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NOW HIRING

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



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

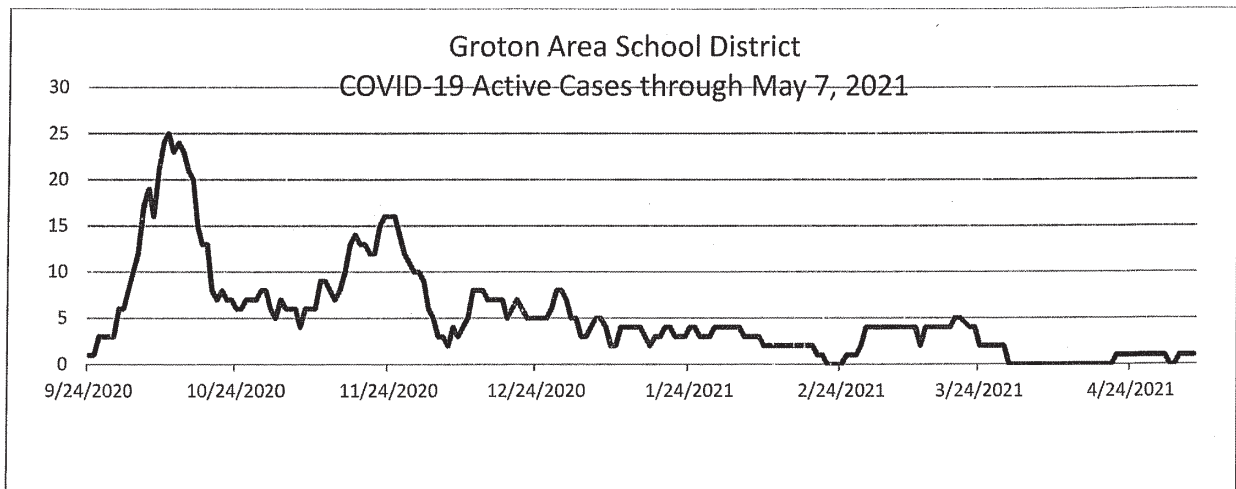
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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

May 10, 2021

Groton Area School District COVID Data Update.



To date we've had 107 total confirmed cases of COVID-19 [14.89%] of students or staff members of our District (35 staff members [35.0%], 23 elementary students [7.23%], 18 middle school students [13.14%], and 32 [17.58%] high school students [21.4%]).

Brown County data to date indicates 5,553 infections of total population 38,839 [14.30%].

Statewide data to date indicates 123,233 infections of total population 884,659 [13.93%].

Looking Ahead. With school dismissed for the year, our attention will shift to completion of year ending reports, facilities maintenance, and preparation for the 2021-2022 school year which starts in 104 days ☺.

When Crisis Comes Virtual Speaking Series. I've been participating in a virtual speaking series funded by the SMHSA Disaster Relief Grant. Two weeks ago, the topic was working through student suicide. Last week's session was Dr. CJ Huff who was the superintendent of schools in Joplin, MO in 2011 when tornadoes destroyed the community and their schools. Dr. Huff talked about leading after tragedy and through recovery. Tomorrow, the speaker is Molly Hudgens whose presentation is entitled "Saving Sycamore: The School Shooting that Never Happened."

Medical Marijuana. The period for public comment on the proposed administrative rules (Article 24:60) for medical marijuana is open until 5/12/2021. The South Dakota Board of Education Standards will hold a public hearing on the proposed rules on 5/17/2021. To review the proposed rules or provide comment go to rules.sd.gov, click on Department of Education, and click Article 24:80.

In summary, the proposed rules require districts to allow the administration of non-smokable medical marijuana to medical cannabis cardholders by registered designated caregivers. The rules prohibit self-administration including by students who have reached the age of 18. The rules also provide permissive language for school districts that choose to administer medical cannabis by school personnel and store medical cannabis on school property.

ESSER 2 Grant Funding. We've submitted an application for the second round of federal ESSER funding in the amount of 411,180. The proposal contains \$272,335 for reimbursement of incurred or previously planned expenditures. We will await word for further guidance from SDDOE. The new funding proposals would fund staff professional development (\$29,286), NWEA Maps testing and implementation, partial replacement of a new school bus (\$21,370), and replacing the fiber line between the two school buildings (\$51,000). The proposal does not need to be final, but needed to be submitted by April 30 to claim expenses from fiscal year 2021 (\$218,253).

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ESSER 3 Grant Funding. We will continue to learn more about the ESSER 3 grant requirements this week Thursday from the Department of Education. Last week we were given the following milestone dates:

May 24, 2021	SDDOE allocates grant funds to school districts. We must acknowledge grant allocations and sign off on certain assurances.
June 7, 2021	SDDOE will submit its plan to US Ed
June 21, 2021	SDDOE will post its required data online
June 23, 2021	School districts post "Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Service" plan online.
August 20, 2021	School districts post <i>updated</i> "Safe Return" plans online. Plans must include 1. Policies related to CDC recommendations, 2. Continuity of services, 3. Routine review/updates to plan, and 4. Uniform and understandable format. We will be required to submit updates to our plan through 2023.
August 20, 2021	Districts submit ESSER 3 plan to SDDOE.

Upcoming Events

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

Trio of Groton golfers place in top 20 at Groton meet

Three Groton girls participated in the golf meet held Monday at the Olive Grove Golf Course in Groton. All three golfers placed in the top 20. Carly Guthmiller placed fifth with a score of 98, shooting a 49 in both halves. Shaylee Peterson placed 11th with a score of 110, shooting a 56 in the front nine and a 54 in the back nine. Emma Schinkel tied for 14th with a 118, scoring a 62 in the front nine and a 56 in the back nine.

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Principal's Report

MS/HS Building

Mrs. Sombke

May 10, 2021

- 1) **Graduation Practice Thursday, May 13th**
 - Practice begins at 9:00am in the GHS Arena
 - Seniors are to please bring their graduation gown on a hanger
 - Bring a basket for cards and gifts
 - Wear your senior shirt for senior class picture
- 2) **Scholarship Donor Meet and Greet, Thursday May 13th**
 - Meet and Greet begins at 1:30-3:30pm in the High School Library
 - Students will be able to come and go as needed during track meet
- 3) **Graduation Ceremony Sunday, May 16th**
 - Graduation ceremony will begin at 2:00pm in the GHS Arena
- 4) **Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching State-Level finalist, Mrs. Kristin Gonsoir!**
 - Mrs. Gonsoir is one of three teachers in grades 7-12 Science, selected to represent our state's best science teachers
 - All three state level finalists will be recognized during the STEM Ed two day conference held in February, in Huron SD in addition to receiving a one year membership to SDSTA and a nights stay at the Crossroads Hotel
 - Mrs. Gonsoir currently teaches Chemistry I, Chemistry II, Anatomy and Physiology, Physics, and Debate I, II, and III
 - Mrs. Gonsoir has completed the additional documents requests which are required to move into the final-round
 - Jennifer Fowler, SD PAEMST Science Coordinator will continue to report findings/results as they are released
- 5) **SD COVID19 Pandemic Impact Survey**
 - South Dakota is currently collecting data from all public-school districts so that a compilation in written form may be submitted and published which will demonstrate and reflect data findings from School Districts across South Dakota
 - Select school data will be shared with the South Dakota Department of Social Services (DSS) to issue Pandemic EBT (food benefits) to qualified children
 - A survey is completed for each school within each district (Elementary, Middle, and High School)
 - Survey is required of all accredited schools and must be completed by Friday, May 21, 2021
- 6) **Planning for School Year 2021-2022- Great things coming**
 - Finalizing Class Schedule for grades 6-12 for the 2021-2022 school year

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- Preparing to welcome new staff to our district and into their new classroom/space
- Beginning to plan ways to increase student incentives for positive choices, and positive consistent behavior in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities; updates will be coming! (Restorative Justice Initiative)
- Mentoring and partnerships a possibility for students and local business owners; using what we have to make a better community and school (Restorative Justice Initiative)

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Powerball, Lucky for Life Rules Approved

PIERRE, S.D. – South Dakota Lottery players will have more ways to win when changes to Powerball and Lucky for Life take place this summer.

Beginning July 19, players will have the chance for a lifetime of winning every day when Lucky for Life drawings are held daily. Lucky for Life drawings are currently held every Monday and Thursday night.

Lucky for Life, which offers players a top prize of \$1,000 a day for life, debuted in South Dakota on June 5, 2017. Since sales began, South Dakota has been home to one top prize winner, as well as six second prize winners of \$25,000 a year for life.

"Throughout the last four years, Lucky for Life has generated a lot of excitement among our players and retail partners," South Dakota Lottery Executive Director Norm Lingle said. "We hope that excitement continues to grow with drawings now taking place every night."

Powerball will also have additional draws on the horizon, but that's not the game's only change.

Beginning August 23, Powerball drawings will be held each Monday, Wednesday and Saturday night. Currently, drawings are held each Wednesday and Saturday.

Powerball will also debut a new add on feature to the game. For \$1 more each play, players may add the Double Play feature. The add on will incorporate an additional drawing, in which players can win up to \$10 million.

Players will have the same numbers for both the regular Powerball and Double Play drawings if they choose the add on.

"Powerball has been a staple of the South Dakota Lottery for decades," Lingle said. "We anticipate this next evolution of the game will appeal to our players."

The changes to Lucky for Life and Powerball were approved by South Dakota's Rules Review Committee on Monday.

The state's Capital Construction Fund receives 65 percent of net revenue from lotto games such as Powerball and Lucky for Life. This supports the Water and Environment Fund, the Ethanol Fuel Fund, and the State Highway Fund. The state's General Fund, which supports K-12 schools, state universities and technical institutes, receives the other 35 percent of lotto revenue.

For more information on Lucky for Life and Powerball, visit <https://lottery.sd.gov/games/lottogames/>.
Powerball Double Play Prize Structure

Powerball Double Play Prize Structure

Match	Prize*	Odds
5 of first set + 1 of second set	\$10,000,000	1:292,201,338
5 of first set	\$500,000	1:11,688,054
4 of first set + 1 of second set	\$50,000	1:913,129
4 of first set	\$500	1:36,525
3 of first set + 1 of second set	\$500	1:14,494
3 of first set	\$20	1:580
2 of first set + 1 of second set	\$20	1:701
1 of first set + 1 of second set	\$10	1:92
0 of first set + 1 of second set	\$7	1:38

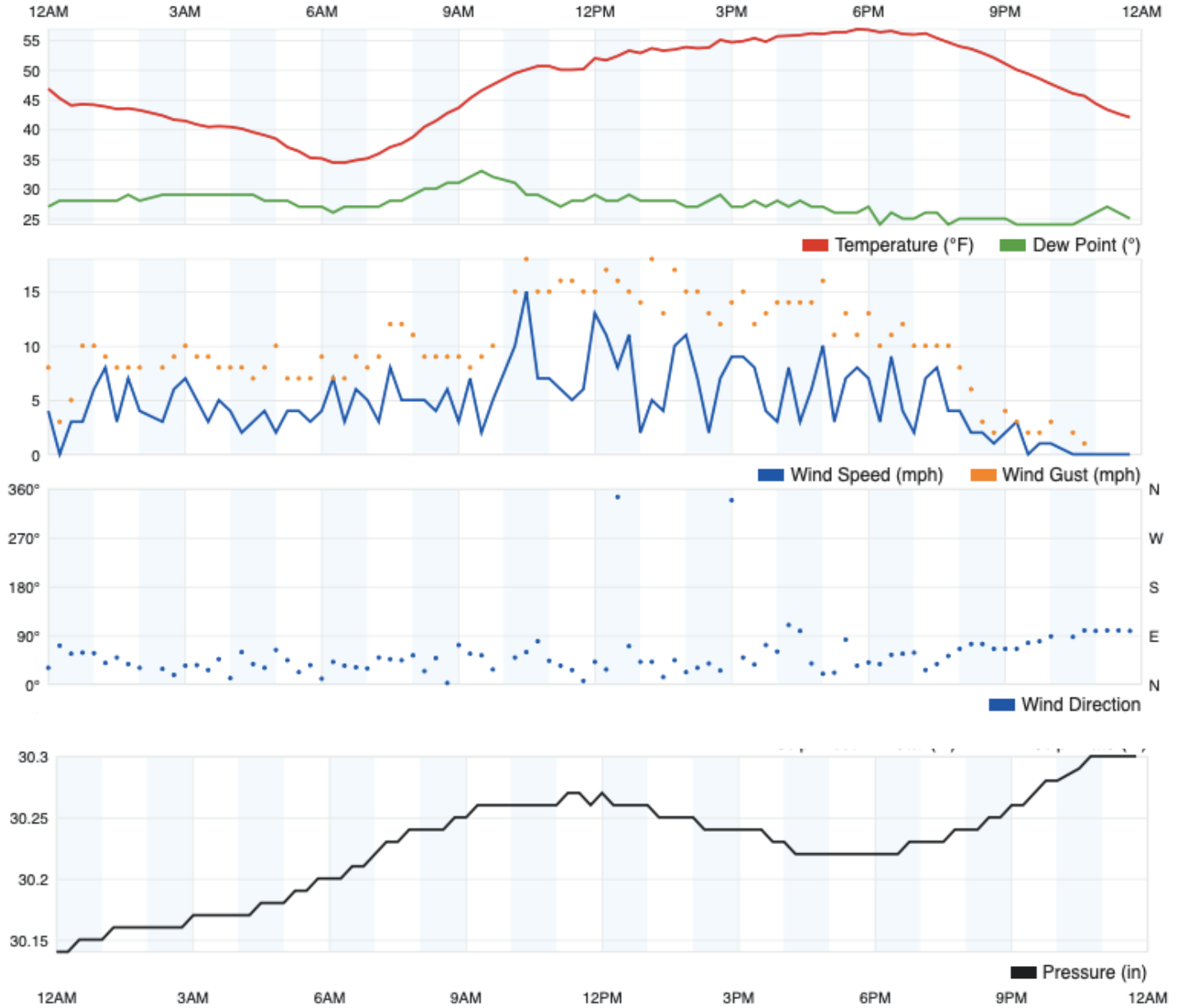
Overall odds of winning a prize are approximately 1:24.9

*Prizes subject to pari-mutuel payouts in accordance with Powerball Game Group rules and regulations.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather



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Today



Sunny

High: 64 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 35 °F

Wednesday



Sunny

High: 67 °F

Wednesday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 42 °F

Thursday



Sunny then
Chance
Showers

High: 66 °F

Today
61 to 65°
Sunny, partly cloudy later
Light winds out of the southeast gusting
10-20 mph during the afternoon

Wednesday
64 to 69°
Near Normal Temps for mid-May
Possible light rain showers in central SD

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
Aberdeen, SD 5/11/2021 4:28 AM

Through the middle of the week we can expected mostly dry conditions with near normal temperatures. Light rain is possible Wednesday, with the better chances of precipitation west of the Missouri River.

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Today in Weather History

May 11, 1966: Late season snow fell in parts of north central and northeast South Dakota and into west central Minnesota. Amounts include; 4 inches in Timber Lake; 3 in Eureka, 2 NNW of Mobridge, and Roscoe; and 2 inches in Artichoke Lake MN, Pollock, and Waubay.

May 11, 1998: Torrential rains of 2 to 4 inches with some amounts nearing 5 inches fell across a large part of Brown, Marshall, Day, Spink, and Clark counties on the evening of the 11th. This round of heavy rain only exacerbated the already extensive flooding occurring from many years of above-average precipitation. Day County was most affected by this round of heavy rain where area lakes were already at new record levels. Blue Dog, Waubay, Rush, and Bitter Lake in Day County were just a few of the lakes hard hit. In fact, extensive sandbagging was done around Blue Dog Lake to save many homes. Some residents of Blue Dog Lake said they had never seen the lake so high in over 35 years of living there. Many more roads become flooded after this heavy rain event and will remain so for quite some time. Spots on U.S. Highway 12 and U.S. Highway 25 become flooded near Holmquist and Webster. Also, more of U.S. Highway 212, 4 miles east of Clark was flooded. There remained only one road opened to the town of Grenville in northeastern Day County. In all five counties, the rising water took away many more acres of farm and pastureland, as well as drowning many crops that had already been planted. One farmer in Spink County said sixty percent of his farm was under water. Some farmhouses and outbuildings became surrounded by water leaving some families stranded. After this heavy rain, around sixty percent of the crop and pastureland in Day County and one-third of it in Spink County had been inundated by a swollen water table and several years of above normal precipitation. Overall, the continued flooding has had a tremendous impact on the economy in the five county areas. Some rainfall amounts on this day include; 4.7 inches just north of Crocker in Clark County; 4.52 at Webster; 4.01 at Doland; 3.81 at Waubay NWR; 3.60 at Turton; 2.63 at Conde; 2.60 at Groton; 2.41 at Clark; and 2.18 inches at Aberdeen.

Additional heavy rain of 2 to 4 inches fell mainly during the evening of the 11th across southern and central Hand County. Many creeks in the area became rushing torrents through the night and the day of the 12th. Also, low-lying areas and a lot of crop and pastureland were flooded. Some businesses and homes in the Miller, Saint Lawrence, Ree Heights, and Vayland areas were flooded. Some sandbagging was done to try and save some properties in Miller. U.S. Highway 14 at the east end of Miller was flooded over for several hours along with many other streets, county and township roads in southern and central Hand County. Many of the roads were damaged as the result of the flooding. Some people in Miller said they had never seen it flood this bad in 35 years. Some rainfall amounts include; 3.99 inches at Miller; 3.10 inches 3 miles south of Ree Heights; and 2.65 at Ree Heights.

1865: A tornado touched down in Philadelphia around 6 PM ET, killing one person and injuring 15 others. There was a considerable destruction of property, with 23 houses blown down, damage to the Reading Railroad depot, with the water tank, carried 150 yards. Fairmont Park was damaged to the amount of \$20,000.

1934: A tremendous dust storm affected the Plains as the Dust Bowl era was in full swing. According to The New York Times, dust "lodged itself in the eyes and throats of weeping and coughing New Yorkers," and even ships some 300 miles offshore sawdust collect on their decks. Click [HERE](#) for more information.

1953: A terrifying F5 tornado rips through downtown Waco, Texas, killing 114 people and injuring nearly 600 more. More than 850 homes, 600 businesses, and 2,000 cars are destroyed or severely damaged. Losses have been estimated at \$41 million. The tornado is the deadliest in Texas history and the tenth deadliest in the US.

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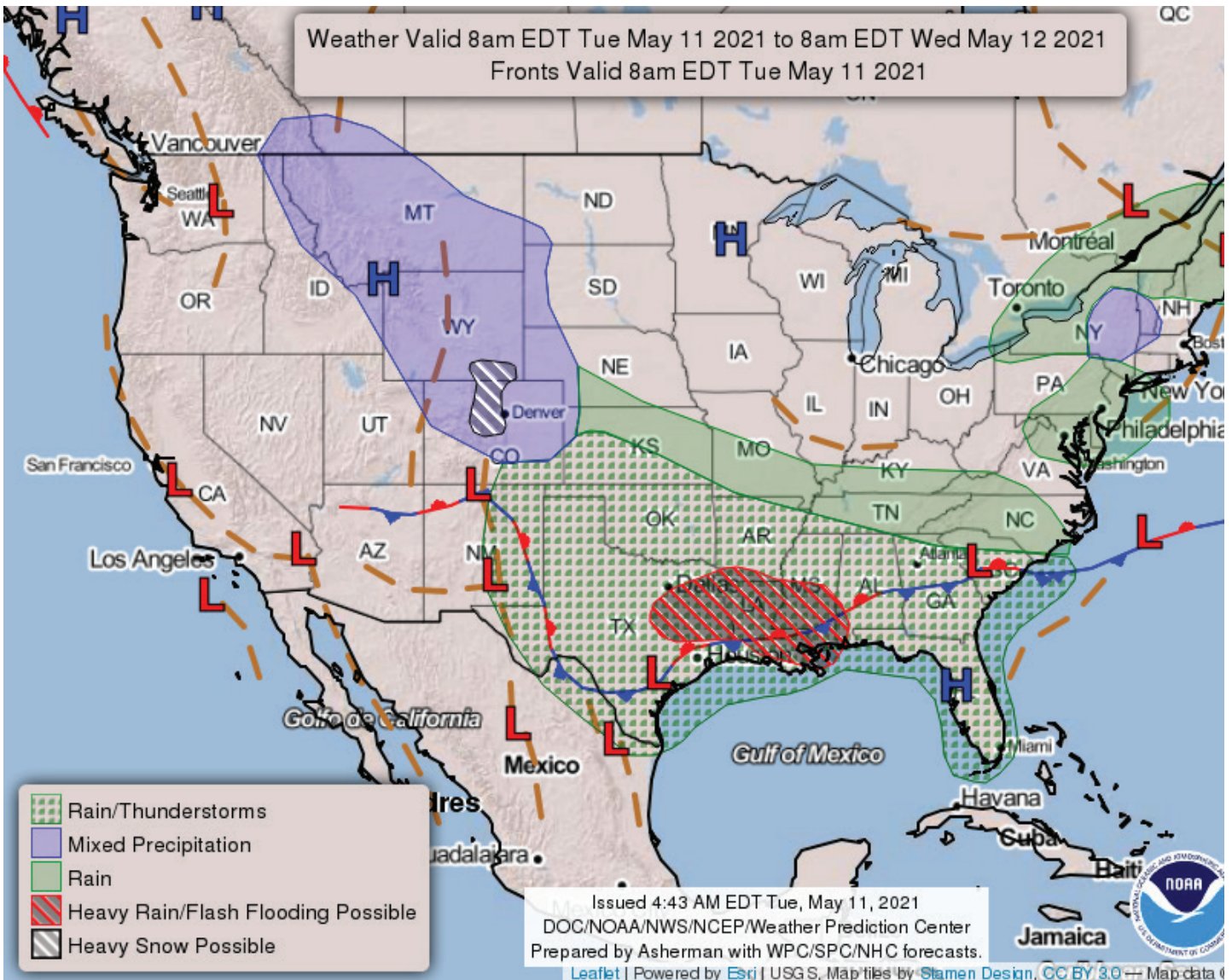
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 57 °F at 5:46 PM
Low Temp: 34 °F at 6:18 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 11:03 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 95° in 1900
Record Low: 18° in 1946
Average High: 69°F
Average Low: 42°F
Average Precip in May.: 1.10
Precip to date in May.: 0.25
Average Precip to date: 5.07
Precip Year to Date: 3.02
Sunset Tonight: 8:53 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:06 a.m.



