

Groton Daily Independent

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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.

Rounds, Shaheen Introduce Bill to Support National World War II Memorial

Commemorative coin proceeds would fund Memorial repair at no cost to taxpayers

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) introduced the Greatest Generation Memorial Act today to authorize the U.S. Treasury to mint coins in commemoration of the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. Proceeds from coin sales will go toward much-needed repairs and maintenance at the Memorial, and support commemorative and educational programming.

The National World War II Memorial has hosted over 70 million visitors, including tens of thousands of World War II veterans, since its dedication in 2004. The Memorial is the first in the nation dedicated to all who served during World War II and acknowledges the commitment and achievement of the entire nation. The Memorial honors the 16 million who served in the Armed Forces of the U.S. during World War II, the more than 400,000 who died, and the millions who supported the war effort here at home.

Large, growing cracks in the Memorial's granite columns resulted in partial closure of the monument in 2019. While the Memorial is funded by the National Park Service, the Park Service currently has a \$12 billion capital construction backlog. This legislation will support quick repairs to this important monument.

"The National World War II Memorial is a special place for our nation's veterans and citizens, both young and old, to remember the tremendous sacrifices made by the Greatest Generation," said Rounds. "I've had the honor of visiting this Memorial alongside some of South Dakota's World War II veterans and I can tell you that it was an unforgettable experience. We must make sure this Memorial is properly maintained for generations to come. Our bipartisan legislation will support the restoration of this Memorial and further education about the Greatest Generation through the creation of a commemorative coin."

"For the millions of U.S. soldiers who served in World War II and the 400,000 who died, the National World War II Memorial is a monument to honor their sacrifice. This memorial helps educate generations of Americans about World War II and our nation's achievements, and its crumbling granite must be repaired to ensure visitors continue to reflect and remember this historical milestone," said Shaheen. "I'm proud to join Senator Rounds in introducing bipartisan legislation to create commemorative coins whose proceeds will finance critical repairs at the memorial, ensuring we continue to pay tribute to those who bravely fought to defend America during World War II."

"On behalf of the Friends of the National World War II Memorial, I want to express my sincere thanks to Senator Rounds and Senator Shaheen for introducing this important legislation," said Holly Rotondi, executive director of the Friends of the National World War II Memorial. "The Greatest Generation Memorial Act will raise private money to make much needed repairs at the Memorial. Not only will this bill save taxpayer money, but it will ensure that the National World War II Memorial remains open and structurally sound for generations to come. I applaud Senators Rounds and Shaheen for their strong leadership and their commitment to ensuring that we as a nation continue to properly honor the Greatest Generation."

The commemorative coin will honor the selfless spirit and sacrifice of America's "Greatest Generation" who bravely fought to defend the nation during World War II. Coin sale proceeds will go to the Friends of the National World War II Memorial, a 501(c)(3) non-profit founded in 2007, to maintain and repair the Memorial, and to make certain educational and commemorative programming remains robust and substantial. The organization plays a vital role in educating the American public about World War II; preserving and maintaining the National World War II Memorial as a treasure for the American people; and facilitating key commemorative programs at the Memorial to pay a fitting tribute to America's "Greatest Generation."

Original cosponsors include U.S. Sens. Steve Daines (R-Mont.), Maggie Hassan (D-N.H.), John Thune (R-S.D.), Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Rick Scott (R-Fla.), Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), and Marco Rubio (R-Fla.).

The Greatest Generation Memorial Act has the endorsement of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Paralyzed Veterans of America, Commemorative Air Force, Afikim Foundation, and 82nd Airborne Division Association.

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

CDC Approves Emergency Use of Pfizer Vaccine for Adolescents South Dakotan's 12-15 Years of Age Now Qualify for Vaccine

PIERRE, S.D. – Wednesday, the South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) announced that adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15, are now eligible to receive their COVID-19 vaccination statewide. The announcement comes after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention authorized the Pfizer vaccine for emergency use for this age group. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also recommended this last Monday evening.

"Given vaccines have proven safe and effective, offering them to this age group is yet another way to protect our citizens and our communities against COVID-19," said Daniel Bucheli, SD-DOH Communications Director. "Our partners across the state stand ready to get shots in arms, and we encourage parents to protect their children from the virus by getting them vaccinated today."

According to U.S. Census data, 48,120 state residents qualify under this age group. Under South Dakota law, parental consent is still required to vaccinate minors.

Residents can directly connect with a health partner serving their area by clicking [here](#) or by texting GETVAX to 438-829 (English) and/or VACUNA to 822-862 (Spanish), to find the nearest vaccination location to them. As of 05/12/21, over 50% of the eligible population in the state has chosen to be vaccinated and zero cases of serious adverse reactions have been recorded. For more information on the state's vaccination plan, click [here](#).

Additionally, any South Dakotan resident can request a free at-home COVID-19 test, by clicking [here](#). To get the most up to date COVID-19 data, updated daily, please visit the Department of Health dashboard.

Groton Service Organizations

Groton Chamber of Commerce

First in a series by Dorene Nelson

The Groton Chamber of Commerce received its first charter on August 20, 1981.

The Groton Chamber is open to all business persons in the Groton area. It was organized to promote commerce with local area businesses in the city of Groton.

The current officers are Carol Kutter, president; Ashley Smith, vice president; April Abeln, secretary; and Stacy Oliver, treasurer.

Over 60 local businesses are members of the Groton Chamber of Commerce. The businesses in Groton are vital to the town and surrounding communities.

These businesses provide

a wide range of products and services, from healthcare to auto care, beauty services, and agronomy services, to name a few.

Chamber business members help promote countless activities and support many community events.

The Chamber meets the first Wednesday of every month at the Groton Community Center with the meetings open to all members.

The Groton Chamber financially supports any and all local events that may encourage commerce in the region. In addition, the Chamber recently awarded two scholarships to high school seniors.

Another current project is to install lighting on the "Welcome to Groton" signs outside of town. The Chamber is already paying for the lighting on the flag pole in the city park. Chamber members have also donated to the American Legion for painting a flag on our new water tower.

There is a dues structure for membership. The dues for businesses with up to ten employees are \$100 annually; businesses with 11-20 employees pay \$250 while any business with 21 or more employees pays \$500 a year.

Investing in the Chamber by membership dues is truly an investment in the Groton community. The Chamber uses the digital sign on Highway 12, its Facebook page, and its website to advertise upcoming events, business anniversaries, special sales, or positions for hire.

Occasionally the group will do radio ads promoting the community and local events. In addition, the Chamber advertises in the Glacial Lakes, Yellowstone Trail, and Aberdeen magazines.

Groton Bucks are offered to promote commerce in the community as well as offering a Notary service that is free of charge to all members. The board is a small, but passionate group of dedicated individuals, who are committed to the economic growth of the region. The Chamber is always open to new members and new ideas to promote this community and the surrounding region. For more information, please check out the website at grotonchamber.com.



Back L to R- Kellie Locke, Lori Westby, Hope Block, Carol McFarland-Kutter, Ashley Smith, April Abeln, Karyn Babcock
Front L to R- Carla Tracy and Kassie Dunbar from Beauty Brew Boutique. (Courtesy Photo)

South Dakota to End Federal Pandemic Unemployment Benefits

PIERRE, SD – Wednesday, Governor Kristi Noem and the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation (DLR) announced South Dakota will terminate its participation in the federal government's pandemic-related unemployment assistance programs.

"Businesses across the state continue to say they would grow and expand, if it wasn't for the lack of workers. Help wanted signs line our streets," said state Labor and Regulation Secretary Marcia Hultman. "South Dakota is, and has been, 'Open for Business.' Ending these programs is a necessary step towards recovery, growth, and getting people back to work."

South Dakota was the only state to not apply for the federal Lost Wages Assistance (LWA) supplement last fall. Additionally, South Dakota did not opt into the federal Mixed Earner Unemployment Compensation (MEUC) program in December 2020.

South Dakota elected to participate in three unemployment-related programs in connection with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Continued Assistance to Unemployed Workers Act of 2020.

South Dakota will no longer participate in the federal Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program, which affected claimants who have exhausted their traditional 26 weeks of regular State unemployment compensation.

South Dakota will no longer issue supplemental \$300 weekly payments to claimants under the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program. This payment was made to all claimants who were receiving unemployment benefits regardless of the program under which they are being paid.

South Dakota will no longer participate in the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program. PUA currently provides benefits to the self-employed, the underemployed, independent contractors, and individuals who have been unable to work due to health or COVID-19-related reasons.

The termination will be effective on the week ending June 26, 2021, for all three programs. South Dakota will continue to pay regular State claims. The agreement signed to initiate these programs allows South Dakota or the U.S. Department of Labor to terminate the programs upon 30 days' written notice to the other party.

"DLR's online jobs database SDWORKS has averaged over 23,000 job openings daily," continued Secretary Hultman. "Our Job Service offices are open and ready to help and support those returning to the workforce, in need of additional skills or training, or who need an extra hand in overcoming barriers."

To search for new jobs or receive virtual employment services, visit www.sdjobs.org.

DNC and State Parties Announce Historic Agreement

Agreement includes over \$23 million in direct investments to state parties and grassroots infrastructure during 2022 election cycle

Today, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Democratic state parties announced an historic four-year agreement that will guarantee more investment into Democratic state parties and grassroots infrastructure than ever before. At a minimum, this investment will provide \$23 million to state parties as part of the DNC's 2022 midterm strategy, and creates a first-of-its-kind program to focus additional investments in historically red states to build on Democrats' 57 states and territories strategy.

As part of the agreement, the DNC will establish a brand-new, seven-figure "Red State Fund" to put Republicans on defense and build tailored programs for traditionally Republican states. The Red State Fund includes \$2 million in direct investments and grants for states that meet two of the following criteria: no Democratic senator or governor, less than 25% of the congressional delegation are Democrats, and a supermajority of Republicans in their state legislature.

The contract also includes a data sharing agreement that increases investment in down-ballot races, solidifies another four years of historic investment in Democratic data, and anchors the DNC and state parties as the central hub of the Democratic data ecosystem.

"As a former state party chair, I know firsthand how critical it is that we invest in the grassroots to strengthen the Democratic Party as a whole -- and we can't leave a single community behind," said DNC Chair Jaime Harrison. "With this agreement, the DNC's new 'Red State Fund' will allow us to take the fight to Republicans as they fight among themselves by providing unprecedented resources to Democrats organizing in every corner of the country."

"I am thrilled that the agreement announced today will empower state parties across the entire country to organize early and in the smartest way possible. This historic agreement will build the critical infrastructure we need to win up and down the ballot this year, next year, and beyond," said ASDC President Ken Martin.

Additional investments in the agreement include:

\$15.5 Million for State Partnership Program (SPP): The new agreement increases monthly SPP funding for 50 state parties and DC by 25% to fund critical party infrastructure including staff, tools, and programming in the states.

\$5.5 Million for State Party Innovation Fund Grants: These grants will ensure innovation and early organizing by putting more boots on the ground throughout the country to help elect Democrats up and down the ticket in 2022. The program includes \$5 million in funding for all 50 state parties plus the District of Columbia, along with an additional \$500,000 for Dems Abroad and the territories. These competitive grants will primarily be used to hire staff in state to develop and implement innovative programs tailored for each state.

Reestablishes the Democratic Grassroots Victory Fund: The agreement is contingent on the Democratic state parties rejoining the joint fundraising agreement that propelled the DNC to record-breaking major donor fundraising over the last four years, and allows the DNC to collect up to \$875,000 per individual per year.

Governor Noem Urges Secretary Buttigieg to Reconsider Essential Air Service Decision

PIERRE, SD – Today, Governor Kristi Noem urged U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Secretary Pete Buttigieg to reconsider his agency's decision regarding Essential Air Service (EAS) at the Pierre and Watertown airports. DOT awarded the two-year EAS contract to Denver Air Connection for both airports, contrary to the united recommendation of Governor Noem, the full Congressional delegation, and both cities that SkyWest's EAS contract be renewed.

"Because of SkyWest's quality service, traffic at Pierre and Watertown Regional Airports skyrocketed prior to the pandemic," said Governor Noem. "After the Biden Administration announced an infrastructure package worth over \$2.5 trillion, it seems inconsistent to reject SkyWest's superior service. I strongly encourage you to rethink this decision and instruct your team to issue a re-bid."

Governor Noem emphasized that the change in service would have a detrimental impact on tourism to these cities and the surrounding areas. Additionally, the loss of high-quality service would put jobs, small businesses, and economic growth at risk in both cities, which are vital economic centers for South Dakota.

Elderly and Disabled Tax Refund Applications Accepted Through July 1

AARP South Dakota is encouraging eligible seniors and disabled individuals to apply for an annual refund of their sales or property tax before July 1, 2021.

"Property taxes are one of the most burdensome taxes for South Dakota homeowners living on a fixed income," said Erik Gaikowski, AARP South Dakota State Director. "Many of our state's elderly citizens have lived in their homes for generations and as their property values have appreciated over time, their property taxes have also increased. This can make it difficult for low-income seniors to continue to afford basic needs such as food, medicine and utilities. This appropriation provides tax relief to some of South Dakota's most vulnerable citizens."

To be eligible, individuals must be at least 66 years old on or before January 1, 2021 or be disabled during any part of the year, be a South Dakota resident for the entire previous year, and meet annual income requirements. The income limit for a single-member household is \$12,880; the limit for a multiple-member household is \$17,420. Refunds are calculated based on income.

Applications are currently being accepted and will be available through July 1, 2021. Applications can be obtained online or by calling 1-800-829-9188 ext. 1 and should be submitted to the South Dakota Department of Revenue, Special Tax Division.

AARP South Dakota is proud to support this program and the annual appropriation from the SD Legislature that makes it possible. "We applaud the Governor and Legislature for continuing to support this program, and for increasing the income parameters to support individuals up to 100% of the 2021 federal poverty level" said Erik Nelson, advocacy director for AARP South Dakota. "We strongly encourage any eligible South Dakotans to apply for a refund."

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SUPPORT NEEDED FOR BILL - CRITICAL TO LOCAL JOURNALISM'S FUTURE

Fairness is not a partisan issue.

Fairness is the goal of the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act currently being considered in the United States Congress. The bill has bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

H.R. 1735 / S.673 is critically important to protecting the future of high-quality, local journalism in South Dakota and across our nation. Support is growing for the legislation, yet much more needs to be done before it can become law.

This bill would make negotiations for fair compensation possible between publishers of news content and those who monetize the online distribution of that work. Facebook and Google are the two primary online platforms that take news stories created by local newspapers, radio and television newsrooms and distribute that content to their large online audiences. Those two social media platforms pay little to nothing for the content created by local news organizations.

The Journalism Competition and Preservation Act – also known as the “Safe Harbor bill” -- would simply create a four-year window for news organizations to collectively negotiate fair prices for the content they create under a safe harbor from federal anti-trust laws. Existing laws make it difficult for news publishers – especially small, local and regional publishers – to obtain fair compensation from the giant online platforms for the use of their news content.

The name of the bill is not hyperbole. As more readers move to digital platforms to find local news, it is vitally important that news organizations footing the bill to create the content be fairly compensated for its distribution.

Journalism - especially local journalism - is more important than ever. Readership is rising even as revenue generated by those readers is falling. This bill would help local news publishers negotiate with the dominant tech platforms fair prices for the stories they create.

Recent experiences in Australia and Europe demonstrate that other countries recognize the disparity in bargaining power between news publishers and Facebook and Google and are moving towards a new compensation model for publishers, one that ensures equitable terms are offered to all publishers and that platforms participate in good faith.

The revenue shared by the online giants in exchange for the news stories that drives their traffic would help pay the salaries of journalists who keep communities from becoming news deserts.

Across the United States, more than 2,000 local newspapers have closed their doors since 2004. That is 2,000 communities with little or no reporting about local governments, businesses, community happenings and sports. With no local journalism, communities suffer.

Now is the time to act before it is too late and even more communities across our nation become news deserts.

It is important for the three members of our South Dakota congressional delegation to support this bill and acknowledge the essential role of journalism in a functioning democracy.

Please join us and our colleagues at the 118 weekly and daily newspapers across South Dakota in urging Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds and Congressman Dusty Johnson to support the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act.

##

The arts are calling YOU to join in this summer

By Jim Speirs, Executive Director, Arts South Dakota

The arts in South Dakota are alive this summer—and they are calling you to safely step into a renewed whirl of concerts, plays, performances and parks filled with arts opportunities.

All over the state, summer programs are being announced and the activities that mark the arts season are summoning live audiences once again. The stage lights are on in theaters from the Black Hills to Aberdeen. Parks in Spearfish, Brookings, Yankton and points in between will fill with arts and crafts booths, food vendors and musical performances as festivals return to welcome visitors. Musicians are tuned up and ready for that instant feedback that only a live audience can provide. Our community arts centers are staging great exhibitions, giving neighbors and tourists alike the chance to see in person the varied and creative work of South Dakota artists. It's all happening this summer throughout the state—and you're invited to be a part of it.

In fact, after a year of social distancing and closed creative venues, your support is more important than ever for our state's cultural centers, community festivals and performers of every kind. Artists, musicians and arts organizations were hit hard by the past year's realities—and they are counting on you to help the creative industry in South Dakota bounce back from the pandemic strong and vital and ready to inspire us.

There are so many things you can do this summer to strengthen the arts in our state and have a great time, too. Take the whole family on a creative road trip to see a show, hear a concert, linger at an art exhibit and spend a day checking out the arts in the park scene. Purchase new art, buy music for a friend who can't get to a concert and, most of all, participate. Be there this summer for our artists and arts organizations and they'll be there for us for years to come!

Please visit www.ArtsSouthDakota.org or www.TravelSouthDakota.com for calendars of arts opportunities all over South Dakota this summer.

South Dakota Reaches Vaccination Milestone

Half of State's Adult Population Fully Vaccinated Against COVID-19

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health (SD-DOH) announced that the adult population of residents who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 has reached the 50% threshold or over 304,435 South Dakotans having completed their full vaccine series. Emergency Use Authorization of the Pfizer vaccine from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for those in the 12-15 age range could come as soon as today, as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved of this late Monday afternoon.

"I want to take this opportunity to thank all South Dakotans who have chosen to get their COVID-19 vaccine—protecting themselves, their family and their community," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. "Vaccines are safe and are the quickest way out of this pandemic."

On April 5, 2021, the SD-DOH began Phase II of the state's vaccination plan. This made COVID-19 vaccines available to all state residents, age 16 and over, in addition to any persons from Phase I that have not yet been vaccinated. Residents can directly connect with a health partner serving their area by clicking [here](#) or by texting GETVAX to 438-829 (English) and/or VACUNA to 822-862 (Spanish), to find the nearest vaccination location to them.

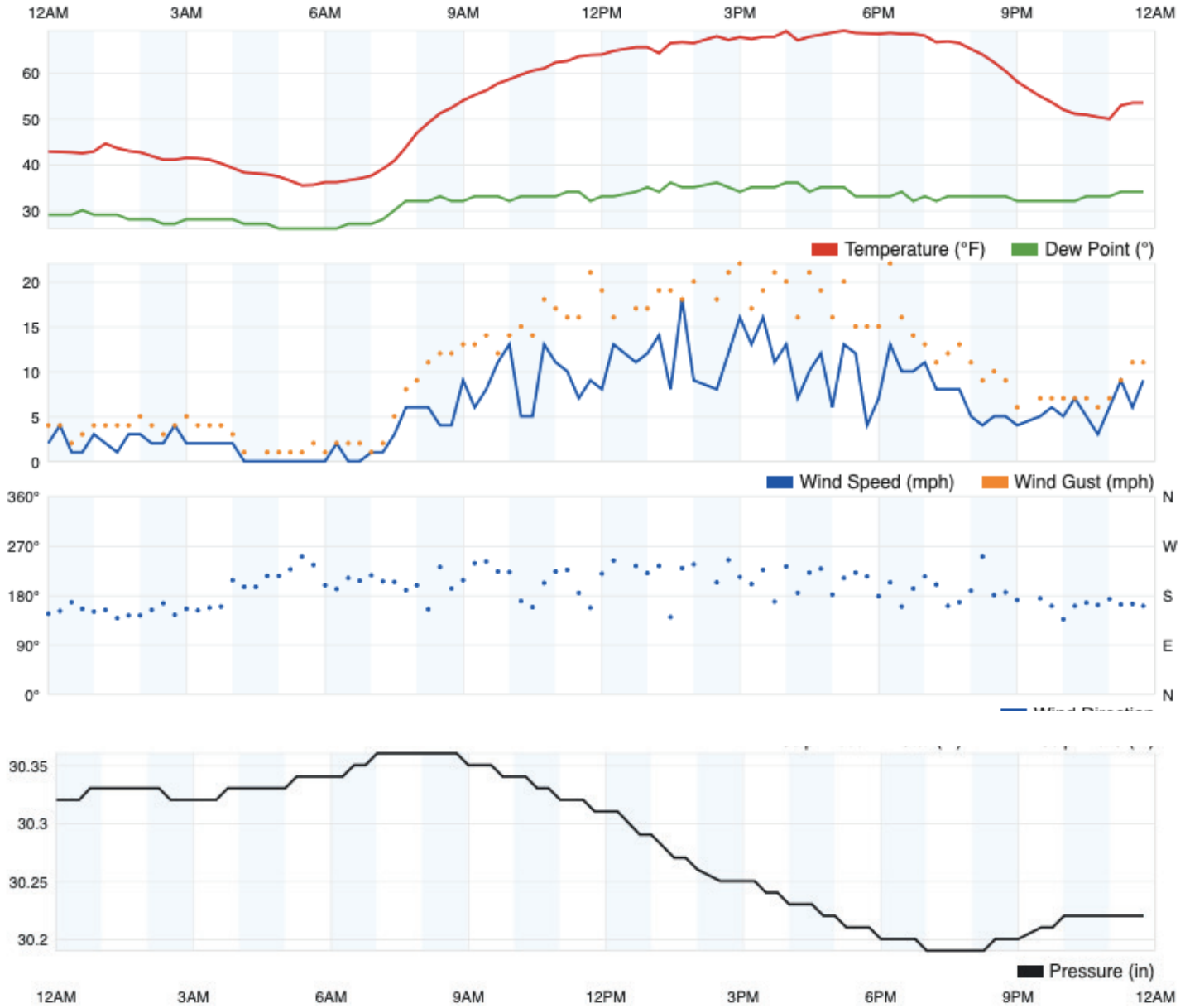
"Getting protected against COVID-19 is now easier than ever. You can access vaccines through your medical provider, federal retail pharmacies or by sending a text message to find the nearest vaccination site to you. It's quick, it's easy, and it's free," added Malsam-Rysdon.

Additionally, any South Dakotan resident can request a free at-home COVID-19 test, by clicking [here](#). To get the most up to date COVID-19 data, updated daily, please visit the Department of Health dashboard.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather



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Today



Sunny then
Mostly Sunny
and Breezy

High: 71 °F

Tonight



Chance
Showers

Low: 44 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 73 °F

Friday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 44 °F

Saturday







Mostly Sunny

High: 73 °F

Today
65 to 72°
Near Normal Temps for mid-May
Winds out of the south gusting 20-30 mph. Isolated storms/showers possible this evening

Friday
64 to 74°
Isolated light storms/showers possible early.
Light winds

  **NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE**
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
Aberdeen, SD 5/13/2021 4:24 AM  

Near normal temperatures continue for today and Friday. There is a chance for some isolated light storms/showers later this evening into Friday morning.

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Today in Weather History

May 13, 2005: Runoff from heavy rain resulted in minor flooding along the White River from south of Belvidere to Oacoma, affecting mainly agricultural land along the river. The river rose over its banks and flooded U.S. Highway 83 south of Murdo for a short time. No property damage was reported.

1930 - A man was killed when caught in an open field during a hailstorm northwest of Lubbock TX. It was the first, and perhaps the only, authentic death by hail in U.S. weather records. (David Ludlum)

1980: An F3 tornado ripped directly through the center of Kalamazoo, Michigan, killing five people, injuring 79, leaving 1,200 homeless and causing \$50 million in damage. The tornado passed directly over the American Bank, where a barograph reported a pressure drop of 0.59 inches.

1981 - A tornado 450 yards in width destroyed ninety percent of Emberson TX. People did not see a tornado, but rather a wall of debris. Homes were leveled, a man in a bathtub was hurled a quarter of a mile, and a 1500 pound recreational vehicle was hurled 500 yards. Miraculously no deaths occurred in the tornado. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front brought an end to the early season warm spell in the north central U.S., but not before the temperature at Sioux City IA soared to a record warm 95 degrees. Strong southwesterly winds ahead of the cold front gusted to 52 mph at Marais MI. Evening thunderstorms produced golf ball size hail at Rockford MN, and wind gusts to 75 mph at Belmond IA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Strong winds along a cold front ushering cold air into the northwestern U.S. gusted to 69 mph at Myton UT. Temperatures warmed into the 80s ahead of the cold front, as far north as Montana. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along a warm front produced severe weather in the Southern Plains Region during the afternoon and night. A thunderstorm at Killeen TX produced wind gusts to 95 mph damaging 200 helicopters at Fort Hood causing nearly 500 million dollars damage. Another thunderstorm produced softball size hail at Hodges TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front spawned ten tornadoes from eastern Wyoming to northern Kansas, including seven in western Nebraska. Thunderstorms forming ahead of a cold front in the eastern U.S. spawned five tornadoes from northeastern North Carolina to southern Pennsylvania. Thunderstorms over southeast Louisiana deluged the New Orleans area with four to eight inches of rain between 7 AM and Noon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

]1995: This outbreak produced tornadoes extending from the Mississippi River near Burlington, Iowa, to the west of Bloomington, Illinois. Two violent tornadoes, each ranked at F4 intensity, were reported. The first tornado traveled 60 miles from near Fort Madison, Iowa, to the southeast of Galesburg, Illinois producing over \$10 million damage. The town of Raritan, Illinois was hit the hardest. The second violent tornado traveled 7 miles across Fulton County from Ipava to Lewistown, Illinois producing \$6 million damage. Another strong tornado took a 25-mile path across parts of Fulton, Mason, and Tazewell Counties. The storms also produced softball-size hail south and northwest of Macomb in Illinois. Five men were injured in Lawrence County, Indiana when lightning struck one of them and traveled to the other four. There were 184 reports of severe weather, including over three dozen tornadoes.

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TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Addictions – whether alcohol, another kind of drug, food, or sexual addiction – will lead to certain destruction and finally death unless the addict completely stops engaging in the self-destructing behavior. As simple as that sounds, it is not easy to do. Why? Because addicts must take “the first step” – admit their addiction, its pervasive power over every aspect of their lives, and finally recognize their inability to control or stop their self-destructing behavior and surrender that addiction to God.

David said it one way and Paul another way. David said, “I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only have I sinned.” And Paul said, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” Two powerful statements from two of God’s most honored servants that are different in words yet identical in meaning. Two men crying out to God in a moment of extreme desperation asking for God’s love, mercy, grace, salvation, and healing. It describes their battle with sin, their inadequacies to be victorious over sin, and their desire to please and honor God.

