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Guthmiller, Peterson place at NEC Meet

Two Groton Area golfers placed at the Northeast Conference golf meet held Monday in Millbank. Carly Guthmiller shot at 39 in the front half and a 46 in the back half to take second place in the conference with a score of 85. Shaylee Peterson shot a 55 and a 58 for a total score of 113, placing 14th. Emma Schinkel shot a 50 and a 69 for a total score of 119.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Clark Traders 10 - 2 Groton Amateurs

📍 Away 📅 Sunday May 16, 2021

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R	H	E
CLRK	1	0	0	1	1	0	7	0	0	10	11	2
GRTN	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	4	3

BATTING

Clark Traders	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
Wesley Jones (CF...	4	1	0	0	2	1
Brent Griffith (P...	5	2	2	0	1	0
Jonathan Rodrig...	0	0	0	0	0	0
Zach Toben (SS,...	5	0	2	1	1	0
Rhett Florey (1B,...	3	2	2	2	1	0
Tyler Brinka (C)	4	0	1	2	1	1
Matt Streff (1B)	0	1	0	0	0	0
Grayson Florey (L...	6	1	2	0	0	2
Andrew Magedan...	4	1	0	1	1	0
Zach Jordan (LF)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jess Karber (RF, P)	4	1	0	0	1	2
Jay Huber (2B)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Levi Sauder (2B,...	4	1	2	1	0	2
Totals	39	10	11	7	8	8

Groton	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
S Locke (LF)	0	0	0	0	1	0
Z Melhoeft (LF)	2	1	0	0	0	1
E Erickson	1	0	0	0	0	1
W Locke (3B, P)	2	0	0	0	0	1
C Kueker (3B)	2	1	1	0	0	0
D Frey (2B)	4	0	1	0	0	0
I Celedonio (C)	2	0	1	1	1	1
H Giedt (DH)	3	0	0	0	0	1
R Tejada (P, DH)	1	0	0	0	0	1
C Jensen (RF)	2	0	0	1	1	1
A Severson (RF)	1	0	0	0	0	0
C Melenciono (SS)	4	0	0	0	0	2
K Blackmond (CF)	4	0	0	0	0	3
A Jones (1B)	2	0	0	0	0	1
G Knebel (1B)	2	0	1	0	0	1
CR: S Duncan	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	32	2	4	2	3	14

TB: Zach Toben 2, Brent Griffith 2, Rhett Florey 2, Levi Sauder 2, Grayson Florey 2, Tyler Brinka, **CS:** Jay Huber, **HBP:** Jay Huber, Rhett Florey 2, Matt Streff, **SB:** Andrew Magedanz, Rhett Florey 2, Matt Streff, Grayson Florey, **LOB:** 14

2B: I Celedonio, **TB:** C Kueker, I Celedonio 2, D Frey, G Knebel, **CS:** S Locke, **HBP:** I Celedonio, S Locke, **SB:** C Melenciono, I Celedonio, **LOB:** 8

PITCHING

Clark Traders	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
Brent Griffith	4.0	1	0	0	1	5	0
Zach Toben	3.0	3	2	1	1	4	0
Jess Karber	2.0	0	0	0	1	5	0
Totals	9.0	4	2	1	3	14	0

Groton	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
R Tejada	4.0	1	2	0	4	5	0
A Fordham	2.0	5	1	1	0	1	0
Z Sahli	0.1	3	6	4	2	0	0
W Locke	2.2	2	1	1	2	2	0
Totals	9.0	11	10	5	8	8	0

W: Zach Toben, **P-S:** Zach Toben 52-36, Brent Griffith 61-38, Jess Karber 30-19, **HBP:** Zach Toben, Brent Griffith, **BF:** Zach Toben 16, Brent Griffith 14, Jess Karber 7

L: R Tejada, **P-S:** A Fordham 38-25, Z Sahli 30-13, R Tejada 83-44, W Locke 61-34, **WP:** Z Sahli 2, W Locke 2, **HBP:** R Tejada, W Locke 3, **BF:** A Fordham 11, Z Sahli 7, R Tejada 17, W Locke 16

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

May 18, 2021 – 7:00pm

**120 N Main Street
(NOTICE ADDRESS)**

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

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
2. Amendment to Owner-Engineer Agreement with IMEG Corp./Formerly Clark Engineering Corp.
3. Agreement Between Owner and Engineer for Professional Services with IMEG Corp.
4. Pay request #4 – AB Contracting
5. Minutes
6. Bills
7. April Finance Report
8. Beer at ball games
9. Pool maintenance
10. City Hall to be CLOSED 5/21/21 for moving and will reopen with the Wage Memorial Library at 120 N Main Street 5/24/21
11. June 22, 2021 – Municipal Debt Training – Hope Block
12. 1st Reading of Ordinance #747 Revising Water Rates
13. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
14. Family Crisis Assistance Procedure
15. Hiring seasonal employees
16. Adjournment

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#439 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Millier

We continue to see declines in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Today, we reported just 29,387 new cases, a 0.1% increase over yesterday, bringing us to 32,996,738 total cases in this pandemic. Hospitalizations are down to 33,950. We now have lost 585,387 lives to this virus, 0.1% more than yesterday. There were 385 deaths reported today.

On May 17, 2020, one year ago today, we had reported 1,493,300 cases and 89,502 deaths in the US. Major League Baseball was working out a way to play ball in empty stadiums and salvage a shortened season. We were still woefully short of testing and were receiving warnings from experts about a possible second wave of infections. We had an outbreak among White House employees. Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) was getting serious attention, despite its rarity. And we were learning from studies how effectively masking and social distancing were reducing transmissions. There were over 4.6 million cases worldwide with more than 314,000 deaths.

On May 14, 2020, we discussed viral reproduction number, R_e , and how that related to the precautions we were instituting at that time. If you'd like a look back, check out my Update #81 posted at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3593396484010065>. It was May 15 that we talked about precautions and herd immunity, topics that seem relevant particularly now as both of those topics are surfacing again; we also talked about test accuracy and how base rate influences our interpretation of those figures. If you're curious about that, have a look at my Update #82 posted at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3596272713722442>.

There are some early signs India's outbreak may be slowing. Their new-case report today was under 300,000 for the first time in over three weeks as they approach a total of 25 million cases. Their daily new case report topped out on May 7 at 414,188 cases, which is pretty horrifying. It's difficult to know what sort of effect Cyclone Tauktae and the accompanying torrential rains will have on the situation. They're not out of the woods for sure.

Remember a couple of months ago when I was sounding the alarm about a variant-fueled fourth wave that might just hit us like a tsunami if we couldn't vaccinate fast enough ahead of it? Well, as things turned out (so far), except for a few limited outbreaks—Michigan, Minnesota, and Colorado, in particular—we managed to dodge the bullet. How did that happen?

Seems likely we just got lucky.

The first of these newer variants to hit back in December was B.1.1.7, the one first identified in the UK, and it was seriously more transmissible than the D614G variant predominating at the time. B.1.1.7 showed up during the post-holiday surge that turned so ugly—and deadly—across the country and the world, helping to take new-case numbers and deaths to heretofore unseen heights and up until now when it accounts for some 72 percent of cases nationwide even as cases taper off. Other variants made a bid for the lead, but none of them prevailed against the ridiculous communicability of B.1.1.7. That turned out to be a pretty good thing because of its susceptibility to prior immune responses; we've watched new cases drop more than 85 percent from the disastrous numbers we saw in January.

The variants noted in California, B.1.427 and B.1.429, threatened to be a big problem. They had at least 10 mutations that could spell trouble, including those which seemed to confer some protection against our naturally-acquired immunity and our vaccine-induced immunity; but then they fizzled. Numbers of infections with those dropped in February and March. We're still seeing some numbers in northern California, but almost nothing in the southern part of the state and not so much across the country.

Then there was B.1.526 which emerged in New York. In the Northeast, it gained something of a foothold, but it, too, couldn't compete against the remarkable transmissibility of B.1.1.7. This variant seems to be slowly receding, even where it was once a real threat. What's happening here is that both the variants seen first in California and this variant which emerged in New York just don't compete well against B.1.1.7; and—crucially—B.1.1.7 has no resistance at all against our naturally- or vaccine-acquired antibodies. Folks are still working on just what the combination of mutations in this variant is accomplishing, but one of

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these things clearly is an enhanced ability to transmit.

B.1.351, the variant first identified in South Africa, might have some advantage against our antibodies, but it doesn't seem to be able to establish itself against B.1.1.7 and accounts for just one percent of US case to date. Doesn't look like this one can overcome B.1.1.7's transmission advantage. Similarly, P.1, the variant first identified in Brazil, is having a tough time setting up shop in the US with just 10 percent of our cases. There is some thought P.1 might have a future here, but we've been so far able to stay ahead of it with vaccinations. We should note that P.1 appears to be causing unusually severe disease in children, as well as in pregnant people, in Brazil so there's something here we need to watch as well.

At the moment, our vaccines make the issue of variants moot, but winter will return, and that will be the test. We need to be prepared with boosters so that, if vaccine-induced immunity wanes, we can get out ahead again; and we also need to get a whole lot more people vaccinated. If we don't, then we could have one more bad winter ahead. Even aside of that, then we must remain alert for the emergence of the next variant—and the next. The virus continues to evolve.

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is now in phase 1 clinical trials in children ages 5 and under. Early on, we're trying to get the dosages right, as well as to establish safety, immune response, and efficacy. There have been more parents willing to volunteer their children for trials than there are available spots in the trials; that is probably a reflection that Covid-19, despite its relative mildness in children, is among the top 10 causes of death for children in the US at the moment and there have been thousands of children hospitalized already. I don't know that this will necessarily translate into lots of parents wanting their children vaccinated after the vaccine is approved for this age group. We do know that controlling this virus is going to depend on getting a fair proportion of children covered—remains to be seen how uptake goes. The plan is still to have these available for ages 5 and up by September or so.

Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) had some troubles in vaccine development earlier in the pandemic, discovering in December that their candidate was not working well in older adults. They pulled back from a planned phase 3 clinical trial so they could do some modification to resolve that issue. This is a protein subunit vaccine containing coronavirus spike (S) protein produced by engineered moth cells. It is an adjuvanted vaccine which is scheduled for two doses three weeks apart. A phase 2 study begun in February in the US and Honduras showed strong immune responses in ages 18 to 90 years, so it looks like the problem has been successfully addressed. As a result, they announced today they are planning a phase 3 trial enrolling over 35,000 participants. They're planning to test two formulations, one against the original strain of the virus and one against B.1.351, the variant first identified in South Africa. Once that trial is underway, the companies plan to move into booster studies as well, tests in which they administer their vaccine to already-vaccinated people to assess whether it provides additional or more durable protection.

We have some laboratory studies from New York University available in preprint and not yet peer-reviewed which provide evidence the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna are effective against B.1.617 and B.1.618, two variants which have emerged recently in India. Early data from a similar study done at Oxford University. Although these variants are somewhat less susceptible to vaccine-induced immunity than others, the protection looks to be robust enough to hold. There will need to be real-world studies to confirm these findings, but so far, so good.

In the US, we have now administered nearly 345 million doses of vaccine. We have administered at least one dose to over 157 million individuals, so over 60 percent of adults have now received at least one dose; this is something like 48 percent of the entire population. At least 123 million have been fully vaccinated—49 percent of adults and nearly 38 percent of the population. Good progress, even though we've moved into the difficult phase of this program.

Since this is shorter tonight, I want to take the opportunity to mention something that might be helpful to you now that we've gone to less frequent Updates from here. As you know, Charlotte Erdmann has done yeoman's work for well over a year, since March 19, 2020, as my unpaid researcher—and done a fine job at that. I don't mention and thank her frequently enough, but I will tonight, especially because she's provided me with a summary of her general search techniques you might seek to emulate if you want to keep more current than these Updates provide. So here's what I have for you:

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(1) Google nytimes.com coronavirus updates: Select "Latest Updates" for the newest information or browse through the stories listed. There are often more stories than are listed at the top. You can also check out the rolling keywords at the top and select those of interest. She also checks out the NYT home page for hot-off-the-press updates.

(2) Google washingtonpost.com coronavirus updates: Main page typically has breaking news, major stories, and opinion pieces.

(3) Google cnn.com coronavirus updates: Generally yields several hits, usually 8 to 10 stories. At the end of the update, select "View More" to get a more complete list of stories. This is added to throughout the day, so it grows all day long.

(4) Google PBS newshour where you can search segments and choose those which interest you.

(5) Go to <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>. There will be many topics listed on the hub. Additionally, check out the Science and Technology page and the Science and Health page for more.

(6) At npr.com, check top stories and use pull-down topics menu for Covid and health-related topics. Menus may be at top or bottom, depending how you get into the page.