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HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT

Few things are more important to us than our safety and security. We depend on rules and regulations for our well-being and protection. We have the police to protect us and the military to guard us. We rely on individuals we have never seen or met to enforce laws we have never read and to be alert if an enemy threatens us if there is a national emergency. Yet, despite all the layers of defense that have been placed around us, the threats of life continue to surround us and invade our spaces. We search for a moment of peace in these times of turbulence and turmoil.

However, as Christians, we must always remember that we have a resource that is always available. The Psalmist reminds us that "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Not only are we reminded that God is our refuge and strength but that He is ever-present! Not might be or could be but is ever-present.

The word refuge means shelter. When the rains fall and the rivers rise, we can always find a place of security in the arms of God. When days are dark and nights are long, we always have His light to shine before us and around us and keep us from becoming lost or falling. When sickness strikes and illness lingers, we always have the assurance of His presence and peace.

And His strength – His mighty power – is there as our shield and sword. No one would go into any battle without the proper equipment to protect and defend themselves. Here, however, we are reminded that the battle belongs to our God and He will not only fight for us but will protect us from anyone who would hurt or harm us, destroy or defeat us.

And we can take great assurance that His refuge and strength are ever-present. He is with us – not He might be with us – wherever we are. We have no reason to be frightened when the world seems to be closing in on us and the pressures of life are about to overcome us. God: our refuge and strength – is right here, right now.

Prayer: Help us to realize, Lord, Your ever-present presence in our lives and that You are constantly involved in anything and everything that concerns us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

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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
Cancelled 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

Jet lands safely in Rapid City after mechanical problems

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Delta Air Lines regional jet landed safely in Rapid City after mechanical problems were reported, the airline said.

The airline said in a statement that flight 5057 operated by Endeavor Air from Minneapolis/St. Paul to Rapid City encountered a “performance issue with one of the CRJ-200 aircraft’s two engines during its descent” into Rapid City Sunday night.

“The flight crew followed established procedures to safely land the aircraft,” the statement said.

No injuries were reported.

Kaley Meyer, who was a passenger on the plane, told the Rapid City Journal that pilots notified passengers of the engine failure shortly before landing.

“All they said is we were having an emergency landing and that one of our engines wasn’t working and we landed safely shortly after.” Meyer said. “Our pilots were amazing and calm.”

The newspaper reported that normal flight operations resumed at the airport about 20 minutes after the plane landed.

UTTC powwow to return to Bismarck late this summer

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The United Tribes Technical College International Powwow and associated events will return late this summer after a year’s hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic.

However, the Tribal Leaders Summit that’s traditionally held at the Bismarck Event Center before the outdoor powwow has been called off a second year.

The Bismarck Tribune reports this year’s powwow will be the weekend of Sept. 10-12, starting with the grand entry Friday night and continuing through Sunday

Associated events will include Powwow Youth Day that Friday, a golf tournament Friday, a three-day softball tournament and a three-day youth basketball tournament beginning Friday, and the Powwow Thunderbird Run on Saturday.

The powwow put on by the five American Indian tribes in North Dakota typically brings about 10,000 people to Bismarck and boosts the area economy by more than \$4 million, according to the college. It attracts dancers from dozens of tribes across the U.S. and Canada and awards more than \$100,000 in prize money. It’s considered one of the top powwows in the nation. United Tribes uses proceeds to fund student scholarships.

Aberdeen man sentenced for choking woman, drug possession

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — An Aberdeen man has been sentenced to five years in prison for choking a woman and for possessing methamphetamine.

Darrell Two Hearts, 41, pleaded guilty to felony domestic aggravated assault stemming from a 2020 choking incident and to felony drug possession. Police were called to a residence in Aberdeen on a report of a domestic fight between Two Hearts and the woman.

She and her child escaped from the house through a window near the roof. Two Hearts was in the house when they left.

The police department’s Special Response Team was sent to get Two Hearts out of the house, but he had left before the team arrived, the Aberdeen News reported.

Two Hearts was sentenced to five years in prison with one year suspended and given credit for 270 days served.

2 killed, others injured in weekend crash in Sioux Falls

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SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sioux Falls police are investigating the cause of a fatal weekend crash that left two dead.

Officers responded to the crash scene about 11:40 p.m. Saturday. They found two vehicles had collided at an intersection in Sioux Falls.

Two people in one of the vehicles were pronounced dead at the scene, officials said.

Passengers from both vehicles were also taken to area hospitals for severe injuries, although it's unclear how many people were hurt and their current conditions, the Argus Leader reported.

The names of the victims have not yet been released.

Speed appears to be a factor in the crash, according to police.

Russian school shooting in Kazan kills 7 students, 1 teacher

MOSCOW (AP) — A gunman attacked a school Tuesday morning in the Russian city of Kazan, killing eight people — seven eighth-grade students and a teacher — and leaving 21 others hospitalized with wounds, Russian officials said.

Russian media said some students were able to escape the building during the attack, while others were trapped inside. Students were eventually evacuated to nearby kindergartens and collected by their families. Dozens of ambulances lined up at the entrance to the school after the attack, with access to the building fenced off by police.

Police opened a criminal investigation into the shooting.

Rustam Minnikhanov, governor of the Tatarstan republic where Kazan is the capital, said four boys and three girls, all eighth-grade students, died in the shooting. Minnikhanov's press service later said a teacher was also killed.

"The terrorist has been arrested, (he is) 19 years old. A firearm is registered in his name. Other accomplices haven't been established, an investigation is underway," Minnikhanov said after visiting the school, adding that security had been restored.

Authorities said additional security measures were immediately put into place in all schools in Kazan, a city 700 kilometers (430 miles) east of Moscow. They also announced a day of mourning on Wednesday to honor the victims of the shooting.

According to Tatarstan health officials, 21 people were hospitalized with wounds after the attack, including 18 children, six of whom were in intensive care.

Russia's state RIA Novosti news agency reported earlier that 11 people had been killed in the Kazan shooting. There was no way to immediately reconcile the differing death tolls.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to families of the victims and wished a speedy recovery to those injured in the shooting, ordering the government to provide them with all the necessary assistance.

Putin also ordered Victor Zolotov, head of Russia's National Guard, to revise the regulations on types of weapons allowed for civilian use in light of the attack.

Russia's Emergency Ministry sent a plane with doctors and medical equipment to Kazan and two leading officials, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko and Education Minister Sergei Kravtsov, also headed to the region.

While school shootings are relatively rare in Russia, there have been several violent attacks on schools in recent years, mostly carried out by students.

Gaza militants, children among 24 dead as Israel hits Hamas

By FARES AKRAM and KARIN LAUB Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel unleashed new airstrikes on Gaza early Tuesday, hitting the high-rise home of a Hamas field commander and two border tunnels dug by militants, as Hamas and other armed groups fired dozens of rockets toward Israel. The escalation in the conflict was sparked by weeks of tensions in contested Jerusalem.

Since sundown Monday when the cross-border attacks began, 24 Palestinians — including nine children

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— were killed in Gaza, most by airstrikes, Gaza health officials said. The Israeli military said 15 of the dead were militants. During the same period, Gaza militants fired more than 250 rockets toward Israel, injuring six Israeli civilians in a direct hit on an apartment building.

In a further sign of rising tensions, Israel signaled it is widening its military campaign. The military said it is sending troop reinforcements to the Gaza border and the defense minister ordered the mobilization of 5,000 reserve soldiers.

In the past, cross-border fighting between Israel and Hamas, the group that rules Gaza, would typically end after a few days, often helped by behind-the-scenes mediation by Qatar, Egypt and others. It was not clear if such a resolution would come this time.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned that fighting could “continue for some time.” Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, an Israeli military spokesman, told reporters Tuesday that the military was in “the early stages” of strikes against Gaza targets that it had planned well in advance.

The overnight rockets and airstrikes were preceded by hours of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, including dramatic confrontations at Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a sacred site to both Jews and Muslims. In fighting in the contested city and across the West Bank, more than 700 Palestinians were hurt, including nearly 500 who were treated at hospitals.

In a sign of widening unrest, hundreds of residents of Arab communities across Israel staged overnight demonstrations — denouncing the recent actions of Israeli security forces against Palestinians — in one of the largest protests by Palestinian citizens in Israel in recent years.

The escalation comes at a time of political limbo in Israel.

Netanyahu has been acting as a caretaker prime minister since an inconclusive parliamentary election in March. He tried and failed to form a coalition government with his hard-line and ultra-Orthodox allies, and the task was handed to his political rivals last week. One of those rivals is Israel’s defense minister who is overseeing the Gaza campaign. It is not clear if and to what extent the toxic political atmosphere is spilling over into military decision-making, though the rival camps have unanimously expressed support for striking Hamas hard.

Israeli media have reported that the new round of violence is slowing efforts by Netanyahu’s rivals to form a ruling coalition among parties with a broad range of ideologies, but a shared goal of toppling Netanyahu. The support of an Arab-backed party with Islamist roots is key for the anti-Netanyahu bloc’s efforts. The party’s leader, Mansour Abbas, has essentially said he’ll work with whatever political camp offers the most improvements in Arab communities, but the current tensions might deter him from joining a coalition, at least for now.

The current round of violence in Jerusalem coincided with the start of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in mid-April. Critics say heavy-handed police measures helped stoke nightly unrest, including a decision to temporarily seal off a popular gathering spot where Palestinian residents would meet after evening prayers. Another flashpoint was the Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, where dozens of Palestinians are under threat of eviction by Jewish settlers.

Over the weekend, confrontations erupted at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, which is the third holiest site of Islam and the holiest site in Judaism.

For four successive days, Israel police fired tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets at Palestinians in the compound who hurled stones and chairs. Hundreds of Palestinians were hurt, requiring treatment at hospitals. Two dozen officers were also injured. At times, police fired stun grenades into the carpeted mosque.

On Monday evening, Hamas began firing rockets from Gaza, setting off air raid sirens as far as Jerusalem, after giving Israel a deadline to withdraw Israeli security forces from the compound. From there on, the escalation was rapid.

Conricus, the army spokesman, said Gaza militants fired more than 250 rockets at Israel, with about one-third falling short and landing in Gaza.

The army said that a rocket landed a direct hit on a seven-story apartment block in the coastal Israeli

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city of Ashkelon. Photos and videos from the scene showed a large hole in the side of the building. Israeli paramedic service Magen David Adom said it treated six people injured in the rocket strike. Two were hospitalized in moderate condition.

Conricus said the military hit 130 targets in Gaza, including the high-rise home of a Hamas field commander and two tunnels militants were digging under the border with Israel. In all, Israel killed 15 militants, Conricus said. He said Israel's new system of concrete barriers and electronic sensors, intended to thwart tunnel digging, has proven effective.

He did not address Gaza Health Ministry reports that nine children were among 24 Palestinians killed overnight.

In Gaza, most of the deaths were attributed to airstrikes. However, seven of the deaths were members of a single family, including three children, who died in an explosion in the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun and it was not clear if the blast was caused by an Israeli airstrike or errant rocket.

More than 100 Gazans were wounded in the airstrikes, the Health Ministry said.

In one, an Israeli missile hit the upper floors of an apartment building in the Shati refugee camp on the edge of Gaza City early Tuesday, killing two men and a woman inside, according to health officials.

Israel had struck scores of Gaza homes in its 2014 war with Hamas, arguing it was aiming at militants, but also killing many civilians. The practice drew broad international condemnation at the time.

Israel's tactics in Jerusalem have drawn angry reactions from the Muslim world.

Regional power house Saudi Arabia said in a statement that it condemns in the strongest terms what it said were attacks by Israeli forces against the sanctity of Al-Aqsa and the safety of its worshippers. The Saudi Foreign Ministry called Tuesday on the international community to hold Israeli forces responsible for any escalation.

Separately, the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation is holding an emergency meeting of its permanent representatives in Jiddah to discuss the tensions.

AIDS virus used in gene therapy to fix 'bubble baby' disease

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

A gene therapy that makes use of an unlikely helper, the AIDS virus, gave a working immune system to 48 babies and toddlers who were born without one, doctors reported Tuesday.

Results show that all but two of the 50 children who were given the experimental therapy in a study now have healthy germ-fighting abilities.

"We're taking what otherwise would have been a fatal disease" and healing most of these children with a single treatment, said study leader Dr. Donald Kohn of UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital.

"They're basically 'free range' -- going to school, doing normal things," without the worry that any infection could become life-threatening, he said.

The other two children who weren't helped by the gene therapy later had successful bone marrow transplants. Doctors say it will take longer to know if any of the 50 are cured, but they seem to be well so far.

The children had severe combined immunodeficiency syndrome, or SCID, which is caused by an inherited genetic flaw that keeps the bone marrow from making healthy versions of the blood cells that form the immune system. Without treatment, it often kills in the first year or two of life.

It became known as "bubble boy disease" because of a case in the 1970s involving a Texas boy who lived for 12 years in a protective plastic bubble to isolate him from germs. It's now called "bubble baby disease" because roughly 20 different gene defects, including some that affect girls as well as boys, can cause it.

A bone marrow transplant from a genetically matched sibling can cure the disorder, but most kids lack a suitable donor and the treatment is risky -- the Texas boy died after one.

Patients now are treated with twice-weekly doses of antibiotics and germ-fighting antibodies, but it's not a permanent solution.

Doctors think gene therapy might be. They remove some of a patient's blood cells, use a disabled AIDS virus to insert a healthy version of the gene that the kids need, and return the cells through an IV.

Josselyn Kish, now 11 and living in Las Vegas, had it at UCLA when she was 3. As a baby, she suffered rashes, painful shingles and frequent diarrhea, said her mother, Kim Carter. "Day care was calling me a couple times a week to come get her because she was always getting fevers."

After the gene therapy, "she was better right away," Carter said. Now, "she rarely, rarely gets sick at all" and has been able to recover whenever she has. That hope extends to Josselyn's newest infection — she was just diagnosed with COVID-19 and so far has only very mild symptoms.

In all, 27 children were treated at the Los Angeles hospital, three at the U.S. National Institutes of Health near Washington and 20 at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London. The fact the treatment seems safe across multiple hospitals performing it makes the study "very powerful," said Dr. Stephen Gottschalk of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis.

He had no role in the new study but he and his colleagues have performed a similar gene therapy on 17 other children with SCID.

"People ask us, is it a cure? Who knows long term, but at least up to three years, these children are doing well," Gottschalk said. "The immune function seems stable over time so I think it looks very, very encouraging."

Results of the UCLA-led study were published Tuesday by the New England Journal of Medicine and presented at an online American Society of Gene & Cell Therapy conference. Grants from U.S. and British government health agencies and the tax-supported California Institute for Regenerative Medicine paid for the work. Kohn is an inventor of the treatment and an adviser to the company now developing it, London-based Orchard Therapeutics.

100 days in power, Myanmar junta holds pretense of control

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — After Myanmar's military seized power by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, it couldn't even make the trains run on time. State railway workers were among the earliest organized opponents of the February takeover, and they went on strike.

Health workers who founded the civil disobedience movement against military rule stopped staffing government medical facilities. Many civil servants were no-shows at work, along with employees of government and private banks. Universities became hotbeds of resistance, and in recent weeks, primary and secondary education has begun to collapse as teachers, students and parents boycott state schools.

One hundred days after their takeover, Myanmar's ruling generals maintain just the pretense of control. The illusion is sustained mainly by its partially successful efforts to shut down independent media and to keep the streets clear of large demonstrations by employing lethal force. More than 750 protesters and bystanders have been killed by security forces, according to detailed independent tallies.

"The junta might like people to think that things are going back to normal because they are not killing as many people as they were before and there weren't as many people on the streets as before, but ... the feeling we are getting from talking to people on the ground is that definitely the resistance has not yet subsided," said Thin Lei Win, a journalist now based in Rome who helped found the Myanmar Now online news service in 2015.

She says the main change is that dissent is no longer as visible as in the early days of the protests — before security forces began using live ammunition — when marches and rallies in major cities and towns could easily draw tens of thousands of people.

At the same time, said David Mathieson, an independent analyst who has been working on Myanmar issues for over 20 years, "Because of the very violent pacification of those protests, a lot of people are willing to become more violent."

"We are already starting to see signs of that. And with the right training, the right leadership and the right resources, what Myanmar could experience is an incredibly nasty destructive, internal armed conflict in multiple locations in urban areas."

The junta also faces a growing military challenge in the always restive border regions where ethnic minor-

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ity groups exercise political power and maintain guerrilla armies. Two of the more battle-hardened groups, the Kachin in the north and the Karen in the east, have declared their support for the protest movement and stepped up their fighting, despite the government military, known as the Tatmadaw, hitting back with greater firepower, including airstrikes.

Even a month ago, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet was describing the situation as grim, saying Myanmar's "economy, education and health infrastructure have been brought to the brink of collapse, leaving millions of Myanmar people without livelihood, basic services and, increasingly, food security."

It was not surprising that The Economist magazine, in an April cover story, labeled Myanmar "Asia's next failed state" and opined it was heading in the direction of Afghanistan.

The U.N.'s Bachelet made a different comparison.

"There are clear echoes of Syria in 2011," she said. "There too, we saw peaceful protests met with unnecessary and clearly disproportionate force. The State's brutal, persistent repression of its own people led to some individuals taking up arms, followed by a downward and rapidly expanding spiral of violence all across the country."

Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations with long experience working with Myanmar, said, "The most immediate step is for the government and the opposition to start a dialogue to end the violence and bloodshed. There has to be a negotiation on humanitarian access to keep the economy and ... health care system from collapsing."

Junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing has so far shunned all suggestions of talks from the United Nations as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Myanmar is a member. He attended a specially called ASEAN summit meeting in Indonesia in April.

The 10-member group issued a statement calling for an immediate cessation of violence and a dialogue mediated by an ASEAN special envoy.

Within days of Min Aung Hlaing's return, his junta brushed aside the initiative, saying Myanmar would "give careful consideration to constructive suggestions made by ASEAN Leaders when the situation returns to stability in the country since priorities at the moment were to maintain law and order and to restore community peace and tranquility."

Myanmar's resistance movement, meanwhile, has organized widely and swiftly underground.

Within days of the junta takeover, elected parliamentarians who were denied their seats convened their own self-styled Parliament. Its members have formed a shadow National Unity Government with guidelines for an interim constitution, and last week, a People's Defense Force as a precursor to a Federal Union Army. Many cities, towns and even neighborhoods had already formed local defense groups which in theory will now become part of the People's Defense Force.

Aside from being morale boosters, these actions serve a strategic purpose by endorsing a federal style of government, which has been sought for decades by the country's ethnic minorities to give them autonomous powers in the border areas where they predominate.

Promoting federalism, in which the center shares power with the regions, aligns the interests of the anti-military pro-democracy movement with the goals of the ethnic minorities. In theory, this could add a real military component to a movement whose armaments are generally no deadlier than Molotov cocktails and air rifles — though homemade bombs have been added to its arsenals in recent weeks.

In practice, at least for the time being, the guerrilla armies of the Kachin in the north and the Karen in the east will fight as they always have, to protect their own territory. They can give military training to the thousands of activists that are claimed to have fled the cities to their zones, but are still overmatched by the government's forces. But on their home ground they hold an advantage against what their populations consider an occupying army. That may be enough.

"The only thing that the military is really threatened by is when all of these disparate voices and communities around the country actually start working against it, not as a unified monolith, but all working against the military's interests," said the analyst, Mathieson. "And I think that's the best that we can hope for moving forward, that the people recognize that all efforts have to go against the military. And if that

means fighting up in the hills and doing peaceful protests and other forms of striking back against the military in the towns and the cities, then so be it.”

It’s hard to gauge if the army has a breaking point.

Mathieson said he’s seen no signs the junta was willing to negotiate or concede anything. The Tatmadaw is “remarkably resilient. And they recognize that this is an almost existential threat to their survival.”

China adds few babies, loses workers as its 1.4B people age

By JOE McDONALD and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The number of working-age people in China fell over the past decade as its aging population barely grew, a census showed Tuesday, complicating Chinese leaders’ efforts to create a more prosperous and influential nation.

The total population rose to 1.411 billion people last year, up 72 million from 2010, according to the once-a-decade census. Slow growth fell closer to zero as fewer couples had children.

That adds to challenges for Chinese leaders who want to create a richer society and increase its global influence by developing technology industries and self-sustaining economic growth based on consumer spending.

The ruling Communist Party has enforced birth limits since 1980 to restrain population growth but worries the workforce is shrinking. It has eased birth limits, but couples are put off by high costs, cramped housing and job discrimination against mothers.

The population of potential workers aged 15 to 59 fell to 894 million last year, the National Bureau of Statistics reported. That would be down 5% from a 2011 peak of 925 million. The percentage of children in the population edged up compared with 2010, but the group aged 60 and older grew faster.

Changes in birth limits and other policies “promoted a rebound in the birth population,” the bureau director, Ning Jizhe, said at a news conference.

However, Ning said 12 million babies were born last year, which would be down 18% from 2019’s 14.6 million.

China, along with Thailand and some other developing Asian countries that are aging fast, faces what economists call the challenge of whether it can grow rich before it grows old. Some warn China faces a “demographic time bomb.”

The potential shortage of workers needed to generate economic activity and tax revenue comes as President Xi Jinping’s government boosts spending on its military and efforts to create global competitors in electric cars and other technologies.

Reflecting the issue’s sensitivity, the statistics agency took the unusual step last month of announcing the population grew in 2020 but gave no total. That looked like an effort to calm companies and investors after The Financial Times reported the census might have found a surprise decline.