We can never underestimate the strong hold that sin has in and over our lives. Nor do we recognize our powerlessness to overcome sin in our own strength. Unfortunately, one of the most used talents Satan gives to us is denial. If we do not admit that there is sin in our lives, we do not have to deal with or confront it. We too easily enjoy our sins and are willing to live with them, unaware that they are slowly destroying us.

Robert Burns said that it would be wonderful if someone could give us a gift that would enable us to see ourselves as others see us. God is that “One” and did it in His Word and in the life of His Son. Now it is up to us to “admit what is” and call on Him for His salvation.

Prayer: It is too easy, Lord, to deceive ourselves by denying the dominating power of sin in our lives. Convict us to admit and confess our sins. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For I know my wrong-doing, and my sin is always in front of me. Psalm 51:3

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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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

07-23-25-26-28

(seven, twenty-three, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-eight)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

12-30-31-46-48, Star Ball: 7, ASB: 5

(twelve, thirty, thirty-one, forty-six, forty-eight; Star Ball: seven; ASB: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$5.85 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$430 million

Powerball

01-19-20-38-54, Powerball: 17, Power Play: 2

(one, nineteen, twenty, thirty-eight, fifty-four; Powerball: seventeen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$168 million

Taming the virus: US deaths hit lowest level in 10 months

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

COVID-19 deaths in the United States have tumbled to an average of around 600 per day — the lowest level in 10 months — with the number of lives lost dropping to single digits in well over half the states and, on some days, hitting zero.

Confirmed infections have fallen to about 38,000 per day on average, their lowest mark since mid-September. While that is still cause for concern, reported cases have plummeted 85% from a daily peak of more than a quarter-million in early January.

The last time U.S. deaths from the pandemic were this low was in early July of last year. The number of people with COVID-19 who died topped out in mid-January at an average of more than 3,400 a day, just a month into the biggest vaccination drive in the nation's history.

The Boston Herald put a huge zero on its front page Wednesday under the headline "First time in nearly a year state has no new coronavirus deaths." Indiana reported one COVID-19 fatality Tuesday. Kansas, which peaked at 63 reported deaths on Dec. 22, has been in the single digits since February and seen multiple days with just one virus-related death.

Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins University, said that vaccinations have played a crucial role even as the nation struggles to reach herd immunity.

"The primary objective is to deny this virus the ability to kill at the rate that it could, and that has been achieved," he said. "We have in effect tamed the virus."

About 45% of the nation's adults are fully vaccinated, and nearly 59% have received at least one dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This week, Pfizer's vaccine won authorization for use in 12- to 15-year-olds, a move that could make it easier to reopen the nation's schools.

Physicians like Dr. Tom Dean in South Dakota's rural Jerauld County are cautiously optimistic, concerned about the many people who have decided against getting vaccinated or have grown lax in guarding against infections. The county has recorded just three confirmed cases in the last two weeks, according to Johns Hopkins data.

"What I'm afraid of is people believing this whole thing is over and you don't have to worry about it any more," Dean said. "I think complacency is our biggest threat right now."

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Several states, including Wyoming, Vermont, Alaska and Hawaii, were averaging fewer than one COVID-19 death per day over the past week, according to data through Tuesday from Johns Hopkins.

And even among the five states with the highest daily deaths — Michigan with an average of 65.4, Florida with 61.7, California with 48, Texas with 44 and New York with 39.3 — all but Florida's number were going down.

California, the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak over the winter, logged 1,231 new confirmed cases Wednesday, down from a peak of 40,000. Los Angeles County reported 18 deaths Tuesday, versus more than 200 a day in January.

Vermont, which at nearly 63% leads the country in the share of its population that has received at least one vaccine dose, has gone nearly a week without reporting a COVID-19 death.

The improvement hasn't been as dramatic everywhere. Michigan, which for weeks has reported the nation's worst infection rate, is only now starting to see a decline in mortality. But over the past two weeks, cases in the state plunged from a daily average of almost 4,860 to about 2,680 on Monday.

"Every day we're getting closer to putting this pandemic behind us," Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said.

In Kansas, the Amos Family Funeral Home & Crematory saw several COVID-19 victims at the height of the outbreak. But for weeks now it has handled one, said Parker Amos, president of the Kansas City-area business.

"It is a huge relief," he said. "Especially at the start of this, when we didn't know exactly how bad this was or how bad this was going to get, it was scary being in this industry."

The funeral home is now working through a backlog of memorial services that families put off when cases were surging.

"You want families to be able to have that closure," Amos said, "and to hold on to that for a year is something that we feel for those families in a big way because that is something that is really hard."

Dr. Mark Rosenberg, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians, was nearly placed on a ventilator when he contracted COVID-19 in December. Now he marvels at how things have changed, saying people are so joyful that it reminds him of the photos he has seen of soldiers returning from World War II.

"That is how it is starting to feel, that we made it through," said Rosenberg, who practices emergency medicine at St. Joseph's Health in Paterson, New Jersey. "People are touching each other again. They are hugging."

The overall U.S. death toll in the pandemic stood at over 583,000 as of Wednesday. Teams of experts consulted by the CDC projected in a report last week that new deaths and cases will fall sharply by the end of July and continue dropping after that.

The encouraging outlook stands in sharp contrast to the catastrophe unfolding in places like India and Brazil.

"I think we are in a great place, but I think India is an important cautionary tale," warned Justin Lessler, a professor of epidemiology at John Hopkins.

"If there is a right combination of vaccine hesitancy, potentially new variants and quickly rolling back control measures that comes together, we could potentially screw this up and have yet another wave that is completely unnecessary at this point," Lessler said.

Ali Mokdad, a University of Washington professor of health metrics sciences, predicted that as vaccinations continued, both confirmed cases and deaths would decline into the summer, leading many to assume "COVID-19 is gone" even as outbreaks in places like India carry the potential to fuel new, more virulent variants.

"The race is to vaccinate as much as we can before we go into the winter," Mokdad said, adding that the current percentage of the population vaccinated is not high enough to stop another wave of coronavirus infections.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

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Yankton Press & Dakotan. May 11, 2021.

Editorial: Health Boards And A Sign Of Progress

Using history as a guide — although, honestly, past events are never a perfect indicator of what will happen next — the local battle with COVID-19 hit what may be viewed as a landmark Monday night.

During the Yankton City Commission meeting, City Manager Amy Leon announced that the city's health board, which was put together when the COVID-19 pandemic began a little more than a year ago, had proposed abandoning its schedule of monthly meetings and instead suggesting it meet on an as-needed basis. Yankton County's health board has already decided to go this route, Leon pointed out. Recent statistics show local COVID cases on the decline after a brief surge in early spring, and with vaccinations going well, the board members felt the need for regular meetings was no longer imperative, at least for the moment. The city commissioners agreed with the move.

So, the city and county health boards have essentially decided to stand down (but not disband). These decisions represent a mildly significant milestone in the pandemic fight, at least based on aforementioned history.

During the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, the event to which the COVID plague is most often compared, the formation of health boards was generally one of the first things local governing bodies did to address the viral onslaught. These boards were comprised of medical types as well as governmental figures, thus creating mechanisms that could more quickly and efficiently deal with the health threats posed by the influenza virus. Such actions helped guide a community and/or a county through perilous days of suffering and death.

Last spring, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in a mad rush, health boards were immediately organized to help both the city and the county cope with the quickly developing situation. It was the proper response, and the public looked to these boards for guidance as we became overwhelmed by the unknown. (One could ask why we had two boards covering Yankton city and Yankton County when perhaps one board might have been more efficient, but that's mostly a matter of perspective.)

The formation of the health boards, meeting frequently and on regular schedules, was demanded by the moment that was upon us.

Now, having the boards stand down, in effect, offers an indication that the pandemic may indeed be subsiding. (On Tuesday, the latest statistics from the Department of Health showed Yankton County dropping to 25 active cases, which is one of the key thresholds for the City of Yankton Health Board in terms of measuring its success in dealing with the pandemic.)

All that being said, it's also hoped that these actions don't present the illusion that the trouble is completely behind us. While the action suggests that COVID-19 is slowing down, the fight certainly isn't over. There is still a lot of work to do and a lot of self-defense that needs to be practiced. And remember, the local board members are ready to reconvene if the situation presents itself again.

Nevertheless, the fact that we've even reached this point is a good measure of what's been done and how we're doing. It's a very promising sign of progress.

END

S.D. company to provide inmate meals at Mississippi jail

COLLINS, Miss. (AP) — A South Dakota-based company has been chosen to provide daily meals to inmates at a Mississippi jail.

Covington County supervisors voted this week to award a contract to Summit Jail Food Service of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to handle food service at the county jail, WDAM-TV reported.

Only two companies bid to provide meal service at the jail, and Sheriff Darrell Perkins said the offer from Summit Jail Food Service was the lowest of the two.

The company will prepare and serve three meals a day at the new kitchen facility at the Covington County Law Enforcement Complex. Construction of that kitchen started in 2019 and was completed in early 2020. The cost of the facility was nearly \$500,000.

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Perkins said the company is planning to start its meal service on June 1.

Currently, a local restaurant is providing meals for inmates. Perkins said, on average, it will cost about \$2,000 more per month to feed inmates with the new company, but he says overall security will be improved because all meals will be prepared and served on-site.

Perkins said the company is also providing meals for inmates at the Simpson and Forrest County jails.

Attorney general's trial in fatal crash may begin in August

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg's trial on charges he's facing in a fatal crash could begin as early as August.

At a status hearing Wednesday, Judge John Brow says he's aiming for the trial to begin in August or early September. Ravensborg's attorney Tim Rensch of Rapid City requested 60 more days, citing the need to review key pieces of evidence, including interviews.

Hyde County Deputy State's Attorney Emily Sovell urged the court to move the trial ahead, KSFY-TV reported.

Ravnsborg is facing several misdemeanor charges in the September crash that killed Joseph Boever who was walking along a highway near Highmore.

They include careless driving, operating a motor vehicle while on a mobile device, and driving outside his lane. Each count is punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine. Ravensborg earlier pleaded not guilty to all three charges.

Ravnsborg claims he did not see Boever that night and maintains he thought he hit a deer. Boever's body was found in a ditch the day after he was struck. An investigation video released by the state revealed Boever's glasses were found inside the car.

Gov. Kristi Noem and several law enforcement organizations have called for Ravensborg to resign, though he has signaled he intends to remain in office.

Another status hearing is scheduled for early July.

More than half of adults have been fully vaccinated in SD

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Department of Health said Wednesday the state has crossed the 50% threshold for the number of adult residents who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Health officials say more than 304,000 South Dakotans have received their vaccinations.

"I want to take this opportunity to thank all South Dakotans who have chosen to get their COVID-19 vaccine— protecting themselves, their family, and their community," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. "Vaccines are safe and are the quickest way out of this pandemic."

State health officials began Phase 2 of South Dakota's vaccination plan on April 5. It made coronavirus vaccines available to all state residents age 16 and older, in addition to any eligible person that had not been inoculated in the first phase.

Parents, schools and vaccine clinics are rushing to begin inoculating younger children after U.S. regulators this week endorsed Pfizer's vaccine for those as young as 12, a decision seen as a breakthrough in allowing classroom instruction to resume safely around the country.

A handful of cities started offering shots to children ages 12 to 15 less than a day after the Food and Drug Administration gave the vaccine emergency use authorization for that age group.

Most communities are waiting for a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advisory committee that meets Wednesday to sign off on the move.

Man struck and killed by his own vehicle in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls man has died after he was hit by his own car, according to police. The 41-year-old man was driving his car in eastern Sioux Falls and struck the back of a Jeep Cherokee Tuesday afternoon.

The SUV was stopped in traffic at an intersection and waiting to make a left turn when it was struck by the car, according to police spokesman Sam Clemens.

As the man stepped out of his car, it started to go in reverse and the victim got caught under the vehicle as it began making circles. The car then ran over the man, fatally injuring him, the Argus Leader reported.

The car eventually stopped when it crashed into a nearby pickup.

The victim has not been identified.

Syrian family reunited, against the odds, in Greece

By COSTAS KANTOURIS Associated Press

THESSALONIKI, Greece (AP) — Torn apart in the deadly chaos of an air raid, a Syrian family of seven has been reunited, against the odds, three years later at a refugee shelter in Greece's second city of Thessaloniki, a centuries-old melting point of cultures overlooking the Aegean Sea.

When the warplanes screamed in over the village of Dana, near Idlib in Syria, in September 2017, Abdul Salam Al Khawien was at home with his five children. His wife, Kariman, was out shopping in the marketplace. Bombs burst among the stalls, scattering corpses and knocking her unconscious.

She spent the next week recovering in a clinic, and by the time she was well enough to leave, Abdul had fled with the children to safety across the Turkish border, some 15 kilometers (9 miles) away.

Now in different countries, lacking mobile phones, internet or any other means of communicating or learning what had happened to each other, Kariman and Abdul each lost hope that the other had survived.

Until, one day last August, Kariman's brother discovered a social media account with a photograph of her eldest son, Hamza. It had been opened by Abdul, who had managed to reach Greece with the children — in his fifth attempt, having paid smugglers 5,000 euros (\$6,000) for berths in a flimsy boat with more than 60 others — and had been granted asylum.

She immediately got in touch.

"I had a good feeling that day," Abdul, a 37-year-old former car salesman from a village near Homs, told The Associated Press. "When I saw the message I nearly went mad with joy. I didn't tell the children, though. I thought it would be better for them to find out when she got here."

Before, he said, whenever the children had asked about their mother, he told them she was in Syria and would rejoin them one day. "But they suspected she was dead," he said. "I had lost all hope."

The 32-year-old mother still faced a daunting prospect: Making the dangerous — and illegal — journey from Syria to Turkey and then Greece, assisted by smuggling gangs.

"We didn't have any money (to pay them)," Kariman said, "and had to find some."

She was able to raise the cash and entered Turkey with other Syrian refugees, finally reaching Istanbul. "From there, using smugglers, I tried to enter Greece by crossing the Evros River" that runs along the Greek-Turkish land border, she said.

But they were caught by Greek border guards and, according to Kariman, were sent back a day later to Turkey in the type of illegal action, known as a pushback, that Greece has repeatedly been accused of using against migrants slipping across the porous frontier. Greek authorities deny the practice.

Her second try, in November 2020, was successful. She found her way on foot, in the dark, to a Greek village.

"I went into a coffee shop and broke into tears," she said. "They asked me where I was from, I said Syria, and they welcomed me. ... I sat on a balcony with a woman and drank coffee, and she made me understand, in sign language, that I was now safe."

She was able to contact Filoxeneio, the facility set up by the Arsis NGO and the Thessaloniki municipality where Abdul and the children were living, and after registering with police the family was reunited.

Filoxeneio coordinator Manolis Zougos said he'd never encountered such a story during the 17 years he's been working with refugees.

"Up to the last minute we had thought her dead, which is what Abdul believed," he said. "He had had a hard time. He was on his own and needed to perform multiple roles for his children."

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Even before the air raid on Dana, the family had struggled to escape violence in Syria's civil war.

"We changed locations 28 times, starting from our village near Homs in 2011," Abdul said. "I had just built our house there, and it was destroyed. Whenever unrest came, we moved on. ... As soon as we heard a bombardment, we grabbed blankets, a tent and a generator, put them in the car and left."

The couple tell their story with their children — Hamza, 10, Iman, 8, Layan, 7, Bayan, 5, and Safa, 3 1/2 — sitting around them. Kariman is pregnant again — "I would like a boy," Abdul said. But their travels may not yet be over.

Abdul says he wants to reach Germany, where his brother and sister live.

"Greece is a very safe country, but it is difficult to find work," he said. "It's difficult for us."

Virus, Mideast turmoil stifle Eid al-Fitr celebrations

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Muslims celebrated Eid al-Fitr in a subdued mood for a second year Thursday as the COVID-19 pandemic again forced mosque closings and family separations on the holiday marking the end of Ramadan.

In the embattled Gaza Strip, the call to prayer echoed over pulverized buildings and heaps of rubble as Israeli warplanes continued to pound the territory in the worst outbreak of violence since the 2014 war.

Hamas, the Islamic militant group ruling Gaza, urged the faithful to mark communal prayers inside their homes or the nearest mosques and avoid being out in the open.

"It is all airstrikes, destruction and devastation," said Hassan Abu Shaaban, who tried to lighten the mood by passing out chocolates to passersby.

Worshippers wearing masks joined communal prayers in the streets of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta. The world's most populous Muslim-majority nation allowed mosque prayers in low-risk areas, but mosques in areas where there was more risk of the virus spreading closed their doors, including Jakarta's Istiqlal Grand Mosque, the largest in Southeast Asia.

Indonesians and Malaysians were banned for a second year from traveling to visit relatives in the traditional Eid homecoming.

In Bangladesh, however, tens of thousands of people were leaving the capital, Dhaka, to join their families back in their villages for Eid celebrations despite a nationwide lockdown and road checkpoints. Experts fear a surge in cases in a country grappling with a shortage of vaccines and fear of Indian variants of the coronavirus spreading.

"I understand that we all miss our relatives at times like this, especially in the momentum of Eid," Indonesian President Joko Widodo said in televised remarks. "But let's prioritize safety together by not going back to our hometowns."

Despite the similar ban a year ago, the number of daily cases in Indonesia had picked up by 37% three weeks after the holiday. Similar patterns followed other holidays in the country that has counted 1.7 million infections and more than 47,600 fatalities from COVID-19.

While police set up highway checkpoints and domestic flights and other modes of transportation were suspended, anxiety lingers that people will defy the prohibition. Television reports showed city dwellers hiding on disguised trucks or fishing boats and officers at roadblocks being overwhelmed by desperate motorists.

"We followed the government decision that banned us visiting my parents for Eid last year, it's enough! Nothing can stop me now," said factory worker Askari Anam, who used alleys and shortcuts to avoid being stopped from visiting his hometown.

"Of course I'm worried," he said when asked about possibly contracting the virus. "But I leave it to God."

Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin expressed concern of a virus spike and feared people would travel despite the ban.

In the southern Philippines, coronavirus outbreaks and new fighting between government forces and Muslim insurgents in one province prevented people from holding large public prayers. Instead, most

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hunkered down in their homes, while in Maguindanao province, many families displaced by recent fighting marked the holiday in evacuation camps.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin unexpectedly announced another nationwide lockdown from Wednesday until June 7 to curb a spike in cases. Inter-state travel and all social activities are banned, which means that like in Indonesia, Muslims cannot visit each other or family graves.

Muhyiddin acknowledged that many are angry with the lockdown but defended the need for drastic measures, saying hospitals have almost reached their capacity.

Malaysia reported 4,765 cases on Wednesday, pushing its tally to 453,222, nearly fourfold from the start of the year. Deaths also rose to 1,761.

"Is this government tyrannical? But I am not a tyrant," Muhyiddin said, "Imagine if you have guests over, then the virus will spread. ... If the guest visits 10 homes, then 10 families will be infected with COVID-19 and in the end as soon as (Eid) ends, the number of positive cases in the country could jump to tens of thousands daily."

Egyptians marked the holiday with group prayers outside, after the government imposed new restrictions on public gatherings. Hundreds prayed shoulder-to-shoulder in the courtyard of an historic Cairo mosque, almost all wearing masks. Group prayers were banned last year due to the pandemic.

"It is a feeling of happiness that we were missing," said Ahmed Saeed, one worshipper. "We hope corona ends and we always gather together."

The Egyptian government is trying to minimize a third wave of infections, with daily reported new cases surpassing 1,000 in the past two weeks. Last week, it ordered a 9 p.m. curfew for restaurants, shops, cafes and social clubs and closed the country's public beaches and parks for the duration of the Eid.

Believers in Turkey were able to attend communal prayers in mosques, however. Hundreds prayed in Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia, the sixth-century Byzantine cathedral which was reconverted into a mosque last summer.

At the end of April, the Turkish government imposed its strictest lockdown yet, until May 17, ordering people to stay home, but mosques have been open, citing strict adherence to rules to fight infections.

Justices consider hearing a case on 'most offensive word'

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Robert Collier says that during the seven years he worked as an operating room aide at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, white nurses called him and other Black employees "boy." Management ignored two large swastikas painted on a storage room wall. And for six months, he regularly rode an elevator with the N-word carved into a wall.

Collier ultimately sued the hospital, but lower courts dismissed his case. Now, however, at a private conference Thursday, the Supreme Court will consider for the first time whether to hear his case. Focusing on the elevator graffiti, Collier is asking the justices to decide whether a single use of the N-word in the workplace can create a hostile work environment, giving an employee the ability to pursue a case under Title VII of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Already, the court's two newest members, both appointed by President Donald Trump, are on record with seemingly different views. The case is also a test of whether the justices are willing to wade into the ongoing, complex conversations about race happening nationwide. The public could learn as soon as Monday whether the court will take Collier's case.

Jennifer A. Holmes, a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which has urged the court to take the case, says she hopes the conversations taking place nationally will push the justices in that direction.

Doing so gives the court an "opportunity to show that they're not insensitive to issues of race," Holmes said. And courts are "all the time" confronting workplace discrimination claims involving use of the N-word, she said. The question for the justices, she said, is just whether someone who experiences an isolated instance of the N-word can "advance their case beyond the beginning stage."

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Two of the court's nine justices have experience with similar cases.

In 2019, as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote an opinion for a panel of three judges who unanimously ruled against a Black man who sued over alleged discrimination and had his case dismissed at an early stage. Among other things, he claimed a former supervisor at the Illinois Department of Transportation called him the N-word.

"The n-word is an egregious racial epithet," she wrote. But she said previous cases have made clear that an employee can't win his case "simply by proving that the word was uttered." He also must prove that "use of this word altered the conditions of his employment and created a hostile or abusive working environment."

Barrett's colleague, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, has said he sees things differently.

In 2013, as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, Kavanaugh was a part of a three-judge panel including now-Attorney General Merrick Garland that sided with a Black former Fannie Mae employee who sued alleging racial discrimination. The judges ruled that the man, who said he was called the N-word by a supervisor, shouldn't have had his case dismissed at an early stage.

Kavanaugh wrote separately about "probably the most offensive word in English." His view, he said, is that the word's use in the workplace by a supervisor "suffices by itself to establish a racially hostile work environment."

The Supreme Court itself has yet to squarely address the issue. The justices have said that the "mere utterance of an ethnic or racial epithet" doesn't allow a person to sue under the Civil Rights Act's Title VII. But in a 1998 case, the court suggested that a single, "extremely serious" incident could.

The hospital's lawyers, for their part, have urged the court not to take Collier's case. Parkland, the hospital where President John F. Kennedy was taken in 1963 after he was fatally shot, says the case's "factual record ... is neither strong nor clear." And Collier himself previously said that the racial graffiti he saw "had no appreciable effect on his job performance."

In a statement to The Associated Press, hospital spokesman Michael Malaise noted that there is no evidence "that any Parkland employee was responsible for the alleged graffiti or that it was directed specifically at Mr. Collier." Over 70% of hospital staff members self-identify as minorities and the hospital's "diversity is one of our strongest assets," he said.

Collier was fired by the hospital in 2016 after a conflict with a supervisor. He brought his lawsuit after he was fired. His attorney, Georgetown law professor Brian Wolfman, declined an interview request on his client's behalf. During a 2018 deposition, however, Collier talked about how seeing the elevator graffiti made him feel.

"I would say it was something I noticed and complained about," Collier said. "And that every time I would have to catch that elevator by not seeing anything done about it ... it was upsetting ... Because I would have wanted to see it gone away pretty much instantly."

Nowhere to run: Fear in Gaza grows amid conflict with Israel

BY ISABEL DEBRE and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Screams and flying debris enveloped Umm Majed al-Rayyes as explosions hurled her from her bed in Gaza City. Groping in the dark, the 50-year-old grabbed her four children and ran as Israeli bombs struck their apartment building Wednesday, shattering windows, ripping doors to splinters and blasting away concrete.

While casualties mounted this week in the most severe outbreak of violence between Israel and the Gaza Strip since a 2014 war, al-Rayyes and other Palestinians in the line of fire faced an all-too-familiar question: Where should we go?

"This whole territory is a tiny place. It's a prison. Everywhere you go, you're a target," al-Rayyes said by phone from a neighbor's house, where she sought refuge with her teenage sons and daughters and a few bags of clothes after the Israeli airstrike that she says came without warning.

In Gaza, a crowded coastal enclave of 2 million people, there are no air raid sirens or safe houses. Tem-

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porary United Nations shelters have come under attack in previous years of conflict. In the past two days, Israeli airstrikes brought down three huge towers housing important Hamas offices and some businesses after the Israeli military fired warning shots, allowing occupants to flee.

Fighter jets also targeted without warning multiple residential buildings, located in teeming neighborhoods where Israel alleged militants lived. In all, more than 83 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Monday, including 17 children. Among the dead were both militants and civilians, including at least two women and children who died during the apartment building strikes.

At a Gaza City hospital, distraught families told of pulling bloodied relatives from piles of rubble. One woman said her 4-year-old grandson and pregnant daughter-in-law were killed when an Israeli air raid hit their two-story building on Wednesday.

"They bombed them without any warning. The house had nothing but the kids," Umm Mohammad al-Telbani cried in the hospital morgue.

The Israeli government long has accused Hamas of using civilians as human shields against retaliatory strikes; militants often launch rockets from civilian areas and set up command centers inside residential buildings. Yet Israel received heavy criticism for its tactic of bombing buildings during the 2014 war with Hamas.

Recalling the horror of past wars, Gaza residents say they feel nowhere is safe. They also cannot leave the narrow territory, one of the world's most densely populated places. It has been under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized control in 2007. Along its borders, Gaza is encircled by sensor-studded fences, concrete walls, galvanized steel barriers and the Mediterranean Sea, where Israel restricts boats from Gaza to some 16 nautical miles offshore.

"There is nowhere to run, there is nowhere to hide," said Zeyad Khattab, a 44-year-old pharmacist in Gaza City, who fled to the family home where he grew up in the central Gaza district of Deir al-Balah with a dozen relatives when bombs pounded his residential high-rise. "That terror is impossible to describe."

As Hamas and other militant groups fired hundreds of rockets into Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv, killing at least seven Israelis, worries grew that the latest violence could spiral into a protracted conflict. The Hamas barrages sent hundreds of thousands of Israelis running to bomb shelters across the country and hit numerous civilian targets, including a bus and a school in the city of Ashkelon that was empty because authorities had ordered all schools closed.

The people killed by the indiscriminate fire at Israeli population centers included three women and two children, spreading fear on both sides of the border.

"There is always this undercurrent of anxiety, but this time is different," Khattab said. Airstrikes shook the walls and windows of his apartment building during the devastating wars of 2008 and 2014, but the building that houses some 400 people collapsed on Wednesday.

In any other year, Palestinians would be thronging the dusty streets of Gaza City this week ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, one of the biggest and most joyous festivals on the Muslim calendar that marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. Markets would be hives of activity as shoppers stocked up on new clothes and pastries for feasts. Beachside restaurants would brim with families. Barbershops would be full of men getting fresh haircuts.

