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Graduation was held Sunday afternoon at the Groton Area Arena with 49 students receiving their diplomas. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Grandmother's Love Surpasses Back Pain

Back pain can be disabling, not only in terms of employment but also in terms of social connections. This point was never more clear to me than when I saw Maria, a 56-year-old experiencing severe low back pain for nearly five years. The pain prevented her from standing or walking for more than five minutes at a time and had cost her the job she loved. Maria shared with me her one heart-wrenching goal; she wanted to hold her first grandchild, a six-month-old baby boy. Doing so had caused pain so intense it put her in bed for a full day afterwards.

At our first visit, we discussed the treatments she had exhausted with no relief. Pain pills had severe side effects. She tried numerous steroid injections which seemed to help for several weeks, but the pain returned as did her disability. These "quick fixes" were not only failing to relieve her pain but were causing other health issues. She was diagnosed with osteopenia and pre-diabetes; both are known risks of prolonged steroid use. She had been told there were no other options for her. I reviewed her medical history and immediately noticed a glaring treatment deficit; she had never been to physical therapy.

After six weeks of physical therapy and a trial of some basic non-opioid medications, she was able to lose weight and developed a home routine to decrease the pain significantly, but one problem remained. She still could not pick up her grandchild without severe pain.

We ordered new imaging and found arthritis in the small, paired joints in the back of the lumbar spine, plus inflammatory disc/bone problems in the front of the low back structure. This is a well-known phenomenon called "Modic endplate changes." For perhaps the first time, Maria received a full explanation of her imaging and learned what was causing her pain.

We treated her L4 and L5 Modic changes with an outpatient, minimally invasive procedure which targets the basivertebral nerve. This treatment has the potential to provide a permanent cure for pain related to this specific problem. Maria's recovery process was mostly anesthesia-related, and she had 80 percent relief of the pain within two weeks. At her three-month follow-up appointment, she had tears of joy as she told me how wonderful it was to hold her now one-year-old grandson!

This is why I am a pain doctor, not only to relieve pain, but to restore function and help patients achieve their basic life goals. Life is about the little things that most of us take for granted, whether it is standing, walking or holding our grandkids.

Tyler A. Ptacek, M.D. is a contributing Prairie Doc® columnist and a guest this week on the Prairie Doc® television show. He practices in Rapid City, South Dakota as a board certified and fellowship-trained interventional pain physician. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

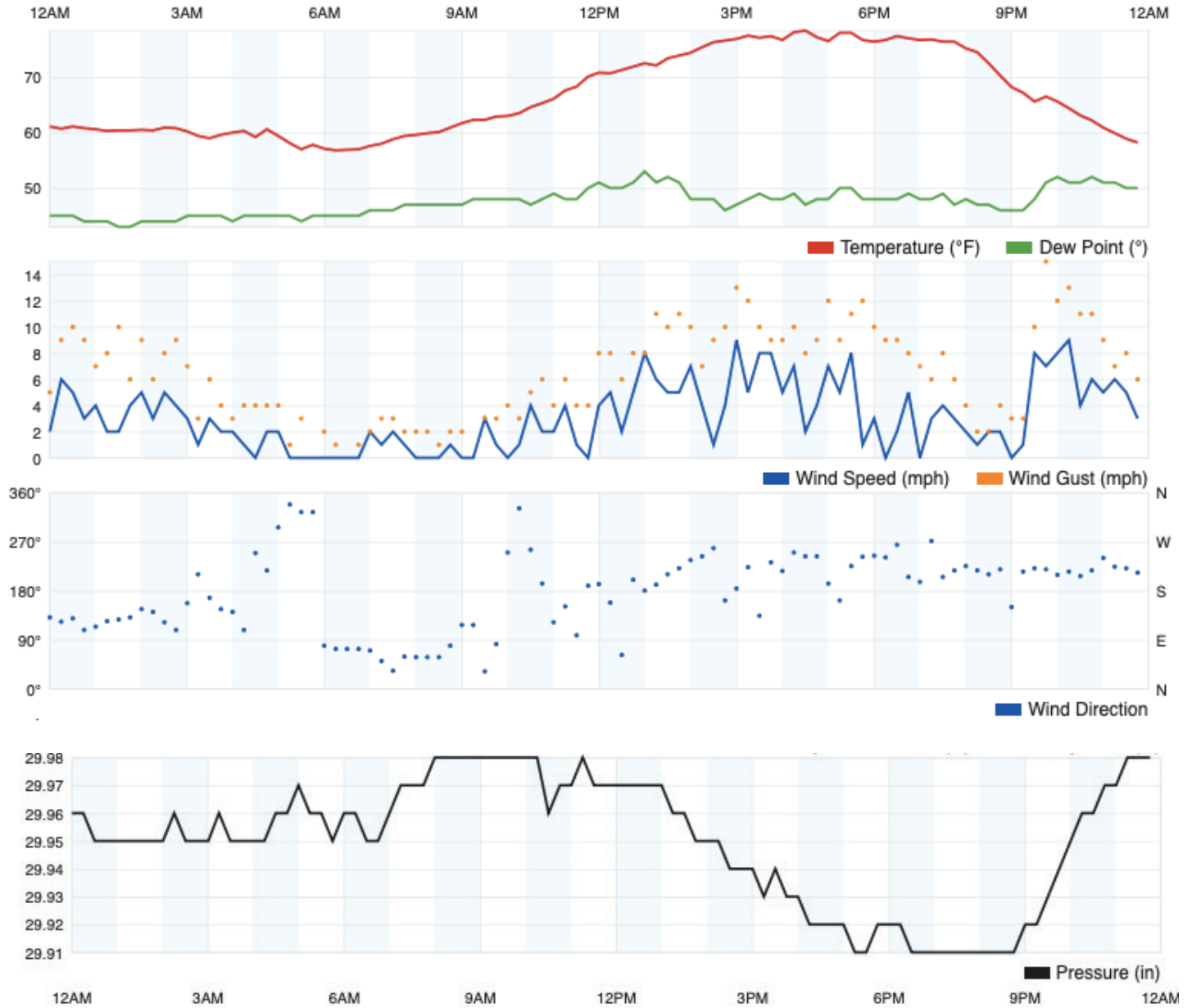


By Tyler A. Ptacek, MD ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

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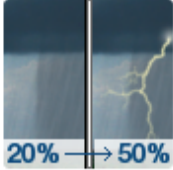
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday
				
Patchy Fog then Sunny	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Slight Chance Showers then Chance T-storms
High: 82 °F	Low: 51 °F	High: 79 °F	Low: 56 °F	High: 79 °F

Work Week Forecast

Pierre, SD					
M	T	W	T	F	
76	78	79	84	80	
52	56	56	58	56	
Aberdeen, SD					
M	T	W	T	F	
83	79	80	81	79	
52	56	57	57	57	
Watertown, SD					
M	T	W	T	F	
78	74	77	76	79	
52	55	58	60	59	



Updated: 5/17/2021 3:36 AM Central

Temperatures will be above normal through the week, but the dry start will give way to increasing precipitation chances on Wednesday and they will remain through the weekend.

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Today in Weather History

May 17, 1902: An estimated F3 Tornado moved northeast from 6 miles southwest of Mina to south of Westport, a distance of about 25 miles. A four-year-old girl was killed in one of two farmhouses blown apart in Edmunds County. Three more homes were damaged in Brown County. There were probably two if not three separate tornadoes involved.

May 17, 1937: A complex of tornadoes and downbursts skipped southeast from near Roslyn and Greenville. This storm also caused \$50,000 in damage in downtown Waubay and damaged farm property to about 4 miles west of Gray, Minnesota. About 20 barns were destroyed. Sheep and horses were killed. These events traveled a distance of about 70 miles. The strongest tornado was estimated at F2 strength.

May 17, 1996: An F1 tornado touched down 20 miles southeast of Wilmot or 5 miles northwest of Ortonville, Minnesota at Schmidts Landing on Big Stone Lake. The roof was ripped off of a house, and a garage wall was blown off its foundation. Three RV's were demolished, and a trailer was overturned and destroyed. This tornado moved into Big Stone County and intensified. An F3 tornado crossed Big Stone Lake from Roberts County, South Dakota destroying a cabin at the Meadowbrook Resort. It also blew the roof off another cabin, and the third cabin was demolished when a tree fell onto it. Several boats on Big Stone Lake were overturned. Approximately 150 buildings sustained damage or were destroyed as the tornado moved northeast across Big Stone County. Southwest of Clinton, a pontoon boat, and a camper were destroyed. East of Clinton, a farm lost all buildings with severe damage to their home. Estimated property damage was listed at \$1.5 million.

A wind gust of 90 mph blew two garage roofs off, destroyed an antenna, blew large trees down, and a grain dryer was blown down near Dumont, Minnesota.

1883 - A three day flood in the Black Hills of western South Dakota resulted in a million dollars damage at Rapid City. (David Ludlum)

1979 - A reading of 12 degrees at Mauna Kea Observatory established an all-time record low for the state of Hawaii. (The Weather Channel)

1983 - A golfer playing the Fox Meadows Course in Memphis TN was struck by a bolt of lightning that went through his neck, down his spine, came out a pocket containing his keys, and went into a nearby tree. Miraculously, he survived! (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A summer-like weather pattern continued, with warm temperatures and scattered thunderstorms across much of the nation. A cold front in the north central U.S. produced a sharp contrast in the weather across the state of Minnesota during the afternoon. At the same time Duluth was 50 degrees with rain and fog, Mankato was 95 degrees with sunny skies. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds over the Carolinas during the afternoon and evening. A "thunderstorm of a lifetime" in northern Spartanburg County, SC, produced hail for forty-five minutes, leaving some places knee-deep in hail. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms ravaged the south central U.S. with severe weather for the third day in a row. Thunderstorms spawned another nineteen tornadoes, for a total of fifty tornadoes in three days. A strong (F-2) tornado injured 14 persons and caused two million dollars damage at Apple Springs TX. Baseball size hail was reported at Matador TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in New York State during the late morning and afternoon. A tornado injured one person at Warren, and wind gusts to 80 mph were reported at Owego. Evening thunderstorms over southwest Texas produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Marfa, along with golf ball size hail which accumulated to a depth of ten inches. Late night thunderstorms over southwest Texas produced up to seven inches of rain in western Crockett County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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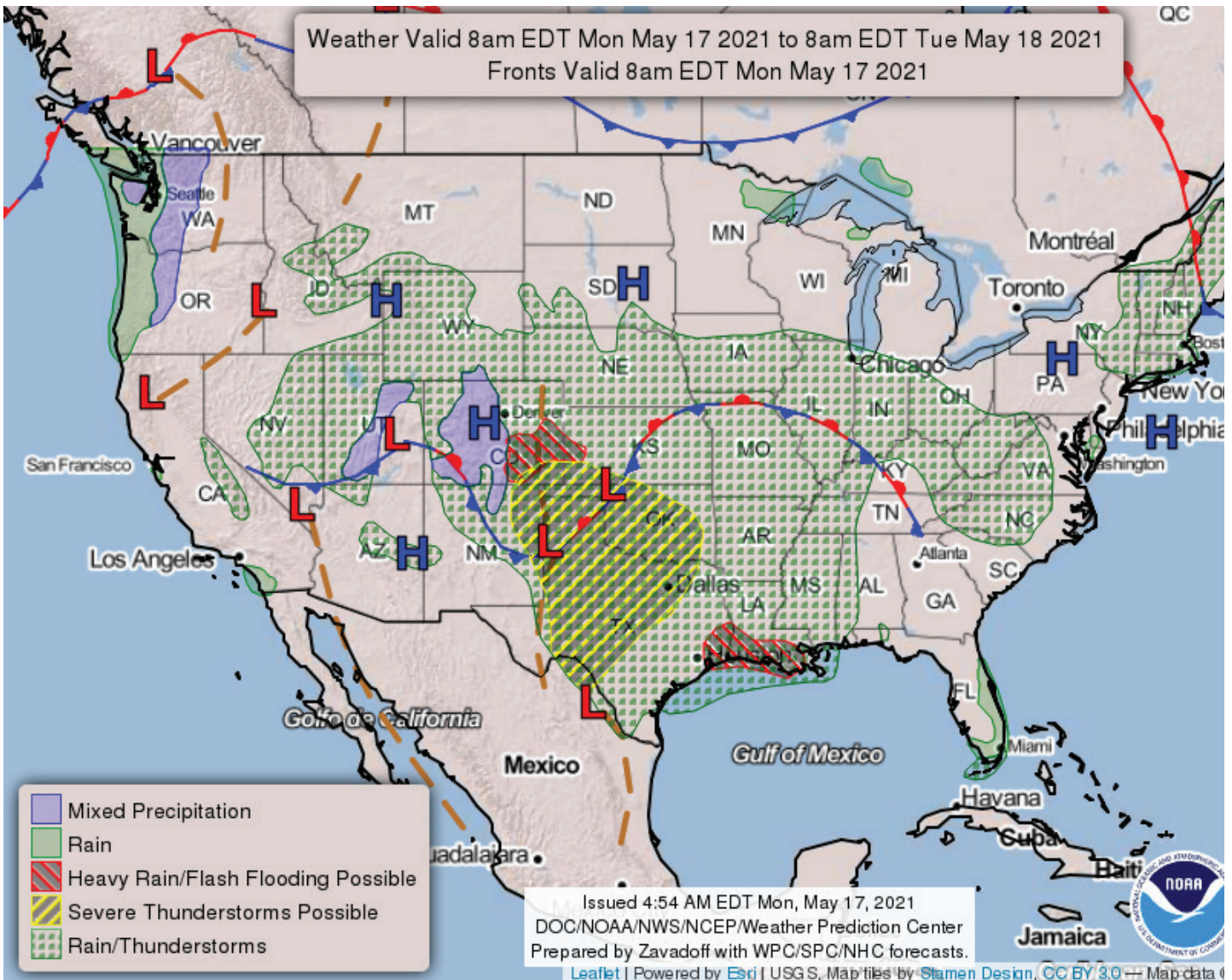
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 78.4 °F
Low Temp: 56.8 °F
Wind: 15 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 103° in 1934
Record Low: 27° in 2025
Average High: 71°F
Average Low: 45°F
Average Precip in May.: 1.77
Precip to date in May.: 0.25
Average Precip to date: 5.74
Precip Year to Date: 3.02
Sunset Tonight: 9:00 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:00 a.m.



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TURN NOW!

"At the next intersection make a complete 'U' turn and follow the direction to return to your original route," said a calm voice wanting to correct the driver who failed to follow the "commands" coming from his GPS. "Then, in five hundred feet, make a left turn and resume your route." It was not normal to listen to an unknown and unfamiliar voice to provide information that would direct a driver to a destination he had never seen before.

Following directions from an unknown source is risky. Trust becomes a critical – if not the most critical – factor. How do we know if the person who is giving us advice is credible and trustworthy? Is that person looking out for our best interests or wanting to play a game with our life in the balance? No doubt all of us, at one time or another, have found ourselves on a route that was wrong – either by being careless or by making a mistake.

David decided to follow a route that would take him in the wrong direction. He went against God's GPS. As a result, he ended up being guilty of a series of sins that came from giving in to a powerful temptation. It set in motion a chain reaction that follows the normal sequence of sin: first, he faced temptation; secondly, he refused to listen to the warning of the Holy Spirit; thirdly, he refused His route of escape; fourth, he committed the sin and then suffered the consequences of the sin on himself and others. What a tragic route he followed. But out of this tragedy there was his triumph. A "voice" said to him, "you have sinned! Repent!" And he was listening.

When David heard God's voice, (His GPS), he admitted his sins and made a "u" turn. He asked God to forgive him, and He did. "Have mercy on me," he cried, "and blot out my transgressions." If we, like David, listen to His voice and follow His "commands," He will lead us safely in paths of righteousness. Are you listening to God's voice?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the directions for our lives we find in Your Word. May we follow them carefully and consistently and seek Your way - always. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: O God, favor me because of Your loving-kindness. Take away my wrong-doing because of the greatness of Your loving-pity. Psalm 51:1

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Educators want Noem's plan for civics class to be inclusive

By MORGAN MATZEN Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem's successful \$900,000 push for educators to create more South Dakota-specific civics and history curriculum is underway now — new materials Noem has said should help explain why the "U.S. is the most special nation in the history of the world."

But educators and Indigenous people say they want to ensure the curriculum covers the Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Council Fires, which refers collectively to the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people.

Concrete examples of the curriculum have yet to be seen after Noem pushed for the expenditure in her budget address. And while Noem has pushed for increased civics education, she's also expressed opinions about the nation's alleged failure "to educate generations of our children about what makes America unique," and the "left's indoctrination" of students.

Most recently, Noem said she was concerned about "teaching our children and grandchildren to hate their own country," and signed on to a "1776 Pledge to Save Our Schools," which commits to "honest, patriotic education that cultivates in our children a profound love for our country."

Those in charge of the civics initiative have said it will take two years to create instructional materials and classroom resources specific to the state's history, civics, government, geography and economics, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

The initiative is part of an expansive budget that passed the Legislature in March.

Still, the question remains: What will it take for South Dakota to have a culturally responsive civics and history curriculum?

Initially, reading about the civics initiative posed some red flags for Dyanis Conrad-Popova, she said.

Conrad-Popova, an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of South Dakota, said that in her experience with research on educational equity and culturally responsive education, she knows a strong K-12 civics and history curriculum is needed in the state. But the approach should be centered in best practice, not opinion, she said.

A culturally responsive curriculum helps bridge gaps "that are fairly evident within our societies," she explained. Culturally responsive curriculum should also validate the values, prior experiences and cultural knowledge of students, Conrad-Popova said.

The effort is not about patriotism, indoctrination, radicalized leftist views, or pitting students against each other based on race or sex, Conrad-Popova said.

"It's about really being honest with ourselves, and being open and honest with the fact that as a country, our history, policies, programs and practices have been rooted in issues of race-based and culture-based oppression and marginalization," Conrad-Popova said.

For example, textbooks in the past have referred to slavery as the "Atlantic triangular trade," or refers to Indigenous removal as "Native Americans moved West voluntarily to make room for the new settlers," Conrad-Popova said.

Teaching such lies, she said, "breeds ignorance and hate."

A culturally responsive curriculum in South Dakota, Conrad-Popova says, is one that includes Lakota perspectives and those "whose voices have historically been ignored."

As part of the Sioux Falls School District's incorporation of South Dakota's Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings, students at Cleveland Elementary created a collaborative art project celebrating the different groups that collectively make up the Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Council Fires, which is the Lakota term for the Sioux Nation. The Oceti Sakowin Essential understandings are a set of educational standards that require students to learn about Lakota perspectives on history, language and culture. The artwork was displayed prominently at the district administration building.

While South Dakota does have curriculum standards on what's called Oceti Sakowin Essential Under-

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standings (OSEUs), which teaches about the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people, officials with the South Dakota Department of Education (DOE) are not sure how broadly these teachings are used in schools.

However, the DOE is trying to get a better understanding of which schools have implemented OSEUs, DOE secretary Tiffany Sanderson said. The major partner in that work is the Office of Indian Education, which Noem moved to the South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations in 2019.

"Certainly we need to strengthen training for teachers so everybody has confidence in using (OSEUs) in the classroom," Sanderson said, adding she guesses OSEUs will be "tucked into" the South Dakota instructional materials the state develops.

Jace DeCory, a Lakota educator, elder and professor emeritus at Black Hills State University, said she believes a state mandate would assist with the goal of including Native American curriculum in the state's school system. North Dakota recently mandated education on Native American history for K-12 students.

Inclusion of Lakota language, history and culture will better serve all students in the state, and could provide relevance and a positive class environment to Native students, DeCory said. A culturally relevant curriculum could also help improve attendance and graduation rates among Native students, she said.

But at the K-12 level, schools will not be required to use the curriculum the education department will develop. However, state officials "are confident (schools) will find the resources very useful," said Ruth Raveling, an information specialist at the education department.

And students already learn a variety of history, civics, geography and economics as early as kindergarten in the Sioux Falls School District.

In the Lennox School District, high schoolers have two elective course offerings: South Dakota history, or civics, which Madeline Voegeli teaches.

Voegeli said she covers diversity, what it means to be an American, the history of immigration, citizenship, the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, volunteerism, the organization of political parties, ideology, the voting process and more in her class.

But Voegeli said she's asked all the time about how she balances teaching about ideological topics in today's political climate. To avoid bumps in the road or conflict, Voegeli said she creates a culture of understanding and empathy in her classroom.

A student takes notes during a history class on Wednesday, May 5, 2021, at Augustana University in Sioux Falls.

"While it can be challenging, I feel like it's my role to tell them how to think, and not what to think," she said. "That's always been a really strong component of my belief as a teacher, so my students don't know where I stand politically."

Lennox superintendent Chad Conaway said as long as districts are following state standards, they're avoiding a political agenda, unless that agenda was embedded in the standards.

Stephanie Hageman, vice president of the South Dakota Education Association (SDEA) and a high school teacher in Watertown, said there's not a lot of balancing between Noem's goals and teaching the nuts and bolts of civics and history.

"As educators in South Dakota, we are required to teach the standards" the DOE gives to us, she said. "Our district might get to select what curriculum we're going to use to implement those standards, but it's already laid out. There's not a political agenda there that we're teaching to hate America. We're following the standards laid out to us and given to us by the (DOE)."

It doesn't help that the amount of time students learn about social studies at the elementary level has also decreased in the last few decades, Sanderson said.

There is no "one-stop shop" for teachers in South Dakota to find a host of resources specific to teaching the state's history, geography or government, Sanderson said. Over time, teachers have put together these resources on their own, she said.

"No textbook publisher is going to invest in South Dakota-specific text materials, instructional resources or lesson plans," Sanderson said. "If we want those available to our teachers, we need to take that on ourselves."

The state education department aims to fill that gap with input from K-12 educators, higher education

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faculty, tribal representatives, experts like historians and museum directors, and educational programming from South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Final decisions on curriculum and standards won't be made for at least another two years, but the state is already laying out how it wants to spend the \$900,000:

—\$550,000 is set aside for the development of state-specific instructional materials and classroom resources. Work will begin for this by early 2022.

—\$200,000 will go toward pilot programs focused on strengthening civics, government and history education for school districts.

—Two expenditures of \$75,000 will also provide for professional development and an instructional materials review. Planning for this professional development will begin this summer, and the instructional materials review will start by early 2022.

The new materials also won't be the subject of a statewide test, said Raveling. There's currently no statewide assessment in social studies.

By late summer, a call for committee members will go out to experts who wish to give input on the curriculum creation, Sanderson said.

The department will also review South Dakota's content standards for social studies this summer. Standards reviews are done on a regular basis and separate from the civics initiative, Raveling said.

Yet, lawmakers and Indigenous educators say that isn't enough, especially in a state that has a history of shooting down proposals to further Indigenous-led education initiatives.

Rep. Shawn Bordeaux, a Democrat from Mission, tried to require OSEUs be taught this spring by way of House Bill 1187, an effort which failed in the Legislature.