“We are more concerned about the fast decline in the proportion of the working age population compared to the total population,” said Lu Jiehua, a professor of population studies at Peking University.

The working-age population will fall from three-quarters of the total in 2011 to just above half by 2050, according to Lu.

“If the population gets too old, it will be impossible to solve the problem through immigration,” said Lu. “It needs to be dealt with at an early stage.”

Couples who want a child face daunting challenges.

Many share crowded apartments with their parents. Child care is expensive and maternity leave short. Most single mothers are excluded from medical insurance and social welfare payments.

Some women worry giving birth could hurt their careers.

“When you have a kid, you take pregnancy leave, but will you still have this position after you take the leave?” said He Yiwei, who is returning from the United States after obtaining a master’s degree. “Relative to men, when it comes to work, women have to sacrifice more.”

Japan, Germany and some other rich countries face the same challenge of supporting aging populations

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with fewer workers. But they can draw on investments in factories, technology and foreign assets. By contrast, China is a middle-income country with labor-intensive farming and manufacturing.

The decline in the working-age population "will place a cap on China's potential economic growth," said Yue Su of the Economist Intelligence Unit in a report. That is a "powerful incentive to introduce productivity-enhancing reforms."

The International Monetary Fund is forecasting Chinese economic growth of 8.4% this year following a rebound from the coronavirus pandemic. The Communist Party wants to double output per person from 2020 levels by 2035, which would require annual growth of about 4.7%.

The numbers reported Thursday reflect a gain of 11.8 million people, or 0.8%, over the official estimate for 2019, when the government says the population edged above 1.4 billion for the first time.

The working-age population fell to 63.3% of the total from 70.1% a decade ago. The group up to age 14 expanded by 1.3 percentage points to 17.9%. Those 60 and older — a group of 264 million people who on their own would be the world's fourth-biggest country — rose 5.4 percentage points to 18.7% of the population.

"Labor resources are still abundant," said Ning of the statistics agency.

The party took its biggest step in 2015 when rules that limited many couples to having only one child were eased to allow two.

However, China's birth rate, paralleling trends in South Korea, Thailand and other Asian economies, already was falling before the one-child rule. The average number of children per mother tumbled from above six in the 1960s to below three by 1980, according to the World Bank.

Demographers say official birth limits concealed what would have been a further fall in the number of children per family.

The one-child limit, enforced with threats of fines or loss of jobs, led to abuses including forced abortions. A preference for sons led parents to kill baby girls, prompting warnings millions of men might be unable to find a wife, fueling social tension.

Thursday's data showed China has 105.7 million men and boys for every 100 women and girls, or about 33 million more males.

The ruling party says the policy averted shortages of food and water by preventing as many as 400 million potential births. But demographers say if China followed Asian trends, the number of additional babies without controls might have been as low as a few million.

After limits were eased in 2015, many couples with one child had a second but total births fell because fewer had any at all.

Some researchers say China's population already is shrinking.

Yi Fuxian, a senior scientist in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says the population started to fall in 2018. His book "Big Country With An Empty Nest" argued against the one-child limit.

"China's economic, social, educational, tech, defense and foreign policies are built on the foundation of wrong numbers," said Yi.

Chinese regulators talk about raising the official retirement age of 55 to increase the pool of workers.

Female professionals welcome a chance to stay in satisfying careers. But others resent being forced to work more years. And keeping workers on the job, unable to help look after children, might discourage their daughters from having more.

The latest data put China closer to be overtaken by India as the most populous country, which is expected to happen by 2025.

India's population last year was estimated by the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs at 1.38 billion, or 1.5% behind China. The agency says India should grow by 0.9% annually through 2025.

Clock is ticking for EU vaccine certificates as summer looms

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

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BRUSSELS (AP) — As strict lockdowns are loosened across Europe and many EU citizens dream about holidays in the sun, the 27-nation bloc has yet to agree on how to quickly implement a virus certificate scheme to boost summer travel and tourism.

European affairs ministers gathered Tuesday in Brussels to assess progress in discussions with European lawmakers. A deal between the Parliament and EU countries is required in May to ensure the system will be up and running by the end of June, but several sticking points remain.

When it proposed the scheme in March, the EU Commission said coronavirus certificates would be given to EU residents who can prove they have been vaccinated or those who tested negative for the virus or have proof they recovered from it.

EU lawmakers and nations agree on that, but the Parliament insists that COVID-19 certificates should be enough to allow EU citizens to move about freely and that EU countries shouldn't be allowed to impose extra restrictions on certificate holders such as quarantines, tests or self-isolation measures.

That's a major roadblock, since border controls are a national responsibility.

A senior EU official, speaking anonymously as is custom before Tuesday's meeting, said EU nations had different opinions on the topic and the bloc was working to find a universal solution. The official said the pressure was on since vaccinations were increasing across Europe and more and more people wanted to travel.

The European Commission hopes that about 70% of the EU's adult population will be vaccinated by the end of the summer.

The Parliament has also raised concerns about the price of the PCR coronavirus tests that could be included in the certificates, which will be available in a digital or paper format with a QR code. EU citizens will get the pass for free but the price of tests vary widely across the bloc.

EU lawmakers said member states should "ensure universal, accessible, timely and free-of-charge testing" to avoid discrimination against those who have yet to be vaccinated.

Lawmakers agreed with the European Commission that all vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency, the EU's drug regulator, should be automatically recognized. So far that includes vaccines from AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. They also offered EU countries the possibility of including other vaccines listed by the World Health Organization for emergency use, which would include China's Sinopharm vaccine.

The EU has already begun working on the technical aspects of the vaccine certificate scheme, with testing starting this week in several EU nations.

The Latest: Taiwan tracing new cases, restricts gatherings

By The Associated Press undefined

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Taiwan reported seven domestic COVID-19 cases with the source of six of the infections still under investigation, its Central Epidemic Command Center said Tuesday.

Five cases were discovered in a gaming cafe in Yilan county on Taiwan's eastern coast. Another was found in New Taipei City, just outside the capital. None of the cases had any history of international travel. Health authorities are doing contact tracing to determine the source of the infection.

The seventh was a person already in quarantine who had been in contact with a cluster discovered in recent weeks after pilots working for Taiwan's China Airlines tested positive. Over 30 cases have been discovered so far.

In response, health authorities said they will ban indoor gatherings of more than 100 people and ban outdoor gatherings of more than 500 people.

Taiwan has been a success story throughout the pandemic, keeping deaths and cases to a minimum with strict border controls and a mandatory two-week quarantine for arrivals. It has counted 1,210 cases of COVID-19 to date, with the vast majority imported and some cases of domestic transmission.

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THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- A jumbo pop-up hospital treating COVID-19 patients in hard-hit Mumbai has more than 2,000 beds, most of them full
- WHO official strongly denied making false statements to Italian prosecutors about spiked U.N. report into Italy's virus response
- Argentina's doctors adapt, more learn intensive-care techniques as COVID-19 puts younger patients in hospitals
- Volunteers at Hindu temples, Muslim groups and Sikh relief organizations in US mobilize to support India during its virus surge
- Follow more of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

HONG KONG — Hong Kong officials have dropped a plan to mandate foreign domestic workers be vaccinated against the coronavirus, after it was criticized as discriminatory.

Officials initially proposed the plan after a foreign domestic worker tested positive for a coronavirus variant in April, with an unknown source of infection.

The plan was dropped after officials assessed public health needs, as well as the legal issues that may arise if they made vaccinations mandatory, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said at a regular news briefing Tuesday.

Lam also announced a second round of mandatory tests for the city's over 370,000 domestic workers as a precaution. The new round of testing will begin on Saturday and last until the end of the May.

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea has told the World Health Organization that it has tested 25,986 people for the coronavirus through April but still has yet to find a single infection.

The WHO said in a weekly monitoring report that North Korea's testing figures include 751 people who were tested during April 23-29, of which 139 had influenza-like illnesses or severe respiratory infections.

The country no longer discloses how many people are quarantined for showing such symptoms, after tens of thousands were last year.

Experts have expressed skepticism about North Korea's claim of a perfect record in keeping out COVID-19, given its poor health infrastructure and a porous border it shares with China.

SAN SALVADOR El Salvador — The president of El Salvador says he will donate coronavirus vaccines to seven towns in Honduras even though his own country's vaccination effort is still struggling.

El Salvador has administered about 1.25 million shots, not nearly enough for the country's 6.5 million people.

But President Nayib Bukele was apparently touched by appeals from mayors of seven towns in neighboring Honduras who asked El Salvador for help, claiming their own government has abandoned them. He said Monday the donations will not affect El Salvador's vaccination drive.

Bukele has been known for staking out populist positions in the past.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have established a travel corridor for tourists who have been vaccinated against the coronavirus.

The Gulf sheikhdoms jointly announced Monday that fully vaccinated travelers will be able to fly between the countries without having to undergo mandatory quarantines.

The deal starts with Eid al-Fitr, one of Islam's biggest holidays, at the end of this week. Travelers must demonstrate their vaccine status with approved COVID-19 health pass apps.

Similar quarantine-free travel bubbles are in effect elsewhere in the world, like Australia and New Zealand.

Daily infection rates in the UAE and Bahrain are similar, hovering around 1,500 infections per day — still far above last year's levels.

WHO official denies lying to Italy prosecutors over report

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — A top World Health Organization official has strongly denied making false statements to Italian prosecutors about a spiked U.N. report into Italy's coronavirus response, doubling down on his assertions in court documents obtained by The Associated Press.

Dr. Ranieri Guerra, a WHO special adviser, outlined his position in a 40-page response, with a 495-page annex, to prosecutors who placed him under investigation last month for having allegedly made false statements to them when he was questioned Nov. 5.

The prosecutors' claims create a picture "that is quite different from the reality of the facts and above all, are imprecise and don't adhere to the reconstruction of events that Dr. Guerra provided," said the response signed by Guerra's Rome-based attorney, Roberto De Vita.

Prosecutors are investigating the huge COVID-19 death toll in the Lombardy province of Bergamo, which was hit hardest when Italy became the epicenter of the pandemic in Europe last year. Their investigation initially focused on whether delayed lockdowns in Bergamo contributed to the toll, but has expanded to include whether Italy's overall preparedness going into the crisis played a role.

That second path of investigation was sparked by controversy over a WHO report into Italy's response that was published by the U.N. health agency May 13, 2020 but taken down a day later from the WHO website and never republished.

The ensuing scandal revealed that Italy's pandemic preparedness plan hadn't been updated since 2006, and the report's disappearance suggested that WHO had spiked it to spare the Italian government criticism and potential liability. WHO has said it was removed because it contained inaccuracies and was published prematurely.

Guerra, who was serving as a WHO liaison with the Italian government during the crisis, has not been charged. But he became embroiled in the scandal after the coordinator of the report, Dr. Francesco Zambon, accused Guerra of pressuring him to alter data in the report to make it appear that the pandemic plan had been "updated" in 2016-2017 when it had not.

Bergamo prosecutors have said the preparedness plan should have been updated during Guerra's 2014-2017 tenure as head of prevention at the Italian Health Ministry to reflect new international guidance from the WHO and European Commission in 2009 and 2013.

In the new document, Guerra argued the WHO guidelines weren't compulsory and that the EU guidance was primarily about coordination with other states, not about internal pandemic plans.

Guerra also noted that before he left the ministry to join the WHO in 2017, he wrote the then-minister alerting her that Italy needed a new pandemic preparedness plan. As a result, his response said, prosecutors should "verify if the action initiated by Dr. Guerra in September 2017 was followed by those who succeeded him."

In addition, Guerra pointed the finger at Italy's regions, which are largely responsible for health care: He argued national preparedness plans are only designed to provide organizational planning, while individual regions are responsible for putting the plans into concrete action with local legislation and policies of their own.

Guerra also said he had nothing to do with the decision to spike the report and that the original impetus came from WHO's Beijing office, which objected to a politically sensitive timeline of the China origins of COVID-19.

"Kindly pull the document off the web immediately. Consider this an emergency," WHO's China representative, Gauden Galea, wrote Zambon and others May 14 in an email contained in the annex. "This document is inaccurate and contradicts the HQ timeline in a couple of places."

Zambon has acknowledged he took the report off the web because of the China inaccuracy, fixed it, and reprinted the report. But WHO never put it back up on the website.

The Bergamo prosecutors outlined their allegations against Guerra in a March 8 rogatory request to the

Italian justice and foreign ministries, seeking their assistance in forwarding specific questions to the WHO as part of the investigation.

Included in the prosecutors' document were transcripts of WhatsApp chats between Guerra and Dr. Silvio Brusaferro, president of Italy's Superior Institutes of Health, in which Guerra appears to boast that he had intervened to have the report spiked.

"In the end I went to Tedros and got the document removed," Guerra wrote Brusaferro May 14, 2020, referring to WHO's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

In his response to prosecutors, Guerra questioned the authenticity of the partial WhatsApp chats and said they lacked necessary context to be understood. Regardless, he said, the content "has no relevance with respect to the declared investigation."

The WHO press office has denied that Tedros was involved in spiking the report and insisted it was taken down based on "inaccuracies and inconsistencies" in the text, which it said hadn't cleared all approvals.

Guerra's lawyer, De Vita, said in an interview that Guerra has suffered greatly from the months of controversy over the report and was embittered to now find himself under investigation, when he freely went to prosecutors to contribute what he knew as a scientist and civil servant.

"He could have, as others probably did, availed himself of functional diplomatic immunity," De Vita said of Guerra's status as a U.N. official. "If he had something to hide, even remotely," he never would have gone.

1.4B but no more? China's population growth closer to zero

By JOE McDONALD and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China's weak population growth is falling closer to zero as fewer couples have children, government data showed Tuesday, adding to strains on an aging society with a shrinking workforce.

The population rose by 72 million people over the past 10 years to 1.411 billion in 2020, the National Bureau of Statistics announced after a once-a-decade census. It said annual growth averaged 0.53%, down by 0.04% from the previous decade.

Chinese leaders have enforced birth limits since 1980 to restrain population growth but worry the number of working-age people is falling too fast, disrupting efforts to create a prosperous economy. They have eased birth limits, but couples are put off by high costs, cramped housing and job discrimination against mothers.

"Labor resources are still abundant," the statistics agency director, Ning Jizhe, said at a news conference.

The percentage of children in the population edged up compared with 2010, while the share 60 and older rose faster. The pool of potential workers aged 15 to 59 shrank to 894 million, down about 5% from a 2011 peak of 925 million.

Changes in birth limits and other policies "promoted a rebound in the birth population," Ning said. However, he said there were 12 million babies born last year, which would be down 18% from 2019's report of 14.6 million.

China, along with Thailand and some other developing Asian countries that are aging fast, faces what economists call the challenge of whether it can grow rich before it grows old. Some forecasters warn China faces a "demographic time bomb."

Reflecting the issue's sensitivity, the statistics agency took the unusual step last month of announcing the population grew in 2020 but gave no total. That looked like an effort to calm companies and investors after The Financial Times reported the census might have found a surprise decline.

"We are more concerned about the fast decline in the working-age population," said Lu Jiehua, a professor of population studies at Peking University.

The population of potential workers aged 15 to 59 will fall from three-quarters of the total in 2011 to just above half by 2050, according to Lu.

"If the population gets too old, it will be impossible to solve the problem through immigration," said Lu. "It needs to be dealt with at an early stage."

Couples who want a child face daunting challenges.

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Many share crowded apartments with their parents. Child care is expensive and maternity leave short. Most single mothers are excluded from medical insurance and social welfare payments.

Some women worry giving birth could hurt their careers.

"When you have a kid, you take pregnancy leave, but will you still have this position after you take the leave?" said He Yiwei, who is returning from the United States after obtaining a master's degree. "Relative to men, when it comes to work, women have to sacrifice more."

Japan, Germany and some other rich countries face the same challenge of supporting aging populations with fewer workers. But they can draw on investments in factories, technology and foreign assets. By contrast, China still is a middle-income country with labor-intensive farming and manufacturing.

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The International Monetary Fund is forecasting Chinese economic growth of 8.4% this year following a rebound from the coronavirus pandemic. The ruling Communist Party wants to double output per person from 2020 levels by 2035, which would require annual growth of about 4.7%.

The numbers reported Thursday reflect a gain of 11.8 million people, or 0.8%, over the official estimate for 2019, when the government says the population edged above 1.4 billion for the first time.

The working-age population fell to 63.3% of the total from 70.1% a decade ago. The group up to age 14 expanded by 1.3 percentage points to 17.9%. Those 60 and older — a group of 264 million people who on their own would be the world's fourth-biggest country — rose 5.4 percentage points to 18.7% of the population.

The party took its biggest step in 2015 when rules that limited many couples to having only one child were eased to allow two.

However, China's birth rate, paralleling trends in South Korea, Thailand and other Asian economies, already was falling before the one-child rule. The average number of children per mother tumbled from above six in the 1960s to below three by 1980, according to the World Bank.

Demographers say official birth limits concealed what would have been a further fall in the number of children per family.

The one-child limit, enforced with threats of fines or loss of jobs, led to abuses including forced abortions. A preference for sons led parents to kill baby girls, prompting warnings millions of men might be unable to find a wife, fueling social tension.

Thursday's data showed China has 105.7 million men and boys for every 100 women and girls, or about 33 million more males.

The ruling party says the policy averted shortages of food and water by preventing as many as 400 million potential births. But demographers say if China followed Asian trends, the number of additional babies without controls might have been as low as a few million.

After limits were eased in 2015, many couples with one child had a second but total births fell because fewer had any at all.

Some researchers say China's population already is shrinking.

Yi Fuxian, a senior scientist in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says the population started to fall in 2018. His book "Big Country With An Empty Nest" argued against the one-child limits.

"China's economic, social, educational, tech, defense and foreign policies are built on the foundation of wrong numbers," said Yi.

Chinese regulators talk about raising the official retirement age of 55 to increase the pool of workers.

Female professionals welcome a chance to stay in satisfying careers. But others resent being forced to work more years. And keeping workers on the job, unable to help look after children, might discourage their daughters from having more.

The latest data put China closer to be overtaken by India as the most populous country, which is ex-

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pected to happen by 2025.

India's population last year was estimated by the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs at 1.38 billion, or 1.5% behind China. The agency says India should grow by 0.9% annually through 2025.

Amid outcry, NBC says it will not air Golden Globes in 2022

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid growing pressure on the Hollywood Foreign Press Association from studios, stars and large swaths of the film industry, NBC said Monday that will not air the Golden Globes in 2022, putting in doubt the viability of one of Hollywood's oldest and most-watched award shows.

Criticism of the HFPA, which puts on the Globes and has been denounced for a lack of diversity and for ethical improprieties, reached such a pitch Monday that Tom Cruise returned his three Globes to the press association's headquarters, according to a person who was granted anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly about the decision.

In a statement, NBC said it believes the Hollywood Foreign Press Association — which is facing possible boycotts over the inclusiveness of its membership from Netflix, Warner Bros. and many Hollywood actors — is committed to reform. But change can't come quickly enough for next year's Globes.

"However, change of this magnitude takes time and work, and we feel strongly that the HFPA needs time to do it right," the network said. "As such, NBC will not air the 2022 Golden Globes. Assuming the organization executes on its plan, we are hopeful we will be in a position to air the show in January 2023."

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association, long a subject of ridicule from even its own telecast hosts, has come under fire following an investigative report in February by The Los Angeles Times that recounted the organization's questionable record on diversity — including, presently, no Black members among its roughly 90 voting members.

The press association has pledged to thoroughly reform, and last week approved a plan to, among other things, diversify its membership. But that hasn't stopped several studios from threatening to pull out of the Globes.

Last week, Netflix and Amazon Studios both said they would cut ties with the HFPA if it didn't swiftly enact more drastic changes.

"We don't believe these proposed new policies — particularly around the size and speed of membership growth — will tackle the HFPA's systemic diversity and inclusion challenges, or the lack of clear standards for how your members should operate," Netflix co-chief executive Ted Sarandos wrote in a letter to the group.

In a letter sent Sunday and shared with reporters Monday, WarnerMedia said it would cease holding screenings and other events for the HFPA until it made more substantial changes.

"For far too long, demands for perks, special favors and unprofessional requests have been made to our teams and to others across the industry," WarnerMedia executives said in a letter. "We regret that as an industry, we have complained, but largely tolerated this behavior until now."

The outcry against the Hollywood Foreign Press Association has gathered force over the last six weeks, as a film industry where racial and gender inequity long went unchecked has grown newly intolerant of the ways of the group, made up of mostly little-known journalists who profit considerably from the annual telecast.

Increasingly, Hollywood has abandoned the HFPA. A group of 100 entertainment publicity firms has said they would urge their clients to skip HFPA functions. Mark Ruffalo, a winner this year, recently said he "cannot feel proud or happy about being a recipient of this award" any longer. Scarlett Johansson said HFPA press conferences for her "meant facing sexist questions and remarks by certain HFPA members that bordered on sexual harassment."

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association didn't address the 2022 telecast in responding to NBC's decision, but board members of the group laid out its schedule of reforms — ultimately leading to a revamped membership and board by early August, as well as numerous other policy changes.

"Regardless of the next air date of the Golden Globes, implementing transformational changes as quickly – and as thoughtfully – as possible remains the top priority for our organization," the group said in a statement. "We invite our partners in the industry to the table to work with us on the systemic reform that is long overdue, both in our organization as well as within the industry at large."

Last week, the press association ratified plans to add at least 20 new members this year "with a specific focus on recruiting Black members" and with a goal of increasing membership 50% over the next 18 months.

For some, that timeline wasn't aggressive enough. In the next few months, several potential awards contending films are set to premiere at film festivals and elsewhere. Tina Tchen, president and chief executive of Time's Up, called the HFPA's pledges "window-dressing platitudes."

"These measures ensure that the current membership of the HFPA will remain in the majority and that the next Golden Globe Awards will be decided with the same fundamental problems that have existed for years," said Tchen.

The Globes, produced by Dick Clark Productions, have suffered ratings drops in recent years but still rank among the most-watched award shows — usually third to the Oscars and the Grammys. The 78th Golden Globes, held Feb. 28, attracted 6.9 million viewers, a 63% drop from the 2020 telecast, watched by 18.4 million.