Instead, shops stood shuttered and the city's streets were eerily empty. Almost nothing moves on the roads except for ambulances and Hamas security vehicles. Bombs thunder in the distance. Plumes of black smoke billow from stricken buildings. Residents walk by rubble-strewn stores and downed power lines, surveying the latest damage to a city already riddled with scars from intense clashes.

"It's the same atmosphere of 2014," Saud Abu Ramadan, a freelance journalist in Gaza City, said, referring to the bloody 7-week war that killed over 2,000 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, and inflicted widespread destruction on Gaza's infrastructure. "Warplanes are buzzing, and people are just trying to keep their heads down."

This week's mayhem stemmed from clashes at the most sensitive place in Jerusalem, the revered plateau site of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the iconic golden Dome of the Rock. Analysts long have considered flaring

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tensions at the compound, sacred to both Muslims and Jews, to be the most dangerous accelerant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Islamic militant groups seized on the violence at Al-Aqsa as the trigger for their hail of rocket fire into Israel. The salvos at times overwhelmed Israeli missile defenses and brought air raid sirens and explosions echoing across Tel Aviv, Israel's biggest metropolitan region, and other areas.

On Monday, the first night of the fighting, teenage boys in Gaza City clambered onto rooftops, cars and scaffolding to get a better view of the rockets alighting the sky and streaming toward Israeli cities in quick succession. Some cried out with joy, as if at a wedding. Shouts of "God is great!" erupted from the crowd.

"People here have been seething," Adnan Abu Amer, a political scientist at al-Ummah University in Gaza City, said. "They take a pride and happiness in seeing Hamas defend the sanctity of Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem."

But with the rush of outrage comes the anguish of knowing the conflict's heavy toll.

"There is so much pain, but thank God the children have been through this before and they're strong," said al-Rayyes, who fled her falling apartment in Gaza City. She corrected herself. "They're pretending to be strong."

Weary Gaza marks Muslim feast as violence spreads in Israel

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Weary Palestinians somberly marked the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on Thursday, as Hamas and Israel traded more rockets and airstrikes and Jewish-Arab violence raged across Israel.

The violence has reached deeper into Israel than at any time since the 2000 Palestinian intifada, or uprising. Arab and Jewish mobs are rampaging through the streets, savagely beating people and torching cars, and flights have been canceled or diverted away from the country's main airport.

The escalating fighting between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers has echoed — and perhaps even exceeded — their devastating 2014 war. That conflict and two others were largely confined to the impoverished and blockaded Palestinian territory and Israeli communities on the frontier. But this round — which like the intifada, began in Jerusalem — seems to be rippling far and wide, tearing apart the country at its seams.

Meanwhile, in Gaza residents are bracing for more devastation as militants fire one barrage of rockets after another and Israel carries out waves of bone-rattling airstrikes, sending plumes of smoke rising into the air. Since the rockets began Monday, Israel has toppled three high-rise buildings that it said housed Hamas facilities after warning civilians to evacuate.

Gaza's Health Ministry said the death toll has climbed to 83 Palestinians, including 17 children and seven women, with more than 480 people wounded. Islamic Jihad confirmed the deaths of seven militants, while Hamas, the Islamic militant group that seized power in Gaza from rival Palestinian forces in 2007, acknowledged that a top commander and several other members were killed. Israel says the number of militants killed is much higher than Hamas has acknowledged.

A total of seven people have been killed in Israel. Among them were a soldier killed by an anti-tank missile and a 6-year-old child hit in a rocket attack.

The fighting comes as Muslims mark Eid al-Fitr, the end of a month of daily fasting that is usually a festive time when families shop for new clothes and gather for large feasts.

Instead, Hamas urged the faithful to mark communal Eid prayers inside their homes or the nearest mosques instead of out in the open, as is traditional.

Hassan Abu Shaaban tried to lighten the mood by passing out candy to passers-by after prayers, but acknowledged "there is no atmosphere for Eid at all."

"It is all airstrikes, destruction and devastation," he said. "May God help everyone."

In Gaza's southern town of Khan Younis, dozens of mourners marched through the streets carrying the bodies of an 11-year-old and a 13-year-old killed when an Israeli airstrike hit near their home on Wednesday.

The owner of a five-story building in Gaza City, meanwhile, said he got a call from the Israeli military on Thursday asking him to evacuate it before an airstrike brought it down.

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"The building is residential, what is in to hit?" said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

The Israeli military later said the building housed intelligence offices used by Hamas.

Gaza militants continued to bombard Israel with nonstop rocket fire into Thursday. The attacks brought life to a standstill in southern communities near Gaza, but also reached as far north as the Tel Aviv area, about 70 kilometers (45 miles) away, for a second straight day.

Israel has begun diverting some incoming flights from Ben Gurion International Airport, near Tel Aviv, to the Ramon airfield in the country's far south, the Transportation Ministry said. Several flights have also been canceled.

The Israeli military says more than 1,600 rockets have been fired since Monday, with 400 falling short and landing inside Gaza. Israel's missile defenses have intercepted 90% of the rockets. Israeli airstrikes have struck around 600 targets inside Gaza, the military said.

The Israeli army shared footage showing a rocket impact between apartment towers in the Tel Aviv suburb of Petah Tikva early Thursday, apparently sparking a large fire. It said the strike wounded people and caused significant damage.

"We're coping, sitting at home, hoping it will be OK," said Motti Haim, a resident of the central town of Beer Yaakov and father of two children. "It's not simple running to the shelter. It's not easy with the kids."

While United Nations and Egyptian officials have said that cease-fire efforts are underway, there were no signs of progress. Israeli television's Channel 12 reported late Wednesday that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Security Cabinet authorized a widening of the offensive.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the "indiscriminate launching of rockets" from civilian areas in Gaza toward Israeli population centers, but he also urged Israel to show "maximum restraint." U.S. President Joe Biden called Netanyahu to support Israel's right to defend itself, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he was sending a senior diplomat to the region to try to calm tensions.

The current eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem, where heavy-handed Israeli police tactics during Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers ignited protests and clashes with police. A focal point of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police was Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, built on a hilltop compound that is revered by Jews and Muslims.

Jerusalem is at the heart of the conflict between the bitter enemies: Israel regards the entire city as its capital, while the Palestinians want east Jerusalem to be the capital of their future state.

Hamas, claiming to be defending the city, launched a barrage of rockets at the city late Monday, in a dramatic escalation. Hamas banners could be seen outside Al-Aqsa on Thursday as thousands gathered there for Eid prayers.

The recent fighting has also set off violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Israel, in scenes unseen in more than two decades. Netanyahu warned that he was prepared to use an "iron fist if necessary" to calm the violence.

But ugly confrontations erupted across the country late Wednesday. Jewish and Arab mobs battled in the central city of Lod, the epicenter of the troubles, despite a state of emergency and nighttime curfew. In nearby Bat Yam, Jewish nationalists attacked an Arab motorist, dragged him from his car and beat him until he was motionless.

Israeli police said two people were shot and wounded in Lod and an Israeli Jew was stabbed. An Arab citizen was stabbed and seriously wounded in Jerusalem's central Mahane Yehuda market, where many Arabs work in restaurants and as food vendors. Dozens of people were arrested in towns across Israel where clashes and rioting broke out.

In the occupied West Bank, the Israeli military said it intervened in a Palestinian shooting attack that wounded two people. The Palestinian Health Ministry said the suspected gunman was killed. No details were immediately available.

Still unclear is how the fighting in Gaza will affect Netanyahu's political future. He failed to form a government coalition after inconclusive parliamentary elections in March, and now his political rivals have three

weeks to try to form one.

They have courted a small Islamist Arab party, but the fighting could hamper those efforts.

Driven by despair, Lebanese pharmacist looks to life abroad

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) — The shelves are bare at the Panacea pharmacy north of Beirut. Its owner, Rita El Khoury, has spent the past few weeks packing up her career, apartment and belongings before leaving Lebanon for a new life abroad.

For the 35-year-old pharmacist and her husband, and countless others feeling trapped in a country hammered by multiple crises, Lebanon has become unlivable.

Driven by financial ruin, collapsing institutions, hyperinflation and rapidly rising poverty, thousands have left since Lebanon's economic and financial crisis began in late 2019 — an exodus that accelerated after the massive explosion at Beirut's port last August, when a stockpile of improperly stored ammonium nitrates detonated, killing 211 people and destroying residential areas nearby.

Lebanon has been without a functioning government since, with political leaders deadlocked or complacent as the country hurtles toward total collapse. Fuel supplies are running out, leaving the country at risk of plunging into total darkness as power stations and generators run dry.

Now young to middle-aged professionals are leaving — doctors, engineers, pharmacists and bankers, part of the latest wave of emigration in the small country's modern history.

"It's been 10 years since I opened this pharmacy. I gave it all that I could," said El Khoury, standing in her empty pharmacy. Though her career was her passion, she is armed with determination and hopes for a better future in France, where they are headed.

LEAVING OR STAYING

It's a question almost every generation of Lebanese has asked throughout the country's turbulent 100-year history, rife with instability and crises. The country has seen a ruinous 15-year civil war, military occupation by its neighbors, bombings, political assassinations and repeated bouts of civil unrest.

The result has been one of the world's largest diasporas relative to the size of the country — estimated to be about three times the population of 5 million at home.

There are no exact figures for how many Lebanese have left since October 2019. Some estimate up to 20% of Lebanese doctors have emigrated or are planning to leave. Out of 3,400 unionized pharmacies, around 400 have shut down and 70% of pharmacy graduates end up leaving, said Ghassan al-Amin, head of the pharmacist syndicate.

Airport scenes of parents sending off their kids to work or study abroad are very common. During the civil war, which ended in 1990, tens of thousands of people left, joining previous generations of Lebanese immigrants to Latin America, Europe, Africa and Australia.

The current economic crisis is unprecedented in Lebanon's modern history, and many worry the flight of educated professionals and soaring poverty this time would forever alter the identity and reputation this small country once had as the medical, tourist and banking capital of the Middle East.

El Khoury and her husband, Marcel, never wanted to leave, determined to remain close to their parents in a country that provides no social welfare for its elderly. She is an only child. Her husband has two brothers, both living in Dubai.

But their resolve to stay began to crack two years ago. The economy was tanking, and hard currency was becoming scarce. In October 2019, public frustration exploded into nationwide street protests. Banks clamped down. People suddenly saw their dollar bank accounts frozen and Lebanese currency withdrawals limited, trapping all their money. The Lebanese pound, pegged to the U.S. dollar for decades, unraveled. Salaries dropped and savings evaporated.

El Khoury's husband, a financial software developer, started looking for jobs abroad, but then the pandemic hit, slowing everything down. The couple decided to apply for immigration to Canada and began the lengthy paperwork process.

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By mid-year, drugs started disappearing from pharmacy shelves, shortages exacerbated by panic buying and suppliers holding on to the drugs, hoping to sell for higher. Six out of 10 brand-name drugs were suddenly unavailable.

"There were days when I came home crying," El Khoury said. "When I was studying pharmacy for five years, they never told me I'd have to decide who gets to have medicine and who doesn't."

On Aug. 4 — the day of the port explosion — she was working remotely from home when the earth shook, followed by a deafening blast. From their apartment north of Beirut's port, she saw a gigantic cloud of smoke rising above the city.

The explosion triggered childhood memories during Lebanon's civil war, when her parents had her sleep behind a sofa, hoping it would protect her from the shells.

The blast solidified the couple's resolve to leave.

El Khoury now ridicules the word 'resilience,' often ascribed to Lebanese people for their ability to pick up the pieces and rebuild after every disaster.

"To me resilience is an excuse that we give ourselves for apathy and not doing anything," she said. "Resilience is why we keep falling lower, and we get used to every new low."

STARTING FROM ZERO

In January, El Khoury's husband received a job offer in France. They decided to take it. She began selling her pharmacy stocks, and begin the long process of packing up a life in preparation for their departure on Saturday.

"We are going to start from zero," she said. "Everything we have worked for the past 15 years, the money we have earned and saved, it's all gone and we're starting from scratch."

They feel sadness, apprehension and nostalgia mixed with relief at finally taking the leap. They worry about leaving their parents behind in a country with an uncertain future but at the same time, there is excitement about what awaits.

El Khoury recalls the hope and enthusiasm she felt when she first opened her pharmacy. She had just returned from a year of study in France, and the pharmacy, she felt, was her mission. That mission was cut short, she said. Hopefully, a more dignified life in France awaits.

With family and friends left behind, ties with Lebanon would not be cut. She is already planning Sunday lunches with an open Skype connection between Paris and Beirut so they can stay connected with their parents. But the move, El Khoury feels, is permanent.

"It would take a miracle for us to come back here," she said, then added: "A miracle or retirement."

Nurses, nonprofits, others take vaccine to homebound people

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — For months, Victoria McAllister searched online to make a vaccination appointment. Unlike other people who can hop into a car, though, she has ruptured discs that could slice her spinal cord if she hits a pothole or her wheelchair bumps floor molding.

So McAllister, 64, was over the moon when the county health department in Hayward, California, where she lives, called offering to inoculate her against COVID-19 at home. Two paramedics with Hayward Fire came last month, jabbed her arm with the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine and stuck around to make sure she was alright.

"Absolutely blessed," she said of how she felt after receiving her vaccination. As soon as they left, she called her doctors and passed along the county phone number with this message: "Call this number and get all your homebound patients to call this number."

As interest in coronavirus vaccinations dwindles nationwide, providers are ramping up efforts to find and reach millions of people in the U.S. who cannot leave their homes or who need help with transportation. The process is slow and requires careful planning, but advocates say getting vaccinated is critical for people who are constantly exposed to visiting aides — and that they should have been a focus sooner.

While the effort is happening in many states, experts say California has one of the most robust programs.

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Meanwhile, Pennsylvania is stepping up efforts, Gov. Tom Wolf said in April.

Health care workers at Boston Medical Center have been racing to inoculate patients since February. And New Jersey, under pressure from advocacy groups, recently posted a phone number and online form for people needing in-home vaccinations.

Elsewhere, the Visiting Nurse Association of Texas, which delivers hot meals to thousands of people in Dallas County, is partnering with the fire department to deliver about 60 in-home vaccinations a week.

Jennifer Atwood, managing director of development and communications for the Texas nonprofit, said a woman who survived brain cancer only to fear COVID-19 "was almost in tears" about getting the vaccine. Another client in her late 80s was persuaded to accept a vaccination after speaking with Atwood and others.

It's hard to say just how many people are in the group. Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Christine Ritchie has said there are an estimated 2 million homebound adults in the U.S. and another 5 million who have trouble leaving their homes or require help to do so.

Inoculation efforts are scattered, and much depends on local officials and medical providers.

"California is one of the few states I've heard that's doing anything in regards to that, like actually going out and vaccinating people in their homes," said Kelly Buckland, executive director of the National Council on Independent Living, an advocacy group in Washington.

He and others are frustrated that providers and government are just now starting to focus on that population.

"This was a problem we knew we were going to have," said Caitlin Donovan, spokeswoman for the National Patient Advocate Foundation. "How are there not plans in place?"

In Los Angeles County, Torrance Memorial Medical Center started inoculating people at home in March, identifying people through a city hotline, county health department, senior centers and doctors offices, said Mei Tsai, a pharmacist who coordinates the program.

Socorro Franco-Martinez, 50, and her sister, Barbara Franco, 47, were vaccinated Wednesday. The sisters both have weakened lungs from muscular dystrophy and have stayed home for more than a year, tended to by Socorro's husband, Martin Martinez.

The socially active sisters can't wait to return to the beach, mall and Sunday Mass, as well as catch up on medical and dental visits.

"I don't want to be here in the house forever," said Barbara Franco. "After my COVID-19 shot, I can have a little freedom."

Under federal guidelines, seniors in nursing homes and health care workers were prioritized when California began vaccinations in December. Homebound people were not in the spotlight.

"This is a group of people who, since the pandemic began last year, have been afraid for their lives and who were worried they would be left behind," said Dr. Kathleen Clanon, medical director Alameda County's Health Care Services Agency in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Last week, nurses Patricia Calloway and Devette Laflore wheeled carriers of vaccine and paperwork to several homes, including the Hayward condo of Patti Amaral, 73. She has severe sciatica and hasn't left the upstairs for at least a year and a half.

The nurses stayed after the shots to monitor Amaral and her husband, John McFarland, who called their visit a treat.

"You're both angels," he told the nurses.

Colleges pushed anew for reparations for slavery, racism

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — For Brown University students, the Ivy League college's next step in its yearslong quest to atone for its legacy of slavery is clear: Pay up.

Nearly two decades after the Providence, Rhode Island, institution launched its much-lauded reckoning, undergraduate students this spring voted overwhelmingly for the university to identify the descendants of slaves that worked on campus and begin paying them reparations.

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At the University of Georgia, community activists want the school to contribute to Athens' efforts to atone for an urban renewal project that destroyed a Black community in the 1960s to make way for college dorms.

And at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., there's growing dissatisfaction among some slave descendants about the Catholic institution's pioneering reparations efforts.

Nearly a year after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police sparked the latest national reckoning on racism, student and community activists from New England to the Deep South are demanding institutions take more ambitious steps to atone for past sins — from colonial-era slavery to more recent campus expansion projects that have pushed out entire communities of color.

"There's been a shift in America," said Jason Carroll, who was student council president during the spring referendum at Brown University. "We're at a different place. Just a few years ago, it was controversial to say 'Black Lives Matter.'"

The 22-year-old Maryland native, who graduated this month, argues Brown has taken nearly every conceivable step to atone for its past — save for making slave descendants whole.

The school released an exhaustive historical report in 2006 and followed it up with the dedication of a slavery memorial in 2014, among other efforts. An "Anti-Black Racism" task force is expected to deliver recommendations soon for how the school can further promote racial equity. But university spokesperson Brian Clark stressed it's not clear whether the panel, which was formed following last summer's racial unrest, will address reparations.

"There's real trauma and pain here," said Carroll, who is descended from Carolina slaves. "This shouldn't just be an academic question. There are real families that have been burdened and harmed by this — and probably still are."

Students at Harvard are similarly calling for reparations after years of headline-grabbing announcements from the school, including dropping the law school emblem, which was derived from the crest of a slave-owning family. A panel looking at the university's slave legacy plans to release its findings and recommendations later this year.

At the University of Chicago, students are frustrated that the university continues to distance itself from its slavery ties, even as it touts efforts to advance racial equity and justice, said Caine Jordan, a graduate student who co-authored a recent report on the school's fraught racial history.

Last year, the university removed markers honoring U.S. Sen. Stephen Douglas, but maintained the Mississippi slave plantation owner donated land to an older version of the school and had "no connection" to the current one.

"All of it rings hollow if you're founded on Black pain, and you're not willing to acknowledge that," Jordan said.

A university spokesperson declined to respond, but said University President Robert Zimmer will provide an update soon on the school's racial equity efforts.

In Athens, Georgia, students and community groups complain the University of Georgia has largely stayed silent on the city's recent efforts to atone for the displacement of some 50 Black families to make way for new dorms for the school in the 1960s.

Earlier this year, Mayor Kelly Girtz signed a resolution acknowledging the taking of the homes under eminent domain, and setting into motion a process to provide "equitable redress." Student groups rallied Wednesday to call attention to the issue, among other racial justice demands.

"UGA has got to do more. It's got to come to the table and acknowledge what it did," said Hattie Whitehead Thomas, a 72-year-old Athens resident who grew up in the destroyed Linnentown neighborhood.

The university responded in part that the dorms have housed tens of thousands of students "from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds — providing those students with the transformational benefits of a higher education."

In Virginia, a new law mandates the state's five public colleges provide "tangible benefits" for slave descendants.

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Cauline Yates, a descendant of one of Thomas Jefferson's slaves, said she hopes the law compels the flagship University of Virginia, which Jefferson founded, to provide academic scholarships and economic development projects for descendants.

"It's time for them to stand up and honor our ancestors," said the 67-year-old Charlottesville resident, who works at the university and co-founded a group advocating for UVA's slave descendants.

Brian Coy, a university spokesperson, said it's premature to say how UVA will meet the new reparations requirement. But he noted the school has already met the first provision of the law — to honor and identify the slaves — with its Memorial to Enslaved Laborers dedicated last month.

Back at Georgetown, the Jesuit university's reparations efforts are meant to atone for the local Jesuit province selling around 272 slaves to settle the school's debts in the 1800s.

Ruth McBain, a Georgetown spokesperson, said the university hopes to award the first grants from a new \$400,000-a-year fund for community-based projects benefiting slave descendants sometime this year, and will work with the campus and descendant communities on that effort.

The recent launch of a \$1 billion "racial reconciliation" foundation by the Jesuit order that owns the university is another "important step in building trust and partnership" with the descendant community, she added.

But one of the main concerns among descendants and students is how committed funds will be spent — and whether descendants will truly have adequate say in the process — according to Shepard Thomas, who graduated from Georgetown last year and was among the first to benefit from the school's new legacy admission status for descendants of the 272.

"The fear is that the university will use these funds for their own purposes," the 23-year-old New Orleans native said. "The university is trying to control the narrative, and we're trying to prevent that."

Davarian Baldwin, an American studies professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, isn't optimistic many colleges will ultimately meet the demands of students and activists, even with the renewed activism.

"Universities will do as little as they can get away with," he said.

Indeed, at Brown, university leaders have long touted the 2007 launch of an endowment to benefit the Providence public school system as a key part of its slavery atonement.

But the university only fully funded its \$10 million pledge to the troubled, state-run school district last year after the mayor and others complained.

Carroll also argues the effort, while laudable, has nothing to do with compensating Black communities for slavery. The school district, after all, is overwhelmingly Latino.

"That's not really a solution," he said. "In a way, it's even more insulting."

Judge weighing relevance of Ahmaud Arbery's mental health

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — A Georgia judge will continue hearing legal motions Thursday in the murder case of three men facing a fall trial in the slaying of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was chased and shot after being spotted running in the defendants' neighborhood.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley planned to revisit defense attorneys' push for permission to show the trial jury evidence involving Arbery's mental health. They argue that mental illness could have played a role in the Feb. 23, 2020, slaying. Prosecutors are objecting, saying it's a ploy by defense lawyers to make a case that Arbery's death was his own fault.

During the pretrial hearing's first day Wednesday, the judge opted against hearing testimony regarding Arbery's mental health. He said he wanted to weigh the issue before allowing the slain man's private medical information to be discussed in open court.

Travis McMichael and his father, Greg McMichael, armed themselves and pursued the 25-year-old man in a pickup truck as he ran past their home just outside the port city of Brunswick, about 70 miles (112 kilometers) south of Savannah.

A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the chase and took cellphone video of Travis McMichael

shooting Arbery three times at close range with a shotgun.

The three men, all of whom are white, are charged with malice murder and other counts. The judge has scheduled jury selection in their trial to begin Oct. 18.

The case sparked a national outcry during a year of protests over killings of unarmed Black people. The Justice Department on April 28 added hate crime charges against the McMichaels and Bryan, who all pleaded not guilty to the federal counts before a U.S. magistrate judge Tuesday.

US agents encounter more single adults are crossing border

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

LA JOYA, Texas (AP) — Parents emerge from the brush into a baseball field, carrying exhausted children. Border Patrol agents dictate orders: Families with young children in one line and unaccompanied children in another. The smallest of three lines is for single adults.

The scene Tuesday night in La Joya, a town of about 4,000 people, plays out nightly in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, presenting Joe Biden with one of the most serious challenges of his young presidency — high numbers of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum. April was the second-busiest month on record for unaccompanied children encountered at the border, following March's all-time high.

But while asylum-seeking families and children dominate public attention, single adults represent a growing number of border encounters, nearly two of every three in April. They are less likely to surrender to authorities than families and children, making them less visible.

The Border Patrol's 173,460 total encounters in April were up 3% from March, marking the highest level since April 2000. The numbers, released Tuesday, are not directly comparable because most of those stopped were quickly expelled from the country under federal pandemic-related powers that deny rights to seek asylum. Being expelled carries no legal consequences, so many people try to cross multiple times.

Single adults — more than half of them from Mexico — drove the increased activity. The Border Patrol had 108,301 such encounters in April, up 12% from March. Nearly nine of 10 adult encounters ended in expulsions under pandemic-related authority that began under former President Donald Trump and continued under Biden.

Biden, however, exempts unaccompanied children from expulsion, allowing them to stay in the U.S. while pursuing asylum claims. Families with young children are also often released in the U.S. while their cases wind through the bottlenecked immigration courts.

Some current and former border enforcement officials say massive attention on families and unaccompanied children consumes agents' time and has created an opening for single adults and drug smugglers to elude authorities.

Michael Fisher, the Border Patrol chief from 2010 to 2015, said some agency leaders have told him that agents are spending 40% less time patrolling and more on "processing, doing meals" and duties related to the increased numbers of children.

"The line is very thin right now, and the cartels exploit that," he said.

While agents try to count how many people elude capture, Fisher thinks it would be "a guess at best" in the Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. Its often thick brush has traditionally not had many sensors, and many families and children cross in large groups. The Border Patrol's most trusted method of counting how many people get away relies on observing tiny human traces: dusty footprints, torn cobwebs, broken twigs, overturned pebbles.

The Trump administration frequently flew Mexican adults far from the border in hopes of deterring them from crossing again, but recidivism has remained unusually high. The Border Patrol says 29% of people expelled in April had been expelled before.

Hoping to recalibrate staffing, the Border Patrol Academy recently graduated its first class of employees devoted to preparing court documents, freeing up more agents to work in the field. They are assigned to the busiest corridors in Texas but their limited numbers mean they're unlikely to make much immediate impact.

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Meanwhile, authorities encountered 17,171 children traveling alone in April, down 9% from 18,960 in March but well above the previous high of 11,475 reported in May 2019 by the Border Patrol, which began publishing numbers in 2009.

Border Patrol encounters with families fell in similar proportion to unaccompanied children — down 10% to 48,226 from 53,406 in March. Barely one in three family encounters resulted in expulsion.

In La Joya, a 15-year-old girl said she left her native Honduras without her parents or siblings in hopes of an education and eventually a job to help her family back home. She traveled for a month and a half and arrived at the baseball field with a larger group of migrants, sporting a black T-shirt with a phrase in English she did not understand: “Women Move Mountains.”

“I wanted a better future for me and my family. I want to study and work,” she said, adding that her uncle and aunt in New York offered to open their home to her.

The Associated Press is not using the girl’s name. It does not normally name children without permission from their parents, and the identity of her parents could not be obtained.

Nearby, two sisters from Honduras, ages 14 and 16, undid their buns and removed the laces of their pink sneakers after an agent ordered them to place the laces and hair ties and other property like phones and bracelets in a plastic bag.

Rudys Acuña, 29, said he left Nicaragua for political reasons. He carried his 4-year-old son on his shoulders as he awaited orders from agents.

“Sometimes you are really forced to leave your country. It’s not that you want to,” he said.

US cities see surge in deadly street racing amid pandemic

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

Jaye Sanford, a 52-year-old mother of two, was driving home in suburban Atlanta on Nov. 21 when a man in a Dodge Challenger muscle car who was allegedly street racing crashed into her head-on, killing her.

Sanford was remembered by friends as kind and thoughtful, but now she will also be remembered for something else: a new state law that requires jail time for all convictions for drag racing and stunt driving.