Bordeaux said he believed by 2020, teaching of OSEUs would be fully implemented in all schools, but teachers in schools said it's not being done and it's an option. He thinks the complication lies in the fact that the Office of Indian Education is no longer under the state education department.

There was an effort by lawmakers to move it back by way of House Bill 1044, but that also died in committee this spring.

Sen. Troy Heinert, a fellow Mission Democrat, also tried to pass Senate Bill 68 that would have provided state funding and organization for the founding of four OSEU community-based schools across the state.

That failed this spring, too.

That forced Indigenous educators and families to take the lead without the help of state funding and develop plans to open an Oceti Sakowin community-based school by fall 2022 in Rapid City.

Mary Bowman, a member of the South Dakota Education Equity Coalition, is helping lead the effort for the new school.

"It's just trying to provide a solution for the historical and decades-long problems that Indigenous students have faced in the public school system," Bowman said.

Still, concerns exist that South Dakota's Indigenous history won't be seen in its full context, and won't include more than settler perspectives.

One of the OSEUs set in statewide standards reads verbatim, "history told from the Oceti Sakowin perspective, through oral tradition and written accounts, frequently conflicts with the stories told by mainstream historians."

Elise Boxer, an assistant professor and coordinator of Native American Studies at USD, adopted this standard in her classes at the college level as well and tells students "it's not about saying that there's only one history, it's saying what happens to history when we include different perspectives."

Boxer said some texts refer to the Wounded Knee Massacre as a war or Sioux uprising, which incorrectly implies that "all of a sudden, Dakota people decided to go out and fight settlers."

What's missing from that interpretation is that there had been violations of treaties, encroachment onto Dakota lands, theft of Dakota sources like water and more, Boxer said. She teaches students to review newspaper accounts, oral histories and traditional narratives of the event.

"In the context of history, when we include different voices, it changes," she said.

Other experts say it's important for South Dakota's students to realize Lakota people have a presence and legal history with the federal government prior to statehood, and that the issue of culturally responsive education has been a political "whipping post" for decades.

"I don't see how you can use South Dakota history without teaching about both Wounded Knees, or the destruction of the Great Sioux reservation," said Michael Mullin, chair and professor of history at Augustana University.

Mullin and his coworkers have started acknowledging in email signatures and in lectures that the university is located on the ancestral territory of the Oceti Sakowin.

Sanderson said while America and South Dakota both have "really rich stories," they are certainly "not without blemish."

"We've got plenty of times in our history that haven't gone well, but we've been able to learn from that," she said. "The anecdote that history repeats itself if we don't understand our past is certainly applicable here."

Dakotas officials weathering ups and downs of oil industry

By ELOISE OGDEN Minot Daily News

MINOT, N.D. (AP) — Four years ago, 64 rigs were actively drilling in the oil field in North Dakota. As of earlier this month, 17 rigs were actively drilling.

The current downturn has had an impact on North Dakota's oil patch but yet the state produced 1.083 million barrels of oil a day in February, the most recent numbers released by the state last month.

"Right now it's all about staying within cash flow and staying within trying to survive and trying to restore some economic strength," said Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council in Bismarck.

The North Dakota Petroleum Council provides governmental relations support to more than 525 companies involved in all aspects of the oil and gas industry including oil and gas production, refining, pipeline, mineral leasing, consulting, legal work, and oil field service activities in North Dakota, South Dakota, and the Rocky Mountain region.

When an earlier downturn occurred, Ness said companies were financially strong. But in the more current downturn, he said there have been a lot of bankruptcies, the Minot Daily News reported.

"Service companies that have survived are here – they're focusing on production," he said, adding that "no one is building a gas plant or pipeline."

Yet, the Williston Basin is an area to be showcased, according to Ness.

"What it's really all about is showcasing that our asset here is still a top asset anywhere you go in the world," Ness said. "The Bakken is going to be developed and we're going to have to survive these upturns and downturns."

"Waking up every day knowing the federal government is trying to crush you doesn't help. But as a state we've got to stand up and be stronger," Ness said.

Ness noted a motion by the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation (Three Affiliated Tribes) "standing up strongly with the State of North Dakota" to continue the use of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), which flows north of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation that straddles the Dakotas.

Mark Fox, tribal chairman, in a sworn statement for documents filed in court last month, stated he opposed any shutdown of the pipeline which transports to market more than 60% of oil produced on the Fort Berthold Reservation. A shutdown would be a loss in revenue to the tribe exceeding \$160 million in a year and \$250 million in two years. A large percentage of the tribe's budget comes from oil and gas revenues and royalties.

Progress in the state in regard to the oil field is the state has a lot of great technology, Ness said.

Ness said efforts are being done in the state to inform students about opportunities in the energy industry. He said he was in Watford City for T4 – Tools, Trades, Torque, Tech, a conference that brought together 900 students from across western North Dakota to talk to them about technical-type career opportunities.

But, he said, he has been hearing from hotel and apartment developers, and others saying, "Hey, we're

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starving up here. What's going on? When are we going to see something happening?"

"What we're seeing now is we're seeing a lot of resistance," he said. "McKenzie County is taking a little bit of heat. It's been a very progressive supportive county and all of a sudden they're rejecting projects at the zoning level and some resistance from the county commission."

"There are some frustrations creeping in," he said, but adding, "We've had some changeover in terms of assets, which is good."

"We've got to get through these downturns," he continued.

But when one looks at the big picture, he said they can say, "Wow, we're still at it."

"What we've been through the past year was drilled 1.1 million barrels a day. We still employed 55,000 workers in northwestern North Dakota," Ness said.

He said North Dakota's Legacy Fund is all about oil and there's now about \$8 billion in the Legacy Fund.

The Legacy Fund is a perpetual source of state revenue derived from oil and natural gas tax revenue.

"There's a lot coming back to North Dakota," he said, referring to the state oil tax distributions.

Sam Houston wins FCS title with late TD over South Dakota St

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FRISCO, Texas (AP) — The way Sam Houston handled everything in the longest and most unusual college football season, coach K.C. Keeler felt it was fitting that the Bearkats got their first FCS national title with a last-minute touchdown after waiting out a lengthy weather delay.

Eric Schmid's third touchdown pass was a 10-yarder to Ife Adeyi with 16 seconds left, and Sam Houston, following two fourth-down conversions on that final drive, beat top-seeded South Dakota State 23-21 on a rain-drenched Sunday.

"It just showed such character by our kids. You're talking about the ultimate game and you have to make one last drive," Keeler said. "It's really a special group when you consider this thing started in June and we had no idea when this thing would ever end. You know, we decided not to play a fall season. ... It's been an emotion draining year, a physically draining year."

Jequez Ezzard caught two touchdowns for No. 2 seed Sam Houston (10-0) after he had an early 63-yard punt return for a TD wiped out by an illegal block. His 5-yard catch on fourth-and-3 extended the final 16-play, 65-yard drive, after Schmid's 9-yard run on an earlier fourth-and-1.

Keeler, in his seventh season at Sam Houston, got his record 24th FCS playoff victory, and became the first coach to win FCS titles at multiple schools. He coached his alma mater Delaware to the 2003 title.

South Dakota State (8-2) led 21-17 on freshman Isaiah Davis' third TD run, an 85-yarder with 5:41 left. Davis, who finished with 178 yards rushing on 14 carries, went down the sideline in front of the Jackrabbits bench, eluding half of the defense before breaking free to the end zone.

"We were this close," Davis said. "We watched them celebrate, raise the trophy up, and we know what it takes. You know, 170-something practices, and came up short one play."

It was the first title game appearance for South Dakota State and coach John Stiegelmeier, who has coached his alma mater for 24 seasons. The Jackrabbits lost dual-threat freshman quarterback Mark Gronowski to a left leg injury on the opening series of the game.

"We didn't have to play in the spring, we got to play in the spring. We embraced it," Stiegelmeier said. "How should our fans remember this team? They should remember a bunch of guys that bonded together and gave everything they had."

Ezzard had a 69-yard TD catch and an 80-yard punt return for a score when the Bearkats overcame a 21-point halftime deficit in a 38-35 win in the semifinals against No. 3 seed James Madison, the only team other than eight-time champion North Dakota State to win the FCS title the past nine seasons. Sam Houston in the quarterfinal round eliminated the Bison, who won the title the last three years.

Ezzard, who had 10 catches for 108 yards, put the Bearkats up 14-7 with his 15-yard TD, when he was wide open in the end zone. That occurred shortly after the game resumed following a 74-minute delay because of lightning. The halftime break was shortened to three minutes.

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"It wasn't a shocker for us because we've dealt with stuff like that all year," said Schmid, who finished 20-of-37 passing for 209 yards. "We were kind of joking in the locker room like it's got to be this way for us to win."

Before the stoppage, Ezzard had a tying 35-yard TD when he made the catch behind the line near the left sideline, then cut back and broke a tackle before scoring near the right corner of the end zone.

The weather delay came in the final game of a season pushed into the spring, and ending in mid-May instead of January, because of the coronavirus pandemic. Next season kicks off in only 3 1/2 months.

The game started in a steady rain before getting stopped with 8:25 left in the second quarter because of lightning from the same weather system that impacted the final round of the PGA Tour's AT&T Byron Nelson tournament in McKinney, Texas, less than 10 miles away. There were tornado warnings south of the area. The rain had stopped when play resumed, and the sun even broke through the clouds.

Schmid couldn't handle a high snap on Sam Houston's opening drive, and it was recovered by Tolu Ogunrinde at Bearkats 41. That led to a 1-yard score by Davis, who early in the fourth quarter broke three tackles on a 28-yard TD.

FANS IN THE STANDS

There was a limited capacity crowd of 7,840 at Toyota Stadium, with both teams well-represented at the home of MLS team FC Dallas. Sam Houston's campus in Texas is about 200 miles south of the stadium, and South Dakota State is about 875 miles to the north.

Harrisburg man, 20, arrested after high-speed police pursuit

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Harrisburg man faces charges after he allegedly led sheriff's deputies on a high-speed chase.

The chase began near Harrisburg High School last month when an officer attempted to pull over a car for speeding, according to the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office.

The vehicle took off, turned off its lights and raced away. The vehicle reached speeds of more than 100 mph with its headlights off.

Deputies terminated the chase when the vehicle entered Sioux Falls due to safety concerns. Deputies discovered the 20-year-old Harrisburg man owned the vehicle and later arrested him outside his house.

He was booked into jail on suspicion of aggravated eluding, possession of a controlled substance, driving under the influence, reckless driving, open container and multiple other traffic violations.

Downtown Sioux Falls visitors react to mask-free guidelines

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Many people who were strolling downtown in South Dakota's most populous city over the weekend say the new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance regarding masks is good news.

The CDC earlier in the week put out new recommendations that people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 no longer have to wear masks in most situations. And many people in Sioux Falls were not wearing face coverings.

"I think it's a great idea, get people back to normal," Wade Wilkie, an Iowa resident, said Saturday. "I think it's great for businesses. I own a small business myself and I think it's wonderful for that."

Dina Lantzer said she was happy to move to Sioux Falls from Minnesota in part because of the strict COVID-19 restrictions in South Dakota's neighboring state. She called ditching the masks "a fabulous idea," KELO-TV reported.

"I've never worn a mask, so I just don't agree with the mask rules in the first place, which is one of the reasons why we moved to South Dakota," Lantzer said.

For others, after more than a year of the CDC urging that people wear masks, it might take some time to adapt to the new suggestions.

"I'm so used to wearing a mask all the time, indoors, outdoors, and I just got fully vaccinated," said Jeff Larsen, of Sioux Falls. "It's been three weeks since my second shot, so I'm feeling a bit more safe and I'm

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feeling a little more comfortable going outside and I've still got my mask, just in case."

AT&T signs deal to combine media biz with Discovery

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — AT&T will combine its massive media operations that include CNN HBO, TNT and TBS in a \$43 billion deal with Discovery, the owner of lifestyle networks including the Food Network and HGTV.

Faced with cord-cutting and incursions by streaming services, major broadcast media companies have retrenched and sought strength through mergers.

The deal announced Monday would create a separate media company with households increasingly abandoning cable and satellite TV, looking instead at Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube.

In the all-stock deal, AT&T will receive \$43 billion in a combination of cash, debt securities, and WarnerMedia's retention of certain debt. AT&T shareholders will receive stock representing 71% of the new company and Discovery stockholders will own 29% of the new company. The transaction is considered a

AT&T had pushed into the streaming sector through HBO Max, a direct competitor with Netflix, Apple, Disney and Comcast. Discovery launched a standalone streaming service called Discovery Plus this year.

The deal to give up its media business marks a major shift by AT&T, which fought hard to push a transaction through in 2018 to buy Time Warner for \$85.4 billion with the Justice Department trying to block the deal on anti-competitive reasons.

The deal is expected to close by the middle of next year.

Israel says Gaza tunnels destroyed in heavy airstrikes

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli military unleashed a wave of heavy airstrikes on the Gaza Strip early Monday, saying it destroyed 15 kilometers (nine miles) of militant tunnels and the homes of nine Hamas commanders.

Residents of Gaza awakened by the overnight barrage described it as the heaviest since the war began a week ago, and even more powerful than a wave of airstrikes in Gaza City the day before that left 42 dead and flattened three buildings. That earlier attack was the deadliest in the current round of hostilities between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers.

There was no immediate word on the casualties from the latest strikes. A three-story building in Gaza City was heavily damaged, but residents said the military warned them 10 minutes before the strike and everyone cleared out. They said many of the airstrikes hit nearby farmland.

Gaza's mayor, Yahya Sarraj, told Al-Jazeera TV that the strikes had caused extensive damage to roads and other infrastructure. "If the aggression continues we expect conditions to become worse," he said.

The U.N. has warned that the territory's sole power station is at risk of running out of fuel, and Sarraj said Gaza was also low on spare parts. Gaza already experiences daily power outages for between eight and 12 hours and tap water is undrinkable. Mohammed Thabet, a spokesman for the territory's electricity distribution company, said it has fuel to supply Gaza with electricity for two or a three days. Airstrikes have damaged supply lines and the company's staff cannot reach areas that were hit because of continued Israeli shelling, he added.

The war broke out last Monday, when the Hamas militant group fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem after weeks of clashes in the holy city between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police. The protests were focused on the heavy-handed policing of a flashpoint sacred site during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers.

Since then, the Israeli military has launched hundreds of airstrikes that it says are targeting Hamas' militant infrastructure. Palestinian militants in Gaza have fired more than 3,100 rockets into Israel.

At least 198 Palestinians have been killed in the strikes, including 58 children and 35 women, with 1,300 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Eight people in Israel have been killed in rocket

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attacks launched from Gaza, including a 5-year-old boy and a soldier.

"I have not seen this level of destruction through my 14 years of work," said Samir al-Khatib, an emergency rescue official in Gaza. "Not even in the 2014 war," he added, referring to the most destructive of the previous three wars fought between Israel and Hamas.

The military said it struck nine houses in different parts of northern Gaza that belonged to "high-ranking commanders" in Hamas, the Islamic militant group that has controlled the territory since seizing power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

In recent days, Israel has targeted the homes of a number of senior Hamas leaders, including Yehiyeh Sinwar, the top leader inside Gaza. The group's leadership goes underground when the fighting begins, and it's unlikely any were at home at the time of the strikes.

Hamas and the Islamic Jihad militant group say at least 20 of their fighters have been killed, while Israel says the number is much higher and has released the names of and photos of more than two dozen militant commanders it says were "eliminated."

The military said it struck 35 "terror targets" as well as the tunnels, which it says are part of an elaborate system it refers to as the "Metro," used by fighters to take cover from airstrikes.

Despite international efforts at a cease-fire, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that Israel's attacks were continuing at "full-force" and would "take time." Israel "wants to levy a heavy price" on the Hamas militant group.

Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh, who is based abroad, said the group has been contacted by the U.S., Russia, Egypt and Qatar as part of cease-fire efforts but "will not accept a solution that is not up to the sacrifices of the Palestinian people."

In an interview with the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar, he blamed the war on Israel's actions in Jerusalem and boasted that the rockets were "paralyzing the usurping entity (Israel) by imposing a curfew on its citizens and closing its airports and ports."

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi said his government is working to "urgently" end the violence, in his first comments since the war broke out. Egypt, which borders Gaza and Israel, has played a central role in the cease-fires brokered after previous rounds of fighting.

An Egyptian diplomat said the efforts were focusing on two issues — a halt in all attacks from both sides and halting Israeli policies in the contested city of Jerusalem that helped spark the fighting. These include police raids against Palestinian protesters in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the planned evictions of Palestinians by Jewish settlers in east Jerusalem.

The diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was talking about confidential diplomatic discussions, said mediators were counting on the Biden administration to put pressure on Israel to stop its offensive and there were expectations for action in the coming 48 hours.

Israel's airstrikes have leveled a number of Gaza City's tallest buildings, which Israel alleges contained Hamas military infrastructure. Among them was the building housing The Associated Press Gaza office and those of other media outlets. The Israeli military alerted staff and residents before the strike, and all were able to evacuate the building safely.

Sally Buzbee, the AP's executive editor, has called for an independent investigation into the airstrike.

Netanyahu alleged that Hamas military intelligence was operating inside the building and said Sunday any evidence would be shared through intelligence channels. Neither the White House nor the State Department would say if any had been seen.

The AP had operated from the building for 15 years, including through three previous wars between Israel and Hamas. The news agency's cameras, operating from its top floor office and roof terrace, offered 24-hour live shots as militant rockets arched toward Israel and Israeli airstrikes hammered the city and its surroundings.

AP President and CEO Gary Pruitt released a statement after Saturday's attack saying he was "shocked and horrified" that Israel targeted the building. He said the AP had "no indication Hamas was in the building or active in the building."

"This is something we actively check to the best of our ability," he said. "We would never knowingly put

our journalists at risk.”

Calls mount for Gaza-Israel cease-fire, greater US efforts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

U.N. Security Council diplomats and Muslim foreign ministers convened emergency weekend meetings to demand a stop to civilian bloodshed as Israeli warplanes carried out the deadliest single attacks in nearly a week of Hamas rocket barrages and Israeli airstrikes.

President Joe Biden gave no signs of stepping up public pressure on Israel to agree to an immediate cease-fire despite calls from some Democrats for the Biden administration to get more involved.

His ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told an emergency high-level meeting of the Security Council that the United States was “working tirelessly through diplomatic channels” to stop the fighting.

But as battles between Israel and Gaza’s militant Hamas rulers surged to their worst levels since 2014 and the international outcry grew, the Biden administration — determined to wrench U.S. foreign policy focus away from the Middle East and Afghanistan — has declined so far to criticize Israel’s part in the fighting or send a top-level envoy to the region. Appeals by other countries showed no sign of progress.

Thomas-Greenfield warned that the return to armed conflict would only put a negotiated two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict even further out of reach. However, the United States, Israel’s closest ally, has so far blocked days of efforts by China, Norway and Tunisia to get the Security Council to issue a statement, including a call for the cessation of hostilities.

In Israel, Hady Amr, a deputy assistant dispatched by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to try to de-escalate the crisis, met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who thanked the U.S. for its support.

Blinken himself headed out on an unrelated tour of Nordic countries, with no announced plans to stop in the Middle East in response to the crisis. He made calls from the plane to Egypt and other nations working to broker a cease-fire, telling Egypt that all parties “should de-escalate tensions and bring a halt to the violence.”

Rep. Adam Schiff, Democratic chairman of the House intelligence committee, urged Biden on Sunday to step up pressure on both sides to end current fighting and revive talks to resolve Israel’s conflicts and flashpoints with the Palestinians.

“I think the administration needs to push harder on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to stop the violence, bring about a cease-fire, end these hostilities, and get back to a process of trying to resolve this long-standing conflict,” Schiff, a California Democrat, told CBS’s “Face the Nation.”

And Sen. Todd Young of Indiana, the senior Republican on the foreign relations subcommittee for the region, joined Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, the subcommittee chairman, in asking both sides to cease fire. “As a result of Hamas’ rocket attacks and Israel’s response, both sides must recognize that too many lives have been lost and must not escalate the conflict further,” the two said.

Biden focused on civilian deaths from Hamas rockets in a call with Netanyahu on Saturday, and a White House readout of the call made no mention of the U.S. urging Israel to join in a cease-fire that regional countries were pushing. Thomas-Greenfield said U.S. diplomats were engaging with Israel, Egypt and Qatar, along with the U.N.

Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City flattened three buildings and killed at least 42 people Sunday, medics said, bringing the toll since Hamas and Israel opened their air and artillery battles to at least 188 killed in Gaza and eight in Israel. Some 55 children in Gaza and a 5-year-old boy in Israel were among the dead.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israelis in a televised address Sunday that Israel “wants to levy a heavy price” on Hamas. That will “take time,” Netanyahu said, signaling the war would rage on for now.

Representatives of Muslim nations met Sunday to demand Israel halt attacks that are killing Palestinian civilians in the crowded Gaza strip. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan called on “the international

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community to take urgent action to immediately stop military operations.”

The meeting of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation also saw Turkey and some others criticize a U.S.-backed push under which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and other Islamic nations signed bilateral deals with Israel to normalize their relations, stepping over the wreckage of collapsed international efforts to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians long-term.

“The massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization,” Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said. t

At the virtual meeting of the Security Council, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the U.N. was actively engaging all parties for an immediate cease-fire.

Returning to the scenes of Palestinian militant rocket fire and Israeli airstrikes in the fourth such war between Israel and Hamas, “only perpetuates the cycles of death, destruction and despair, and pushes farther to the horizon any hopes of coexistence and peace,” Guterres said.

Eight foreign ministers spoke at the Security Council session, reflecting the seriousness of the conflict, with almost all urging an end to the fighting.

Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump, had thrown U.S. support solidly behind Israel, embracing Netanyahu as an ally in Trump’s focus on confronting Iran. Trump gave little time to efforts by past U.S. administrations to push peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians, instead encouraging and rewarding Arab nations that signed two-country normalization deals with Israel.

Biden, instead, calls Middle East and Central Asia conflicts a distraction from U.S. foreign policy priorities, including competition with China.

He’s sought to calm some conflicts and extricate the U.S. from others, including ending U.S. military support for a Saudi-led war in Yemen, planning to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and trying to return to a nuclear deal with Iran that Israel opposes.

Joy for UK pubs and hugs tempered by rise in virus variant

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Pubs and restaurants across much of the U.K. opened for indoor service for the first time since early January on Monday, even as the prime minister urged people to be cautious amid the spread of a more contagious COVID-19 variant.

The latest step in the gradual easing of nationwide restrictions imposed on Jan. 4 also includes the reopening of theaters, sports venues and museums, raising hopes that the economy may soon start to recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic. The government is also relaxing guidance on close personal contact, such as hugging, and permitting international travel, though only 12 countries and territories are on the list of “safe” destinations.