In Argentina, doctors adapt as COVID-19 strains hospitals

By ALMUDENA CALATRAVA Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Verónica Verdino, an Argentine doctor, helped a therapist insert a tube into the trachea of a COVID-19 patient during another hectic day in a hospital emergency room.

Verdino, 31, has become adept at the delicate procedure during the current outbreak of coronavirus cases that has filled clinics in Buenos Aires and nearby towns with patients.

A little over a year ago, before the pandemic hit Argentina, Verdino did not imagine that she would be performing so many intubations, and helping others with the same procedure, at the Llavallol Dr. Norberto Raúl Piacentini Hospital in the town of Lomas de Zamora, outside Buenos Aires.

Now doctors who used to be on duty in general wards have become experts in this and other complex techniques typical of intensive care specialists as they help patients who are seriously ill with COVID-19. Some wards have been converted into intensive care units because the outbreak is straining the health system.

The situation at the hospital where Verdino works is similar in many public and private health facilities in Buenos Aires and nearby towns, with an average of more than 20,000 infections and 400 deaths per day in recent weeks and 100% occupation of ICUs in some centers.

Doctors say they are seeing many younger patients, partly because youths are being infected with coronavirus variants at social gatherings, while older people are protected by vaccines they have received.

"We're cutting corners everywhere ... We have all the illnesses other than COVID, plus this (coronavirus) wave that exploded," Verdino told The Associated Press during a recent 24-hour shift.

The husband of the woman who was intubated by Verdino stared dejectedly through the glass from the other side of a door. Nearby, in another room, two patients lay connected to respirators. A few meters away, a man who had just died was placed in a black plastic bag.

A few days later, on another grueling shift, Verdino climbed onto a small bench next to the bed of a man she had tried to intubate, leaned over his chest and performed CPR in a desperate attempt to save his life. Several of her colleagues helped her.

The patient died. Verdina and her colleague, Stephanie Muñoz, took time to prepare the man's body and the room before his son viewed him through the window of the door.

Nurses describe a situation known as "warm bed", in which a patient who has died is promptly replaced in a room by another seriously ill person.

General ward medics have also learned to master the use of complex drugs that keep patients sedated and to study electrocardiograms and CT scans, as well as to perform laryngoscopes. They do it as oxygen

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supplies become scarce in hospitals, which have formed networks to assist each other when they can.

"I was used to working a lot but this overwhelms you in everything," said nurse Silvia Cardoso, who works with Verdino.

Cardoso said she was shocked by the number of young people who are hospitalized with serious symptoms, something that did not happen previously.

"It could be prevented," she lamented, suggesting that some young people had not observed health protocols.

Police in some Argentine towns often break up clandestine parties. In restaurants that serve outdoors, tables full of diners are placed close to each other. Parks are full of people having picnics and playing sports. There are frequent social protests, including for higher wages, in Buenos Aires.

With people exhausted by quarantines and vaccination programs going slowly, politicians argue over issues such as whether to allow students back to class. During a peak of coronavirus cases, students went to school in Buenos Aires but were not allowed to do so in the city suburbs, creating a confusing situation.

Many doctors try to stay out of the political disputes, instead urging people to stick to measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. Argentina has so far reported more than 67,300 confirmed deaths and more than 3.1 million people sickened by the disease.

If people don't collaborate, "the point will come where the health system collapses," Verdino said.

Army of fake fans boosts China's messaging on Twitter

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — China's ruling Communist Party has opened a new front in its long, ambitious war to shape global public opinion: Western social media.

Liu Xiaoming, who recently stepped down as China's ambassador to the United Kingdom, is one of the party's most successful foot soldiers on this evolving online battlefield. He joined Twitter in October 2019, as scores of Chinese diplomats surged onto Twitter and Facebook, which are both banned in China.

Since then, Liu has deftly elevated his public profile, gaining a following of more than 119,000 as he transformed himself into an exemplar of China's new sharp-edged "wolf warrior" diplomacy, a term borrowed from the title of a top-grossing Chinese action movie.

"As I see it, there are so-called 'wolf warriors' because there are 'wolves' in the world and you need warriors to fight them," Liu, who is now China's Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs, tweeted in February.

His stream of posts — principled and gutsy ripostes to Western anti-Chinese bias to his fans, aggressive bombast to his detractors — were retweeted more than 43,000 times from June through February alone.

But much of the popular support Liu and many of his colleagues seem to enjoy on Twitter has, in fact, been manufactured.

A seven-month investigation by the Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute, a department at Oxford University, found that China's rise on Twitter has been powered by an army of fake accounts that have retweeted Chinese diplomats and state media tens of thousands of times, covertly amplifying propaganda that can reach hundreds of millions of people -- often without disclosing the fact that the content is government-sponsored.

More than half the retweets Liu got from June through January came from accounts that Twitter has suspended for violating the platform's rules, which prohibit manipulation. Overall, more than one in ten of the retweets 189 Chinese diplomats got in that time frame came from accounts that Twitter had suspended by Mar. 1.

But Twitter's suspensions did not stop the pro-China amplification machine. An additional cluster of fake accounts, many of them impersonating U.K. citizens, continued to push Chinese government content, racking up over 16,000 retweets and replies before Twitter kicked them off late last month and early this month, in response to the AP and Oxford Internet Institute's investigation.

This fiction of popularity can boost the status of China's messengers, creating a mirage of broad support.

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It can also distort platform algorithms, which are designed to boost the distribution of popular posts, potentially exposing more genuine users to Chinese government propaganda. While individual fake accounts may not seem impactful on their own, over time and at scale, such networks can distort the information environment, deepening the reach and authenticity of China's messaging.

"You have a seismic, slow but large continental shift in narratives," said Timothy Graham, a senior lecturer at Queensland University of Technology who studies social networks. "Steer it just a little bit over time, it can have massive impact."

Twitter, and others, have identified inauthentic pro-China networks before. But the AP and Oxford Internet Institute investigation shows for the first time that large-scale inauthentic amplification has broadly driven engagement across official government and state media accounts, adding to evidence that Beijing's appetite for guiding public opinion – covertly, if necessary -- extends beyond its borders and beyond core strategic interests, like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Twitter's takedowns often came only after weeks or months of activity. All told, AP and the Oxford Internet Institute identified 26,879 accounts that managed to retweet Chinese diplomats or state media nearly 200,000 times before getting suspended. They accounted for a significant share – sometimes more than half -- of the total retweets many diplomatic accounts got on Twitter.

It was not possible to determine whether the accounts were sponsored by the Chinese government.

Twitter told AP that many of the accounts had been sanctioned for manipulation, but declined to offer details on what other platform violations may have been at play. Twitter said it was investigating whether the activity was a state-affiliated information operation.

"We will continue to investigate and action accounts that violate our platform manipulation policy, including accounts associated with these networks," a Twitter spokesperson said in a statement. "If we have clear evidence of state-affiliated information operations, our first priority is to enforce our rules and remove accounts engaging in this behavior. When our investigations are complete, we disclose all accounts and content in our public archive."

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it does not employ trickery on social media. "There is no so-called misleading propaganda, nor exporting a model of online public opinion guidance," the ministry said in a statement to AP. "We hope that the relevant parties will abandon their discriminatory attitude, take off their tinted glasses, and take a peaceful, objective, and rational approach in the spirit of openness and inclusiveness."

IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD

Twitter and Facebook function as formidable – and one-sided – global megaphones for China's ruling Communist Party, helping to amplify messaging broadly set by central authorities.

Today, at least 270 Chinese diplomats in 126 countries are active on Twitter and Facebook. Together with Chinese state media, they control 449 accounts on Twitter and Facebook, which posted nearly 950,000 times between June and February. These messages were liked over 350 million times and replied to and shared more than 27 million times, according to the Oxford Internet Institute and AP's analysis. Three-quarters of Chinese diplomats on Twitter joined within the last two years.

The move onto Western social media comes as China wages a war for influence – both at home and abroad -- on the internet, which President Xi Jinping has called "the main battlefield" for public opinion.

"On the battlefield of the Internet, whether we can withstand and win is directly related to our country's ideological security and political security," he said in 2013, not long after taking power. In September 2019, as Chinese diplomats flocked to Twitter, Xi gave another speech, urging party cadres to strengthen their "fighting spirit."

Xi has reconfigured China's internet governance, tightening controls, and bound Chinese media ever more tightly to the party, to ensure, as he said in a 2016 speech, that the media loves, protects and serves the party.

That intimacy was formalized in 2018, when the party consolidated administrative control of major print, radio, film and television outlets under an entity it manages, the Central Propaganda Department.

Like other nations, China has recognized the value of social media for amplifying its messaging and re-

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inforcing its hold on power. But unfettered access to Western social media has given Beijing a unilateral advantage in the global fight for influence.

Twitter and Facebook are blocked within China, and Beijing controls the conversation on domestic alternatives like WeChat and Weibo, effectively cutting off unmediated access to the Chinese public.

"It's creating a significant challenge for Western democracies. We don't have the same capacity to influence international audiences given that China has walled off its internet," said Jacob Wallis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's International Cyber Policy Centre. "That creates a significant asymmetric advantage."

Despite the high levels of Chinese government activity, Twitter and Facebook have failed to label state content consistently. In an effort to provide users with more context, Twitter last year began labelling accounts belonging to "key government officials" and state-affiliated media. But Twitter had labelled just 14 percent of Chinese diplomatic accounts on the platform, as of Mar. 1, failing even to flag dozens of verified profiles.

Twitter said that in keeping with its policy of labelling senior officials and institutions that speak for a country abroad, not all diplomatic accounts will be flagged. It offered no further details on how those decisions are made and declined to provide a list of Chinese accounts that have been labelled.

Facebook also began putting transparency labels on state-controlled media accounts last year. But disclosure is especially weak in languages other than English, despite the fact that Chinese state content has strong distribution in Spanish, French, and Arabic, among other languages.

Facebook had labelled two-thirds of a sample of 95 Chinese state media accounts in English, as of Mar. 1, but less than a quarter of accounts in other languages. Unlike Twitter, Facebook does not flag diplomatic accounts, the majority of which are official embassy and consulate accounts.

Facebook labelled an additional 41 Chinese state media outlets AP and the Oxford Internet Institute flagged to them, bringing the overall portion of labelled accounts from less than half to nearly 90 percent. The company said it was looking into the rest.

"We apply the label on a rolling basis and will continue to label more publishers and pages over time," a company spokesperson said in a statement to AP. The company declined to provide a full list of which Chinese state media accounts it has flagged.

The China Media Project, a Hong Kong research group, found that transparency labels make a difference: Twitter users liked and shared fewer tweets by Chinese news outlets after August 2020, when the platform started flagging them as state-affiliated media and stopped amplifying and recommending their content.

"We need the labels," said China Media Project director David Bandurski, though he cautioned that they risk painting all Chinese media with the same broad brush, including outlets like Caixin that have managed to maintain a degree of independence. "This is all about co-opting the narrative. Telling China's story means we the party get to tell China's story and no one else. That's happening in Portuguese and Spanish and French. It really is a global plan."

The outspoken editor-in-chief of China's Global Times, Hu Xijin, noticed the impact immediately. On Aug. 14, he tweeted his dismay at the "China state-affiliated media" label that had been added to his profile, saying his follower growth had plummeted. "It seems Twitter will eventually choke my account," he wrote.

COUNTERFEITING CONSENSUS

In early February, China's state news agency Xinhua published a "fact check" of 24 "lies" it said anti-China forces in the West had been spreading about Xinjiang, where China stands accused of genocide for its brutal, systematic repression of minority Uighur Muslims.

According to Xinhua, the real problem in Xinjiang is not human rights, but Uighur terrorism. Beijing has brought stability and economic development to its restive western region, and information suggesting otherwise has been fabricated by U.S. intelligence agencies, a racist scholar, and lying witnesses, Xinhua said.

The story was picked up by other Chinese state media outlets, amplified by China's foreign ministry at a press conference, and blasted across Twitter by the foreign ministry and Chinese diplomats in the United States, India, Djibouti, Canada, Hungary, Austria, Tanzania, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Liberia, Grenada, Nigeria, Lebanon, Trinidad and Tobago, Qatar and the United Kingdom.

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From there, it was further amplified by devoted but mysterious fans -- like gyagyagya10, whose account pushed out an identical quote-tweet and reply, within seconds, to a message about Xinjiang posted by China's Embassy in London, writing "Ethnic groups in China are well protected, no matter in economic aspect or in cultural aspect."

This is the ruling Communist Party's global propaganda machine in action: Messages set by key state media outlets and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs get picked up by Chinese diplomats around the world, who repackage the content on Twitter, where it is amplified by networks of fake and suspicious accounts working covertly to shape public discourse for the benefit of China's ruling Communist Party.

Gyagyagya10, who had a single follower, was part of a network of 62 accounts dedicated to amplifying Chinese diplomats in the U.K. that Marcel Schliebs, the Oxford Internet Institute's lead researcher on the project, found exhibited multiple patterns suggesting coordination and inauthenticity.

Little can be gleaned about gyagyagya10 from the image of abstract art posted as a profile photo and the lack of any sort of personal description. Indeed, none of the accounts in the network had fleshed-out profiles with recognizable names and authentic profile photos.

Gyagyagya10's account came to life in mid-August at the same time as more than a dozen other accounts that also devoted themselves exclusively to promoting tweets by the Chinese Embassy in London and Ambassador Liu. Then, after Liu left his post at the end of Jan., they went quiet.

The 62 accounts in the network retweeted and replied to posts by Chinese diplomats in London nearly 30,000 times between June and the end of January, the Oxford Internet Institute found. They exhibited unique patterns in the ways they amplified content.

Like gyagyagya10, they often simultaneously posted identical quote-tweets and replies, and they repeatedly used identical phrases like "Xinjiang is beautiful" and "shared future for mankind" in their comments. Other users who engaged with the two diplomatic accounts did neither.

They were also slavish in their devotion, sometimes replying to more than three-quarters of all the ambassador's tweets. Most weeks, the fake accounts generated at least 30 to 50 percent of all retweets of Ambassador Liu and the Chinese Embassy in London.

By Mar. 1, Twitter had suspended 31 of the accounts in the pro-China U.K. network and two had been deleted. The remaining 29 -- including gyagyagya10 -- continued to operate, churning out more than 10,000 retweets and nearly 6,000 replies in support of China's U.K. diplomats before Twitter permanently suspended them for platform manipulation at the end of April and beginning of May in response to this investigation.

"We are also aware of concerns about some of the Twitter rules," China's Embassy in the U.K. said in a statement to AP. "If it is against the rules of social media to retweet the Chinese Embassy's tweets, then shouldn't these rules be more applicable to retweets of malicious rumors, smears, and false information against China? We hope relevant companies will not adopt double standards."

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says China uses social media the same way other nations do, with the goal of deepening friendly ties and facilitating fact-based communication.

In practice, China's network on Twitter amplifies messaging set by central authorities, both for domestic and global consumption, as diplomats translate, repackage and amplify content from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and key state media outlets, network analysis and academic research show.

Zhao Alexandre Huang, a visiting assistant professor at Gustave Eiffel University, in Paris, analyzed social media messaging at key points in the U.S.-China trade dispute and found that content first published on the Weibo account of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was repackaged and broadcast around the world by Chinese diplomats on Twitter.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses Weibo like a central kitchen of information," Huang said. "It's an illusion of polyphony."

Within China's state network on Twitter, the most referenced accounts belonged to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its spokespeople, as well as People's Daily, CGTN, China Daily, and Xinhua, and the most active amplifiers were diplomats, AP network analysis showed.

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The party's efforts on Twitter have been helped by a core of hyperactive super-fans. Some 151,000 users retweeted posts by Chinese diplomats from June through January. But nearly half of all retweets came from just one percent of those accounts, which together blasted out nearly 360,000 retweets, often in bursts of activity separated by just seconds.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of this concentrated bulk engagement – which is not necessarily inauthentic – were Chinese diplomatic accounts in Poland, Pakistan, India, and South Africa, as well as China's foreign ministry and its spokespeople.

The pro-China accounts that Twitter later suspended were active in a host of languages, with profile descriptions in English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Italian, French, Russian, Korean, Urdu, Portuguese, Thai, Swedish, Japanese, Turkish, German and Tamil. Some worked cross-network to amplify a range of government accounts, while others appeared to function as smaller cells, dedicated to amplifying diplomats in a specific location.

This manufactured chorus accounted for a significant portion of all the engagement many Chinese diplomats got on Twitter. More than 60 percent of all retweets for the Chinese embassies in Angola and Greece from June 2020 through January 2021 came from accounts that have been suspended. China's hawkish foreign ministry spokespeople Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian racked up more than 20,000 retweets from accounts that have been sanctioned by Twitter.

INTERNET COMMENTING SYSTEMS

Within China, manipulation of online discourse has been effectively institutionalized. It remains to be seen how aggressive—and how successful – China will be in implementing its model of public opinion guidance on Western social media, which was founded on very different civic values, like transparency, authenticity, and the free exchange of ideas.

The party's systems for shaping public opinion online go far beyond censorship. Budget documents for Chinese propaganda and cyberspace departments include references to cyber armies, teams of trained online commentators tasked with keeping conversation online aligned with the ruling party's interests. Universities in China openly post announcements about their teams of "online commentators" and "youth internet civilization volunteers," composed exclusively of recruits who "love the motherland" and work to guide public opinion by eliminating negative influences and spreading positive energy online.

For-profit companies also contract with government agencies to run coordinated networks of social media accounts, both human and automated, to help "guide public opinion," according to Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Asia Program, and Jessica Batke, a senior editor at ChinaFile, an online magazine published by the Asia Society. They poured through thousands of Chinese government procurement notices to identify tenders for such services.

While the majority were for opinion management on domestic platforms, Ohlberg told AP that since 2017 a growing number have also targeted Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. One public security bureau in a relatively small city in northeastern China, for example, wanted to buy a "smart Internet-commenting system," capable of commenting on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube from thousands of different accounts and IP addresses.

"This is just a natural extension of what the party has been doing at home for a very long time," Ohlberg said. "Why would they change that model once they go abroad?"

China's advance on Western social media is one part of a much broader infrastructure of influence that has shaped how Hollywood makes movies, what Western publishers print and what overseas Chinese-language media outlets communicate to China's vast diaspora.

Anne-Marie Brady, a professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, said people may not even realize that information they receive has been, in part, framed by China's ruling Communist Party.

"The propaganda system is vast, and it has incorporated Western social media," she said. "It has helped to reshape perceptions of China. It may not uniquely create a positive image of China, but it creates hopelessness that anything can be done about what China is doing to our democracies."

GOP readies blitz against Democrats' voting rights bill

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans are preparing to launch an all-out assault on sweeping voting rights legislation, forcing Democrats to take dozens of politically difficult votes during a committee hearing that will spotlight the increasingly charged national debate over access to the ballot.

The bill, as written, would bring about the largest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, touching on almost every aspect of the electoral process. Democrats say the changes are even more important now as Republican-controlled states impose new voting restrictions after the divisive 2020 election.

Yet it's a motivating issue for Republicans, too, with GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell so determined to stop Democrats that he will personally argue against the measure, a rare role for a party leader that shows the extent to which Republicans are prepared to fight as a hearing for the bill begins Tuesday.

That's on top of scores of amendments Republicans will propose to highlight aspects of the bill they believe are unpopular, including public financing for congressional campaigns and an overhaul of the federal agency that polices elections.

What's typically an hourslong legislative slog could drag into a dayslong showdown in the Senate Rules Committee, as Democrats look to advance one of their key priorities to a vote in the full Senate.

"It's a vast federal takeover of all American elections. It's a horrible bill," McConnell said during an interview that aired last weekend on KET, a PBS affiliate in his native Kentucky. "I'm going to do everything I can and my colleagues are going to do everything we can to prevent it."

The action in Congress comes as states including Georgia, Florida, Arizona and Texas are pushing new voting rules, spurred by former President Donald Trump's false claims about election fraud after his 2020 loss.

Democrats are on defense, having been unable to halt the onslaught of new state rules that will take months or years to litigate in court. That leaves passage of legislation through Congress as one of the few remaining options to counteract the GOP efforts.

Republicans argue the new state rules are needed to clamp down on mail ballots and other methods that became popular during the pandemic, but critics warn the states are seeking to reduce voter access, particularly for Black voters, ushering in a new Jim Crow era for the 21st century.

There was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election. Trump's claims were rejected by Republican and Democratic election officials in state after state, by U.S. cybersecurity officials and by courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court. And his attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of fraud that could change the election outcome.

McConnell won't be the only high-profile figure at Tuesday's hearing.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., is also expected to stop in at the Rules panel meeting to add his weight to the debate.

On Monday he said the coming debate would test if Republicans are willing to work on "improving out democracy" or whether they were more interested in "in helping aiding and abetting" Trump's "big lie" about the 2020 election.

"Our Republican colleagues face a critical choice between working with Democrats in good faith to pass a law to protect our democracy, or siding with Republican state legislatures that are orchestrating the largest contraction of voting rights in decades," Schumer said.

President Joe Biden has said the federal legislation would "restore the soul of America" by giving everyone equal access to the vote.

The legislation, known as the For the People Act, was given top billing on the Democratic agenda, but the path ahead is unclear. Despite the expected showing from McConnell, who has cultivated a reputation for turning the Senate into a legislative graveyard, moderate members of the Democratic caucus also pose a sizable obstacle to the bill becoming law.

Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have both said they oppose making changes to the Senate's filibuster rules, which would be needed to maneuver the bill past Republican opposition and pass it with a simple majority in a 50-50 Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris delivering

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the tiebreaking 51st vote.

Manchin has called for any elections overhaul to be done on a bipartisan basis. Other Democrats want to pare back the bill to core voting protections to try to put Republicans on the spot.

House resolution H.R. 1, and its companion, S. 1, in the Senate have been in the works for several years. As passed by the House in March, the legislation would create automatic voter registration nationwide, require states to offer 15 days of early voting, require more disclosure from political donors and restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, among other changes. It would also compel states to offer no-excuse absentee voting.