Across America, illegal drag racing has exploded in popularity since the coronavirus pandemic began, with dangerous upticks reported from Georgia and New York to New Mexico and Oregon.

Street racers block roads and even interstates to keep police away while they tear around and perform stunts, often captured on videos that go viral. Packs of vehicles, from souped-up jalopies to high-end sports cars, roar down city streets, through industrial neighborhoods and down rural roads.

Experts say TV shows and movies glorifying street racing had already fueled interest in recent years.

Then shutdowns associated with the pandemic cleared normally clogged highways as commuters worked from home.

Those with a passion for fast cars often had time to modify them, and to show them off, said Tami Eggleston, a sports psychologist who participates in legal drag racing.

“With COVID, when we were separated from people, I think people sort of bonded in their interest groups,” said Eggleston, who is also the provost of McKendree University, a small college in suburban St. Louis. “So that need to want to socialize and be around other people brought the racers out.”

But people have been killed. The snarl of engines and traffic tie-ups have become huge annoyances. Racers have been reported wielding guns and strewing beer cans in parking lots.

Now, police in many cities are stepping up enforcement, and states are fighting back with new laws.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed the bill named for Sanford last week after it passed the General Assembly. Besides mandating at least 10 days of jail time for all drag racing convictions, the measure requires people convicted a third time within five years to forfeit their vehicles.

“This illegal activity is very dangerous,” the Republican governor said at a bill-signing ceremony. “Our goal is simple: to protect every family in every community.”

In New York City, authorities received more than 1,000 drag racing complaints over six months last year — a nearly five-fold increase over the same period in 2019.

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"Illegal street racing puts lives at risk and keeps us up at night," said New York state Sen. Brad Hoylman. "While there's been less traffic during the pandemic, some drivers have used this as an opportunity to treat our streets like a NASCAR speedway."

The Democratic lawmaker has introduced legislation that would authorize New York City to operate its speed cameras overnight and on weekends in hot spots for illegal street racing. The Senate Transportation Committee recently unanimously approved the measure, setting it up for a floor vote.

In Mississippi, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves signed into law in March a bill that allows state troopers to respond to incidents in cities. On New Year's Eve, drivers blocked traffic on an interstate highway in Jackson, the state capital, for an hour while they spun out and did donuts, etching circles in the pavement.

Even though the highway patrol headquarters was nearby, troopers couldn't respond because they were prohibited from handling incidents in cities with over 15,000 people. That prohibition will be lifted when the new law takes effect July 1.

In Arizona, the state Senate has passed a bill to impose harsher penalties. It now awaits a House vote. Under an ordinance approved in March by the Phoenix City Council, police can impound a car involved in street racing or reckless driving for up to 30 days.

Meanwhile, the death toll climbs. On the night of May 2, a 28-year-old woman was killed in Phoenix when a street racer crashed into her car. A man was arrested on suspicion of manslaughter.

Police in Albuquerque, New Mexico, handed out thousands of tickets for speeding and racing since a crackdown began in October.

"Racing up and down our streets is so deadly, especially while more kids, seniors, pedestrians and cyclists are out during this pandemic," said Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller.

Street racing in an industrial neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, scares people who work there. A motorcyclist was killed last month in a crash that police said apparently involved racing. Business owners on April 2 wrote to the mayor and city commissioners, asking them to take action.

Kathryn, an employee in the neighborhood's Portland French Bakery, says the roadside and its 2-mile (3.2 kilometer) straightaway are littered with alcohol containers on Mondays after weekends of racing and stunts. Spray-painted lines mark start and finish lines. Parking lots are scarred by circular tire tracks or completely eroded in places by spinning tires.

"A lot of the employees are afraid to go anywhere near them, honestly. There's been a couple of shootings," said Kathryn, who didn't want her last name used because she was worried about possible retaliation from street racers.

Portland police say they're too overwhelmed to do much about it.

"The city of Portland has experienced an enormous increase in our shooting rate, a staggering amount of volatile demonstrations, while our staffing numbers have dwindled," said acting Lt. Michael Roberts, who is tasked with addressing illegal street racing. "We often do not have the bandwidth to address the street racer calls."

In Denver, police have deployed a helicopter to track races, closed lanes often used by racers and sent officers to places where racers meet. On April 3, a mother was killed when a street racer broadsided her car in downtown Denver.

In one of the most notorious incidents, hundreds of street racers clogged a stretch of interstate in nearby Aurora on March 7 while they raced and cruised. Police warned other motorists to stay away amid reports of guns being brandished and fireworks going off.

The events have given more urgency to a long-standing effort by the Colorado State Patrol to lure street racers to a safer environment. The agency's "Take it to the Track" program features weekly contests at Bandimere Speedway, in the foothills west of Denver.

"You can bring out whatever you have, be it a supercar or mom's minivan, grandpa's Buick," Trooper Josh Lewis said at the racetrack last week. "And you can race a cop, and do so legally."

Lewis then beat a Toyota SUV on the quarter-mile track, reaching 88 mph (142 kph) in his Dodge Charger. Ray Propes, 58, started street racing when he was 16 but now prefers Bandimere Speedway for its

traction and safety.

"You don't have to worry about accidents, animals, kids, birds, anything," he said.

Pipeline hack sends people scrambling for fuel in the South

By TOM FOREMAN, JR., JEFF MARTIN and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

CLEMMONS, N.C. (AP) — A run on gas following a computer hack of the nation's largest fuel pipeline had North Carolina tow-truck driver Jonathan King worried about whether he could do his job.

"I drive all over the place," King said at a packed gas station outside Winston-Salem on Wednesday. "It gets really busy. And yeah, with the fuel going the way it's going, it's going to be very hard for us. Hopefully we'll be able to get through it."

The cybersecurity attack on the Colonial Pipeline has prompted fuel-hoarding and panic-buying in parts of the Southeastern U.S., striking fear and stress among those who've waited in long lines for gas. And while Colonial initiated the restart of pipeline operations late Wednesday, the company said it will take several days for deliveries to return to normal.

The scene at gas stations was far from typical Wednesday after governors of both North Carolina and Virginia declared states of emergency to help ensure supply and access to gas.

As people in the region emerge from the lockdowns and limitations of the coronavirus pandemic, some feared the prospect of lost wages and missed doctors appointments. They also worried about canceling plans with family members who they were only beginning to see again.

Mary Goldberg, 60, of Norfolk, Virginia, said she needs her car for work but also to see her grandchildren — whom she barely got to see last year. Her job includes delivering T-shirts for events and other promotional products.

"I can't get paid until my customers get their products," said Goldberg as a slow-operating pump filled her tank for more than 20 minutes at a 7-Eleven.

Construction worker Jamar Gatison, 36, was also filling up his tank there Wednesday before he had a doctor's appointment.

"I'm about to run out of gas, so I have no choice," Gatison said, adding that he is also is an Uber Eats driver but wasn't planning on delivering food that night because he didn't want to wait in line again.

Restaurants and bars, which are already struggling to fill job openings, will find themselves particularly squeezed, said Robert McNab, an economics professor at Virginia's Old Dominion University. Some workers may not be able to come to work. And some customers may abandon plans to eat out.

"In all likelihood, these service workers will be impacted most significantly, with rising fuel and food prices eating a larger part of their household budgets and income being reduced this month by the fear-induced shortage of gasoline," McNab said.

The Colonial Pipeline delivers about 45% of the fuel consumed on the East Coast. There is no gasoline shortage, according to government officials and energy analysts. But there has been a problem getting the fuel from refineries on the Gulf Coast to the states that need it, and officials have been scrambling to find alternate routes to deliver that fuel.

The distribution problems and panic-buying have been draining supplies at thousands of gas stations. On Wednesday, four to five cars were lined up at each pump at a Circle K in Clemmons, North Carolina, a community southwest of Winston-Salem along I-40.

Detlef Badorrek said he drove to four gas stations before he found one where he could fill up his car. He expressed concern that motorists may become a little more unnerved as the situation extends itself.

"I sense things could go a little bit more desperately as time goes by. So far, it's reasonable," he said.

But not for everyone, apparently. Two people were charged with assault after a fight over spots in a line at a Marathon gas station in Knightdale, outside Raleigh, on Tuesday afternoon, authorities said.

The man and woman arguing over spots each spat in the other's face before the fight turned physical and a cellphone was damaged, police said.

Video posted on Instagram shows two cars bumped up against each other at a gas station. The woman

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was charged with simple assault and the man was charged with assault on a female and damage to personal property, police said. Both were cited and released with a pending court date.

In Walton County, Georgia, paramedic Jeff Lisle had just under a quarter-tank of gas in his Jeep — but no one knew of any stations near his house that had gas. So, he went to his garage and found a small amount in the cans he uses for his lawnmower in case he needed the extra boost to make it to work.

As for the ambulances he works in, “we have to buy fuel at gas stations like everybody else does,” he said. That means that whenever possible, the ambulances have been stopping to refuel when they’re lucky enough to drive past a station with gas.

Along the Appalachian Trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine, hikers depend on car and van shuttles to access the trail and get supplies.

“Everybody’s out here buying from the same gas pumps, so the lines are long, some are out -- you’ve really got to look for it,” said Ron Brown, who operates Ron’s Appalachian Trail Shuttles and often takes hikers from Atlanta’s airport into the north Georgia mountains..

But he said that hikers are resourceful enough to get where they need to go.

“It will get rectified because it’s a big deal, and everybody needs gas,” he said. “We’ll just make due until it does.”

Wealthy nations once lauded as successes lag in vaccinations

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Some wealthy nations that were most praised last year for controlling the coronavirus are now lagging far behind in getting their people vaccinated — and some, especially in Asia, are seeing COVID-19 cases grow.

In Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, the vaccination rates are languishing in the single figures. That is in sharp contrast to the U.S., where nearly half of all people have gotten at least one shot, and Britain and Israel, where rates are even higher.

Not only do those three Pacific countries rank worst among all developed nations in vaccinating against COVID-19, they also rank below many developing countries such as Brazil and India, according to national figures and the online scientific publication Our World in Data.

Australia, which isn’t providing a full breakdown of its vaccination numbers, is also performing comparatively poorly, as are several other places initially considered standout successes in battling the virus, including Thailand, Vietnam and Taiwan.

That could change as vaccination campaigns gather pace and supplies loosen. But meanwhile, previously successful countries are being left exposed to the virus and face longer delays in reopening to the world.

Japan, for instance, has fully vaccinated only about 1% of its population and is facing a significant new outbreak just 10 weeks before it is to host the already delayed Olympic Games — although without spectators from abroad.

The government last week announced an extension of a state of emergency through the end of the month and confirmed more than 7,000 new cases on Saturday alone, the highest daily number since January.

Bureaucracy has been part of the problem. Countries that faced mounting death tolls from the virus often threw out the rulebook, rushing through emergency vaccine approvals and delaying second shots past the recommended timeline in order to maximize the number getting their first.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally negotiated with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla to get early access to vaccines, and called in the military to get them in people’s arms. In the U.S., some groups handed out doughnuts, free drinks and even marijuana to get people to roll up their sleeves.

Japan went through a more traditional approval process that required an extra layer of clinical testing for vaccines that had already been tested elsewhere and were being widely used.

And once it did start getting shots, Japan faced a shortage of people to administer them. Under the conservative medical culture, people only trust doctors and nurses enough to do so.

Dentists are willing to help and are authorized, but have not been called upon. Getting shots from phar-

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macists at drug stores like in the U.S. or from volunteers with no medical background other than a brief training like in Britain remains unthinkable in Japan.

New Zealand also went through its own approval process, finally giving a thumbs up to the Pfizer vaccine in February, two months after U.S. regulators had approved it for emergency use.

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins last year promised New Zealand would be "at the front of the queue" for vaccines. Now he says the issue is supply.

"We can't move any faster than we can get the vaccines into the country," Hipkins told The Associated Press.

Pfizer declined to discuss whether it could have supplied New Zealand any faster, referring questions back to the government.

Australia has faced its own set of issues. Its plans to use mainly Australian-made vaccines took a blow in December when development was halted on a promising candidate because it produced false-positive HIV results.

Then the European Union blocked a shipment of more than 250,000 AstraZeneca doses to Australia in March, considering the EU's needs greater. Australian regulators also switched from recommending the AstraZeneca vaccine to the Pfizer vaccine as their preferred option for people under age 50, slowing the rollout further.

In South Korea, government officials initially insisted on a wait-and-see approach with vaccines, saying the country's outbreak wasn't as dire as in America or Europe. But as transmissions worsened in recent months, public pressure mounted and officials sped up their negotiations with drug companies.

Worried about possible shortages, South Korea's Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun and other officials began pointing fingers at measures taken by the U.S., Europe and India to tighten controls on vaccine exports to deal with large outbreaks at home.

Taiwan has given first shots to less than 1% of its population, after receiving just a fraction of the millions of doses it ordered. It has also been developing its own COVID-19 vaccine, which officials say will be available by the end of July under emergency use.

After it had effectively eliminated the virus, Taiwan this week raised its emergency preparedness and imposed crowd restrictions after finding new and unexplained cases in the community. President Tsai Ing-wen has called on people not to panic.

Helen Petousis-Harris, a vaccine expert at New Zealand's University of Auckland, said there were some advantages to taking a less frantic, more measured approach to vaccinating.

"It's much easier to commit yourself to something after you've seen it be used 100 million times," she said.

And having the luxury of sticking to the three-week schedule for second doses of the Pfizer vaccine will likely result in more people getting those shots, she added. Those facing lengthy waits for second doses were more likely to lose interest or move on with their lives.

Petousis-Harris said that New Zealand and many other wealthy countries that were slow to get going will likely see their vaccination rates rise quickly in the coming months as their campaigns swing into high gear.

By next year, she said, it will likely once again be developing nations that are left behind.

Takeaways: Partisan discord instead of Jan. 6 answers

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A House hearing about what went wrong in the Jan. 6 Capitol siege frequently spiraled into partisan shouting matches on Wednesday, with lawmakers more often blaming each other than thoroughly questioning witnesses about the events of the day.

Democrats and Republicans have so far been unable to agree on a bipartisan commission to investigate the insurrection, and officials involved in responding to the attack have pointed fingers at one another. The latest witnesses, including former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller and former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, were called by Democrats who are conducting their own set of investigations in the House.

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Amid the rancor, the hearing yielded few new answers about the confusion that day, including why it took so long for the National Guard to arrive at the Capitol as the rioters — supporters of former President Donald Trump — beat and injured police defending the building and sent lawmakers running as they broke through windows and doors.

Five people died, including a Capitol Police officer who collapsed afterward and a woman who was shot by an officer as she broke through a broken window adjacent to the House chamber with lawmakers still inside. Two other police officers took their own lives in the wake of the riot.

Takeaways from Wednesday's House hearing:

PARTISAN FRICTION

Democrats focused on Trump from the start, with House Oversight and Reform Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney saying the riots were "incited by shameless lies told by a defeated president." The House impeached Trump shortly after the attack for telling his supporters that day to "fight like hell" to overturn the election and for pushing lies about election fraud. He was later acquitted by the Senate.

Republicans defended the former president, who baselessly says the election was stolen from him even though his claims were debunked by election officials across the country and his own attorney general.

And some defended the rioters, painting them in a patriotic light.

"It was not an insurrection," said Georgia Rep. Andrew Clyde, a freshman Republican. He described the rioters as peaceful and said video of their presence in the Capitol didn't look much different from a "normal tourist visit," despite the fact that they injured police outside, broke through windows and doors and breached the Senate floor moments after senators had evacuated. They tried to beat down the doors of the House as well, but were stopped by police. Some menacingly called out for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and chanted for the hanging of Vice President Mike Pence.

Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar of Arizona defended a woman who was shot and killed by the Capitol Police as she tried to break into the House chamber, saying Ashli Babbitt was "executed" and casting her as a martyr because she was an Air Force veteran and was wearing an American flag. The Department of Justice decided after an investigation not to charge the police officer who shot her.

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin said the Republican narrative was "outrageous, Orwellian revisionist history" and showed the need for a bipartisan commission.

CHANGING THE SUBJECT

Many Republican members turned the subject to riots in cities around the country instead of what happened at the Capitol, a contrast that resonates with base GOP voters.

"Democrats continue to demonize tens of millions of Americans who support President Trump and have legitimate questions about the integrity of the elections," said Kentucky Rep. James Comer, the top Republican on the panel, about those who believe Trump's false claims.

He said individuals who take to "crime, violence and mob tactics" are wrong, and that was true on Jan. 6 and also during last summer's riots in response to the death of George Floyd at the hands of police. Comer said it's "hypocritical" that Pelosi and Democrats are focused on Jan. 6 instead.

Arizona Rep. Andy Biggs played videos of riots last summer in Portland, Oregon, comparing an attack on a federal courthouse there to the Capitol siege.

FEW NEW ANSWERS

The hearing ultimately fell short of its advance billing as addressing "unexplained delays and unanswered questions."

There's still confusion on why law enforcement didn't bolster security prior to Jan. 6 after weeks of public concerns about pro-Trump extremists descending on Washington for a rally near the White House.

Timelines issued by law enforcement agencies and the military conflict on what authority the D.C. National Guard believed it had as rioters ransacked the Capitol, with hours elapsing before a quick response force set up prior to Jan. 6 arrived to help restore order.

And who was ultimately in charge remains in doubt. The Associated Press has reported that Pence told military leaders at 4:08 p.m. to "clear the Capitol." But Miller said Wednesday that he didn't consider

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Pence's statements a direct order since the vice president wasn't in the chain of command. He also said he didn't speak to Trump that day because he believed the then-president had given him the authority he needed earlier.

Miller did describe a conversation he had with Trump three days earlier. On Jan. 3, Miller said, Trump told him to "do whatever was necessary to protect the demonstrators that were executing their constitutionally protected rights."

PENTAGON DELAYS

Democrats attacked Miller repeatedly — at some points screaming at him — about what they argue were unnecessary delays by the Pentagon in sending help to an overrun Capitol.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., told Miller that he has "never been more offended" by a witness statement than he was at Miller's testimony defending his own actions. As the former acting defense secretary became more combative, Khanna told him that "your pugnacious style is not going to override the Democratic process" and said he was after "total self promotion."

Rep. Hank Johnson of Georgia speculated that Miller may have "slow-rolled" troops and asked if Trump or any officials had pushed for a delay.

"110%, absolutely not," Miller responded. "No, that is not the case."

Under questioning from Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., Miller said he agreed at 3 p.m. to move guardsmen to the Capitol. A Defense Department timeline includes that direction but also adds that at 4:32 p.m., Miller "provided verbal authorization" for the Guard to "conduct perimeter and clearance operations."

During those 92 minutes, rioters continued to rampage inside the building as lawmakers and others inside huddled for safety.

Miller testified that D.C. National Guard Commanding Gen. William Walker was preparing a formal plan — a "concept of operations" — for the Guard to enter the Capitol.

Walker has testified that the "concept of operations" his superiors wanted was "unusual." Miller retorted Wednesday that Walker's request could have been met "in a matter of seconds with an oral briefing."

Asked by Ocasio-Cortez if he doubted Walker's testimony, Miller said, "I can understand there's an inconsistency and perhaps disagreement."

Scrum of challengers awaits Cheney after House GOP ouster

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — For pro-Trump Republicans, removing Rep. Liz Cheney from House GOP leadership was relatively easy. Booting her from office will be another matter.

The rush to punish Cheney for her criticism of former President Donald Trump and his loyalists is drawing a cast of Wyoming primary challengers so big it could ultimately help her win again next year. Another boost for Cheney is a pile of campaign money and a family legacy that has helped her before.

Still, there's no doubt that her campaign to call out Trump's lies about fraud in the 2020 election is firing up opposition — in the process revitalizing old complaints about a politician some see as more in touch with Washington insiders than Wyomingites.

Over a year remains before Wyoming's deadline to file for the August 2022 Republican primary, but already at least six Republicans plan to run against her.

The growing scrum, ranging from a retired Army colonel to a rural kombucha brewer, is on the minds of Cheney allies and opponents alike.

"There's going to be an awful lot of them. It's probably going to split the vote," observed Mark Falk, a Cheyenne resident planning to vote against Cheney.

Trump has promised to endorse a Cheney challenger, but the window of opportunity for Cheney's opponents to do much else to narrow the field may have closed. A bill, backed by Trump's son Donald Trump Jr. to institute primary runoffs, failed in the Wyoming Legislature in March amid concerns about costs and making big changes to the election system on short notice.

Cheney, meanwhile, has proved she can rebound from ignominy to prevail in a crowded field of Republicans — it's how she first got elected. After ditching an ill-received run for Senate in 2014, she came back

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to run for the House in 2016, winning almost twice as many votes as the runner-up in a nine-way primary.

She's since knocked off little-known Republican and Democratic opponents alike with ease, all while building up a formidable fundraising operation. From January through March, she brought in \$1.5 million — her best quarter yet.

Her national profile as a daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney doesn't hurt. And she could even get a boost from her status as Democrats' new favorite Republican. Wyoming allows voters to register at the polls, and its Democrats often switch affiliation to vote in a hotly contested Republican primary.

To be sure, discontent with Cheney in Wyoming has grown wider and deeper since she voted to impeach Trump for his role in the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. Even after she survived her House Republican colleagues' first attempt to oust her from leadership on Feb. 3, she was censured in an overwhelming vote by the state GOP central committee.

"I've never been a Cheney fan," said one primary opponent, Marissa Joy Selvig, a former mayor of Pavilion, population 200. "She has been working more for herself and for the Republican Party than she has the citizens of Wyoming. That's what I see."

A farmer's market kombucha brewer who accompanies student and church musicians on harp, piano, flute and other instruments, Selvig said she planned to run for Congress even before Cheney's recent troubles.

Selvig pledged to serve in Congress with a "sense of peacefulness" and willingness to "work together for the good of the nation."

Others running include state Sen. Anthony Bouchard, a gun rights activist and co-owner of a Cheyenne-area septic system business; state Rep. Chuck Gray, a conservative radio commentator whose father owns Casper-area radio stations; and retired Army Col. Denton Knapp of Trabuco Canyon, California, who graduated from high school in Wyoming in 1983 and plans to move back.

Trump and his allies have yet to hint at whom, if anybody, among Cheney's opponents they prefer, even though doing so could discourage yet more candidates from entering the fray.

Cheney's predicament with Trump has meanwhile breathed new life into old gripes, including that she spent little time in Wyoming before moving to wealthy Jackson Hole in 2012.

Labeled a "carpetbagger," Cheney struggled through a six-month run against popular Sen. Mike Enzi, a fellow Republican, before dropping out in early 2014.

She regrouped, traveling the state and building an organization that helped her dominate a nine-way Republican primary for an open U.S. House seat in 2016. She beat a little-known Democrat with 62% of the vote and has won reelection by even wider margins since.

Yet to this day, Cheney has never quite proved herself for some Wyomingites who wonder why she voted to impeach when she and Trump both won the state in 2020 with almost 70% of the vote.

"I think she's gotten way too far away from Wyoming, is just more of a Washington insider than anything," Falk said. "I always kind of never thought she was a real Wyoming representative."

Trump wasn't popular in Wyoming at first, either. But that has changed.

In 2016, caucusing Republicans gave Texas Sen. Ted Cruz 23 delegates and just one each to Trump and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio. That October, with Cheney closing in on winning the House seat Republican Rep. Cynthia Lummis was vacating, Lummis said she would vote for Trump while "holding my nose."

Lately though, Lummis, elected last year to the Senate to replace the retiring Enzi, has been conspicuously quiet about Cheney. Just as Cheney was being voted out of House leadership, Lummis tweeted about transportation infrastructure and has kept silent about her close colleague's fate.

"Nobody is standing with Liz," lamented Republican state Rep. Landon Brown of Cheyenne, one of the very few Wyoming elected officials to take to social media in Cheney's defense. "They're all afraid to take on the Republican Party and stand up for what's right."

Another Cheyenne resident, though, said that while he understood Cheney's interest in upholding the Constitution, impeaching Trump over the riot wasn't a straightforward proposition.

"Let's be honest, the attack on Congress was terrible. Whether or not you hold him responsible for that, I don't know that that's completely fair to say that he was personally responsible, although he didn't do much to relieve it," said George Geyer, a retired teacher and coach.

Cheney hasn't done a terrible job, Geyer added, but he will probably consider voting for somebody else.

Officials: Tiny uptick in 2020 military sex assault reports

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reports of sexual assaults across the U.S. military increased by a very small amount in 2020, a year when troops were largely locked down for months as bases around the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, according to U.S. officials.

Officials familiar with the data said sexual assault reports went up by about 1%, compared with the 2019 totals. They said the Army and Marine Corps saw slight increases in the number of reports, while the Navy and Air Force saw small decreases. Officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss data not yet made public.

In 2019, there were more than 7,800 reported sexual assaults, up from more than 6,000 the previous year. It is unclear how much of a role the pandemic played in the small increase in assaults last year.

While small, the increase is likely to only fuel the escalating debate about the Defense Department's failure to reduce the number of sexual assaults and harassment over the last decade or more. And it will do little to quash growing arguments that military prosecutions of the crimes must be taken away from commanders and turned over to civilians.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's first directive after he took office in January ordered senior leaders to look into their sexual assault prevention programs, and he later created an independent panel to study the matter. That panel has already recommended that decisions to prosecute service members for sexual assault be made by independent authorities, not commanders.

Such a change would be a major reversal of military practice and a shift long sought by congressional lawmakers. Austin has given service leaders 30 days to review the recommendation and come back to him with their input.

The military's handling of sexual assaults and other violence in the military has come under significant scrutiny in the aftermath of a series of violent crimes, including murders and suicides last year at Fort Hood, Texas. More than two dozen Fort Hood soldiers died in 2020, including Spc. Vanessa Guillén, who was killed by a fellow soldier.

Her death prompted an independent review, which found that military leaders were not adequately dealing with high rates of sexual assault and harassment at the post. The chairman of the independent review panel told members of Congress in a hearing earlier this year that the base leadership was focused on military readiness, and "completely and utterly neglected" the sexual assault prevention program. As a result, he said, lower-level unit commanders didn't encourage service members to report assaults, and in many cases were shaming victims or were actually the perpetrators themselves.

Those conclusions have spurred military and defense leaders to pursue new solutions to the problem, which has stymied Pentagon officials for years.

Formal reports of sexual assaults have steadily gone up since 2006, including a 13% jump in 2018 and a 3% increase in 2019 that included a much larger 9% increase for the Air Force, according to Pentagon data.

The Pentagon releases a report every year on the number of sexual assaults in the military. Because sexual assault is a highly under-reported crime, the department also sends out an anonymous survey every two years to get a clearer picture of the problem. That survey was last done in 2018, and was scheduled for last year, but those plans were scrapped due to the pandemic.

Defense officials acknowledge that reports of sexual assault have steadily increased over the past 15 years, as the department worked to encourage victims to come forward. Department and military service leaders have implemented a wide range of programs to both deter assaults and protect and treat victims, and have focused more time training unit leaders how to better reach out to their young service members.

The 2019 report found that commanders took some kind of action on close to two-thirds of the cases.