But the rapid spread of a variant first discovered in India is tempering the optimism for pubs and hugs amid memories of how another variant swept across the country in December, triggering England’s third national lockdown. Public health officials and the government are urging people to continue to observe social distancing and hygiene guidance, even though they say the situation is different now because almost 70% of the adult population has received at least one dose of vaccine.

“Please, be cautious about the risks to your loved ones,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a video posted on Twitter. “Remember that close contact such as hugging is a direct way of transmitting this disease, so you should think about the risks.”

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are following similar but slightly different reopening paths.

Monday’s reopening allows people to go out for a drink or a meal without shivering in outdoor beer gardens or huddling around sidewalk tables, as only outdoor service was permitted after the rules were initially eased last month. The next phase in Britain’s reopening is scheduled for June 21, when all of the remaining restrictions are set to be removed. Johnson has said a big surge in COVID-19 cases could scuttle those plans.

Both confirmed new cases and coronavirus-related deaths have risen over the past week, though they

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remain well below the peak reported in late December and early January.

New infections averaged about 2,300 per day over the past seven days compared with nearly 70,000 a day during the winter peak, according to government statistics. Deaths averaged just over 10 a day during the same period, down from a peak of 1,820 on Jan. 20.

Britain has recorded almost 128,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest figure in Europe.

Despite concern about the new variant, people are venturing out. Some pubs opened at midnight, ready to scoop up any trade.

Ian Snowball, owner of the Showtime Bar in Huddersfield, northern England, said it was nice to be inside again, rather than facing the island nation's unpredictable weather.

"I don't have to have a hoodie or a coat on any more - it's great," he said. "And hopefully we don't have to go back outside again, hopefully this is the end of it now."

Other Britons couldn't wait to leave altogether. Holidaymakers got up early to check in for the first flights to green list destinations such as Portugal.

Keith and Janice Tomsett, a retired couple in their 70s, were on their way to the Portuguese island of Madeira. They booked their holiday in October "on the offchance" it could go ahead. They had followed all the testing guidelines and were fully vaccinated.

"After 15 months of being locked up this is unbelievably good," Keith Tomsett said. "It was even worth getting up at 3 o'clock this morning."

Dogged by Mideast crisis, US envoy Blinken visits Denmark

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was in Denmark on Monday for talks on climate change, Arctic policy and Russia as calls grew for the Biden administration to take a tougher, more active stance on spiraling Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Blinken is seeing Danish leaders as well as top officials from Greenland and the Faeroe Islands in Copenhagen on Monday before he heads to Iceland for an Arctic Council meeting. That gathering will be marked by his first face-to-face talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a time of significantly heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow.

Russia on Sunday called for an immediate ministerial-level session of the "quartet" of Mideast peacemakers to discuss the escalating Israeli-Palestinian crisis but there was no overt indication that the U.S. would agree. There was also no sign yet that Blinken was changing his travel plans, which currently have him returning to Washington from Reykjavik late Thursday after a brief stop in Greenland.

The Mideast quartet includes envoys from the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. With Blinken and Lavrov both attending the Arctic Council meeting, Iceland could serve as a venue for the group to gather.

The U.N. Security Council held an urgent session Sunday on the Mideast at which U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said the administration was working tirelessly through diplomatic channels to stop the fighting. President Joe Biden spoke with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday, Blinken worked the phones with his counterparts while flying to Copenhagen on Sunday, and a senior U.S. diplomat is in Israel meeting with the parties there.

Yet calls for a greater U.S. response are growing, especially in Congress, where a large number of Biden's Democratic allies are clamoring for more action, including a demand from the administration for a cease-fire. Biden has thus far resisted such calls, reaffirming staunch support for Israel's right to defend itself from rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip while maintaining that both Israelis and Palestinians have an equal right to peace and security.

Israel on Monday unleashed a wave of new airstrikes on the Gaza Strip, saying it had destroyed 15 kilometers (9 miles) of militant tunnels and the homes of nine Hamas commanders. Gaza residents described the barrage as the heaviest since the war began a week ago. At least 188 Palestinians have been killed

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in the strikes and over 1,200 have been wounded, while Hamas rocket attacks have killed eight people in Israel.

In Denmark, Blinken met with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod and Denmark's Queen Margrethe. He also saw the foreign ministers of Denmark's semi-autonomous far north territories of Greenland and the Faeroe Islands.

Climate change is expected to dominate the discussions. The Biden administration is seeking to restore U.S. credibility with allies on the topic after four years during which the Trump administration either downplayed the threat posed by climate change or urged other nations to take advantage of the commercial possibilities resulting from a loss of sea ice and melting glaciers.

After their meeting, Blinken and Frederiksen both noted the change.

"It's a different approach," Frederiksen told reporters. "That means a desire for cooperation around the Arctic region, where changes are taking place."

In a statement, the State Department said Blinken "had emphasized the importance of advancing our mutual goals of combating the climate crisis, developing green technology, and continuing common efforts with the Kingdom of Denmark on the Arctic."

Former President Donald Trump had also created a stir when he proposed purchasing Greenland from Denmark, an offer roundly rejected by both. Trump then canceled a scheduled state visit to Denmark in 2019, creating more ill feelings.

A senior U.S. official said Blinken hoped to get beyond any lingering doubts on Greenland by highlighting "all of the things that we're doing with Greenland as a part of the Kingdom of Denmark."

Afghans who helped the US now fear being left behind

By RAHIM FAIEZ and BEN FOX Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — He served as an interpreter alongside U.S. soldiers on hundreds of patrols and dozens of firefights in eastern Afghanistan, earning a glowing letter of recommendation from an American platoon commander and a medal of commendation.

Still, Ayazudin Hilal was turned down when he applied for one of the scarce special visas that would allow him to relocate to the U.S. with his family. Now, as American and NATO forces prepare to leave the country, he and thousands of others who aided the war effort fear they will be left stranded, facing the prospect of Taliban reprisals.

"We are not safe," the 41-year-old father of six said of Afghan civilians who worked for the U.S. or NATO. "The Taliban is calling us and telling us, 'Your stepbrother is leaving the country soon, and we will kill all of you guys.'"

The fate of interpreters after the troop withdrawal is one of the looming uncertainties surrounding the withdrawal, including a possible resurgence of terrorist threats and a reversal of fragile gains for women in chaos, whether from competing Kabul-based warlords or the Taliban, follows the end of America's military engagement.

Interpreters and other civilians who worked for the U.S. government or NATO can get what is known as a special immigrant visa, or SIV, under a program created in 2009 and modeled after a similar program for Iraqis.

Both SIV programs have long been dogged by complaints about a lengthy and complicated application process for security vetting that grew more cumbersome with pandemic safety measures.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters last month that the U.S. is committed to helping interpreters and other Afghan civilians who aided the war effort, often at great personal risk. The Biden administration has also launched a review of the SIV programs, examining the delays and the ability of applicants to challenge a rejection. It will also be adding anti-fraud measures.

Amid the review, former interpreters, who typically seek to shield their identities and keep a low profile, are becoming increasingly public about what they fear will happen should the Taliban return to power.

"They absolutely are going to kill us," Mohammad Shoaib Walizada, a former interpreter for the U.S.

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Army, said in an interview after joining others in a protest in Kabul.

At least 300 interpreters have been killed in Afghanistan since 2016, and the Taliban have made it clear they will continue to be targeted, said Matt Zeller, a co-founder of No One Left Behind, an organization that advocates on their behalf. He also served in the country as an Army officer.

"The Taliban considers them to be literally enemies of Islam," said Zeller, now a fellow at the Truman National Security Project. "There's no mercy for them."

Members of Congress and former service members have also urged the U.S. government to expedite the application process, which now typically takes more than three years. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said May 10 that the U.S. Embassy in Kabul had temporarily increased staff to help process the visas.

In December, Congress added 4,000 visas, bringing the total number of Afghans who can come with their immediate family members to 26,500, with about half the allotted amount already used and about 18,000 applications pending.

Critics and refugee advocates said the need to relocate could swell dramatically if Afghanistan tumbles further into disarray. As it is, competing warlords financed and empowered by U.S. and NATO forces threaten the future along with a resurgent Taliban, which have been able to make substantive territorial gains against a poorly trained and poorly equipped Afghan security force largely financed by U.S. taxpayers.

"While I applaud the Biden administration's review of the process, if they are not willing to sort of rethink the entire thing, they are not going to actually start helping those Afghans who are most at need," said Noah Coburn, a political anthropologist whose research focuses on Afghanistan.

Coburn estimates there could be as many as 300,000 Afghan civilians who worked for the U.S. or NATO in some form over the past two decades.

"There is a wide range of Afghans who would not be tolerated under the Taliban's conception of what society should look like," said Adam Bates, policy counsel for the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Those fears have been heightened by recent targeted killings of journalists and other civilians as well as government workers. The Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan has claimed responsibility for several, while the Taliban and government blame each other.

Biden raised the nation's overall cap on refugee admissions to 62,500 this month, weeks after facing bipartisan blowback for his delay in replacing the record low ceiling set by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

The U.S. is not planning to move civilians out en masse, for now at least. "We are processing SIVs in Kabul and have no plans for evacuations at this time," a senior administration official said.

The White House is in the beginning stages of discussing its review with Congress and will work with lawmakers if changes in the SIV program are needed "in order to process applications as quickly and efficiently as possible, while also ensuring the integrity of the program and safeguarding national security," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Former interpreters have support in Congress, in part because many also have former American troops vouching for them.

Walizada, for example, submitted a letter of support from an Army sergeant who supervised him in dozens of patrols, including one where the interpreter was wounded by Taliban gunfire. "I cannot recall a linguist who had a greater dedication to his country or the coalition cause," the sergeant wrote.

Walizada was initially approved for a visa, but it was later revoked, with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services telling him that it had "adverse information you may be unaware of," in a letter he provided to The Associated Press. Walizada said he has appealed the decision and hasn't received a response.

Hilal, who translated from Dari and Pashto to English for the Army from June 2009 to December 2012, was rejected by the U.S. Embassy, which said he did not meet the requirement for "faithful and valuable service," because he was fired by the contracting firm that hired him after 3 1/2 years of service.

It was a stinging response, considering the dangers he faced. "If I haven't done faithful and good service for the U.S. Army, why have they given me this medal?" he says, holding the commendation, in an AP interview at an office in Kabul used by the former interpreters to meet with journalists.

Why he was fired by the U.S.-based contractor, Mission Essential, is unclear. Hilal said he had a conflict

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with supervisors that started with a dispute over a work assignment. The company says it does not discuss current or former employees and declined to comment.

But whatever happened eventually, a November 2019 letter of support from his platoon commander was highly complimentary of "stellar" service that "rivals that of most deployed service members."

Hilal was by his side on hundreds of patrols and dozens of firefights, monitoring enemy radio traffic and interpreting during encounters with locals, Army Maj. Thomas Goodman said in the letter.

"He was dependable and performed admirably," Goodman wrote. "Even in firefights that lasted hours on end, he never lost his nerve, and I could always count him to be by my side."

As it happens, an AP journalist was embedded with the unit for a time, amid intense fighting in eastern Afghanistan, and captured images of Hilal and Goodman, surrounded by villagers as American forces competed with the Taliban for the support of the people.

Goodman said he stands by his recommendation but declined to comment further.

Coburn, who interviewed more than 150 special immigrant visa recipients and applicants for a recently released study of the program, said Hilal's denial reflects a rigid evaluation process. "There is no nuance to the definition of service," he said. "You either served or you didn't serve."

The special immigration visa program allows applicants to make one appeal, and many are successful. Nearly 80% of 243 Afghans who appealed in the first quarter of 2021 were subsequently approved after providing additional information, according to the State Department. Hilal says his appeal was rejected.

Bates, of the International Refugee Assistance Project, says the fact that there is a U.S. Army officer willing to support should count for something. "Even if he doesn't qualify for the SIV program, this plainly seems like someone who is in need of protection," he said.

Next Digital trading halted after Jimmy Lai's assets frozen

HONG KONG (AP) — The Hong Kong stock exchange halted trading of Next Digital shares Monday at the media company's request after authorities froze assets belonging to its founder Jimmy Lai, who has been a high-profile voice in the territory's pro-democracy movement.

Later in the day, the media tycoon and nine other pro-democracy activists pleaded guilty to taking part in an unlawful assembly in 2019. Lai is already serving a 14-month sentence for his role in two other unauthorized assemblies during a period when Hong Kong residents were involved in mass anti-government protests.

Next Digital said in a filing that it requested the trading halt after authorities announced the freeze on Lai's assets Friday under a national security law that critics say is meant to snuff out dissent in the semi-autonomous Chinese territory. Next Digital publishes pro-democracy tabloid Apple Daily, and the company was founded by Lai, who owns a 71% stake and is its controlling shareholder.

The freezing of Lai's assets raises questions about Next Digital's survival as a company. Advertisers have become wary of Apple Daily's staunch, pro-democratic stance in Hong Kong, adversely impacting its revenue as authorities crack down on dissenting voices in the city at the urging of leaders in Beijing.

Last week, the Taiwan Apple Daily newspaper said it would stop publishing a print edition. The paper said it had been losing money, and Next Digital could no longer support it because "pro-China forces" had blocked access to advertising for its flagship Apple Daily newspaper and other publications in Hong Kong.

Lai and the nine others who pleaded guilty over an October 2019 demonstration, can make mitigation pleas on May 24 and the sentences will be handed down on May 28. They face up to five years imprisonment.

The mass protests started over a proposed extradition bill that many saw as an infringement on the freedoms Hong Kong was promised when it was handed over from British to Chinese control in 1997 and then evolved to include broader demands for democracy. After months of protests and sometimes violent clashes between security forces and protesters, Beijing began tightening its control over the territory.

Last year it imposed a new national security law on the city that is widely seen as giving authorities a way to crack down on dissent that was previous legal. The law broadly criminalizes secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign collusion, and police have arrested more than a hundred people under the legislation.

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Lai is under investigation by the national security department for allegedly colluding with foreign powers and endangering national security.

His assets were frozen under the national security law, which states that if there are reasonable grounds to believe that property is related to a national security offense, then "relevant persons and organizations must not, directly or indirectly, deal with certain property which is reasonably suspected to be related to offences endangering national security," the government said in a statement Friday.

In recent months, Hong Kong police have arrested most of the city's pro-democracy activists, and have put prominent activists such as Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow behind bars. Most of the pro-democracy activists arrested are still in police custody.

India braces for powerful cyclone amid deadly virus surge

NEW DELHI (AP) — A powerful cyclone roaring in the Arabian Sea was moving toward India's western coast on Monday as authorities tried to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people and suspended COVID-19 vaccinations in one state.

Cyclone Tauktae, which has already killed six people in parts of southern India, was expected to make landfall on Monday evening in Gujarat state with winds of up to 175 kilometers (109 miles) per hour, the India Meteorological Department said.

Forecasters warned of possible extensive damage from high winds, heavy rainfall and flooding in low-lying areas.

The massive storm comes as India is battling with a devastating coronavirus surge — and both the storm and the virus could exacerbate the effects of the other. The storm has already led to the suspension of some vaccination efforts and there is greater risk of virus transmission in crowded evacuation shelters.

Virus lockdown measures, meanwhile, could slow relief work after the storm, and damage from the storm could destroy roads and cut vital supply lines for vaccines and medical supplies needed for virus patients.

In Gujarat, vaccinations were suspended for two days and authorities worked to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people to temporary relief shelters. The state's chief minister, Vijay Rupani, asked officials to ensure that oxygen supplies for hospitals are not disrupted.

In Maharashtra, operations at Mumbai city's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport were suspended for five hours.

Fishing boats off the coast in both states returned to their harbors and thousands of rescue and relief teams, along with ships and aircraft, were deployed for recovery operations.

The South Asia head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Udaya Regmi, said the cyclone is a "terrible double blow" for families that have already been hit by COVID-19 infections and deaths.

"The potential impacts of Cyclone Tauktae are frightening as this monster storm threatens the state of Gujarat. Every effort must continue to keep people safe from this dangerous storm and the raging pandemic," Regmi said.

India's western coast is no stranger to devastating cyclones, but changing climate patterns have caused them to become more intense, rather than more frequent.

In May 2020, nearly 100 people died after Cyclone Amphan, the most powerful storm to hit eastern India in more than a decade, ravaged the region and left millions without power.

The Latest: Turkey urges Pope to back sanctions on Israel

By The Associated Press undefined

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has asked Pope Francis to support sanctions against Israel, saying Palestinians will continue to be "massacred" as long as the international community does not punish Israel.

During a telephone call Monday with the pope, Erdogan also said that "continued messages

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and reactions" from Francis in support of Palestinians would be of great importance for the "mobilization of the Christian world and of the international community," according to a statement from the Turkish presidential communications directorate.

During their conversation, Erdogan also renewed a call for the international community to take concrete steps to show Israel the "dissuasive reaction and lesson it deserves," according to the statement. The Turkish leader has been engaged in a telephone diplomacy bid to end Israel's use of force.

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Gaza's mayor says Israeli airstrikes Monday on the Gaza Strip have caused extensive damage to roads and other infrastructure, while the Israeli military says they destroyed 15 kilometers (nine miles) of militant tunnels and the homes of nine alleged Hamas commanders.

"If the aggression continues we expect conditions to become worse," mayor Yahya Sarraj told Al-Jazeera TV.

The U.N. has warned that the territory's sole power station is at risk of running out of fuel, and Sarraj said Gaza was also low on spare parts. Gaza already experiences daily power outages for between eight and 12 hours and tap water is undrinkable. Mohammed Thabet, a spokesman for the the territory's electricity distribution company, said it has fuel to supply Gaza with electricity for two or three days. Airstrikes have damaged supply lines and the company's staff cannot reach areas that were hit because of continued Israeli shelling, he added.

The war broke out last Monday, when the Hamas militant group fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem after weeks of clashes in the holy city between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police. The protests were focused on the heavy-handed policing of a flashpoint sacred site during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers.

Since then, the Israeli military has launched hundreds of airstrikes that it says are targeting Hamas' militant infrastructure. Palestinian militants in Gaza have fired more than 3,100 rockets into Israel.

At least 188 Palestinians have been killed in the strikes and 1,230 people wounded. Eight people in Israel have been killed in rocket attacks from Gaza.

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says its airstrikes on the Gaza Strip have destroyed 15 kilometers (nine miles) of militant tunnels and the homes of nine alleged Hamas commanders.

Residents of Gaza awakened early Monday by the overnight barrage described it as the heaviest since the war began a week ago, and even more powerful than a wave of airstrikes in Gaza City the day before that left 42 dead and flattened three buildings.

There was no immediate word Monday on the casualties from the latest strikes. A three-story building in Gaza City was heavily damaged, but residents said the military warned them 10 minutes before the strike and everyone cleared out. They said many of the airstrikes hit nearby farmland.

AP Exclusive: Full-blown boycott pushed for Beijing Olympics

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

Groups alleging human-rights abuses against minorities in China are calling for a full-blown boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, a move likely to ratchet up pressure on the International Olympic Committee, athletes, sponsors and sports federations.

A coalition representing Uyghurs, Tibetans, residents of Hong Kong and others issued a statement Monday calling for the boycott, eschewing lesser measures that had been floated like "diplomatic boycotts" and further negotiations with the IOC or China.

"The time for talking with the IOC is over," Lhadon Tethong of the Tibet Action Institute said in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press. "This cannot be games as usual or business as usual; not for the IOC and not for the international community."

The Beijing Games are set to open on Feb. 4, 2022, just six months after the postponed Summer Olympics in Tokyo are to end.

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Rights groups have met several times in the last year with the IOC, asking that the games be removed from China. A key member in those talks was Zumretay Arkin of the World Uyghur Congress.

Tethong, herself, was detained and deported from China in 2007 — a year before the Beijing Summer Olympics — for leading a campaign for Tibet.

"The situation where we are now is demonstrably worse than it was then," Tethong said, pointing out that the IOC said the 2008 Olympics would improve human rights in China. "If the games go ahead, then Beijing gets the international seal of approval for what they are doing."

The push for a boycott comes a day before a joint hearing in the U.S. Congress focusing on the Beijing Olympics and China's human-rights record, and just days after the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee said boycotts are ineffective and only hurt athletes.

"People have worked to engage with the IOC in good faith to have them understand the issues directly from the mouths of those most impacted — the Uyghurs at the top of that list and the Tibetans and others," Tethong said. "It's clear the IOC is completely uninterested in what the real impacts on the ground for people are."

The IOC has repeatedly said it must be "neutral" and stay out of politics. The Switzerland-based body is essentially a sports business, deriving about 75% of its income from selling broadcast rights, and 18% more from sponsors. It also has observer status at the United Nations.

"We are not a super-world government," IOC President Thomas Bach said recently.

China's foreign ministry has criticized "the politicization of sports" and has said any boycott is "doomed to failure." China has denied accusations of genocide against the Uyghur people.

A recent U.S. State Department report stated explicitly that "genocide and crimes against humanity" have taken place in the past year against Muslim Uyghurs and other minorities in the western region of Xinjiang.

Tethong said she knows some athletes may be opposed. But she said others, who gained traction from Black Lives Matter movement, may become allies. She acknowledged this as a "gloves-off" moment.

"There are obviously a lot of people who are concerned about the athletes and their lifelong work," Tethong said. "But in the end it's the IOC that has put them in this position and should be held accountable."

American skier Mikaela Shiffrin, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, spelled out the dilemma for athletes in a recent interview on CNN.

"You certainly don't want to be put in the position of having to choose between human rights like morality versus being able to do your job," she said.

Tethong suggested coalition members might lobby the IOC's top 15 sponsors, American network NBC, which generates about 40% of all IOC revenue, sports federations, civil society groups "and anyone that will listen."

Activists have already singled out IOC sponsor Airbnb for attention.

"First is the moral question," Tethong said. "Is it OK to host an international goodwill sporting event such as the Olympic Games while the host nation is committing genocide just beyond the stands?"

In meetings with the IOC, activists say they have asked to see documents in which China has given "assurances" about human rights conditions. Activists say the IOC has not produced the documents.

The IOC included human rights requirements several years ago in the host city contract for the 2024 Paris Olympics, but it did not include those guidelines — the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights — for Beijing. Paris is the first Olympics to contain the standards, long pushed for by human rights groups.

Last week, human rights groups and Western nations led by the United States, Britain and Germany accused China of massive crimes against the Uyghur minority and demanded unimpeded access for U.N. experts.

At the meeting, Britain's U.N. Ambassador, Barbara Woodward, called the situation in Xinjiang "one of the worst human rights crises of our time."

"The evidence points to a program of repression of specific ethnic groups," Woodward said. "Expressions of religion have been criminalized and Uyghur language and culture are discriminated against systematically and at scale."

Eurovision Song Contest returns despite coronavirus pandemic

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands (AP) — Pounding beats? Check. Uplifting lyrics? Check. Huge, backlit white wings? Check.

After last year's Eurovision Song Contest was canceled amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is roaring back to life this year with coronavirus bubbles added to its heady mix of music and melodrama.

