, and un-American," said Patricia Brigham, president of the League of Women Voters of Florida.

The league joined the Black Voters Matter Fund, the Florida Alliance for Retired Americans and others in assailing the new law in a federal lawsuit filed minutes after the signing. A separate federal suit filed in Tallahassee by the NAACP and Common Cause also says the law targets people who are Black, Latino or disabled.

"For far too long, Florida's lawmakers and elected officials have created a vast array of hurdles that have made it more difficult for these and other voters to make their voices heard," these groups said.

## NCAA reaches a key moment as transgender laws multiply

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

The NCAA has reached a delicate moment: It must decide whether to punish states that have passed laws limiting the participation of transgender athletes by barring them from hosting its softball and baseball tournaments.

Legislation requiring athletes to compete in interscholastic sports according to their sex at birth has been introduced in dozens of states this year, and governors have signed bills in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and West Virginia. The Arkansas, Mississippi and West Virginia laws also cover college sports teams.

The NCAA Board of Governors issued a statement April 12 saying it "firmly and unequivocally supports the opportunity for transgender student-athletes to compete in college sports."

"When determining where championships are held, NCAA policy directs that only locations where hosts can commit to providing an environment that is safe, healthy and free of discrimination should be selected," the board added. "We will continue to closely monitor these situations to determine whether NCAA championships can be conducted in ways that are welcoming and respectful of all participants."

Last week, the NCAA announced a preliminary list of 20 schools being considered to host the early round of the NCAA softball tournament; the 16 regional sites will be announced when the field is unveiled May 16. The 20 potential regional sites for baseball will be announced next week and that list will be pared to 16 on May 31.

Three of the possible softball hosts — Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee — are in states with signed transgender sports bans.

"This is kind of where the rubber meets the road for the NCAA," said Mac McCorkle, a Duke University professor of public policy.

Karen Weaver, a former college field hockey coach and athletic administrator now on the faculty at Penn, called the NCAA statement as "wishy washy as you can get."

Weaver said the NCAA is in a precarious position because of separate, highly charged issues that are likely to impact its bedrock amateurism model: it is depending on Congress to create legislation allowing athletes to make money on use of their name, image or likeness. The Supreme Court also is considering a case weighing whether the NCAA's prohibition on compensation for college athletes violates federal antitrust law.

The NCAA's statement on transgender sports bans was "carefully worded," Weaver said, "and I think it's a tenuous time to be taking any kind of stance that might be viewed as political because they're trying to craft their future in the Congress and Senate with the NIL legislation."

"They're trying to not tick off any potential folks who might vote for something that benefits the NCAA the most," Weaver said.

Jeff Altier, the NCAA Division I Baseball Committee chairman and the athletic director at Stetson, said last month that his committee had been given no directive to exclude any school from consideration for hosting a regional.

Altier referred other questions to the NCAA. Gail Dent, spokeswoman for the Board of Governors, did not respond to questions about the NCAA's willingness to pull events out of states with bans.

"It's surprising the NCAA would say one thing, that they are monitoring it, and then select site locations that are in areas of the country that are doing anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ legislation," said Shane Windmeyer, founder and executive director of Campus Pride, a national organization advocating for safer college environments for LGBT students.

Windmeyer said the NCAA's Office of Inclusion has been an ally. He said Campus Pride and similar organizations have received grants from the NCAA to fund diversity and inclusion summits and other programming.

The NCAA has had policies in place since 2011 that allow for transgender participation in sports. Testosterone suppression treatment is required for transgender women to compete in women's sports.



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Last year, following the Southeastern Conference's lead, the NCAA announced it would not hold championship events in Mississippi unless a depiction of the Confederate flag was removed from the state flag. The Mississippi Legislature acted swiftly to remove the symbol.

In 2016, the NCAA made good on its threat to pull championship events out of North Carolina in response to the "bathroom bill," which required transgender people to use restrooms according to their sex at birth and not their gender identity. Greensboro lost first- and second-round games in the men's basketball tournament in 2017; they were moved to Greenville, South Carolina. The law was repealed before the NCAA could take away more events.

"When they got involved with the bathroom bill in North Carolina, that was, in my opinion, a bold step for them," Weaver said. "I'm not seeing that same enthusiasm right now."

The NCAA traditionally selects baseball and softball regional sites based on a team's performance as well as quality of facilities and financial considerations. This year, potential sites were pre-determined because each must be evaluated for its ability to meet the NCAA's COVID-19 protocols.

Four of the top five teams in this week's D1Baseball.com Top 25 — No. 1 Arkansas, No. 2 Vanderbilt, No. 4 Mississippi State and No. 5 Tennessee — ordinarily would be considered shoo-ins to be regional hosts. The four schools confirmed to The Associated Press they submitted bids to host but declined interview requests on the topic of the NCAA's decision.

Since 2000, the home team has won 67.5% of baseball regionals and there is money to be made, too. A University of Arkansas study showed baseball fans visiting the Fayetteville area spent about \$2 million during a three-day regional in 2018, excluding cost of tickets and in-stadium purchases.

The NCAA is limiting attendance to 50% of stadium capacity at its spring sports championships because of the pandemic, so the windfall won't be as great this year.

For now, everyone waits to see the next step on site selections from the NCAA, which has referred all questions to the Board of Governors statement.

"Speaking as a consultant, you can say to the NCAA, 'Oh well, you made this problem, you shouldn't have said anything,'" McCorkle said. "I don't know how they navigate it, but I don't think there's any way to have avoided this."

## At least 25 dead during Brazilian police raid in Rio

By MARCELO SILVA DE SOUSA and DIARLEI RODRIGUES Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Police targeting drug traffickers raided a slum in Rio de Janeiro on Thursday and at least one officer and two dozen others died after being shot, authorities said.

The civil police's press office confirmed the death of the cop and 24 alleged "criminals" in a message to the Associated Press.

A police helicopter flew low over the Jacarezinho favela as heavily armed men fled police by leaping from roof to roof, according to images shown on local television.

One woman told The Associated Press she saw police kill a badly wounded man she described as helpless and unarmed who they found after he had fled into her house.

Felipe Curi, a detective in Rio's civil police, denied there had been any executions. "There were no suspects killed. They were all traffickers or criminals who tried to take the lives of our police officers and there was no other alternative," he said during a press conference.

Police had to struggle to enter the favela because of concrete barriers built by the criminals, according to the detective. Shooting spread throughout the community. During the operation, several people Curi described as criminals invaded neighboring houses trying to hide. Six were arrested, he said.

The police also seized 16 pistols, six rifles, a submachine gun, 12 grenades and a shotgun.

Service on a subway line was temporarily suspended "due to intense shooting in the region," according to a statement from the company that operates it. Earlier, two subway passengers were injured when a stray bullet shattered the glass of one car.

Jacarezinho, one of the city's most populous favelas, with some 40,000 residents, is dominated by the

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Comando Vermelho, one of Brazil's leading criminal organizations. The police consider Jacarezinho to be one of the group's headquarters.

Thursday's operation was aimed at investigating the recruitment of teenagers to hijack trains and commit other crimes, police said in a statement.

A group of about 50 residents in Jacarezinho poured into a narrow street on Thursday afternoon to follow members of the state legislature's human rights commission as it conducted an inspection. They shouted "justice" while clapping their hands and some raised their right fists into the air.

Human Rights Watch Brazil said in a statement that the public prosecutor must immediately investigate possible police abuses.

The police statement said the criminal gang has a "warlike structure of soldiers equipped with rifles, grenades, bulletproof vests, pistols, camouflaged clothing and other military accessories."

The Candido Mendes University's Public Safety Observatory said that at least 12 police operations in Rio state this year have resulted in three or more deaths.

Observatory director Silvia Ramos said Thursday's raid was among the deadliest in the city's recent history.

Many of them appear to violate a ruling by Brazil's Supreme Court last year that ordered the police to suspend operations during the pandemic, restricting them to "absolutely exceptional" situations.

The Supreme Court declined to comment when asked by The Associated Press if Thursday's operation would qualify.

Rio police killed an average of more than five people a day during the first quarter of 2021, the most lethal start of a year since the state government began regularly releasing such data more than two decades ago, according to the Observatory.

## **AP FACT CHECK: Yes, Trump lost election despite what he says**

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Seeking to shame Republicans who are disloyal to him, former President Donald Trump distorted the Constitution's meaning in asserting widespread voter fraud and insisting that state legislatures could overturn Joe Biden's presidential win.

He's wrong on all those fronts.

TRUMP: "Had Mike Pence referred the information on six states (only need two) back to State Legislatures ... we would have had a far different Presidential result." — statement Wednesday urging Republicans to push out Rep. Liz Cheney as the No. 3 House Republican in favor of Rep. Elise Stefanik, who voted to overturn Biden's victory in key states.

THE FACTS: Trump's trash talk about his former vice president is fantasy.

Pence had no authority under the Constitution, congressional rules, the law or custom to refer the results back to the states.

On Jan. 6, Pence presided over the congressional tally of Electoral College votes, carrying out his ceremonial duty to announce who has won the majority of votes for president and vice president, when the proceedings were interrupted by a mob of angry Trump supporters whom Trump had exhorted to "fight like hell" earlier that day after falsely claiming election fraud.

Pence had no path for avoiding his pro forma certification of Biden as the next president and Kamala Harris as vice president. After the proceedings were interrupted for several hours by angry protesters, the congressional tally resumed and Pence officially declared Biden the winner early the next morning on Jan. 7.

Nor did state legislatures have recourse in changing the election result. The Constitution gives state legislatures a role in the process of selecting a president by determining the "manner" in which presidential electors are appointed to the Electoral College. States did that, by passing laws specifying how electors would be chosen and then by certifying their election results in early December.

"There was no role for the vice president to refer matters back to state legislatures," said Richard Hasen, an election law professor at the University of California, Irvine. "This is not a thing.

"Instead, it was up to Congress to count the valid electoral college votes submitted by the states, which

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it did.”

TRUMP: The election was “corrupt” and “was indeed The Big Lie.” — statement Thursday.

THE FACTS: To be clear, no widespread corruption was found and no election was stolen from Trump. Biden earned 306 electoral votes to Trump’s 232, the same margin that Trump had when he beat Hillary Clinton in 2016, which he repeatedly described as a “landslide.” (Trump ended up with 304 electoral votes because two electors defected.) Biden achieved victory by prevailing in key states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona and Georgia.

Trump’s former attorney general, William Barr, found no evidence of widespread election fraud. Trump’s allegations of massive voting fraud also have been dismissed by a succession of judges and refuted by state election officials and an arm of his own administration’s Homeland Security Department.

No case has established irregularities of a scale that would have changed the outcome.

TRUMP: “The 2020 Election ... didn’t even have Legislative approvals from many States (which is required under the U.S. Constitution).” — statement Thursday.

THE FACTS: Whether the Constitution requires “legislative approvals” is questionable.