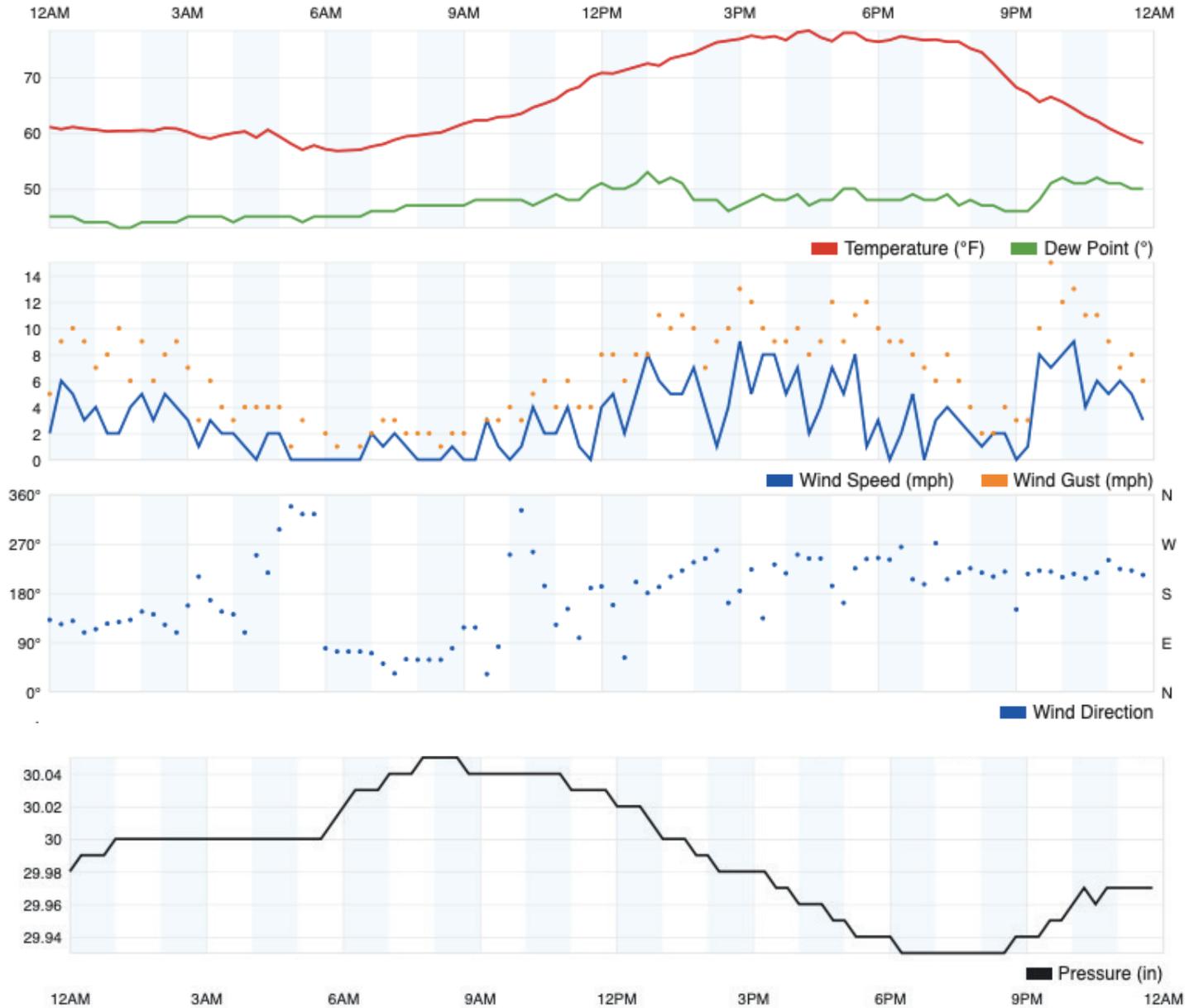
I'm going to guess most of you don't have Charlotte's energy, but this is sort of a getting-started guide for those who do.

That's it for the night. Be well. We'll talk again.

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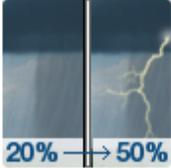
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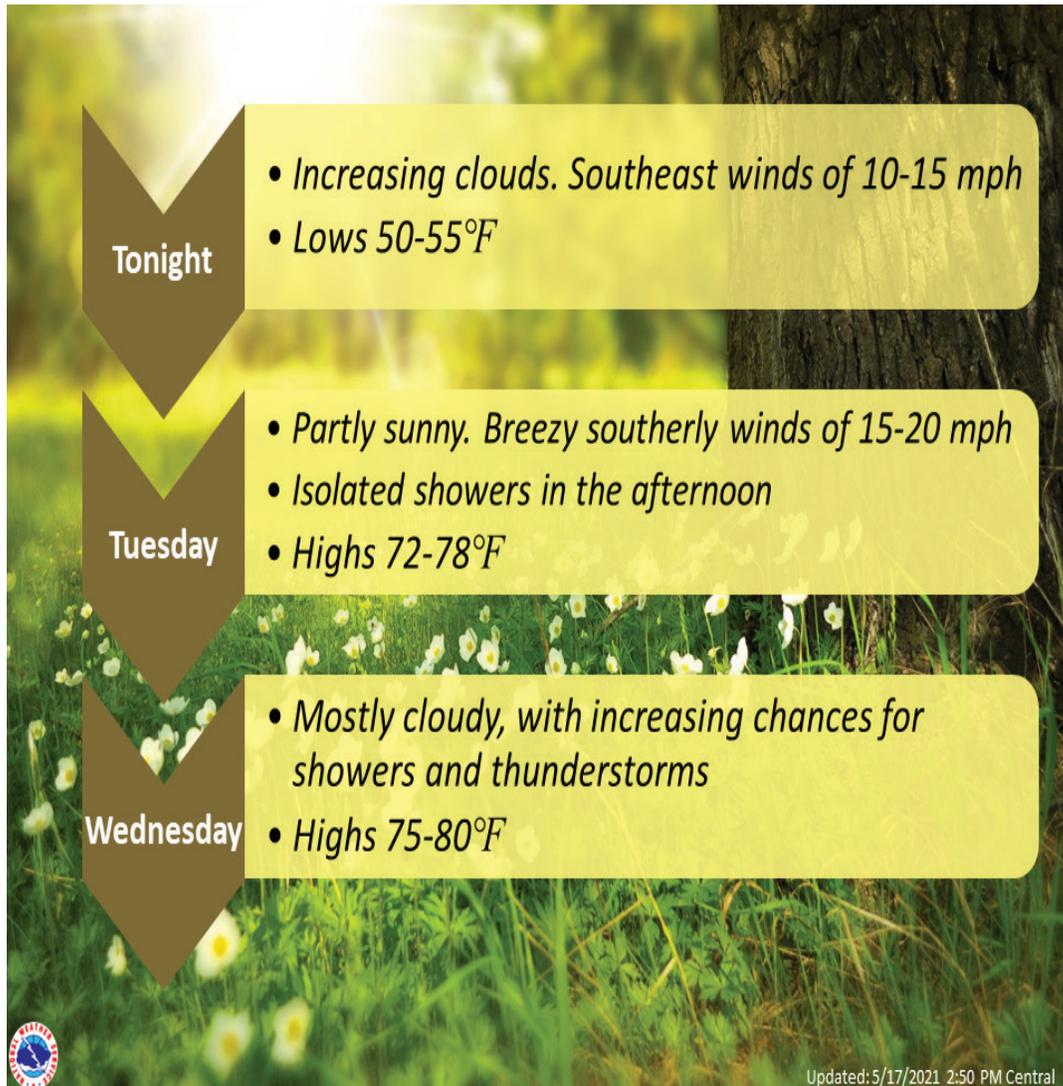
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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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



Tonight

- Increasing clouds. Southeast winds of 10-15 mph
- Lows 50-55°F

Tuesday

- Partly sunny. Breezy southerly winds of 15-20 mph
- Isolated showers in the afternoon
- Highs 72-78°F

Wednesday

- Mostly cloudy, with increasing chances for showers and thunderstorms
- Highs 75-80°F

Updated: 5/17/2021 2:50 PM Central

Tonight will feature increasing clouds with lows dropping into the 50s. A partly sunny sky is expected on Tuesday, with highs warming into the 70s. Isolated showers are also possible on Tuesday. Better rain chances enter the picture later this week.

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Today in Weather History

May 18, 1918: An estimated F2 tornado moved NNE from 5 miles NNW of Ferney, across the eastern edge of Groton. Homes were unroofed, and barns were destroyed. Nine farms lost buildings. One man was injured in a barn, another in a car that was thrown from the road. Estimated damage was set at \$60,000. Tornadoes were also seen in Lincoln and Sanborn Counties in South Dakota.

Also, an estimated F2 tornado moved northeast through the townships of Akron and Artichoke in Big Stone County, Minnesota. About 300 farms had tornado damage. The funnel dissipated on Artichoke Lake.

May 18, 1960: Pierre received 1.96 inches of rain in less than 30 minutes which caused flash flooding. About 30 basements were flooded with extensive cave-in damage at one home. Flash flooding from 2 to 3 inches of rain occurred near Presho, washing out county roads, three bridges, and a grain storage bin. Gettysburg also received 2.5 inches of rain.

May 18, 1996: A brief F0 tornado touchdown and cut a narrow path from 2 miles east of Willow Lake with no damage reported.

A 100 mph wind gust blew down 38 large trees on Highway 81 from the junction of Lake Norden corner on Highway 28 to the intersection of the Hayti corner. Also, four double posted and five single posted signs were broken off, and one single posted steel sign was bent over.

1883: The massive tornado outbreak on record in Illinois affected the northern and central parts of the state. At least 14 strong to violent tornadoes touched down killing 52 people. The largest death toll from a single tornado was 12, with 50 injuries, from an estimated F4 tornado which moved from near Jacksonville to 5 miles west of Petersburg. This tornado destroyed the town of Literberry. Another tornado, with an estimated F4 intensity, killed 11 people and injured 50 along its path from the south edge of Springfield northeast to near Kenney. This particular tornado reportedly drove 10 inches by 12-inch oak timbers 10 feet into the ground. Another estimated F4 tornado in far northern Illinois touched down near Capron and tracked for 17 miles before lifting in far southern Wisconsin. Lastly, an estimated F4 tornado tracked 20 miles through Kenosha and Racine Counties in Wisconsin. Eight people were killed, and 85 were injured.

1980: Mount Saint Helens erupted, spewing ash and smoke sixty-three thousand feet into the air. Heavy ash covered the ground to the immediate northwest, and small particles were carried to the Atlantic coast.

1825 - A tornado (said to have crossed all of the state of Ohio) smashed into the log cabin settlement of Burlington, northeast of Columbus. (David Ludlum)

1960 - Salt Lake City UT received an inch of snow. It marked their latest measurable snowfall of record. (The Weather Channel)