National delegations traveling to the Dutch port city of Rotterdam are abiding by strict measures to reduce the risk of infections, while the thousands of fans allowed to attend dress rehearsals, two semifinals and May 22's grand final will have to undergo testing to ensure they do not bring the virus into the cavernous venue.

Executive producer Sietse Bakker is glad it's going ahead at all.

"Organizing the Eurovision Song Contest is always challenging because you have less than a year to organize one of the biggest and most complex events in Europe, but to do it in a pandemic is much, much more complicated," he told The Associated Press.

Despite the pandemic measures, the contest that aims to unite Europe in song is continuing its 65-year tradition of upbeat fun.

Fans near the Ahoy arena can get into the swing of the event early. Traffic lights at a pedestrian walkway outside the venue have been transformed so that a green figure dances to Abba's iconic 1974 winning song "Waterloo" when it's safe to cross.

The immensely popular event mixes high camp — at rehearsals, Norway's Andreas Haukeland, known as TIX, performed his song "Fallen Angel" in huge white wings — with lyrics encouraging inclusion and positivity while avoiding political messages.

Belarus was booted out before the contest even started because organizers the European Broadcasting Union said the country's original song "puts the nonpolitical nature of the Contest in question." A replacement song also was rejected.

The theme for this year's Eurovision Song Contest is "Open up." It was actually chosen before the pandemic derailed public life around the globe, but is now very apt as Europe begins to tentatively emerge from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We decided to keep the theme because, especially in these times, it's important that we are open towards each other and that we feel the possibility to open up to one another, to show our true feelings, emotions and thoughts," Bakker said.

The 2019 Dutch winner, Duncan Laurence, says on the event's website that he sees music as a way of forging links. "That's why we need the Eurovision Song Contest. To feel connected again."

Thousands of fans will be able to make the connection in person.

Each event will be open to 3,500 people — only about 20% of the capacity of the arena — who must show a negative test result that is less than 24 hours old.

The top 10 from each semifinal joins France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom — together with host country the Netherlands — in the final. Voting is conducted in each participating country by a panel of music industry experts and viewers.

The pandemic forced the cancellation of last year's event and this year prevented Australian singer Montaigne from flying to Rotterdam. The Netherlands is hosting the event because the country won the last time the contest was held, in 2019.

Montaigne is still taking part, but by sending in a recorded live performance.

She's not the only one missing out. The mother of Dutch entrant Jeangu Macrooy also is unable to attend as she can't travel from her home in Suriname. Swedish singer Tusse's father wants to know if he can vote for him from his home in Congo.

Ukraine had a scare when the lead singer of its band, Go_A, Kateryna Pavlenko, had to skip a rehearsal in Rotterdam and get tested after feeling unwell. The result was negative and she was welcomed back.

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She and her band are among 39 national entrants vying for a coveted victory that can be a springboard to a global career or a fleeting taste of fame.

For many, the stage and global television audience of millions is a chance to express messages of inclusion and positivity.

Russia's performer, Manizha, sings a song whose lyrics include the lines: "Every Russian Woman. Needs to know. You're strong enough to bounce against the wall."

The singer, whose family fled to Russia from Tajikistan, said the message is for women all over the world "because we need to be, we have to be brave. We need to be happier. And I'm happy that I can inspire them on that stage because, you know, Eurovision stage is the one of the hugest stages in the world."

Maltese singer Destiny also has a message of body positivity and is tipped to take it to the final. The 18-year-old's powerful voice helped her win the Junior Eurovision contest and reach the semifinals of Britain's Got Talent in 2017.

Amid the many over-the-top performances, the relatively restrained song "Voilà" by French singer Barbara Pravi has emerged as the bookmakers' favorite.

Cyprus' performer Elena Tsagrinou has already been in the spotlight after Orthodox Christian faithful on the Mediterranean island protested that it promoted satanic worship.

Tsagrinou says her song, "El Diabolo," which she performs flanked by four dancers in skin-tight red costumes, was misinterpreted and is actually about an abusive relationship between two lovers.

She laughs off the controversy that saw protesters hold up wooden crosses and sing hymns outside of Cyprus' state broadcaster in March.

Tsagrinou said dealing with the COVID-19 restrictions is tough ahead of the contest, "but that's not going to keep us back and we're going to feel the vibe that we want to feel and the smile on our face."

111-year-old Australian recommends eating chicken brains

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australia's oldest-ever man has included eating chicken brains among his secrets to living more than 111 years.

Retired cattle rancher Dexter Kruger on Monday marked 124 days since he turned 111, a day older than World War I veteran Jack Lockett was when he died in 2002.

Kruger told Australian Broadcasting Corp. in an interview at his nursing home in the rural Queensland state town of Roma days before the milestone that a weekly poultry delicacy had contributed to his longevity.

"Chicken brains. You know, chickens have a head. And in there, there's a brain. And they are delicious little things," Kruger said. "There's only one little bite."

Kruger's 74-year-old son Greg credits his father's simple Outback lifestyle for his long life.

Nursing home manager Melanie Calvert said Kruger, who is writing his autobiography, was "probably one of the sharpest residents here."

"His memory is amazing for a 111-year-old," Calvert said.

John Taylor, a founder of The Australian Book of Records, confirmed that Kruger had become the oldest-ever Australian man.

The oldest-ever verified Australian was Christina Cook, who died in 2002 aged 114 years and 148 days.

Glimmer of hope seen in India, but virus crisis not over yet

By KRUTIKA PATHI and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

BENGALURU, India (AP) — For the first time in months, Izzaar Hussain Shaikh is feeling somewhat optimistic.

The 30-year-old ambulance driver in India's metropolis of Mumbai has been working tirelessly ever since the city became the epicenter of another catastrophic COVID-19 surge slashing through the country. Last month, he drove about 70 patients to the hospital, his cellphone constantly vibrating with calls.

But two weeks into May, he's only carried 10 patients. Cases are falling and so are the phone calls.

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"We used to be so busy before, we didn't even have time to eat," he said.

In the last week, the number of new cases plunged by nearly 70% in India's financial capital, home to 22 million people. After a peak of 11,000 daily cases, the city is now seeing fewer than 2,000 a day.

The turnaround represents a glimmer of hope for India, still in the clutches of a devastating coronavirus surge that has raised public anger at the government.

A well-enforced lockdown and vigilant authorities are being credited for Mumbai's burgeoning success. Even the capital of New Delhi is seeing whispers of improvement as infections slacken after weeks of tragedy and desperation playing out in overcrowded hospitals and crematoriums and on the streets.

With over 24 million confirmed cases and 270,000 deaths, India's caseload is the second highest after the U.S. But experts believe that the country's steeply rising curve may finally be flattening — even if the plateau is a high one, with an average of 340,000 confirmed daily cases last week. On Monday, infections continued to decline as cases dipped below 300,000 for the first time in weeks.

It is still too early to say things are improving, with Mumbai and New Delhi representing only a sliver of the overall situation.

For one, drops in the national caseload, however marginal, largely reflect falling infections in a handful of states with big populations and/or high rates of testing. So the nationwide trends represent an incomplete and misleading picture of how things are faring across India as a whole, experts say.

"There will always be smaller states or cities where things are getting worse, but this won't be as clear in the national caseload numbers," said Murad Banaji, a mathematician modeling India's cases.

Given India's size and population of nearly 1.4 billion, what's more important to track is a cascade of peaks at different times instead of a single national one, experts said.

"It seems like we are getting desensitized by the numbers, having gotten used to such high ones," said Bhramar Mukherjee, a University of Michigan biostatistician tracking the virus in India. "But a relative change or drop in overall cases does not diminish the magnitude of the crisis by any means."

With active cases over 3.6 million, hospitals are still swamped by patients.

Experts also warn that another reason for an apparent peak or plateau in cases could be that the virus has outrun India's testing capabilities. As the virus jumps from cities to towns to villages, testing has struggled to keep pace, stirring fears that a rural surge is unfurling even as data lags far behind.

Combating the spread in the countryside, where health infrastructure is scarce and where most Indians live, will be the biggest challenge. "The transmission will be slower and lower, but it can still exact a big toll," said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India.

Even in big cities, testing has become increasingly harder to access. Labs are inundated and results are taking days, leading many to start treating symptoms before confirming a coronavirus infection. In the last month, cases have more than tripled and reported deaths have gone up six times — but testing has only increased by 1.6 times, said Mukherjee. Meanwhile, vaccinations have plummeted by 40%.

One of the biggest concerns for experts is that India may never know the full death toll from the virus, with fatalities undercounted on such a scale that reporters are finding more answers at crematoriums than official state tallies.

But while authorities previously appeared to struggle to even acknowledge the scale, they're now taking action. "Before, there just wasn't a focused attention. But now everyone is focused on containing it as much as possible," Reddy said.

Hit by a staggering shortage of beds, oxygen and other medical supplies, many states are now adding thousands of beds a week, converting stadiums into COVID-19 hospitals, and procuring as much equipment as possible. States across India are preparing to be hit by another torrent of infections and even courts have intervened to help untangle oxygen supplies.

Aid from overseas, while still facing bureaucratic hurdles, is starting to trickle in. More than 11,000 oxygen concentrators, nearly 13,000 oxygen cylinders and 34 million vials of antivirals have been sent to different states.

Still, help is arriving too slowly in many districts as new infections surface in every single region, even

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the remote Andaman and Nicobar islands in the Indian Ocean.

Even though Mumbai looks as if it might have turned a corner, surrounding Maharashtra state is still seeing around 40,000 daily cases. "You have a really, really complicated and mixed picture," said Banaji, the mathematician.

But in at least one Mumbai hospital, "the burden is 30% to 40% less than before," said Dr. Om Shrivastav, a doctor and member of Maharashtra's COVID-19 task force.

Already, the city and state are bracing for more infections. A court told Maharashtra this week to continue updating and ramping up measures as authorities look into getting vaccines from abroad to fill a domestic shortage.

"We are making sure we're not caught napping. In the event this happens again, we're going to do better," Shrivastav said.

Officer charged in death of Daunte Wright to appear in court

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A former suburban Minneapolis police officer charged with second-degree manslaughter for fatally shooting 20-year-old Black motorist Daunte Wright is scheduled to appear in court via videoconference Monday.

Former Brooklyn Center Officer Kim Potter, who is white, has an omnibus hearing, also known as a pretrial hearing, on Monday afternoon in Hennepin County District Court. The purpose of such a hearing is to go over evidence and determine if there's probable cause for the case to proceed.

Wright, father of a young son, was killed April 11 after a traffic stop. The former Brooklyn Center police chief has said he believes Potter meant to use her Taser on Wright instead of her handgun. Body camera video shows her shouting "Taser!" multiple times before firing. The shooting ignited days of unrest. Wright's family members and protesters had wanted prosecutors to file murder charges.

The shooting happened amid the trial for Derek Chauvin, the white former Minneapolis police officer who was convicted of murder for pressing his knee against George Floyd's neck as the Black man said he couldn't breathe.

Police have said Wright was pulled over for expired tags, but they sought to arrest him after discovering an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and had a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

Police body camera video shows Potter approaching Wright as he stands outside of his car as another officer is arresting him. As Wright struggles with police, Potter shouts, "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" before firing a single shot from a handgun in her right hand.

The criminal complaint noted that Potter holstered her handgun on the right side and her Taser on the left, both with their grips facing rearward. To remove the Taser — which is yellow and has a black grip — Potter would have to use her left hand, the complaint said.

Intent isn't a necessary component of second-degree manslaughter in Minnesota. The charge — which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison — can be applied in circumstances where a person is suspected of causing a death by "culpable negligence" that creates an unreasonable risk and consciously takes chances to cause a death.

Wright family attorney Ben Crump has disputed that the shooting was accidental, arguing that an experienced officer knows the difference between a Taser and a handgun. Experts say cases of officers mistakenly firing their gun instead of a Taser are rare, usually less than once a year nationwide.

Brooklyn Center was moving toward firing Potter when she resigned shortly after the shooting. The city's police chief also resigned, after the City Council fired the city manager.

AP's top editor calls for probe into Israeli airstrike

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Associated Press' top editor is calling for an independent investigation into the

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Israeli airstrike that targeted and destroyed a Gaza City building housing the AP, broadcaster Al-Jazeera and other media, saying the public deserves to know the facts.

Separately, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders asked the International Criminal Court to investigate Israel's bombing of a building housing the media organizations as a possible war crime.

Sally Buzbee, AP's executive editor, said Sunday that the Israeli government has yet to provide clear evidence supporting its attack, which leveled the 12-story al-Jalaa tower.

The Israeli military, which gave AP journalists and other tenants about an hour to evacuate, claimed Hamas used the building for a military intelligence office and weapons development. Israeli military spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus said Israel was compiling evidence for the U.S. but declined to commit to providing it within the next two days.

"We're in the middle of fighting," Conricus said Sunday. "That's in process and I'm sure in due time that information will be presented."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would share any evidence of Hamas' presence in the targeted building through intelligence channels. But neither the White House nor the State Department would say if any American official had seen it.

Buzbee said the AP has had offices in al-Jalaa tower for 15 years and never was informed or had any indication that Hamas might be in the building. She said the facts must be laid out.

"We are in a conflict situation," Buzbee said. "We do not take sides in that conflict. We heard Israelis say they have evidence; we don't know what that evidence is."

"We think it's appropriate at this point for there to be an independent look at what happened yesterday — an independent investigation," she added.

In remarks Sunday, Netanyahu repeated Israel's claim that the building housed an intelligence office of Hamas. Asked if he had relayed supporting evidence of that in a call with President Joe Biden on Saturday, Netanyahu said that "we pass it through our intelligence people."

The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, known by its French acronym RSF, said in a letter to the court's chief prosecutor that the offices of 23 international and local media organizations have been destroyed over the past six days.

RSF said it had strong reason to believe that the Israeli military's "intentional targeting of media organizations and intentional destruction of their equipment" could violate one of the court's statutes. It said the attacks serve "to reduce, if not neutralize, the media's capacity to inform the public."

RSF asked the international court, based in the Dutch city of The Hague, to include the recent attacks in a war crimes probe opened in March into Israel's practices in Palestinian territories.

Buzbee said the AP journalists were "rattled" after the airstrike but are doing fine and reporting the news. She expressed concern about the impact on news coverage.

"This does impact the world's right to know what is happening on both sides of the conflict in real time," she said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by phone Saturday with AP's president and CEO, Gary Pruitt. The State Department said Blinken offered "his unwavering support for independent journalists and media organizations around the world and noted the indispensability of their reporting in conflict zones."

Buzbee and Conricus spoke on CNN's "Reliable Sources" and Netanyahu was on CBS' "Face the Nation."

'So I raped you.' Facebook message renews fight for justice

By MARYCLAIRE DALE AP Legal Affairs Writer

MOORESTOWN, New Jersey (AP) — Shannon Keeler was enjoying a weekend getaway with her boyfriend last year when she checked her Facebook messages for the first time in ages. A name popped up that stopped her cold.

"So I raped you," the person said in a burst of unread messages sent six months earlier.

"I'll never do it to anyone ever again."

"I need to hear your voice."

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"I'll pray for you."

The messages rocketed Keeler back to the life-shattering night in December 2013 when an upperclassman at Gettysburg College stalked her at a party, snuck into her dorm and barged into her room while she pleaded with him and texted friends for help. It was the final night of her first semester of college.

Eight years later, she still hopes to persuade authorities in Pennsylvania to make an arrest, armed now with perhaps her strongest piece of evidence: his alleged confession, sent via social media.

But is it enough?

Before and after the attack, Keeler followed the protocols designed to prevent campus sex assaults or address them when they happen. She had a male friend walk her home from the party. She reported the rape that day, met with police and endured a painful and intrusive rape exam. And she pushed for charges. Yet, at every turn, the justice system failed her, just like it fails most college rape victims.

For all the focus on sexual violence in the #MeToo era, and on student protections under Title IX, very few campus rapes are ever prosecuted, according to victim advocates and the limited crime data available. Only one in five college sex assault victims report to police. And when they do, prosecutors often hesitate to take cases where victims had been drinking or knew the accused.

"It has bothered me over the years that I was never able to do anything," said Keeler, now 26. "If you're not going to help me, who are you going to help? Because I do have evidence."

As a 5-foot-11 goalie for one of the best high school lacrosse teams in the country, Keeler had plenty of options for college. By senior year, she was the starter, and capped her career at Moorestown High School in New Jersey with a state title. She had long dreamed of playing Division I.

But Gettysburg Coach Carol Cantele sold her on the rewards of playing for a smaller Division III program. She could study abroad. Join a sorority. Have a life.

She left for Gettysburg in August.

"I was loving college. I had a great first semester," said Keeler, the youngest of four. "I would say Shannon was full of life on Dec. 14, 2013."

A snowstorm had pushed back her last final, leaving the 18-year-old on campus an extra day. Most students had cleared out.

Keeler sat for the Spanish exam that Saturday. She and a girlfriend took playful pictures in the snow that night, and had a few drinks and got pizza. She'd drive her little Nissan Versa home the next day.

"You know, I didn't have a worry in the world," Keeler said.

She met up with friends at a fraternity house, where she had fun drinking and dancing. An upperclassman, who did not belong to the frat, started bothering a sophomore from Connecticut.

"I met this guy. And we started dancing and kissing," said the woman, Katayoun Amir-Aslani. "But then he grabbed my chest and my crotch and told me he wanted to take me away. And so I freaked out and told him I needed to go to the bathroom."

She spotted Keeler in there and asked for help, though they'd never met. The tall, first-year athlete agreed to help fend him off.

Later in the night, the same guy focused on Keeler, "getting gross" with her on the dance floor.

"He wasn't getting the hint," she said. "It was getting creepy. My friend said, 'Do you want me to walk you home?'"

The dorm was just across the street, but the male friend accompanied her. The creep followed them — offering \$20 for the friend to leave them alone, disappearing when he was rebuffed, and finding his way to Keeler's room after she went to bed.

Keeler heard a knock and presumed it was a friend. To her dread, it was him.

"I opened it and I texted my friends that he was here and I needed help. And he raped me," Keeler said. "As soon as he did, he started crying after."

"He said, 'I didn't mean to hurt you. Did I hurt you?'" she said. "And then he ran away."

At that point, she did not even know his name.

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Four friends came running from the frat house. It was nearly 3 a.m., and the freshman dorm was locked. They had to wait for Keeler to come down from the third floor and let them in.

"I will never forget the look on her face, when she opened the door for us. It was heartbreaking," said Amir-Aslani, who was among them.

Keeler went back to the frat with them and tried to get some sleep.

At 10 a.m., back at Patrick Hall, she ran into a resident assistant, and he brought her to campus security. They asked Gettysburg police to respond, but an officer said Keeler had to come to them, records show. The RA took her to the police station, and she gave a statement. Then her coach came and took her to the hospital.

Cantele, as she drove, thought: "How could this have happened to one of 'my girls'? How could I have educated them better to watch out for each other, and for themselves?"

And: "Why do we even have to think like that?"

Keeler's parents were in church when they got the call. Monica Keeler, a nurse, stepped out into the cold to take it, on to a quaint Main Street in their Philadelphia suburb, dotted with century-old churches and small stores.

"I think I could have died," she said. "I went in and I said to Lou, 'Come on, we've got to go.'"

A friend drove Dr. Louis Keeler to Gettysburg, nearly three hours away.

He found Cantele at the hospital. Already, his daughter had been given medications to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, infections, pregnancy and nausea, and been interviewed again, photographed and swabbed.

They drove home together in the Versa for Christmas.

Within a week or so, Monica and Shannon Keeler returned to Gettysburg to meet with police. It did not go well.

"The impression was, there are so many of these (campus) incidents, how could we ever investigate all this?" the mother recalled.

The suspect, identified by others at the party, left Gettysburg but denied any wrongdoing in an email to school officials, according to records that Keeler obtained. His withdrawal ended the school's Title IX investigation, she said.

The Associated Press — which tried to reach the 28-year-old man through phone numbers and emails linked to him and his parents, and through social media — is not identifying him because he has not been charged. None of the AP's messages were returned. He appeared to finish college at another school, based on his online profile.

In early January, Keeler got a terse letter from Gettysburg's police chief saying she had 20 days to decide whether to pursue charges. The statute of limitations for rape in Pennsylvania is 12 years.

Her family, following her lead, went all in. They called school officials, detectives, prosecutors and the victim's advocate. They sent emails seeking updates. Keeler told police how to reach Amir-Aslani and the other witnesses. Eighteen months and two lacrosse seasons went by.

Finally, before Keeler left for Spain her junior year, Adams County District Attorney Scott Wagner agreed to meet with them at a highway rest stop.

Keeler recalls him saying it would be hard to prove what went on in her room that night. And that it was difficult to bring cases when alcohol is involved. And that the suspect was living out-of-state — seemingly, out of their reach.

In late December 2015, days after she returned from Seville, Keeler learned he would not be filing charges. The two-year window to sue her attacker had closed.

"So, basically, you're telling me that anybody that rapes a girl in Adams County gets a pass?" Keeler thought.

Wagner, now a county judge, declined to speak with The Associated Press.

His successor, District Attorney Brian Sinnett, would not discuss the specifics of Keeler's case, but said he can't bring charges unless a case meets the high bar needed for conviction.

According to his records, his office filed 10 rape charges in the county from 2013 to 2019 involving adult

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victims, along with seven counts of another felony, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse. (Most of their sex crimes cases involve children or child pornography, he said.)

Yet Gettysburg College alone received 95 rape complaints during that period, according to the crime data that schools must report each year.

A well-regarded school of about 2,500 students, Gettysburg is far from alone in reporting a troubling number of campus sex assaults under the 1990 Clery Act. School officials declined to comment for this story, except to note that Clery data captures all alleged sexual assaults reported to them, some filed anonymously and never investigated.

According to Sinnett, few of those reports reach his office. And not all that do can be prosecuted.

"You have to look at what evidence do you have: can it be corroborated, whether it fits in with the statute of limitations, what is the likelihood of success at trial? All of those types of things," Sinnett said. "I don't know an ethical prosecutor who would say, 'I think I might have probable cause — let's just throw it up and see what a jury does.'"

Campus sexual assaults are rarely easy to prosecute.

Many victims want to keep the matter private or resolve it through school disciplinary hearings. Often, the two parties know each other or perhaps dated. And the sting of rape accusations that fall apart, including the 2006 Duke lacrosse case and the retracted 2014 Rolling Stone story on the University of Virginia, may trouble prosecutors.

Still, their hesitancy can discourage not only victims from coming forward, but police from doing their job.

"You can see cases, that are strong cases, that don't get prosecuted," said Carol Tracy, executive director of the Women's Law Project in Philadelphia, who has worked with police groups on the issue. "What one hears ... is it's so discouraging that it affects the next investigation that gets done."

Gettysburg's current police chief, Robert Glenny, told the AP that one of his detectives is actively working on Keeler's case. He cautioned that online messages, however damning, need to be traced and verified. He wouldn't comment on how her case was handled earlier, but did express concerns about college sex assault investigations in general. He believes the Title IX mandates bring police in too late, after victims tell their stories several times to campus officials. He said his office never sees most of the sex assault complaints from the college police.