Trump appears to be referring to the legal argument, made in several lawsuits he backed before and after the November election, that the Constitution gives the power of election administration exclusively to state lawmakers.

But the Supreme Court opted not to take up any of those cases and rule on the issue.

Had the justices sided with Trump, it would have invalidated a number of pandemic-era accommodations like expanded mail voting that were put in place not by state legislatures, but by governors, state election officials and judges.

At least a third of the justices — Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Neil Gorsuch — dissented when the court in February declined to take up consideration of the lawsuits, indicating they were sympathetic to the argument and saying the case could be a guide for future elections.

States issued a number of rulings and orders to ensure voters could cast ballots while staying safe during a pandemic, including a Pennsylvania Supreme Court opinion that extended the receipt deadline for mail-in ballots in that state by 3 days after the Nov. 3 election.

But there’s no indication in any of the lawsuits that those changes would have altered a state’s election results. On two occasions before the election, in fact, the Supreme Court had declined to intervene in the Pennsylvania case.

TRUMP: “Had gutless and clueless MINORITY Leader Mitch McConnell (he blew two seats in Georgia that should have never been lost) fought to expose all of the corruption that was presented at the time, with more found since, we would have had a far different Presidential result. ... Never give up!” — statement Wednesday.

THE FACTS: That’s an empty exhortation. Railing against McConnell, who earlier criticized him for egging protesters on before the Jan. 6 Capitol riots, Trump seemingly suggests it’s not too late to fight to overturn the November election.

But it is.

While legislative Republicans in Arizona are challenging the outcome with an unprecedented effort to audit the election results in Maricopa, the state’s most populous county, the audit’s findings will not affect Biden’s victory in the state or nationwide.

Future elections may be a different matter, though, as Republican-led legislatures push changes to election laws.

“They can’t change the 2020 election, but they can use it as a predicate for new restrictive voting laws,” said Hasen, the election law professor.

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## In GOP stronghold, Biden pushes for his infrastructure plan

By JOSH BOAK and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

LAKE CHARLES, La. (AP) — With a badly aging bridge as his backdrop, President Joe Biden stood in reliably Republican Louisiana on Thursday to pressure GOP lawmakers to support his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan — and yet express a willingness to compromise on the corporate tax hikes he's recommending to pay the cost.

Biden leaned into the stagecraft of the presidency by choosing to speak in the city of Lake Charles, which has been battered by historic storms and is home to a 70-year-old bridge that is two decades past its designed lifespan.

Where to find the money for replacements and repairs here and elsewhere? The Democratic president, who wants to raise corporate taxes, challenged Republican dogma that low taxes for corporations and the wealthy fuel economic growth. But he also declared he was willing to make a deal and dared them to do the same.

"I'm willing to hear ideas from both sides," said Biden. "I'm ready to compromise. What I'm not ready to do is, I'm not ready to do nothing. I'm not ready to have another period where America has another Infrastructure Month and it doesn't change a damn thing."

Even as he engages with Republicans in Washington, Biden is trying to sell their voters on the idea that higher corporate taxes can provide \$115 billion for roads and bridges and hundreds of billions of dollars more to upgrade America's electrical grid, make the water system safer, rebuild homes and jump-start the manufacturing of electric vehicles. To drive home the point, he also toured a water plant in New Orleans.

He's proposing to pay for his plan by undoing the 2017 tax cuts signed into law by President Donald Trump and raising the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%. Biden contends his programs would bolster the middle class and make the country stronger than tax cuts for big companies and CEOs.

"You're entitled to be a millionaire, be a billionaire, just pay your fair share," said Biden. "I'm not looking to punish anyone. I'm sick and tired of corporate America not doing their fair share."

The White House has found little support from congressional Republicans, none of whom voted for the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 bill signed into law in March and who have, so far, uniformly opposed the infrastructure plan. But the West Wing has pointed to polling that suggests the plan is popular with GOP voters and notes that some Republican officials do back it.

"I find more support from Republican governors and mayors and Democratic governors and mayors around the country," Biden said, "because they've got to answer the question: Is life better in this town, this city, this state than it was before I got elected?"

To emphasize that point, Biden was introduced in Lake Charles, which still has blue tarps where roofs once were and plywood replacing glass in office buildings, by a Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, and the city's Republican mayor, Nic Hunter. Hunter outlined his many political differences with the president before focusing on their common ground.

"I do believe we can agree on the dire need here in Lake Charles for an infrastructure plan that can build us a new bridge and I do believe we can agree on the dire need to support disaster relief in Southwest Louisiana," Hunter said. "Any member of Congress out there listening: Lake Charles needs help right now. And we are asking for it."

Louisiana has a long history of accepting federal money for storm recovery — most notably after Katrina and Rita in 2005. And the Army Corps of Engineers has been a staple in the state managing the Mississippi River levees and drain basins, demonstrating that the conservative lean of voters has been tempered by that established relationship with the federal treasury.

Republican lawmakers, however, are firmly sticking with low taxes as a pillar of their ideology and partisan identity.

Several GOP senators favor spending \$568 billion on infrastructure over five years, a small fraction of what the Democratic president has proposed — a sign of how difficult a deal might be.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said that Republicans would rather finance infrastructure through user fees such as tolls and gasoline taxes, though he declined to specify which fees he would back.

McConnell has also said that "100%" of his focus was "on stopping this new administration," echoing similarly obstructionist threats he made during President Barack Obama's term and underscoring the challenge Biden faces in trying to work across the aisle.

Biden brushed off that talk, noting that as vice president he was "able to get a lot done" with McConnell during the Obama era. And after landing in New Orleans ahead of his water plant tour, he spent time on the tarmac talking with Louisiana's two Republican senators, John Kennedy and Bill Cassidy. But the president's true audience has been Republican voters, not GOP lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

The administration is banking that its message on infrastructure could play in Louisiana, which last backed a Democratic presidential candidate in 1996. Louisiana has been barraged by 30 extreme weather events over the past decade that caused \$50 billion worth of damage. Biden is seeking \$50 billion to make infrastructure better able to withstand storms, winds and flooding.

Hurricanes battered Lake Charles, a city of 78,000 residents, twice last year over six weeks. Trump, whose administration's planned "Infrastructure Weeks" became noted for being anything but, had promised to fix the city's bridge were he to be reelected.

Rep. Steve Scalise, the Republican whip who represents portions of Louisiana, derided Biden's plan as a "budget-busting tax hike spending boondoggle masquerading as an infrastructure bill."

"Raising taxes that will force middle-class jobs overseas is not infrastructure," Scalise said. "Unionizing health care workers is not infrastructure."

There is general agreement among Democrats and Republicans in Washington about the need for infrastructure spending, but the GOP wants to define the term more narrowly, concentrating on roads, bridges, airports, transit and broadband rather than renewable energy and access to caregivers. They object to undoing the 2017 tax cuts and imposing higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

## Cheney challenger Stefanik says GOP must work with Trump

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. Elise Stefanik stated her case Thursday for replacing Rep. Liz Cheney as the No. 3 House Republican leader, implicitly lambasting Cheney's battles with former President Donald Trump by saying, "We are one team and that means working with the president."

The remarks by Stefanik, R-N.Y., a one-time moderate who's evolved into an ardent Trump champion, came as Cheney seems likely to be tossed from her leadership post next week. Cheney, R-Wyo., has repeatedly rejected Trump's false insistence that he lost the 2020 election because of widespread fraud, and has blamed him for inflaming followers who assaulted the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Speaking on Steve Bannon's "War Room" podcast, Stefanik said she is committed to "sending a clear message that we are one team and that means working with the president and working with all of our excellent Republican members of Congress." Stefanik repeatedly used "president" in referring to Trump.

Facing opposition from Trump and the House's two top Republicans — Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Whip Steve Scalise — Cheney has remained defiant.

In an opinion essay in The Washington Post, Cheney implored her GOP colleagues on Wednesday to pry themselves from a Trump "cult of personality" and declared that the party and even American democracy were at stake. "History is watching," she said.

Trump issued a statement giving his "COMPLETE and TOTAL Endorsement" to Stefanik, 36, who's played an increasingly visible role within the GOP.

Stefanik responded quickly, highlighting his backing to colleagues who will decide her political future.

"Thank you President Trump for your 100% support for House GOP Conference Chair. We are unified and focused on FIRING PELOSI & WINNING in 2022!" she tweeted.

The careers of Cheney and Stefanik are seemingly racing in opposite directions, as if to contrast the fates awaiting Trump critics and backers in today's GOP.

The turmoil also raised questions about whether the price for political survival in the party entails standing by a former president who keeps up his false narrative about a fraudulent 2020 election and whose

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supporters stormed the Capitol just four months ago in an attempt to disrupt the formal certification of Joe Biden's victory.

In her essay, Cheney denounced the "dangerous and anti-democratic Trump cult of personality," and warned her fellow Republicans against embracing or ignoring his statements "for fundraising and political purposes."

She said McCarthy has "changed his story" after initially saying Trump "bears responsibility" for the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. McCarthy, who is tacitly backing the drive to oust her, has said Trump issued a video to try halting the violence.

Dozens of state and local officials and judges from both parties have found no evidence to support Trump's assertions that he was cheated out of an election victory.

Cheney, in the Post, agreed with Democrats that a bipartisan investigation should focus solely on the riot and not on disturbances at some of last summer's racial justice protests. In an apparent reference to her own situation, she said she would defend "basic principles" of democracy, "no matter what the short-term political consequences might be."

Biden weighed in at the White House on Wednesday.

"I think Republicans are further away from trying to figure out who they are and what they stand for than I thought they would be at this point," he told reporters.

Cheney, a daughter of Dick Cheney, who was George W. Bush's vice president and before that a Wyoming congressman, seemed to have almost unlimited potential until this year. Her career began listing after she was among just 10 House Republicans to back Trump's impeachment for inciting supporters to attack the Capitol on Jan. 6, when five died.

Stefanik, who represents a mammoth upstate New York district, began her House career in 2015 as a moderate Republican.

She opposed Trump's ban on immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries, and joined Democrats in voting against Trump's effort to unilaterally redirect money to building a wall along the Southwest border. She also led an effort to recruit female candidates for her party.

Stefanik's rural district, which Barack Obama carried in his successful 2008 and 2012 presidential runs, was subsequently won twice by Trump. She morphed into a stalwart Trump defender and was given a high-profile role during the 2019 House Intelligence Committee impeachment hearings.

That was widely seen as a strategic move by the GOP to soften its image by giving a woman a prominent role. Stefanik's status and visibility within the GOP have soared since then.

Cheney is the highest-ranking GOP woman in Congress. There are just 31 Republican women in the House, about one-third of Democrats' total but up from the 13 who served in the last Congress.

There were no other visible contenders for Cheney's post, with a secret ballot by House Republicans on her fate possible next week. A vote on a replacement, seemingly Stefanik, could come that day as well.