1980 - Mount Saint Helens (in Washington State) erupted spewing ash and smoke sixty-three thousand feet into the air. Heavy ash covered the ground to the immediate northwest, and small particles were carried to the Atlantic coast. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Thunderstorms in Kansas, developing along a cold front, spawned tornadoes at Emporia and Toledo, produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Fort Scott, and produced golf ball size hail in the Kansas City area. Unseasonably hot weather prevailed ahead of the cold front. Pomona NJ reported a record high of 93 degrees, and Altus, OK, hit 100 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure anchored over eastern Virginia kept showers and thunderstorms over the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Flash flooding was reported in Pennsylvania. Up to five inches of rain drenched Franklin County PA in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from the Central Gulf Coast States to the Lower Missouri Valley during the day and evening. Thunderstorms spawned sixteen tornadoes, and there were 74 reports of large hail and damaging winds. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the central U.S. spawning a sixteen tornadoes, including a dozen in Nebraska. Thunderstorms also produced hail four inches in diameter at Perryton TX, wind gusts to 84 mph at Ellis KS, and high winds which caused nearly two million dollars damage at Sutherland NE. Thunderstorms deluged Sioux City IA with up to eight inches of rain, resulting in a record flood crest on Perry Creek and at least 4.5 million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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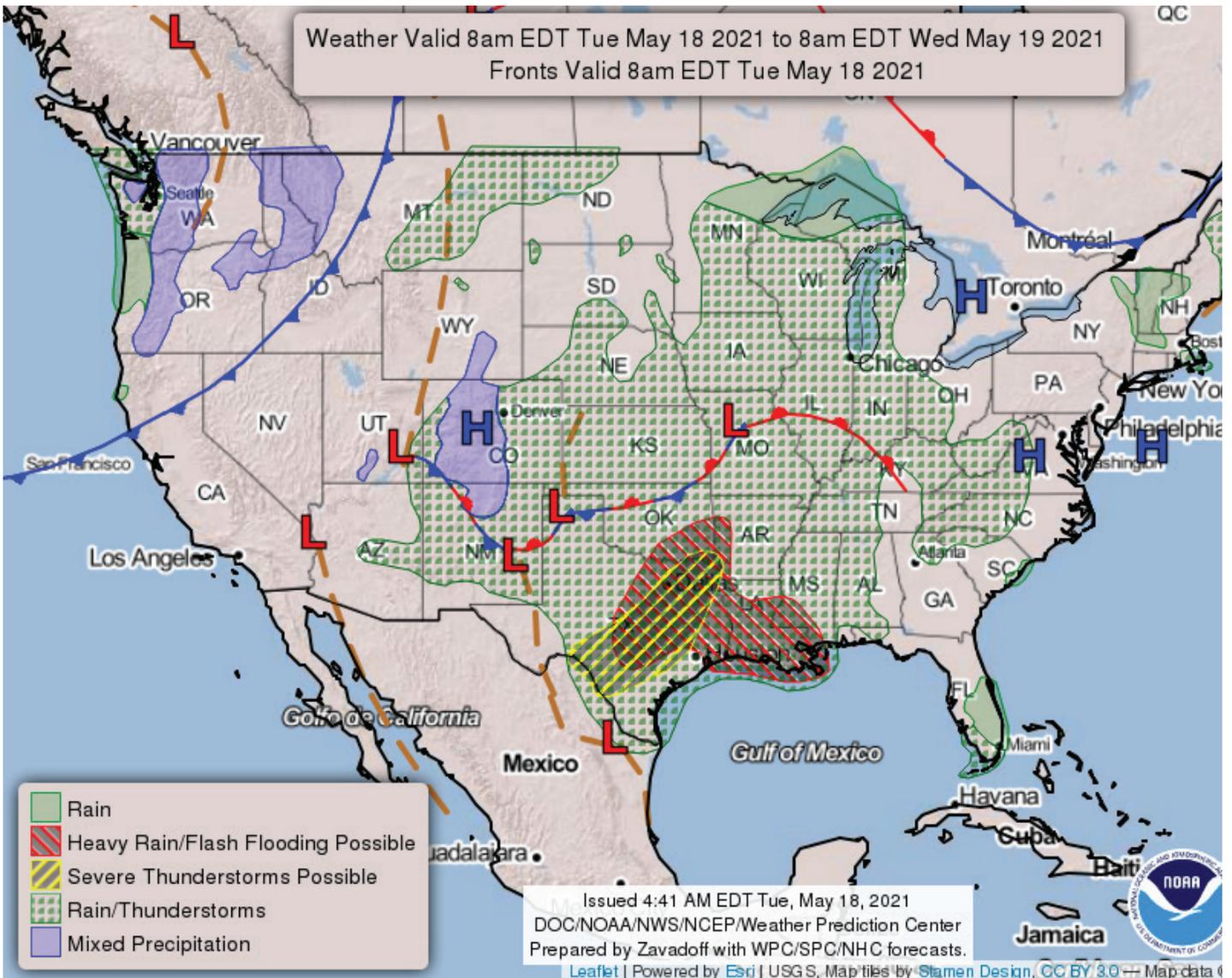
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 78.2 °F
Low Temp: 47.4 °F
Wind: 26 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 100° in 1934
Record Low: 26° in 1915
Average High: 71°F
Average Low: 45°F
Average Precip in May.: 1.88
Precip to date in May.: 0.25
Average Precip to date: 5.85
Precip Year to Date: 3.02
Sunset Tonight: 9:01 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:59 a.m.



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WHERE DO YOU GO FOR HELP?

"Help me, someone help me! I have fallen and cannot get up. Someone help me, please!" cried a lady in obvious pain and distress. There was no real person calling for help. It was a television commercial advertising personal security systems. It was intended to attract and assure people who were alone that a "system" was available to help them if they could not help themselves.

All of us know that feeling of being helpless, perhaps even hopeless, at times. Problems surface from beneath us or seem to descend from the sky when we least expect them. We know they are beyond us, recognize our limits and cry out for help. Life's demands are often more than we can manage by ourselves. They force us to see that we cannot take care of ourselves by ourselves. So, we are forced to reach out and up. There is something inside all of us that tells each of us that life is beyond every one of us. That "something" is a gift from God. He wants us to search for that "someone." It begins at birth when we utter that first cry for help not knowing who will respond. And it never ends until we turn to Him.

Most of us have turned to God recognizing His power and strength and desire to help us. That need for Him is normal and natural because He planted it there when He created us. He knew we would search for Him and He also knew that He would respond in love when we call on Him to make us complete in Christ.

David said those who say "there is no God" are fools. Are they dumb or stupid or ignorant? No! They are fools because they choose to live life without God.

Prayer: Thank You, God, for Your willingness to hear and then answer our calls for help. Thank You for meeting our needs when we seek Your help. Thank You for loving us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, and their ways are vile; there is no one who does good. Psalm 53:1

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Driver arrested, accused of running over and killing man

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Police have made an arrest in the death of a man who was run over by a vehicle in Rapid City last week.

According to authorities, investigators spoke with witnesses and reviewed surveillance video and determined that the driver, the victim and another individual were drinking alcohol in the vehicle while it was parked along a street last Friday night.

At one point, the victim, 47-year-old Paul Walking, of Pine Ridge, got out of the car and walked around to the rear of the vehicle. The driver, a 34-year-old Rapid City man, put the car in reverse and backed over the victim, then ran over him a second time when he put the vehicle in drive to pull forward, officials said.

The driver is being held in the Pennington County Jail on a possible charge of vehicular homicide.

Pedicabs launching in downtown Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — There's another option for getting around downtown Sioux Falls. Besides ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft, environmentally friendly Pedicabs will soon hit the streets.

Pedicabs, sometimes called cycle rickshaws or bike taxis, are three-wheeled vehicles that have seating in the back and a driver in front who will peddle to your destination.

Emmett Reistroffer is the founder of the new Sioux Falls Pedicabs.

"I saw a lot of pedicabs when I lived in Denver, Colorado. That's where I first got the idea when I took my mom out for dinner on the 16th Street Mall. We took a pedicab, and she had such a great time we took another pedicab ride after dinner," Reistroffer said.

"Across the country and across the world, people are getting around in a lot of different ways," Reistroffer said.

Downtown Sioux Falls President Joe Batcheller tells KELO-TV that as the city continues to grow, so do options for travel.

"I think that it speaks to our cultural evolution as a community, that we're ready to try new things," Batcheller said.

The business will start with two pedicabs, then Reistroffer hopes to have up to four or five cycling the streets by next month. He said the drivers are also going to serve as tour guides.

"I want the drivers to really know Sioux Falls, love Sioux Falls," Reistroffer said.

Sioux Falls Pedicabs will officially launch on May 29.

Spain, Morocco square off after 6,000 migrants arrive by sea

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Spain deployed its military to the Moroccan border Tuesday after thousands of Moroccans took advantage of their government's relaxed border controls to swim or paddle in inflatable boats onto European soil.

Live footage on Spain's public broadcaster TVE showed dramatic scenes of soldiers carrying children in their arms and Red Cross personnel helping migrants who were emerging from the water exhausted and cold. One unconscious woman laid on the sand before she was carried away on a stretcher.

The sudden influx of migrants has deepened the diplomatic spat between Rabat and Madrid and created a humanitarian crisis for Ceuta, the Spanish city of 85,000 that lies in North Africa on the Mediterranean Sea, separated from Morocco by a double-wide, 10-meter (32-foot) fence.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez canceled a trip to Paris, where he was to attend a summit on international aid to Africa, to turn his focus to the crisis with Morocco.

By Tuesday morning, at least 6,000 sea-soaked people had crossed the border into Ceuta since the first

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arrivals began early Monday, the Spanish government said, including 1,500 thought to be teenagers. The number getting in appeared to have slowed but didn't stop Tuesday as Spain deployed additional police and soldiers to the border.

"It's such a strong invasion that we are not able to calculate the number of people that have entered," said Juan Jesús Vivas, the president of Ceuta, an autonomous city of about 20 square kilometers (7.7 square miles).

"The army is in the border in a deterrent role, but there are great quantities of people on the Moroccan side waiting to enter," he told Cadena SER radio.

One young man drowned Monday and dozens have been treated for hypothermia. The arriving adults were being transferred to Ceuta's main soccer stadium as they waited to be returned back to Morocco while those thought to be minors were sent to warehouses run by the Red Cross and other groups.

Several military armored vehicles parked Tuesday at Tarajal beach in Ceuta, where the border fence leads to a short breakwater extending into the sea.

In a video shared by a Spanish police union urging authorities to provide more reinforcements, anti-riot officers behind the border fence were using shields to protect themselves from stones being thrown by people in Morocco.

Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska said authorities had processed the return of 2,700 migrants by midday Tuesday and that the rest would follow soon because Morocco and Spain signed an agreement three decades ago to return all those who swim into the territory.

It was unclear if that applied to unaccompanied migrants under 18, who are usually allowed to remain legally under the tutelage of Spanish authorities.

The European Union's top migration official – Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson – described the incidents as "worrying," and she called on Morocco to prevent people from setting out in the first place.

"The most important thing now is that Morocco continues to commit to prevent irregular departures, and that those who do not have the right to stay are orderly and effectively returned," Johansson told members of the European Parliament.

"Spanish borders are European borders. The European Union wants to build a relationship with Morocco based on trust and shared commitments. Migration is a key element in this," she said.

Neither Moroccan authorities in Rabat nor Moroccan officials in the north have commented on the situation or responded to queries by The Associated Press.

Morocco's loosened border watch came after Spain decided to give a visa for medical treatment to the chief of a militant group that fights for the independence of Western Sahara. Morocco annexed the sprawling region on the west coast of Africa in 1975.

Morocco's Foreign Ministry has said Madrid's move to assist Brahim Ghali, head of the Polisario Front that has fought Morocco, was "inconsistent with the spirit of partnership and good neighborliness" and vowed there would be "consequences."

Vivas, Ceuta's conservative regional president, said residents were in a state of "anguish, concern and fear." He linked the sudden mass arrival to Spain's compassionate assistance to Ghali.

The Spanish government itself, however, officially rejects the notion that Morocco is punishing Spain for a humanitarian move.

"I cannot envisage that putting the lives of young people and minors at risk is in response to a humanitarian issue, I simply cannot conceive it," Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya said late Monday on the radio.

The prime minister's office said the government was supporting residents in Ceuta "to ensure their safety and guarantee public order under any circumstances."

"My priority at this time is to restore normalcy in Ceuta," Sánchez wrote in a tweet. "Its citizens must know that they have the absolute support of the government of Spain and the utmost firmness to ensure their safety and defend their integrity as part of the country."

Sánchez was also facing a political storm at home, with the far-right Vox party blaming the migration crisis on the government's "inaction" and sending its leader on a quick visit to Ceuta.

Many African migrants regard Ceuta and nearby Melilla, another Spanish territory, as a gateway into

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Europe. In 2020, 2,228 chose to cross into the two enclaves by sea or by land, often risking injuries or death. The year before the figure hit 7,899.

On Tuesday, another 80 African migrants also crossed into Melilla, 350 kilometers (218 miles) east of Ceuta, by jumping over the enclave's double fence.

Morocco scored a diplomatic victory last year when the previous U.S. administration under Donald Trump recognized Rabat's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara to pave the way for normalizing relations between Israel and Morocco.

Blinken brings Biden's anti-Trump climate policy to Iceland

BY MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

REYKJAVIK, Iceland (AP) — On a trip overshadowed by the crisis in the Middle East, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday touted the Biden administration's abrupt shift in its predecessor's climate policies as he visited Iceland for talks with senior officials from the world's Arctic nations.

In Reykjavik for a meeting of foreign ministers of the eight members of the Arctic Council, Blinken heralded President Joe Biden's return to the Paris climate accord and determination to combat climate change.

Yet the worsening violence between Israel and the Palestinians hung over the discussions. A small group of pro-Palestinian demonstrators holding banners and flags protested outside the conference center where Blinken met Icelandic Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson.

"We are very focused on reinvigorating our closest alliances and partnerships, and also our engagement in multilateral institutions, and being here really represents both aspects of that effort," Blinken told the foreign minister. He lauded Iceland for its strong support for human rights, climate change mitigation and the role it plays in NATO.

The Arctic is warming faster than the rest of the world and has been particularly hard hit by rising sea levels from melting sea ice and glaciers. Former U.S. President Donald Trump had alienated Arctic countries and others with his dismissal of the phenomenon and his withdrawal from the 2015 Paris agreement.

Trump's former Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, also stunned many in the environmental community at an Arctic Council meeting two years ago in Finland with a call for countries to embrace and harness climate change, particularly the opening of new sea lanes due to melting ice, for commercial gain.

Blinken will tour several Icelandic geo-thermal energy sites later Tuesday before holding a series of bilateral meetings with other Arctic Council foreign ministers on Wednesday. Among them will be Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in what will be the highest-level face-to-face talks between the two countries since Biden took office.