Ex-cops in Floyd death claim witness coercion, harm of leak

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Attorneys for three former Minneapolis officers awaiting trial in George Floyd's death will be in court Thursday to argue pretrial motions, including a request that prosecutors be sanctioned after media reports that Derek Chauvin had planned to plead guilty a year ago, and allegations that they haven't disclosed information about the alleged coercion of a witness.

Attorneys for Thomas Lane, J. Kueng and Tou Thao have said they want the court to require prosecuting attorneys to submit affidavits under oath that they aren't responsible for the leak to the media. In a filing late Wednesday, Thao's attorney also alleged that the Hennepin County medical examiner was coerced to include "neck compression" in his findings — and that prosecutors knew of it.

The former officers waived their right to appear at Thursday's hearing. Their trial is set for Aug. 23.

Attorney General Keith Ellison, whose office is prosecuting the officers, has said allegations that his office was involved in a leak are false. His office had no immediate comment on the allegations of coercion. A spokeswoman for Dr. Andrew Baker, the medical examiner, said they could not comment due to the pending case.

Chauvin, who was seen in widely viewed bystander video pressing his knee into Floyd's neck as the Black man said he couldn't breathe, was convicted in April of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter. He's to be sentenced June 25.

Lane, Kueng and Thao are charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. Their trial was separated from Chauvin's to comply with COVID-19 courtroom spacing restrictions.

Bob Paule, Thao's attorney, said in a court filing Wednesday that Baker initially said there was no physical evidence that Floyd died of asphyxiation. But after talking twice to Dr. Roger Mitchell — a former medical examiner in Washington, D.C. — he amended his findings to include neck compression as a factor, according to Paule.

Paule said that in one of the conversations, Mitchell called Baker and told him he was going to submit an opinion piece critical of Baker's findings to the Washington Post. When Baker released final autopsy findings June 1, they included neck compression, Paule wrote, and Mitchell never submitted his piece to the newspaper.

Mitchell, now chairman of the Department of Pathology at the Howard University College of Medicine, did not immediately respond to a phone message left at the department after hours.

Paule also took aim at Mitchell's criticism of Dr. David Fowler, a key defense witness for Chauvin who testified that the former officer was not responsible for Floyd's death. Mitchell sent a letter — signed by 431 doctors from around the country — to the Maryland attorney general, saying Fowler's conclusions were so far outside the bounds of accepted forensic practice that all his previous work could be questioned.

Maryland officials then announced they would review all in-custody death reports during Fowler's tenure. Paule said Mitchell's accusations had a chilling effect on Thao's ability to find medical experts unafraid to testify on his behalf.

He said prosecutors have yet to give the defense evidence about Mitchell's actions. He's asking that the case against Thao be dismissed.

Paule also said in a court filing in February that he wants an order sanctioning the state for "its role — directly or indirectly — in the leaking of highly prejudicial information related to potential plea agreements of co-defendants."

The New York Times reported Feb. 10 that Chauvin was ready to plead guilty to a third-degree murder charge last year but then-Attorney General William Barr rejected the agreement. The Associated Press published a similar report the next day, citing two law enforcement officials with direct knowledge of the talks. Paule alleged that the leaks came from the state, and asked that anyone who did so be barred from participating in the trial. Tom Plunkett, Kueng's attorney, echoed his statements.

Ellison earlier dismissed Paule's motion as "completely false and an outlandish attempt to disparage the

prosecution.”

Earl Gray, Lane’s attorney, has a motion asking Judge Peter Cahill to compel the state to disclose all use-of-force reports over the past 50 years in which a Minneapolis police officer used force and another officer intervened verbally or physically. Gray said it’s necessary to show the jury that no such intervention has been made in the past 50 years, which would call into question the state’s expert testimony about the duty of officers to intervene.

Prosecutors have said that request should be denied. They’ve noted that department policy requires officers to intervene when excessive force is used, and say Gray hasn’t shown how the testimony of experts could be called into question by a lack of interventions.

All four officers have also been indicted on federal charges alleging they violated Floyd’s civil rights.

Israel steps up Gaza offensive, kills senior Hamas figures

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel on Wednesday pressed ahead with a fierce military offensive in the Gaza Strip, killing as many as 10 senior Hamas military figures and toppling a pair of high-rise towers housing Hamas facilities in airstrikes. The Islamic militant group showed no signs of backing down and fired hundreds of rockets at Israeli cities.

In just three days, this latest round of fighting between the bitter enemies has already begun to resemble — and even exceed — a devastating 50-day war in 2014. Like in that previous war, neither side appears to have an exit strategy.

But there are key differences. The fighting has triggered the worst Jewish-Arab violence inside Israel in decades. And looming in the background is an international war crimes investigation.

Israel carried out an intense barrage of airstrikes just after sunrise, striking dozens of targets in several minutes that set off bone-rattling explosions across Gaza. Airstrikes continued throughout the day, filling the sky with pillars of smoke.

At nightfall, the streets of Gaza City resembled a ghost town as people huddled indoors on the final night of Islam’s holiest month of Ramadan. The evening, followed by the Eid al-Fitr holiday, is usually a time of vibrant night life, shopping and crowded restaurants.

“There is nowhere to run. There is nowhere to hide,” said Zeyad Khattab, a 44-year-old pharmacist who fled with a dozen other relatives to a family home in central Gaza after bombs pounded his apartment building in Gaza City. “That terror is impossible to describe.”

Gaza militants continued to bombard Israel with nonstop rocket fire throughout the day and into early Thursday. The attacks brought life to a standstill in southern communities near Gaza, but also reached as far north as the Tel Aviv area, about 70 kilometers (45 miles) to the north, for a second straight day.

The military said sirens also wailed in northern Israel’s Emek area, or Jezreel Valley, the farthest the effects of Gaza rockets have reached since 2014. The Israeli army also shared footage showing a rocket impact between apartment towers in the Tel Aviv suburb of Petah Tikva early Thursday, apparently sparking a large fire. It said the strike left people wounded and caused “significant damage.”

“We’re coping, sitting at home, hoping it will be OK,” said Motti Haim, a resident of the central town of Beer Yaakov and father of two children. “It’s not simple running to the shelter. It’s not easy with the kids.”

Gaza’s Health Ministry said the death toll rose to 69 Palestinians, including 16 children and six women. Islamic Jihad confirmed the deaths of seven militants, while Hamas acknowledged that a top commander and several other members were killed.

Rescuers pulled the bodies of a man and his wife from the debris of their home that was hit by rockets in the latest Israeli airstrikes early Thursday, relatives said.

A total of seven people have been killed in Israel, including four people who died on Wednesday. Among them were a soldier killed by an anti-tank missile and a 6-year-old child hit in a rocket attack.

The Israeli military claims the number of militants killed so far is much higher than Hamas has acknowledged.

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Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said at least 14 militants were killed Wednesday — including 10 members of the “top management of Hamas” and four weapons experts. Altogether, he claimed some 30 militants have been killed since the fighting began.

More raids conducted early Thursday were aimed at several “strategically significant” facilities for Hamas, including a bank and a compound for a naval squad, the military said.

While United Nations and Egyptian officials have said that cease-fire efforts are underway, there were no signs of progress. Israeli television’s Channel 12 reported late Wednesday that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Security Cabinet authorized a widening of the offensive.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the “indiscriminate launching of rockets” from civilian areas in Gaza toward Israeli population centers, but he also urged Israel to show “maximum restraint.” President Joe Biden called Netanyahu to support Israel’s right to defend itself and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said he was sending a senior diplomat to the region to try to calm tensions.

The current eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem, where heavy-handed Israeli police tactics during Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers ignited protests and clashes with police. A focal point was the Al-Aqsa Mosque, built on a hilltop compound that is revered by Jews and Muslims, where police fired tear gas and stun grenades at protesters who threw chairs and stones at them.

Hamas, claiming to be defending Jerusalem, launched a barrage of rockets at the city late Monday, setting off days of fighting.

The Israeli military says militants have fired about 1,500 rockets in just three days. That is roughly one-third the number fired during the entire 2014 war.

Israel, meanwhile, has struck over 350 targets in Gaza, a tiny territory where 2 million Palestinians have lived under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas took power in 2007. Two infantry brigades were sent to the area, indicating preparations for a possible ground invasion.

In tactics echoing past wars, Israel has begun to target senior members of Hamas’ military wing. It also has flattened three high-rise buildings in a tactic that has drawn international scrutiny in the past.

Israel says the buildings all housed Hamas operations centers, but they also included residential apartments and businesses. In all cases, Israel fired warning shots, allowing people to flee, and there were no reports of casualties.

The fighting has set off violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Israel, in scenes unseen since 2000. Netanyahu warned that he was prepared to use an “iron fist if necessary” to calm the violence.

But ugly clashes erupted across the country late Wednesday. Jewish and Arab mobs battled in the central city of Lod, the epicenter of the troubles, despite a state of emergency and nighttime curfew. In nearby Bat Yam, a mob of Jewish nationalists attacked an Arab motorist, dragged him from his car and beat him until he was motionless.

In the occupied West Bank, the Israeli military said it thwarted a Palestinian shooting attack that wounded two people. The Palestinian Health Ministry said the suspected gunman was killed. No details were immediately available.

Still unclear is how the fighting in Gaza will affect Netanyahu’s political future. He failed to form a government coalition after inconclusive parliamentary elections in March, and now his political rivals have three weeks to try to form one.

His rivals have courted a small Islamist Arab party. But the longer the fighting lasts, the more it could hamper their attempts at forming a coalition. It could also boost Netanyahu if another election is held, since security is his strong suit with the public.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since the Islamic militant group seized power in Gaza from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

The International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into possible war crimes by Israel and Hamas. In a brief statement, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said she had noted “with great concern” the escalation of violence and “the possible commission of crimes.”

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The ICC is looking into Israeli actions in past wars in Gaza. Israel is not a member of the court, does not recognize the ICC's jurisdiction and rejects the accusations. But in theory, the ICC could issue warrants and try to arrest Israeli suspects while they are traveling overseas.

Conricus, the military spokesman, said Israeli forces respect international laws on armed conflict and do their utmost to minimize civilian casualties. Israel blames Hamas for civilian casualties because the group fires rockets from residential areas.

Emanuel Gross, a professor emeritus the University of Haifa law school, said Israel should "take into consideration the concerns of the ICC." But he said he believes the military is on solid legal ground while rockets are striking Israeli cities.

"That's the real meaning of self defense," he said. "If you are attacked by a terrorist group, you defend yourself."

GOP dumps defiant Trump critic Cheney from top House post

By ALAN FRAM and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans dumped GOP Rep. Liz Cheney from her House leadership post Wednesday for her persistent repudiation of Donald Trump's election falsehoods, underscoring the hold the defeated and twice-impeached former president retains on his party.

She defiantly insisted she'll keep trying to wrench the party away from him and his "destructive lies."

Meeting behind closed doors, GOP lawmakers needed less than 20 minutes and a voice vote to oust the Wyoming congresswoman from her job as their No. 3 House leader. The banishment, urged by Trump and other top Republicans, showed his ability to upend the careers of antagonists, even those from GOP royalty.

Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, has repeatedly rebuked Trump for his oft-repeated falsehood that his 2020 reelection was fraudulently stolen from him and for his encouragement of supporters who assaulted the Capitol on Jan. 6. On Wednesday she unrepentantly lashed out anew.

"If you want leaders who will enable and spread his destructive lies, I'm not your person," she told her colleagues before the vote, according to a person who provided her remarks on condition of anonymity. "You have plenty of others to choose from. That will be their legacy."

Just minutes after she accused her fellow Republicans of dishonestly buttressing Trump, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., told reporters at the White House, "I don't think anybody is questioning the legitimacy of the presidential election. I think that is all over with."

McCarthy spoke a week after Trump released a statement saying, "The Fraudulent Presidential Election of 2020 will be, from this day forth, known as THE BIG LIE!"

Cheney's critics say her offense wasn't her view of Trump but her persistence in publicly expressing it, undermining the unity they want party leaders to display in advance of next year's elections, when they hope to win House control. Several also say GOP voters' allegiance to Trump means the party's electoral prospects without him would be dismal.

Cheney's ouster effectively means the GOP is setting a remarkable requirement for admission to its highest ranks: adherence to, or at least silence about, Trump's fallacious claim about widespread voting fraud. In states around the country, officials and judges of both parties found no evidence to support his assertions.

Cheney, 54, would seem to have an uphill climb in her quest to redirect the GOP away from Trump.

She's told Republicans she's not quitting Congress and will run for reelection next year, but she will have to survive a near-certain GOP primary challenge from a Trump-recruited opponent. Even if she returns to the House, it is unclear how loud her voice will be inside a party that has all but disowned her.

"Bring it on," Cheney said of a potential challenge by a Trump ally, in a portion of an interview released by NBC News.

And though she has establishment lineage and embraces classical GOP conservative stances, it almost seems the party has evolved out from under her.

Polls show Trump's hold is deep and wide on the party's voters. And many of the time-tested conserva-

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tive views she and her father share — including a belief in assertively projecting U.S. military force abroad — have lost ground to Trump's inward-focused America First agenda.

Cheney showed no signs of being bashful about her mission.

Outside the GOP meeting, she told reporters that the country needs a Republican Party "that is based upon fundamental principles of conservatism, and I am committed and dedicated to ensuring that that's how this party goes forward, and I plan to lead the fight to do that."

She added, "I will do everything I can to ensure that the former president never again gets anywhere near the Oval Office."

Wednesday's voice vote by House Republicans means there is no precise way to measure how much support Cheney would have had, though only a handful of GOP colleagues have spoken out on her behalf.

"What happened today was sad," said Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., another Trump critic and one of the few Republicans who have publicly defended her. "Liz committed the only sin of being consistent and telling the truth. The truth is that the election was not stolen."

Hard-right conservatives, among Cheney's fiercest critics, were exultant.

And Trump himself took a sharp-elbowed victory lap, saying, "Liz Cheney is a bitter, horrible human being. I watched her yesterday and realized how bad she is for the Republican Party. She has no personality or anything good having to do with politics or our Country."

"Na na na na, na na na na, hey hey, goodbye Liz Cheney," tweeted Rep. Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina.

"You can't have a conference chair who recites Democrat talking points," said Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, a conservative leader using the formal title for Cheney's former post.

As if to underscore Jordan's contention, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said: "Congresswoman Liz Cheney is a leader of great courage, patriotism and integrity. Today, House Republicans declared that those values are unwelcome in the Republican Party."

But President Joe Biden deflected an opportunity to comment on the matter, telling MSNBC, "I have enough trouble figuring out my own party all the time, let alone Republicans."

Participants said Cheney received a polite standing ovation after her remarks inside Wednesday's meeting. Then she had to endure what Rep. Byron Donalds of Florida said was a "deafening" voice vote to topple her.

Her replacement in the party's House leadership is expected to be Rep. Elise Stefanik of upstate New York, who entered the House in 2015 at age 30, then the youngest woman ever elected to Congress.

Stefanik owns a more moderate voting record than Cheney but has evolved into a vigorous Trump defender who's echoed some of his claims about widespread election cheating.

Some of Washington's hardest-right conservatives have remained wary of Stefanik's moderate record, but no challenger has emerged. Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., said the vote on replacing Cheney will occur Friday.

Cheney arrived in Congress in 2017, and by November 2018 was elected to her leadership job unopposed. Her career path seemed to potentially include runs at becoming speaker, senator or even president.

She occasionally clashed with Trump during his presidency over issues like the U.S. withdrawal from Syria. But virtually open warfare between the two commenced in January once she became one of 10 House Republicans to back his second impeachment for inciting his supporters' deadly Capitol assault. The Senate acquitted him.

Cheney withstood a February effort to boot her from leadership in a 145-61 secret ballot, with a McCarthy speech on her behalf credited with saving her. That didn't happen this time.

Ohio's million-dollar idea: Lottery prizes for vaccinations

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine unveiled a lottery system Wednesday to entice people to get COVID-19 shots, offering a weekly \$1 million prize and full-ride college scholarships in a creative bid to overcome the vaccine hesitancy that remains a stubborn problem across the nation.

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The move comes as governors, health officials and community leaders are coming up with creative incentives to get more shots in arms, including insider access to NFL locker rooms and an Indianapolis 500 garage, cash incentives, various other promotions.

With three weeks to go before most state restrictions lift, DeWine rolled out the big-ticket incentives during a prime-time address. Beginning May 26, adults who have received at least one vaccine dose may enter a lottery that will provide a \$1 million prize each Wednesday for five weeks. In random drawings, the state will also provide five full four-year scholarships to an Ohio public university — including tuition, room-and-board, and books — to vaccinated Ohioans under 18.

The money will come from existing federal pandemic relief dollars, DeWine said, and the Ohio Lottery will conduct the drawings.

State Rep. Emilia Sykes, the top House Democrat, questioned the use of federal funds.

"Using millions of dollars in relief funds in a drawing is a grave misuse of money that could be going to respond to this ongoing crisis," she said.

DeWine acknowledged the unusual nature of the financial incentives.

"I know that some may say, 'DeWine, you're crazy! This million-dollar drawing idea of yours is a waste of money,'" he said. But the real waste, when the vaccine is now readily available, "is a life lost to COVID-19," the governor said.

The White House and Treasury Department had no immediate comment on the governor's plan.

All Ohio's COVID-19 orders except those applying to nursing homes and other long-term care facilities will end June 2, the Republican also announced during the address. However, DeWine noted that stores and businesses still may require customers to be masked.

In announcing the mandates' end, the governor cited the sharp drop in the numbers of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations and the high vaccination rates among people 65 and older. He also said the vaccine is a "tested and proven weapon" that all Ohioans 12 and older can now avail themselves of.

"It's time to end the health orders. It's been a year. You've followed the protocols," DeWine said. "You've done what we've asked. You've bravely fought this virus."

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Ohio did not increase over the past two weeks, going from about 1,522 new cases per day on April 26 to 1,207 new cases per day on May 10, according to data collected by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering.

More than 4.2 million Ohioans — about 36% of the population — had completed the vaccination process as of Tuesday. But the number of people seeking vaccines has dropped in recent weeks, with an average of about 16,500 starting the process last week, down from figures above 80,000 in April. About 42% of Ohioans have received at least one dose.

"There comes a time when individual responsibility simply must take over," DeWine said.

Business groups uniformly praised the decision. The news "is the logical next step in fully reopening our state for Ohio's businesses and families," said John Barker, president and CEO of the Ohio Restaurant Association.

"Removing these barriers comes at the right time and will assist the efforts of Ohio's business community to restore Ohio's economy," said Andrew Doehrel, Ohio Chamber of Commerce CEO and president.

Dr. Lisa Egbert, president of the Ohio State Medical Association, said the organization supported the announcement but urged all eligible Ohioans to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

DeWine made the announcement even though his previous goal for dropping the orders hadn't been reached. In a March 4 primetime address, the governor had said he would lift remaining mandates once the state hit 50 coronavirus cases per 100,000 people for two weeks. At the time, the figure was 179 cases per 100,000 people; it had dropped to 123 cases as of this week.

Despite DeWine's message, he had little choice in removing the mandates. His speech came only a few weeks before fellow GOP lawmakers could have voted to immediately remove all mandates, per a bill passed earlier this year over the governor's veto. That legislation takes effect June 23. House Republicans had signaled their intention to introduce a resolution Wednesday in preparation for a June 23 vote.

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"There's a strong sentiment that the health orders need to be dissolved," House Speaker Bob Cupp, a Lima Republican, said earlier Wednesday.

Senate President Matt Huffman, another Lima Republican, also said Wednesday it was time for the end of mandates.

"Ohioans care about getting their businesses open and doing other things that will allow some freedom," Huffman said.

Also Wednesday, DeWine spokesperson Dan Tierney confirmed that employees of executive branch agencies — who have been working almost exclusively from home — would return to their offices in stages, beginning July 6.

DeWine implemented the current mask mandate in July as case numbers rose. That followed a mandatory mask order in April 2020 that he rescinded just a day later under intense criticism that the directive was "one government mandate too far."

In addition to his daily or weekly midday briefings, DeWine previously addressed Ohioans about the pandemic in primetime speeches Nov. 11 and July 15.

Also Wednesday, a federal judge denied Republican Attorney General Dave Yost's request for a temporary order preventing U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen from enforcing a provision of the American Rescue Plan Act that says states can't use their recovery dollars to offset tax cuts or credits.

Judge Douglas Cole said Ohio has a strong chance of proving the tax rule unconstitutionally ambiguous. But the judge also found that granting the order against Yellen wouldn't provide Ohio the relief it seeks, because Treasury's rules for the money are still being worked out, the state hasn't yet received its money and Yellen has not yet tried to recoup anything.

Colonial Pipeline restarts operations days after major hack

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ, BEN FINLEY and TOM FOREMAN, JR. Associated Press

CLEMMONS, N.C. (AP) — The nation's largest fuel pipeline restarted operations Wednesday, days after it was forced to shut down by a gang of hackers.

The disruption of Colonial Pipeline caused long lines at gas stations in the Southeast due to distribution problems and panic-buying, draining supplies at thousands of gas stations.

Colonial initiated the restart of pipeline operations late Wednesday, saying in a statement that "all lines, including those lateral lines that have been running manually, will return to normal operations."

But it will take several days for deliveries to return to normal, the company said.

In the meantime, drivers have been finding gas stations with little or no gas in some Southeast states.

The Colonial Pipeline, which delivers about 45% of the fuel consumed on the East Coast, was hit on Friday with a cyberattack by hackers who lock up computer systems and demand a ransom to release them. The hackers didn't take control of the pipeline operations, but Colonial shut the pipeline down to contain the damage.

The attack raised concerns, once again, about the vulnerability of the nation's critical infrastructure.

"What you're feeling is not a lack of supply or a supply issue. What we have is a transportation issue," said Jeanette McGee, spokeswoman for the AAA auto club. "There is ample supply to fuel the United States for the summer, but what we're having is an issue with getting it to those gas stations" because the pipeline is down.

The pipeline runs from the Gulf Coast to the New York metropolitan region, but states in the Southeast are more reliant on it. Other parts of the country have more sources to tap. For example, a substantial amount of fuel is delivered to states in the Northeast by massive tankers.

Jamar Gatison, 36, was filling up his tank in Norfolk, Virginia, Wednesday before a doctor's appointment.

"I'm about to run out of gas, so I have no choice," the construction worker said while waiting in line at a 7-Eleven.

"I'm also an Uber Eats driver. I also need gas for that," said Gatison, who added he probably won't deliver food Wednesday night because he doesn't want to wait in line again while the shortage continues.

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In North Carolina, more than half of gas stations were out of fuel, according to Gasbuddy.com, a technology firm that tracks real-time fuel prices across the country. Just outside Raleigh, two people were charged with assault after fighting and spitting in each other's faces while arguing over their spots in line Tuesday at a Marathon gas station, authorities said.

North Carolina Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper urged people Wednesday to only buy gas if their tank is low, and to report any instances of price gouging.

"This news is another reason people do not need to panic buy gas right now unless they really need it," he tweeted after Colonial announced it was restarting the pipeline.

Georgians and Virginians were also getting squeezed, with about half of stations there out of gas, according to Gasbuddy.com.

Along the Appalachian Trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine through some of the most rugged and remote terrain in the Southeast, hikers depend on car and van shuttles to ferry them to and from the trail and get them back to civilization.

"If I don't have the gas, I'm not running," said Ron Brown of Ellijay, Georgia, who operates Ron's Appalachian Trail Shuttles and often takes hikers on hourslong trips from Atlanta's airport into the north Georgia mountains, and to and from many points along the trail.

Mary Goldberg, 60, of Norfolk, Virginia, waited more than 20 minutes for a slow-operating pump at a 7-Eleven to fill up her tank on Wednesday. Her job includes delivering T-shirts for events and other promotional products.

"I can't get paid until my customers get their products," Goldberg said.

The disruption is taking place at the time of year when Americans begin to become more mobile, especially as the nation emerges from the pandemic.

Four to five cars were lined up at each pump at a Circle K in Clemmons, North Carolina. Several people said they had driven to multiple gas stations to find one that had gas. Across the street, gas stations were out of fuel.

Mair Martinez, who works in landscaping, was filling up his lawn equipment and truck after checking several other gas stations without luck.

"That's why we've come in today, to fill up everything," he said.

Johnathan King, who works for an area towing company, was filling up his tow truck. He said he typically does 10 to 12 service calls a day, driving between several area cities.

"It's going to be very hard for us. Hopefully we'll be able to get through it," he said.

Multiple U.S. agencies coordinated to relax rules and enable fuel to be shipped faster using trucks, trains or ships, but those changes had little impact Wednesday.

The White House said the Department of Transportation is now allowing states served by the pipeline to use interstate highways to transport overweight loads of gasoline and other fuels. But there's a national trucker shortage, so the industry isn't able to put many more trucks on the road.

Nationwide there are about 121,000 convenience stores that sell about 5,300 gallons per day of gasoline, accounting for about 80% of retail fuel sales. At many stores demand has been two to five times the normal amount, said Jeff Lenard of the National Association of Convenience Stores, in a conference call with reporters. Retailers were even running out of fuel in parts of Florida that are not dependent on the pipeline, he said.

Rationing has been imposed after some natural disasters, including Hurricane Sandy in 2012, but there could be resistance to that this time, especially if it looks like the pipeline could return to normal operation in a few days.

It could also backfire. "Once rationing occurs, more panic buying ensues," said Ryan McNutt, CEO of the Society of Independent Gasoline Marketers of America.

The national average price for a gallon of gasoline ticked above \$3 for the first time since 2016 Wednesday, according to the AAA. Prices begin to rise around this time every year and the auto club said Wednesday that the average price hit \$3.008 nationally.

"You go to some states, and you're going to see much higher increases, especially in the South, because

that's where you're seeing the largest impact in terms of strain of gasoline, or strain of people," McGee said.

Biden team moves swiftly to tackle pipeline political peril

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

The Biden administration swung aggressively into action after a primary gasoline pipeline fell prey to a cyberattack — understanding that the situation posed a possible series of political and economic risks.

The pipeline shutdown was an all-hands-on-deck situation for a young presidency that has also had to deal with a pandemic, a recession, an influx of unaccompanied children at the southern border, a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and high-stakes showdowns globally that carry the specter of war.

The administration devoted the first half of the week to showcasing all the steps it was taking to get gas back to service stations in affected areas. It scrambled into action after ransom-seeking hackers on Friday shut down the pipeline, which delivers about 45% of the East Coast's gas. The shutdown caused a supply crunch and spiking prices — all of which the administration was preparing to address.

Then, hours before the Colonial Pipeline was restarted, President Joe Biden signaled Wednesday that there were reasons for optimism.

"We have been in very, very close contact with Colonial Pipeline," Biden said. "I think you're going to hear some good news in the next 24 hours and I think we'll be getting that under control."

The president followed up later Wednesday with an executive order to improve cybersecurity. Biden's team also seized on the shutdown as an argument for approving the president's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said the cyberattack was a reminder that infrastructure is a national security issue and investments for greater resilience are needed.

"This is not an extra, this is not a luxury, this is not an option," he told reporters at the White House on Wednesday. "This has to be core to how we secure critical infrastructure."