Cheney was making little noticeable effort to cement support by calling colleagues or enlisting others to lobby on her behalf, said two House GOP aides who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the situation. A third person familiar with Cheney's effort also said she was not lining up votes.

Cheney's opposition to Trump put her out of step with most House Republicans, 138 of whom voted against certifying the Electoral College vote for Biden's victory.

Republicans say a McCarthy speech backing Cheney at a closed-door House GOP meeting in February was largely credited with her surviving an earlier push by conservatives to oust her, in a 145-61 secret ballot. A top House GOP aide has said McCarthy won't do that this time.

## **EXPLAINER: Why patents on COVID vaccines are so contentious**

By LINDA A. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The Biden administration's call to lift patent protections on COVID-19 vaccines to help poor parts of the world get more doses has drawn praise from some countries and health advocates.

But it has run into resistance from the pharmaceutical industry and others, who say it won't help curb

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the outbreak any time soon and will hurt innovation.

Here's a look at what patents do and why they matter:

## HOW DO DRUG PATENTS WORK?

Patents reward innovation by preventing competitors from simply copying a company's discovery and launching a rival product. In the U.S., patents on medicines typically last 20 years from when they are filed, which usually happens once a drugmaker thinks it has an important or lucrative drug. Because it often takes a decade to get a drug approved, companies typically enjoy about a dozen years of competition-free sales. But drugmakers usually find ways to improve their product or widen its use, and they secure additional patents that can extend their monopoly for many more years.

## WHY IS PATENT PROTECTION SO IMPORTANT TO DRUGMAKERS?

Medicines are incredibly expensive to develop. Most experimental drugs fail at some point during the years of laboratory, animal and finally human testing. Averaging in the cost of those flops, it typically costs over \$1 billion to bring a drug from discovery to regulatory approval. Without the prospect of years of sales without competition, there's far less incentive to take that risk.

## WHY IS THE U.S. BACKING EFFORTS TO LIFT PROTECTIONS ON COVID-19 VACCINES?

The Biden administration has been under intense pressure, including from many Democrats in Congress, to get more COVID-19 vaccines to the rest of the world. Support for the waiver idea floated by India and South Africa in October has been growing in other countries while the outbreak worsens in some places, especially India.

## WHY HAVE THE U.S. AND OTHERS OPPOSED LIFTING PROTECTIONS IN THE PAST?

The U.S. and some other wealthy countries lead the world in many areas of research and innovation, particularly medicines. Aside from the prestige that confers, pharmaceutical companies provide millions of well-paying jobs, generate tax revenue and provide new medicines that can save or improve lives. Drugmakers and their trade groups spend millions every year lobbying governments to maintain the status quo on patents.

## WHY IS THE INDUSTRY SO OPPOSED TO THE EFFORT?

In a word, money. In the U.S., pharmaceutical companies can charge whatever they want for their medicines. They typically raise prices twice a year, often doubling or tripling them during a drug's patent-protected years. That makes the big, long-established drugmakers among the world's most profitable companies. But a huge amount of innovation also comes from startup companies, which rely heavily on investors to fund early research. Without the prospect of a big payday, it would be much harder to attract investment.

Les Funtleyder, health care portfolio manager at E Squared Asset Management, thinks the industry is less worried about protecting its patents for the COVID-19 vaccines than about the "slippery slope" such a precedent could create.

## WHAT IS THE PROCEDURE FOR LIFTING PATENT PROTECTIONS?

The decision is up to the 164-member World Trade Organization, which administers complex trade rules among nations. And all of them would have to agree for it to happen. If waivers are approved, vaccine developers would then have to share their know-how for the very complex manufacturing.

## HAS THIS EVER HAPPENED BEFORE?

There's no precedent for vaccines, but two decades ago WTO members passed a temporary waiver allowing poor countries to import cheap generic drugs for HIV, tuberculosis and malaria amid health crises. That temporary waiver eventually was made permanent.

## WHAT WOULD LIFTING PROTECTIONS ON COVID-19 VACCINES ACCOMPLISH?

That's not entirely clear, but drugmakers and analysts say waiving patent rights won't do much to get COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries faster. That's because making them is far more complex than following a recipe, requiring factories with specialized equipment, highly trained workers and stringent quality control. There is also little available factory capacity. In addition, many raw materials to make the vaccines, along with vials, stoppers and other components, are in very short supply, which won't change soon.

## More support easing vaccine patent rules, but hurdles remain

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Several world leaders Thursday praised the U.S. call to remove patent protections on COVID-19 vaccines to help poor countries obtain shots. But the proposal faces a multitude of hurdles, including resistance from the pharmaceutical industry.

Nor is it clear what effect such a step might have on the campaign to vanquish the outbreak.

Activists and humanitarian institutions cheered after the U.S. reversed course Wednesday and called for a waiver of intellectual property protections on the vaccine. The decision ultimately is up to the 164-member World Trade Organization, and if just one country votes against a waiver, the proposal will fail.

The Biden administration announcement made the U.S. the first country in the developed world with big vaccine manufacturing to publicly support the waiver idea floated by India and South Africa in October. On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron embraced it as well.

"I completely favor this opening up of the intellectual property," Macron said at a vaccine center.

However, like many pharmaceutical companies, Macron insisted that a waiver would not solve the problem of access to vaccines. He said manufacturers in places like Africa are not now equipped to make COVID-19 vaccines, so donations of shots from wealthier countries should be given priority instead.

Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca — all companies with licensed COVID-19 vaccines — had no immediate comment, though Moderna has long said it will not pursue rivals for patent infringement during the pandemic.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored the urgency of moving fast now.

"On the current trajectory, if we don't do more, if the entire world doesn't do more, the world won't be vaccinated until 2024," he said in an interview with NBC while visiting Ukraine.

India, as expected, welcomed the move. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the U.S. position "great news."

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio wrote on Facebook that the U.S. announcement was "a very important signal" and that the world needs "free access" to vaccine patents. But Italian Premier Mario Draghi was more circumspect.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said his country would support it. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the U.S. decision too.

But German Chancellor Angela Merkel's office spoke out against it, saying: "The protection of intellectual property is a source of innovation and must remain so in the future."

A Merkel spokeswoman, speaking on customary condition of anonymity, said Germany is focused instead on how to increase vaccine manufacturers' production capacity.

In Brazil, one of the deadliest COVID-19 hot spots in the world, Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga said he fears that the country does not have the means to produce vaccines and that the lifting of patent protections could interfere with Brazil's efforts to buy doses from pharmaceutical companies.

In closed-door talks at the WTO in recent months, Australia, Britain, Canada, the European Union, Japan, Norway, Singapore and the United States opposed the waiver idea, according to a Geneva-based trade official who was not authorized to discuss the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Some 80 countries, mostly developing ones, have supported the proposal, the official said. China and Russia — two other major COVID-19 vaccine makers — didn't express a position but were open to further discussion, the official said.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the 27-nation bloc is ready to talk about the idea, but she remained noncommittal and emphasized that the EU has been exporting vaccines widely — while the U.S. has not.

EU leaders said the bloc may discuss the matter at a summit that starts Friday.

The pharmaceutical industry has argued that a waiver will do more harm than good in the long run.

Easing patent protections would eat into their profits, potentially reducing the incentives that push com-



panies to innovate and make the kind of tremendous leaps they did with the COVID-19 vaccines, which have been churned out at a blistering, unprecedented pace.

The industry has contended, too, that production of the vaccines is complicated and can't be ramped up simply by easing patent rights. Instead, it has said that reducing snarls in supply chains and shortages of ingredients is a more pressing issue.

The industry has insisted that a faster solution would be for rich countries to share their vaccine stockpiles with poorer ones.

"A waiver is the simple but the wrong answer to what is a complex problem," said the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations. "Waiving patents of COVID-19 vaccines will not increase production nor provide practical solutions needed to battle this global health crisis."

Intellectual property law expert Shyam Balganes, a professor at Columbia University, said a waiver would only go so far because of bottlenecks in the manufacturing and distribution of vaccines.

Backers of the waiver say that expanded production by the big pharmaceutical companies and donations from richer countries to poor ones won't be enough, and that there are manufacturers standing by that could make the vaccines if given the blueprints.

"A waiver of patents for #COVID19 vaccines & medicines could change the game for Africa, unlocking millions more vaccine doses & saving countless lives," World Health Organization Africa chief Matshidiso Moeti tweeted.

Just over 20 million vaccine doses have been administered across the African continent, which has 1.3 billion people.

There is precedent: In 2003, WTO members agreed to waive patent rights and allow poorer countries to import generic treatments for the AIDS virus, malaria and tuberculosis.

"We believe that when the history of this pandemic is written, history will remember the move by the U.S. government as doing the right thing at the right time," Africa CDC Director John Nkengasong said.

## Chicago suburb set to pay reparations, but not all on board

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

EVANSTON, Ill. (AP) — When Teri Murray tried to buy her first home in 1968, searching this leafy college town for the perfect place, she thought she was an ideal candidate: married, steadily employed, ample savings.

But banks rejected her, giving dubious excuses that they had stopped offering loans or the application period had closed.

At 76, Murray now realizes those experiences were common for Black residents like her who faced decades of racist housing practices designed to stymie homeownership or force them to live in certain areas.

"Whatever reasons they gave us, I completely bought it," said Murray, who eventually purchased the Evanston property where she lives. "I was discriminated against and didn't know it."

Now her community is trying to make amends as the first American city to pay reparations. Acknowledging past racist policies, Evanston is giving eligible Black residents \$25,000 housing grants for down payments, repairs or existing mortgages this year. Although the approach is considered a model and homeowners like Murray are ready to apply, some Black residents say the effort falls short and true atonement hasn't begun.

The idea of reparations wasn't a hard sell in the predominantly white Chicago suburb of about 74,000 that's known for liberal activism, intellectual discourse and Northwestern University. Alderwoman Robin Rue Simmons, a fourth generation Black resident, spearheaded the effort after studying racial disparity data, which shows the average income of Black families in Evanston is \$46,000 less than white families.

"We had to create ordinances and laws that said we are committed to inclusion in a tangible way, not just in a sign, not just in a resolution, but with our budget," said Simmons, who represents the predominantly Black 5th Ward.

Last summer's reckoning over racial injustice revived interest in reparations in communities across the country, including the state of California and cities like Chicago; Amherst, Massachusetts; Asheville, North

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Carolina; and Iowa City, Iowa. Federal legislation for a commission has also gained traction.

The Rev. Michael Nabors, a local NAACP chapter president who leads Evanston's Second Baptist Church, said this is the most exciting time in his 61 years.

"It is Evanston today and, in my opinion, it is going to be the United States tomorrow," he said. "We are leading the way."

But not everyone agrees.

Alderswoman Cicely Fleming, the sole vote against the grants, said she supports reparations but Evanston's effort isn't that. Instead of giving money to banks, direct cash payments would give Black people power in deciding how they need repair, she said.