In particular, it would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which are a magnet for wealthy interests looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

McConnell has spent a career fighting for the free flow of campaign cash as a constitutionally protected right to free speech.

One Republican aide who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the situation without authorization said they are planning to try to strike full sections of the bill and introduce other changes.

Democrats have been making their own changes to the bill to draw support. Manchin has not yet signed on, and his backing will be crucial.

In the latest version of the legislation, states would have more time and flexibility to put new federal rules in place. Some election officials had complained of unrealistic timelines, increased costs and onerous requirements.

States would have more time to launch same-day voter registration at polling places and to comply with new voting system requirements. They would also be able to apply for an extension if they were unable to meet the deadline for automatic voter registration. Officials have said these are complex processes that require equipment changes or upgrades that will take time to get in place.

Democrats are also dropping a requirement that local election offices provide self-sealing envelopes with mail ballots and cover the costs of return postage. Instead, they plan to require the U.S. Postal Service to carry mail ballots and ballot request forms free of charge, with the federal government picking up the tab.

Manchin told reporters Monday that he hadn't yet reviewed the changes but remained open to supporting the bill.

"We are looking at everything. We hope there's a pathway there," he said.

Across faiths, US volunteers mobilize for India crisis

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

Volunteers at Hindu temples, Muslim groups and Sikh relief organizations across the United States are mobilizing to support India as the world's second most populous country struggles to handle a devastating surge of the coronavirus.

From coast to coast, faith groups tied to the Indian diaspora have collected hundreds of oxygen concentrators and electrical transformers to ship to overwhelmed hospitals, raised millions for everything from food to firewood for funeral pyres and gathered in prayer for spiritual support for the Asian nation.

"This is a human tragedy, said Manzoor Ghori, executive director of the California-based Indian Muslim Relief and Charities, which has donated more than \$1 million for purposes including supporting teachers and providing families with thousands of medical kits and more than 300,000 meals.

Ghori said he has had five loved ones, including two nephews, die in India from COVID-19 — "so, it is a personal tragedy" as well.

He's one of many in the U.S. diaspora to have lost relatives to the virus in India, where total confirmed infections and deaths have surpassed 22.6 million and 246,000, respectively, though the true numbers are believed to be much higher.

Kashyap Patel, an Atlanta-based physician, said the pandemic has been "catastrophic" for him, with about a dozen members of his extended family in India contracting the virus, from teenagers to octogenarians, and his 73-year-old uncle dying from it.

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He volunteers for the North America branch of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha Hindu organization, which has provided 250 oxygen concentrators and several hundred thousand dollars in COVID-19 relief to help with India's overwhelmed health system.

"It is challenging to find hospital beds," Patel said. "It is challenging to find oxygen, to find contemporary medicine."

India's Supreme Court recently said it would set up a national task force consisting of top experts and doctors to conduct an "oxygen audit" to determine whether supplies from the government were reaching states in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people amid widespread complaints of shortages.

The U.S. branch of Khalsa Aid, a U.K.-based Sikh humanitarian organization, is sending another 500 concentrators and 500 electrical transformers this week to New Delhi, where the group's team is already helping COVID-19 patients, hospitals and NGOs with essential supplies as well as wood for cremations.

At a warehouse on New York's Long Island, workers busily packed, sorted and labeled dozens of boxes containing transformers on a recent day ahead of their shipment.

"In these last two weeks, many of us haven't slept. We've been running our day jobs at the same time," one of the group's directors, Manpreet Kaur said.

"It's been an intense period of time, but for us, it's about giving back to the community," Kaur continued. "And the people in India definitely need that support."

Khalsa Aid's India relief effort has gotten grassroots support from individuals all over the country, such as Tahil Sharma, a Los Angeles-based interfaith activist born to a Hindu father and a Sikh mother. He raised nearly \$3,000 on Facebook for the initiative.

"It's a small amount for a really big crisis," Sharma said. "But it helps mitigate the costs that Khalsa Aid needs to take upon itself sometimes in being able to get oxygen concentrators, to be able to secure beds at gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship) on the ground in New Delhi, to help them get the resources that they need so people don't get hit by more waves of deaths."

Seeing individual pledges like that on social media platforms motivated members of Shri Shirdi Saibaba, a Hindu Temple in South Brunswick Township, New Jersey, to organize as a religious organization for their own effort, temple founder and chairman Rajesh Anand said. So far the temple has raised about \$3,000 to buy concentrators for two hospitals in New Delhi.

"We are one among many to help the cause," Anand said.

In the New York City borough of Queens, the Hindu Temple Society of North America has also been fundraising online and has so far donated more than \$50,000 to the India Development and Relief Fund in Washington, D.C., for concentrators and other medical needs.

The temple also organized special group prayers for those who have died of COVID-19 and a virtual vigil featuring music, prayer and speeches by interfaith leaders and elected officials.

"When we learned more about the difficulties the country was facing," said Ravi Vaidyanaat, the temple's director of religious affairs, "we immediately thought we had to do something."

Support for India has come, too, from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which sent ventilators to hospitals in Mumbai and Ahmedabad and personal protective equipment to rural communities. It is also recruiting U.S. and Israeli intensive-care doctors and nurses for a telemedicine training program.

"In the efforts that we're making in India ... what we keep in mind is that with each action that we engage in, we can save one life," said Michael Geller, the group's director of communications and media relations. "And that one life represents an entire world of people who can be impacted."

Nepal, India's much-smaller neighbor, is seeing its own pandemic spike, with doctors there warning recently of a major crisis as hospitals run out of beds and oxygen. That has prompted similar aid efforts by Nepalese in the United States.

"It's a landlocked country, and there's a lack of resources there. ... The situation in Nepal is very bad," said Urgan Sherpa, a former president and current adviser of New York City's United Sherpa Association, which has raised about \$5,000 for Nepal.

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Gaza militants, Israel trade new rocket fire and airstrikes

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Palestinian militants launched dozens of rockets from Gaza and Israel unleashed new air strikes against them early Tuesday, in an escalation triggered by soaring tensions in Jerusalem and days of clashes at an iconic mosque in the holy city.

Twenty-four people, including nine children, were killed in Gaza overnight, most of them in Israeli strikes. More than 700 Palestinians were hurt in clashes with Israeli security forces in Jerusalem and across the West Bank in 24 hours, including nearly 500 who were treated at hospitals. The Israeli military said six Israeli civilians were hurt by rocket fire Tuesday morning.

This round of violence, like previous ones, was fueled by conflicting claims over Jerusalem, home to major holy sites of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The rival national and religious narratives of Israelis and Palestinians are rooted in the city, making it the emotional core of their long conflict.

In recent weeks, tension has been soaring in Jerusalem, marked by clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police in the walled Old City, located in east Jerusalem which Israel captured and annexed in the 1967 war.

One of the flashpoints in the Old City has been the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site of Islam and the holiest site of Judaism. Another driver of Palestinian anger has been the threatened eviction of Palestinian families from homes in an east Jerusalem neighborhood by Israeli settlers.

Monday was a long day of anger and deadly violence, laying bare Jerusalem's deep divisions, even as Israel tried to celebrate its capture of the city's eastern sector and its sensitive holy sites more than half a century ago. With dozens of rockets flying into Israel throughout the night, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with top security officials and warned that the fighting could drag on, despite calls for calm from the U.S., Europe and elsewhere.

Hamas, the militant group ruling the Gaza Strip, fired dozens of rockets Monday evening, setting off air raid sirens as far as Jerusalem. The barrage came after Hamas had given Israel a deadline to withdraw forces from the Al-Aqsa compound.

By Tuesday morning, Hamas and other Gaza militants had fired more than 200 rockets. That included a barrage of six rockets that targeted Jerusalem, some 100 kilometers (60 miles) away. It set off air raid sirens throughout Jerusalem, and explosions could be heard in what was believed to be the first time the city had been targeted since a 2014 war.

There appeared to be some first signs of de-escalation in Jerusalem early Tuesday. Palestinian worshippers performed the dawn prayer at the mosque without confrontations as Israel apparently limited the presence of its police officers around the compound. Amateur videos showed dozens of faithful marching to the mosque and chanting "we sacrifice our blood, soul for Al-Aqsa."

In Gaza, an Israeli drone strike killed a man in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis early Tuesday, according to local media reports. In another strike, a woman and two men were killed when a missile struck the upper floors of an apartment building in the Shati refugee camp on the edge of Gaza City, according to Gaza Health Ministry and rescue services.

Hamas' armed wing said it intensified the rocket barrages following the airstrike on the house.

The Israeli military said it had carried out dozens of airstrikes across Gaza overnight, targeting what it said were Hamas military installations and operatives. It said a Hamas tunnel, rocket launchers and at least eight militants had been hit.

Dozens of rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. But one landed near a home on the outskirts of Jerusalem, causing light damage to the structure and sparking a brush fire nearby. In southern Israel, an Israeli man was lightly wounded after a missile struck a vehicle.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "terrorist organizations in Gaza have crossed a red line and attacked us with missiles in the outskirts of Jerusalem."

He said fighting could continue for some time and that "whoever attacks us will pay a heavy price," he said, warning that the fighting could "continue for some time."

Gaza health officials gave no further breakdowns on the casualties. At least 15 of the 22 deaths in Gaza

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were attributed to the airstrikes. Seven of the deaths were members of a single family, including three children, who died in a mysterious explosion in the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun. It was not clear if the blast was caused by an Israeli airstrike or errant rocket. More than 100 Gazans were wounded in the airstrikes, the Health Ministry said.

In a statement issued early Tuesday, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said the rocket attacks would continue until Israel stops "all scenes of terrorism and aggression in Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa mosque."

Tensions at the site, known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as the Temple Mount, have triggered repeated bouts of violence in the past.

In Monday's unrest, Israeli police fired tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets in clashes with stone-throwing Palestinians at the compound.

More than a dozen tear gas canisters and stun grenades landed in the mosque as police and protesters faced off inside the walled compound that surrounds it, said an Associated Press photographer at the scene. Smoke rose in front of the mosque and the golden-domed shrine on the site, and rocks littered the nearby plaza. Inside one area of the compound, shoes and debris lay scattered over ornate carpets.

Over 600 Palestinians were hurt in Jerusalem alone, including more than 400 who required care at hospitals and clinics, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent.

Palestinians and police reported renewed clashes late Monday. Israeli police also reported unrest in northern Israel, where Arab protesters burned tires and threw stones and fireworks at security forces. Police said 46 people were arrested.

Monday's confrontations came after weeks of almost nightly clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police in the Old City of Jerusalem during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The month tends to be a time of heightened religious sensitivities.

Most recently, the tensions have been fueled by the planned eviction of dozens of Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of east Jerusalem, where Israeli settlers have waged a lengthy legal battle to take over properties.

Israel's Supreme Court postponed a key ruling Monday in the case, citing the "circumstances."

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ned Price condemned "in the strongest terms" the rocket fire on Israel and called on all sides to calm the situation.

"More broadly, we're deeply concerned about the situation in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including violent confrontations in Jerusalem," he said. He said the U.S. would remain "fully engaged" and praised steps by Israel to cool things down, including the court delay in the eviction case.

In an apparent attempt to avoid further confrontation, Israeli authorities changed the planned route of a march by thousands of flag-waving nationalist Jews through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City to mark Jerusalem Day.

The annual festival is meant to celebrate Israel's capture of east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. But it is widely seen as a provocation because the route goes through the heart of Palestinian areas.

Israel also captured the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. It later annexed east Jerusalem and considers the entire city its capital. The Palestinians seek all three areas for a future state, with east Jerusalem as their capital.

Meanwhile, the United Nations, Egypt and Qatar, which frequently mediate between Israel and Hamas, were all trying to halt the fighting, a diplomatic official confirmed. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the issue with the media.

The tensions in Jerusalem have threatened to reverberate throughout the region and come at a crucial point in Israel's political crisis. Netanyahu failed to form a governing coalition last week, and his opponents are now working to build an alternate government.

Westbrook breaks Robertson's NBA triple-double record

By GEORGE HENRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Oscar Robertson's NBA record of 181 triple-doubles had stood since 1974 and was once thought to be untouchable — until Russell Westbrook surpassing it became inevitable.

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Westbrook got it done Monday night, hardly a surprise given that he's averaging a triple-double this season and this was his 36th, including seven in his last eight games.

"I normally don't like to pat myself on the back but tonight I will just because I'm so grateful for the ones before me and so blessed to the man above to allow me to go out and do it," Westbrook said. "I take this job very seriously and I'm super grateful for my teammates and coaches on my journey so far."

The 32-year-old Westbrook, in his 13th season overall and his first with the Washington Wizards, completed his 182nd triple-double when he grabbed his 10th rebound with 8:29 remaining in the game against the Atlanta Hawks. He finished with 28 points, 13 rebounds and 21 assists and missed a potential game-winning 3-pointer as the Wizards lost 125-124.

Although triple-doubles happen more frequently than in Robertson's era thanks to the pace of the contemporary NBA game, Westbrook has no peer for how routinely he fills the stat sheet. Magic Johnson is third all-time with 138 triple-doubles. Jason Kidd finished his career with 107, and LeBron James is the closest among active players with 99.

Westbrook began the night averaging 11.5 assists, tops in the NBA and the only player in double digits. He ranked sixth in rebounds with 11.6 per game and was averaging 22 points. He has triple-doubles in five straight games, three of them before the start of the fourth quarter.

Westbrook, the 2016-17 MVP and a nine-time All-Star, praised Robertson after he tied the record in Saturday's overtime win at Indiana. He had 33 points, 19 rebounds and 15 assists, closing out the game with a blocked shot.

"It's just a blessing," Westbrook said Monday night. "You put so much into the game. You put in so much time. You sacrifice so much and to be able to mentioned with guys like Oscar and Magic and Jason Kidd and those guys, it's just something I never dreamt about when I was a young kid growing up in LA. I'm truly grateful for moments like this."

Washington acquired Westbrook in a trade with Houston for John Wall before the season, reuniting Westbrook with coach Scott Brooks, who guided him to that MVP season with Oklahoma City.

The Wizards, who are trying to secure a spot in the postseason play-in tournament, were playing the first of at least two games without Bradley Beal, the NBA's No. 2 scorer who has a strained left hamstring.

That was nothing new for Westbrook, who has seven triple-doubles in nine games that Beal has missed. Westbrook also has at least 15 assists in five straight games, the longest streak in the league since Steve Nash in 2007-08.

The crowd at State Farm Arena cheered when Westbrook broke the record and the video board offered congratulations.

"They're witnessing a guy who competes every single possession," Brooks said. "Not a lot of guys you can say that about. I see it, but he does. He competes. Oscar Robertson is special. What he did was incredible. That's why no one's come close to it in 50 years. We always say that every record is meant to be broken. I don't know that anybody's ever going to get to this again, but he's definitely set it to another level now. He passed one of the greatest of all-time to ever play the game."

Westbrook had eight triple-doubles during his first six seasons in Oklahoma City. Then something clicked, and he's produced 174 over the last seven seasons.

His league-leading 36 this season is the second-highest total of his career. He had 42 in 2016-17 when he became the first player since Robertson in 1961-62 to average a triple-double. He will match that feat for the fourth time in five seasons.

"I just want to thank him and the things (Robertson) was able to do for the game. I probably wouldn't be doing some of the things I'm able to do now without his sacrifice and the things he did for the game as well," Westbrook said.

Pfizer COVID-19 shot expanded to US children as young as 12

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

U.S. regulators on Monday expanded the use of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to children as young as 12,

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offering a way to protect the nation's adolescents before they head back to school in the fall and paving the way for them to return to more normal activities.

Shots could begin as soon as Thursday, after a federal vaccine advisory committee issues recommendations for using the two-dose vaccine in 12- to 15-year-olds. An announcement is expected Wednesday.

Most COVID-19 vaccines worldwide have been authorized for adults. Pfizer's vaccine is being used in multiple countries for teens as young as 16, and Canada recently became the first to expand use to 12 and up. Parents, school administrators and public health officials elsewhere have eagerly awaited approval for the shot to be made available to more kids.

"This is a watershed moment in our ability to fight back the COVID-19 pandemic," Dr. Bill Gruber, a Pfizer senior vice president who's also a pediatrician, told The Associated Press.

The Food and Drug Administration declared that the Pfizer vaccine is safe and offers strong protection for younger teens based on testing of more than 2,000 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15. The agency noted there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents compared with 16 among kids given dummy shots. More intriguing, researchers found the kids developed higher levels of virus-fighting antibodies than earlier studies measured in young adults.

The younger teens received the same vaccine dosage as adults and had the same side effects, mostly sore arms and flu-like fever, chills or aches that signal a revved-up immune system, especially after the second dose.

Pfizer's testing in adolescents "met our rigorous standards," FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks said. "Having a vaccine authorized for a younger population is a critical step in continuing to lessen the immense public health burden caused by the COVID-19 pandemic."

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech recently requested similar authorization in the European Union, with other countries to follow.

The latest news is welcome for U.S. families struggling to decide what activities are safe to resume when the youngest family members remain unvaccinated.

"I can't feel totally comfortable because my boys aren't vaccinated," said Carrie Vittitoe, a substitute teacher and freelance writer in Louisville, Kentucky, who is fully vaccinated, as are her husband and 17-year-old daughter.

The FDA decision means her 13-year-old son soon could be eligible, leaving only her 11-year-old son unvaccinated. The family has not yet resumed going to church, and summer vacation will be a road trip so they do not have to get on a plane.

"We can't really go back to normal because two-fifths of our family don't have protection," Vittitoe said.

President Joe Biden said Monday's decision marked another important step in the nation's march back to regular life.

"The light at the end of the tunnel is growing, and today it got a little brighter," Biden said in a statement.

Pfizer is not the only company seeking to lower the age limit for its vaccine. Moderna recently said preliminary results from its study in 12- to 17-year-olds show strong protection and no serious side effects. Another U.S. company, Novavax, has a COVID-19 vaccine in late-stage development and just began a study in 12- to 17-year-olds.

Next up is testing whether the vaccine works for even younger children. Both Pfizer and Moderna have begun U.S. studies in children ages 6 months to 11 years. Those studies explore whether babies, pre-schoolers and elementary-age kids will need different doses than teens and adults. Gruber said Pfizer expects its first results in the fall.

Outside of the U.S., AstraZeneca is studying its vaccine among 6- to 17-year-olds in Britain. And in China, Sinovac recently announced that it has submitted preliminary data to Chinese regulators showing its vaccine is safe in children as young as 3.

Children are far less likely than adults to get seriously ill from COVID-19, yet they represent nearly 14% of the nation's coronavirus cases. At least 296 have died from COVID-19 in the U.S. alone, and more than 15,000 have been hospitalized, according to a tally by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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That's not counting the toll of family members becoming ill or dying -- or the disruption to school, sports and other activities so crucial to children's overall well-being.

The AAP welcomed the FDA's decision.

"Our youngest generations have shouldered heavy burdens over the past year, and the vaccine is a hopeful sign that they will be able to begin to experience all the activities that are so important for their health and development," said AAP President Dr. Lee Savio Beers in a statement.

Experts say children must get the shots if the country is to vaccinate the 70% to 85% of the population necessary to reach what's called herd immunity.

In the meantime, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says unvaccinated people — including children — should continue taking precautions such as wearing masks indoors and keeping their distance from other unvaccinated people outside of their households.

States push jobless from virus recession to return to work

By WILSON RING Associated Press

STOWE, Vt. (AP) — Eduardo Rovetto is hoping the state of Vermont's reinstated requirement that people who are collecting unemployment benefits must seek work to qualify will help him hire enough staff for his restaurant in the resort town of Stowe.

After more than a year of coronavirus restrictions on his business, Picasso Pizzeria & Lounge, he's expecting a breakout summer tourism season. But like employers across the country, he's worried he won't have enough workers.

"We've been getting many excuses as to why not to return," said Rovetto, who is offering a signing bonus of up to \$600 to try to add 15 to 20 employees who agree to stay through the middle of October. "Obviously, it was a legitimate one with COVID, but, you know, I think that's getting used less and less now. The vaccines are free; they are out there for anyone."

Many employers are telling similar stories. Fourteen months after COVID-19 put hundreds of thousands of people out of work, the U.S. economy is rebounding and employers are desperate for workers.

The challenge was highlighted Friday when employers nationwide added 266,000 jobs, far fewer than expected, and businesses reported they couldn't find people to fill the openings they have to keep up with the rapidly strengthening economic rebound.

To encourage people to return to work, more states are making it harder for people to stay on unemployment. Many blame the easy benefits that followed the pandemic, including what is now a \$300-a-week supplemental federal payment on top of state benefits. The argument is that people make more money staying home than going back to work.

Several states have begun requiring those receiving unemployment benefits to show they are actively searching for work, and a few will stop providing the additional federal supplement.

It's not just the hospitality sector that is scrambling to fill positions. Alene Candles, based in Milford, New Hampshire, is looking to fill 1,500 positions for its facility there and another in New Albany, Ohio, to meet demand for the holiday season. Company representatives will be participating in a number of virtual job fairs this month.

"We have had more than 100 positions open since the start of the year, and just recently we increased sign-on bonuses to \$1,200 for hourly positions -- in-part because we are competing with an entity that can print its own money -- the federal government -- and its \$300 per week additional unemployment benefit," said CEO Rod Harl. "I would love to welcome those searching for work to join our team."

On Monday, the state of New Hampshire reopened its job centers for the first time since the pandemic hit to help people looking for work, but only a handful showed up in the first few hours at the largest one in Manchester.

Labor experts say the shortage is not just about the \$300 payment. Some unemployed people also have been reluctant to look for work because they fear catching the virus. Others have found new occupations rather than return to their old jobs. And many women, especially working mothers, have had to leave the

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workforce to care for children.

The details and the timing of the state-led efforts to get people back to work differ, but they are coming from states led by both Republicans and Democrats.

In addition to Vermont, states reinstating the work-search requirement include Arizona, Maine, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and South Carolina.