Blinken will see Lavrov amid a sharp deterioration in ties between Washington and Moscow sparked by Russia's build-up of troops along the border with Ukraine, cyberattacks and allegations that Russia interfered in U.S. presidential elections in 2016 and 2020. The two nations are also at odds over influence in the Arctic, with Russia insisting its large Arctic landmass makes it the pre-eminent power in the region.

Moscow and Washington are also embroiled in a bitter dispute over the status of their respective embassies and consulates after tit-for-tat expulsions this year. Russia has given the U.S. until Aug. 1 to get rid of all non-American staff at its diplomatic missions, something the U.S. says will make it nearly impossible for its facilities to function.

Blinken and Lavrov's talks will also serve as a preview for an expected summit between Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin next month.

Senior officials say Biden is interested in testing the proposition that the U.S. and Russia can work collaboratively on certain issues, like climate change, the Mideast, Iran and North Korea, despite bitter disagreements on others.

Palestinians go on strike as Israel, Hamas trade fire

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinians across Israel and the occupied territories went on strike in

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a rare collective action against Israel's policies on Tuesday as Israeli strikes rained down on Gaza and militants fired dozens of rockets from the Hamas-ruled territory.

With the war in Gaza showing no sign of abating and truce efforts apparently stalled, the general strike and expected protests could again widen the conflict after a spasm of communal violence in Israel and protests across the occupied West Bank last week.

Tuesday's airstrikes toppled a six-story building that housed libraries and educational centers belonging to the Islamic University, leaving behind a massive mound of rebar and concrete slabs. Desks, office chairs, books and computer wires could be seen in the debris. Residents sifted through the rubble, searching for their belongings.

Israel warned the building's residents ahead of time, sending them fleeing into the predawn darkness, and there were no reports of casualties. Israel said it was targeting militants, their tunnels and rocket launchers across the territory.

"The whole street started running, then destruction, an earthquake," said Jamal Herzallah, a resident of the area. "This whole area was shaking."

Heavy fighting broke out May 10 when Gaza's militant Hamas rulers fired long-range rockets toward Jerusalem in support of Palestinian protests against Israel's heavy-handed policing of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a flashpoint site sacred to Jews and Muslims, and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers.

At least 213 Palestinians have been killed in heavy airstrikes since, including 61 children and 36 women, with more than 1,440 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not break the numbers down into fighters and civilians. As the fighting drags on, medical supplies, fuel and water are running low in Gaza. Ten people in Israel, including a 5-year-old boy and a soldier, have been killed in the ongoing rocket attacks launched from civilian areas in Gaza toward civilian areas in Israel.

The fighting is the most intense since a 2014 war between Israel and Hamas, but efforts to halt it have so far stalled. Egyptian mediators are trying to negotiate a cease-fire, but the U.S. has stopped short of demanding an immediate stop to the hostilities and Israel has so far vowed to press on.

With no end in sight to the fighting, Palestinians in Israel, east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank observed a general strike on Tuesday. It was a rare show of unity among Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20% of its population, and those in the territories Israel seized in 1967 that the Palestinians have long sought for a future state of their own. Life had already ground to a halt in Gaza when the fighting began.

The strike was intended to protest the Gaza war and Israeli policies that many activists and some rights groups say constitute an overarching system of apartheid that denies Palestinians the rights afforded to Jews. Israel rejects that characterization, saying its citizens have equal rights. It blames the war on Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, and accuses it of inciting violence across the region.

Leaders of the Palestinian community in Israel called the strike, which was embraced by the internationally-backed Palestinian Authority in the occupied West Bank, where ministries and schools were closed. Most businesses appeared to be observing the strike, and protests were expected.

Muhammad Barakeh, one of the organizers of the strike, said Palestinians are expressing a "collective position" against Israel's "aggression" in Gaza and Jerusalem, as well as the "brutal repression" by police across Israel.

The war has also seen an unusual outbreak of violence in Israel, with groups of Jewish and Palestinian citizens fighting in the streets and torching vehicles and buildings. In both Israel and the West Bank, Palestinian protesters have clashed with Israeli forces.

The Israeli military said Tuesday it fired at 65 militant targets, including rocket launchers, a group of fighters and the homes of Hamas commanders that the army said were being used for military purposes. It said more than 60 fighter jets took part in the operation.

The military said it also shot down a drone "approaching the Israeli border" in the northeast, far from the Gaza fighting. It did not say where the unmanned aircraft originated, but it's possible the drone came

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from Syria.

The military said Palestinian militants fired 90 rockets, 20 of which fell short into Gaza. Israel says its missile defenses have intercepted about 90% of the rockets.

Israel's strikes have brought down several buildings and caused widespread damage in the narrow coastal territory, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians and has been under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

The attacks have damaged at least 18 hospitals and clinics and entirely destroyed one health facility, the World Health Organization said in a new report. Nearly half of all essential drugs in the territory have run out.

It said the bombing of key roads, including those leading to the main Shifa Hospital, has hindered the movement of ambulances and supply vehicles. Over 41,000 displaced Palestinians have sought refuge in U.N. schools in Gaza, which was already struggling to cope with a coronavirus outbreak. Gaza is also running low on fuel for its electricity supply and water.

Israel has vowed to press on with its operations, and the United States signaled it would not pressure the two sides for a cease-fire even as President Joe Biden said he supported one.

"We will continue to operate as long as necessary in order to return calm and security to all Israeli citizens," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after meeting with top security officials on Monday.

The Biden administration has declined so far to publicly criticize Israel's part in the fighting or send a top-level envoy to the region. On Monday, the United States again blocked a proposed U.N. Security Council statement calling for an end to "the crisis related to Gaza" and the protection of civilians, especially children.

Since the fighting began, the Israeli military has launched hundreds of airstrikes it says are targeting Hamas' militant infrastructure. Palestinian militants in Gaza have fired more than 3,400 rockets into Israel.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad say at least 20 of their fighters have been killed, while Israel says the number is at least 160 and has released the names of and photos of more than two dozen militant commanders it says were "eliminated."

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.

Netanyahu alleged that Hamas military intelligence was operating inside the building and said any evidence would be shared through intelligence channels. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he hasn't yet seen any evidence supporting that.

AP President Gary Pruitt reiterated the organization's call for an independent investigation into the attack.

"As we have said, we have no indication of a Hamas presence in the building, nor were we warned of any such possible presence before the airstrike," he said in a statement. "We do not know what the Israeli evidence shows, and we want to know."

EXPLAINER: How worrying is the variant first seen in India?

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — For the first time in months, people across England are meeting indoors at pubs, restaurants, cinemas, gyms and elsewhere as coronavirus rules were relaxed this week.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned Britons to be cautious and some of the scientists advising him say restrictions might need to be reimposed quickly because of a worrying variant first detected in India.

Here's a look at what we know and don't know about the variant:

WHAT IS THIS VARIANT?

The COVID-19 variant first identified in India has been classified as a "variant of concern" by Britain and the World Health Organization, meaning there is some evidence that it spreads more easily between people, causes more severe disease, or might be less responsive to treatments and vaccines.

"The absolute numbers of cases (of the variant) in the U.K. remain quite small, but the growth rate is quite high," said Nick Loman, a professor of microbial genomics at the University of Birmingham.

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To date, there have been more than 2,300 cases identified in Britain. Figures released by Public Health England show cases of the variant first detected in India have tripled in the past week and experts say it's on track to become the most dominant COVID-19 variant in the country.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, said more information was still needed about the variant's spread globally.

"We need more sequencing, targeted sequencing to be done and to be shared in India and elsewhere so that we know how much of this virus is circulating," she said.

HOW TRANSMISSIBLE IS THE VARIANT?

We don't entirely know. But according to the minutes of an expert group advising the government last week, scientists said "it is a realistic possibility that (the variant first seen in India) is as much as 50% more transmissible" than the variant first reported in Britain — whose explosive spread led to the country's longest lockdown in January.

"There are plausible biological reasons as to why some of the mutations present could make this variant more transmissible," they concluded. If the variant proves to be 40 to 50% more transmissible, the scientists predicted that would "lead to a much larger peak" of cases, hospitalizations and deaths than previous waves of coronavirus — particularly if the government continues with its existing plans to exit lockdown.

Dr. Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust and one of the scientists advising the government, said it was entirely possible the COVID-19 restrictions relaxed on Monday might need to be reintroduced soon if the variant's spread leads to a spike in hospitalizations and deaths.

"A very careful lifting (of restrictions) is reasonable, but we may have to reverse that," Farrar warned. Experts think the next few weeks should provide more details about how quickly the variant identified in India is sickening people and whether that might overwhelm hospitals.

Johnson said any proof the variant identified in India is more dangerous could "pose a serious disruption" to the U.K. government's plans to lift all remaining COVID-19 restrictions next month.

DO VACCINES WORK AGAINST THIS VARIANT?

Scientists think so but are still waiting for definitive answers.

At a press briefing last week, Marco Cavaleri, head of vaccines at the European Medicines Agency, said the data appeared "rather reassuring" that vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna would protect against the variant first seen in India.

He said the agency was still gathering more information on the effectiveness of the shots made by AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson and was "pretty confident" those vaccines too would afford people enough protection from the variant.

"Urgent experimental data is being generated (for this variant)," said Sharon Peacock of the U.K. COVID-19 Genomics Consortium. She noted that vaccines appear to work against other variants to date but that it is important to determine if one dose is effective or if two are needed.

In the areas of the U.K. worst hit by the variant, Britain's health secretary Matt Hancock said most people hospitalized had "chosen not to have the jab."

On Monday, Johnson said people over 50 and those with underlying health conditions would have their wait for a second vaccine dose cut from 12 weeks to eight, over concerns about the variant's rapid spread.

Irish health system struggling to recover from cyberattack

LONDON (AP) — Ireland's health system was still struggling to restore its computers and treat patients on Tuesday, four days after it shut down its entire IT system in response to a cyberattack.

Thousands of diagnostic appointments, cancer treatment clinics and surgeries have been canceled since a ransomware attack on Friday.

Health Service Executive chief clinical officer Colm Henry said Tuesday that the attack had had "a profound impact on our ability to deliver care" and has also shut down the system used to pay health care workers. He told Irish broadcaster RTE that the disruptions would only "mount in the coming days and weeks."

Ransomware attacks are typically carried out by criminal hackers who scramble data, paralyzing victims'

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networks, and demand a large payment to decrypt it. Irish officials say a ransom has been demanded but they will not pay it.

"There are serious concerns about the implications for patient care arising from the very limited access to diagnostics, lab services and historical patient records," the Health Service Executive said in a statement late Monday.

The health service said it was working methodically to assess and restore "approximately 2,000 IT patient-facing systems, each supported by infrastructure, multiple servers and devices.

"Our priority is keeping our patients safe and maintaining essential care and support services," it said.

Conti, a Russian-speaking ransomware group, was demanding \$20 million, according to the ransom negotiation page on its darknet site viewed by The Associated Press. The gang threatened Monday to "start publishing and selling your private information very soon" if the money was not paid.

Ransomware attacks are an increasing problem for private companies and public bodies around the world.

The Thai affiliate of Paris-based insurance company AXA and a public health provider in New Zealand were both dealing with ransomware attacks on Tuesday.

In the U.S., the nation's largest fuel pipeline was hit with a ransomware attack earlier this month. The disruption of the Colonial Pipeline caused long lines at gas stations due to distribution problems and panic-buying, draining supplies at thousands of gas stations.

Amid threats to members, House to vote on new security

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Colorado Rep. Jason Crow, a former Army Ranger who served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, says it took time for him to stop constantly scanning his environment for threats when he returned from war 15 years ago. But after the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, he says he's picked the habit up again.

Crow was trapped with several other members of Congress in the upper gallery of the U.S. House that day while a mob of President Donald Trump's supporters tried to beat down the doors to the chamber and stop the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

Crow says he never would have thought "in a million years" he'd be in that situation in the Capitol, but some of his old training has since kicked in, like looking in his rear-view mirror and assessing if people around him might be carrying a gun. Like almost every other member of Congress, his office has received threats against his life.

"There's no doubt that members are on edge right now," Crow says, and the threats from outside "are unfortunately the reality of congressional life."

Those threats have more than doubled this year, according to the U.S. Capitol Police, and many members of Congress say they fear for their personal safety more than they did before the siege. Several say they have boosted security measures to protect themselves and their families, money for which will be part of a broad \$1.9 billion spending bill that the House will vote on this week, along with a separate measure that would create a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack. Democrats, in particular, say both bills are crucial to try to reconcile the trauma that many still feel.

"This was an armed assault on our democracy, and I'm a witness — I'm a victim and a witness to it," says New Hampshire Rep. Annie Kuster. She received treatment for post-traumatic stress after she was also trapped in the House gallery that day and heard rioters trying to break through the doors close to where she was hiding.