"The bank continues to be the largest beneficiary and perpetrator of housing discrimination," said Fleming, who's Black. "It really lays under the guise of a narrative that poor and/or African American people don't know how to manage their money. Therefore, when the government gives them money, there are lots of parameters on how they can use it."

Experts also questioned calling it reparations.

Duke University economist William Darity said the label is overused and often has little to do with making restitution for Black American descendants of slavery. While Evanston's program was a positive step, he co-wrote in a Washington Post opinion piece, calling it reparations "does more harm than good."

Bennett Johnson, 92, won't apply.

"It's just a housing program," he said. "It won't work."

The Evanston resident who's worked as a book publisher, political organizer and activist pitched his own plan, which includes a venture capital group and a truth and reconciliation program like in post-apartheid South Africa.

Still, those involved say Evanston has been introspective.

"It's a lot, a lot of work, and be prepared for pulling back old wounds, telling truth, gaining the trust," said local historian Morris "Dino" Robinson Jr., who co-authored a city-commissioned study on housing practices.

The program will provide 16 grants the first year, with money from a \$10 million reparations fund created in 2019 with legal marijuana taxes. To qualify, Black applicants must have lived in Evanston between 1919 and 1969 or be a direct descendent of someone who did. They must show proof, like a deed, and reside in Evanston currently. Aldermen will then decide how the rest of the fund will be spent.

The hope is to boost Black homeownership, increase property values and draw residents back. Evanston's Black population dropped to under 17% in 2017 from more than 22% in 2000.

Evanston's first Black residents came during the Great Migration, many finding plentiful domestic and service jobs. By 1940, the Black population was over 6,000, Illinois' largest outside Chicago, according to the study commissioned by the city. Most were concentrated in a triangular area, which is today's 5th Ward.

Some racist practices were informal: Real estate agents would steer Black families to certain areas and banks denied loans, making predatory financing pervasive. Other practices were law: A 1921 zoning ordinance converted areas where Black families lived to industrial, forcing them out.

"The consequences of the racial discrimination multiplied over time," said Jenny Thompson of the Evanston History Center, another study author.

Lots in the Black enclave were smaller; the buildings densely populated. Later, Evanston deemed many Black-owned homes "substandard" and they were cleared for new development, including a football field in 1941.

Murray and her sister, Jo-Ann Cromer, grew up in the 5th Ward, calling it thriving and close-knit. Cromer also remembers white families leaving, physically moving homes out of the neighborhood.

The sisters will apply.

Adjacent properties Murray owns through the 1968 purchase require foundational repairs and a new water line.

Cromer, 78, bought their parents' home and wants to pay down her mortgage.

"Real estate represents wealth. I don't think people understand if Black people had been allowed to buy property, there would be a lot of wealthy Black people in Evanston," Cromer said. "There would be a path of wealth, generation to generation."

That's what Nikko Ross, 25, wants.

He'll seek a grant, either for his down payment or for his mother to repair her six-bedroom house.

Buying a home in a community where his great-grandparents lived — Evanston's median home value is roughly \$400,000 — would help his future family too.

"This home can always be used as a resource to any one of our family members," he said. "If my kids want to live here, they will always have a home."

## Study: Residents left big metros during pandemic for family

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

Cece Linder was living in a 770-square-foot apartment outside Washington, D.C., last spring when the area went into lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In May 2020, after a few months of both living and working in the small space, Linder decided to leave the capital area and move into the 2,000-square-foot (186-square-meter) beachside home she jointly owns with her parents in Cocoa Beach, Florida. Now she gets to see the sunrise over the water each morning before work.

"If I'm teleworking anyway, why not move to this other place that is more visually attractive, it's beachside, and someone can occasionally cook for me?" Linder said. "Though that didn't exactly work out. My mom has me cooking for them."

Linder was not alone in her thinking. According to a new study and data from the U.S. Census Bureau, she was one of thousands of people who migrated out of the nation's largest metropolitan areas and into smaller ones during the pandemic.

The study found that, like Linder, many of the migrants weren't driven by new jobs or weather — or even a fear of the virus — but a desire to be closer to family and a freedom to make it happen because of remote working. Although the pattern of people moving from larger to smaller cities has been going on for several years, the pandemic exacerbated that trend, said Peter Haslag of Vanderbilt University, who conducted the study on migrant motivations with Daniel Weagley of Georgia Tech. Their paper has not yet been published.

The data adds to understanding of how the pandemic has changed where and how Americans live. The moves were most common among those with higher incomes and more job flexibility. If the trends continue, it could have long-term implications for real estate markets, tax bases and the wealth inequality in cities, according to researchers.

"For us, the question is, is this a temporary blip or is it going to continue?" Haslag said. "If work-from-home really is going to be a factor in job and company decisions, and by allowing work and location to be separate decisions, people are going to be able to optimize their locations, if they have the right jobs."

The Census Bureau data shows that the New York metro area — which was hit early by the new coronavirus — declined by about 108,000 residents, or 0.5%. Roughly 216,000 residents moved out of the metropolitan area, but the natural increase from births and gains in international migration offset the departures. The New York metro area has experienced decelerated growth over the past several years, but last year's decline was a bigger bite of the Big Apple than in 2019, when it lost 60,000 residents.

The nation's next largest metro areas — Los Angeles and Chicago — also experienced greater population declines last year compared to the previous year: around 0.5% last year compared to 0.3% in 2019 for both metros. San Francisco also had a drop of around 0.5% last year compared to a 0.1% gain in 2019.

"I think some core urban counties like Manhattan, San Francisco and others may have taken a bigger brunt of pandemic-related out-movement, as well as lower immigration," said William Frey, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. "Overall, it was a year of slow growth with selective movement out of some urban centers."

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Smaller metros in the Sun Belt and West, several with large communities of vacation homes, saw the biggest population gains last year, mostly driven by migration. Led by the Florida retirement community The Villages, the metros seeing population increases between 3% and 4% included St. George, Utah; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Austin, Texas; and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Sun Belt megalopolises, such as Dallas, Houston and Phoenix, also grew last year, though not as much as their smaller cousins.

The Census Bureau data captured changes in states, metros and counties between July 1, 2019, and July 1, 2020. The last third of that time-frame overlapped with the first three months of the spread of the virus in the U.S. Population-change estimates are different from the 2020 census, a head count of every U.S. resident that determines how many congressional seats each state gets. Those numbers were released last week. Population changes are estimated using data on births, deaths and migration.

Haslag and Weagley estimate that 10% to 20% of the 300,000 interstate moves they studied between April 2020 and February 2021 were influenced by the pandemic. Their study used four years of long-distance moving data obtained from UniGroup, the parent company of United Van Lines and Mayflower Transit.

Job-related reasons for moving dropped from 46.6% of responses before the pandemic to 34.5% after the start of the pandemic in the U.S. in March 2020, while the desire to be closer to family jumped from 24.7% to 29.9%. The researchers theorized the jump for family reasons was due to people wanting to create social "bubbles" with family members, and the drop in job-related reasons was due to remote working and the decoupling of jobs from offices.

"It's not really about the infection rate when it comes to moving. It's about all the other things that came with the pandemic, whether it was to be closer to family or work from home," Haslag said. "That was really surprising to us."

Higher-income households moved less because of job loss or to take a new job than for other reasons such as lifestyle or the ability to work remotely. In fact, 75% of those who cited the ability to work remotely had annual household earnings of \$100,000 or more. Lower-income households were more likely to move for financial reasons such as job loss or to move to a place with a lower cost of living, the researchers said.

David Mann and his wife, Lauren, had been wanting to move to the U.S. southeast from Dallas to be closer to family and friends for some time, but it was the pandemic that made it possible. Knowing they could work from home in their jobs in supply-chain consulting and merchandise planning, they made the leap and moved to Atlanta last summer.

"Working from home gave us the opportunity to move without having to look for new jobs," Mann said.

## Family upset that 2 Americans got Italy's harshest sentence

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The family of one of two Americans, both convicted of a fatal stabbing during a scuffle with an Italian police officer, on Thursday blasted the jury for ordering Italy's harshest punishment of life imprisonment, a sentence frequently meted out to mobsters who assassinate state officials.

Months after the July 26, 2019 slaying of Carabinieri Vice Brigadier Mario Cerciello Rega in Rome, prosecutors asked for indictments for the two teenage friends from California. They described the defendants, then 19 and 18, as being in cahoots from start to finish, even though only one of them wielded the knife in what their lawyers steadfastly contended was in self-defense.

When trial ended Wednesday night, more than 14 months later, the jury convicted both on all charges and handed down life sentences — a ruling that U.S. lawyer Craig Peters called "a mockery of justice."

Finnegan Lee Elder, now 21, said that he stabbed the 35-year-old Cerciello Rega because he feared he was being strangled as the two scuffled on a Rome street. Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, now 20, testified that at his friend's request, he hid the knife in their hotel room after the stabbing.

Each was convicted of five identical counts: murder, attempted extortion, resisting a public official, injuring the officer's plainclothes partner and carrying the attack-style knife outside of home without due cause.

Natale-Hjorth testified that he didn't know Elder had a knife on him.

The two police officers, in casual summer plainclothes, had been dispatched to follow up on an alleged

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small-scale extortion attempt. The two Americans had paid for cocaine in a Rome nightlife district but didn't get it. In retaliation, they snatched a backpack with a cellphone that belonged to the go-between of the botched deal. The go-between told police he had been contacted by Natale-Hjorth, who told the man he'd give back the bag and the phone if they got their money back.

"They gave him and they gave Gabe a sentence that is befitting a Mafia boss who wantonly kills innocent people," Peters, a spokesman for the Elder family, told The Associated Press in an interview Thursday.

"How could these two boys possibly be in that same league? So from a reasoned standpoint, the verdict didn't make any sense to hold them guilty on every single charge," Peters said. "And from a compassion standpoint, it made no sense to put them on the same level as cold-blooded killers ... even the prosecutor acknowledged there was no premeditation here."

Italy's justice system is supposed to stress rehabilitation. Many sentenced to life imprisonment are often released after serving 20 years. There is an ongoing debate, however, over whether convicted mobsters, serving time for crimes including multiple murders and bombings that killed magistrates and anti-Mafia investigators, should have to stay in prison till death.

Italy's complicated, drawn-out justice system foresees two levels of appeals.

The Americans' defense teams are likely to highlight apparent failure of the Italian police to follow procedures. Neither Cerciello Rega nor his fellow plainclothes partner Andrea Varriale brought their service pistols on their assignment.

A top Carabinieri official has said it was unknown why Cerciello Rega left his pistol in his locker. Varriale, who scuffled with Natale-Hjorth, offered various versions, eventually testifying that he, too, didn't bring his weapon.

Varriale claimed the two officers showed their police badges while the Americans said they didn't and that they thought the Italians were drug dealers or mafiosi.

Not infrequently, Italian appeals courts either throw out earlier convictions or significantly reduce the sentences.