Some lawyers are trying to address the reluctance to prosecute.

Jennifer Long, a former Philadelphia prosecutor, co-founded a training organization called Aequitas in 2009 to help prosecutors tackle sexual assault cases. She thinks her peers focus too much on conviction rates.

"I don't mean to minimize convictions. Obviously, we want to hold offenders responsible. But we want to identify what skills and knowledge we need to be able to do that," Long said.

Too often, she said, prosecutors underestimate the strength of their cases and the ability of juries to sort through them.

Aequitas shows them how to overcome potential hurdles, such as using a toxicologist to discuss a victim's impairment or a psychiatrist to explain victim and offender behavior.

A few prosecutors in college towns have blazed forward, bringing cases that involved Stanford, where a star swimmer infamously received a 6-month sentence for sexually assaulting a woman and leaving her unconscious by a Dumpster; Yale, where a student from Afghanistan was acquitted in a 2018 trial and later sued the school; and Philadelphia, where a Temple University fraternity president arrested while boarding a flight to Israel was convicted in one of two alleged attacks.

More often, cases linger and no one is charged, which discourages other victims from coming forward.

That's what happened with the sophomore Keeler met the night she was attacked, Katayoun Amir-Aslani.

A few months after meeting Keeler in the frat house bathroom, she was raped at Gettysburg by an acquaintance, she said.

She did not file a report. She did not get a rape kit. Instead, she quietly left school after that spring.

"I didn't have any witnesses, and after the experience I had ... with Shannon, and nothing happened

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with her, I just (thought), 'Well, what's the point of me going through all of this for nothing?'" said the 26-year-old artist, who now lives in New York City. "So I just didn't really tell anyone."

Keeler stayed at Gettysburg, capping her time there with a 5-4 win in the Division III national championship her senior year. She considered it "the ultimate victory" over her attacker.

"I was thinking, 'Look, I won. You didn't hold me back.'"

Still, there were breakdowns, and therapy, and too much drinking for a time, and flashbacks. She suffered anxiety attacks when it snowed.

The summer before her senior year, while doing an internship in New York, she got several calls from the suspect's area code. She reached out again to the DA. Nothing happened.

"I wasn't the best version of myself for a few years," said Keeler, who now has a job she enjoys in software sales and a good relationship with a long-time boyfriend. "My anger was more at the criminal justice system than what actually happened."

Keeler, who retained Washington lawyer Laura Dunn last year, learned from the new detective that her rape kit had been destroyed when the case was closed in 2015. Pennsylvania law now prohibits their destruction before the statute of limitations expires.

She still has the hospital report of the exam, along with her police complaint, witness statements, text messages, campus records and the suspect's rambling blog posts over the years, which appear to show him living in Europe for a time.

"He's had a good life, as far as we can tell," her father said.

Keeler believes she has a strong case. More so than most rape victims.

And so, she keeps pushing for justice, nearly eight years after the knock on her door and a year after she forwarded the screenshot to police that said: "So I raped you."

Israeli warplanes stage more heavy strikes across Gaza City

By FARES AKRAM and RAVI NESSMAN Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli warplanes unleashed a new series of heavy airstrikes at several locations in Gaza City early Monday, hours after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signaled the fourth war with Gaza's Hamas rulers would rage on.

Explosions rocked the city from north to south for 10 minutes in an attack that was heavier, on a wider area and lasted longer than a series of air raids 24 hours earlier in which 42 Palestinians were killed — the deadliest single attack in the latest round of violence between Israel and the Hamas militant group that rules Gaza. The earlier Israeli airstrikes flattened three buildings.

The Israeli military said it attacked the homes of nine Hamas commanders across Gaza. There were no immediate reports of injuries, and in the predawn darkness there was little information on the extent of damage inflicted early Monday.

Local media reports said the main coastal road west of the city, security compounds and open spaces were hit in the latest raids. The power distribution company said airstrikes damaged a line feeding electricity from the only power plant to large parts of southern Gaza City.

In a televised address on Sunday, Netanyahu said Israel's attacks were continuing at "full-force" and would "take time." Israel "wants to levy a heavy price" on the Hamas militant group, he said, flanked by his defense minister and political rival, Benny Gantz, in a show of unity.

Hamas also pressed on, launching rockets from civilian areas in Gaza toward civilian areas in Israel. One slammed into a synagogue in the southern city of Ashkelon hours before evening services for the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, Israeli emergency services said. No injuries were reported.

In the Israeli air assault early Sunday, families were buried under piles of cement rubble and twisted rebar. A yellow canary lay crushed on the ground. Shards of glass and debris covered streets blocks away from the major downtown thoroughfare where the three buildings were hit over the course of five minutes around 1 a.m.

The hostilities have repeatedly escalated over the past week, marking the worst fighting in the territory

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that is home to 2 million Palestinians since Israel and Hamas' devastating 2014 war.

"I have not seen this level of destruction through my 14 years of work," said Samir al-Khatib, an emergency rescue official in Gaza. "Not even in the 2014 war."

Rescuers furiously dug through the rubble using excavators and bulldozers amid clouds of heavy dust. One shouted, "Can you hear me?" into a hole. Minutes later, first responders pulled a survivor out. The Gaza Health Ministry said 16 women and 10 children were among those killed, with more than 50 people wounded.

Haya Abdelal, 21, who lives in a building next to one that was destroyed, said she was sleeping when the airstrikes sent her fleeing into the street. She accused Israel of not giving its usual warning to residents to leave before launching such an attack.

"We are tired," she said, "We need a truce. We can't bear it anymore."

The Israeli army spokesperson's office said the strike targeted Hamas "underground military infrastructure."

As a result of the strike, "the underground facility collapsed, causing the civilian houses' foundations above them to collapse as well, leading to unintended casualties," it said.

Among those reported killed was Dr. Ayman Abu Al-Ouf, the head of the internal medicine department at Shifa Hospital and a senior member of the hospital's coronavirus management committee. Two of Abu Al-Ouf's teenage children and two other family members were also buried under the rubble.

The death of the 51-year-old physician "was a huge loss at a very sensitive time," said Mohammed Abu Selmia, the director of Shifa.

Gaza's health care system, already gutted by an Israeli and Egyptian blockade imposed in 2007 after Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces, had been struggling with a surge in coronavirus infections even before the latest conflict.

Israel's airstrikes have leveled a number of Gaza City's tallest buildings, which Israel alleges contained Hamas military infrastructure. Among them was the building housing The Associated Press Gaza office and those of other media outlets.

Sally Buzbee, the AP's executive editor, called for an independent investigation into the airstrike that destroyed the AP office on Saturday.

Netanyahu alleged that Hamas military intelligence was operating inside the building and said Sunday any evidence would be shared through intelligence channels. Neither the White House nor the State Department would say if any had been seen.

"It's a perfectly legitimate target," Netanyahu told CBS's "Face the Nation."

Asked if he had provided any evidence of Hamas' presence in the building in a call Saturday with U.S. President Joe Biden, Netanyahu said: "We pass it through our intelligence people."

Buzbee called for any such evidence to be laid out. "We are in a conflict situation," Buzbee said. "We do not take sides in that conflict. We heard Israelis say they have evidence; we don't know what that evidence is."

Meanwhile, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders asked the International Criminal Court on Sunday to investigate Israel's bombing of the AP building and others housing media organizations as a possible war crime.

The Paris-based group said in a letter to the court's chief prosecutor that the offices of 23 international and local media organizations have been destroyed over the past six days. It said the attacks serve "to reduce, if not neutralize, the media's capacity to inform the public."

The AP had operated from the building for 15 years, including through three previous wars between Israel and Hamas. The news agency's cameras, operating from its top floor office and roof terrace, offered 24-hour live shots as militant rockets arched toward Israel and Israeli airstrikes hammered the city and its surroundings.

"We think it's appropriate at this point for there to be an independent look at what happened yesterday — an independent investigation," Buzbee said.

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The latest outbreak of violence began in east Jerusalem last month, when Palestinians clashed with police in response to Israeli police tactics during Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers. A focus of the clashes was the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a frequent flashpoint located on a hilltop compound revered by both Muslims and Jews.

Hamas began firing rockets toward Jerusalem on Monday, triggering the Israeli assault on Gaza.

At least 188 Palestinians have been killed in hundreds of airstrikes in Gaza, including 55 children and 33 women, with 1,230 people wounded. Eight people in Israel have been killed in some of the 3,100 rocket attacks launched from Gaza, including a 5-year-old boy and a soldier.

Hamas and the Islamic Jihad militant group have acknowledged 20 fighters killed in the fighting. Israel says the real number is far higher and has released the names and photos of two dozen alleged operatives it says were "eliminated."

The assault has displaced some 34,000 Palestinians from their homes, U.N. Mideast envoy Tor Wennesland told an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council, where eight foreign ministers spoke about the conflict.

Efforts by China, Norway and Tunisia to get the U.N. body to issue a statement, including a call for the cessation of hostilities, have been blocked by the United States, which, according to diplomats, is concerned it could interfere with diplomatic efforts to stop the violence.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Al-Malki urged the Security Council to take action to end Israeli attacks. Israel's U.N. ambassador, Gilad Erdan, urged the council to condemn Hamas' "indiscriminate and unprovoked attacks."

The turmoil has also fueled protests in the occupied West Bank and stoked violence within Israel between its Jewish and Arab citizens, with clashes and vigilante attacks on people and property.

On Sunday, a driver rammed into an Israeli checkpoint in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, where Palestinian families have been threatened with eviction, injuring six officers before police shot and killed the attacker, Israeli police said.

The violence also sparked pro-Palestinian protests in cities across Europe and the United States.

Israel appears to have stepped up strikes in recent days to inflict as much damage as possible on Hamas as international mediators work to end the fighting and stave off an Israeli ground invasion in Gaza.

The Israeli military said it destroyed the home Sunday of Gaza's top Hamas leader, Yahiyeh Sinwar, in the southern town of Khan Younis. It was the third such attack in the last two days on the homes of senior Hamas leaders, who have gone underground.

Police: 2 arson suspects detained in Los Angeles wildfire

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A smoky wildfire churning through a Los Angeles canyon community gained strength Sunday as about a thousand residents remained under evacuation orders while others were warned they should get ready to leave, authorities said.

The cause of the fire near Topanga State Park has been deemed "suspicious" and is under investigation, the Los Angeles Fire Department said.

Arson investigators with the fire department and the Los Angeles Police Department identified one individual who was detained and released. Investigators then detained a second suspect and were questioning them Sunday evening, according to a statement from fire department spokesperson Margaret Stewart.

Cool, moist weather early in the day gave firefighters a break, but by afternoon flames starting moving again in steep terrain where tinder-dry vegetation hasn't burned in a half-century, the fire department said.

"We're definitely seeing increased fire activity," said Stewart.

No structures were damaged and no injuries were reported in the wildfire that broke out late Friday in the Santa Monica Mountains. It smoldered for much of Saturday before erupting in the afternoon.

A thousand or so residents of the Topanga Canyon area were ordered to evacuate their homes as flames raced along ridges, sending a huge plume of smoke and raining ash across surrounding neighborhoods

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and the U.S. 101 freeway to the north.

By Sunday evening, the fire had charred a little over 2 square miles (5.4 square kilometers) of brush and trees. There was no containment. The Los Angeles sheriff's department's Lost Hills station said on Twitter that the evacuation orders will remain in effect throughout the night.

Los Angeles has seen very little rain in recent months, making for extremely parched conditions and high fire risk.

Crews relied on aircraft making drops of water and retardant because "the terrain is very steep and extremely difficult to navigate which hinders ground based firefighting operations," a fire department statement said.

Topanga Canyon is a remote, wooded community with some ranch homes about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of downtown Los Angeles, on the border with Malibu.

Calls mount for Gaza-Israel cease-fire, greater US efforts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

U.N. Security Council diplomats and Muslim foreign ministers convened emergency meetings Sunday to demand a stop to civilian bloodshed as Israeli warplanes carried out the deadliest single attacks in nearly a week of Hamas rocket barrages and Israeli airstrikes.

President Joe Biden gave no signs of stepping up public pressure on Israel to agree to an immediate cease-fire despite calls from some Democrats for the Biden administration to get more involved.

His ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, told an emergency high-level meeting of the Security Council that the United States was "working tirelessly through diplomatic channels" to stop the fighting.

But as battles between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers surged to their worst levels since 2014 and the international outcry grew, the Biden administration — determined to wrench U.S. foreign policy focus away from the Middle East and Afghanistan — has declined so far to criticize Israel's part in the fighting or send a top-level envoy to the region. Appeals by other countries showed no sign of progress.

Thomas-Greenfield warned that the return to armed conflict would only put a negotiated two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict even further out of reach. However, the United States, Israel's closest ally, has so far blocked days of efforts by China, Norway and Tunisia to get the Security Council to issue a statement, including a call for the cessation of hostilities.

In Israel, Hady Amr, a deputy assistant dispatched by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to try to de-escalate the crisis, met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who thanked the U.S. for its support.

Blinken himself headed out on an unrelated tour of Nordic countries, with no announced plans to stop in the Middle East in response to the crisis. He made calls from the plane to Egypt and other nations working to broker a cease-fire, telling Egypt that all parties "should de-escalate tensions and bring a halt to the violence."

Rep. Adam Schiff, Democratic chairman of the House intelligence committee, urged Biden on Sunday to step up pressure on both sides to end current fighting and revive talks to resolve Israel's conflicts and flashpoints with the Palestinians.

"I think the administration needs to push harder on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to stop the violence, bring about a cease-fire, end these hostilities, and get back to a process of trying to resolve this long-standing conflict," Schiff, a California Democrat, told CBS's "Face the Nation."

And Sen. Todd Young of Indiana, the senior Republican on the foreign relations subcommittee for the region, joined Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, the subcommittee chairman, in asking both sides to cease fire. "As a result of Hamas' rocket attacks and Israel's response, both sides must recognize that too many lives have been lost and must not escalate the conflict further," the two said.

Biden focused on civilian deaths from Hamas rockets in a call with Netanyahu on Saturday, and a White House readout of the call made no mention of the U.S. urging Israel to join in a cease-fire that regional countries were pushing. Thomas-Greenfield said U.S. diplomats were engaging with Israel, Egypt and

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Qatar, along with the U.N.

Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City flattened three buildings and killed at least 42 people Sunday, medics said, bringing the toll since Hamas and Israel opened their air and artillery battles to at least 188 killed in Gaza and eight in Israel. Some 55 children in Gaza and a 5-year-old boy in Israel were among the dead.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israelis in a televised address Sunday that Israel "wants to levy a heavy price" on Hamas. That will "take time," Netanyahu said, signaling the war would rage on for now.

Representatives of Muslim nations met to demand Israel halt attacks that are killing Palestinian civilians in the crowded Gaza strip. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan called on "the international community to take urgent action to immediately stop military operations."

The meeting of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation also saw Turkey and some others criticize a U.S.-backed push under which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and other Islamic nations signed bilateral deals with Israel to normalize their relations, stepping over the wreckage of collapsed international efforts to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians long-term.

"The massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said. t

At the virtual meeting of the Security Council, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the U.N. was actively engaging all parties for an immediate cease-fire.

Returning to the scenes of Palestinian militant rocket fire and Israeli airstrikes in the fourth such war between Israel and Hamas, "only perpetuates the cycles of death, destruction and despair, and pushes farther to the horizon any hopes of coexistence and peace," Guterres said.

Eight foreign ministers spoke at the Security Council session, reflecting the seriousness of the conflict, with almost all urging an end to the fighting.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, had thrown U.S. support solidly behind Israel, embracing Netanyahu as an ally in Trump's focus on confronting Iran. Trump gave little time to efforts by past U.S. administrations to push peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians, instead encouraging and rewarding Arab nations that signed two-country normalization deals with Israel.

Biden, instead, calls Middle East and Central Asia conflicts a distraction from U.S. foreign policy priorities, including competition with China.

He's sought to calm some conflicts and extricate the U.S. from others, including ending U.S. military support for a Saudi-led war in Yemen, planning to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and trying to return to a nuclear deal with Iran that Israel opposes.

Report: Microsoft investigated Gates before he left board

The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Board members at Microsoft Corp. made a decision in 2020 that it wasn't appropriate for its co-founder Bill Gates to continue sitting on its board as they investigated the billionaire's prior romantic relationship with a female Microsoft employee that was deemed inappropriate, according to a report in The Wall Street Journal.

Citing unnamed sources, The Journal reported online Sunday that board members looking into the matter hired a law firm in late 2019 to conduct an investigation after a Microsoft engineer alleged in a letter that she had a sexual relationship with Gates over several years.

The Journal reported that Gates resigned before the board's investigation was finished, citing another person familiar with the matter.

An unnamed spokeswoman for Gates acknowledged to The Journal that there was an affair almost 20 years ago, and that it ended "amicably." The spokesperson told The Journal that "his decision to transition off the board was in no way related to this matter.""

When he left Microsoft's board last year, Gates said he was stepping down to focus on philanthropy.

In an email sent to The Associated Press late Sunday, Microsoft said that it "received a concern in the

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latter half of 2019 that Bill Gates sought to initiate an intimate relationship with a company employee in the year 2000. A committee of the Board reviewed the concern, aided by an outside law firm, to conduct a thorough investigation. Throughout the investigation, Microsoft provided extensive support to the employee who raised the concern."

Earlier this month, Bill and Melinda Gates announced that they were divorcing after 27 years of marriage but would keep working together at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the largest charitable foundations in the world. Gates was formerly the world's richest person and his fortune is estimated at well over \$100 billion.

Earlier Sunday, The New York Times reported that Gates had developed "a reputation for questionable conduct in work-related settings."

The Times reported that on at least a few occasions, Gates made overtures to women who worked for him at Microsoft and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Times cited people with direct knowledge of his behavior.

The Latest: Israeli jets stage heavy airstrikes in Gaza City

By The Associated Press undefined

GAZA CITY — Israeli warplanes have unleashed a series of heavy airstrikes at several locations of Gaza City.

Explosions rocked the city from north to south for 10 minutes early Monday.

The airstrikes were heavier, on a wider area and lasted longer than a series of air raids 24 hours earlier in which 42 Palestinians were killed. That attack was the deadliest single attack in the latest round of violence between Israel and the Hamas militant group that rules Gaza.

In a brief statement, the Israel Defense Forces says only that "IDF fighter jets are striking terror targets in the Gaza Strip."

TOP NEWS IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT:

- Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City flatten three buildings and kill at least 42 people on Sunday
- An AP reporter documents the terrifying final minutes of leaving the Gaza office before it is blown up by the Israelis
- An Israeli airstrike destroys a high-rise building that housed The Associated Press office in the Gaza Strip despite urgent demands by the news agency to halt. AP's top editor called for an independent investigation into the airstrike.
- Protesters in major US cities urge Israelis to halt attacks on the Gaza Strip
- French police use tear gas to quell pro-Palestinian march that was banned in Paris

RABAT, Morocco — Moroccans have taken to the streets in the capital and other cities to protest Israeli air raids on Gaza during clashes with the Hamas extremist group that rules the Palestinian territory.

Sizeable demonstrations were held Sunday across the North African kingdom, including in Casablanca, the country's largest city, where thousands waved Palestinian flags and chanted slogans denouncing Israel's military actions. Protesters also gathered outside the Parliament building in Rabat.

In December, Morocco announced it had resumed relations with Israel as part of a U.S. brokered deal. As part of the agreement, the United States agreed to recognize Morocco's claim over the disputed Western Sahara region.

On Friday, Moroccan King Mohammed VI ordered forty tons of aid to be shipped to the West Bank and Gaza in solidarity with Palestinians in the wake of recent clashes.

UNITED NATIONS — The three U.N. Security Council nations trying to get the U.N.'s most powerful body to take action on the escalating violence between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers say they are still trying to get the U.S. to support a statement including a call to end the fighting.

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China, Norway and Tunisia tried unsuccessfully at closed meetings Monday and Wednesday to get agreement on a council statement. Diplomats say the U.S. argued such a statement could interfere with diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation.

There also was no agreement at Sunday's first open meeting on the violence.

The ambassadors of China, Norway and Tunisia issued a joint statement on the Gaza conflict demanding an immediate end of all acts of violence, provocation and destruction.

PARIS — A media watchdog group is asking the International Criminal Court to investigate Israel's bombing of buildings housing The Associated Press and other media organizations in Gaza as a possible war crime.

The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders says in a letter to the court's chief prosecutor that the offices of 23 international and local media organizations have been destroyed over the past six days.

The group says the Israeli military's "intentional targeting of media organizations and intentional destruction of their equipment" could violate one of the court's statutes. It says the attacks serve "to reduce, if not neutralize, the media's capacity to inform the public."

Israel's military says Hamas was operating inside the building where AP had offices and accused the militant group of using journalists as human shields.

AP journalists and other tenants were safely evacuated after the Israeli military warned of an imminent strike Saturday.

UNITED NATIONS -- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is urging the United States to join the 14 other members of the U.N. Security Council and support a statement urging a halt to violence between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza.

He also wants the U.S. to support calling for a two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Wang chaired a high-level emergency meeting of the Security Council on Sunday and said the "dangerous and urgent" situation calls for an immediate cease-fire.

He urges Israel to exercise restraint, stop evictions and settlement expansion, "put an end to the violence, threats and provocations against Muslims" and respect the status quo of holy sites in Jerusalem. He says Palestinians must avoid steps that would escalate the situation, avoid civilian casualties and work for an immediate de-escalation.

UNITED NATIONS — The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations says the United States "has been working tirelessly through diplomatic channels" to try to end the conflict between Palestinians in Gaza and Israel, and is warning that the current cycle of violence will only put a negotiated two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict further out of reach.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield told a high-level emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council that President Joe Biden spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday and Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken with senior Israeli, Palestinian and regional leaders.

At the same meeting, Israel's U.N. ambassador called the rocket attacks launched by Gaza's Hamas rulers against Israel "completely premeditated" to gain political power and replace the Palestinian Authority as the leader of the Palestinians.

He said the rocketing of Israel was part of "a vicious plan" by Hamas, which not only seeks the destruction of Israel but is vying to take power in the West Bank and was frustrated when Abbas postponed elections last month that would have been the first in 15 years.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte says he has spoken to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, urging them to end violence and expressing support for mediation by Egypt and the United States.

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Rutte said in a statement Sunday that the Netherlands "stands ready to help" using its good relations with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and the U.S.

He says that "a further escalation and yet more Palestinian and Israeli civilian casualties must be avoided."

Rutte says Israel "has the right to defend itself" against rocket attacks but says the country must "act proportionally within the borders of international law."

UNITED NATIONS — Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Al-Malki is accusing Israel of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza and carrying out a policy of "apartheid" in Jerusalem.