Kuster says she thought she was going to die before officers cleared the hallways and hustled her and others out. "I think we need a full investigation with a Jan. 6th commission, and I believe that the Capitol Police who saved our lives that day deserve more support," she says.

Democrats say a bipartisan commission investigating the attack, including what led to it, is more important than ever after some Republicans have recently started to downplay the severity of the insurrection, portraying the rioters who brutally beat officers with flagpoles and other weapons and broke into the

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Capitol through windows and doors as peaceful patriots.

Many Republicans who initially condemned Trump for telling his supporters to "fight like hell" that day have increasingly stayed quiet on his repeated false claims that the election was stolen, even though that was rebuked by numerous courts, bipartisan election officials across the country and Trump's own attorney general. It's unclear how many in the GOP will vote for either bill.

Rep. Andrew Clyde, R-Ga., said at a hearing last week that a video feed of the rioters looked like they were on a "normal tourist visit." Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., said a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break through a window adjacent to the House chamber was "executed," and he argued that the Justice Department is harassing those who have been arrested.

Michigan Rep. Dan Kildee, a Democrat who also says he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after the attack, said those comments were "really hard to take" after witnessing the insurrection. He says he's received an increased number of threats since January, especially when he has spoken on TV about treatment he received in the aftermath. Some of the calls and messages are specific and credible threats, he says, while many others are "abusive, threatening type language."

The security spending bill would provide congressional offices with more money to combat those threats, including enhanced travel security, upgrades to home-district offices and better intelligence to track people down. The bill would also "harden" the complex by reinforcing doors and windows, adding security vestibules and cameras and providing dollars for removable fencing that could quickly be erected during a threatening situation while leaving the Capitol open to visitors.

Like many members, Republican Rep. Rodney Davis of Illinois says he feels as if the threats are more acute in his home district, where there is less security. On Capitol Hill, lawmakers are currently protected by a tall fence and National Guard troops who have been there since Jan. 6. Members are "as safe as ever" there, he says, but "it's those times when you're not in the Capitol, I think that's where the threats seem to emanate from the most."

Davis knows that well, as one of several Republican members who was at a baseball practice four years ago in Alexandria, Virginia, when a gunman wounded Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., and four other people. And in 2019, an Illinois man was arrested for "threatening to blow my head off," as Davis puts it. Randall Tarr pleaded guilty to federal charges and was sentenced to probation.

As the top Republican on the House Administration Committee, which oversees the Capitol Police, Davis has pushed for the force to be more aggressive in arresting those who threaten members and to reform the arcane command structure in Congress that forces the chief to ask for permission before making major decisions. The security spending bill would not do that, but it would boost Capitol Police training and pay for new equipment after the force was badly overrun on Jan. 6.

In the meantime, members are upgrading their personal security. Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., says he's started using his house alarm more often and has been more cautious in recent months. "I've definitely felt less secure since Jan. 6 than I did before," says Himes, who sits on the House intelligence committee.

Some say it's easier not to know what's going on. Illinois Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, a Democrat, said he's generally adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy with his staff on security matters since the insurrection, and he doesn't ask why when a police car sometimes shows up in front of his house to guard it.

"I don't necessarily want to know the full story," says Krishnamoorthi, who has young children. "I just trust that law enforcement is doing their job."

Kuster says she is feeling better these days after taking advantage of employee assistance resources in the Capitol. Still, she says her experience was "really, really difficult," especially because she received a death threat as soon as she arrived home to New Hampshire after the insurrection. Home was the one place "I can usually feel safe," she says.

She said she regularly talks to and texts with her colleagues who have also had post-traumatic stress, and she says some of them are still hurting.

"We need a security plan so that everyone can feel safe here," Kuster says. "I want the 'people's house' to be able to reopen."

Supreme Court throws abortion fight into center of midterms

By DAVID CRARY and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In agreeing to hear a potentially groundbreaking abortion case, the Supreme Court has energized activists on both sides of the long-running debate who are now girding to make abortion access a major issue in next year's midterm elections.

For many evangelicals, the case could serve as a validation of more than four decades of persistent work and a sometimes awkward relationship with former President Donald Trump, whose three Supreme Court appointments sealed a 6-3 conservative majority. If those justices unite to uphold a Mississippi law banning abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy, it would mark a first step toward the possible demise of the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which established a nationwide right to abortion at any point before a fetus can survive outside the womb, roughly 24 weeks.

Abortion rights advocates, meanwhile, are urgently warning that the case is the biggest threat to decades of rulings that have consistently upheld, with some caveats, a woman's constitutional right to decide whether to end her pregnancy.

Since the Roe decision, abortion has become a defining theme in American politics, emerging as the sole issue that some voters use to assess which candidates they'll support. The Mississippi case could emerge as another turning point — with unpredictable results. Abortion opponents may become further emboldened if their long-desired goal moves closer to reality, while an unfavorable decision could spur supporters to intensify calls for dramatic changes to the judiciary.

For now, both sides say they are fully engaged.

"This is huge — it's saying that for the first time in a long time that we have a pro-life majority on the Supreme Court," said Katherine Beck Johnson, a lawyer with the conservative Family Research Council. "It will encourage the voting base to get out and vote Republican."

Jennifer Dalven, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Reproductive Freedom Project, said the high court's decision to hear the case was "really alarming."

"For more than 40 years the Supreme Court has said states can't ban abortion prior to viability," Dalven said. "There is simply no way for the court to rule for Mississippi without gutting Roe v. Wade."

The case probably will be argued in the fall, with a decision likely in the spring of 2022 during the campaign for congressional midterm elections. Many abortion-rights groups urged their supporters to start mobilizing now.

"There's never been a more important time to elect Democratic pro-choice women to local and national office," said one of those groups, Emily's List. "If the Supreme Court strikes down Roe v. Wade, we'll need all the help we can get."

Even if the court does not explicitly overrule Roe, a decision favorable to Mississippi could lay the groundwork for allowing more restrictions on abortion. Bills have been enacted in multiple Republican-governed states that would ban abortion as early as six weeks, and also in cases where a decision to abort was based solely on a diagnosis of Down syndrome.

Nationwide polls have repeatedly shown that most Americans support the premise of Roe v. Wade. An April poll from the Pew Research Center found that 59% of Americans think abortion should be legal in most or all cases, while 39% think it should be illegal in most or all cases.

Some abortion opponents, noting those surveys, are skeptical that the Supreme Court would fully overturn Roe.

"The Supreme Court has never led public opinion but followed it when it comes to major issues like slavery, gay marriage and women's rights," said the Rev. Robert Jeffress, a Dallas megachurch pastor who has been a close ally of Trump.

"As long as 70% of the American people oppose the overturn of Roe, it will never happen," he said. "Realistically, conservatives can hope that the court uses the Mississippi case to chip away at unrestricted abortion in our country."

Charles Camosy, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University, also acknowledged

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those poll findings. But he noted that the Gallup poll has repeatedly found that more than two-thirds of Americans say abortion should be illegal after the 12th week of pregnancy — a time frame that is in force in several European countries.

"I doubt the court's majority is willing to totally undo the legal right to abortion," he said. "More than likely is they will rule that a 15-week limitation does not pose an undue burden on a woman's right to abortion."

White evangelicals, who remain among Trump's most loyal backers, had celebrated his overhaul of the federal courts and his reshaping of the Supreme Court as perhaps his greatest accomplishment. But there remains trepidation after the court surprised them by failing to rule their way in past cases.

"Trying to predict what the Supreme Court is going to do on a state statute on abortion regulation is like trying to predict the path of a hurricane, only more difficult, because there are a lot of things at play," said Ralph Reed, chair of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and a longtime ally of Trump.

Reed acknowledged that abortion is only a top issue for a small minority of voters but argued that in many competitive congressional and gubernatorial elections, "it could theoretically be the difference."

"It's not necessarily the issue that ranks highest in terms of determining one's vote, but it still matters in terms of intensity and enthusiasm," he said.

Among 2022 U.S. Senate races where the issue could be a key factor are those in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

If the Mississippi ban is upheld, "pro-lifers would be energized," said Michael New, an abortion opponent who teaches social research at Catholic University of America.

"It would show that the strategy of supporting pro-life candidates for the presidency resulted in a Supreme Court that was sympathetic to legal protections to preborn children," he said. "Pro-life state legislators in other states would likely pass similar 15-week abortion bans, confident that these bans would also be upheld."

The Rev. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said he was optimistic the Mississippi ban would be upheld, giving abortion-rights groups a chance to mobilize their supporters with warnings of Roe's demise while infusing abortion opponents with a new sense of optimism.

"Pro-life voters are looking for progress," Mohler said. "What serves to deflate the vote of pro-life Americans is frustration at the impression of the lack of progress."

Mallory Quigley of the Susan B. Anthony List, which seeks to elect anti-abortion candidates, predicted the issue would be a "huge motivator on both sides" going into the midterms.

As far as Republicans, she said, "It's motivating to see how past electoral choices are impacting policy today and then moving forward, what more is to be done."

Abortion-rights supporter Kelly Baden of Strategic Initiatives and Services, a strategy center for state legislators who champion progressive values, said the wave of anti-abortion legislation in Republican-led states "shows how much we've already lost and how dire our circumstances already are."

"But we have the power to take it back," she said. "If and when the courts let us down, we can and must show up at the voting booth."

New Dutch exhibition takes unflinching look at slavery

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — The delicacy of one of the first objects in new exhibition at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum belies its brutality. At the end of a thin iron rod are the artistically interwoven letters GWC — used to brand the initials of a Dutch trading company into the skin of enslaved workers.

The stark contrast between finery and brutality, wealth and inhumanity is a recurring pattern at the museum's unflinching exhibition titled, simply, "Slavery," that examines the history of Dutch involvement in the international slave trade.

Nearby, a huge wooden set of stocks and heavy iron chains and locks used to constrain enslaved people stands close to a small box, intricately decorated with gold, tortoiseshell and velvet celebrating some of the valuable commodities traded by the Dutch West India Company in the 18th century: Gold, ivory and

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human beings.

The exhibit, being opened Tuesday by King Willem-Alexander, tells the story of slavery by drilling down into the personal stories of 10 people, ranging from enslaved workers to a wealthy Amsterdam woman.

"We wanted to make the case, that this is a history that speaks to anybody in the Netherlands. It belongs to all of us, so that's why we chose a personal approach," Valika Smeulders, head of the museum's history department, told The Associated Press.

The exhibition opens — belatedly and mainly online because of the COVID-19 pandemic — at a time when scrutiny of many nations' brutal colonial history has been spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement that swept the world last year after the death of Black man George Floyd.

School children will be able to visit the museum beginning this week, but the exhibition will not open to the general public until the Dutch lockdown eases further, possibly in June.

Amsterdam had a significant role in the global slave trade — the stately mansions lining its canals attest to the fortunes made by Golden Age traders often with the use of slave labor. That history has led to calls for a formal apology from the current municipality.

"Well, apologies are in the air, absolutely. And I think that, with this exhibition, as a museum, what we are adding to that is that we bring this story in the most honest way possible for us at the moment," said Smeulders.

The Dutch show is part of a broader movement to re-examine colonial histories. In neighboring Belgium, the Africa Museum near Brussels re-opened a few years ago after a major renovation and shone a light on the country's dark colonial history in Congo.

Germany is returning hundreds of artifacts known as the Benin Bronzes that were mostly looted from West Africa by a British colonial expedition.

The 10 stories featured in the Amsterdam exhibition span 250 years of Dutch colonial history and four continents — Europe, Asia, South America and Africa.

Among the stories is that of Wally, an enslaved man forced to work on a sugar plantation in the colony of Suriname. In an audio presentation, his history is narrated by former kickboxing world champion Remy Bonjasky, whose ancestors worked on the same plantation.

Wally became involved in a conflict with the managers of the plantation in 1707. He and other enslaved people fled before they were recaptured, interrogated and executed.

Wally and his fellow escapees "were to have their flesh torn off with red hot pincers while being burned alive," Bonjasky says in the online narration. "Their severed heads would later be displayed on spikes as a warning."

The "might" shown by Wally and the other enslaved men "is still in my blood," Bonjasky says. "It has been passed down through generations and is one of the reasons why I was able to become kickboxing world champion three times."

Another story in the exhibition that provides a glaring contrast to the horror of Wally's short life is that of Oopjen Coppit, the widow of Marten Soolmans, whose father owned Amsterdam's largest sugar refinery, processing crops harvested by enslaved men and women in South America.

In the exhibition, she is a personification of the wealth generated for a privileged few by enslaved workers. In a full-length portrait painted in 1664 by Rembrandt van Rijn, she wears a long black, lace-trimmed dress accessorized a pearl necklace and earrings.

"That we're able to use Rembrandt to speak about the history of slavery is really exciting and really new," Smeulders said.