"As President Reagan said, the best social program is a job," Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, a Republican, said when announcing the resumption of the work-search requirement. "This statement rings true today. Unemployment benefits are still available to Arizonans who need them, but now that plenty of jobs are available, those receiving the benefits should be actively looking for work."

Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana and South Carolina are planning to stop accepting the \$300 benefit.

In announcing last week that unemployed workers will no longer receive the additional benefit beginning June 27, Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte, a Republican, said it was "doing more harm than good."

Rachel Mata, an area manager for a Fayetteville, North Carolina-based staffing company, said it's been increasingly difficult to find people for positions since the passage of the latest federal COVID-19 relief bill.

"We get candidates who will mention, 'Hey, you know, why would I go to work when I get paid more on unemployment to sit at home?'" said Mata.

At a recent job fair, only one candidate showed up, said Mata, whose company, Mega Force Staffing Group Inc., mainly focuses on manufacturing jobs. In other cases, candidates have gone through the staffing company's onboarding process, only to not show up on their start date.

In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the heart of the state's \$20 billion tourism industry, restaurants and resorts are scrambling for summer help. Angelo Verdone, an assistant general manager at Seaside Resorts, said hotels are so short-staffed that managers are working double duty, cleaning rooms and doing maintenance. He is working some front desk shifts.

Some applicants have responded to ads but failed to attend the interviews; others have gotten offers but did not show up to the job itself.

Though the company has offered a \$500 sign-on bonus for its \$11-an-hour housekeeping role, it got no takers.

"It's not like they're bad jobs," Verdone said. "Most years, people are beating down the front door for the front desk jobs."

William Spriggs, an economist at Howard University and the chief economist for the AFL-CIO, said the issue isn't as simple as the unemployed being able to receive more benefits. He says the economy has changed.

He said he didn't think the job-search requirement is bad, but it won't solve the labor shortage.

"Matching workers to employers isn't as easy as people think, which is what some of these employers are finding out," Spriggs said.

There might be a lot of jobs available, but in some cases they don't fit for the unemployed with specialized work skills.

"I am a master technician with 30 years experience. You think I am going to go work in a pet store?" said Harry Chaikin, an out-of-work stagehand from Burlington, Vermont, who lost his job last year when the theater where he works stopped offering performances.

Chaikin says he is eager to return to work when theaters resume normal performances. He's receiving unemployment, including the \$300 supplemental benefit, but he's still months behind in his rent.

"The sense of optimism I feel is that human nature being what it is, I know that sooner or later people are going to gather again in big groups to be entertained. And when that happens, I will have work," he said.

And people are still losing their jobs.

Crystal Dvorak, 41, an audiologist in Billings, Montana, who has two teenage daughters, weathered a furlough early in the pandemic and had to dip deep into her savings. Last month, she found out she would lose her job when the clinic where she worked for nearly nine years had been sold.

When the governor announced the \$300 supplemental benefit would end, it was Dvorak's second day

of unemployment.

"It had me in tears," she said.

The state plans to launch a new program to give one-time \$1,200 bonuses to unemployed workers who return to work. Dvorak has begun applying for waitressing jobs, even though it could complicate her search for positions in her field.

"Knowing that change is coming, I'm having to be open to other positions," she said. "I have shown interest in more jobs in the last week than I have applied for my entire 25 years of working."

California expands drought emergency to large swath of state

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday expanded a drought emergency to a large swath of the nation's most populous state while seeking more than \$6 billion in multiyear water spending as one of the warmest, driest springs on record threatens another severe wildfire season across the American West.

The Democratic governor said he is acting amid "acute water supply shortages" in northern and central parts of California as he called again for voluntary conservation. Yet the state is in relatively better shape than it was when the last five-year drought ended in 2017, he said, as good habits have led to a 16% reduction in water usage.

His emergency declaration now includes 41 of 58 counties, covering 30% of California's nearly 40 million people, and he said a further expansion is likely as conditions worsen. The U.S. Drought Monitor shows most of the state and the American West is in extensive drought just a few years after California emerged from the last punishing multiyear dry spell.

"We're staring down at what could be disastrous summer and fall, with the potential of communities running out water, and fires," said Democratic U.S. Rep. Jim Costa, who accompanied Newsom to the announcement made before a Central Valley reservoir with a deep bathtub ring of dry earth surrounded by browning grass.

Like most of the state's extensive interconnected system of reservoirs and canals, the San Luis Reservoir is at less than 60% of its seasonal average as scarce winter rain and snow turns to a dry summer that Newsom said is imperiled by climate change.

Officials fear an extraordinarily dry spring presages a wildfire season like last year, when flames burned a record 6,562 square miles (16,996 square kilometers).

"The hots are getting a lot hotter in this state, the dries are getting a lot drier," Newsom said. "We have a conveyance system, a water system, that was designed for a world that no longer exists."

That requires the state to envision "a much more resilient, a much more vibrant, much more dynamic water delivery system," he said, noting that the one largely constructed in the last mid-century to carry water from Northern California to the south, "helped us build the world's largest middle class" by enabling the state's population and agricultural growth.

The governor is asking state lawmakers to approve what he said is a record \$5.1 billion over four years for water projects, plus another \$1 billion to help an estimated million Californians who are behind on their water bills in part because of the economic hardship of the pandemic.

His proposed water spending includes \$1.3 billion for drinking water and wastewater systems, prioritizing smaller and poorer communities.

Another \$200 million would go to repair canals damaged when the ground beneath them sank as more groundwater was pulled from wells.

Other projects would address groundwater cleanup, water recycling, fish and wildlife habitat, flood preparedness, weather forecasting, and agricultural water use.

His expanded drought emergency declaration includes the counties in the Klamath River, Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Tulare Lake watersheds across much of the northern and central parts of the state.

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The Sierra Nevada snowpack, which provides about a third of the state's water, was at just 59% of average on April 1, when it is normally at its peak.

This year is unique because of extraordinarily warm temperatures in April and early May, Newsom said. That led to quick melting of the Sierra Nevada snowpack in the waterways that feed the Sacramento River, which in turn supplies much of the state's summer water supply.

The problem was worse because much of the snow seeped into the ground instead of flowing into rivers and reservoirs, he said.

The warmer temperatures also caused water users to draw more water more quickly than even in other drought years, he said, leaving reservoirs extremely low for farmers, fish and wildlife that depend on them.

That all reduced the state's water supplies by as much as what would supply up to 1 million households for a year, he said.

Newsom urged residents to limit their use, whether by limiting outdoor watering, checking for leaks, or taking shorter showers and turning off the water when washing dishes or brushing teeth.

Senate Republicans blamed majority Democrats for not building more dams to increase water storage, with GOP leader Scott Wilk saying in a statement that the governor's declaration "does nothing to remove regulatory roadblocks that hold up shovel-ready water projects."

Newsom is spending the week previewing highlights of the revised budget he will present to state lawmakers Friday for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Earlier Monday in the San Francisco Bay Area, Newsom proposed tax rebates of up to \$1,100 for millions of lower- and middle-income Californians, one leg of a pandemic recovery plan made possible by an eye-popping \$76 billion budget surplus.

The barnstorming comes as Newsom faces a fall recall election driven in large part by frustration over his handling of the pandemic, though he noted that he also previewed his budget proposals in the past when he wasn't facing a recall.

"This expanded #drought declaration should have happened weeks ago," tweeted former Congressman Doug Ose, one of the Republicans who wants to replace Newsom. "Playing politics like this with people's livelihoods doesn't do anybody any good."

The governor's fellow Democrats, who control the Legislature, have until June 15 to pass a spending plan.

Colorado police seek motive in party shooting that killed 7

By THOMAS PEIPERT, JAMES ANDERSON and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — A shooting at a birthday party inside a trailer park home in Colorado Springs that killed six people before the gunman took his own life stunned a state weary of gun violence just weeks after another Colorado mass shooting killed 10 people.

Police on Monday were investigating what led the gunman, who they said was the boyfriend of one of the victims, to walk into the crowded party early Sunday and open fire.

Six adults were killed at the home at the Canterbury Mobile Home Park on the east side of Colorado's second-largest city, and a seventh died at a hospital, authorities said. The shooter was the boyfriend of a female victim at the party attended by friends, family and children, police said.

Authorities didn't release the names of the victims, gunman or disclose a possible motive. Nor did they release any further details on what weapon or weapons were used. Officials were still in the process of identifying the victims, Sandy Wilson of the El Paso County Coroner's Office said Monday.

The attack follows a series of mass shootings across the U.S. this year, including one on March 22 at a crowded supermarket in Boulder, Colorado, that killed 10 people, including a police officer. The gunman in that attack faces multiple charges including first-degree murder. He has yet to enter a plea pending a mental health evaluation requested by his public defenders.

A mobile crime lab was parked early Monday outside the Colorado Springs home, which was cordoned off by yellow police tape as officers guarded the scene. By midafternoon the tape was gone; a sign stood in front of the home advertising "Grief Support, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.," at the mobile home park office.

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A small crowd of mourners arrived to pay their respects, leaving bouquets of yellow roses and devotional candles on a small table they set up in front of the home. They silently gazed, then left without comment under a dark, gray sky and blustering winds. Someone closed a partially open window in the home from the outside.

Gladis Bustos, who lives three homes away, tearfully recalled the home's owner, whom she identified as Joana, as a warmhearted, hardworking person who always took the time to say hello to her neighbors, ask how they were doing, and brag about her children.

"She was an incredibly pleasant woman, very beautiful, happy all the time," Bustos said. "She loved to chat. And she was very proud of her family."

The gunfire that startled Bustos from her sleep early Sunday had forever changed what she described as a safe and welcoming neighborhood. "We're all in shock," she said. "How can this happen here? This is all so painful, so devastating, so overwhelming."

Another neighbor, Yenifer Reyes, told The Denver Post that she woke to the sound of gunfire and later saw police escorting children who were "crying hysterically" from the home. The children weren't hurt in the attack and have been placed with relatives, police said.

The first fire crews to respond to the shooting were told to stay back because of possible gunfire — then given an all-clear to approach the home an agonizing eight minutes after the initial dispatch, according to a recording of a Colorado Springs dispatch call.

As the magnitude of the shooting became clearer, the first on the scene requested more ambulances and engine crews. Sirens are heard in the background as responders at the scene request more help.

"Engine 11, sounds like more shots are still being fired -- keep your distance," a dispatcher says at one point. Twenty seconds later the engine crew responds: "Looking like we have multiple victims," and asks for more ambulances. The dispatcher requests another engine to "2828 Preakness Way, possible multiple gunshot victims."

More than eight minutes in, the dispatcher says that "police on scene are advising that there are four victims and that you are clear to go in." Soon thereafter, Engine 11 requests another ambulance; 13 minutes in the dispatcher says: "The sergeant on the scene is saying that medical is cleared to enter for all six patients. ... They're saying we have six."

The attack was the latest mass killing — defined as four or more dead, not including the shooter — to plague the U.S. this year. Before the Colorado Springs shooting, a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University showed there had been at least 11 mass shootings since Jan. 1, compared to just two public mass shootings in 2020.

Colorado Springs saw a 2015 attack on a Planned Parenthood clinic that killed three people, including a police officer, and injured eight others. Earlier that year, a man shot three people to death at random before dying in a shootout with police.

In 2007, a man killed two people and wounded three at Colorado Springs' New Life Church before taking his own life. Earlier the same day, he'd killed two people and injured two at a Youth With a Mission Center in the Denver suburb of Arvada.

Colorado also suffered the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School that killed 13 people before the two student attackers took their own lives, and the 2012 massacre at the Aurora movie theater that killed 12 people and injured 70.

After the Boulder shooting, Colorado lawmakers introduced a bill to create a state "Office of Gun Violence Prevention" to educate residents about gun safety and collect data on Colorado gun violence. Other bills advancing through the Democrat-led Legislature would tighten background checks, allow municipalities greater freedom to adopt their own gun control laws that are stricter than state law, and require a person facing a protection order related to alleged domestic violence to report what firearms they possess.

Democratic Gov. Jared Polis has signed into law this year legislation requiring safe firearms storage and the reporting of lost or stolen firearms.

Watchdog says Capitol Police deficient at monitoring threats

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Capitol Police force was hobbled by inadequate intelligence gathering ahead of the Jan. 6 siege, the department's watchdog told Congress on Monday, alarming lawmakers who are concerned for their own safety amid rising threats against members of Congress.

Capitol Police Inspector General Michael Bolton testified in the first of three House hearings this week on what went wrong during the Jan. 6 insurrection. Lawmakers are investigating the riots as they contemplate overhauling security, and Bolton has recommended that the Capitol Police create a new stand-alone division that would gather intelligence about threats and protect members similar to the way the U.S. Secret Service protects the president.

Many lawmakers are receiving threats and worry for their safety after the U.S. Capitol was so easily breached on Jan. 6 by supporters of then-President Donald Trump who wanted to overturn the election. The rioters were hunting for lawmakers, calling out House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then-Vice President Mike Pence by name as they roamed the building and members fled the House and Senate. In a statement Friday, the Capitol Police said that there has been a 107% increase in threats against members of Congress this year compared to 2020 and "provided the unique threat environment we currently live in, the Department is confident the number of cases will continue to increase."

A new inspector general report, one of several Bolton is preparing in response to the insurrection, said the department "has experienced issues" because of the increase in threats over the last five years and recommended the force hire more agents who are dedicated to assessing threats.

Bolton said there were multiple deficiencies that led to a lack of communication and guidance ahead of the siege. He said the department's guidance on counterintelligence was "outdated or vague" — some so ancient that it referred to Blackberry communication devices, which are now rarely used.

"A stand-alone entity, with a defined mission dedicated to countersurveillance activities in support of protecting the Congressional Community, would improve the Department's ability to identify and disrupt individuals or groups intent on engaging in illegal activity directed at the Congressional Community and its legislative process," the report says, according to a summary released by the House Administration Committee ahead of the hearing. Bolton has not released the full report.

Bolton told the panel that the Capitol Police is in the process of opening up two regional offices so it can better protect lawmakers at home. The department confirmed that on Monday, saying they will be opening up offices in San Francisco and Tampa, Florida.

Illinois Rep. Rodney Davis, the top Republican on the committee, said he hopes they open up more offices around the country and prosecute more people who are making the threats. He noted that he has received threats himself — a man was arrested in 2019 for threatening to shoot him.

"So I know firsthand that these threats are real, and that the people making these threats intend to act on them," Davis said. "I do believe a truly more aggressive enforcement stance, more arrests and more prosecutions of those who make violent threats and intend to carry them out would be a very strong deterrent."

In Friday's statement, the Capitol Police said they have already taken "significant steps" to improve counterintelligence and agreed that a stand-alone intelligence division would be helpful, but said they'd need more money to achieve it. The statement said the Capitol Police have about 30 agents and analysts doing the same job as more than 100 in the Secret Service, while the Capitol Police had 9,000 cases in 2020 and the Secret Service had 8,000.

The House is also scheduled to hear this week from former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller, who will testify about his role in approving National Guard troops during the insurrection. The troops did not arrive until several hours after the riots began, a subject that has attracted intense interest in Congress.

Miller is expected to appear Wednesday before the House Oversight Committee alongside former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen and District of Columbia Police Chief Robert Contee III. All three were part of frantic meetings that day as Capitol Police begged for backup.

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Army and Pentagon leaders have repeatedly denied any efforts to delay the Guard response. Miller denied in a Vice News interview in March that the response was unduly slow, saying, "It comes back to understanding how the military works." He said "this isn't a video game," adding "it's not 'Black Ops Call of Duty.'"

In a statement ahead of the hearing, House Oversight and Reform Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., said Congress and the American people "still have many unanswered questions" about why more wasn't done about threats of violence from right-wing extremists before the attack.

"Our hearing will provide the American people the first opportunity to hear from top Trump Administration officials about the catastrophic intelligence and security failures that enabled this unprecedented terrorist attack on our nation's Capitol," Maloney said in a statement.

The House Administration Committee will also hear this week from Christopher Failla, the inspector general for the architect of the Capitol, who is one of three officials sitting on a board that oversees the Capitol Police.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat and chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said last week that a \$2 billion supplemental spending bill that the House is expected to take up soon will have a focus on increased training, intelligence analysis and capabilities for the police force.

Vatican warns US bishops over get-tough Communion proposals

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

The head of the Vatican's doctrine office is warning U.S. bishops to deliberate carefully and minimize divisions before proceeding with a possible plan to rebuke Roman Catholic politicians such as President Joe Biden for receiving Communion even though they support abortion rights.

The strong words of caution came in a letter from Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, addressed to Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The USCCB will convene for a national meeting June 16, with plans to vote on drafting a document on the Communion issue.

There is division among the bishops, with some pressing for Biden and other Catholic public figures to be excluded from Communion over their abortion stance, and other bishops warning that such a move would be politically polarizing.

Ladaria, in his letter, said any new policy "requires that dialogue occurs in two stages: first among the bishops themselves, and then between bishops and Catholic pro-choice politicians within their jurisdictions."

Even then, Ladaria advised, the bishops should seek unanimous support within their ranks for any national policy, lest it become "a source of discord rather than unity within the episcopate and the larger church in the United States."

Ladaria made several other points that could complicate the plans of bishops pressing for tough action:

— He said any new statement should not be limited to Catholic political leaders but broadened to encompass all churchgoing Catholics in regard to their worthiness to receive Communion.

— He questioned the USCCB policy identifying abortion as "the preeminent" moral issue, saying it would be misleading if any new document "were to give the impression that abortion and euthanasia alone constitute the only grave matters of Catholic moral and social teaching that demand the fullest accountability on the part of Catholics."

— He said that if the U.S. bishops pursue a new policy, they should confer with bishops' conferences in other countries "both to learn from one another and to preserve unity in the universal church."

— He said any new policy could not override the authority of individual bishops to make decisions on who can receive Communion in their dioceses. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the archbishop of Washington, D.C., has made clear that Biden is welcome to receive Communion at churches in the archdiocese.

Among the leaders of the campaign to rebuke Biden is Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, who recently issued a pastoral letter arguing that Catholic politicians who support abortion rights should not receive Communion. A few days later, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego published an essay saying

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such an initiative "will bring tremendously destructive consequences."

Ladaria's letter was dated May 7. It was first reported Monday by Catholic News Service and the Jesuit magazine America.

NASA spacecraft begins 2-year trip home with asteroid rubble

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — With rubble from an asteroid tucked inside, a NASA spacecraft fired its engines and began the long journey back to Earth on Monday, leaving the ancient space rock in its rearview mirror.

The trip home for the robotic prospector, Osiris-Rex, will take two years.

Osiris-Rex reached asteroid Bennu in 2018 and spent two years flying near and around it, before collecting rubble from the surface last fall.

The University of Arizona's Dante Lauretta, the principal scientist, estimates the spacecraft holds between a half pound and 1 pound (200 grams and 400 grams) of mostly bite-size chunks. Either way, it easily exceeds the target of at least 2 ounces (60 grams).

It will be the biggest cosmic haul for the U.S. since the Apollo moon rocks. While NASA has returned comet dust and solar wind samples, this is the first time it's gone after pieces of an asteroid. Japan has accomplished it twice, but in tiny amounts.

Scientists described Monday's departure from Bennu's neighborhood as bittersweet.

"I've been working on getting a sample back from an asteroid since my daughter was in diapers and now she's graduating from high school, so it's been a long journey," said NASA project scientist Jason Dworkin.

Added Lauretta: "We have gotten used to being at Bennu and seeing new and exciting images and data coming back to us here on Earth."

Osiris-Rex was already nearly 200 miles (300 kilometers) from the solar-orbiting Bennu when it fired its main engines Monday afternoon for a fast, clean get-away.

Colorado-based flight controllers for spacecraft builder Lockheed Martin applauded when confirmation arrived of the spacecraft's departure: "We're bringing the samples home!"

Scientists hope to uncover some of the solar system's secrets from the samples vacuumed last October from Bennu's dark, rough, carbon-rich surface. The asteroid is an estimated 1,600 feet (490 meters) wide and 4.5 billion years old.

Bennu — considered a broken chunk from a bigger asteroid — is believed to hold the preserved building blocks of the solar system. The returning pieces could shed light on how the planets formed and how life arose on Earth. They also could improve Earth's odds against any incoming rocks.

Although the asteroid is 178 million miles (287 million kilometers) away, Osiris-Rex will put another 1.4 billion miles (2.3 billion kilometers) on its odometer to catch up with Earth.

The SUV-size spacecraft will circle the sun twice before delivering its small sample capsule to Utah's desert floor on Sept. 24, 2023, to end the more than \$800 million mission. It launched from Cape Canaveral in 2016.

The precious samples will be housed at a new lab under construction at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, already home to hundreds of pounds of lunar material collected by the 12 Apollo moonwalkers from 1969 to 1972.

Scientists initially thought the spacecraft stored 2 pounds (1 kilogram) of asteroid rubble, but more recently revised their estimate downward. They won't know for certain how much is on board until the capsule is opened after touchdown.

"Every bit of sample is valuable," Dworkin said. "We have to be patient."

NASA has lots more asteroid projects planned.

Set to launch in October, a spacecraft named Lucy will fly past swarms of asteroids out near Jupiter, while a spacecraft known as Dart will blast off in November in an attempt to redirect an asteroid as part of a planetary protection test. Then in 2022, the Psyche spacecraft will take off for an odd, metallic asteroid

bearing the same name. None of these missions, however, involve sample return.

Hit by COVID, Senegal's women find renewed hope in fishing

By CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

BARGNY, Senegal (AP) — Since her birth on Senegal's coast, the ocean has always given Ndeye Yacine Dieng life. Her grandfather was a fisherman, and her grandmother and mother processed fish. Like generations of women, she now helps support her family in the small community of Bargny by drying, smoking, salting and fermenting the catch brought home by male villagers. They were baptized by fish, these women say.

But when the pandemic struck, boats that once took as many as 50 men out to sea carried only a few. Many residents were too terrified to leave their houses, let alone fish, for fear of catching the virus. When the local women did manage to get their hands on fish to process, they lacked the usual buyers, as markets shut down and neighboring landlocked countries closed their borders. Without savings, many families went from three meals a day to one or two.