Al-Malki told a high-level emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Sunday that "there are no words that can describe the horrors that our people are enduring," listing families and children and infants killed by Israeli airstrikes.

"Israel is killing Palestinians in Gaza, one family at a time," he said. "Israel is trying to uproot Palestinians from Jerusalem. It's expelling families, one home, neighborhood at a time. Israel is executing our people, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity."

ISRAEL — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday renewed his claim that a Gaza building leveled by an Israeli airstrike housed a Hamas office as well as American and Middle East news organizations, but gave no evidence.

Netanyahu spoke to CBS's Face the Nation about ongoing violence between Israeli forces and the armed Palestinian group Hamas, and about Saturday's airstrike that leveled the building housing Gaza offices of the Associated Press and Al Jazeera news organizations. "It's a perfectly legitimate target," he said.

Asked if he had provided any evidence of Hamas presence in the building in a call later Saturday with President Joe Biden, Netanyahu said, "We pass it through our intelligence people."

Netanyahu gave no time frame for when Israel would be ready to halt its side of the fighting after nearly a week of Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rocket barrages. "We hope that it doesn't continue very long, but we were attacked by Hamas," he said.

Asked about reports that Hamas had agreed to an Egypt-brokered cease-fire but Israel had not, he said, "That's not what I know."

UNITED NATIONS -- A U.N. Mideast envoy says the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip has displaced some 34,000 Palestinians from their homes.

Tor Wennesland told the Security Council on Sunday that over 40 U.N. schools in Gaza have been turned into shelters. He says the schools have limited water and no access to food or health care, and serve "for protection purposes only."

After nearly a week of fighting, Wennesland called for calm and said further escalation would have "devastating consequences for both Palestinians and Israelis."

He called Hamas' rocket fire from civilian neighborhoods in Gaza into Israeli population centers a violation of international law. He also urged Israel to show "maximum restraint to spare civilians and civilian objects" in its operations in Gaza.

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City flattened three buildings and killed at least 42 people Sunday, medics said. It is the deadliest single attack since heavy fighting broke out between Israel and the territory's militant Hamas rulers nearly a week ago.

The violence, which came as international mediators worked to broker a cease-fire and stave off an Israeli ground invasion of the territory, marked the worst fighting here since the devastating 2014 war in Gaza.

The airstrikes Sunday hit a busy downtown street of residential buildings and storefronts over the course of five minutes just after midnight, destroying two adjacent buildings and one about 50 yards (meters) down the road.

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UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations chief is appealing to Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza to immediately stop the “utterly appalling” escalation in fighting and “senseless cycle of bloodshed, terror and destruction” at the start of a high-level emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the virtual meeting on Sunday that “the United Nations is actively engaging all sides towards an immediate cease-fire.”

He warned that the most serious escalation in violence in Gaza in years “only perpetuates the cycles of death, destruction and despair, and pushes farther to the horizon any hopes of coexistence and peace.”

The open meeting is scheduled to be addressed by the Palestinian foreign minister and the foreign ministers of Jordan, Egypt, China, Tunisia, Norway, Ireland, Algeria and the deputy foreign minister of Russia along with ambassadors from other nations on the 15-member council, an Israeli representative and the head of the Arab League.

Guterres said he is “appalled by the increasingly large numbers of Palestinian civilian casualties” from Israeli airstrikes, and deplores Israeli casualties from rockets launched from Gaza. He called the destruction of media offices in Gaza “extremely concerning,” stressing that “journalists must be allowed to work free of fear and harassment.”

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — The Gaza Health Ministry says the death toll from Israeli strikes on a main thoroughfare in Gaza City has climbed to 33, including 12 women and eight children.

It was the deadliest single attack since heavy fighting between Israel and Gaza’s Hamas rulers erupted nearly a week ago. The airstrikes hit Wahda Street, a major thoroughfare.

The ministry says another 50 people were wounded in the strikes early Sunday, mostly women and children.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military.

ISTANBUL — Turkey’s state-run Anadolu news agency has offered to share its Gaza offices with The Associated Press and Al Jazeera after Israel bombed the building that housed the media offices.

Anadolu said its Director-General Serdar Karagoz made the offer in letters to AP President and CEO Gary Pruitt and Al-Jazeera’s chairman.

Karagoz said the Turkish wire service was “appalled” by the Israeli military’s targeting of media offices. “Since this recent conflict has escalated over the past week, there is an apparent pattern of targeting journalists who are carrying out their professional duties so as to block coverage of the situation on the ground,” Karagoz said.

BRUSSELS — The European Union’s foreign policy chief says the 27-nation bloc’s foreign ministers will talk Tuesday about what the EU can do to help end the current round of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Josep Borrell tweeted Sunday that he convened the special videoconference “in view of the ongoing escalation between Israel and Palestine and the unacceptable number of civilian casualties.”

He added that “we will coordinate and discuss how the EU can best contribute to end the current violence.”

The latest outbreak of violence began in east Jerusalem earlier this month, when Palestinians protested attempts by settlers to forcibly evict a number of Palestinian families from their homes and Israeli police measures at Al-Aqsa Mosque. Gaza’s militant Hamas rulers fired rockets toward Jerusalem late Monday, triggering an Israeli assault on Gaza.

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis has denounced the “unacceptable” spiral of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, saying the deaths in particular of children was a “sign that they don’t want to build the future but want to destroy it.”

Francis prayed for peace, calm and international help to open a path of dialogue during his Sunday blessing, delivered from his studio window overlooking St. Peter’s Square.

The pope said: “I ask myself: this hatred and vendetta, what will it bring? Do we truly think that we can build peace by destroying the other?”

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In unusually pointed comments, Francis added: "In the name of God, who created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity and are called to live as brothers, I appeal for calm" and an end to the violence.

Israeli airstrikes have been pounding Gaza City for days as heavy fighting has broken out between Israel and the territory's militant Hamas rulers. The Gaza Health Ministry said 10 women and eight children were among the 26 people killed in Sunday's airstrikes, with another 50 people wounded in the attack.

JERUSALEM — Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City flattened three buildings and killed at least 23 people on Sunday, medics said, making it the deadliest single attack since heavy fighting broke out between Israel and the territory's militant Hamas rulers nearly a week ago.

The Gaza Health Ministry said another 50 people were wounded in the attack. Rescuers were racing to pull survivors and bodies from the rubble.

Earlier, the Israeli military said it destroyed the home of Gaza's top Hamas leader in a separate strike. It was the third such attack in the last two days.

Israel appears to have stepped up strikes in recent days to inflict as much damage as possible on Hamas as efforts to broker a cease-fire accelerate. A U.S. diplomat is in the region to try to de-escalate tensions, and the U.N. Security Council is set to meet Sunday.

The military said it struck the homes of Yehiyeh Sinwar, the most senior Hamas leader inside the territory, and his brother Muhammad, another senior Hamas member. On Saturday it destroyed the home of Khalil al-Hayeh, a senior figure in Hamas' political branch.

Brig. Gen. Hidai Zilberman confirmed the strike on Sinwar's house in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis to army radio.

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military said Sunday it destroyed the home of Gaza's top Hamas leader, the third such attack in as many days, after nearly a week of heavy Israeli airstrikes on the territory. The Palestinian militant group ruling Gaza has fired hundreds of rockets into Israel.

Israel appears to have stepped up strikes in recent days to inflict as much damage as possible on Hamas as efforts to broker a cease-fire accelerate. A U.S. diplomat is in the region to try to de-escalate tensions, and the U.N. Security Council is set to meet Sunday.

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GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Israeli warplanes have struck several buildings and roads in a vital part of Gaza City early Sunday.

According to photos circulated by residents and journalists, the airstrikes created a crater that blocked one of the main roads leading to Shifa, the largest hospital in the strip.

The Health Ministry said the latest airstrikes left at least two dead and 25 wounded, including children and women. It said rescuers are still digging through the rubble and had so far pulled up five more wounded.

Two hours into the heavy bombardment, there has been no comment from the Israeli military.

Second Amendment sanctuaries facing 1st court test in Oregon

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — The first court test of whether local governments can ban police from enforcing certain gun laws is playing out in a rural Oregon county, one of a wave of U.S. counties declaring itself a Second Amendment sanctuary.

The measure that voters in the logging area of Columbia County narrowly approved last year forbids local officials from enforcing most federal and state gun laws and could impose thousands of dollars in fines on those who try.

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Second Amendment sanctuary resolutions have been adopted by some 1,200 local governments in states around the U.S., including Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Illinois and Florida, according to Shawn Fields, an assistant professor of law at Campbell University who tracks them. Many are symbolic, but some, like in Columbia County, carry legal force.

The movement took off around 2018, as states considered stricter gun laws in the wake of mass shootings, including a high school shooting near Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people and made survivors into high-profile gun control activists.

After President Joe Biden took office, conservative lawmakers in several states proposed banning police from enforcing federal gun measures, and at least one proposal in Arizona has been signed into law.

The movement hasn't yet faced a major legal challenge. The Oregon case was filed by Columbia County under an unusual provision in state law that allows a judge to examine a measure before it goes into effect. No timeline has been set for a court hearing.

"This will allow the court to tell us whether the county can actually decline to enforce certain state laws, and it will tell us how to abide by the will of the voters to the extent that we can," said Sarah Hanson, who serves as counsel in the conservative-leaning county in deep-blue Oregon.

Supporters of the ordinance include the Oregon Firearms Federation, which said in a November statement that "extremists" and "big city radicals" were trying to curtail gun rights.

The group referenced Portland protests opposing police brutality that occasionally turned violent last summer and called the ordinance a "common sense" step that would "ensure your right and ability to defend your life and the lives of your loved ones."

The ordinance would ban the enforcement of laws like background check requirements and restrictions on carrying a gun, though it would have exceptions for others, including keeping firearms from convicted felons.

The Oregon Firearms Federation didn't respond to a request for comment on the court case.

Sheriff Brian Pixley has expressed support, saying in a March statement that one of his responsibilities is to uphold people's Second Amendment rights and that he's eager to "move forward with the will of the voters."

The measure is divisive locally, though, and four residents filed court documents opposing it. One, Brandee Dudzic, referenced the strict gun safety drills she learned in military medic training, saying she values the right to own a gun but believes it should come with safety measures like background checks and secure storage.

A gun shop owner in Columbia County said he supports background checks and believes that "state law trumps the county law." But he voted in favor of the Second Amendment measure on principle.

"We need to make sure that people are safe. We need to make sure that people are responsible," he said. "But as more rules are in place, we just need to make sure that we're not overregulated."

He spoke on the condition he not be identified because some of his customers take a hard line against gun restrictions and he didn't want to lose their business.

Everytown Law, an affiliate of the group Everytown for Gun Safety, is pushing for the measure to be overturned. Managing Director Eric Tirschwell said it would be the nation's first court test amid the current wave of Second Amendment sanctuary laws.

Everytown argues that the ordinance violates the U.S. Constitution, which says federal law supersedes state law, as well as the state Constitution and an Oregon law that gives the state power to regulate firearms.

The decision won't have a direct effect outside Oregon but could send a message.

"This case is important and should send the message that where state or local jurisdictions attempt to unconstitutionally or unlawfully nullify gun safety laws, we are prepared to and will go to court," Tirschwell said.

Other laws trying to blunt the effect of federal gun restrictions haven't fared well in court, including a 2009 Montana measure that made guns and ammunition manufactured in the state exempt from federal law and a similar 2013 measure in Kansas.

Many of the latest wave of measures, though, take a different tack by focusing on the actions of local

police, including punishments like fines.

In terms of federal law, gun rights advocates may have a successful legal argument under the so-called anti-commandeering doctrine, which says the U.S. government can't make state and local officials enforce federal law, said Darrell Miller, a professor of law at Duke Law School and co-faculty director of the Duke Center for Firearms Law. He agreed that the Oregon case is the first of its kind.

Local enforcement of state law, meanwhile, is another matter. Most states don't have similar provisions in their own legal codes, and Oregon's attorney general said in court documents that the Columbia County ordinance is "incompatible" with criminal law and the duties of county officials.

"To the extent the local government is trying to say, 'We're also not going to enforce state law either' ... that's a much more difficult and complicated position," Miller said. "The authority of the state over localities is much, much stronger."

Arrest made after boy, 4, found slain on Dallas street

DALLAS (AP) — An 18-year-old man has been arrested after the body of a 4-year-old boy was found lying on a neighborhood street in Dallas, police said Sunday.

Police said that Darrynn Brown has been charged with kidnapping and theft. Police say they also anticipate additional charges pending the results of a forensic analysis.

Brown was being held Sunday in Dallas County jail on \$750,000 bond. Jail records did not list an attorney for him.

Police received a call that there was a child dead in the street at about 6:50 a.m. Saturday.

Assistant Police Chief Albert Martinez has said it appeared the child suffered a violent death and that "an edged weapon" was used. He said it's believed the child was killed at about 5 a.m.

The child's name hasn't been released, but he's believed to have lived in the southwest Dallas neighborhood where he was found, Martinez said.

Antwainese Square, 39, told The Dallas Morning News she alerted authorities after seeing the boy's body while she was jogging. She said the boy's face and upper half of his body were covered in blood and that he didn't have shoes or a shirt.

"It breaks my heart," Square told the newspaper. "And now I'm afraid. Now I'm paranoid. Because I don't know what happened, I don't know what's going on."

"I mean just knowing that someone out there is capable of killing a child, that alone is just unsettling," she said.

By midafternoon Saturday, FBI agents were focusing on a wooded trail not far from where the body was found and police were on horseback in the area.

The trail, which neighbors said is popular for biking, was sealed off with crime-scene tape.

UK readies for major reopening but new variant sparks worry

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Travelers in England were packing their bags, bartenders were polishing their glasses and performers were warming up as Britain prepared Sunday for a major step out of lockdown — but with clouds of worry on the horizon.

Excitement at the reopening of travel and hospitality vied with anxiety that a more contagious virus variant first found in India is spreading fast and could delay further plans to reopen.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged Britons to "take this next step with a heavy dose of caution."

"We are keeping the spread of the variant first identified in India under close observation and taking swift action where infection rates are rising," he said. "I urge everyone to be cautious and take responsibility when enjoying new freedoms today in order to keep the virus at bay."

Cases of the variant have more than doubled in a week in the U.K., defying a sharp nationwide downward trend in infections and deaths won by hard-earned months of restrictions and a rapid vaccination campaign. A surge testing and stepped-up vaccination effort was being conducted in the northern England areas hardest hit by that variant.

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Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the variant, formally known as B.1.617.2, is more transmissible than the U.K.'s main strain and "it is likely it will become the dominant variant."

On Monday, people in England will be able to eat a restaurant meal indoors, drink inside a pub, go to a museum, hug friends and visit one another's homes for the first time in months. A ban on overseas holidays is also being lifted, with travel now possible to a short list of countries with low infection rates. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are following similar but slightly different reopening paths.

Patrick Dardis, chief executive of brewery and pub chain Young's, said the indoor opening — which follows the reopening of outdoor patios and beer gardens last month — is "a big step back on to the path to normality."

"The weather has been pretty dire, and people are hardy, but we really needed this next step to come," he said.

But hospitality and entertainment venues say they won't be able to make money until they can open at full capacity. That's due to happen June 21, the date set by the government for lifting its remaining COVID-19 restrictions, including social distancing and mask-wearing rules.

Johnson has said if the new variant causes a big surge in cases, it could scupper that plan.

Britain has recorded almost 128,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest reported toll in Europe. But new infections have plummeted to an average of around 2,000 a day, compared with nearly 70,000 a day during the winter peak, and deaths have fallen to single figures a day.

Almost 70% of British adults have received a first dose of a coronavirus vaccine, and more than 38% have had both doses.

Health officials, backed by the army, are carrying out surge testing in Bolton and Blackburn in northwest England, where cases of the new variant are clustered. Pop-up vaccination sites have been set up to speed the inoculation drive, with authorities aiming to inoculate all members of multi-generational households to stop the variant spreading within families.

Across the country, the government is shortening the gap between doses for people over 50 from 12 to eight weeks in a bid to give them more protection.

Hancock said scientists had a "high degree of confidence" that current vaccines work against the Indian-identified variant.

Critics of Britain's Conservative government say lax border rules allowed the new variant to enter the country. They accuse the government of delaying a ban on visitors from India, which is experiencing a devastating coronavirus outbreak, because it is seeking a trade deal with the vast country.

India was added to the U.K.'s high-risk "red list" on April 23, weeks after neighbors Pakistan and Bangladesh.

"We shouldn't be in this situation," said opposition Labour Party lawmaker Yvette Cooper. "This was not inevitable."

The government denies that its health policies were influenced by political or trade considerations.

Mark Walport, a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, said Britain was at a "perilous moment," and people should be cautious with their new freedoms.

"My advice is that just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean you should," he told Sky News. "As far as possible, socialize outside, maintain social distancing. If you're going to hug, hug cautiously."

Trump critic Cheney cautions Jan. 6 riot could happen again

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. Liz Cheney, newly ousted from House Republican leadership for challenging former President Donald Trump, criticized GOP colleagues Sunday for downplaying the Jan. 6 riot and condoning Trump's lies that the 2020 election was stolen, saying they were "complicit" in undermining democracy.

In television interviews, the Wyoming Republican said there was "no question" an attack like Jan. 6 could

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happen again if Trump's claims go unchecked.

"I think it's dangerous," Cheney said. "I think that we have to recognize how quickly things can unravel. We have to recognize what it means for the nation to have a former president who has not conceded and who continues to suggest that our electoral system cannot function, cannot do the will of the people."

"We've seen not only his provocation of the attack, but his refusal to send help when it was needed, his refusal to immediately say, 'Stop,'" she added.

Asked in a separate interview if she believes House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California and Rep. Elise Stefanik, who replaced Cheney in the No. 3 leadership job, are complicit by embracing Trump, Cheney responded: "They are."

"I'm not willing to do that," she said. "We all have an obligation to stand up against that."

Stefanik, a Trump stalwart from upstate New York, was elected Friday to the leadership post by House Republicans after they voted to remove Cheney on Wednesday. Stefanik has a moderate voting record but had strong backing from Trump and other party leaders.

Speaking Sunday, Stefanik described Republicans as now "unified" in their goal of beating Democrats, with Trump playing a key role in the GOP's future success.

"He is the leader of the Republican Party," Stefanik said. "Voters determine the leader of the Republican Party. And they continue to look to President Trump for his vision."

Cheney on Sunday called it indefensible that some GOP colleagues, such as Reps. Andrew Clyde of Georgia and Louie Gohmert of Texas, suggested last week that the breach of the Capitol on Jan. 6 posed no real threat, with Clyde likening it to a "normal tourist visit."

"The notion that this was somehow a tourist event is disgraceful and despicable," Cheney said. "And, you know, I won't be part of whitewashing what happened on Jan. 6. Nobody should be part of it. And people ought to be held accountable."

She also said McCarthy should testify before a bipartisan commission that is investigating the riot because he has key facts about Trump's "state of mind" on that day, including whether the former president knew the proceedings were turning violent and did nothing to stop it.

"He clearly has facts about that day, that an investigation into what happened, into the president's actions, ought to get to the bottom of," Cheney said. "And I think that he has important information that needs to be part of any investigation, whether it's the FBI, the Department of Justice, or this commission."

Speaking about her future, Cheney said she now regrets voting for Trump last November and did not expressly rule out a presidential bid of her own in 2024, admitting that her father, former Vice President Dick Cheney, would like to see her run though "he's not objective."

"At this moment, the majority of the Republican Party is not where I am," she said.

Cheney appeared on ABC's "This Week" and "Fox News Sunday" and Stefanik spoke on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures."

Israeli paramedics: 2 dead in synagogue bleacher collapse

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli medics said at least two people were killed and more than 150 injured after a bleacher collapsed at an uncompleted West Bank synagogue on Sunday, the eve of a major Jewish holiday.

The bleacher was packed with ultra-Orthodox worshippers and collapsed during prayers at the beginning of Shavuot. A spokesman for Magen David Adom told Channel 13 that paramedics had treated over 157 people for injuries and pronounced two dead, a man in his 50s and a 12-year-old boy.

Rescue workers were on the scene, treating the injured and taking people to the hospital. The collapse comes weeks after 45 ultra-Orthodox Jews were killed in a stampede at a religious festival in northern Israel.

The Israeli military said in a statement that it dispatched medics and other search and rescue troops to assist at the scene. Army helicopters were airlifting the injured.

Amateur footage showed the collapse Sunday during evening prayers in Givat Zeev, a West Bank settle-

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ment just north of Jerusalem. The ultra-Orthodox synagogue was packed with hundreds of people.

Shavuot is a spring harvest festival that also marks the day in the Jewish calendar on which the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is traditionally marked with all-night Torah study and the consumption of dairy.

Israeli authorities traded blame.

The mayor of Givat Zeev said the building was unfinished and dangerous, and that the police had ignored previous calls to take action. Jerusalem police chief Doron Turgeman said the disaster was a case of "negligence" and that there would likely be arrests.

Deddi Simhi, head of the Israel Fire and Rescue service, told Israel's Channel 12 that "this building is not finished. It doesn't even have a permit for occupancy, and therefore let alone holding events in it."

Television footage from the scene showed the five-story building was incomplete, with exposed concrete, rebar, and wooden boards, and plastic sheeting as windows. A sign in Hebrew pasted to a wall of the building warned that "for safety reasons entrance to the site is forbidden."

Defense Minister Benny Gantz wrote on Twitter that "my heart is with the victims of the disaster in Givat Zeev."

On April 29, a stampede at a religious festival in northern Israel killed 45 ultra-Orthodox Jews, the deadliest civilian disaster in the country's history.

The stampede at Mount Meron came after years of warnings that the holy site was unsafe for the tens of thousands of visitors it draws each year for the Lag Baomer holiday.

This year's festivities were attended by about 100,000 people, most of them ultra-Orthodox Jews, after powerful ultra-Orthodox politicians reportedly pressured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others to lift attendance restrictions.

Experts had long warned the Mount Meron complex was inadequately equipped to handle the enormous crowds that flock there during the springtime holiday, and that the existing state of infrastructure was a safety risk.

The disaster triggered renewed criticism over the broad autonomy granted to the country's politically powerful ultra-Orthodox minority.

Last year, many ultra-Orthodox communities flouted coronavirus safety restrictions, contributing to high outbreak rates in their communities and angering the broader secular public.

Fauci says pandemic exposed 'undeniable effects of racism'

ATLANTA (AP) — The immunologist who leads the COVID-19 response in the United States said Sunday that "the undeniable effects of racism" have led to unacceptable health disparities that especially hurt African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans during the pandemic.

"COVID-19 has shone a bright light on our own society's failings," Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a graduation ceremony for Emory University.

Speaking by webcast from Washington, Fauci told the graduates in Atlanta that many members of minority groups work in essential jobs where they might be exposed to the coronavirus. He also said they are more likely to become infected if exposed because of medical conditions such as hypertension, chronic lung disease, diabetes or obesity.