Oopjen's second husband, Maerten Daey, also had links to the slave trade. Before their wedding, he served as a soldier with the Dutch West India Company in Brazil, where he kidnapped and raped an African woman called Francisca, fathering a daughter in 1632, according to church records cited in the exhibition.

"The lives of Marten, Oopjen and Maerten are intertwined with the history of slavery," Rijksmuseum Director Taco Dibbits says in an audio tour of the exhibition. "They owed their wealth to the slave labor in Brazil. It is an example of how the history of slavery and the history of the Netherlands are bound together."

Biden raises cease-fire, civilian toll in call to Netanyahu

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW LEE and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

President Joe Biden expressed support for a cease-fire between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers in a call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but he stopped short of demanding an immediate stop to the eight days of Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rocket barrages that have killed more than 200 people, most of them Palestinian.

Biden's carefully worded statement, in a White House readout Monday of his second known call to Netanyahu in three days as the attacks pounded on, came with the administration under pressure to respond more forcefully despite its determination to wrench the U.S. foreign policy focus away from Middle East conflicts.

Biden's comments on a cease-fire were open-ended and were similar to previous administration statements of support in principle for a cease-fire. That's in contrast to demands from dozens of Democratic lawmakers and others for an immediate halt by both sides. But the readout of the call to the Israeli leader showed increased White House concern about the air and rocket attacks—including Israeli airstrikes aimed at weakening Hamas—while sticking to forceful support for Israel.

The U.S. leader "encouraged Israel to make every effort to ensure the protection of innocent civilians," the White House said in its readout.

An administration official familiar with the call said the decision to express support and not explicitly demand a cease-fire was intentional. While Biden and top aides are concerned about the mounting bloodshed and loss of innocent life, the decision not to demand an immediate halt to hostilities reflects White House determination to support Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private deliberations.

Meanwhile, European Union foreign ministers were meeting Tuesday to discuss how to use the 27-nation bloc's political clout to help diplomatic efforts to end the fighting between the Israeli armed forces and Palestinian militants. The EU has been united in its calls for a cease-fire and the need for a political solution to end the latest conflict, but the nations are divided over how best to help.

Netanyahu told Israeli security officials late Monday that Israel would "continue to strike terror targets" in Gaza "as long as necessary in order to return calm and security to all Israeli citizens."

As the worst Israeli-Palestinian fighting since 2014 raged, the Biden administration has limited its public criticisms to Hamas and has declined to send a top-level envoy to the region. It also had declined to press Israel publicly and directly to wind down its latest military operation in the Gaza Strip, a 6-mile-by-25-mile territory that is home to more than 2 million people. Cease-fire mediation by Egypt and others has shown no sign of progress.

Separately, the United States, Israel's top ally, blocked for a third time Monday what would have been a unanimous statement by the 15-nation U.N. Security Council expressing "grave concern" over the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the loss of civilian lives. The final U.S. rejection killed the Security Council statement, at least for now.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki and national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the United States was focusing instead on "quiet, intensive diplomacy."

Biden has been determined to wrench U.S. foreign policy away from Middle East and Central Asia conflicts, including withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan and ending support for a Saudi-led war in Yemen, to focus on other policy priorities. Internationally for the U.S., that means confronting climate change and dealing with the rise of China, among other objectives.

That shift carries risks, including weathering flaring violence as the United States steps back from hotspots.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking in Denmark on the first stop of an unrelated tour of Nordic countries, said Monday the United States was ready to spring in to help if Israel and Hamas signal interest in ending hostilities—but that the U.S. wasn't demanding that they do so.

"Ultimately it is up to the parties to make clear that they want to pursue a cease-fire," Blinken said.

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He described U.S. contacts to support an end to the fighting, including the calls he was making midair between his Nordic stops.

Blinken defended the U.S. handling of the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict as America works to push for climate-accord deals, withdraw troops from Afghanistan and turn U.S. attention to what Biden sees as the nation's most pressing foreign policy priorities.

It's "a big world, and we do have responsibilities," he said.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Monday joined dozens of Democratic lawmakers — and one Republican and independent Sen. Bernie Sanders — in calling for the cease-fire by both sides. A prominent Democrat, Rep. Adam Schiff, the House intelligence committee chairman, pressed the U.S. over the weekend to get more involved.

Progressive Democrats have been more outspoken in demanding pressure on Israel — and Republicans and conservative Democrats comparatively quiet, for a politically fraught U.S. issue like support for Israel — as the death toll has mounted.

Rep. Cori Bush, a Missouri Democrat, linked Palestinian issues to those of Black Americans.

"We oppose our money going to fund militarized policing, occupation, and systems of violent oppression and trauma," Bush tweeted.

But Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., took the Senate floor on Monday to assail lawmakers for including Israel in their demands for a cease-fire.

"To say that both sides, both sides need to de-escalate downplays the responsibility terrorists have for initiating the conflict in the first place and suggests Israelis are not entitled to defend themselves against ongoing rocket barrages," McConnell said.

In a shot at Democrats, McConnell said, "The United States needs to stand foursquare behind our ally, and President Biden must remain strong against the growing voices within his own party that create false equivalence between terrorist aggressors and a responsible state defending itself."

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., led 19 Republican senators releasing a resolution supporting Israel's side of the fighting. They plan to try to introduce the legislation next week.

Blinken also said Monday he had asked Israel for any evidence for its claim that Hamas was operating in a Gaza office building housing The Associated Press and Al Jazeera news bureaus that was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike over the weekend. But he said that he personally had "not seen any information provided."

Ransomware hits AXA units in Asia, Irish healthcare

By CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL and NICK PERRY Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — The Thai affiliate of Paris-based insurance company AXA said Tuesday it is investigating a ransomware attack by Russian-speaking cybercriminals that has affected operations in Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Meanwhile, a cyberattack on a public health provider in New Zealand took down information systems across five hospitals, forcing staff to cancel some elective surgeries and creating all sorts of other problems.

In Bangkok, Krungthai AXA said it has formed a team with AXA's Inter Partner Assistance to urgently investigate the problem. It was unclear how long it might take to evaluate the exposure of personal data after the criminals claimed to have stolen 3 terabytes of data including medical records, customer IDs and privileged communications with hospitals and doctors.

Kanjana Anantasomboon, assistant vice president for corporate and internal communications at Krungthai-AXA Life Insurance, said the company handles some of its services inhouse, so only part, she declined to say how much, of its customer data was with Inter Partner Assistance's claim service.

Other AXA affiliates in the Philippines, Malaysia and Hong Kong did not respond to requests for comment.

AXA Partners, the Paris insurer's international arm, has given few details. It said Sunday that the full impact of the attack was being investigated and that steps would be "taken to notify and support all corporate clients and individuals impacted." It said the attack was recent, but did not specify when exactly. It said data in Thailand was accessed.

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In New Zealand, Waikato District Health Board Chief Executive Kevin Snee said its emergency department was now only taking urgent patients. He said administrators were working to resolve the issue but he gave no timeline for when the system might be restored.

Dr. Deborah Powell, the national secretary for two unions representing doctors and other health professionals, said the attack hit every part of the operation, with doctors unable to access clinical records to quickly assess patients.

Still, Powell said she didn't believe patients were at extra risk because staff were using workarounds.

Hospital discharges were being done by hand, and a pager system to alert multiple doctors when a patient suffered a cardiac arrest that was down was replaced by a system of personal mobile numbers. People trying to contact patients were encouraged to try calling their cell phones.

Powell said she was told it was a ransomware attack but she didn't have all the details. New Zealand's Ministry of Health described it only as an "attempted cyber incident."

It was unclear if the event was linked in any way to others, including a cyberattack that has nearly paralyzed Ireland's national healthcare IT systems. Conti, a Russian-speaking ransomware group different from the one involved in the attack on AXA, was demanding \$20 million, according to the ransom negotiation page on its darknet site, which The Associated Press viewed.

That gang threatened Monday to "start publishing and selling your private information very soon."

The Irish government's decision not to pay the criminals means hospitals won't have access to patient records — and must resort mostly to handwritten notes — until painstaking efforts are complete to restore thousands of computer servers from backups.

News of the Asia attack was first reported by the Financial Times. The attackers used a ransomware variant called Avaddon. Avaddon threatened to leak "valuable company documents" in 10 days if the company did not pay an unspecified ransom.

So-called "big-game" hunters like Avaddon and Conti identify and target lucrative victims, leasing their "ransomware-as-a-service" to affiliates they recruit who do most of the heavy-lifting — taking more risk and a higher share of the profits.

AXA, among Europe's top five insurers, said this month that it will stop writing cyber-insurance policies in France that reimburse customers for extortion payments made to ransomware criminals. It said it did so out of concern that such reimbursements encourage cyber criminals to demand ransom from companies they prey on, crippling them with malware. Once victims of ransomware pay up, criminals provide software keys to decode the data.

Ransomware attacks returned to headlines this month after hackers struck the United States' largest fuel pipeline, the Colonial Pipeline. The company shut it down for days to contain the damage.

Last year, ransomware reached epidemic levels as criminals increasingly turned to "double extortion," stealing sensitive data before activating the encryption software that paralyzes networks and threatening to dump it online if they don't get paid.

That appears to be what happened to the AXA subsidiaries and Ireland's health care system.

The top victims of ransomware are in the United States, followed by France, experts say. The extent of damage and payouts in Asian countries is unclear. Like most top ransomware purveyors, Avaddon's ransomware is programmed not to target computers with Russian-language keyboards and enjoys safe harbor in former Soviet states.

Conti also enjoys Kremlin tolerance and is among the most prolific of such gangs. It recently attacked the school system in Broward County, Florida, which serves Fort Lauderdale and is one of the largest U.S. school districts.

India scours sea after barge sinks, 2nd adrift after cyclone

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The Indian navy is working to rescue crew members from a sunken barge and a second cargo vessel that was adrift Tuesday off the coast of Mumbai after a deadly cyclone struck the

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western coast.

The navy said it has rescued 177 of the 400 people on the two barges in the Arabia Sea. Three warships, maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters joined the rescue operations and were scouring the sea, the navy said.

Both barges were working for Oil and Natural Gas Corp., the largest crude oil and natural gas company in India.

Cyclone Tauktae, the most powerful storm to hit the region in more than two decades, packed sustained winds of up to 210 kilometers (130 miles) per hour when it came ashore in Gujarat state late Monday. Four people were killed in the state, raising the storm's total to 16.

Residents emerged from relief shelters Tuesday to find debris strewn across roads, trees uprooted and electricity lines damaged. The coast guard rescued eight fishermen who were stranded at sea near Veraval, a fishing industry hub in Gujarat state.

In Maharashtra, six people were killed Monday but the state's capital, Mumbai, was largely spared from major damage even as heavy rains pounded the city's coastline and high winds whipped its skyscrapers. Over the weekend, the cyclone killed six people in Kerala, Karnataka and Goa states as it moved along the western coast.

The cyclone has weakened, but the India Meteorological Department forecast heavy rainfall for many parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra in the coming days.

Ahead of the cyclone, about 150,000 people were evacuated from low-lying areas in Maharashtra and Gujarat states. S.N. Pradhan, director of India's National Disaster Response Force, said social distancing norms were being followed in evacuation shelters and rescue teams were clearing debris from affected areas.

Both states, among the hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, had scrambled disaster response teams, fearing the storm could endanger India's fight against the virus with supply lines cut, roads destroyed and lockdown measures slowing relief work.

Tropical cyclones are less common in the Arabian Sea than on India's east coast and usually form later in the year. Experts say changing climate patterns have caused them to become more intense, rather than more frequent.

In May 2020, nearly 100 people died when Cyclone Amphan, the most powerful storm to hit eastern India in more than a decade, ravaged the region.

Rockets from Gaza rain havoc on Israeli cities in latest war

By ILAN BEN ZION and LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Sirens wailed just before the Jewish holiday of Shavuot began on Sunday evening, sending Chen Farag and her family once again running for cover as they have dozens of times over the past week since the latest war between Palestinian militants in Gaza and the Israeli military erupted.

The Farags live in Ashdod, Israel's largest port on the Mediterranean coast. The city of about 225,000 people is around 30 kilometers (18 miles) north of the Gaza Strip. Six adults, two dogs and a parrot huddled in their home's reinforced safe room — a routine precaution for hundreds of thousands of Israelis in the country's south.

After an explosion shook the building, they rushed outside to see cars on fire, including their own. Their home's front door had been blown off, windows were blasted and shrapnel was embedded in walls.

"We are in shock. It's a nightmare," said Farag, a 24-year-old cable technician. "It's hard to sleep, because we are thinking, what if Gaza tries to hit us again?"

The cycle of fighting and cease-fires has repeated itself numerous times in the past 15 years since the first rockets were fired at southern Israel from the Gaza Strip. The barrages have caused deep frustration for residents, many weary over what they see as the government's failure to change to the situation. Many children who have grown up in the area suffer from trauma-related issues.