The administration took a variety of steps to address the gasoline situation.

The Transportation Department was surveying how many vessels could carry fossil fuels to the Gulf of Mexico and Eastern Seaboard to provide gasoline. Waivers were issued to expand the hours that fuel can be transported by roadways. The Environmental Protection Agency issued waivers on gas blends and other regulations to ease any supply challenges.

The technology firm Gasbuddy.com found that 28% of stations were out of fuel in North Carolina. In Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia, more than 16% of stations were without gas.

The sudden supply crunch after Friday's hack showed the challenges that can pop up for a White House that must constantly respond to world events. Republican lawmakers were quick to criticize the administration for previously canceling plans to construct the Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada. Biden had canceled its permit over risks of spills and worries that climate change would worsen by burning the oil sands crude that would have flowed through the pipeline.

"The Colonial Pipeline crisis shows that we need more American energy to fuel our economy, not less," House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy said Tuesday on Twitter, adding that Biden had "left our energy supply more vulnerable to attacks" by blocking the Keystone XL pipeline.

The cyberattack was but one of many challenges confronting the president.

Within just a few days, the Biden administration has also been dealt a disappointing monthly jobs report, a potentially worrisome increase in inflation and lethal violence in Israel. It is still trying to vaccinate the country against the coronavirus, send out hundreds of billions of dollars in economic aid and pass its own sweeping jobs and education agenda.

"You have to be prepared to juggle multiple challenges, multiple crises at one time, and that's exactly what we're doing at this moment," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

Higher energy prices often have political fallout, complicating reelection campaigns for incumbents outside oil-producing regions. The 1979 fuel shortage famously crushed Jimmy Carter's presidential reelection efforts and helped usher in the Reagan era.

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Research published last year by the World Bank looked at 207 elections across 50 democracies and found an oil price spike a year before the election "systematically lower the odds of incumbents being reelected." The findings applied to both conservatives and liberals, showing a degree of pragmatism by voters.

The best way for Biden to respond was probably to show that he understands how rising gas prices can hurt family budgets and to move quickly to help fix the pipeline problem.

"It's important for the president to show empathy and recognize the position that the average American is in vis-à-vis gas prices," said Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University in Houston. "Gas prices are something that don't affect the elite — and our politicians are all among the elite."

Hearing on Jan. 6 violence exposes stark partisan divisions

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans sought to rewrite the history of the Jan. 6 insurrection during a raucous congressional hearing Wednesday, painting the Trump supporters who attacked the building as mostly peaceful patriots and downplaying repeatedly the violence of the day.

Democrats, meanwhile, clashed with Donald Trump's former Pentagon chief about the unprepared government response to a riot that began when hundreds of Trump loyalists bent on overturning the election broke through police barriers, smashed windows and laid siege to the building.

The colliding lines of questioning, and a failure to settle on a universally agreed-upon set of facts, underscored the challenges Congress faces as it sets out to investigate the violence and government missteps. The House Oversight Committee hearing unfolded just after Republicans in the chamber voted to remove Rep. Liz Cheney from her leadership post for rebuking Trump for his false claims of election fraud and his role in inciting the attack.

Former acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller and former acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, testifying publicly for the first time about Jan. 6, defended their agencies' responses to the chaos. But the hearing almost immediately devolved into partisan bickering about how that day unfolded, with at least one Republican brazenly stating there wasn't an insurrection at all.

"I find it hard to believe the revisionist history that's being offered by my colleagues on the other side," Rep. Stephen Lynch, a Massachusetts Democrat, proclaimed in exasperation.

The violence of that day is well-established, particularly after an impeachment trial that focused on the clashes between rioters and police that left officers beaten and bloodied, including one who was crushed between a door and another shocked with a stun gun before he had a heart attack. Some of the insurrectionists threatened to hang then-Vice President Mike Pence and menacingly called out for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in an apparent effort to find her in the building.

But Republican lawmakers on the committee sought to refocus the hearing's attention away from those facts, repeatedly equating the insurrection with violence in American cities last summer that arose from racial justice protests that they said Democrats had failed to forcefully condemn.

Rep. Andy Biggs of Arizona played video footage of violence outside the federal courthouse in Portland last summer. Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia said that while "there were some rioters" on Jan. 6, it was a "bold-faced lie" to call it an insurrection and likened it in some ways to a "normal tourist visit."

In ways that fundamentally rewrote the facts of the day and the investigations that resulted, Rep. Paul Gosar of Arizona said the Justice Department was "harassing peaceful patriots." He described Ashli Babbitt, a California woman who was fatally shot by an officer during the insurrection after climbing through the broken part of a door, as having been "executed," even though prosecutors have said the officer won't be prosecuted because the shooting did not break the law.

"It was Trump supporters who lost their lives that day, not Trump supporters who were taking the lives of others," said Rep. Jody Hice of Georgia, downplaying the violent tactics used by loyalists to the president, including spraying officers with pepper and bear spray.

One Capitol Police officer who was injured while confronting rioters suffered a stroke and died a day later of natural causes. Dozens more were severely injured, some of whom may never return to duty.

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"This was a violent white supremacist mob who assaulted the nation's Capitol" said Democratic Rep. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts. "It was a deadly and dangerous insurrection that was incited by Donald Trump."

For their part, Democrats clashed with Miller over the hours-long gap between when National Guard support was first discussed and the time troops arrived.

Rep. Ro Khanna of California told Miller he was dumfounded "we had someone like you in that role." After Miller described a statement from Lynch, the Massachusetts congressman, as "ridiculous," Lynch replied that Miller himself was ridiculous.

"You were AWOL, Mr. Secretary," said Democratic Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi of Illinois.

"That's completely inaccurate," Miller replied. "That's completely inaccurate."

In testimony aimed at rebutting broad criticism that military forces were too slow to be deployed, Miller told the committee he was concerned before the insurrection that sending troops to the Capitol could fan fears of a military coup and cause a repeat of the deadly Kent State shootings in 1970.

"No such thing was going to occur on my watch, but these concerns, and hysteria about them, nonetheless factored into my decisions regarding the appropriate and limited use of our armed forces to support civilian law enforcement during the Electoral College certification," Miller said. "My obligation to the nation was to prevent a constitutional crisis."

Miller said that though military involvement in domestic law enforcement should be a "last resort," he regarded the speed at which the National Guard was dispatched as among the most expedient deployments in history. He said he stood by each decision he made that day.

He said that though he believed Trump had encouraged his supporters to protest the election results, he did not believe Trump's rhetoric — which led to his impeachment — was the "unitary" factor in the riot. That drew complaints from Democrats, who said Miller appeared to be softening criticism of Trump that he voiced in earlier media interviews.

Trump was ultimately acquitted by the Senate of having incited the riot.

Miller denied that Trump had any involvement in the Defense Department's response, saying the two of them did not speak that day. Democrats nonetheless honed in on Trump and his role in the riot.

"The failures of Jan. 6 go beyond the craven lies and provocations of one man," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, a New York Democrat and the committee's chairwoman.

Rosen in his testimony defended the Justice Department's preparation and also said there was no evidence of widespread election fraud that could have caused the results to be voided. His former boss, William Barr, has said the same.

EXPLAINER: With bankruptcy tossed, what's next for the NRA?

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Now that a judge has rejected the National Rifle Association's bankruptcy bid, blocking its plan to reincorporate in Texas, the gun rights group is back to fighting a lawsuit that threatens to put it out of business.

Harlin Hale, a federal bankruptcy judge in Dallas, dismissed the NRA's case Tuesday. He ruled the organization's leadership sought Chapter 11 protection in bad faith — without informing most of its 76-member board — and did so to gain an "unfair advantage" in its fight with New York regulators.

What does that mean for the NRA and America's long-running battle over guns? Here's a look at where things go from here.

NEW YORK'S LAWSUIT

Hale's ruling ensures New York Attorney General Letitia James' lawsuit seeking the organization's dissolution can continue. James, a Democrat, said Tuesday that discovery is ongoing. The case is expected to go to trial next year.

"The rot runs deep, which is why we will now refocus on and continue our case in New York court," James said.

James sued the NRA in August 2020, alleging executives diverted tens of millions of dollars for lavish

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personal trips, no-show contracts for associates and other questionable expenditures. NRA chief Wayne LaPierre and three others who have worked for the organization were also sued.

The NRA countersued, alleging James — who once called the NRA a “terrorist organization” — was motivated by political hostility. That case is pending.

In filing for bankruptcy protection in January, the Virginia-headquartered NRA made clear it sought to escape regulatory oversight in New York, where it was chartered as a nonprofit in 1871. James has regulatory power over nonprofits incorporated in the state.

The NRA had sought to move litigation to a state where it thought it could get an “even shake,” board member Charles Cotton said at the time.

Aside from putting the NRA out of business, James also wants LaPierre and the other defendants removed from leadership and ordered to repay money they are accused of illegally spending, plus penalties.

“Clearly the NRA is in need of oversight and reform, if not dissolution,” James said Tuesday.

Washington, D.C., Attorney General Karl Racine is also suing the NRA’s foundation, seeking to have a court-appointed monitor supervise its finances. The organization is also embroiled in ongoing litigation with its former advertising agency.

An NRA lawyer said it filed for bankruptcy in part because it feared the lawsuits would result in “death by 1,000 cuts.”

SELF-DEALING ALLEGATIONS

James’ lawsuit highlights misspending and self-dealing claims involving LaPierre — from his wife’s hair and makeup to a \$17 million post-employment contract for himself.

“There are individuals and officers who are using the NRA as their personal piggy bank and they need to be held accountable,” James said Tuesday.

LaPierre, who’s led day-to-day operations since 1991, is accused of spending millions on private travel and personal security, and accepting expensive gifts from vendors, including African safaris and use of a 107-foot (32-meter) yacht.

The lawsuit said LaPierre, 71, spent NRA money on travel consultants, luxury car services and private jet flights for himself and his family, including more than \$500,000 on eight trips to the Bahamas.

LaPierre has defended himself, testifying last month that cruising the Bahamas on a yacht was a “security retreat” because he was facing threats after mass shootings.

He conceded not reporting the trips on conflict-of-interest forms, testifying: “It’s one of the mistakes I’ve made.”

Phillip Journey, an NRA board member skeptical of LaPierre’s leadership, said testimony at the bankruptcy trial about the organization’s operations could be fresh ammunition for James’ lawsuit or a potential criminal inquiry.

“They were just waiting for all of these transcripts to be completed, all of these exhibits to be admitted,” said Journey, a Kansas judge. “I figure they’re going to go throw them in front of a grand jury and see what pops out.”

SIGHTS STILL SET ON TEXAS

The NRA remains interested in moving to Texas and has powerful allies who’d be happy to see it set up shop there. But doing so through another bankruptcy attempt would be fraught with risk, and James says she has the authority to block efforts to abandon its New York incorporation.

Hale dismissed the NRA’s case without prejudice, meaning the organization can refile — but he warned a second bankruptcy petition would prompt him to take a hard look at the NRA’s lawyers “unusual involvement” in the group’s affairs.

The judge wrote that the lawyers’ actions raised concerns the group couldn’t fulfill its fiduciary duty, which might lead him to appoint a trustee. That would hand the organization’s reins to an outside official selected by the Biden administration’s Justice Department.

The NRA could still pursue other steps to incorporate in Texas, where it claims to have about 400,000 members. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, said on Twitter that he supports the move.

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But neither Abbott's office, nor that of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who's voiced support in past, responded to questions about the NRA's possible path to Texas.

FUTURE OF GUN DEBATE

Even as it filed for bankruptcy protection, the NRA claimed it was in "its strongest financial condition in years" — but the coronavirus pandemic and mounting legal costs have hurt.

The organization, which in January reported total assets of about \$203 million, liabilities of about \$153 million, and \$31 million in bank loans, said in court papers it saw revenues drop about 7% because of the pandemic. To cut costs, it laid off dozens and canceled its national convention.

Gun-control groups have seized on its troubles and a recent spate of mass shootings as prime opportunity to advance new legislation.

Yet the NRA has promised to "continue to fight on all fronts." Even with Democrats in control of Congress and the White House, gun-control legislation faces barriers.

"The fact that the NRA is a shadow of its former self doesn't mean all of a sudden the nation's gun-violence problem is going to solve itself," said Adam Skaggs, chief counsel at the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. "But certainly, the days where the NRA could wield power and exert unprecedented influence in our legislatures and our political system, I think those days are numbered."

In March, the House passed two bills requiring background checks on all firearms sales and transfers and allowing an expanded 10-day review for gun purchases. But the legislation faces a tough road ahead, with some Senate Republican support required for passage.

Meanwhile, Journey, who requested that a court-appointed examiner investigate LaPierre, worries what will become of the group's non-lobbying work. He's particularly concerned dismantling the organization will mean the end of things like firearms safety programs.

"I think some organizations may be able to pick up some of the pieces," he said, "but most of it will simply go away."

As ethnic violence rocks Israel, Arabs cite deep grievances

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As rockets from Gaza streaked overhead, Arabs and Jews fought each other on the streets below and rioters torched vehicles, a restaurant and a synagogue in one of the worst spasms of communal violence Israel has seen in years.

The mayor of the mixed town of Lod, which saw the worst of the violence Tuesday, compared it to a civil war or a Palestinian uprising. Arab experts and activists say the violence was fueled by unrest in Jerusalem that has brought Israel to the brink of another Gaza war, but is rooted in deeper grievances that go back to the founding of the state.

Violence flared again Wednesday night with a wave of apparent revenge attacks. In Bat Yam, a Tel Aviv suburb, a large crowd of ultranationalist Israelis pulled a man from a car who they thought was Arab and beat him until he lay on the ground motionless and bloodied. A hospital said he's in serious condition without identifying him.

Earlier, a group of black-clad Israelis smashed the windows of an Arab-owned ice cream shop in Bat Yam and ultranationalists could be seen chanting, "Death to Arabs!" on live television during a standoff with Border Police. In the northern city of Tiberias, video uploaded to social media appeared to show flag-waving Israelis attacking a car.

Israel's Channel 13 quoted a senior police officer as saying Arabs are suspected of attacking and seriously wounding a Jewish man in the coastal city of Acre amid new clashes there.

In a late night television interview, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, whose figurehead office is meant to serve as the nation's moral compass, said the country was gripped by civil war and urged citizens to "stop this madness."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on both Jews and Arabs to cease attacks on each other: "It doesn't matter to me that your blood is boiling. You can't take the law in your hands," he said.

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Police said they arrested nearly 400 people allegedly "involved in riots and disturbances" across the country Wednesday.

The violence comes at a time when Israel's Arab minority appeared to be gaining new acceptance and influence. Mansour Abbas, the head of an Arab party with Islamist roots, emerged as a kingmaker of sorts after March elections and was poised to play a key role in a coalition that would oust Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing allies.

But in an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday, Abbas indicated that coalition talks would be put on hold because of the escalating violence. "If there is a cease-fire, we will return to the political track to form a government," he said.

In recent days, Arab citizens of Israel have held mass protests across the country over Israel's policing of a flashpoint holy site in Jerusalem and plans to evict dozens of Palestinian families in the city following a legal campaign by Jewish settlers.

Adding to the tensions are increasingly powerful far-right groups in Israel that won seats in March elections and are allied with Netanyahu. In recent days, far-right politicians have visited the tense east Jerusalem neighborhood where the families are threatened with eviction and staged marches elsewhere in the bitterly contested city.

After police broke up a protest Monday night in Lod, a young Arab resident was shot and killed. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the man was with a group of rioters threatening Jewish homes, and that Jewish residents opened fire in a "life-threatening situation." He said three people have been detained for questioning and police are investigating. Arab residents of Lod disputed the account, pointing out that the slain man was unarmed.

His funeral the next day drew thousands of people and a heavy police presence. Clashes broke out between the two sides, leading to riots in which several vehicles and a synagogue were set ablaze. A 56-year-old Jewish man was severely wounded after Arabs pelted his car with rocks, according to the Magen David Adom emergency service.

The violence soon spread to other mixed communities across Israel. In neighboring Ramle, ultra-nationalist Jewish demonstrators vandalized Arab cars. In Acre, protesters torched Uri Buri, a famous Jewish-owned seafood restaurant. Magen David Adom said 46 people were wounded in the riots.

Rosenfeld said there were several different instances of Arabs attacking Jews, and that 12 police officers were wounded. He said 270 suspects were arrested at 40 locations across the country where vehicles were set on fire and public property was damaged.

"The Arabs don't want us here, but we're going to stay," said Avraham Sagron, a Jewish resident of Lod, as he surveyed the charred entrance of the synagogue, the interior of which appeared largely untouched.

Netanyahu visited Lod and Acre, where he pledged to "stop the anarchy" and restore order "with an iron fist if needed." He called on Arab and other community leaders to condemn the violence and act to stop it.

Authorities deployed hundreds of police reinforcements to Lod and other areas, including paramilitary border police who usually operate in the occupied West Bank. They also ordered a nighttime curfew in Lod.

Arabs say the violence of the past two days was not directed at Jews, but at religious nationalists with close ties to the settlement movement who have moved into mixed areas in recent years, pushing Arab residents out.

Israel's Arab minority makes up about 20% of the population and are the descendants of Palestinians who stayed in the country after the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation, when an estimated 700,000 fled or were driven from their homes in towns like Lod. They have citizenship, including the right to vote, but face widespread discrimination.

Arab citizens speak Hebrew and are well-represented in Israel's medical profession and universities, but they largely identify with the Palestinian cause, leading many Israelis to view them with suspicion. Lod's Arabs, who make up about a third of the city's population, are among the poorest communities in Israel.

"We're talking about young people who have no horizon, no dreams, who are unemployed and live in a very difficult reality," said Dr. Nasreen Haddad Haj-Yahya, the director of the Arab-Jewish relations program at the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank.

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She said the anger of the last two days was not directed at Lod's longtime Jewish community but at more ideological recent arrivals.

"It's not because of who they are. It's because they are trying to Judaize Lod. They are trying to drive out the indigenous Arab residents," she said. "The young people see it as a threat to their presence in the land, to their existence."

Thabet Abu Rass, the co-director of the Abraham Initiatives, which promotes Jewish-Arab coexistence, said the six Arab members of Lod's municipal council have been sidelined and the city's budget heavily favors Jews. He accused Mayor Yair Revivo of inciting against Arabs.

Revivo, a member of Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, has courted controversy by complaining about the volume of the Muslim call to prayer in Lod and for remarks that appeared to cast its Arab residents as a national security threat.

"He should be a mayor for everybody," said Abu Rass, who lives near Lod and has an office there. "He's not giving equal services for all residents."

The mayor's spokesman said he was not available for comment. Earlier, Revivo had urged Arab residents to end the violence, saying: "The day after, we will still have to live here together."

Israeli officials often hold up the Arab minority as proof of their commitment to tolerance, frequently pointing out that Arab citizens enjoy civic rights and freedoms that many Arab states deny their own people.

Ghassan Munayyer, a Lod-based activist, says the veneer of coexistence conceals deeper disparities, including in housing and infrastructure, comparing its Arab neighborhoods to "refugee camps."

"The Jews love saying there's coexistence. They go out to eat in an Arab restaurant and they call it coexistence," he said. "But they don't see Arabs as equal human beings who have rights that they have to respect."

US advisers endorse Pfizer COVID shot for kids 12 and up

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

U.S. health advisers endorsed use of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine in kids as young as 12 on Wednesday — just as planned new guidelines say it's OK for people of any age to get a coronavirus shot at the same time as other needed vaccinations.

The shots will let kids safely attend camps this summer and help assure a more normal return to classrooms next school year, concluded advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"And this is another way to get closer to ending this horrible pandemic," said adviser Dr. Camille Kotton of Harvard Medical School.

The sprint to vaccinate millions of middle and high school students has already started in parts of the country, as a long line of kids rolled up their sleeves in suburban Atlanta for a first dose Wednesday.

"It just felt like a flu shot, honestly," said Meredith Rogers, 14, from Decatur, Georgia, after getting her vaccination.

Michelle Rogers, Meredith's mother, said she hoped the youth vaccinations would help bring some normalcy back.

"A little apprehensive, but you know what? This is a step towards getting life back to normal so, we're all in," Michelle Rogers said with a slight fist pump.

Pfizer's vaccine has been used for months in people 16 and older, and earlier this week the Food and Drug Administration cleared its use for those as young as age 12. But before rolling it out to the younger kids, much of the nation was awaiting recommendations from CDC's advisers — and the panel concluded the same dose adults use is safe and strongly protective in those 12 to 15 years old, too.

The CDC rapidly accepted its advisers' recommendation.

A key question: Is it OK to get vaccinated against COVID-19 at the same doctor's visit as people receive some routine vaccinations? That's an urgent back-to-school concern especially for the 12- to 15-year-olds, who have missed out on regularly scheduled vaccines during the pandemic — but it's an issue for adults, too.

The CDC until now has recommended not getting other vaccinations within two weeks of a COVID-19

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shot, mostly as a precaution so that safety monitors could spot if any unexpected side effects cropped up.

But the CDC said Wednesday it is changing that advice because the COVID-19 vaccines have proved very safe — and that health workers can decide to give another needed vaccine at the same time for people of any age.

“The need for catch-up vaccination in coordination with COVID-19 vaccination is urgent as we plan for safe return to school,” CDC’s Dr. Kate Woodworth told the panel, citing millions of missed doses of vaccines against tetanus, whooping cough and other health threats.

The American Academy of Pediatrics on Wednesday also urged that kids 12 and older get the Pfizer vaccine — and agreed that it’s fine to give more than one vaccine at the same time, especially for kids who are behind on their regular vaccinations.

Children are far less likely than adults to get seriously ill from COVID-19 -- but they do sometimes die, and thousands have been hospitalized. By last month, those ages 12 to 17 were making up slightly more of the nation’s new coronavirus infections than adults over 65, a group that’s now largely vaccinated.

The two-dose vaccine made by Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech was studied in more than 2,000 kids ages 12 to 15. There were no cases of COVID-19 among vaccinated kids compared with 16 in the group given dummy shots. Kids also developed higher levels of virus-fighting antibodies than vaccinated adults.

Side effects are the same as adults experience, mostly sore arms and flu-like fever, chills or aches that signal the immune system is revving up.

CDC’s advisers did caution that those temporary shot reactions may be even more common if people get a COVID-19 shot at the same time as another vaccination.

President Joe Biden hailed Wednesday’s vote, noting that means 17 million more people in the U.S. now qualify to get vaccinated.

“I encourage their parents to make sure they get the shot,” he said. “As I promised last week, we’re ready. This new population is going to find the vaccine rollout fast and efficient.”

In addition to the mass vaccination sites and health department rollouts that were key for adults, many states will be offering kids more familiar options -- shipping doses to pediatricians and even to schools.

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, data the FDA will need to scrutinize.

As for even younger children, both companies have begun tests in youngsters ages 6 months to 11 years. Those studies explore if different doses are needed at the youngest ages, and FDA plans to hold a public meeting next month to debate exactly what evidence is needed.

Taming the virus: US deaths hit lowest level in 10 months

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

COVID-19 deaths in the United States have tumbled to an average of around 600 per day — the lowest level in 10 months — with the number of lives lost dropping to single digits in well over half the states and, on some days, hitting zero.

Confirmed infections have fallen to about 38,000 per day on average, their lowest mark since mid-September. While that is still cause for concern, reported cases have plummeted 85% from a daily peak of more than a quarter-million in early January.

The last time U.S. deaths from the pandemic were this low was in early July of last year. The number of people with COVID-19 who died topped out in mid-January at an average of more than 3,400 a day, just a month into the biggest vaccination drive in the nation’s history.

The Boston Herald put a huge zero on its front page Wednesday under the headline “First time in nearly a year state has no new coronavirus deaths.” Indiana reported one COVID-19 fatality Tuesday. Kansas, which peaked at 63 reported deaths on Dec. 22, has been in the single digits since February and seen multiple days with just one virus-related death.

Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins University, said that vaccinations have

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played a crucial role even as the nation struggles to reach herd immunity.

"The primary objective is to deny this virus the ability to kill at the rate that it could, and that has been achieved," he said. "We have in effect tamed the virus."

About 45% of the nation's adults are fully vaccinated, and nearly 59% have received at least one dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This week, Pfizer's vaccine won authorization for use in 12- to 15-year-olds, a move that could make it easier to reopen the nation's schools.

Physicians like Dr. Tom Dean in South Dakota's rural Jerauld County are cautiously optimistic, concerned about the many people who have decided against getting vaccinated or have grown lax in guarding against infections. The county has recorded just three confirmed cases in the last two weeks, according to Johns Hopkins data.

"What I'm afraid of is people believing this whole thing is over and you don't have to worry about it any more," Dean said. "I think complacency is our biggest threat right now."

Several states, including Wyoming, Vermont, Alaska and Hawaii, were averaging fewer than one COVID-19 death per day over the past week, according to data through Tuesday from Johns Hopkins.

And even among the five states with the highest daily deaths — Michigan with an average of 65.4, Florida with 61.7, California with 48, Texas with 44 and New York with 39.3 — all but Florida's number were going down.

California, the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak over the winter, logged 1,231 new confirmed cases Wednesday, down from a peak of 40,000. Los Angeles County reported 18 deaths Tuesday, versus more than 200 a day in January.

Vermont, which at nearly 63% leads the country in the share of its population that has received at least one vaccine dose, has gone nearly a week without reporting a COVID-19 death.

The improvement hasn't been as dramatic everywhere. Michigan, which for weeks has reported the nation's worst infection rate, is only now starting to see a decline in mortality. But over the past two weeks, cases in the state plunged from a daily average of almost 4,860 to about 2,680 on Monday.

"Every day we're getting closer to putting this pandemic behind us," Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said.

In Kansas, the Amos Family Funeral Home & Crematory saw several COVID-19 victims at the height of the outbreak. But for weeks now it has handled one, said Parker Amos, president of the Kansas City-area business.

"It is a huge relief," he said. "Especially at the start of this, when we didn't know exactly how bad this was or how bad this was going to get, it was scary being in this industry."

The funeral home is now working through a backlog of memorial services that families put off when cases were surging.

"You want families to be able to have that closure," Amos said, "and to hold on to that for a year is something that we feel for those families in a big way because that is something that is really hard."

Dr. Mark Rosenberg, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians, was nearly placed on a ventilator when he contracted COVID-19 in December. Now he marvels at how things have changed, saying people are so joyful that it reminds him of the photos he has seen of soldiers returning from World War II.

"That is how it is starting to feel, that we made it through," said Rosenberg, who practices emergency medicine at St. Joseph's Health in Paterson, New Jersey. "People are touching each other again. They are hugging."

The overall U.S. death toll in the pandemic stood at over 583,000 as of Wednesday. Teams of experts consulted by the CDC projected in a report last week that new deaths and cases will fall sharply by the end of July and continue dropping after that.

The encouraging outlook stands in sharp contrast to the catastrophe unfolding in places like India and Brazil.

"I think we are in a great place, but I think India is an important cautionary tale," warned Justin Lessler, a professor of epidemiology at John Hopkins.