"Now, very few of these comorbidities have racial determinants," Fauci said. "Almost all relate to the social determinants of health dating back to disadvantageous conditions that some people of color find themselves in from birth regarding the availability of an adequate diet, access to health care and the undeniable effects of racism in our society."

Fauci said correcting societal wrongs will take a commitment of decades, and he urged the graduates to be part of the solution.

Fauci said that once society returns to "some form of normality," people should not forget that infectious disease has disproportionately hospitalized and killed people of color.

Fauci on Sunday was awarded the Emory University president's medal. Previous recipients include former

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President Jimmy Carter, the Dalai Lama and the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis, a civil rights icon. In accepting the award, Fauci denounced the destruction of division.

"Societal divisiveness is counterproductive in a pandemic," Fauci said. "We must not be at odds with each other since the virus is the enemy, not each other."

He praised the graduates for handling the profound disruption of the pandemic.

"Not since the influenza pandemic of 1918 has humanity faced a public health crisis of this magnitude," he said. "Each of you deserves enormous respect for your extraordinary adaptability, resilience and dedication to learning, completing your studies and graduating despite immense difficulties and uncertainties."

Groups call for reintroduction of jaguars in US Southwest

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Environmental groups and scientists with two universities want U.S. wildlife managers to consider reintroducing jaguars to the American Southwest.

In a recently published paper, they say habitat destruction, highways and existing segments of the border wall mean that natural reestablishment of the large cats north of the U.S.-Mexico boundary would be unlikely over the next century without human intervention.

Jaguars are currently found in 19 countries, but biologists have said the animals have lost more than half of their historic range from South and Central America into the southwestern United States largely due to hunting and habitat loss.

Several individual male jaguars have been spotted in Arizona and New Mexico over the last two decades but there's no evidence of breeding pairs establishing territories beyond northern Mexico. Most recently, a male jaguar was spotted just south of the border and another was seen in Arizona in January.

Scientists and experts with the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Center for Landscape Conservation, Defenders of Wildlife, the Center for Biological Diversity and other organizations are pointing to more than 31,800 square miles (82,400 square kilometers) of suitable habitat in the mountains of central Arizona and New Mexico that could potentially support anywhere from 90 to 150 jaguars.

They contend that reintroducing the cats is essential to species conservation and restoration of the region's ecosystem.

"We are attempting to start a new conversation around jaguar recovery, and this would be a project that would be decades in the making," Sharon Wilcox of Defenders of Wildlife, one of the study's authors, said in an interview. "There are ecological dimensions, human dimensions that would need to be addressed in a truly collaborative manner. There would need to be a number of stakeholders who would want to be at the table in order to see this project move forward."

Under a recovery plan finalized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mexico as well as countries in Central and South America are primarily responsible for monitoring jaguar movements within their territory. The agency has noted that the Southwestern U.S. represents just one-tenth of 1% of the jaguar's historic range.

Environmentalists have criticized the plan, saying the U.S. government overlooked opportunities for recovery north of the international border.

While the recovery plan doesn't call for reintroductions in the U.S., federal officials have said efforts will continue to focus on sustaining habitat, eliminating poaching and improving social acceptance to accommodate those cats that find their way across the border.

The habitat highlighted by the conservation groups is rugged and made up mostly of federally managed land. They say it includes water sources, suitable cover and prey.

Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have yet to review the latest study, but such a proposal would likely face fierce opposition from ranchers and some rural residents who have been at odds with environmentalists and the Fish and Wildlife Service over the reintroduction of Mexican gray wolves. That program has faced numerous challenges over the past two decades and while wolf numbers are trending upward, ranchers say so are livestock deaths.

Jaguar advocates said losses could be mitigated through compensation programs like those established

as a result of the wolf program.

Then there's the question of where the jaguars would come from. Advocates say a captive breeding program could be developed over time and jaguars from existing wild populations could be relocated.

Wilcox said there are many factors — some understood and others still being studied — that influence the movement of jaguars.

"But this is a vast area with suitable vegetation," she said. "It's populated with the right kind of prey for these cats and given its elevation and its latitude, it might provide an important climate refugium for the species in the future."

CDC director says mask turnaround based solely on science

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

The head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Sunday defended the decision to ease mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people, stressing that increasing political pressure had nothing to do with the abrupt shift in guidelines.

"I'm delivering the science as the science is delivered to the medical journals. And it evolved," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on FOX News Sunday. "I deliver it as soon as I can when we have that information available."

Under the new guidelines released last week, fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their final dose of a COVID-19 vaccine — can quit wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings and give up social distancing.

However, partially vaccinated or unvaccinated people should continue wearing masks, the agency said. The guidance also still calls for masks in crowded indoor settings including buses, airplanes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters.

The sudden change sparked praise from those eager to return to pre-pandemic life, particularly those who see the new guidelines as a way to reopen workplaces, schools and other venues that went dark during the pandemic.

Yet concerns have been raised from those who say there's no easy way for businesses and others to determine who is fully vaccinated and who is not. Instead, many will have to rely on an honor system as many states and communities have already been lifting mask mandates amid improving virus numbers and as more Americans have been shedding face coverings after getting shots.

"I would imagine within a period of just a couple of weeks, you're going to start to see significant clarification of some of the actually understandable and reasonable questions that people are asking," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the face of the U.S. government's pandemic response, said on Face the Nation.

The timing of the change has also faced questions. Just days earlier, Walensky had defended the agency's strict mask guidance in front of a Senate committee where some Republicans on the panel described the CDC's guidance as "unworkable."

When pressed about the quick turnaround on the agency's stance on mask wearing, Walensky said the agency was not giving in to pressure but instead needed time to review evolving science.

"I can tell you it certainly would have been easier if the science had evolved a week earlier and I didn't have to go to Congress making those statements. But I'm delivering the science as the science is delivered to the medical journals," she said.

To date more than 156 million Americans, or more than 47% of the population, have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and more than 121 million are fully vaccinated.

Walensky cautioned that even with the new guidelines, it was still too early to "declare victory," but added that she was "cautiously optimistic" about the pandemic.

"We have to remain humble. We've had way too many curveballs in this pandemic come to us. But I am really cautiously optimistic that we are in a good place right now, that cases continue to come down," she said.

But, she added, even though the guidance has changed, "there's no need for everybody to start ripping

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off their masks.”

“There is no mandate to take it off. What we’re saying is, now this is safe,” she said. “Work at your own speed, work with your own family and your own businesses to remove them when necessary.”

Severe cyclone heading toward southern India; 6 dead

NEW DELHI (AP) — A severe cyclone is roaring in the Arabian Sea off southwestern India with winds of up to 140 kph (87 mph), already causing heavy rains and flooding that have killed at least six people, officials said Sunday.

Cyclone Tauktae, the season’s first major storm, is expected to make landfall early Tuesday in Gujarat state, a statement by the India Meteorological Department said.

The massive storm will likely hamper India’s fight against a coronavirus surge that’s sweeping the country with devastating death tolls, as virus lockdown measures may slow relief work and damage from the storm could potentially destroy roads and cut vital supply lines.

In areas along the Arabian Sea coast, four people were killed and 73 villages badly damaged on Sunday, according to the southwestern Karnataka state’s disaster management authority.

A woman was killed when a coconut tree fell on her and a man riding a scooter was hit by an uprooted electric pole in the western state of Goa lashed by stormy winds and heavy rains, said Pramod Sawant, the state’s top elected official.

Nearly 2,500 government rescuer workers have been deployed in six states on Cyclone Tauktae’s path — Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa — equipped with wireless radios, satellite phones, cutters and tools needed for post-cyclone operations.

The storm, moving at a speed of 11 kph (7 mph), was currently 660 kilometers (410 miles) south-southeast of Veraval in Gujarat state, the India Meteorological Department said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday reviewed with officials the preparedness of states to deal with the cyclone, a government statement said.

The region is no stranger to devastating cyclones, but changing climate patterns have caused them to become more intense, rather than more frequent.

Last cyclone season, K.J. Ramesh, the former chief of India’s weather agency, said the increased ferocity of the storms is caused by the temperature of the sea’s surface. Warm ocean water is where storms get their energy, and the amount of heat trapped in the top 700 meters (2,300 feet) of the seas has increased.

Minneapolis suburb OKs roadmap for policing changes

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — Elected officials in a Minneapolis suburb where a police officer fatally shot Daunte Wright during a traffic stop in April approved a resolution that puts the city on track to major changes to its policing practices.

The Brooklyn Center City Council voted 4-1 Saturday in favor of a resolution that would create new divisions of unarmed civilian employees to handle non-moving traffic violations and respond to mental health crises. It also limits situations in which officers can make arrests and requires more de-escalation efforts by police before using deadly force. In addition, a new Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention would be formed to oversee efforts on community health and public safety, led by a director with public health expertise.

The city attorney and mayor have said that adopting the resolution commits the city to change, though it is not a final action.

The resolution “will establish a new north star for our community, one that will keep all of us safe,” said Brooklyn Center Mayor Mike Elliott. “It says that we, as your elected leaders, are committing ourselves. And that you can hold us accountable for achieving those goals.”

Elliott introduced the resolution last week, less than a month after then-Brooklyn Center Officer Kim Potter, who is white, fatally shot Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist. The city’s police chief, who has

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since stepped down, has said he believed Potter meant to use her Taser on Wright during the April 11 stop instead of her handgun. Body camera video shows her shouting "Taser!" multiple times before firing. The shooting ignited days of unrest.

Council Members Marquita Butler, April Graves and Dan Ryan joined Elliott in voting for the resolution. Council Member Kris Lawrence-Anderson voted against it, saying that the council hadn't taken enough time to weigh the proposal, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported.

The three-hour meeting included testimony from Wright's family as well as the family of Kobe Dimock-Heisler, who also was killed by Brooklyn Center police.

"I truly believe if this was implemented prior to April 11, our son would still be with us today," said Katie Wright, Daunte's mother.

Potter, who is charged with second-degree manslaughter in his death, resigned within days of the shooting. Police have said Wright was pulled over for expired tags, but they sought to arrest him after discovering an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and had a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

Dozens of citizens spoke at Saturday's council meeting. In one tense moment, a man said he didn't agree with having unarmed people pull over drivers. He then turned to Wright and said: "Your son was killed, not because of a traffic stop in my mind. But because he had warrants." The man was drowned out by boos.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota called the proposal "an important first move" in changing policing. But several police groups have raised concerns, saying parts of the resolution conflict with state law and will put public safety at risk.

No police officers spoke at Saturday's meeting.

Durst trial to resume after long delay; will jury be ready?

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — It took nearly 15 years for police to arrest New York real estate heir Robert Durst in the killing of his best friend and another five to bring him to trial. After just two days of testimony, jurors were sent home when the coronavirus closed courthouses.

On Monday, more than 14 months later, the jury is returning to Los Angeles County Superior Court to see if they can complete their assignment. If so, it could be a first for the U.S. legal system.

The length of the stoppage is unprecedented and it's the highest-profile U.S. case postponed because of the pandemic, Durst's lawyers say. They have repeatedly — and unsuccessfully — sought a mistrial because they argued the delay harmed his chance of a fair trial.

Durst, 78, has pleaded not guilty to murdering his friend Susan Berman, who was shot in the back of the head in her LA home in December 2000. Prosecutors say he silenced Berman before she could tell police she helped him cover up the killing of his wife, Kathie, in New York in 1982.

Judge Mark Windham has called back the panel of 23 jurors, including 11 alternates, and plans to question them Monday to see if they can go forward with the case.

The defense has submitted a list of proposed questions, including whether jurors read or heard about the case during the break and remain impartial, and if COVID-19 altered their lives in a way that prevents them from serving another four to five months.

The pandemic has disrupted courts nationwide, leading to delays and video rather than in-person proceedings in many instances. Many defendants awaiting trial were freed because of concerns they would get the virus in jail.

What makes the Durst case so unusual is that it was halted after the jury — winnowed from over 400 people — was sworn in and heard four days of opening statements and two days of testimony.

Defense lawyer Chip Lewis said Durst's legal team had done extensive research and couldn't find case delays even close to this long.

Scott Sundby, a University of Miami law professor, said he looked into trials that were halted due to damaging earthquakes and hurricanes and hadn't discovered a break as long as the Durst case.

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The length of the pause itself was less likely to be a problem because it was not anyone's fault, Sundby said.

But he said Windham, who is likely motivated to keep the jury intact, would have to be vigilant when screening jurors to make sure they hadn't been tainted in any way that could violate Durst's right to a fair trial.

"I think the motivation is most likely that, 'We spent a lot of time and effort picking a jury and unless I become convinced that this jury cannot be fair, we're not going to go through that process again,'" Sundby said.

Durst, an eccentric worth more than an estimated \$100 million, is being held without bail. He is only charged with Berman's killing but prosecutors are using his wife's disappearance and neighbor's slaying in Texas to build their case against him.

He has long been suspected of killing his wife, whose body has never been found, though he's never been charged and has denied any role in her disappearance.

Berman, a Las Vegas mobster's daughter who met Durst at the University of California, Los Angeles, served as his unofficial spokeswoman when Kathie Durst vanished. She helped him cover his tracks, prosecutors said.

After New York investigators announced they reopened the case in fall 2000, authorities say Berman told Durst she was going to speak with them about what she knew. She was dead two months later.

Nine months after Berman was killed, Durst fatally shot his neighbor Morris Black in a Galveston, Texas, boarding house, where he had gone into hiding as a mute woman.

Prosecutors say he killed Black because the neighbor discovered his real identity.

Durst was acquitted after testifying Black pulled a pistol on him and was shot as they struggled for the weapon. He said he panicked and butchered the man's body and tossed it into Galveston Bay.

During opening statements in LA, defense lawyer Dick DeGuerin, who defended Durst in Texas, said Durst didn't kill Berman and doesn't know who did. But he said his client had found her body, panicked and bolted.

Durst sent police a cryptic note alerting them to a "cadaver" in the house only to ensure she would be found, DeGuerin said. Durst had long denied penning the note.

He was arrested in New Orleans in 2015 on the eve of the final episode of "The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst," an HBO documentary in which he was confronted with the cadaver note and a letter he once sent Berman with similar block print handwriting and the city of Beverly Hills misspelled "Beverley."

Before being shown the letter he had written to Berman, Durst told the filmmakers that only the killer could have written the cadaver note.

After the "gotcha" moment on camera, he was caught on a hot mic saying to himself in a bathroom, "You're caught! What the hell did I do? Killed them all, of course."

If the judge lets the case continue with the current jury, lawyers will be allowed to refresh the panel's memories by presenting one- to two-hour opening statements.

During the testimony jurors previously heard, several witnesses, including Thomas Durst, another heir to the family's New York commercial real estate empire, said he was terrified of his brother. Others testified that Kathie Durst was afraid of her husband.

Sundby said one of the main concerns for defense lawyers will be whether any of the prosecution's evidence from the start of trial seared an impression in jurors' minds during the intervening months.

"If the last impression is that his deceased wife was walking around scared of him," Sundby said, "I would be arguing strongly that that kind of unconscious view of the defendant was allowed to sit and become concrete over the last 14 months."

Afghan cease-fire ends amid calls for fresh peace talks

By KATHY GANNON and TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A three-day cease-fire marked by violent attacks — most claimed by the Islamic State group — ended Sunday in Afghanistan amid calls for renewed peace talks between the

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government and Taliban.

Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen said the negotiating teams of the government and the Islamic Emirate, as the Taliban refer to their ousted regime, met briefly Saturday in the Middle Eastern State of Qatar. They renewed their commitment to finding a peaceful end to the war and called for an early start to talks that have been stalled, he said.

The U.S. has been pressing for accelerated talks as it withdraws the last of its 2,500-3,500 soldiers and NATO its remaining 7,000 allied forces.

Even as the Taliban and government signed on to the cease-fire, which was declared to mark the Islamic holiday of Eid-al-Fitr, violence continued unabated in Afghanistan. A bombing Friday in a mosque north of the capital killed 12 worshippers, including the prayer leader. Another 15 people were wounded. The Taliban denied involvement and blamed the government intelligence agency.

In a statement Sunday, the IS affiliate took responsibility for the mosque attack, saying its fighters planted an explosive device in "a worship place for disbelievers Sufis," killing the "apostate Imam," or prayer leader. The statement claimed 40 worshipers were wounded.

The IS also claimed it blew up several electrical grid stations over the weekend. That left the capital Kabul in the dark for much of the three-day holiday that followed the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

In posts on its affiliated websites, IS claimed additional attacks over the last two weeks that destroyed 13 electrical grid stations in several provinces. The stations bring imported power from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The attacks have left nine provinces including Kabul with disrupted power supplies, said Sanger Niazai, a government spokesman. There was also concern that local warlords, demanding protection money from the government to safeguard stations in areas they control, may have been behind some of the destruction.

At least one local warlord was arrested last year after demanding protection money.

On Sunday in the mostly Shiite neighborhood of Dasht-e-Barchi, parents of scores of young girls killed in a brutal May 8 bombing demonstrated to demand the government provide them with greater security. They said 90 people were killed, most of them students of Syed Al-Shahda girls school, in the bombings outside the school. No one took responsibility but the IS affiliate has declared war on the country's minority Shiites.

The seemingly unstoppable violence in Afghanistan has residents and regional countries fearful the final withdrawal of U.S. and NATO soldiers could lead to further chaos. Washington said it wants its last soldier out of Afghanistan by Sept. 11 at the latest, but the withdrawal is progressing quickly and a Western official familiar with the exit said it is likely to be completed by early July. He spoke on condition of anonymity because details of the withdrawal are not being made public.

On Saturday, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed concern about the rapid withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in a phone call with Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

Wang called the withdrawal hasty and warned it would "severely" impact the Afghan peace process and negatively affect regional stability. He called on the United Nations to play a greater role.

Virus testing strategies, opinions vary widely in US schools

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Children are having their noses swabbed or saliva sampled at school to test for the coronavirus in cities such as Baltimore, New York and Chicago. In other parts of the U.S., school districts are reluctant to check even students showing signs of illness for COVID-19.

Education and health officials around the country have taken different approaches to testing students and staff members — and widely varying positions on whether to test them at all as more children give up virtual classrooms for in-person learning. Some states have rejected their share of the billions of dollars the Biden administration made available for conducting virus tests in schools.

Officials in districts that have embraced testing describe it as an important tool for making sure schools reopen safely and infections remain under control. They note that the virus might otherwise elude detec-

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tion since young people with the virus often are asymptomatic and most teachers have been vaccinated.

But many school administrators and families, weary of pandemic-related disruptions, see little benefit in screening children, who tend not to become as sick from COVID-19 as adults. Meanwhile, each positive test that turns up at a school can trigger quarantine orders that force students back into learning from home.

In Nebraska, Superintendent Bryce Jorgenson said he doubts parents with children in the Southern Valley Public School District would embrace school-based virus tests. His rural, 370-student district eliminated its mandatory mask policy in March.

"I can tell you right now, I would say that not just in our district, but in many districts around, there is not an appetite for that at all," he said of ongoing screening. "I don't know as a leader, too, if I want to get into testing kids because we don't test kids for any other virus, really."

Elected officials in Iowa and Idaho made their opinions known by turning down millions in federal aid for voluntary COVID-19 testing in schools.

"Here's your \$95 million back," Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, declared on Fox News after commenting that in her view, President Joe Biden "thinks that COVID just started."

In Idaho, the state House of Representatives rejected \$40.3 million in offered funding.

"Schools are not medical facilities, and we shouldn't want to place that responsibility and liability on our schools," Republican state Rep. Tammy Nichols said in an email. "That is why we have medical facilities and staff who are licensed, certified and insured to handle those things."

Experts are divided about how worthwhile it is to test for the coronavirus inside schools as more people are vaccinated and confirmed cases decline.

Joshua Salomon, a professor of medicine at Stanford University who supports screening students, said the procedure could help curb outbreaks involving more contagious variants.

"Basically, it gives you an insurance policy against things we may not be able to anticipate," Salomon said. "The virus has really kind of caught us off guard in a few instances."

But Dr. Monica Gandhi, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said the nation's vaccination program makes the tests less useful because immunized individuals are so much less likely to get infected. At the same time, she said, false positives in school settings carry significant consequences when they cause a return to online learning.

Screening tests have played a key role in reopening plans for schools in New York City and liberal-leaning states like California and Massachusetts.

Some districts, like Baltimore City Public Schools, use so-called pooled testing methods that combine multiple samples from students in kindergarten to eighth grade; a positive result leads to everyone in the pool being quarantined. The district is using individual saliva-based PCR tests to screen its high school students.

"By doing this screening testing, you can actually catch the cases early, and that is really effective at preventing transmission," Cleo Hirsch, who oversees the testing in Baltimore's public schools, said.

In Chicago, surveillance testing for COVID-19 was part of the district's reopening agreement with the teachers union. For elementary students who are at least 10, the district tests a percentage at random, focusing on zip codes with the most confirmed COVID-19 cases. The district tests a sampling of high school students citywide. The tests require parental consent.

In Massachusetts, which also relies on pooled testing, the collected data indicates a positivity rate within schools of 2 cases for every 1,000 people, said Russell Johnston, a senior associate commissioner at the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"That just again gives us enormous confidence in the mitigation strategies that we have available in the schools," he said.

Oregon is beginning to pilot testing of unvaccinated school employees and plans to expand the health surveillance effort to children attending overnight summer camp before deciding how to proceed in the fall. Some school administrators have expressed trepidation about adding surveillance testing, state epidemiologist Dr. Dean Sidelinger said.

"COVID has added 12 new challenges every hour for them on top of everything else they were already

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burdened with," Sidelinger said. "So many of them just kind of, I think instinctively, said, 'No, you cannot ask us to do another thing.'"

In Minnesota, the 8,500-student Edina Public Schools has quarantined hundreds of close contacts of students with positive results. The district began a "Test The Nest" surveillance program at its high school and middle schools in mid-March in an attempt to identify individuals without symptoms who are carrying the virus, spokeswoman Mary Woitte said.

But Nicole Schnell, of the group Edina Parents 4 Progress, opposes the expanded testing, saying a single positive case can lead to massive disruptions.

Schnell said her daughters, age 15 and 18, spent two weeks quarantined in the fall and another two weeks in the spring despite testing negative because they were considered close contacts of people who were infected. Her 17-year-old son decided to keep attending classes virtually because he didn't want to risk a potential exposure that might force him to miss the spring baseball season.

"I have seen firsthand effects of keeping kids out of society," Schnell said, adding that one of her children was diagnosed with depression after being quarantined. "We are not just talking about out of school. We are talking about out of any sport that they play, out of any activity, out of anything outside, out of seeing their friends, because of a potential positive exposure."

As GOP restricts voting, Democrats move to expand access

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

Last year, for the first time in more than a quarter-century, Democrats in Virginia took control of the statehouse and the governor's mansion. Since then, one priority has become clear: expanding voting rights.

Once home to the capital of the Confederacy, Virginia has made Election Day a state holiday, repealed a voter identification law and allowed no-excuse absentee voting. Earlier this year, Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam approved a sweeping voting rights act, reinstating election rules once required by federal law to prevent racial discrimination.