Since the latest war erupted last week, Palestinian militants have fired more than 3,200 rockets at Israeli

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cities. Most were intercepted or fell short, in Gaza, but hundreds made it through.

The Farag home is one of 146 buildings in Israel that were hit by rockets fired from Gaza, according to military statistics. They include homes, apartment blocks, schools, kindergartens and an oil storage tank.

When sirens signal incoming rockets, Israelis can seek shelter in communal shelters or in reinforced rooms in their apartments, a feature of newer buildings. Many have been pinned down indoors, fearing they couldn't reach shelter in time.

So far, 10 people have been killed in Israel, most from rocket fire. This includes a soldier, a 5-year-old boy and two people who died from injuries sustained while running for cover. Paramedics say at least 106 people suffered shrapnel and blast wounds.

In Gaza, at least 212 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli airstrikes, including 61 children and 36 women, with more than 1,400 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

Fighting erupted on May 10, when Hamas fired seven rockets at Jerusalem following clashes between Israeli police and Palestinian protesters at a shrine considered holy to both Jews and Muslims. Since then, Palestinian militants have fired heavy barrages at cities deep inside Israel, and the Israeli military has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets in the Gaza Strip.

For hundreds of thousands in communities in southern Israel — cities, towns, kibbutzim and farming villages — air raid sirens have been unrelenting as missiles rain down.

"There were two difficult days. The rockets didn't stop falling," said Ronit Ifergan, 47, a mother of three from Kfar Aza, a kibbutz just a couple of miles from the Gaza Strip.

Almost everyone left the kibbutz to seek safety elsewhere; Ifergan and her family are staying with relatives in the nearby town of Ofakim. Her children are too scared to use the bathroom, terrified they would get caught in a barrage, she said.

"I don't know where to flee to. I am afraid of every place I need to go," she said.

Ifergan and other residents of the area say the past week of fighting has been far more intense than previous rounds, with Hamas firing near-nonstop barrages of rockets indiscriminately into Israel.

This is the fourth Israel-Hamas war since the militants seized the Gaza Strip in 2007, driving out the Palestinian Authority, which administers autonomous enclaves in the occupied West Bank.

Israel and Egypt have enforced a border blockade of Gaza for the past 14 years, with the aim of preventing Hamas from building up its weapons arsenal. But despite the chokehold, the militants have been able to produce thousands of rockets, even as the blockade caused growing hardships for the tiny territory's 2 million people.

On the Israeli side, Yoash Hagay, 53, said his hometown of Ashkelon — just 11 kilometers (6 miles) from Gaza — has been hit hard, with a couple of rockets making it through Israel's Iron Dome defense system with every barrage.

"Every time you hear a couple interceptions by the Iron Dome, and two or three explosions on the ground," he said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press on with airstrikes against Gaza militants "as long as necessary in order to return calm and security to all Israeli citizens."

Ifergan says southern Israel has seen "many years of neglect" by the government, exacerbated by what she describes as unfinished military campaigns against Gaza militants. She criticized the government's handling of the past month of mounting tensions in Jerusalem, violence that heralded the Gaza fighting.

"We are tired of this," said Farag, whose house was damaged in Ashdod. "We always hope that it will end. And it will be just be quiet."

"It never happens," she added.

The Latest: Germany quarantines all in 2 high-rise buildings

By The Associated Press undefined

BERLIN — Health officials say they have quarantined the residents of two high-rise buildings in the western German town of Velbert after several people tested positive with the coronavirus variant first

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detected to India.

Officials from the county of Mettmann said "there are currently several infections with the Indian virus variant in Velbert."

They said several families who were in close touch with each other were affected and that everyone was being tested. Local broadcaster WDR reported about 200 people in the two buildings were affected. They have been quarantined, are getting tested and the Red Cross is providing food and other help.

So far, the COVID-19 variant that was first detected in India has not been found a lot in Germany, but is said to be more contagious than other variants currently more prevalent in Germany.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- Clinic helps long-haul patients in London neighborhoods where COVID-19 hit hard
- India reports record day of virus deaths as cases of infection level off
- Virus testing strategies, opinions vary widely in US schools
- Joy over the U.K.'s measured reopening is tempered by worries over the variant from India
- Follow more of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Taiwan reported 240 cases of domestically transmitted cases of COVID-19 and two new deaths Tuesday.

It was lower than Monday's 333 cases but continues to be the island's worst outbreak of the pandemic, with more than 1,000 cases discovered in about a week. Now, more than 600,000 people are in medical isolation for two weeks, as the island seeks to stop transmission of the virus.

Island-wide, schools will be shut for two weeks starting Wednesday, the minister of education said on Tuesday at a daily news briefing.

The island has recorded 14 deaths and 2,260 cases in total and has been lauded for its success in curbing the spread of the virus despite close ties with China, where COVID-19 first emerged in late 2019.

President Tsai Ing-wen spoke about the island's handling of the current outbreak during a visit to the Central Epidemic Command Center Tuesday morning.

She assured people vaccines purchased abroad will arrive and that domestic development of a vaccine was progressing.

And she said several quarantine centers were being added to care for patients with mild or no symptoms. "We will continue to strengthen our medical capacity."

NEW DELHI — India's total virus cases since the pandemic began swept past 25 million as the country registered more than 260,000 new cases and a record 4,329 fatalities in the last 24 hours.

The numbers reported Tuesday follow a trend of falling cases after infections dipped below 300,000 for the first time in weeks a day earlier.

Active cases in the country also decreased by more than 165,000 on Tuesday — the biggest dip in weeks. But deaths have continued to rise and hospitals are still swamped by patients.

India has recorded nearly 280,000 virus deaths since the pandemic began. Both the number of deaths and total reported cases are thought to be vast undercounts.

The government on Monday announced that 17 new labs will help track variants, boosting India's genome sequencing abilities as concern grows over a potentially worrisome variant first detected here. The variant may spread more easily but the country has lagged behind in doing the testing needed to track it and understand it better.

The variant first identified in India has prompted global concern — most notably in Britain, where it has more than doubled in a week, defying a sharp nationwide downward trend in infections.

HARTFORD, Conn. — As some states set plans to a pandemic \$300 weekly supplemental unemployment

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benefit as a way to encourage people to find work, Connecticut is offering a much different incentive — a \$1,000 signing bonus for taking a job.

Starting May 24, up to 10,000 people in Connecticut considered to have been unemployed for the “long-term” will be able to sign up for the program with the state Department of Labor. Ultimately, they would be paid the bonus after spending eight weeks in their new full-time job.

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont said Monday that the state will also retain the \$300 benefit before some people are still afraid to work because of the coronavirus.

WASHINGTON — The Biden Administration is putting a fresh wave of funding toward its stated goal of making a serious dent in homelessness across the country.

Despite a wave of public support and a nationwide eviction moratorium, Housing Secretary Marcia Fudge said as many of 580,000 people experienced homelessness in the middle of the pandemic.

Fudge, who heads the Department of Housing and Urban Development, said Monday that an extra \$5 billion would be allocated toward keeping families off the streets. That’s in addition to the \$5 billion in funds for preventing homelessness previously announced as part of the American Rescue Plan.

The aid will come in the form of 17,000 emergency housing vouchers that will be distributed to housing authorities across the country. Fudge said the vouchers were expected to help provide shelter for up to 130,000 people and called the new money, “an important milestone in our effort to end homelessness in the United States.”

WARSAW, Poland — Poland-based molecular diagnostics firm Genomtec says it has registered for use in European Union a pioneer, high-reliability COVID-19 test from saliva.

The test, Genomtec SARS-CoV-2 EvaGreen Direct-RT-LAMP CE-IVD Kit spares those tested the discomfort of having swabs pushed up their noses and down their throats. Instead, they only need to produce a sample of saliva in a small test tube, Genomtec, a Polish-British firm, said Monday.

The result is obtained within one hour, because the technology does not require special preparatory procedures on the sample. Its reliability is pegged at over 92%, according to the Genomtec. The test detects various mutations of the coronavirus, said the company that is listed on the Warsaw’s Stock Exchange NewConnect market.

Genomtec said the test has been registered and approved for use in the European Union by Poland’s Office of Medicinal Products, Medical Devices and Biocidal Products. First tests on the general public using the kit will be done still this month in Wroclaw, southwestern Poland, where Genomtec is based.

PRAGUE — The Czech government has announced a new wave of easing coronavirus restrictions amid falling numbers of infected people.

Starting May 24, all hotels are allowed to return to business. The guests will need to present a negative coronavirus test or be vaccinated or recover from COVID-19. If they want to stay longer than seven days, an additional test will be required.

At the same time, all elementary schools and high schools will fully reopen. Schoolchildren and students will be tested once a week.

The same applies for universities where, however, the spring term in many cases ends next week.

It will be also possible for up to 1,000 people to attend outdoor cultural events, while up to 500 are allowed at such events indoor.

Monday’s announcement comes on the day when Czech bars and restaurants are reopening for outdoor dining.

The number of people infected per 100,000 inhabitants in last seven days has dropped to 71 in the Czech Republic.

BERLIN — Germany’s health minister says the country will open up coronavirus vaccinations to everyone starting on June 7. Health Minister Jens Spahn told reporters on Monday that the current system of

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prioritization in which the most vulnerable groups are to be vaccinated first will no longer be valid then. The minister said, "this does not mean that everyone will get an appointment within days, but ... everyone who wants to get vaccinated will get an offer."

Spahn said that the vaccination campaign has picked up speed in recent weeks and that by the end of May about 40 percent of all people in Germany will have received at least one shot. He said 70 percent of those above the age of 60 have received one shot, about one-quarter of them are fully vaccinated. All in all, 40 million doses of coronavirus vaccines have been given and around nine million people are fully vaccinated, in this country of 83 million.

After months of lockdown, the infection rate has been dropping in Germany and some states are slowly starting to open up outdoor dining and various shopping possibilities.

NEW YORK — Vaccinated people no longer have to wear masks or social distance in New York starting Wednesday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Monday.

The governor said the state is adopting the guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released last week.

"Let's get back to life," Cuomo said. "If you are vaccinated, you are safe, no masks, no social distancing."

Cuomo urged people who are unvaccinated and immunocompromised to continue to wear a mask and social distance.

BISMARCK, N.D. — The North Dakota Department of Health on Monday issued new guidance on coronavirus masks.

State health officer Nizar Wehbi says the department is aligning with U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that fully vaccinated individuals can resume activities without wearing a mask indoors and outdoors.

The risk of being infected or spreading COVID-19 once fully vaccinated is very low, and therefore wearing a mask if you are fully vaccinated is no longer a recommendation, the health department said in a statement.

Individuals are considered fully vaccinated two weeks after the second dose of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines or two weeks after a single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

A recommendation remains that everyone wears masks when they are in a health care setting, when they are traveling on public transportation, including airplanes, and when they are in a business or employer that requires masks, health officials said.

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. — Vermont is preparing to hold its first jury trials since the coronavirus pandemic hit last year.

Jury draws were planned Monday for a number of cases in Windham County criminal court. Among them are cases involving drug crimes. According to court documents, social distancing and masking will be part of the proceedings.

Vermont Chief Superior Judge Brian Grearson told the Brattleboro Reformer that the judiciary picked cases that were not very complicated, meaning they did not involve a large number of witnesses and could be tried within a couple of days because of the virus-related protocols.

An upgrade to the building's heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system for proper airflow could lead to fluctuating temperatures, according to a court flyer sent to jurors.

The trial arrangements were planned in consultation with an infectious disease expert to comply with virus guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Vermont Health Department, the newspaper reported.

GENEVA — The head of the World Health Organization is calling on some of the world's top COVID-19 vaccine makers to do more to get doses to needy people around the world, especially in the developing

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world -- and more quickly.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus appealed in particular to U.S.-based Moderna to accelerate its planned timetable for doses of its vaccine to be available to the U.N.-backed COVAX program, which aims to get vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.

"Moderna has signed a deal for 500 million doses with COVAX, but the majority has been promised only for 2021," Tedros said Monday. "We need Moderna to bring hundreds of millions of this forward into 2021 due to the acute moment of this pandemic."

The WHO chief also said COVAX was working toward a deal with U.S.-based Johnson & Johnson that could get doses to the program by the second half of this year, "but this has not been finalized and we do not know when they will arrive."

Tedros said "we appreciate the work of AstraZeneca" — the British-Swedish manufacturer that has been the main pillar so far of COVAX and the source of the vast majority of doses in the program that has now deployed some 65 million doses.

U.S.-based Pfizer, along with German partner BioNTech, has committed to 40 million doses this year to COVAX, "but the majority of this would be in the second half of 2021," he said.

Tedros cited figures from UNICEF, which is helping the deployment, that COVAX is facing a "huge shortfall" of 190 million doses in its planned rollout because of tight supplies and a surge in cases.