"If there is a right combination of vaccine hesitancy, potentially new variants and quickly rolling back

control measures that comes together, we could potentially screw this up and have yet another wave that is completely unnecessary at this point," Lessler said.

Ali Mokdad, a University of Washington professor of health metrics sciences, predicted that as vaccinations continued, both confirmed cases and deaths would decline into the summer, leading many to assume "COVID-19 is gone" even as outbreaks in places like India carry the potential to fuel new, more virulent variants.

"The race is to vaccinate as much as we can before we go into the winter," Mokdad said, adding that the current percentage of the population vaccinated is not high enough to stop another wave of coronavirus infections.

Gaza teeters on the brink as fighting with Israel escalates

BY ISABEL DEBRE and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Screams and flying debris enveloped Umm Majed al-Rayyes as explosions hurled her from her bed in Gaza City. Groping in the dark, the 50-year-old grabbed her four children and ran as Israeli bombs struck their apartment building Wednesday, shattering windows, ripping doors to splinters and blasting away concrete.

While casualties mounted this week in the most severe outbreak of violence between Israel and the Gaza Strip since a 2014 war, al-Rayyes and other Palestinians in the line of fire faced an all-too-familiar question: Where should we go?

"This whole territory is a tiny place. It's a prison. Everywhere you go, you're a target," al-Rayyes said by phone from a neighbor's house, where she sought refuge with her teenage sons and daughters and a few bags of clothes after the Israeli airstrike that she says came without warning.

In Gaza, a crowded coastal enclave of 2 million people, there are no air raid sirens or safe houses. Temporary United Nations shelters have come under attack in previous years of conflict. In the past two days, Israeli airstrikes brought down three huge towers housing important Hamas offices and some businesses after the Israeli military fired warning shots, allowing occupants to flee.

Fighter jets also targeted without warning multiple residential buildings, located in teeming neighborhoods where Israel alleged militants lived. In all, more than 65 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Monday, including 16 children. Among the dead were both militants and civilians, including at least two women and children who died during the apartment building strikes.

At a Gaza City hospital, distraught families told of pulling bloodied relatives from piles of rubble. One woman said her 4-year-old grandson and pregnant daughter-in-law were killed when an Israeli air raid hit their two-story building on Wednesday.

"They bombed them without any warning. The house had nothing but the kids," Umm Mohammad al-Telbani cried in the hospital morgue.

The Israeli government long has accused Hamas of using civilians as human shields against retaliatory strikes; militants often launch rockets from civilian areas and set up command centers inside residential buildings. Yet Israel received heavy criticism for its tactic of bombing buildings during the 2014 war with Hamas.

Recalling the horror of past wars, Gaza residents say they feel nowhere is safe. They also cannot leave the narrow territory, one of the world's most densely populated places. It has been under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized control in 2007. Along its borders, Gaza is encircled by sensor-studded fences, concrete walls, galvanized steel barriers and the Mediterranean Sea, where Israel restricts boats from Gaza to some 16 nautical miles offshore.

"There is nowhere to run, there is nowhere to hide," said Zeyad Khattab, a 44-year-old pharmacist in Gaza City, who fled to the family home where he grew up in the central Gaza district of Deir al-Balah with a dozen relatives when bombs pounded his residential high-rise. "That terror is impossible to describe."

As Hamas and other militant groups fired hundreds of rockets into Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv, killing at least seven Israelis, worries grew that the latest violence could spiral into a protracted conflict. The

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Hamas barrages sent hundreds of thousands of Israelis running to bomb shelters across the country and hit numerous civilian targets, including a bus and a school in the city of Ashkelon that was empty because authorities had ordered all schools closed.

The people killed by the indiscriminate fire at Israeli population centers included three women and two children, spreading fear on both sides of the border.

"There is always this undercurrent of anxiety, but this time is different," Khattab said. Airstrikes shook the walls and windows of his apartment building during the devastating wars of 2008 and 2014, but the building that houses some 400 people collapsed on Wednesday.

In any other year, Palestinians would be thronging the dusty streets of Gaza City this week ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, one of the biggest and most joyous festivals on the Muslim calendar that marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. Markets would be hives of activity as shoppers stocked up on new clothes and pastries for feasts. Beachside restaurants would brim with families. Barbershops would be full of men getting fresh haircuts.

Instead, shops stood shuttered and the city's streets were eerily empty. Almost nothing moves on the roads except for ambulances and Hamas security vehicles. Bombs thunder in the distance. Plumes of black smoke billow from stricken buildings. Residents walk by rubble-strewn stores and downed power lines, surveying the latest damage to a city already riddled with scars from intense clashes.

"It's the same atmosphere of 2014," Saud Abu Ramadan, a freelance journalist in Gaza City, said, referring to the bloody 7-week war that killed over 2,000 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, and inflicted widespread destruction on Gaza's infrastructure. "Warplanes are buzzing, and people are just trying to keep their heads down."

This week's mayhem stemmed from clashes at the most sensitive place in Jerusalem, the revered plateau site of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the iconic golden Dome of the Rock. Analysts long have considered flaring tensions at the compound, sacred to both Muslims and Jews, to be the most dangerous accelerant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Islamic militant groups seized on the violence at Al-Aqsa as the trigger for their hail of rocket fire into Israel. The salvos at times overwhelmed Israeli missile defenses and brought air raid sirens and explosions echoing across Tel Aviv, Israel's biggest metropolitan region, and other areas.

On Monday, the first night of the fighting, teenage boys in Gaza City clambered onto rooftops, cars and scaffolding to get a better view of the rockets alighting the sky and streaming toward Israeli cities in quick succession. Some cried out with joy, as if at a wedding. Shouts of "God is great!" erupted from the crowd.

"People here have been seething," Adnan Abu Amer, a political scientist at al-Ummah University in Gaza City, said. "They take a pride and happiness in seeing Hamas defend the sanctity of Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem."

But with the rush of outrage comes the anguish of knowing the conflict's heavy toll.

"There is so much pain, but thank God the children have been through this before and they're strong," said al-Rayyes, who fled her falling apartment in Gaza City. She corrected herself. "They're pretending to be strong."

Barry Jenkins on his unflinching epic 'Underground Railroad'

By AMANDA LEE MYERS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When Oscar-winning director Barry Jenkins was considering adapting Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the Underground Railroad into a limited series, he kept hearing the same thing: Impossible.

It would be emotionally and mentally draining, Jenkins knew. And he questioned the ethics of such a production: Do people really need to be reminded about the horrors of slavery?

Ultimately, Jenkins worked through the doubts. The result is "The Underground Railroad," an unflinching portrayal of Cora, an enslaved woman who escapes a Georgia plantation and its horrors only to be pursued by an unrelenting bounty hunter. Along the way she must confront the anger she feels for her mother, who left her at the plantation when she was 10.

The 10-hour limited series, which premieres Friday on Amazon, is at times unbearably painful to watch

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and at others achingly beautiful. Early reviews have declared the series a triumph and something only Jenkins could have pulled off.

It was "the most satisfying creative experience of my life," said Jenkins, who won an Oscar in 2017 for "Moonlight" and was nominated again the next year for "If Beale Street Could Talk."

It was also the biggest challenge he's ever faced.

"The story is so, so large and wide-ranging. Before doing this, I spoke to Steven Soderbergh and Cary Fukunaga, who did 'True Detective' and 'The Knick,' and they both said 'It's impossible. It's going to kill you because there's no way to properly prep that many hours of any story,'" he said in a recent interview. "It was going to be a test of my skills to do that."

It was also an irresistible opportunity to, as he puts it, "re-contextualize how we view my ancestors."

"When this trailer came out, someone said, 'Oh, I don't want to see another show about slaves. I want to see positive imagery.' And I'm like, 'Oh, that inherently says that any imagery depicting my ancestors is negative,'" Jenkins said. "No, we have to really relearn how to look at these people."

To him, enslaved people showed "one of the greatest acts of collective parenting the world has ever seen."

"If everyone had taken up arms and decided they were going to rebel, everyone would have perished and there would have been all these children left behind," he said. "The choice was to protect these children out of faith that at some point this thing would end and these children would go on and carry the legacy."

During production, Jenkins said the most important thing to him was to protect himself, the cast and the crew from being "devoured by the barbarity."

To make sure of that, a counselor was on set at all times. And the cast says Jenkins went to great lengths to make sure that they knew they could say when they were too close to the line or simply needed a break.

"I remember Barry saying lots of times, 'Everyone, it looks very real. Everything looks very real. So, when you get on set, just be aware that you are in a position where this could bring up stuff for you,'" said Ugandan actor Sheila Atim, who plays Cora's mother.

And bring up stuff it did. For everyone.

"The emotions that were brought up were all the emotions that the character dealt with, ranging from rejection, abandonment, a huge sense of loss, running from self and all of that," said Thuso Mbedu, a South African newcomer who plays Cora. "I had to be extra aware of who I am and where I was personally at every step because those are very heavy states of being to carry and being someone who struggled with depression in 2016, I personally couldn't afford to allow myself to get into that space, especially because we're going to shoot for 10 months."

For Atim, "it did bring up a lot of anger" about "injustice and also the understanding that race-based oppression is still a thing and racism is still a thing in the world."

That's part of what drove Jenkins and the cast. They hope their work helps spark more conversations about race, inequality and injustice.

Australian actor Joel Edgerton, who plays the bounty hunter pursuing and tormenting Cora, said it's important to remember that "we're not that far away from what you're seeing in 'The Underground Railroad.'"

"We were able to go to towns and dress them up without too much ... and you go, 'OK, those buildings are still there where things took place, where environments, plantations still exist,'" he said. "Things have morphed and shifted ... but there's a lot of problems and there always sadly, will be. But I think we need to have conversations and art is a great way of sparking conversations."

The series should lead everyone to question their role in society and whether we could all be doing more, said William Jackson Harper ("The Good Place"), who plays a free-born man in "The Underground Railroad."

"I think that we all would like to think that we would go back to 1850-something and we would all be abolitionists," he said. "And that's not true. We wouldn't. There's a lot of things that are going on right now and a lot of us sitting on the sidelines and I include myself. There's ways in which I'm sitting on the sidelines of things that need to be changed, and I'm like, 'Someone should change that but oh well.'"

"I'm hoping that we all feel in a certain way indicted and that we start to ask ourselves really tough questions and ask our family members and our friends really tough questions about who we would have been in this time and who we are in this moment."

EXPLAINER: How COVID-19 vaccines will work for kids in US

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Children ages 12 and older can now roll up their sleeves for COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S., offering parents and schools a chance to relax their pandemic precautions and bringing the country a step closer to controlling the virus.

A government advisory committee recommended Pfizer's vaccine for children 12 and older on Wednesday, after the Food and Drug Administration expanded authorization of the shots to the age group earlier in the week.

Here's what you need to know:

ARE THE SHOTS THE SAME AS THOSE FOR ADULTS?

Yes. The dose and the schedule are the same; the two shots are given three weeks apart.

WHERE CAN KIDS GET THE SHOTS?

Pharmacies, state sites and other places that are already vaccinating people 16 and older with the Pfizer vaccine should be able to give the shots to all authorized ages in most cases.

"All those sites can simply extend down to the younger age group," Dr. Janet Woodcock, the FDA's acting commissioner, said in a call with reporters after the agency expanded authorization.

School districts are also preparing to host vaccination clinics to speed up the campaign. And since parents might feel more comfortable with their pediatricians and primary care doctors, health officials are working to make the shots more widely available at private practices.

WILL KIDS NEED A GUARDIAN?

Parental consent will be needed, but exactly how it's obtained could vary.

For vaccinations at school-based clinics, for example, parents might be able to give consent by signing a form, said Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention and president of Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

Walgreens said a parent or guardian will need to be present and sign a consent form, but noted guidelines on parental consent vary by jurisdiction.

In Pennsylvania's Montgomery County, anyone under 18 needs to be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Proof of guardianship and the child's age aren't being checked, said Kelly Cofrancisco, a spokeswoman for the county, which began vaccinating younger teens Tuesday.

HOW WAS THE VACCINE VETTED FOR KIDS?

Pfizer's late-stage vaccine study tested the safety and efficacy of the shots in about 44,000 people 16 and older. The study then enlisted about 2,200 children ages 12 to 15 to check for any differences in how the shots performed in that age group.

"This is just extending it down from 16 and 17 year olds, and getting further information," Woodcock said.

None of the children who got the real shots in the study developed COVID-19, compared with 16 who got the dummy shots. That confirmed previous finding among adults that the shots are highly effective.

Children were also followed for two months after the second shot as part of the study.

Dr. Sharon Nachman, chief of pediatric infectious diseases at Stony Brook Children's Hospital, said there's no reason the shots would be less effective or have any unique safety issues in children compared with adults.

WHY ONLY THE PFIZER VACCINE?

Because only Pfizer, which developed the vaccine with its German partner BioNTech, has completed studies in younger teens. Moderna recently said preliminary results from its study in 12- to 17-year-olds show strong protection and no serious side effects, but regulators still need to review the results before it can be offered to younger people.

WHAT SIDE EFFECTS ARE EXPECTED?

Common side effects were similar to those experienced by adults, and included fatigue, headache, muscle pain and fever. Except for pain in the arm where the needle is injected, the effects were likelier after the second shot.

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Dr. Michael Smith, medical director of the Duke Children's Health Center Infectious Diseases Clinic, noted that younger people tend to have more robust immune systems that respond better to vaccines. That explains why side effects were more common in the 12 to 15 age group than among adults, he said.

It's also why trials for children younger than 12 are testing different doses.

"You need to find that dose that is enough to give a good immune response, without giving too many side effects," Smith said.

Dosages for children and adults are the same for many other vaccines, he noted.

CAN KIDS GET OTHER ROUTINE VACCINATIONS AT THE SAME TIME?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it's updating its guidance to say other routine vaccinations can be given at the same time as the COVID-19 shots. It previously advised against other vaccinations within a two-week window so it could monitor people for potential side effects.

The American Academy of Pediatrics said it agrees with the position.

WHEN WILL YOUNGER KIDS BE ELIGIBLE?

It's unclear how long the ongoing trials or regulatory reviews will take. But Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, recently suggested it could happen this year.

"We think by the time we get to the end of this year we will have enough information to vaccinate children of any age," he said.

WHY SHOULD KIDS GET VACCINATED?

Even though children are far less likely to get severely ill if infected, health officials note the risk isn't zero.

Vaccinating children is also key to ending the pandemic, since children can get infected and spread the virus to others, even if they don't get sick themselves.

About 20% of the U.S. population is younger than 16, according to Census data. That included about 16.7 million children ages 12 to 15 in 2019.

US looking at how to weed out extremists in law enforcement

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department has begun an internal review to determine how to remove any extremists from within federal law enforcement following the arrest of current and former police officers for their involvement in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, Attorney General Merrick Garland said Wednesday.

Garland, in response to a question during a Senate hearing on domestic extremism, described a review that was in its early stages and is complicated by the need to avoid violating the First Amendment rights of Justice Department employees.

The deputy attorney general, Lisa Monaco, "has met with the heads of all of our law enforcement agencies to determine how we can carefully vet our own employees," he told the Senate Appropriations Committee.

It was a notable disclosure considering that the Justice Department is charged with enforcing federal civil rights laws and oversees the FBI, which is the lead agency in charge of investigating the growing threat posed by violent domestic extremists.

It is also potentially tricky legal ground because of the risk of intrusion on personal beliefs that are protected under the Constitution.

Garland described those competing interests as "being mindful of First Amendment free associational rights, but at the same time being careful that we don't have people in our ranks who commit criminal acts or who are not able to carry out their duties."

The Department of Homeland Security last month announced a similar review aimed at determining the extent of any presence of violent extremists within its ranks. Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who also testified at Wednesday's hearing on the broader efforts by their agencies to address the growing threat from extremism, told the committee that the results of that analysis would be publicly released.

The attorney general's disclosure of an internal review came in response to a question from Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin about the arrest of a retired New York Police Department officer, Thomas Webster, in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol in which supporters of President Donald Trump sought to force Congress to

overturn the results of the November election.

Webster, who was captured on video tackling a police officer and striking him with a metal flagpole, was charged with six counts.

Durbin said Webster's arrest raises a "painful" question: whether there are others in state, local or federal law enforcement who might be capable of extremist behavior.

Garland suggested that federal grants could be issued to local and state police departments to help them vet potential officers.

Also during the hearing, he described the broader Capitol insurrection investigation, with more than 400 arrests to date, as far from complete as authorities comb through video and other evidence.

"This investigation is not over," he said. "We will pursue each lead until we're confident that we will have reached the end."

At times during the hearing, Republicans sought to shift discussion to the increasing number of migrants apprehended at the southwest border or press Garland on whether the Justice Department was improperly making the Capitol investigation a priority over other matters, including violence during last summer's social justice protests.

The attorney general called the Jan. 6 attack an attempt to interfere with the peaceful transfer of power, a "fundamental element of our democracy," and thus worthy of attention.

"I have not seen a more dangerous threat to democracy than the invasion of the Capitol," he said.

At least 10 of the people charged for involvement in the insurrection were current or former law enforcement officers at the time of their alleged offenses.

An Associated Press survey of law enforcement agencies nationwide found that at least 31 officers in 12 states are being scrutinized by their supervisors for their behavior in Washington either in the riot itself or the march and protest that preceded it.

Officials are looking into whether the officers violated any laws or policies or participated in the violence.

Schools ditch student mask requirements in growing numbers

By JEFF AMY and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

As a lengthy, bitter fight over mask requirements for students neared its conclusion, the chairperson of a Florida school board announced that she would agree to lift a mandate that had been in place since September even though she preferred leaving it in place until the end of the academic year. Parents hurled insults in response.

"Communist! Democrat!," opponents of making children wear masks in school shouted as board chair Wei Ueberschaer and the district superintendent explained at a May 3 meeting that they still considered masks advisable. "This is Santa Rosa County, America, not China!"

Moments later, the Santa Rosa school board voted unanimously to make masks optional for all grades effective immediately, joining dozens of other U.S. communities in declaring that masks were or would soon no longer be mandatory for students.

The debates have been emotional and highly divisive around the country, in some cases leading to the involvement of police. A few beleaguered school boards, caught between the demands of anti-mask parents and the appeals of employee unions, eliminated student mask rules only to reverse or revise the decisions. Where many see a continued need to protect children who aren't vaccinated against COVID-19, opponents argue that masks make students uncomfortable and mandates impinge on freedom.

"The mask is a personal choice, and I wore it at the beginning, but I just decided that it wasn't about the mask anymore," said Cynthia Licharowicz, a Milton, Florida, parent who opposed Santa Rosa County's rule. "So I decided to take it off, and I wanted my child to have the same choice."

The dustups highlight competing risk narratives 14 months into the pandemic: Even as a number of U.S. schools remain closed to minimize infections, districts in states from Alabama to Wyoming decided to ditch student mask mandates. Many more are likely to do the same before the next school year starts, despite the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidance that schools "should prioritize universal and

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correct use of masks and physical distancing.”

Some public health experts are alarmed. While the Food and Drug Administration this week approved Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine for children as young as 12, it’s unlikely that many young adolescents will be vaccinated before the end of the academic year. Data from the CDC shows infection rates among U.S. residents ages 14-17 are now higher than for all Americans, while the rates among children 6-13 are getting closer to the national average.

“We know that masks work to reduce transmission,” Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said. “This is really not the time to remove one of the best tools we have to reduce transmission.”

In Arkansas, a law will make it illegal by the end of the summer for schools or any government entity to require masks. On Wednesday in South Carolina, schools Superintendent Molly Spearman dropped a statewide student mask mandate but said Gov. Henry McMaster had no legal basis for an order letting parents choose for their children whether or not to wear masks. Spearman said districts could continue to apply their own mask rules.

Many parents in school districts where masks have become voluntary are concerned.

“I am so frustrated....I don’t see any harm in wearing masks, and there is potential harm in not wearing a mask,” said Christie Black, the mother of a kindergartner and a third grader in Mesa, Arizona, who was puzzled by the decision of the state’s largest school district to make masks optional indoors starting earlier this month.

There’s little U.S. data about the spread of the coronavirus in schools where students didn’t wear masks since most reopened schools required them, said Adam Hersh, a professor of pediatric infectious diseases at the University of Utah. Mask supporters point to worrying examples, including high transmission at a maskless summer camp in Georgia.

Evidence from earlier in the pandemic found children less likely than adults to be infected with the coronavirus and less likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19. The CDC has said that while schools haven’t been associated with substantial spread, outbreaks in schools not following infection-prevention measures “tend to result in increased transmission among teachers and school staff rather than among students.”

Black continues to send her two children to school with masks but says “they flung their masks off” as soon as they saw classmates no longer covering their faces.

“I feel like because the governor and the school board caved to peer pressure, it’s now up to my children not to cave to peer pressure,” Black said. “It just feels like we’re more concerned with our own freedom and rights than doing what’s best for the most vulnerable.”

In Santa Rosa, east of Pensacola, mask opponents dominated public debate even though surveys of parents and teachers showed divided opinions in the 28,000-student district. A small majority of teachers wanted to require masks at least through the end of the school year, while a small majority of parents wanted the requirement lifted immediately.

The school board’s April 20 discussion about the issue nonetheless grew so heated that sheriff’s deputies escorted multiple attendees out of the meeting, including at least one who was shouting profanities at board members.

Jennifer Hensley, a Santa Rosa County parent and middle school teacher, was the only member of the public at the meeting who spoke in favor of keeping the mask mandate versus the 18 who spoke against the requirement. She said she was worried about the health of her fellow teachers and of her 15-year-old daughter, who has an autoimmune disorder.

“The atmosphere was so charged,” Hensley recalled later. “I don’t think they were expecting that level of emotion to be involved.”

Critics of the mask policy started organizing months earlier. Hailei Smead, a mother of three students, runs a Facebook group called Santa Rosa County Parents SPEAK UP that was created in September to oppose mask requirements and has nearly 900 members registered.

Smead said her fifth-grade daughter was repeatedly isolated in the school office for refusing to wear a mask and eventually obtained a medical exception allowing her to forego a face covering. Smead declined

to state the medical reason.

"It's not society's job to protect every other individual," Smead said. "It's your own job to protect yourself and your own family."

Santa Rosa County district leaders emphasized they were following public health guidance, but state officials undercut that position even as public pressure built locally. On April 29, Florida Surgeon General Scott Rivkees rolled back a series of health advisories that had been cited by the Santa Rosa district. So the school board called the May 3 meeting at which its five members voted to revoke the mask mandate.

"I still strongly recommend the use of face masks, especially for those who are not fully vaccinated," board chair Ueberschaer said before the vote, raising her voice to be heard over shouting parents. "My hope is that the families will have a conversation with their children that face masks are now a personal choice, and that students should respect the choice of their peers."

Some of the insults hurled at Ueberschaer, a longtime school volunteer who is of Asian descent, included references to China.

"It truly does make me sad that face masks have morphed from a virus-prevention strategy to a political statement," she said.

Ruling paves way for longer sentence in George Floyd's death

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Minnesota judge has ruled that there were aggravating factors in the death of George Floyd, paving the way for the possibility of a longer sentence for Derek Chauvin, according to an order made public Wednesday.

In his ruling dated Tuesday, Judge Peter Cahill found Chauvin abused his authority as a police officer when he restrained Floyd last year and that he treated Floyd with particular cruelty. He also cited the presence of children and the fact Chauvin was part of a group with at least three other people.

Cahill said Chauvin and two other officers held Floyd handcuffed, in a prone position on the street for an "inordinate amount of time" and that Chauvin knew the restraint was dangerous.

"The prolonged use of this technique was particularly egregious in that George Floyd made it clear he was unable to breathe and expressed the view that he was dying as a result of the officers' restraint," Cahill wrote.

Even with the aggravating factors, legal experts have said Chauvin, 45, is unlikely to get more than 30 years when he is sentenced June 25.

Ben Crump and the team of attorneys representing Floyd's family applauded the ruling, saying in a statement that it "offers hope that we will see real change in the relationship between police and people of color by holding officers properly accountable for egregious behavior and for failing to honor the sanctity of all lives."

Chauvin, who is white, was convicted in April of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter for pressing his knee against Floyd's neck for about 9 1/2 minutes as the Black man said he couldn't breathe and went motionless. Floyd's death, captured on widely seen bystander video, set off demonstrations around the United States and beyond as protesters demanded changes in policing.

Even though Chauvin was found guilty of three counts, under Minnesota statutes he'll only be sentenced on the most serious one — second-degree murder. Under Minnesota sentencing guidelines, he would have faced a presumptive sentence of 12 1/2 years on that count, and Cahill could have sentenced him to as little as 10 years and eight months or as much as 15 years and still stayed within the guideline range.

But prosecutors asked for what is known as an upward departure — arguing that Floyd was particularly vulnerable with his hands cuffed behind his back as he was face-down on the ground. They also said Chauvin treated Floyd with particular cruelty, saying Chauvin inflicted gratuitous pain and caused psychological distress to Floyd and to bystanders. They also said Chauvin abused his position of authority as a police officer, committed his crime as part of a group of three or more people, and that he pinned Floyd down

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in the presence of children — including a 9-year-old girl who testified at trial that watching the restraint made her “sad and kind of mad.”

Cahill agreed with all but one of the prosecutors’ arguments. He said prosecutors did not prove that Floyd was particularly vulnerable, noting that even though he was handcuffed, he was able to struggle with officers who were trying to put him in a squad car.

Cahill said one of the other officers twice checked Floyd’s pulse and told Chauvin he detected none, while another officer suggested rolling Floyd to his side and said he was passing out. Cahill said these officers let Chauvin know that asphyxia was actually happening — yet Chauvin held his position. Cahill said when it became clear to bystanders that Floyd was in distress and stopped breathing, Chauvin continued to abuse his position of authority by not rendering aid.

In finding that Chauvin treated Floyd with particular cruelty, Cahill wrote: “The slow death of George Floyd occurring over approximately six minutes of his positional asphyxia was particularly cruel in that Mr. Floyd was begging for his life and obviously terrified by the knowledge that he was likely to die but during which the Defendant objectively remained indifferent to Mr. Floyd’s pleas.”

With Tuesday’s ruling, Cahill has given himself permission to sentence Chauvin above the guideline range, though he doesn’t have to, said Mark Osler, professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. He said attorneys for both sides will argue whether an upward departure is appropriate and how long the sentence should be.

A pre-sentence investigation report will also be conducted. These are usually nonpublic and include highly personal information such as family history and mental health issues, as well as details of the offense and the harm it caused others and the community.

Defense attorney Eric Nelson had argued there were no aggravating factors. He said Chauvin had legal authority to assist in Floyd’s arrest and was authorized to use reasonable force. He also said Floyd was not particularly vulnerable, citing his large size and struggle with officers. Nelson argued that there was no particular cruelty, saying there is no evidence that the assault perpetrated by Chauvin involved gratuitous pain that’s not usually associated with second-degree murder.

No matter what sentence Chauvin gets, in Minnesota it’s presumed that a defendant with good behavior will serve two-thirds of the penalty in prison and the rest on supervised release, commonly known as parole.