One noted example of that involved an American student, Amanda Knox, and her former Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito. In that case, Italy's top criminal Cassation court scathingly faulted prosecutors for presenting a flawed and hastily constructed case. It threw out their lower court convictions for the 2007 murder of her British roommate in Italy. Had they lost their final appeal, Knox would have faced 28½ years in an Italian prison; the Italian, 25 years.

At the Italian appeals level, Peters said, "hopefully we will have more sophisticated, more experienced, more reasonable and rational judges who will actually do the hard work of trying to make sense of all this and then fairly apportion justice."

## **Fishing tensions flare between France, UK over Brexit rules**

By JILL LAWLESS and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Royal Navy vessels and French police boats patrolled Thursday near the English Channel island of Jersey, where French fishermen angry about losing access to its waters gathered for a maritime protest.

The irate mariners set off flares and entered the island's main harbor in the first major dispute between France and Britain over fishing rights in the wake of the U.K.'s Brexit divorce from the European Union.

EU officials appealed for calm, but also accused the U.K. of not respecting the terms of the post-Brexit trade deal.

The French naval policing boats Athos, which has a large machine gun on its front deck, and the unarmed Themis were sent to keep watch on waters between France and Jersey, French maritime authorities said. The deployment came after Britain on Wednesday directed two naval vessels, the HMS Severn and the HMS Tamar, to also patrol the waters around the island, a self-governing British Crown Dependency near the coast of northern France.

French fishermen steamed into Jersey waters to protest new post-Brexit rules requiring them to submit

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their past fishing activities in order to receive a license to continue operating in the island's waters. French fishing communities claim some boats that have operated around Jersey for years have suddenly had their access restricted.

Dimitri Rogoff, who heads a group of fishermen, said about 50 boats from French ports along the western Normandy coast joined the protest Thursday morning, gathering off the Jersey port of St. Helier. He said the protest over licenses was not an attempt to blockade the port.

"This isn't an act of war," Rogoff said in a phone interview. "It's an act of protest."

Yet Jersey fisherman John Dearing said the scene off St. Helier was "like an invasion."

"It was quite a sight," he told British news agency PA. "I looked from the shore this morning and it was just like a sea of red lights and flares already going off at sea."

French authorities said the patrol vessels were there to assist in any maritime emergencies. "We would thus be capable of intervening rapidly should the situation worsen, which is not the case at the moment," they said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The French flotilla later dispersed peacefully after wrapping up its protest, French authorities said.

The British government said that, "given the situation is resolved for now," the Royal Navy vessels would return to port in the U.K.

Opponents accused British Prime Minister Boris Johnson of escalating the crisis and of using the fishing spat as an Election Day stunt. The story dominated U.K. front pages on Thursday as voters went to the polls in local and regional elections in England, Scotland and Wales.

French and British fishermen have often clashed. The latest dispute, the first since Britain's departure from the European Union last year, came after Jersey implemented new requirements that make fishermen account for their past work in Jersey waters to be eligible for a license to continue operating.

"It clearly is an attempt at pitting fishermen against each other – I'm entitled to this, you don't have rights to that," said Hugo Lehuby, a representative for French fishermen in Normandy. "It really is a provocation from Jersey."

Authorities on Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands, said some French boats had not provided the right paperwork and accused France of acting disproportionately after Paris threatened to cut off electricity to the island.

Jersey and the other Channel Islands lie closer to France than to Britain and Jersey receives most of its electricity from France, supplied through undersea cables.

French maritime minister Annick Girardin warned Tuesday that France was ready to take "retaliatory measures," accusing Jersey of stalling in issuing licenses to French boats.

Jersey government officials met with French fishermen on Thursday in an attempt to end the dispute, calling the talks "constructive."

Don Thompson, president of the Jersey Fishermen's Association, said the French fishermen should be given more time to supply the information to get the permits but that no more concessions should be made.

"The real way to solve this is not by rolling over and giving (the) French what they want," he told the AP. "They want the conditions completely removed from the licenses."

He said if French fishermen had missing paperwork, "then they just need to go back to their government, not hold Jersey under siege."

## **NY: Broadband cos paid for 8.5M fake net neutrality comments**

By TALI ARBEL AP Technology Writer

The Office of the New York Attorney General said in a new report that a campaign funded by the broadband industry submitted millions of fake comments supporting the 2017 repeal of net neutrality.

The Federal Communications Commission's contentious 2017 repeal undid Obama-era rules that barred internet service providers from slowing or blocking websites and apps or charging companies more for faster speeds to consumers. The industry had sued to stop these rules during the Obama administration but lost.

The proceeding generated a record-breaking number of comments — more than 22 million — and nearly

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18 million were fake, the attorney general's office found. It has long been known that the tally included fake comments.

One 19-year-old in California submitted more than 7.7 million pro-net neutrality comments. The attorney general's office did not identify the origins of another "distinct group" of more than 1.6 million pro-net neutrality comments, many of which used mailing addresses outside the U.S.

A broadband industry group, called Broadband for America, spent \$4.2 million generating more than 8.5 million of the fake FCC comments. Half a million fake letters were also sent to Congress.

The goal of the broadband industry campaign, according to internal documents the attorney general's office received, was to make it seem like there was "widespread grassroots support" for the repeal of net neutrality that could give the FCC chairman at the time, Ajit Pai, "volume and intellectual cover" for the repeal.

The agency is supposed to use the comments it receives, from industry and public-industry groups and the public, to shape how it makes its rules.

The FCC did not immediately answer how or if it has changed its commenting process, but the acting chairwoman, Jessica Rosenworcel, said in a prepared statement that "widespread problems with the record" of the 2017 proceedings "was troubling at the time" and the agency has to learn and improve the commenting process.

The fake comments had high-profile victims. In 2018, two senators, Democrat Jeff Merkley of Oregon and Republican Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania, said their identities were stolen to file fake comments for the net neutrality proceeding. "We were among those whose identities were misused to express viewpoints we do not hold," they wrote to the FCC's then-chairman, Pai, asking him to investigate the fake comments.

Many expect the FCC to try to reinstate net neutrality rules once a third Democratic commissioner is appointed. The agency is currently split half Democrat and Republican, which makes undoing the repeal unlikely.

Broadband for America's website says its members include AT&T and Comcast as well as major trade groups for the wireless, cable and telecom industries.

The campaign hired companies known as lead generators which created the fake comments, but that the attorney general's office had not found evidence that the broadband companies had "direct knowledge of fraud" and thus they had not violated New York law, according to the report.

Still, the report criticized the broadband industry group's behavior as "troubling," saying the campaign organizers ignored red flags and hid the broadband industry's involvement.

The lead generators copied names and addresses they had already collected and said those people had agreed to join the campaign against net neutrality, the report said. One company copied information that had been stolen in a data breach and posted online.

The attorney general, Letitia James, also announced agreements with three of the companies that were responsible for millions of the fake comments, Fluent Inc., Opt-Intelligence Inc. and React2Media Inc., that require them to change practices in future advocacy campaigns and pay \$4.4 million in fines. The companies did not reply to requests for comment.

The attorney general's office and other law enforcement agencies are still investigating "other responsible parties," according to the report.

AT&T, Comcast and industry trade groups NCTA and USTelecom did not respond to questions.

## India's gov't eases hospital oxygen shortage as demand jumps

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Under order by the Supreme Court, India's government on Thursday agreed to provide more medical oxygen to hospitals in the capital city of New Delhi, potentially easing a 2-week-old shortage that worsened the country's exploding coronavirus crisis.

Government officials also denied reports that they have been slow in distributing life-saving medical supplies donated from abroad.

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The government raised the oxygen supply to 730 tons from 490 tons per day in New Delhi as ordered by the Supreme Court. The court intervened after 12 COVID-19 patients, including a doctor, died last week at New Delhi's Batra Hospital when it ran out of medical oxygen for 80 minutes.

On Wednesday night, 11 other COVID-19 patients died when pressure in an oxygen supply line stopped working at a government medical college hospital in Chengalpet in southern India, possibly because of a faulty valve, The Times of India newspaper reported.

Hospital authorities said they repaired the oxygen line last week, but that the consumption of oxygen doubled since then, the newspaper said.

The number of new confirmed cases in India on Thursday surpassed 400,000 for the second time since the devastating surge began last month.

The 412,262 new cases pushed the country's official tally of confirmed cases to more than 21 million. The Health Ministry also reported 3,980 deaths over the past 24 hours, boosting the country's total to 230,168. Experts believe both figures are an undercount.

K. Vijay Raghvan, a principal scientific adviser to the government, characterized the explosion of cases "a very critical time for the country."

Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser, suggested a complete shutdown in India may be needed two to four weeks to help ease the surge of infections.

"As soon as the cases start coming down, you can vaccinate more people and get ahead of the trajectory of the outbreak of the pandemic," Fauci said in an interview with the Indian television CNN News18 news channel on Thursday. He did not provide specifics of what a shutdown should entail.

He suggested that India should mobilize its military to erect field hospitals that could ease the pressure on hospitals packed with patients.

Fauci also said it appears there are at least two types of virus variants circulating in India. He said B117, which is the U.K. variant, tends to be concentrated in New Delhi and that the 617 variant is concentrated in the worst-hit western Maharashtra state.

"Both of those have increasing capability of transmitting better and more efficiently than the original Wuhan strain a year ago," Fauci said.

Demand for hospital oxygen has increased sevenfold since last month, a government official said, as India struggles to set up large oxygen plants and transport oxygen to where it is needed. Ships carrying oxygen are bound for India from Bahrain and Kuwait in the Persian Gulf, officials said.

Most hospitals in India don't have their own plants to generate oxygen for patients, As a result, hospitals typically rely on liquid oxygen, which can be stored in cylinders and transported in tanker trucks. But amid the virus surge, supplies in hard-hit places like New Delhi have run critically short.

Dr. Himaal Dev, chief of the critical care unit at Apollo Hospital in the southern city of Bengaluru, said COVID-19 patients in intensive care wards need to receive at least 10-15 liters of oxygen per minute because of reduced lung function.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said India has enough oxygen but faces capacity constraints moving it to where it is needed. Most oxygen is produced in the eastern parts of India, while the demand has risen in northern and western parts.

The outbreak has also spread to neighboring countries which share porous borders with India.

In Nepal, thousands of people rushed to leave the country ahead of a halt to all international flights because of spiking COVID-19 cases.

Nepali citizens leaving to go back to their jobs in foreign countries or to visit family members and a few foreign tourists lined up at Kathmandu's airport before flights stopped at midnight Thursday. Domestic flights in Nepal were halted on Monday.

Nepal's main cities and towns have been in lockdown since last month as the number of coronavirus cases and deaths continue surging. Nepal recorded its highest number of daily infections, 8,659, on Wednesday and 58 deaths, which was also a record.

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviewed the coronavirus situation with top officials on Thursday and told them to ramp up the country's vaccination drive.



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The country, with nearly 1.4 billion people, has so far administered 162 million doses but is faces vaccine shortages.