Dieng is among more than a thousand women in Bargny, and many more in the other villages dotting Senegal's sandy coast, who process fish — the crucial link in a chain that constitutes one of the country's largest exports and employs hundreds of thousands of its residents.

"It was catastrophic — all of our lives changed," Dieng said. But, she noted, "Our community is a community of solidarity."

That spirit sounds throughout Senegal with the motto "Teranga," a word in the Wolof language for hospitality, community and solidarity. Across the country, people tell each other: "on est ensemble," a French phrase meaning "we are in this together."

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. AP's series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AP is responsible for all content.

Last month, the first true fishing season since the pandemic devastated the industry kicked off, bringing renewed hope to the processors, their families and the village. The brightly painted vast wooden fishing boats called pirogues once again are each carrying dozens of men to sea, and people swarm the beach to help the fishermen carry in their loads for purchase.

But the challenges from the coronavirus — and so much more — remain. Rising seas and climate change threaten the livelihoods and homes of those along the coast, and many can't afford to build new homes or move inland. A steel processing plant rising near Bargny's beach raises fears about pollution and will join a cement factory that also is nearby, though advocates argue they are needed to replace resources depleted by overfishing.

"Since there is COVID, we live in fear," said Dieng, 64, who has seven adult children. "Most of the people here and women processors have lived a difficult life. ... We are exhausted. But now, little by little, it's getting better."

Dieng and her fellow processors weathered the pandemic by relying on each other. They're accustomed to being breadwinners — one expert estimated that each working woman in Senegal feeds seven or eight family members. Before the pandemic, a good season could bring Dieng 500,000 FCFA (\$1,000). Last year, she said, she made little to nothing.

Dieng's husband teaches the Quran at the mosque next door to their home, and the couple pooled their money with their children, with one son finding work repairing TVs. Other women got help from family abroad or rented out parts of their refrigerators for storage.

They survived, but they missed their work, which isn't just a job — it is their heritage. "Processing is a pride," Dieng said.

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Most fishing in Senegal is small-scale, and carried out in traditional, generations-old methods, as old as the ways Dieng and other villagers process the fish. They refer to it as artisanal fishing. Once processed, the fish is sold to local and international buyers, and preserving it means it lasts longer than fresh and is cheaper for all who purchase it. In Senegal alone, the fish accounts for more than half of protein eaten by its 16 million residents — key for food security in this West African country.

Industrial fishing is carried out in Senegal's waters as well, via motorized vessels and trawlers instead of the traditional pirogues, and more than two dozen companies also specialize in industrial processing in the country alongside fishmeal factories and canning plants. The fishmeal factories price women like Dieng out by paying more for the fish and depleting resources — 5 kilos of fish are needed for 1 kilo of fishmeal, a lower-grade powder-like product used for farm animals and pets.

Senegal's government also has agreements with other countries allowing them to fish off the country's coast and imposing limits on what they can haul in, but monitoring what these large boats from Europe, China and Russia harvest has proven difficult. The villagers say the outsiders are devastating the local supply.

Dieng has become a local leader and mentor whose neighbors increasingly come to her for advice on everything from money woes to their marriages, and she and others are now part of a rising collective voice of women in Senegal working for change along the coast and beyond.

Senegal has designated land near Bargny as an economic zone in its efforts to invest in redevelopment. Dieng's neighbor Fatou Samba is a town councilor and president of the Association of Women Processors of Fish Products, and she's testified about the challenges in artisanal fishing. She hopes to stop much of the expansion of big industry as fishmeal companies scoop up fish and send the product to Europe and Asia.

"If we let ourselves be outdone, within two or three years, women will not have work anymore," Samba said. "We are not against the creation of a project that will develop Senegal. But we are against projects that must make women lose the right to work."

Samba also warns of the effects of climate change, with rising tides eroding Senegal's coast and forcing fisherman to seek their catch further out to sea. Samba and Dieng have each lost at least half of their seaside homes as water gutted rooms during the rainy seasons of the past decade.

In addition to their laborious work processing fish, Samba and other women handle the bulk of the work at home.

"Especially in Africa, women are fighters. Women are workers. Women are family leaders," Samba said. "Therefore, women must be empowered."

Dieng, Samba and other women want to be heard — by the government, and by the companies building projects near them. They want better financing, protection of their fish and processing sites, and improved health regulations.

These women open their doors to family, friends, neighbors and even strangers who are eager to hear about the work they take such pride in, and which they want preserved — to help put food on the table for their families and to pay school fees for their children so they can have a future that might not involve fish. But while they're happy to talk about the work, they hesitate to focus on themselves. Community is what they are most comfortable with.

Late last month, when word spread that fishermen were finally coming back to Bargny with catches, Dieng and others hurried to meet the pirogues, tethered by ropes to the beach. It was the longest Dieng had been away from the catch. She bought enough to have her haul carried by horse-drawn cart to the plot of land she and friends claimed along acres of black sand. Then she started the work she's known for decades.

Once the fish were piled onto the ground, the women smoothed them out with a small, flat piece of wood. They covered them in light brown peanut shells, bought by the sack, and then lit embers in a bowl and placed those on the shells, which started to burn. Smoke billowed everywhere, a sign of progress. But it also made trying to breathe as brutal as toiling under the hot sun — even tougher during Ramadan, when the women are fasting.

The women stoked the fire, and after feeling confident it would smoke for hours, stepped away. After a day or so, they returned to turn the fish and let it dry in the sun. Another day passed, and the women returned to clean it. Finally, the fish was packaged in vast nets, sold and taken away in trucks.

The pandemic has taught villagers a crucial lesson: Money from fish may not always be there, so it's important to try to save some of their earnings.

The pandemic also is not over, so Dieng and other women go door to door to raise awareness and urge people to get vaccinated. Like many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Senegal imposed strict measures at the start of the pandemic. The government was widely commended for its overall handling of the pandemic, and curfews have been lifted and restrictions largely eased. But the country has had more than 40,000 cases, and both volunteer and government campaigns aim to keep another wave at bay.

At the end of a long day of work, and before she goes home to break fast of Ramadan with her family, Dieng stands in front of her smoking fish and records a video she hopes will motivate the women working in the industry.

"It's our gold. This site is all, this site is everything for us," Dieng said of the coast and its vital importance to Bargny. "All the women must rise up. ... We must work, to always work and work again for our tomorrows, for our future."

McConnell poised for starring role in voting bill fight

By LISA MASCARO, BRIAN SLODYSKO and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell is so determined to stop a sweeping elections overhaul pushed by congressional Democrats that he will personally argue against it, armed with a stack of amendments at a Senate hearing this week as Democrats advance the bill toward a vote.

It's a rare role for a party leader but shows the extent to which Republicans are prepared to fight the Democratic priority. The legislation would be the largest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation and touches on almost every aspect of the electoral process, changes that Democrats argue are even more important now as states impose new voting restrictions after the divisive 2020 election.

What's typically an hourslong legislative slog could drag into a dayslong showdown starting Tuesday at the Senate Rules Committee, a surprising new venue in the nation's broader debate over voting rules.

The action in Congress comes as states including Georgia, Florida, Arizona and Texas are pushing new voting rules, spurred by former President Donald Trump's false claims about election fraud after his 2020 loss. Democrats are on defense, having been unable to halt the onslaught of new state rules that will take months or years to litigate in court. Republicans argue the new state rules are needed to clamp down on mail ballots and other methods that became popular during the pandemic, but critics warn the states are seeking to reduce voter access, particularly for Black voters, ushering in a new Jim Crow era for the 21st century.

There was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election. Trump's claims were rejected by Republican and Democratic election officials in state after state, by U.S. cybersecurity officials and by courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court. And his attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of fraud that could change the election outcome.

McConnell is expected to be an "active" participant in Tuesday's session to debate and amend the voting bill, his office said. Stopping the bill is his "priority," as Republicans argue the legislation represents a Democratic power grab and federal overreach into state administration of elections.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., is also expected to stop in at the Rules panel meeting to add his weight to the debate.

On Monday, Schumer asked whether Republicans would act in good faith or further the spread of Trump's "big lie" about the 2020 election.

"Will they participate in improving our democracy, or in helping, aiding and abetting the big lie and a giant step backward?" he said during a speech on the Senate floor.

The legislation, known as the For the People Act, was given top billing on the Democratic agenda, but the path ahead is unclear. Despite the showing from McConnell, who has cultivated a reputation for turning the Senate into a legislative graveyard, moderate members of the Democratic caucus also pose a sizable obstacle to the bill becoming law.

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Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have both said they oppose making changes to the Senate's filibuster rules, which would be needed in order to maneuver the bill past Republican opposition and pass it with a simple majority in a 50-50 Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris delivering the tiebreaking 51st vote.

Manchin has called for any elections overhaul to be done on a bipartisan basis.

Other Democrats want to pare back the bill to core voting protections to try to put Republicans on the spot.

House resolution H.R. 1, and its companion, S. 1, in the Senate have been in the works for several years. As passed by the House in March, the legislation would create automatic voter registration nationwide, require states to offer 15 days of early voting, require more disclosure from political donors and restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, among other changes. It would also compel states to offer no-excuse absentee voting.

In particular, it would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which are a magnet for wealthy interests looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

McConnell has spent a career fighting for the free flow of campaign cash as a constitutionally protected right to free speech.

One Republican aide who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the situation candidly said they are planning to try to strike out full sections of the bill and introduce other changes.

Democrats have been making their own changes to the bill to draw support. Manchin has not yet signed on, and his backing will be crucial.

In the latest version of the legislation, states would have more time and flexibility to put new federal rules in place. Some election officials had complained of unrealistic timelines, increased costs and onerous requirements.

States would have more time to launch same-day voter registration at polling places and to comply with new voting system requirements. They would also be able to apply for an extension if they were unable to meet the deadline for automatic voter registration. Officials have said these are complex processes that require equipment changes or upgrades that will take time to get in place.

Democrats are also dropping a requirement that local election offices provide self-sealing envelopes with mail ballots and cover the costs of return postage. Instead, they plan to require the U.S. Postal Service to carry mail ballots and ballot request forms free of charge, with the federal government picking up the tab.

Manchin told reporters Monday that he hadn't yet reviewed the changes but remained open to supporting the bill.

"We are looking at everything. We hope there's a pathway there," he said.

US restores transgender health protections denied by Trump

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal government will protect gay and transgender people against sex discrimination in health care, the Biden administration declared Monday, reversing a Trump-era policy that narrowed rights at the intersection of changing social mores and sensitive medical decisions.

It marked the latest step by President Joe Biden to advance the rights of gay and transgender people across society, from military service, to housing, to employment opportunities.

The policy announcement by the Department of Health and Human Services affirms that federal laws forbidding sex discrimination in health care also protect gay and transgender people. The Trump administration had defined "sex" to mean gender assigned at birth, thereby excluding transgender people from the law's umbrella of protection.

"Fear of discrimination can lead individuals to forgo care, which can have serious negative health consequences," said HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra. "Everyone — including LGBTQ people — should be able to access health care, free from discrimination or interference, period."

Both opponents and supporters of Biden's action said it's likely to lead to litigation.

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Speaking for the medical community, the American Medical Association said in a statement the Biden administration "did the right thing" by ending "a dismal chapter which a federal agency sought to remove civil rights protections." But some conservatives warned that doctors could be forced to perform gender reassignment procedures against their professional judgement.

Becerra said HHS will now be aligned with a landmark 6-3 Supreme Court decision last year in a workplace discrimination case, which established that federal laws against sex discrimination on the job also protect gay and transgender people.

In a tweet at the time, then-President Donald Trump called the decision "horrible & politically charged." Undeterred by the ruling, his administration proceeded to try to narrow protections against discrimination in health care. But Biden early on in his term directed government agencies to apply the Supreme Court's reasoning to areas under their jurisdiction.

Monday's action means that the HHS Office for Civil Rights will again investigate complaints of sex discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Hospitals, clinics and other medical providers can face denial of Medicare and Medicaid payments for violations of the law.

Since the Trump transgender rule had been blocked by a federal judge, the Biden administration action essentially restores a policy established during the Obama years. The Affordable Care Act prohibited sex discrimination in health care but did not use the term "gender identity." The Obama administration interpreted the law as shielding gay and transgender people as well.

Conservative lawyer Roger Severino, who as a former HHS official oversaw the drafting of the Trump rules, said the Biden administration cut corners in issuing its new policy.

"This is inflaming the culture wars, especially when you are trying to circumvent the process," said Severino, now at the Ethics and Public Policy Center think tank. Partly because of conflicting lower court rulings on the Trump and Obama policies, Becerra should have undertaken a formal rule-making, which can take months. "I expect lawsuits," Severino added.

But civil rights advocates said the Supreme Court's ruling on transgender protections essentially wiped the slate clean for Biden. "The Supreme Court has already laid out the reasoning that applies under all sex discrimination laws," said Omar Gonzalez-Pagan, a lawyer for Lambda Legal. "They did so in an employment case but their reasoning applies equally in health care, in education, and in housing."

In recent years the understanding of sex has broadened to acknowledge a person's inner sense of being male, female, neither or a combination.

Behind the dispute over rights for transgender people is a medically recognized condition called "gender dysphoria" — discomfort or distress caused by a discrepancy between the gender that a person identifies as and the gender assigned at birth. Consequences can include severe depression. Treatment can range from gender confirmation surgery and hormones to people changing their outward appearance by adopting a different hairstyle or clothing.

Under the Obama-era rule, a hospital could be required to perform gender-transition procedures such as hysterectomies if the facility provided that kind of treatment for other medical conditions.

LGBTQ groups say explicit protections are needed for people seeking gender transition treatment, and even for transgender people who need care for illnesses such as diabetes or heart problems.

But Tony Perkins, president of the religious conservative Family Research Council, called sex "an objective biological reality" and said the Biden administration is promulgating "a nonsensical definition" of discrimination. "While this decision will advance America's cultural psychosis, it will potentially put the physical well-being of individuals at grave risk," Perkins said in a statement.

More than 1.5 million Americans identify as transgender, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank focusing on LGBT policy at the UCLA School of Law. A bigger number — 4.5% of the population — identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, according to Gallup.

HHS is a traditional battleground for conflicts over social issues. During the Trump administration the department bent to the will of conservatives. Other Trump policies applauded by the right restricted abortion referrals and broadened employers' ability to opt out of providing birth control to women workers covered by their health plans. Under Biden, the policy pendulum has been swinging back in the opposite direction.

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One of Biden's first steps after taking office was a Jan. 20 executive order on combating discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Biden quickly followed that up with another order reversing a Trump-era Pentagon policy that largely barred transgender individuals from serving in the military.

And earlier this spring, the Department of Housing and Urban Development withdrew a Trump policy that would have allowed taxpayer-funded homeless shelters to deny access to transgender people.

At HHS, Biden's term has seen the Senate confirmation of Dr. Rachel Levine to be assistant secretary for health, a senior position that involves oversight of public health initiatives, HIV/AIDS, women's health and minority health, as well as other areas including research protections. Levine, formerly Pennsylvania's top health official, is the first openly transgender person to be confirmed by the Senate.

AGs urge Facebook to drop 'Instagram for kids' proposal

By MARK PRATT Associated Press

A bipartisan group of 44 attorneys general has written to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg urging him to drop company plans for a version of Instagram for children under the age of 13, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey announced Monday.

The attorneys general in the letter said they are concerned about social media's effects on the physical and emotional well-being of children, the potential for increased cyberbullying, possible vulnerability to on-line predators, and what they called Facebook's "checkered record" in protecting children on its platforms.

"It appears that Facebook is not responding to a need, but instead creating one, as this platform appeals primarily to children who otherwise do not or would not have an Instagram account," said the letter, signed by the attorneys general of 40 states, the District of Columbia and three U.S. territories.

Children under 13 are technically not allowed to use the Instagram app in its current form due to federal privacy regulations. But Facebook in March confirmed a report by BuzzFeed News, saying it is "exploring a parent-controlled experience" on Instagram.

"It's shameful that Facebook is ignoring the very real threat that social media poses to the safety and well-being of young children in an attempt to profit off of a vulnerable segment of our population," Healey said in a statement.

Facebook in a statement Monday said it is exploring Instagram for kids to give parents more control over what children who are already online are exposed to, will make every effort to protect children, and will not show advertising on the platform.

"We are developing these experiences in consultation with experts in child development, child safety and mental health, and privacy advocates," the company said. "We also look forward to working with legislators and regulators, including the nation's attorneys general."

Facebook also pointed out that it is a founding sponsor of the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital, launched in March to study the effects of digital technology on kids' "brains, bodies, and behaviors."

The effort of the attorneys general is backed by Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

"Facebook faces a critical choice: will they plow ahead with their ill-conceived plan to ensnare young children, or will they listen to the growing chorus of parents, experts, advocates, lawmakers and regulators who are telling them that an Instagram kids' site will undermine young children's healthy development and right to privacy?" Executive Director Josh Golin said in a statement.

Facebook faced similar criticism in 2017 when it launched the Messenger Kids app, touted as a way for children to chat with family members and friends approved by parents.

'X Gon' Give It to Ya': New DMX album out on May 28

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new album from DMX will be released later this month.

DMX's longtime producer and collaborator, Grammy winner Swizz Beatz, announced on Monday that

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"EXODUS" will feature new material and drop on May 28.

"My brother X was one of the most pure and rare souls I've ever met. He lived his life dedicated to his family and music. Most of all, he was generous with his giving and loved his fans beyond measure. This album, X couldn't wait for his fans all around the world to hear and show just how much he valued each and every single person that has supported him unconditionally," Swizz Beatz said in a statement.

The posthumous album will be released on Def Jam, where DMX released most of his albums and made music history. The Grammy-nominated performer's first five albums all debuted at No. 1 on the all-genre Billboard 200 albums chart. His hits include "Get at Me Dog," "Ruff Ryders' Anthem," "Party Up (Up in Here)" and "X Gon' Give It to Ya."

DMX, whose birth name was Earl Simmons, died last month at age 50. His life and legacy was celebrated at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York, where Kanye West, Nas, Busta Rhymes and members of DMX's Ruff Ryders collective — Swizz Beatz, Eve, The Lox — attended and spoke highly of the rapper.

His last album, "Undisputed," was released in 2012.

AP-NORC poll: Biden approval buoyed by his pandemic response

By JULIE PACE and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is plunging into the next phase of his administration with the steady approval of a majority of Americans, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The survey shows Biden is buoyed in particular by the public's broad backing for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the fourth month of his presidency, Biden's overall approval rating sits at 63%. When it comes to the new Democratic president's handling of the pandemic, 71% of Americans approve, including 47% of Republicans.

The AP-NORC poll also shows an uptick in Americans' overall optimism about the state of the country. Fifty-four percent say the country is on the right track, higher than at any point in AP-NORC polls conducted since 2017; 44% think the nation is on the wrong track.

Those positive marks have fueled the Biden White House's confidence coming out of the president's first 100 days in office, a stretch in which he secured passage of a sweeping \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package and surged COVID-19 vaccines across the country. The U.S., which has suffered the most virus deaths of any nation, is now viewed enviably by much of the rest of the world for its speedy vaccination program and robust supplies of the shots.

"We are turning a corner," said Jeff Zients, the White House's COVID-19 response coordinator.

The improvements have also impacted Americans' concerns about the virus. The AP-NORC poll shows the public's worries about the pandemic are at their lowest level since February 2020, when the virus was first reaching the U.S. About half of Americans say they are at least somewhat worried that they or a relative could be infected with the virus, down from about 7 in 10 just a month earlier.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, there is a wide partisan gap in Americans' views of pandemic risks. Among Democrats, 69% say they remain at least somewhat worried about being infected with the virus, compared with just 33% of Republicans.

Despite the overall positive assessments of Americans, Biden's advisers are well aware that the next phase of his presidency is potentially trickier. Vaccination rates have slowed, and the administration is grappling with how to persuade those who are reluctant to get the shots about their safety and efficacy.

Biden's legislative agenda for the rest of this year also faces obstacles on Capitol Hill. Republicans are resisting his calls for passing a sweeping infrastructure package, and there's insufficient support among Democrats for overhauling Senate rules in a way that would allow the party to tackle changes to immigration policy, gun laws and voting rights on its own.

There are also potential warning signs emerging on the economy after a strong start to the year. A new government report out Friday showed employers added just 266,000 jobs in April, sharply lower than in March and far fewer than economists had expected. The slowdown was attributed to a multitude of fac-

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tors, including nearly 3 million people reluctant to look for work because they fear catching the virus. Some businesses — and Republican lawmakers — also argue that a \$300-a-week jobless benefit, paid for by the federal government, is discouraging some of the unemployed from taking new jobs.

Biden, however, argued that the report is an indication that more federal spending is needed to help bolster the economy. He's pitched to Congress a \$4 trillion package for spending on infrastructure, education and children, a measure many liberal Democrats say should be bigger and most Republicans argue is far too large.

"We never thought that after the first 50 or 60 days everything would be fine," Biden said after Friday's job report was released. "There's more evidence our economy is moving in the right direction. But it's clear we have a long way to go."

What's unclear is whether the employment slowdown will continue or how it will impact Americans' views of Biden's handling of the economy. Ahead of Friday's new jobs numbers, his approval rating on the economy stood at a solid 57%.

Compared with Biden's approval ratings on the pandemic, there is a starker partisan divide in views of his handling of the economy. Nearly all Democrats, 91%, back his economic stewardship, while just 19% of GOP voters do.

While the pandemic and the economy have dominated Biden's early months in office, other significant issues loom.

Immigration in particular has become a growing concern for the White House as it grapples with an increase in migration, including by unaccompanied minors, at the U.S. border with Mexico. Republicans have tried to tie the uptick to Biden's rollback of more stringent border policies enacted by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

Immigration is also among Biden's lowest-rated issues in the AP-NORC survey. Overall, 43% approve of his handling of the issue, while 54% disapprove.