Other Democratic states also are acting to remove restrictions to the ballot — in marked contrast to many Republican-controlled states that are moving in the opposite direction. Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Iowa have already passed restrictive voting laws; Ohio and Texas are considering their own.

"It was kind of surreal to know that we had the power to change something in 2021 that we had been working on for my entire lifetime," said Del. Marcia Price, a Virginia Democrat who sponsored the Voting Rights Act of Virginia. "I think the contrast is becoming so clear of what democracy looks like and what impeding democracy looks like."

More than 800 bills have been filed in 47 states this year with provisions that would expand voting rights, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy group that advocates for voting access. A majority of the proposals focus on absentee voting, while others are meant to make it easier to register to vote or restore voting rights for those with prior criminal convictions.

At the same time, congressional Democrats in Washington are pushing an overhaul of elections through a proposal that would compel states to offer no-excuse absentee voting, require 15 days of early voting, mandate greater disclosure from political donors and more.

The Voting Rights Act of Virginia requires local election officials to get public feedback or approval from the attorney general before making changes to voting procedures. It also empowers voters and the state to sue in cases of voter suppression at the local level and forbids discrimination in election administration.

The law mirrors parts of the federal Voting Rights Act, in which states and counties with a history of discrimination in voting, including Virginia and some other Southern states, had to receive federal approval before making changes to election law. The U.S. Supreme Court in 2013 threw out that requirement, known as preclearance, effectively gutting the Voting Rights Act.

Democratic states also are introducing legislation to make permanent or build upon procedures that were expanded in 2020, when officials relaxed rules to make voting easier and safer during the pandemic. Elections officials of both parties have said the election ran smoothly, and former President Donald Trump's

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attorney general said the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that would have altered the results.

Similar to Virginia, Connecticut is considering a proposal to create its own voting rights act. A separate bill would make ballot drop boxes a permanent fixture of elections. In Colorado, Democrats are pushing numerous elections bills, including measures to expand ranked-choice voting, encourage colleges and universities to inform students about registering to vote, and put polling centers in low-turnout areas.

The Vermont Legislature is moving a bill that would send general election ballots to all active voters, making permanent a policy used last year during the pandemic. Nevada Democrats are trying to do the same for all elections, with state Assembly Speaker Jason Frierson saying mailed ballots made voting more convenient and accessible.

"The more options that we give our voters, the better off we are as states and the more we're advancing democracy," he said.

Democrats in Maryland have passed several bills aimed at making voting easier this year. One wide-ranging bill created a permanent list that any voter can join to automatically get an absentee ballot before each election. It also requires election officials to send absentee ballot applications to all eligible voters before the state's primary elections in 2022 and 2024 and approve ballot drop box locations.

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan did not act on the bill, instead letting it become law without his signature. He said it would result in ballots being incorrectly mailed to ineligible voters.

"I think the 2020 election was really a game-changer," said Del. Jheanelle Wilkins, a Democrat who sponsored the bill. "We had vote-by-mail in unprecedented numbers in 2020, and I think also the climate of the 2020 election really showed us how important it is to expand this fundamental aspect of our democracy and to protect the right to vote and reduce any barriers that might be present in terms of freedom to vote."

Dale Ho, who oversees voting rights for the American Civil Liberties Union, said states should be trying to come up with ways to facilitate voting, not diminish it.

"A lot of the analysis and conversation is, 'Is this going to help Republicans, is this going to help Democrats?' Why aren't we talking about what's going to help voters? What's better for voters?" he said. "That's what we should be talking about as a country. That's what these politicians should be talking about."

Islamic nations slam Israel — and each other's ties to it

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A league of Muslim nations on Sunday demanded that Israel halt attacks killing Palestinian civilians amid heavy fighting between it and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, even as fissures between countries over their recognition of Israel emerged.

A statement by the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation hewed closely to previous ones issued by the Saudi-based group, including backing the decades-old call for Palestinians to have their own nation with East Jerusalem as its capital.

However, recent normalization deals between Israel and some nations in the group — as well as their own concerns about Hamas — saw diplomats at points instead criticize each other.

"The massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said. "This criminal and genocidal regime has once again proven that friendly gestures only aggravate its atrocities."

The past week has seen some of the worst violence across Israel and the Palestinian territory since the 2014 war in Gaza, with militants launching missiles and Israel pounding the blockaded coastal strip home to 2 million people with heavy fire. At least 188 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza with 1,230 people wounded. Eight people in Israel have been killed.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation statement called on Israel to respect Muslims' access to Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam, as well as stop settlers from forcibly evicting Palestinian families from their homes.

"The plight of the Palestinian people is the bleeding wound of the Islamic world today," Afghan Foreign

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Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar said.

But the videoconference meeting saw some delegates instead turn their fire toward countries like Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, Muslim nations which reached normalization deals last year to recognize Israel. While Egypt and Jordan earlier reached peace deals, supporters of the Palestinians criticized the new countries for recognizing Israel before the formation of an independent Palestinian state.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu joined Zarif in criticizing the normalization, though Israel maintains diplomatic ties with Ankara.

"There are a few who have lost their moral compass and voiced support for Israel," he said. "If there are half-hearted statements within our own family, how could we criticize others? Who will take our words seriously?"

Zarif also accused Israel of "genocide and crimes against humanity."

"Make no mistake: Israel only understand the language of resistance and the people of Palestine are fully entitled to their right to defend themselves," Zarif said.

Hamas, which seized power in Gaza in 2007, didn't take part in the meeting, which came before consultations at the United Nations over the crisis.

Across the Arabian Peninsula, reactions to the fighting similarly has been mixed. In Qatar, home to the Al-Jazeera satellite network, hundreds turned out late Saturday night to listen to a speech by Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh. Kuwait's parliament speaker reportedly spoke with Haniyeh on Saturday, as did Qatar's foreign minister.

Meanwhile, in Bahrain and the UAE, government-linked media hasn't been covering the current flare-up of violence nonstop like other networks in the region.

There are murmurs of dissent though. In Bahrain, civil society groups signed a letter urging the kingdom to expel the Israeli ambassador. In the UAE, where political parties and protests are illegal, Palestinians have expressed their anger quietly, worried about losing their residency permit. Some Emiratis also have expressed concerns.

"The region's only democracy," tweeted the Emirati writer and political analyst Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in writing about Israel's strike on a Gaza building that housed the offices of The Associated Press and Al-Jazeera.

Hussein Ibish, a senior scholar at the Washington-based Arab Gulf States Institute, said most Gulf Arab leaders fear Hamas' rocket fire as "cynical, dangerous, unnecessarily provocative and endangering Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza alike." That takes the pressure off those Gulf leaders to respond, unlike in other confrontations involving the Al-Aqsa Mosque or when Israeli settlers force Arab families out of their homes, he said.

"There won't be much sympathy for what is widely viewed in the Gulf as Israel's heavy-handed and disproportionate retaliation," Ibish wrote, "but it will be much easier for Gulf leaders and many citizens to regard the exchange as a tragic conflagration at the expense of ordinary people brought about by two leaderships over which they have neither control nor responsibility."

Cedar Rapids tries to turn city of stumps into tree oasis

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa (AP) — Until one afternoon last August, Cedar Rapids had always been a lush, leafy island surrounded by a sea of corn and soybeans, with its giant oaks, sycamores and other trees towering over the community's neighborhoods and providing a shady refuge from Iowa's steamy summer heat.

It took 45 minutes to shred nearly all of those trees, as a rare storm called a derecho plowed through the city of 130,000 in eastern Iowa with 140 mph (225 kph) winds and left behind a jumble of branches, downed powerlines and twisted signs.

Power was restored in the following weeks, and workers continue repairing thousands of homes battered by the hurricane-force winds, but nine months later Cedar Rapids is not back to normal — because of the trees.

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"A lot of people once took the trees for granted, for what they provided," said city arborist Todd Fagan. "That's not the case anymore."

Now, city officials, businesses and nonprofit groups have teamed up with ambitious plans to somehow transform what is a city of stumps back into the tree-covered Midwestern oasis along the Cedar River.

They all acknowledge it won't be easy, or cheap. Most of the trees are gone, and many of those that remain lost many of their branches, giving them a sparse, stick-like appearance.

As Shannon Ramsay, who heads the nonprofit group Trees Forever, put it, "It will take decades and decades to get our canopy back, but it will happen."

The lasting damage in Cedar Rapids is a testament to the scale of the storm, which cut a roughly 100-mile-wide (160-kilometer-wide) swath from Nebraska across Iowa and through Illinois and Wisconsin and into Indiana and Ohio. It took the storm about 14 hours to travel nearly 800 miles (1,290 kilometers), causing an estimated \$7.5 billion in damage and ruining 850,000 acres (345,000 hectares) of crops in Iowa alone.

Derechos are sometimes called inland hurricanes, but they're actually classified as thunderstorms, with straight-line rather than circular winds that make up hurricanes and tornadoes. A University of Iowa professor coined the term in 1888, using the Spanish word for "direct" or "straight ahead," according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The storm smacked directly into Cedar Rapids, and an estimated 100,000 trees were either snapped off or torn out of the ground, leaving giant root balls exposed on streets and sidewalks. Seventy percent of the tree canopy was destroyed and some of the city's 97 parks lost almost every tree.

"It was chaos," said Austin Even, who has been hauling away trees nearly every day since the storm.

It's more manageable now, but in the days after the derecho, just getting around town was a nightmare, given 10-foot-high (3-meter-high) walls of debris, broken power poles and no cell service, Even said.

"No one can really understand it," Mayor Brad Hart said. "The crews who came from other parts of the country to help clean up said they had never seen anything like this."

Even now, piles of branches line streets and the whine of chainsaws is part of city life.

City officials have begun the long recovery process by committing at least \$1 million annually for 10 years toward planting trees and \$24,000 to watering new trees for the next two years. The city is working with Trees Forever on a "releaf initiative" that is expected to stretch for 15 years or more.

As part of the effort, organizers are tallying up the remaining trees and specifying where new ones are needed on city property. Organizers also hope to raise up to \$25 million from private sources.

With current funding, officials said, it will be years before some streets have a city-provided tree, and property owners will be responsible for planting trees on private property. Even if more money were available, officials said the need in Cedar Rapids has outstripped the supply of native Midwest trees available to plant.

The city has put out detailed plans for grinding out massive stumps in the right-of-way and rules for residents who can take on the task themselves. Officials promise they have no intention of planting puny trees even though they might be easier to maintain.

"Cedar Rapids has a long history of great shade trees on the street, and that's what citizens want," Ramsay said.

About 10,000 trees will be planted on city and private property this year, and that number will need to be repeated far into the future.

Ramsay said she hopes more businesses will pitch in. Hundreds of trucks and trailers lined up recently for a grocery chain's offer of an 80% discount on 2,500 bur oak trees that were up to 10 feet tall and would typically cost \$500.

Trinidad Green said three trees around her house east of downtown came crashing down in the storm. The loss was heartbreaking, she said, and the lack of shade made it harder to keep her old home cool last summer and this spring.

"It's so naked now," she said.

Lisa Williams, the director of development for Trees Forever, acknowledged Cedar Rapids won't look the

same for years, but she said replanting efforts are picking up pace.

"It's so important to replant now so people have this image of hope and the future rather than focusing on the tree skeletons," she said.

Hundreds of bodies found buried along Indian riverbanks

By RAJESH KUMAR SINGH and BISWAJEET BANERJEE Associated Press

PRAYAGRAJ, India (AP) — Police are reaching out to villagers in northern India to investigate the recovery of bodies buried in shallow sand graves or washed up on the Ganges River banks, prompting speculation on social media that they're the remains of COVID-19 victims.

In jeeps and boats, police used portable loudspeakers with microphones asking people not to dispose of bodies in rivers. "We are here to help you perform the last rites," police said.

On Friday, rains exposed the cloth coverings of bodies buried in shallow sand graves on a wide, flat riverbank in Prayagraj, a city in Uttar Pradesh state. While officials say the riverside burials have taken place for decades, the sheer numbers in the shadow of the pandemic are focusing more attention on the practice.

Navneet Sehgal, a state government spokesman, on Sunday denied local media reports that more than 1,000 corpses of COVID-19 victims had been recovered from rivers in the past two weeks. "I bet these bodies have nothing to do with COVID-19," he said.

He said some villagers did not cremate their dead as is customary, due to a Hindu tradition during some periods of religious significance, and instead disposed of them in rivers or by digging graves on riverbanks.

Ramesh Kumar Singh, a member of Bondhu Mahal Samiti, a philanthropic organization that helps cremate bodies, said the number of deaths is very high in rural areas, and poor people have been disposing of bodies in the river because of the exorbitant cost of performing the last rites and a shortage of wood. The cost of cremation has tripled up to 15,000 rupees (\$210).

On Saturday, an Associated Press photojournalist estimated there were at least 300 shallow riverside graves on a sand bar near Prayagraj. Each grave was covered by an orange, yellow or reddish cloth and appeared laid out in the same direction. Several policemen were at the scene, but allowed a family who arrived in a small truck to bury a 75-year-old woman at the site.

K.P. Singh, a senior police officer, said authorities had earmarked a cremation ground on the Prayagraj riverbank for those who died of COVID-19, and police were no longer allowing any burials on the riverfront. Authorities in Sehgal state have found "a small number" of bodies on the riverbanks, he said, but didn't give a figure.

However, on Sunday, a 30-year-old Buddhist came to the same riverbank in Prayagraj with other family members and buried his mother, who he said had died of a heart attack.

"She was not infected with COVID-19," Vijay Kumar told the AP, adding that his religion allows both cremation and burial, "but I chose burial."

Health authorities last week retrieved 71 bodies that washed up on a Ganges River bank in neighboring Bihar state.

Authorities performed post mortems but said they could not confirm the cause of death due to decomposition.

A dozen corpses were also found last week buried in sand at two locations on the riverbank in Unnao district, 40 kilometers (25 miles) southwest of Lucknow, the Uttar Pradesh state capital. District Magistrate Ravindra Kumar said an investigation is underway to identify the cause of death.

India's two big states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, with nearly 358 million people in total, are among the worst hit in the virus surge sweeping through the country with devastating death tolls. Hapless villagers have been rushing the sick to nearby towns and cities for treatment, many of them dying on the way, victims of India's crumbling health care.

After hitting record highs for weeks, the number of new cases was stabilizing, said Dr. V.K. Paul, a government health expert.

The Health Ministry on Sunday reported 311,170 confirmed cases in the past 24 hours, down from

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326,098 on Saturday.

It also reported 4,077 additional deaths, taking the total fatalities to 270,284. Both figures are almost certainly a vast undercount, experts say.

In rural America, census takers relied more on neighbors

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

In Alaska, West Virginia and other mostly rural states, census takers relied more on the word of neighbors, landlords and others for information about a home's residents. In New Jersey, New York and other more densely populated states in the Mid-Atlantic region, they were more likely to come away from a household lacking basic information on race, sex and ethnic background.

An Associated Press review of the first data-quality measurements released by the U.S. Census Bureau last month shows some early patterns that may point to red flags in the data that could emerge when more detailed numbers from the 2020 census are released in August.

While it's too early to reach any conclusions about the accuracy of the data gathered during the once-a-decade head count, these types of responses — a reliance on proxies for answers and just a head count with no basic demographic information — result in poorer quality data compared to other methods.

Poor quality data can diminish the political power and resources available to communities across the U.S.: Children who are missed in the census deprive communities of money for building schools, and undercounting racial or ethnic minorities prevents them from forming minority-majority political districts.

The bureau released data quality measurements last month as part of an effort to engender confidence in the numbers following a head count challenged by the spread of the new coronavirus, concerns about politicization by the Trump administration and natural disasters. The bureau also is allowing a team of outside statisticians to perform quality checks.

The measurements include state-by-state breakdowns of rates of households that answered the census questionnaire on their own, the percentage of households where a member answered a census taker's questions and the rate of households where information was gathered from administrative records from agencies like the IRS or Social Security Administration. Answers gathered from these methods are considered higher quality than proxies and population-only counts.

"We will learn more when smaller geography data is released," said Jan Vink, a demographer at Cornell University.

Besides Alaska and West Virginia, other rural states that had the highest rates of household answers coming from proxies such as neighbors and landlords included Maine, Montana, Vermont and New Mexico. In these states, census takers relied on information from proxies for between almost a quarter and a third of households. Puerto Rico's rate was 37.3%.

Nationally, the rate was 18.2%, a little less than the 2010 rate of 19.5%, but the bureau for the first time used administrative records in 2020, which helped fill in some of those information gaps.

These same states and Puerto Rico are also places where large numbers of households got counted from a bureau operation geared towards rural and remote communities that often lack mail delivery at their homes. Known as "Update/Leave," it involved census takers dropping off paper questionnaires at homes. The operation's launch coincided with the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. in March 2020, and was suspended for two months as the pandemic spread.

While it's too early to reach any conclusions about the fairness or accuracy of the 2020 count, the correlation between the high use of proxies and the fact these states had large numbers of households covered by this operation "raises an important red flag that needs to be examined further," said Steven Romalewski, director of the CUNY Mapping Service.

When it came to households where census takers only got a head count without demographic information, the national rate was a 5.9%. But it was higher for states in the Mid-Atlantic region, some with the nation's highest population densities, as well as the District of Columbia. It ranged between almost 8% and 12% for the District of Columbia, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware.

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In a statement, the Census Bureau confirmed the findings of the AP review. In 2010, those mostly rural states also had higher rates of proxy responses compared to other states. Residents in these states tend to self-respond at lower rates, requiring census takers to visit their homes, said Mike Bentley, the bureau's assistant division chief for Census Statistical Support.

Regarding the higher head count-only responses in the Mid-Atlantic states, Bentley said, "It is something that we are exploring further."

One of the questions the bureau needs to ask is if the failed effort by the Trump administration to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census had a residual effect on residents refusing to provide personal information, said Thomas Saenz, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Saenz also serves on a bureau advisory committee.

At the same time, because of the Trump administration's attempts to politicize the 2020 census, the bureau needs to determine if people were more willing to provide false information about their neighbors or tenants when proxies were used, Saenz said.

"If you are a Latino family, and a census taker is asking about you, and your proxy is a Trump lover, is this the first census where we have to worry about whether a proxy lied?" Saenz said.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, May 17, the 137th day of 2021. There are 228 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 17, 1954, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court handed down its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision which held that racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal, and therefore unconstitutional.

On this date:

In 1792, the New York Stock Exchange had its beginnings as a group of brokers met under a tree on Wall Street and signed the Buttonwood Agreement.

In 1875, the first Kentucky Derby was run; the winner was Aristides, ridden by Oliver Lewis.

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman seized control of the nation's railroads, delaying — but not preventing — a threatened strike by engineers and trainmen.

In 1973, a special committee convened by the U.S. Senate began its televised hearings into the Watergate scandal.

In 1980, rioting that claimed 18 lives erupted in Miami's Liberty City after an all-white jury in Tampa acquitted four former Miami police officers of fatally beating Black insurance executive Arthur McDuffie.

In 1987, 37 American sailors were killed when an Iraqi warplane attacked the U.S. Navy frigate *Stark* in the Persian Gulf. (Iraq apologized for the attack, calling it a mistake, and paid more than \$27 million in compensation.)

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed a measure requiring neighborhood notification when sex offenders move in. ("Megan's Law," as it's known, was named for Megan Kanka, a 7-year-old New Jersey girl who was raped and murdered in 1994.)

In 2002, former President Jimmy Carter ended a historic visit to Cuba sharply at odds with the Bush administration over how to deal with Fidel Castro, saying limits on tourism and trade often hurt Americans more than Cubans.

In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriages.

In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that young people serving life prison terms should have "a meaningful opportunity to obtain release" provided they didn't kill their victims.

In 2015, a shootout erupted between bikers and police outside a restaurant in Waco, Texas, leaving nine of the bikers dead and 20 people injured.

In 2017, the Justice Department appointed former FBI Director Robert Mueller as a special counsel to

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oversee a federal investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the 2016 Donald Trump campaign.

Ten years ago: Queen Elizabeth II began the first visit by a British monarch to the Republic of Ireland, a four-day trip to highlight strong Anglo-Irish relations and the success of Northern Ireland peacemaking. Former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger confirmed a Los Angeles Times report that he had fathered a child with a woman on his household staff more than a decade earlier. (Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, had announced their separation on May 9, 2011.) Baseball Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew, 74, died in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Five years ago: Bernie Sanders won Oregon's Democratic presidential primary while Hillary Clinton eked out a razor-thin victory in Kentucky. Federal investigators concluded that a speeding Amtrak train that crashed in Philadelphia in May 2015, killing eight people, most likely ran off the rails because the engineer was distracted by word of a nearby commuter train getting hit by a rock. Guy Clark, the Grammy-winning musician who mentored a generation of songwriters, died in Nashville at age 74.

One year ago: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo was tested for the coronavirus on live TV as he announced that all people in the state who were experiencing flu-like symptoms were eligible for tests. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell expressed optimism that the U.S. economy could begin to recover in the second half of the year, assuming that there would not be a second wave, but he suggested in a CBS "60 Minutes" interview that a full recovery would likely not be possible before the arrival of a vaccine. A spokesman for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said Ghani and his political rival Abdullah Abdullah had signed a power-sharing agreement, two months after both men declared themselves the winner of the country's presidential election.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Peter Gerety is 81. Singer Taj Mahal is 79. Rock musician Bill Bruford is 72. TV personality Kathleen Sullivan is 68. Boxing Hall of Famer Sugar Ray Leonard is 65. Actor-comedian Bob Saget is 65. Sports announcer Jim Nantz is 62. Producer Simon Fuller (TV: "American Idol") is 61. Singer Enya is 60. Actor-comedian Craig Ferguson is 59. Rock singer-musician Page McConnell is 58. Actor David Eigenberg is 57. Singer-musician Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails) is 56. Actor Paige Turco is 56. R&B musician O'Dell (Mint Condition) is 56. Actor Hill Harper is 55. TV personality/interior designer Thom Filicia is 52. Singer Jordan Knight is 51. R&B singer Darnell Van Rensalier (Shai) is 51. U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo is 50. Actor Sasha Alexander is 48. Rock singer-musician Josh Homme (HAHM'-ee) is 48. Rock singer Andrea Corr (The Corrs) is 47. Actor Sendhil Ramamurthy (SEN'-dul rah-mah-MURTH'-ee) is 47. Actor Rochelle Aytes is 45. Singer Kandi Burruss is 45. Actor Kat Foster is 43. Actor Ayda Field is 42. Actor Ginger Gonzaga is 38. Folk-rock singer/songwriter Passenger is 37. Dancer-choreographer Derek Hough (huhf) is 36. Actor Tahj Mowry is 35. Actor Nikki Reed is 33. Singer Kree Harrison (TV: "American Idol") is 31. Actor Leven Rambin is 31. Actor Samantha Browne-Walters is 30. Actor Justin Martin is 27.