The United States, Britain, Germany and several other nations are rushing medicine, rapid virus tests and oxygen and material the country needs to boost domestic production of vaccines to ease pressure on the country's fragile health infrastructure.

India's vaccine production is expected to get a boost with the United States supporting a waiver of intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines.

Vaccine components from the U.S. that have arrived in India will allow the manufacturing of 20 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, said Daniel B. Smith, the senior diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Last month, Adar Poonawalla, CEO of the Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, appealed to President Joe Biden to lift the embargo on U.S. export of raw materials, which he said was affecting his company's production of COVID-19 shots.

The government meanwhile described as "totally misleading" Indian media reports that it took seven days to develop a procedure for distributing urgent medical supplies that started arriving from other countries on April 25.

The government said in a statement that a mechanism for allocating supplies received by India has been put in place for effective distribution. The Indian Red Cross Society is involved in distributing the supplies from abroad, the statement said.

## **Blinken reaffirms US support for Ukraine amid Russia tension**

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed Washington's support for Ukraine at a meeting Thursday with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the wake of Kyiv's heightened tensions with Russia, fueled by Moscow's recent troop buildup near their border.

The top American diplomat met with Zelenskyy during his one-day visit and reiterated the U.S. commitment to Ukraine's "sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence," while also underscoring the importance of Ukrainian efforts to tackle widespread corruption and carry out reforms.

"Ukraine is facing two challenges: aggression from outside, coming from Russia, and in effect aggression from within, coming from corruption, oligarchs and others who are putting their interests ahead of those of the Ukrainian people," Blinken told a news conference after meeting with Zelenskyy.

By visiting so early in his tenure, before any trip to Russia, Blinken signaled that Ukraine is a high priority for President Joe Biden's foreign policy. His visit was highly anticipated in Ukraine, with hopes for increased military aid and strong support for NATO membership being voiced on the front lines of the battle against Russia-backed separatists in the east and in the halls of government in Kyiv.

Ukraine has seen an increase in hostilities in the east in recent months. Ukraine's military says 35 of its soldiers have been killed by rebel attacks this year, a significant rise from the latter part of 2020. Russia, which claims it has no soldiers in eastern Ukraine, fueled the tensions this year by massing troops and conducting large-scale military exercises near the border.

Zelenskyy has made it clear that he wants significant action — "a clear signal about the European and Euro-Atlantic prospect," as he said Monday on Twitter, referring to Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO and the European Union. "Postponing these issues for 'later,' 'some day,' '(in) 10 years' has to end."

Blinken said Ukraine's "Euro-Atlantic aspirations" were discussed with Zelenskyy and that the U.S. was "actively looking" at strengthening its security assistance to Ukraine, but didn't give details.

Zelenskyy also said the military support and the financial support from the U.S. "is increasing," but didn't elaborate.

Both noted that while Russia has pulled back some of its forces from the border, a significant number of troops and equipment is still there. Blinken said Washington was watching the situation "very, very closely," as "Russia has the capacity, on fairly short notice, to take aggressive action if it so chooses."

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"I can tell you, Mr. President, that we stand strongly with you," Blinken said.

In Brussels on Thursday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also said the 30-nation military alliance "needs to stay vigilant and closely monitor the developments" in and around Ukraine. "We have seen some reduction in the number of Russian troops, but tens of thousands remain, and we also see that Russia has kept a lot of weapons, prepositioned equipment, and they're also imposing restrictions in the Black Sea," Stoltenberg told reporters.

Efforts have stalled to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has killed more than 14,000 people since it broke out in 2014. Zelenskyy has called for the U.S. to try to push these efforts forward by joining the negotiations of the "Normandy Format" that consists of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France. Russia is almost certain to oppose any U.S. involvement in the negotiations.

Earlier this week, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Ukraine also was worried about Russia's announcement last month that it was redeploying warships from its Caspian flotilla to the Sea of Azov, an extension of the Black Sea that borders Ukraine and Russia. "There is now a big threat in the Sea of Azov; it is unprecedentedly large," Kuleba said.

Zelenskyy said he discussed security in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov with Blinken, but wouldn't reveal any details.

He also said he invited Biden to visit Ukraine this year, and Blinken said the U.S. president would "welcome the opportunity at the right time."

Earlier in the day, Blinken met with Kuleba, and they both joined Metropolitan Epiphaniy — head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which split from Russia's Orthodox Church. They laid flowers at a memorial to Ukrainian soldiers killed in the conflict in the east and toured St. Michael's Monastery.

Blinken also met with Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, who tweeted that his visit to Kyiv was "a manifestation of firm support and a high level of relations of two states," and with Ukrainian lawmakers.

Blinken's visit to Kyiv comes at a time of heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine, imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and accusations of hacking and election interference.

Last month, Biden suggested to Russian President Vladimir Putin to meet for talks in a third country in an effort to defuse tensions. The Kremlin has been considering the proposal.

Asked by the Russian state news agency Tass on Thursday whether there was a list of possible places for the meeting, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he had "still nothing to tell about the possible meeting."

Kyiv-based political analyst Vadym Karasev said Washington was trying to avoid "sharp and loud statements in order not to thwart the (possible) meeting of Putin and Biden, during which the issue of de-escalation near Ukrainian borders should be resolved for good."

"That's why Blinken used the whole arsenal of a sophisticated diplomat in order to be calm Kyiv on one hand by promising to increase military and financial support, and on other had not to force the question of Ukraine's NATO membership," Karasev said.

"Both Washington and Kyiv need one thing today — to avoid a hot war with Russia and to make Russian troops pull back from the Ukrainian border," Karasev said. "If diplomatic methods are exhausted, only then one should expect vivid metaphors and loud accusations from loudspeakers."

## National Teacher of Year focuses on individual student needs

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic forced students out of the classroom and starkly revealed how learning difficulties, distractions and challenging home dynamics can make it tough to adhere to a rigid curriculum.

In a year with so much loss, a silver lining is that educators are embracing a flexible approach that meets students where they are, said Juliana Urtubey, the newly named 2021 National Teacher of the Year.

"We, as teachers, are much more open to this self-paced learning, this flipped classroom, which has been an invitation for students who think and learn differently," Urtubey said.

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The Council of Chief State School Officers recognized the Las Vegas special education teacher with the award Thursday.

"Juliana Urtubey exemplifies the dedication, creativity and heart teachers bring to their students and communities," council CEO Carissa Moffat Miller said.

The council said she is the first Latino recipient since 2005 and the first Nevada teacher to win the award.

First lady Jill Biden, who was in Las Vegas as part of a three-state swing through the U.S. West, congratulated Urtubey during a surprise visit to her classroom Thursday. "CBS This Morning" aired video of Urtubey appearing shocked when Biden, also an educator, walked into the classroom and handed her flowers.

"She is just the epitome of a great teacher, a great educator," Biden said as she sat for an interview with Urtubey.

Urtubey, who has been an educator for 11 years, works with elementary school students, individualizing lessons to match their academic, emotional and behavioral needs. That can put her everywhere in a school, from spending hours with struggling pre-K students to helping a fifth-grader with science class and strategizing with teachers on how to work with their special-needs students.

She said her approach is to think about a child holistically — taking into account their interests, hobbies, family structure and community — and using that to understand what they will need and how to find their strengths.

"There's always strengths to find, and so once you find those strengths, you start there," Urtubey said.

She said she learned early in life the value of an education that takes a child's background into consideration. She moved to the U.S. from Colombia as a young child and spent part of her early education in a bilingual magnet school before her family moved and couldn't find a similar school nearby.

Urtubey said it hammered home the importance of a school "that really knows how to nurture and uplift" a student in a way that takes their identity into account.

She said she decided to enter special education after seeing how capable some students can be after receiving information a different way.

"I knew that I could be the kind of teacher that would just take it step by step, have a whole lot of celebration for kids, particularly kids with thinking and learning differences and really just make learning fun," she said.

She has reached and nurtured students by starting a community garden at Crestwood Elementary School, where she taught before joining a new school this academic year. She launched the project seven years ago, sprucing up a bare patch of grass and a section of the aging school building. It's now a flourishing outdoor classroom with flowers, fruit trees, vegetables and more than a dozen murals.

Her students formed a garden club called "Gnomies" to care for the space, along with a mini farmer's market that runs on donations and sends students home with fresh produce.

"You can imagine what it means to be a child who doesn't experience a whole lot of success in the classroom but then to go and learn outside all the time in the garden," she said. "It's fun for them, and it's fun for teachers."

Thanks to her students, Urtubey picked up a new nickname: "Ms. Earth-to-bey," as a play on her last name. Nowadays, they just call her Ms. Earth.

"It's by far the most prestigious award that I've ever been awarded," she said of the nickname.

Urtubey's garden and the way it connected with the community and helped her students grow was among the factors the selection committee cited in naming her Teacher of the Year.

Urtubey is in her first year at new school: Kermit R. Booker, Sr. Innovative Elementary School in Las Vegas, where she's planning to launch another garden. As Teacher of the Year, a yearlong advocacy role, she said she plans to promote for "a joyous and just education," where students feel they're understood and teachers work with families and communities to address injustices, bias, racism and a lack of access to resources.

The winner of the award is usually recognized by the president at a White House ceremony each spring, but that's been postponed for the second year because of the pandemic. The Council of Chief State School

Officers says it will work with the White House to schedule a ceremony for Urtubey and the 2020 winner, Tabatha Rosproy of Kansas, when it's safe to do so.

## Super Thursday: Britons vote in a bumper crop of elections

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Millions of British voters were casting ballots Thursday in local and regional elections, and the choices of Scottish voters in particular could have huge repercussions for the future of the United Kingdom.

On what has been dubbed Super Thursday, around 50 million voters were eligible to take part in scores of elections, some of which had been postponed a year because of the pandemic that has left the U.K. with Europe's largest coronavirus death toll.

At stake is the make-up of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales and the next mayors for England's big cities, including London and Manchester. Thousands of council members, police commissioners and other local authorities are also seeking seats. No elections were taking place in Northern Ireland.

A special election will also fill the U.K. parliamentary seat of Hartlepool in the north of England. The vote there could show whether Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party is still making inroads into parts of the country that the Labour Party has dominated for decades.

The result of that race is expected early Friday, but the outcomes of the other elections will take longer, with some possibly not emerging until Sunday, partly because of restrictions related to the pandemic.

More voters than usual were expected to cast postal ballots, while those still going to polling stations were encouraged to bring their own pen and wear a face mask. With traditional doorstep campaigning restricted because of the pandemic, there are concerns about low turnout in many of the races.

The election that could have the biggest U.K.-wide implications was taking place in Scotland, where the governing Scottish National Party is looking for a renewed mandate that could speed up the prospect of a second independence referendum.

The party's leader, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, says she's looking to push for another referendum if her party wins a majority in the parliament in Edinburgh, but only after the pandemic has been dealt with and the economic recovery from it is on track.