Chauvin has also been indicted on federal charges alleging he violated Floyd’s civil rights, as well as the civil rights of a 14-year-old he restrained in a 2017 arrest. If convicted on those charges, which were unsealed Friday, a federal sentence would be served at the same time as Chauvin’s state sentence. The three other former officers involved in Floyd’s death were also charged with federal civil rights violations; they await trial in state court on aiding and abetting counts.

Rising commodities costs hit Americans at home and on road

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Rising prices for a variety of commodities are contributing to a jump in prices at the consumer level, with Americans paying more for meat, gasoline, items they keep in their homes and even the homes themselves.

The government said Wednesday that consumer prices surged 0.8% in April from March, while the year-over-year rise was the fastest since 2008.

Prices for corn, grain and soybeans are at their highest since 2012; the price of lumber is at an all-time high.

Many factors are playing into the price hikes. As the economy strengthens, demand for products is outpacing manufacturers’ ability to produce enough supply of the raw materials. Many manufacturers are still understaffed as employment lags the broader economic recovery. Companies are also paying more for shipping as fuel costs rise and ports experience longer delays because of congestion.

CONSUMER GOODS

Everyday consumer items are about to get more expensive as the building blocks of those products

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become pricier.

Higher costs for polyethylene, wood pulp, refined sugar and milled grains don't immediately resonate with consumers. But they mean higher price tags at checkout for toilet paper, breakfast cereals, diapers and just about anything in a plastic container.

Consumers have been warned: Cheerios maker General Mills is considering raising prices on its products as grain, sugar and other ingredients become more expensive. Hormel Foods has already increased prices for Skippy peanut butter and its turkey products. Soda giant Coca-Cola has said it expects to raise prices to offset higher costs.

Kimberly-Clark, which makes Kleenex tissues and Scott toilet paper, said price increases will cover about 60% of its product portfolio. Procter & Gamble is raising prices for baby, feminine and adult care products.

AGRICULTURE

Consumers are also paying more at the grocery store for much of the meat they take home and cook, as well as for their favorite takeout burgers and burritos.

The higher prices are the result of a number of factors, including the skyrocketing cost of feed for farm animals, whose diets consist largely of corn and soybeans. The price of corn is up 57% in 2021 and has more than doubled in the past year, while soybean prices are up more than 25% since Jan. 1. Although it can be somewhat gradual, eventually those higher costs get passed down to the consumer.

One factor is tight supplies, in part because China is buying massive amounts of soybeans and corn for feed as it continues to replenish its pork herd that was devastated by the African swine fever in 2018. Scott Gerlt, an economist with the American Soybean Association, says soybean prices will remain elevated at least through the fall.

On an earnings call with investors, chicken producer Tyson Foods said feed ingredients last quarter were \$135 million higher than the same quarter last year.

Menu prices are on the rise. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said prices in the "food away from home" category were up 3.8% in the 12 months ended in April. Besides increases in beef, poultry and fish prices, restaurants are spending more on labor, safety training and cleaning due to COVID-19, and passing along some of those costs, according to the National Restaurant Association.

HOUSING

Few areas of the economy have seen inflation intensify like the U.S. housing market. The median price of a previously occupied U.S. home hit a record-high \$329,100 in March, a whopping 17.2% increase from a year earlier, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Behind the frenzy is a shortage of available homes for sale, with an inventory that stood at just 1.07 million at the end of March, down 28.2% from a year earlier, according to the NAR. That translates to a 2.1 months' supply, well short of the six-month supply economists say is needed for a balanced market. In March last year, it stood at 3.3 months.

The shortage of homes and steady surge in prices has begun to put a damper on home sales, which fell in February and March.

Homebuilders are racing to capitalize on the strong demand, but that's stoking inflation in building materials like lumber, which is up more than fourfold from a year ago, according to FactSet.

The cost of lumber is adding about \$36,000 to the price of an average new single-family home, according to the National Association of Home Builders.

While building materials prices always fluctuate, the volatility has been heightened over the past year as the pandemic led to factory closures, a shortage of truckers and other logistical issues that made the supply chain unpredictable.

ENERGY

Energy prices steadied in April but are still up 25% over the past 12 months, according to the BLS.

According to AAA, the average price of a gallon of gasoline topped \$3 Wednesday for the first time since October 2014. The price of oil is at \$66.40 a barrel, the highest since 2018; more people are driving as the economy recovers from the worst of the pandemic; and some areas of the country are seeing prices

rise due to the shutdown of a major pipeline.

A year ago a gallon cost an average of just \$1.85 as people hunkered down at home in the early stages of the pandemic.

The vehicles that run on gasoline are getting more expensive as well. Prices for used cars and trucks jumped a record 10% in April. A global shortage of computer chips is curtailing production and leading to higher sticker prices.

Analysis: Violence upends Biden's Israel-Palestinian outlook

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The surge in Israeli-Palestinian violence has flummoxed the Biden administration in its first four months as it attempts to craft a Middle East policy it believes will be more durable and fairer than that of its predecessor.

Its early hesitation to wade more deeply into efforts to resolve the decades-long conflict has created a leadership vacuum that is exacerbated by political uncertainty in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, each of which is clamoring for outside support and unhappy with America's new determination to toe a middle line.

Israelis and Palestinians alike have denounced the Biden administration's call for all sides to step back following clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in east Jerusalem that escalated into rocket attacks on Israel from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and retaliatory strikes from Israel's military.

"The US State Department message is not acceptable to me," Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, said on Twitter. "It is impossible to put in the same message statements by Israeli leaders who call for calm alongside instigators and terrorist organizations that launch missiles and rockets."

On the Palestinian side, there is frustration that the U.S. has slow-walked a U.N. Security Council statement that it sees as too unfavorable to Israel.

"The continued paralysis of the Security Council on the situation in Palestine is unacceptable," the Palestinian ambassador to the United Nations, Riyad Mansour, said Tuesday. "The international community, particularly the Security Council, must condemn all of Israel's illegal actions."

Advocates for both sides say the administration appears to be pursuing an interim strategy that lacks coherence and sends mixed messages to the parties, neither of which has shown a willingness to listen or to back down.

The administration, unsurprisingly, has rejected that criticism.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Wednesday said there had been more than 20 high-level phone calls from senior U.S. officials to their counterparts in the region urging a de-escalation of violence since the weekend. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, meanwhile, announced he was dispatching a senior diplomat to press the case to both Israeli and Palestinian officials.

"We are very focused on this," Blinken told reporters.

"It is not that we failed to prioritize this," State Department spokesman Ned Price said Tuesday, allowing, though, that "the United States is doing what we can knowing that our ability in certain situations is going to be in some cases limited."

President Joe Biden won initial but cautious plaudits from Mideast analysts when he rejected the Trump administration's unabashedly pro-Israel stance and tentatively embraced the Palestinians by restoring aid and diplomatic contacts.

Yet the Biden administration has also retained key elements of President Donald Trump's policies, including several that broke with long-standing U.S. positions on Jerusalem and the legitimacy of Israeli settlements that the Palestinians believe are manifestly biased against them. The administration has said little would be accomplished with immediate, wholesale shifts in Israel-Palestinian policy.

At the same time, Israelis fear that even subtle shifts away from Trump's hard line on the Palestinians and Biden's determination to re-enter the Iran nuclear deal represent a direct threat to their security even as the administration seeks to build on Trump-era Israeli-Arab normalization accords.

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"The parties have basically been conditioned over the past four years," said former U.S. Mideast negotiator Aaron David Miller, who served under both Republican and Democratic administrations. "The Trump sugar high for the Israelis and the vinegar high for the Palestinians have created a certain set of expectations that this administration hasn't addressed."

The administration has not yet named an ambassador to Israel nor indicated that it will appoint a special envoy for peacemaking. By contrast, Trump's nomination of an ambassador to Israel was one of his earliest appointments, announced more than a month before inauguration, and President Barack Obama chose former Sen. George Mitchell to serve as his Middle East peace envoy on his second day in office.

"I realize the administration has lowballed and deprioritized the Middle East and Israeli-Palestinian issue. But the lack of an ambassador to Israel and a consul general in Jerusalem is a serious problem during a crisis," Miller said.

Some Democrats and other progressives are also voicing frustration.

"The United States must call for an immediate cease-fire and an end to provocative and illegal settlement activity. And we must also recommit to working with Israelis and Palestinians to finally end this conflict," Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, said in a statement.

While it has categorically condemned Hamas rocket attacks on Israel and backed Israel's absolute right to self-defense, the Biden administration has been either unwilling or unable to say whether the Palestinians meet the criteria to enjoy that same right of self-defense. It has also not modified long-held U.S. policy that the Palestinians are ineligible to take their grievances to the International Criminal Court because they are not a state.

This apparent contradiction, along with what the Palestinians consider to be a weak response to Israel's threatened evictions of Palestinian families from east Jerusalem, which were a proximate cause of the latest tensions, have frustrated those looking for a new U.S. approach.

They note that the Biden administration, through a White House statement, has made clear that it believes "Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, security, dignity and prosperity."

"We're still waiting to see equal measures of empathy," said Zaha Hassan, a visiting fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the lead author of a report it issued last month titled "Breaking the Israel-Palestine Status Quo." "The administration needs to recognize that Palestinian rights need to be respected."

Hassan and others have urged the administration to stop resisting international attempts to put pressure on Israel, like stalling a U.N. Security Council statement condemning the violence. Although it won't win Biden friends in Israel, "it will shore up U.S. credibility around the world and obviously with the Palestinians," Hassan said.

EXPLAINER: Why are fears of high inflation getting worse?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Gas prices are rising. Auto prices are soaring. Consumer goods companies are charging more for household basics like toilet paper, peanut butter and soft drinks.

All of which is resurrecting fears of an economic threat that has all but disappeared over the past generation: Runaway inflation. It occurs when prices for most goods and services not only rise but accelerate, making the cost of living steadily more expensive and shrinking the purchasing power of Americans' earnings and savings.

On Wednesday, the government reported that consumer prices for goods and services surged 0.8% in April — the largest monthly jump in more than a decade — and that year-over-year inflation reached its fastest rate since 2008.

Growing jitters about inflation have contributed to a sharp sell-off in stock prices this week. Any significant acceleration of inflation would exert a drag on the market and potentially imperil the economic recovery.

In the past, rising inflation has usually led to higher pay as workers have demanded and received raises to keep pace. In fact, inflation can't really accelerate for long without sizable wage gains. Yet pay raises —

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if they do occur — typically lag behind price increases, thereby squeezing consumers at least temporarily. And eventually, pay gains themselves will fuel further inflation: Companies raise prices further to offset higher wages for their employees.

Some companies, including Amazon, have recently raised or said they plan to raise wages.

Not since the late 1960s and early '70s has the United States endured chronic high inflation, with consumer prices rising at or near double-digit percentages from one year to the next. In fact, the reverse has been true for about a decade: Inflation has remained persistently below the 2% annual target set by the Federal Reserve. Under Chair Jerome Powell, the Fed is betting that it can keep rates ultra-low even as the economic recovery kicks into high gear — and that it won't have to quickly raise rates to stop runaway inflation.

Few economists think the nation is on the verge of uncontrollably high inflation. But worries among businesses, consumers and investors about uncomfortably high inflation are growing.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CONCERNS ABOUT INFLATION?

Mainly, it's the fact that prices for so many things are rising and seem likely to do so for the next several months at least. One reason for that is that prices tumbled in March and April of last year, when the pandemic tore through the economy, and have since rebounded. As a result, year-over-year price increases now look much higher than most consumers are used to. The consumer price index rose 2.6% in March compared with a year ago, a significant rise from just 1.7% a month earlier. Analysts forecast that consumer prices will soar again in April when that month's figures are reported Wednesday, to a year-over-year reading of 3.6%. If that prediction is accurate, that would be the largest increase in nearly a decade.

Another factor is a widespread shortages of raw materials and parts that is magnifying costs. Builders can't find enough lumber to build new homes. Manufacturers are desperate for more copper and other commodities. Auto makers need more semiconductor chips. And some restaurants are scrambling for chicken wings.

Supply bottlenecks have occurred because companies were caught flat-footed by the speed of the economic recovery from the pandemic, with most consumers flush with cash, after multiple stimulus checks, and spending freely. With everyone now ramping up at once, manufacturers, shipping firms, miners and agricultural companies can't keep up.

WILL AMERICANS' PAYCHECKS INCREASE, TOO?

Paychecks are starting to rise. Average hourly earnings jumped 0.7% in April, a substantial gain for a single month. Many companies have said they are struggling to attract applicants to fill their open jobs. Only 266,000 jobs were added last month, far fewer than expected. Rising pay is a sign that companies are trying harder to fill their jobs. That's good for workers, and many companies may eat the higher cost or turn to automation to reduce their labor expenses. But if businesses start to raise their prices to cover higher wage bills, that would accelerate inflation.

IT'S THE FED'S JOB TO KEEP PRICES IN CHECK. WHAT DO ITS OFFICIALS THINK?

Powell said last month that he expects higher inflation to prove temporary, once the supply shortages are worked out. The Fed's policymakers have stressed that one-time increases are not the same thing as a difficult bout of inflation, which is characterized by ongoing, chronic price increases.

"A persistent material increase in inflation would require not just that wages or prices increase for a period after reopening, but also a broad expectation that they will continue to increase at a persistently higher pace," Lael Brainard, a Fed governor and key voice on the central bank's interest rate policies, said in an appearance Tuesday. "A limited period of pandemic-related price increases is unlikely to durably change inflation dynamics."

WHY IS THE FED SO SURE THAT PRICE INCREASES WILL PROVE FLEETING?

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Two reasons: Because the public still largely expects inflation to remain in check and because of recent history.

The Fed is closely monitoring "inflation expectations." These are measures of where consumers and financial markets expect inflation to be in the future. Inflation expectations have changed little for more than two decades, even amid sharp price fluctuations, such as a spike in oil prices in 2008 that took oil to nearly \$150 a barrel. If the public expects inflation to stick around 2%, then consumers and businesses won't likely change their behavior much even if commodity prices rise. Businesses won't charge their customers more, because they'll expect the increases to be temporary. And workers won't generally demand large wage increases to offset higher prices.

Some measures of inflation expectations are rising, but not markedly so. Financial market measures, based on the yields of different Treasury securities, show that investors' expectations for inflation are increasing in the short-run but less so over the longer-term. That suggests that they agree with the Fed: They expect a temporary increase in inflation. But they also think that entrenched inflation expectations will prevent price rises from running rampant.

Another reason the Fed thinks inflation will likely be temporary is that prices have been in check for roughly a quarter-century. Even when the unemployment rate fell to a 50-year low of 3.5% in 2019, forcing wages higher, consumer prices remained below the Fed's 2% target.

WHAT WILL THE FED DO IF INFLATION STAYS TOO HIGH?

Powell has said repeatedly that the Fed has the "tools" to address higher inflation: It could reduce its bond purchases of \$120 billion in Treasuries and mortgage-backed securities each month, which are intended to lower long-term interest rates. And it could also raise its short-term rate from its current level near zero. This rate influences borrowing rates throughout the economy. Such moves would likely rein in inflation. But they could also slow the economy or even cause a recession.

88-year-old artist finishes year of pandemic 'daily doodles'

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

WESTMORELAND, N.H. (AP) — Much like the round clock faces, gears and planets that often populate his artwork, Robert Seaman has come full circle.

Seaman, 88, has been drawing since he was a boy, and at age 60, left a real estate career to pursue his hobby professionally. But it took the coronavirus pandemic to fully return him to his passion.

"As a kid, I kept lurching between being a loner and being an extrovert," he said. "But in my introvert phase, I would love to go up to my room where I had a drawing table kind of desk and I'd spend hours up there drawing pictures. That's what I'm doing now."

Tuesday marked one year since Seaman started churning out "daily doodles" from his small, one-room apartment at the Maplewood Assisted Living facility in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. He spends about six hours a day working on his intricate, fanciful illustrations, starting with pencil sketches and finishing with ink, colored pencil and watercolor.

"After a long life, I'm back doing what I did when I was 11 years old," he said. "And it's great, I love it. I'm so lucky that I can do this."

Seaman moved in to Maplewood just two weeks before the pandemic restrictions cut residents off from the outside world. For many months, they couldn't leave their rooms. It was only last week that they were allowed to interact in hallways and other common areas without masks.

"The first thought I had was to just do some kind of dark stuff that reflected the nature of the confinement that we were experiencing and the difficulties that were created by this pandemic," he said. "Then it just started to grow, and I thought it would be interesting to do one a day."

He started sending the doodles to his daughter, Robin Hayes, and other friends and family. Hayes then shared them on Facebook, and as interest grew, began offering the originals and prints for sale on Etsy.com, with half the proceeds going to charities, including a COVID-19 relief fund, a homeless shelter and

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an organization that helps refugees.

As the days passed, Seaman's art got a bit brighter in both theme and appearance.

Some pieces showcase his fascination with science fiction, while others portray whimsical animals or sly humor — #131, "Portraits of a Shy Family," depicts framed paintings of the backs of heads. Robots carrying purple flags march across the page. Blackbirds burst from a pie. A squiggly-lined brain is sandwiched between two burger buns. A much-loved cat, Piper, shows up in all kinds of scenes.

Seaman, who has been fully vaccinated since January, says he'll "probably kick the bucket" before he runs out of ideas.

"I might be watching something on television, and someone will have a picture on the wall that will give me an idea. Or things just pop into my head. When I go to sleep at night, for a few minutes I try to think of some new ideas," he said. "When I get stuck, I'll just start drawing an object and it's like word association. I'll draw a hand, and all of a sudden that suggests something else, so it just grows from there."

Craig and Sandra Fox, of Deerfield, bought Doodles #13, 271 and 274 after hearing about Seaman on the radio and getting added to his daily email list.

"During the pandemic, a lot of our normal ability to get out and have contact with people was diminished, so to be able to get some output or something that isn't an advertising flier or newsletter on a daily basis was cool," Craig Fox said. "I collect books by people I know. If someone I know writes a book, I buy it and ask for an autograph ... and by watching the doodles come by, I started to feel like I know him."

Sandra Fox, who once stared at a painting in a museum so long that a guard teased her about "casing the joint," said she loves how much there is to see in Seaman's drawings.

"They are what they are to me, I have the same feelings, but I see more every time," she said. "I could look at them for half an hour and see many, many things. I'll catch another color or something in a corner I never even noticed before."

Doodle #365, titled "Potpourri" includes the Earth looming behind a jumble of objects that include the aforementioned cat, a wind-up bird Seaman keeps on his desk, a horse and a man wearing an aviator cap and goggles. It's framed by a series of shapes that evoke calligraphy but aren't actual letters. Though he accomplished his goal of a year of daily doodles, Seaman said he has no plans to stop.

"It's selfish. It keeps me occupied, and I love doing it, but it also does help some other people, which is kind of nice," he said. "Maybe I'll get so shaky I can't do anything, but as long as I can, I will."

Jay-Z, Foo Fighters and Go-Go's in Rock Hall on first try

By DAVID BAUDER AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Jay-Z, Foo Fighters and the Go-Go's were elected Wednesday to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame their first time on the ballot, leading a class that also includes Tina Turner, Carole King and Todd Rundgren.

Each will be honored during an induction ceremony in Cleveland on Oct. 30 before what organizers hope is a full house of fans enjoying live music again.

The hall will also welcome LL Cool J, Billy Preston and Randy Rhoads with musical excellence awards, and honor Kraftwerk, Gil Scott Heron and Charley Patton as early influencers.

With Jay-Z, the hall inducts a 23-time Grammy winner and the first rap artist in the Songwriters Hall of Fame. His discography includes "Hard Knock Life," "99 Problems" and "Empire State of Mind." He has had 14 No. 1 albums to his credit.

After serving as Nirvana's drummer, Dave Grohl stepped to center stage with Foo Fighters, becoming one of the few modern rock bands comfortable in arenas. Their hard-hitting sound produced the hits "Best of You," "Everlong" and "Times Like These."

As an all-female band that played their own instruments, the Go-Go's were a relative rarity in the early 1980s. Born from Los Angeles' punk rock scene, they had a string of melodic hits that included "We Got the Beat," "Our Lips Are Sealed" and "Vacation."

Turner, recently celebrated in an HBO documentary, was one of rock's most stirring comeback stories.

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After escaping from an abusive relationship with husband and musical partner Ike Turner, she became a solo star in the 1980s behind the world-weary "What's Love Got to Do With It," and scored other hits with "Private Dancer" and "We Don't Need Another Hero."

King's life was celebrated in the Broadway musical "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical." Stepping forward following a career writing songs for others, her 1971 album "Tapestry" became one of music's best-selling albums of all time. Hits include "It's Too Late," "You've Got a Friend" and "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman."

A power pop pioneer, Rundgren is known for melodic hits like "Hello It's Me," "I Saw the Light" and "We Gotta Get You a Woman." With "Bang the Drum All Day," he's also responsible for the song most celebrated by hooky players everywhere.

Clarence Avant, a former manager, label owner and concert organizer, is being given the Ahmet Ertegun Award as a non-performer. His impact on the music industry was highlighted in the 2019 Netflix documentary, "The Black Godfather."

Grohl, King and Turner bring the number of artists inducted into the Rock Hall twice to 26. Prior to King and Turner, Stevie Nicks had been the only woman with that distinction.

Two new inductees — Belinda Carlisle of the Go-Go's and Pat Smear of Foo Fighters — were once members of the L.A. punk band the Germs before getting the jobs that led to later fame.

Before getting into the hall in their special categories, both LL Cool J and Kraftwerk had each been nominated six times as performers without being elected.

Five of the six inducted performers are still working artists. Only Turner is retired, and no doubt the hall will try recruiting Beyoncé — she should be in town anyway — to pay tribute onstage. Either way, the hall is hoping for one of the first big concerts since the live music business essentially shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We really see it as a true celebration of the reopening of music — not only in America but in the world," John Sykes, chairman of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

The induction ceremony, to be held at the Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse in Cleveland, will simulcast on SiriusXM and air later on HBO.

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

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propaganda that can reach hundreds of millions of people — often without disclosing the fact that the content is government-sponsored.

This type of analysis is possible because Twitter makes more of its data available to researchers than other social media platforms routinely do.

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. 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

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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 reinforcing 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 labeled just 14% of Chinese diplomatic accounts on the platform, as of March 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 labeled.

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 labeled 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 labeled an additional 41 Chinese state media outlets AP and the Oxford Internet Institute brought to their attention, bringing the overall portion of labeled accounts from less than half to nearly 90%. 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

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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.

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% 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

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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.

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% 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.

The scale of the operation is immense. Ryan Fedasiuk, a research analyst at Georgetown University’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology, reviewed dozens of government budget documents, university announcements and media reports and found that last year, China’s Communist Party had some 20 million part-time volunteers, many of them students, and 2 million paid commentators at its disposal to steer conversation online.

For-profit companies also contract with government agencies to run coordinated networks of social media

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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 and an expert in Chinese propaganda, 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."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, May 13, the 133rd day of 2021. There are 232 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 13, 1607, English colonists arrived by ship at the site of what became the Jamestown settlement in Virginia (the colonists went ashore the next day).

On this date:

In 1568, forces loyal to Mary, Queen of Scots were defeated by troops under her half-brother and Regent of Scotland, the Earl of Moray, in the Battle of Langside, thwarting Mary's attempt to regain power almost a year after she was forced to abdicate.

In 1914, heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis was born in Lafayette, Alabama.

In 1917, three shepherd children reported seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary near Fatima, Portugal; it was the first of six such apparitions that the children claimed to have witnessed.

In 1940, in his first speech as British prime minister, Winston Churchill told Parliament, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

In 1958, Vice President Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat, were spat upon and their limousine battered by rocks thrown by anti-U.S. demonstrators in Caracas, Venezuela.

In 1961, actor Gary Cooper died in Los Angeles six days after turning 60.

In 1967, a vault fire at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in Culver City, California, destroyed hundreds of the studio's early films.

In 1972, 118 people died after fire broke out at the Sennichi Department Store in Osaka, Japan.

In 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot and seriously wounded in St. Peter's Square by Turkish assailant Mehmet Ali Agca (MEH'-met AH'-lee AH'-juh).

In 1985, a confrontation between Philadelphia authorities and the radical group MOVE ended as police dropped a bomb onto the group's row house, igniting a fire that killed 11 people and destroyed 61 homes.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton nominated federal appeals Judge Stephen G. Breyer to the U.S. Supreme Court to replace retiring Justice Harry A. Blackmun; Breyer went on to win Senate confirmation.

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In 2002, President George W. Bush announced that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin (POO'-tih-n) would sign a treaty to shrink their countries' nuclear arsenals by two-thirds.

Ten years ago: Two suicide bombers attacked paramilitary police recruits heading home after months of training in northwest Pakistan, killing 87 people in what the Pakistan Taliban called revenge for the U.S. slaying of Osama bin Laden. Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi taunted NATO in an audio broadcast, saying he was alive despite a series of airstrikes and "in a place where you can't get to and kill me."

Five years ago: The Obama administration issued a directive requiring public schools to permit transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their chosen gender identity. President Barack Obama hosted a state dinner honoring the leaders of Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Denmark and Norway, following a multilateral summit that Obama used to laud the Nordic states as model global citizens on climate change, security, humanitarian efforts and economic equality.

One year ago: President Donald Trump urged governors to work to reopen schools that were closed because of the coronavirus; he took issue with Dr. Anthony Fauci's caution against moving too quickly in returning students to class. The Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down Gov. Tony Evers' coronavirus stay-at-home order, ruling that his administration had overstepped its authority by extending the order for another month. An American cargo pilot, Brian Yeargan, was sentenced to four weeks in prison in Singapore for violating coronavirus restrictions by leaving his hotel to buy masks and a thermometer. Michigan regulators suspended the license of barber Karl Menke, who insisted on cutting hair despite an order to stay closed during the pandemic. Paul Manafort, a former Trump campaign chairman who was convicted as part of the special counsel's Russia probe, was released from federal prison to serve the rest of his sentence at home due to concerns about the coronavirus.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Buck Taylor is 83. Actor Harvey Keitel is 82. Author Charles Baxter is 74. Actor Zoe Wanamaker is 73. Actor Franklyn Ajaye is 72. Singer Stevie Wonder is 71. Former Ohio Gov. John Kasich (KAY'-sihk) is 69. Actor Leslie Winston is 65. Producer-writer Alan Ball is 64. Basketball Hall of Famer Dennis Rodman is 60. "Late Show" host Stephen Colbert (kohl-BEHR') is 57. Rock musician John Richardson (The Gin Blossoms) is 57. Actor Tom Verica is 57. Singer Darius Rucker (Hootie and the Blowfish) is 55. Actor Susan Floyd is 53. Actor Brian Geraghty is 46. Actor Samantha Morton is 44. Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., is 44. Former NBA player Mike Bibby is 43. Rock musician Mickey Madden (Maroon 5) is 42. Actor Iwan Rheon is 36. Actor-writer-director Lena Dunham is 35. Actor Robert Pattinson is 35. Actor Candice Accola King is 34. Actor Hunter Parrish is 34. Folk-rock musician Wylie Gelber (Dawes) is 33. NHL defenseman P.K. Subban is 33. Actor Debby Ryan is 28.