The president also receives lower marks on gun policy, which has catapulted back to the forefront of the national debate following a string of mass shootings across the country. Americans are largely split over Biden's approach to the issue, with 48% approving and 49% disapproving.

The next phase of Biden's presidency is also likely to include more action on foreign policy. He announced that all U.S. troops will withdraw from Afghanistan by September, and American negotiators have resumed discussions with Iran on a new nuclear agreement. The White House has also signaled that Biden may hold his first in-person meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin this summer.

Thus far, a slim majority of Americans, 54%, say they approve of Biden's foreign policy.

Hopes fade for minke whale stuck in River Thames near London

By MIKE FULLER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Hopes faded Monday for a young minke whale who became trapped in the River Thames near London, authorities said.

Rescuers trying to recapture the whale said that by 5 p.m. (1600 GMT; 12 p.m. EDT) its condition had deteriorated rapidly and it would soon be stranded by the dropping tide near Teddington in southwest London.

"Once the whale is beached a veterinary team will be on stand by to euthanize the animal to end its suffering," the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) said in a statement.

The BDMLR said the injured and drained calf would struggle to swim even if it managed to get back into deeper water.

Crews had already worked for hours before being able to free the whale early Monday from a perilous stranding on a lock near Richmond, a few miles downstream of Teddington.

But as the mammal was being taken for further health checks on an inflatable pontoon, it slipped back into the water.

"This animal is very, very lost," Port of London Authority spokesman Martin Garside said. "It's like seeing

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a camel at the North Pole.”

Garside said a whale had never been seen this far up the Thames before, 95 miles (150 kilometers) along the river from its mouth, with the sheer distance making the whale’s route back to safety extremely difficult.

The whale, which measured about four meters (13 feet) long, was first seen lying on the lock’s boat rollers Sunday night. Hundreds of people gathered along the banks of the Thames to watch the rescue operation as night fell. The area is known for wide tidal swings that easily reach over 5.5 meters (18 feet) high.

Port staff were joined by firefighters, coast guard members and marine animal rescue divers.

Minke whales, which are more typically found in the northern Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, can grow to a size of nine meters (30 feet).

Meanwhile, in Spain, a marine wildlife group was working to make sure that a gray whale found near Spain’s northeastern Mediterranean coast, far from its usual northern Pacific migration routes, doesn’t get stranded.

Maritime rescuers, firefighters and other authorities worked with conservationists over the weekend to keep a whale nicknamed Wally from venturing into shallow water and ports near Barcelona.

The maritime group said the whale entered the Mediterranean Sea through the Strait of Gibraltar and has been spotted since March in the vicinity of Morocco, Algeria, Italy and France.

In an aerial video released by the group, the whale could be seen very close to a seawall near one of Barcelona’s main beaches.

Americans set another pandemic-era record for air travel

By The Associated Press undefined

Americans set a record for pandemic-era air travel, then broke it again over the Mother’s Day holiday weekend.

The Transportation Security Administration said that slightly more than 1.7 million people were screened at airport checkpoints on Sunday, the highest number since March 2020, when travel was collapsing because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Sunday’s mark was about 4,500 more than the previous record, set just two days earlier.

However, those crowds were still far smaller than before the pandemic. Sunday’s TSA count was down 29% from the comparable Sunday two years ago, according to TSA.

Air travel has been rising slowly for more than a year since hitting bottom in mid-April 2020. The numbers had leveled off recently, but with the busy weekend, the 7-day moving average of U.S. air travelers surpassed the period around the Easter holiday and also set a pandemic-era high.

Airlines say most of the people on flights now are leisure travelers going to destinations within the United States.

International travelers entering the U.S. are required to show proof of a negative test for COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said recently travelers can meet that requirement with federally approved home-testing kits, potentially making international travel a little easier.

Dracula’s castle proves an ideal setting for COVID-19 jobs

By STEPHEN MCGRATH Associated Press

BUCHAREST (AP) — At Dracula’s castle in picturesque Transylvania, Romanian doctors are offering a job in the arm rather than a stake through the heart.

A COVID-19 vaccination center has been set up on the periphery of Romania’s Bran Castle, which is purported to be the inspiration behind Dracula’s home in Bram Stoker’s 19th-century gothic novel “Dracula.”

Every weekend through May “vaccination marathons” will be held just outside the storied 14th-century hilltop castle, where no appointment is needed, in an attempt to encourage people to protect themselves against COVID-19.

“We wanted to show people a different way to get the (vaccine) needle,” Alexandru Priscu, the marketing manager at Bran Castle, told The Associated Press.

Those brave enough to get a Pfizer vaccine shot receive a "vaccination diploma," which is aptly illustrated with a fanged medical worker brandishing a syringe.

"Besides the diploma, people benefit with free entry to the (castle's) torture rooms, which have 52 medieval torture instruments," Priscu noted.

Since the light-hearted campaign was launched over the weekend — when nearly 400 people were vaccinated — Priscu said he has received scores of requests from foreigners wishing to get vaccinated in the spooky setting. Bad news for them: only residents of Romania can officially receive a jab.

The campaign runs alongside a series of government initiatives as it pushes to speed up the inoculation campaign for the European Union nation of more than 19 million people. The government is hoping to vaccinate 5 million people by June 1 to herald in a "return to normality."

On Saturday, all vaccination centers in the country became appointment-free after 2 p.m., and round-the-clock "vaccination marathon" events have been launched in several cities throughout Romania.

Since the pandemic started, Romania has recorded more than 1 million COVID-19 infections and 29,034 people have died.

New White House panel aims to separate science, politics

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eager to turn the page on the Trump years, the Biden White House is launching an effort to unearth past problems with the politicization of science within government and to tighten scientific integrity rules for the future.

A new 46-person federal scientific integrity task force with members from more than two dozen government agencies will meet for the first time on Friday. Its mission is to look back through 2009 for areas where partisanship interfered with what were supposed to be decisions based on evidence and research and to come up with ways to keep politics out of government science in the future.

The effort was spurred by concerns that the Trump administration had politicized science in ways that put lives at risk, eroded public trust and worsened climate change.

"We want people to be able to trust what the federal government is telling you, whether it's a weather forecast or information about vaccine safety or whatever," said Jane Lubchenco, the deputy director for climate and environment at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

People need to know "it's not by fiat, somebody's sort of knee-jerk opinion about something," added Alondra Nelson, the science office's deputy director for science and society. Nelson and Lubchenco spoke to The Associated Press ahead of a Monday announcement about the task force's first meeting and part of its composition. It stems from a Jan. 27 presidential memo requiring "evidence-based policy-making."

Scientists and others have accused the Trump administration of setting aside scientific evidence and injecting politics into issues including the coronavirus, climate change and even whether Hurricane Dorian threatened Alabama in 2019.

Naomi Oreskes, a Harvard University historian who has written about attacks on science in the book "Merchants of Doubt," said politicization of science undermines the nation's ability to address serious problems that affect Americans' health, their well-being and the economy.

"There's little doubt that the American death toll from covid-19 was far higher than it needed to be and that the administration's early unwillingness to take the issue seriously to listen to and act on the advice of experts and to communicate clearly contributed substantively to that death toll," Oreskes said in an email.

Lubchenco, who led the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the Obama administration, pointed to an incident during the Trump years that became known as "Sharpiegate" as a clear example of "political interference with scientific information that was potentially extraordinarily dangerous."

During Sharpiegate, the NOAA reprimanded some meteorologists for tweeting that Alabama was not threatened by the hurricane, contradicting President Donald Trump, who said Alabama was in danger. The matter became known as Sharpiegate after someone in the White House used a black Sharpie — a favorite pen of Trump's — to alter the official National Hurricane Center warning map to indicate Alabama could be in the path of the storm. A 2020 inspector general report found the administration had violated

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scientific integrity rules.

The Sharpigate case revealed flaws in the scientific integrity system set up in 2009 by President Barack Obama, Lubchenco said. There were no consequences when the agency violated the rules, Lubchenco said. Nor were there consequences for NOAA's parent Cabinet agency, the Commerce Department. That's why President Joe Biden's administration is calling for scientific integrity rules throughout government and not just in science-oriented agencies, she said.

Lubchenco said a reluctance to fight climate change in the last four years has delayed progress in cutting emissions of heat-trapping gases. "That will inevitably result in the problem being worse than it needed to be," she said.

"What we have seen in the last administration is that the suppression of science, the reassignment of scientists, the distortion of scientific information around climate change was not only destructive but counterproductive and really problematic," Lubchenco said.

Kelvin Droegemeier, who served as Trump's science adviser, in an email repeated what he told Congress in his confirmation hearing: "Integrity in science is everything," and science should be allowed to be done "in an honest way, full of integrity without being incumbered by political influence."

Droegemeier said the White House science office, where Nelson and Lubchenco now work and where he used to be, is more about policy and does not have the authority to investigate or enforce rules.

Last week, Republican legislators accused the Biden White House of playing politics with science when it removed climate scientist Betsy Weatherhead, who had been praised by atmospheric scientists, from heading the national climate assessment. Lubchenco said it was normal for a new administration to bring in new people.

Rice University historian Douglas Brinkley said the Biden administration is trying hard but isn't approaching the task of restoring science quite right.

"It's impossible to keep politics out of science," Brinkley said. "But you can do your best to mitigate it."

He said that only looking as far back as the Obama and Trump administrations will doom the task force's efforts not to be politicized itself and looked at in a partisan way.

What's really needed, Brinkley said, is to "get to the root of things" and look back as far as 1945. Both Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, and John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, elevated science efforts and tried to keep out the politics. But Brinkley said that with the onset of the environmental movement, the distraction of the Vietnam War and corporations seeing science as leading to too much regulation during the Reagan era, a unified public admiration for science fell apart.

Harvard's Oreskes said her research indicated Ronald Reagan was "the first president in the modern era to exhibit disregard and at times even contempt for scientific evidence."

The new task force will focus more on the future than the past, Nelson said.

"Every agency is being asked to really demonstrate that they are making decisions that are informed by the best available research evidence," Nelson said.

One of the four task force co-chairs is Francesca Grifo, scientific integrity officer for the Environmental Protection Agency since 2013. She clashed with the Trump EPA, which would not allow her to testify at a 2019 congressional hearing about scientific integrity.

The others are Anne Ricciuti, deputy director for science at the Education Department's Institute of Education Sciences; Craig Robinson, director of the Office of Science Quality and Integrity at the U.S. Geological Survey; and Jerry Sheehan, deputy director of the National Library of Medicine.

Mexican villages arm children in desperate bid for attention

By MARÍA VERZA Associated Press

AYAHUALTEMPA, Mexico (AP) — The children in this mountain village usually spend their days caring for goats or cows and playing with their dogs.

But on the rare occasions that the press comes to Ayahualtempa, the kids are lined up and handed guns.

They pull on the shirts of a community police force, cover their faces with handkerchiefs, grab their

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guns — fake wooden ones for the youngest — and line up in formation on the town's basketball court to pose and march for the cameras.

The images have shocked people across Mexico and beyond. And that's the point.

Few of those children actually wield guns on patrol, but such displays here and in other oft-forgotten communities are desperate attempts to attract the federal government's help to fend off organized criminals.

"They are the poster children for a country at war that doesn't speak of war," said Juan Martín Pérez, director of the Network for Children's Rights in Mexico.

The remote region of Guerrero state is one of Mexico's poorest and one of its most violent. It's a key corridor for drug production and transit, especially heroin from opium poppies. Communities of the ethnic Nahuatl like Ayahualtempa are caught between warring criminal bands and suffer kidnappings, extortion and murders.

On a recent afternoon, four boys cared for goats and played with puppies on a slope looking out over mountaintops running to the horizon.

Asked about training with guns, the oldest, 12-year-old Valentín Toribio said now they only march "when the reporters are going to come and interview us."

"It's so the president sees us and helps us," he said.

But there is at least some real training, too.

Valentín said he had liked learning to fire a gun and hopes to become a policeman when he gets older. His older brother taught him to shoot, though he normally only holds a gun for the performance. "When I'm older I'll carry the gun because (now) it can be dangerous," he said.

His 11-year-old cousin, Geovanni Martínez, is less interested in the performance because he is too busy. "I take care of the goats, then I go to my pigs and then to give water to Filomena," his donkey, he said. If there's any free time, he plays basketball. He yearns to return to school, closed for the past year by the pandemic.

Asked if he would shoot at an enemy, he issued a convincing, "No!"

A short time later, three of the four joined about a dozen others in a display for visiting reporters. They marched a bit and displayed firing positions from one knee, seated and flat on their stomachs.

Clemente Rodríguez, 10, didn't participate because he said his mother would not approve. His only weapons were two slingshots dangling around his neck.

The day's display was less militant than one a few weeks earlier, when some three dozen children marched out of town and fired weapons into the air while shouting slogans against the gang that terrorizes them — Los Ardillos, "the Squirrels."

The town's demands include more National Guard troops and help for orphans, widows and those displaced by violence that has cost 34 lives in several nearby communities over the past two years.

Only a few of the children in the village, which has more than 1,000 residents, actually take part. They are all boys; a girl who wanted to participate was barred from doing so. Most are sons or brothers of members of the town's community police force, guarding the entrances to the town with old shotguns.

The threats residents fear are real, and regional authorities are often suspect. Guerrero is the state where 43 students from a teachers' college disappeared in 2014 at the hands of local police and state and federal authorities working with a drug gang.

Around Ayahualtempa, the Ardillos gang is battling with Los Rojos — "the Reds" — and many communities have formed their own forces. But leadership disputes and gang infiltration have fractured those forces and many people struggle to identify who is on which side.

The result, says Abel Barrera, founder of local human rights group Tlachinollan, has set local people against one another while the government does nothing to stop the violence or solve other deep problems.

"We've normalized that these children don't eat, are illiterate, are farm workers," he said, and mocked the outrage that outsiders feel at seeing children carrying guns: "We're used to the 'Indians' dying young, but, 'How dare they arm them!'"

Bernardino Sánchez Luna, co-founder of a vigilante coalition, said authorities did nothing when gang members once attacked the community of Rincon de Chautla in the same region. That prompted the group

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to distribute a video in 2019 of children performing military-style drills with sticks.

Asked why, he said, "Because they didn't pay attention!"

Sánchez Luna said the government wound up donating some housing material for the displaced, but the violence continued.

Another performance came in January 2020 in Alcozacan — a 30-minute drive from Ayahualtempa — prompted by the slaying of 10 musicians from the town. The victims, including a 15-year-old boy, were burned and their vehicles sent off a cliff.

After 17 children paraded for the cameras with real guns, the community was given scholarships for the victims' orphaned children and houses for the widows.

But just two months later, a couple and their two young daughters were killed in a nearby community, infuriating residents again.

An April 10 display in Ayahualtempa — the more aggressive one in which children fired in the air — came just two months before major midterm elections in Mexico that could define the remaining three years of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration. It was an expression of concern about violence that often increases during political campaigns.

The president noticed. López Obrador condemned the exploitation of children and said he believed Mexico had made a mistake in allowing self-defense for Indigenous communities. Criminals had taken advantage of the legalization of so-called community police forces to create their own armed groups, he said.

"The government has to guarantee public safety," he said. "If there are gaps, they are filled," but with the National Guard.

However, the government didn't immediately send aid or bolster security, people in the village say.

International organizations have responded to the displays with condemnations of the "recruitment" of children and warned of the effects.

But Barrera, the rights activist, said of the communities: "They see that the issue of the children is effective for making people take notice and they think: If that's what works, we'll have to keep doing it."

National Guard troops have a checkpoint on the road connecting the communities to Chilapa — the nearest sizable town — and the army has another nearby. Farther up the road, there are other armed men, whom locals identify as Ardillos.

Residents say that when the criminals are on the move, federal forces look the other way.

Three miles (five kilometers) outside Ayahualtempa, the ghost village of El Paraiso de Tepila is a reminder of what can happen. All 35 families who lived there fled. More than two years later, no one has returned. The exterior of the school that faces the road is pocked with bullet holes.

Nearly two years ago, when Ayahualtempa itself was under siege, Luis Gustavo Morales couldn't safely travel the kilometer (half mile) from home to his middle school. That was when his parents began to have him train with a gun.

Now 15, Luis Gustavo says he always carries a pistol. Chambering a bullet and unloading it in front of journalists, he appears comfortable with the weapon. He is the only boy who joins his father every 16 days for shifts guarding the town entrance.

Community police say teaching their children to defend their homes with guns is different from the exploitation of children by profit-seeking criminal gangs.

Luis Gustavo's father, Luis Morales, said that at first it made him sad to train his son to defend the town, but now he is proud because the boy will know how. Still, he plans to send him back to school if Ayahualtempa becomes safe again.

The last march of armed children happened April 30 — Children's Day in Mexico — in nearby Alcozacan.

Some 20 media outlets showed up, many of them international. But this time there were no guns — only toys and slogans about justice and demands for safety. Children also chanted against guns and drugs.

Satisfied, the local organizers smiled wryly. The media had turned up for the show, which unfolded without accusations from the government that the community is endangering its children.

But people in Ayahualtempa say they plan to keep displaying armed children until they feel safe. As young Valentín noted, "There are a lot of bad men who want to hurt us."

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David Attenborough to address leaders at UN climate summit

LONDON (AP) — Veteran British broadcaster David Attenborough has been appointed the “people’s advocate” at the global climate summit this year, where he is expected to address political leaders about the need for urgent action to tackle the “crippling” threat of climate change.

The 95-year-old, best known for his documentaries on the natural world such as “Planet Earth,” said the coronavirus pandemic has shown how crucial it is to secure international agreements to solve worldwide problems.

“But the problems that await us within the next five to 10 years are even greater,” he said in a short video message Monday.

Britain is hosting the United Nations’ COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland, in November.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanked Attenborough for taking up the role, saying he has inspired millions with his TV work.

“There is no better person to build momentum for further change” ahead of the climate summit,” Johnson said.

As part of his role, Attenborough is also expected to speak at the G-7 leaders’ summit in Cornwall, southwestern England, next month.

Johnson’s government said last month it would commit to a tough new climate target, aiming to cut carbon emissions 78% of their 1990 levels by 2035. The new target, which will be enshrined in law, will include for the first time Britain’s share of emissions from international aviation and shipping.

Britain’s previous target was to slash emissions 68% by 2030, one of the most ambitious targets among developed nations.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, May 11, the 131st day of 2021. There are 234 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On May 11, 1935, the Rural Electrification Administration was created as one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs.

On this date:

In 1858, Minnesota became the 32nd state of the Union.

In 1943, during World War II, U.S. forces landed on the Aleutian island of Attu, which was held by the Japanese; the Americans took the island 19 days later.

In 1946, the first CARE packages, sent by a consortium of American charities to provide relief to the hungry of postwar Europe, arrived at Le Havre, France.

In 1947, the B.F. Goodrich Company of Akron, Ohio, announced the development of a tubeless tire.

In 1953, a tornado devastated Waco, Texas, claiming 114 lives.

In 1960, Israeli agents captured Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In 1973, the espionage trial of Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo in the “Pentagon Papers” case came to an end as Judge William M. Byrne dismissed all charges, citing government misconduct.

In 1981, legendary reggae artist Bob Marley died in a Miami hospital at age 36.

In 1996, an Atlanta-bound ValuJet DC-9 caught fire shortly after takeoff from Miami and crashed into the Florida Everglades, killing all 110 people on board.

In 1997, IBM’s “Deep Blue” computer demolished an overwhelmed Garry Kasparov, winning the six-game chess re-match between man and machine in New York.

In 1998, India set off three underground atomic blasts, its first nuclear tests in 24 years. A French mint produced the first coins of Europe’s single currency, the euro.

In 2010, Conservative leader David Cameron, at age 43, became Britain’s youngest prime minister in

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almost 200 years after Gordon Brown stepped down and ended 13 years of Labour government.

Ten years ago: Former hedge fund titan Raj Rajaratnam was convicted by a federal jury in New York in an insider-trading case of five counts of conspiracy and nine of securities fraud. (Rajaratnam was sentenced to 11 years in prison.)

Five years ago: A white former South Carolina police officer already facing a state murder charge in the shooting death of Black motorist Walter Scott was indicted on federal charges including depriving the victim of his civil rights. (Michael Slager pleaded guilty to violating Scott's civil rights and was sentenced to 20 years in prison; prosecutors agreed to drop the state murder charge.) CBS News veteran Morley Safer, a "60 Minutes" correspondent for all but two of the newsmagazine's 48-year history, announced his retirement (Safer died eight days later at age 84).

One year ago: After two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed among staffers, a memo to White House staff directed "everyone who enters the West Wing to wear a mask or facial covering"; a maskless President Donald Trump addressed a Rose Garden audience filled with mask-wearing administration officials. Twitter announced that it would add a warning label to tweets containing disputed or misleading information about the coronavirus. Georgia's attorney general appointed a Black district attorney from the Atlanta area to take over the case of a white father and son charged with killing a Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, near the Georgia port city of Brunswick. Jerry Stiller, best known for his role as George Costanza's father in "Seinfeld" and earlier as part of a comedy duo with wife Anne Meara, died at 92.

Today's Birthdays: Comedian Mort Sahl is 94. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan is 88. Jazz keyboardist Carla Bley is 85. Rock singer Eric Burdon (The Animals; War) is 80. Actor Pam Ferris is 73. Former White House chief of staff John F. Kelly is 71. Actor Shohreh Aghdashloo (SHOH'-reh ahg-DAHSH'-loo) is 69. Actor Frances Fisher is 69. Sports columnist Mike Lupica is 69. Actor Boyd Gaines is 68. Actor Martha Quinn is 62. Actor Tim Blake Nelson is 57. Actor Jeffrey Donovan is 53. Actor Nicky Katt is 51. Actor Coby Bell is 46. Cellist Perttu Kivilaakso (PER'-tuh KEE'-wee-lahk-soh) is 43. Actor Austin O'Brien is 40. Actor-singer Jonathan Jackson is 39. Rapper Ace Hood is 33. Latin singer Prince Royce is 32. Actor Annabelle Attanasio (TV: "Bull") is 28. Musician Howard Lawrence (Disclosure) is 27.