Scotland has been part of the U.K. since 1707 and the issue of Scottish independence appeared settled when Scottish voters rejected secession by 55%-45% in a 2014 referendum. But the U.K.-wide decision in 2016 to leave the European Union ran against the wishes of most Scots — 62% voted in favor of staying within the bloc while most voters in England and Wales wanted to leave. That gave the Scottish nationalist cause fresh legs.

"I hope the SNP win because we're looking for a second independence referendum, especially since we've now left the EU," 18-year-old student Emily Blair said while lining up to vote in Edinburgh.

As U.K. prime minister, Johnson has the ultimate authority to permit another referendum on Scottish independence. So far he has refused, setting up the possibility of renewed tensions between his government and Sturgeon's devolved administration if the SNP wins a majority in the 129-seat assembly in Edinburgh. The nationalists are expected to win the most seats but polls before the election indicate it's not clear if they will get a majority.

"I think it will be extremely close," said Roddy Millar, a 53-year-old businessman in Edinburgh. "I suspect the SNP might edge it, but I'm hoping not, because I think it just leads to much more dislocation and uncertainty and instability."

It's also an important Election Day for the Labour Party, a year into the leadership of Keir Starmer, whose left-wing predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, led the party in 2019 to its worst election performance since 1935.

Starmer has impressed as the leader of the opposition within the British Parliament but has been unable to go out on the stump to generate enthusiasm around the country because of the pandemic.

Labour Party candidates Sadiq Khan and Andy Burnham are expected to easily win second terms as the mayors of London and Manchester, but a Labour defeat in the special election in Hartlepool would be

particularly disappointing for the party. Labour has held the seat since the constituency was created in 1974. Losing it would show that the opposition party is struggling to hold onto support in the "red wall" in north England, which has been its bedrock base for a century.

Although the U.K. has recorded Europe's highest virus-related death toll at more than 127,500 and witnessed one of the world's worst recessions over the past year, Johnson's Conservatives are hoping to find support in the traditional Labour heartlands of central and northern England due to the success of Britain's vaccine rollout.

Britain has given two-thirds of its adults at least one vaccine dose, raising the prospect of a return to some type of normal life and summer holidays over the coming months. According to the Bank of England on Thursday, the British economy this year could be headed for its highest annual growth rate since 1941.

## Arrested youth detention center worker was fired, rehired

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — A former worker at a New Hampshire youth detention center recently charged with holding down a teenage boy during a rape was fired years before that, over allegations of physical and psychological abuse, according to court documents obtained by The Associated Press.

But Bradley Asbury, now 66, was rehired under an agreement that kept his termination out of his personnel file, the court records show.

Asbury, of Dunbarton, was charged April 7 with being an accomplice to the rape of a boy at the Youth Development Center in 1997 or 1998. Prosecutors say he and a colleague at the Manchester facility held the teen down while two other staffers sexually assaulted him in the dormitory where Asbury served as house leader.

All four men, plus seven others, were arrested last month as part of an ongoing investigation into the center, now called the Sununu Youth Services Center after former Gov. John H. Sununu, father of the current governor. The facility has been the target of a criminal investigation since 2019. Additionally, more than 300 men and women allege in a lawsuit that they were physically or sexually abused as children by 150 staffers from 1960 to 2018.

The investigation also has expanded to include a Concord facility where children were held while awaiting court disposition of their cases. Asbury was working there in July 1994 when he and two other supervisors were fired for "severe verbal and severe psychological abuse and some extremely inappropriate and unauthorized confinement" of children, Lorrie Lutz, then-director of the state Division for Children, Youth and Families, told a reporter at the time.

Lutz did not respond to recent emails seeking comment, but one of Asbury's former co-workers told the AP that she reported him after he and several other male staffers performed a violent "takedown" of a teen during which the boy's head hit the concrete floor.

"They went in, and they were just very, very aggressive with this kid, and he was just a little thing. You could tell the staff, the guys that were dealing with him, were angry. They weren't de-escalating him, they were escalating him," said the woman, who spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because she still fears Asbury. "I saw them take him down, and his head hit the floor, and they didn't stop, and they didn't call the nurse or anyone else. They were just there, on him."

Asbury immediately appealed his firing to a state board, which held a hearing six months later in early 1995. The details of that proceeding aren't public, and his current attorney declined to comment. But according to a lawsuit Asbury filed against Lutz in 1996, he reached an agreement with the state in April 1995 to be reinstated with back pay and have the details of his termination removed from his file.

In the lawsuit, which Asbury withdrew months after filing, he said the appeals board "completely exonerated" him. He also claimed Lutz used him as a scapegoat for "institutional deficiencies" and called the investigation a "witch hunt" sparked by disgruntled employees.

The former co-worker who spoke to The AP said Asbury and others took a militant, intimidating approach to their jobs. Instead of having unruly kids serve a "time out" on the main floor in view of the staff, they

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locked them in their rooms alone for hours at a time, she said. And the use of physical force to subdue the teens increased.

"It was very obvious once people from YDC came up and started working on our unit, the unit shifted, and it shifted to more disciplinarian, more aggressiveness," she said. "It went from an environment where we would talk the kids down to deescalate them to physically confining them to deescalate them and holding them down when they were screaming and carrying on."

Asbury initially was hired as night watchman in Manchester in 1985 and later promoted to assistant house leader of the center's maximum-security cottage, according to his lawsuit. In 1989, he was transferred from Manchester to the Youth Detention Services Unit in Concord.

After being rehired in 1995, Asbury worked in Manchester until 2001, and for a time led a chapter of the state employees union there. In 2000, when the state was investigating 25 complaints of physical abuse and neglect at the center, he was quoted as saying the allegations were offensive.

"We take them personally," Asbury told The Union Leader. "That stuff does not take place. It's not tolerated. We don't have time to abuse them."

Asbury later went to work directly for the State Employees Association, which had helped him regain his job, serving in various positions on and off until 2016. The union's current president declined to comment.

The former co-worker, meanwhile, quit her job soon after Asbury was fired and moved out of state. She was unaware of the recent criminal investigation and lawsuit alleging decades of abuse until after his arrest.

"It makes me angry but it more so breaks my heart," she said. "I can't prove it. I wasn't privy to it. But I was privy to aggressiveness, and it was more so after he came."

She said she no longer felt safe once word got around about her complaint, especially after a female staffer sympathetic to Asbury told her to watch her back. She also worried about getting attacked by an older teen who was accused of a particularly violent crime. Asbury, she said, frequently gave the boy privileges such as staying up late and visiting the center's gym at night.

"I was afraid," she said. "I felt so bad for those kids — I did — but I got the hell out there."

## An online post helps both the hungry and a chef in Ramadan

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

A few years ago, Mariam Yehia, her mom and a friend started a Ramadan tradition — they bought hot meals and handed them out to the needy in Cairo so they can break their fast during the Muslim holy month.

"We feel really good that we try as much as we can to help people," Yehia said. But "we feel always that we're not doing enough."

This year, an online post gave the 26-year-old a way to do more.

A friend wrote on Facebook about Mahmoud Kamal, a chef who needed financial help. So instead of getting the iftar meals from a restaurant near her home, Yehia decided to buy them from Kamal.

She and her group placed a first order of 60 meals that included chicken, rice and vegetables. For a little extra money, Kamal added dates and juice.

Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, is a time for heightened giving and empathy. In Egypt, free communal iftar meals typically see strangers huddled around long tables on the street to break their fast together. But such tables were banned due to the coronavirus, and Yehia felt the need to give had been amplified.

"Some kids run to their parents when you tell them that you're giving out meals, and they're very excited and happy," she said. "It breaks our hearts, but ... at least seeing them happy and excited to just get a simple meal is really something."

Yehia then decided to make a post of her own, recommending the meals and encouraging people to either order from Kamal or suggest other cooks who may also need more business. Her post ended up getting about a thousand shares.

"The idea of going an extra mile to do two good things instead of one in one simple act, I think this is what resonated with people," she said. "It's all about encouraging people to do good things."

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Jana El Daour is the friend who made the original post that inspired Yehia and others. El Daour had never met Kamal but heard from an acquaintance who knew him that he was in debt.

She was used to seeing her father give rides to strangers who needed them and, growing up, she and family members would pack meals to distribute in Ramadan or toys to give out during religious feasts. So she wanted to help.

"Often we get overwhelmed with everything we need to do and with work. ... We're in a bubble, so when I find a chance to break away from the bubble and help, I do what I can," El Daour said. "It was just a post. I don't feel like I did much."

It didn't feel that way to Kamal.

Since El Daour's post, phone calls and orders have been streaming in. Some paid for the meals and requested he distribute them to the needy himself. He said he would send them a video showing him handing out the food. Others told him they just wanted to help him.

His wish now is to meet El Daour. "I really want to thank her," he said.

"Often we have this negative outlook on life and on people," El Daour said. "But this just proved that people are still good, still share, still support and still help each other."

## Jhené Aiko, Saweetie to perform on AAPI advocacy TV special

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Platinum-selling performers of part-Asian descent, including R&B singer Jhené Aiko and rapper Saweetie, will perform on a TV special produced by The Asian American Foundation, the newly formed organization launched to improve AAPI advocacy.

TAAF announced Thursday that English icon Sting will also perform at "See Us Unite for Change — The Asian American Foundation in service of the AAPI Community." It will air on May 21 on a number of channels, including MTV, BET, VH1, Comedy Central as well as Facebook Watch.

TAAF's launch comes as anti-AAPI hate and violence persist at alarming rates. Actor Ken Jeong will host the special, which will include appearances by Daniel Dae Kim and Lisa Ling and "will feature testimonials from leading Asian American public figures, as well as individuals working to enact change on the ground," organizers said.

The TV special coincides with TAAF's See Us Unite campaign, which launched Thursday and is designed to expand support for the AAPI community. The Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation and the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation have partnered with TAAF for the campaign, and funds raised will benefit several grassroots-led efforts, including Stop AAPI Hate and Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

Aiko, who is part-Japanese, is one of R&B's top stars and has achieved multi-platinum status with songs like "Sativa," "While We're Young" and "The Worst." Saweetie is of Chinese, Filipino and Black descent, and has released hits like "Tap In," "My Type" and "Best Friend."

## US unemployment claims fall to a pandemic low of 498,000

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment aid fell last week to 498,000, the lowest point since the viral pandemic struck 14 months ago and a sign of the job market's growing strength as businesses reopen and consumers step up spending.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that applications declined 92,000 from a revised 590,000 a week earlier. The number of weekly jobless claims — a rough measure of the pace of layoffs — has declined significantly from a peak of 900,000 in January as employers have ramped up hiring.

At the same time, the pace of applications is still well above the roughly 230,000 level that prevailed before the viral outbreak tore through the economy in March of last year.

As vaccinations have been more widely administered, restrictions on businesses have gradually lifted

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and consumers have become more willing to travel, shop and dine out, stronger spending has boosted hiring, slowed layoffs and accelerated growth. The economy grew last quarter at a vigorous 6.4% annual rate, with expectations that the current quarter will be even better.

The rapid turnaround has led many businesses, especially restaurants and others in the hospitality industry, to complain that they can't find enough workers to fill open jobs. Some other employers are raising pay to attract applicants.

Pointing to the \$300-a-week federal jobless check that was included in a \$1.9 trillion rescue package enacted in March, some employers have complained that some unemployed people can receive more money from jobless aid than from a job.

The complaints have led Gov. Greg Gianforte to announce that Montana would stop issuing the federal unemployment payments at the end of June. Instead, the state will use some of the federal money to pay \$1,200 bonuses to unemployed workers who take jobs. Montana's unemployment rate has fallen to 3.8%. About 30,000 people are receiving jobless aid in Montana.

Other states are ending a pandemic-era exemption to long-standing rules that required aid recipients to show that they were looking for jobs in order to keep receiving unemployment. That requirement was suspended during the pandemic but has recently been reinstated in Florida and New Hampshire.

Andrew Stettner, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, disputed the notion that unemployment benefits are dissuading many people from taking jobs. He noted that jobless claims are declining faster in states where hiring is strong, indicating that many of the new hires had previously been receiving unemployment aid.

"It will take many months of economic recovery, vaccine progress and rebuilding of the child care infrastructure before (many unemployed) are able to find suitable work," Stettner said. "Until then, enhanced unemployment benefits will not only sustain jobless families, but continue to power a robust recovery through greater consumer spending."

"In other words," Stettner said, "when the labor market recovers and job opportunities abound, workers will exit (unemployment) benefits for available jobs."

In March, employers added nearly 1 million jobs, the most since August. Roughly the same number is expected to be reported Friday when the government issues the jobs report for April. Even so, the economy will still be more than 7 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level.

The government's report Thursday showed that about 16.2 million people were continuing to collect unemployment benefits in the week that ended April 17, down from 16.6 million in the previous week. That's a sign that some former recipients have found jobs.

As economic growth has accelerated, sales of vehicles and newly built homes have soared, manufacturing output has risen and Americans on average have increased their savings and wealth. In part, this is because of \$1,400 stimulus checks that were distributed to most adults and in part because many affluent households have built up savings while working from home and have benefited from a surging stock market.

Shortages of raw materials and parts have swollen prices for lumber, copper and semiconductor chips, which are critical to the housing and auto industries, among other sectors. Those higher costs, along with wage pressures, have elevated fears that inflation could accelerate.

Analysts have forecast that when the monthly jobs report is released Friday, it will show that the economy added 975,000 jobs in April, according to data provider FactSet, and that the unemployment rate fell from 6% to 5.8%. That would show that more Americans are looking for work and more employers are hiring them.

## **In the shadow of COVID-19, a toll on entertainment workers**

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Like so many, the pandemic upended life for actor and dancer Rena Riffel. The Los Angeles-based performer needed help with rent, utilities and counselling when jobs suddenly dried up.

"Being an artist, we are already very fragile with our finances," she said. "It's like an ebb and flow. So



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when the pandemic happened and everything shut down, for myself and for everyone else, there's really no hope. There's no opportunity."

Riffel's experience is echoed in a new survey by The Actors Fund that illustrates the depths of need created by the COVID-19 pandemic in the arts community. Released Thursday, it reveals financial hardship, food insecurity and lost housing.

The survey of 7,163 people helped by the organization — including Riffel — found that 76% of respondents lost income and 40% reported reduced food security.

Some 28% fell behind in rent or mortgage and 20% were forced to change housing. Ten percent of respondents had to sell a large asset, such as a house or a car.

"We see the pandemic as having a long tail on its impact on performing artists and entertainment professionals, and especially people involved in live entertainment," Joe Benincasa, CEO of The Actors Fund, said to The Associated Press.

A massive 79% of respondents reported that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their mental health, with increased feelings of anxiety or depression.

"For people working in the gig economy, not always knowing when they're going to work again — that stress — the impact is tremendous," said Benincasa.

The Fund provides a national safety net for performing arts and entertainment professionals in the fields of film theater, television, music, opera, radio and dance.

Last year, it served more than 40,000 individuals, a 71% increase from 2019. It distributed more than \$19 million in direct cash to about 15,000 individuals.

The Fund helped Riffel get a grant to cover living expenses, gave her financial advice, pointed her to more schooling and how to pay for it, and offered workshops to broaden her skill set and supplied wellness counselling.

"It just really helped me stay focused and continue to work on myself as an artist and being creative," she said. "And just really remain hopeful. I think that was the key to it all: Just know that things are going to get better."

The survey, which has a margin of error of plus/minus 1.2%, was conducted by Morey Consulting. The median household income among all respondents was \$34,186.

Benincasa credited the work done by the Fund in the years before the pandemic for keeping the loss of health insurance coverages relatively lower than anticipated. Only 10% of respondents reported that they lost health insurance and have not had it replaced.

He said the marketplace provided by the Affordable Care Act was one reason the rate was low, as well as the Fund's trained counselors who were able to find clients affordable health care.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday that Broadway theaters can reopen Sept. 14. "Phantom of the Opera," Broadway's longest-running show, announced Wednesday that it would resume performances Oct. 22, with tickets going on sale Friday. More shows are expected to circle return dates in the coming weeks. Actors' Equity Association, the national labor union representing more than 51,000 actors and stage managers in live theater, said the news meant the theater community is "one step closer to the safe reopening" of Broadway.

But Benincasa warned that for those in the arts community, more bad numbers are likely to be generated in the coming months. The Fund is preparing for a surge in requests for direct financial assistance around housing.

"People will be slow to get back on their feet. They've accumulated debt. They've maxed out credit cards. They have rent and mortgages to catch up on," he said.

"My sense is that the fall, when the moratorium is lifted on rent and mortgage, I think that could have a serious impact on people's lives and that we'll see an uptick."

Benincasa credited his group's social workers and front-line staff for helping so many, especially at their residences, which includes a nursing home in Englewood, New Jersey. He also thanked the people who have staged concerts and events to raise money for the Fund.

"We're proud of the community, how they stepped up to help us help people," he said. As for the Fund's

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work, he said: "We're going to stay with it."

In Los Angeles, Riffel said things are beginning to look up for her. "I've started auditioning again," she said. "Being an artist is really what feeds my soul."

She credits The Actors Fund for helping her through the dark time. "If I wouldn't have found my way to them, I don't know what my life would be because I feel like my life has improved in every way."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, May 7, the 127th day of 2021. There are 238 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 7, 1945, Germany signed an unconditional surrender at Allied headquarters in Rheims (rams), France, ending its role in World War II.

On this date:

In 1833, composer Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany.

In 1840, composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, Russia.

In 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed and sank the British liner RMS Lusitania off the southern coast of Ireland, killing 1,198 people, including 128 Americans, out of the nearly 2,000 on board.

In 1928, the minimum voting age for British women was lowered from 30 to 21 — the same age as men.

In 1939, Germany and Italy announced a military and political alliance known as the Rome-Berlin Axis.

In 1946, Sony Corp. had its beginnings as the Tokyo Telecommunications Engineering Corp. was founded in the Japanese capital by Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka.

In 1954, the 55-day Battle of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam ended with Vietnamese insurgents overrunning French forces.

In 1963, the United States launched the Telstar 2 communications satellite.

In 1975, President Gerald R. Ford formally declared an end to the "Vietnam era." In Ho Chi Minh City — formerly Saigon — the Viet Cong celebrated its takeover.

In 1998, the parent company of Mercedes-Benz agreed to buy Chrysler Corp. for more than \$37 billion. Londoners voted overwhelmingly to elect their own mayor for the first time in history. (In May 2000, Ken Livingstone was elected.)

In 2010, a BP-chartered vessel lowered a 100-ton concrete-and-steel vault onto the ruptured Deepwater Horizon well in an unprecedented, and ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to stop most of the gushing crude fouling the sea.

In 2019, two gunmen opened fire inside a charter school in a Denver suburb not far from Columbine High School, killing a student, 18-year-old Kendrick Castillo, who authorities said had charged at the shooters to protect classmates; two students at the school were charged in the attack. (A 16-year-old, Alec McKinney, pleaded guilty to 17 felonies and was sentenced to life in prison plus 38 years; 19-year-old Devon Erickson pleaded not guilty to the same charges; his trial has been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.)

Ten years ago: The U.S. released videos seized from Osama bin Laden's hideout showing the terrorist leader watching newscasts of himself amid shabby surroundings. Justin Verlander threw his second career no-hitter, leading the Detroit Tigers to a 9-0 victory over the Toronto Blue Jays. World Golf Hall of Famer Seve Ballesteros, 54, died in Pedrena, Spain.

Five years ago: A Tesla Model S sedan that was in self-driving mode crashed into the side of a tractor-trailer in Williston, Florida, killing its occupant, Joshua D. Brown. President Barack Obama told the graduating class at Howard University in Washington, D.C. that the country was "a better place" than when he left college more than 30 years earlier, but acknowledged that gaps persisted, citing racism and inequality.

One year ago: Georgia authorities arrested a white father and son and charged them with murder in the February shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man they had pursued in a truck after spotting him running in their neighborhood near the port city of Brunswick. In an abrupt about-face, the Justice

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Department dropped a criminal case against Michael Flynn, President Donald Trump's first national security adviser, who was accused of lying to the FBI about conversations with the Russian ambassador. The White House said a member of the military serving as one of Trump's valets tested positive for the coronavirus. A Texas hair salon owner, Shelley Luther, sentenced to a week behind bars for keeping her business open despite Gov. Greg Abbott's emergency orders, was freed after less than 48 hours; Abbott had removed jail as a punishment for defying virus safeguards. A study in the New England Journal of Medicine found no evidence of benefit from a malaria drug that was promoted as a treatment for the coronavirus. Neiman Marcus said it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, becoming the first department store chain to be toppled by the pandemic.

Today's Birthdays: R&B singer Thelma Houston is 78. Actor Robin Strasser is 76. Singer-songwriter Bill Danoff is 75. Rock musician Bill Kreutzmann (Grateful Dead) is 75. Former Utah Gov. Gary Herbert is 74. Rock musician Prairie Prince is 71. Movie writer-director Amy Heckerling is 69. Actor Michael E. Knight is 62. Rock musician Phil Campbell (Motorhead) is 60. Rock singer-musician Chris O'Connor (Primitive Radio Gods) is 56. Actor Traci Lords is 53. Actor Morocco Omari is 51. Singer Eagle-Eye Cherry is 50. Actor Breckin Meyer is 47. Rock musician Matt Helders (Arctic Monkeys) is 35. Actor-comedian Aidy Bryant is 34. Actor Taylor Abrahamse is 30. Actor Alexander Ludwig is 29. Actor Dylan Gelula is 27.