TORONTO — All adults in Canada's most populous province will be eligible to book a COVID-19 vaccine starting Tuesday.

The Ontario government says those turning 18 this year will be allowed to book shots. The provincial government had initially said it would lower the vaccine eligibility age to 30 this week.

The province will also now send shots to regions on a per-capita basis, after two weeks of sending half the vaccine supply to COVID-19 hot spots.

Canada expects to get 3.5 million Pfizer and Moderna vaccines this week. More than 55% of the population in Ontario aged 18 and over have received at least one dose.

Russia's northernmost base projects its power across Arctic

By KOSTYA MANENKOV and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

NAGURSKOYE, Russia (AP) — During the Cold War, Russia's Nagurskoye airbase was little more than a runway, a weather station and a communications outpost in the Franz Josef Land archipelago.

It was a remote and desolate home mostly for polar bears, where temperatures plunge in winter to minus-42 Celsius (43 degrees below zero Fahrenheit) and the snow only disappears from August to mid-September.

Now, Russia's northernmost military base is bristling with missiles and radar and its extended runway can handle all types of aircraft, including nuclear-capable strategic bombers, projecting Moscow's power and influence across the Arctic amid intensifying international competition for the region's vast resources.

The shamrock-shaped facility — three large pods extending from a central atrium — is called the "Arctic Trefoil" and is painted in the white-red-and-blue of the national flag, brightening the otherwise stark vantage point on the 5,600-kilometer (3,470-mile) Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast. Other buildings on the Island, which is called Alexandra Land, are used for radar and communications, a weather station, oil storage, hangars and construction facilities.

Russia has sought to assert its influence over wide areas of the Arctic in competition with the United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway as shrinking polar ice from the warming planet offers new opportunities for resources and shipping routes. China also has shown an increasing interest in the region, believed to hold up to one-fourth of the Earth's undiscovered oil and gas.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has cited estimates that put the value of Arctic mineral riches at \$30 trillion.

Tensions between Russia and the West will likely loom large over Thursday's meeting of the Arctic na-

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tions' foreign ministers in Reykjavik, Iceland, where Moscow is set to take a rotating chairmanship in the Arctic Council.

The base, which sits about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) south of the geographic North Pole, was built using new construction technologies as part of Kremlin efforts to bolster the military amid spiraling tensions with the West following Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

The following year, Russia submitted a revised bid for vast territories in the Arctic to the United Nations, claiming 1.2 million square kilometers (over 463,000 square miles) of Arctic sea shelf, extending more than 350 nautical miles (650 kilometers) from shore.

While the U.N. pondered that claim and those from other nations, Russia has said it sees the Northern Sea Route as its "historically developed national transport corridor," requiring authorization from Moscow for foreign vessels to navigate along it. The U.S. has dismissed Russia's claims of jurisdiction on parts of the route as illegitimate.

Moscow has declared its intention to introduce procedures for foreign ships and assign Russian pilots for guidance along the route, which runs from Norway to Alaska.

As part of that effort, Russia has rebuilt and expanded facilities across the polar region, deploying surveillance and defensive assets. A base in the similar trefoil shape and patriotic colors to the one in Nagurskoye is on Kotelny Island, between the Laptev Sea and the East Siberian Sea on eastern end of the shipping route, also with missiles and radar.

Adm. Alexander Moiseyev, chief of Russia's Northern Fleet, said last week that Moscow has the right to set navigation rules along the shipping lane.

"Practically the entire Northern Sea Route goes through Russia's territorial waters or the country's economic zone," Moiseyev told reporters aboard the Peter the Great missile cruiser. "The complex ice conditions make it necessary to organize safe shipping, so Russia insists on a special regime of its use."

NATO is increasingly worried about the growing Russian military footprint in the Arctic, and Washington sent B-1 bombers to Norway this year.

"Increased Russian presence, more Russian bases in the High North, has also triggered the need for more NATO presence, and we have increased our presence there with more naval capabilities, presence in the air, and not least, the importance of protecting transatlantic undersea cables transmitting a lot of data," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.

Moiseyev fretted about the U.S. military assets in Norway, saying it has led to an "increase of the conflict potential in the Arctic."

The Russian Foreign Ministry last week fumed at a U.S. nuclear submarine calling at a Norwegian port, saying it reflected what it described as "Oslo's course for the militarization of the Arctic."

On the sidelines of this week's Arctic Council meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is set to hold talks with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken -- an encounter intended to lay the groundwork for Putin's meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden planned for next month.

Blinken has pointed out that with the Arctic warming at twice the rate of the rest of the global average, Russia has moved to increase its presence in the region.

"Russia is exploiting this change to try to exert control over new spaces," he said last month. "It is modernizing its bases in the Arctic and building new ones."

Since Putin visited the Nagurskoye base in 2017, it has been strengthened and expanded. It now houses a dedicated tactical group that operates electronic surveillance, air defense assets and a battery of Bastion anti-ship missile systems.

A runway has been extended to accommodate all types of aircraft, including Tu-95 nuclear-capable strategic bombers, said Maj.-Gen. Igor Churkin, who oversees air force operations at the base.

"The modernization of Arctic airfields significantly increases the potential of the Northern Fleet's aviation to control the airspace in the area of the Northern Sea Route and allows to ensure its security," he said.

In March, the Russian military conducted drills at Nagurskoye with ground troops and a pair of MiG-31 fighters flying over the North Pole. The exercise also saw three nuclear submarines smash through the Arctic ice next to one another in a carefully planned show of force.

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On Monday, Lavrov rebuffed Western criticism of Russia's Arctic expansion and bristled at what he described as Norway's push for a stronger NATO presence there.

"We hear whining about Russia expanding its military activities in the Arctic," Lavrov said. "But everyone knows that it's our territory, our land. We bear responsibility for the Arctic coast to be safe, and everything our country does there is fully legitimate."

EXPLAINER: Are Israel, Hamas committing war crimes in Gaza?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — More than a week into their fourth war, Israel and the Hamas militant group already face allegations of possible war crimes in Gaza. Israel says Hamas is using Palestinian civilians as human shields, while critics say Israel is using disproportionate force.

Who's right? It's hard to say, especially in the fog of battle.

The firing of hundreds of imprecise rockets into Israel by Hamas and other Palestinian groups is fairly clear-cut. International law prohibits targeting civilians or using indiscriminate force in civilian areas. Rockets slamming into Tel Aviv apartment blocks is a clear violation.

But in Gaza, where 2 million people are packed into a narrow coastal strip, the situation is far murkier. Both sides operate in dense, urban terrain because that's pretty much all there is. Because of the tight space and intense bombardments, there are few safe places for Gazans to go. A blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt after Hamas seized power in 2007 makes it virtually impossible to leave.

As a grassroots movement, Hamas is deeply embedded in Palestinian society, with a political operation and charities separate from its secretive armed wing. While Israel and Western countries view Hamas as a terrorist organization, it is also Gaza's de facto government, employing tens of thousands of people as civil servants and police. So just being connected to Hamas doesn't mean someone is a combatant, and there are many in Gaza who oppose the group — and all are equally exposed with nowhere to run.

Earlier this year, the International Criminal Court launched an investigation into possible war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants during the last war, in 2014. Both sides already appear to be using the same tactics in this one.

Here's a look at potential violations of international law.

URBAN COMBAT

Palestinian fighters are clearly operating in built-up residential areas and have positioned tunnels, rocket launchers and command and control infrastructure in close proximity to schools, mosques and homes.

A prosecutor would have to prove that the combatants deliberately placed military assets near civilians to benefit from protections afforded to noncombatants during war.

"If France invades Switzerland, the Swiss are not prohibited from defending Geneva, including by putting Swiss soldiers, Swiss artillery positions and so on inside Geneva," said Marco Sassoli, professor at the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights.

Because international humanitarian law applies to all sides in any conflict, the French could fight in Geneva as well. But here the issue of proportionality applies on the big picture level: To continue the analogy, was the French assault on Geneva proportional to the provocation?

PROPORTIONALITY

Israel's critics often accuse it of the disproportionate use of force. They note that the undeclared nuclear power, with the region's most powerful military, is waging war on a militant group armed with little beyond long-range rockets, the majority of which are intercepted by Israel's anti-missile defenses. As in the past, the toll in the current conflict is dramatically lopsided, with at least 200 killed in Gaza, nearly half of them women and children, and 10 in Israel, all but one of them civilians.

Israel argues it has the right to eliminate the threat from rockets, including command infrastructure connected to it. It says it makes every effort to avoid harming civilians, including by warning them ahead

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of some strikes. But Sassoli said that in past conflicts, Israel had a "quite large concept of what is a legitimate military objective."

Proportionality in international law also applies to individual attacks, but experts say proving a specific attack is disproportionate is extremely difficult. One would need to know what was targeted, what military advantage was gained, and whether it exceeded the harm inflicted on civilians and civilian property. That means that in practice, only the most extreme cases are likely to be prosecuted.

On Saturday, Israel bombed a 12-story building housing the Gaza offices of The Associated Press and the Al-Jazeera news network, as well as dozens of private apartments and small businesses, including a law firm, a lab for blood testing and a TV production company.

The Israeli military warned residents to evacuate the building, and no one was hurt.

The military says there was a considerable Hamas presence in the building, including a command and control center, an intelligence unit and other infrastructure used to coordinate combat operations. But it has provided no evidence.

AP President and CEO Gary Pruitt has said he was "shocked and horrified" by the attack, and AP has called for an independent investigation. "We have no indication of a Hamas presence in the building, nor were we warned of any such possible presence before the airstrike. This is something we check as best we can," Pruitt said Monday.

Sassoli said it would be "completely unlawful" to attack a media center, but it's impossible to know whether the bombing was justified without knowing what the military was targeting.

Strikes causing civilian casualties raise strong proportionality questions.

On Sunday, Israel launched heavy airstrikes along a main thoroughfare in Gaza City, saying it was targeting Hamas' "underground military infrastructure." The bombardment toppled three buildings and killed at least 42 people, including 16 women and 10 children. A day earlier, a strike in a crowded refugee camp killed 10 women and children. Israeli media said the military was aiming for senior Hamas officials meeting in the building.

UNDERGROUND ARMY

Members of Hamas' armed wing rarely if ever wear uniforms or identify themselves in public, and they go underground as soon as hostilities begin, along with the political leadership.

The vast majority of Hamas supporters are not involved in fighting, which means they aren't supposed to be targeted. The International Committee of the Red Cross defines a combatant as someone with a "continuous combat function" or those engaged in combat at the time they are targeted, a widely adopted definition.

So even if a building were filled with die-hard Hamas supporters, experts say it wouldn't be considered a legitimate target unless they were actively involved in combat operations.

India reports record day of virus deaths as cases level off

NEW DELHI (AP) — India's total virus cases since the pandemic began swept past 25 million on Tuesday as the country registered more than 260,000 new cases and a record 4,329 fatalities in the past 24 hours.

The numbers continue a trend of falling cases after infections dipped below 300,000 for the first time in weeks on Monday. Active cases in the country also decreased by more than 165,000 on Tuesday — the biggest dip in weeks.

But deaths have continued to rise and hospitals are still swamped by patients.

India has recorded nearly 280,000 virus deaths since the pandemic began. Experts warn that both the number of deaths and total reported cases are likely vast undercounts.

Infections in India have surged since February in a disastrous turn blamed on more contagious variants as well as government decisions to allow massive crowds to gather for religious festivals and political rallies.

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, according to Bhramar Mukherjee, a biostatistician at the University

of Michigan tracking India's battle with the virus. With infections outrunning testing capabilities, there are fears that many cases are going undetected.

Experts also say India has lagged behind in doing the testing needed to track and better understand a worrisome virus variant first detected in the country. On Monday, the Health Ministry said 17 new labs will be brought online to help track variants.

The variant first identified in India has prompted global concern — most notably in Britain, where it has more than doubled in a week, defying a sharp nationwide downward trend in infections.

Meanwhile, ever since India opened up vaccinations to all adults this month, the pace of administering shots has plunged. Many states have said they don't have enough stock to give out. The southern state of Karnataka, for example, has temporarily halted its drive to inoculate those aged between 18 and 44 at government-run centers due to a shortage of doses.

Clinic helps long-haul patients in London's "COVID triangle"

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Gary Miller drove a London taxi. Rohit Patel worked behind the till in a supermarket. Barry Bwalya was in customer service.

When the coronavirus tore through their London neighborhoods in early 2020, they all got sick. More than a year later, they are still struggling.

"It's like a rollercoaster," said Miller, a previously fit, gym-loving 57-year-old who is coping with leg and joint pain, headaches and breathlessness. "There are times that I see light at the end of the tunnel. I feel like I'm taking one step forward, and then all of a sudden — bang — I'm ill again and I take two steps back."

Even as London looks to life after lockdown, thousands of people are still grappling with long-term physical and mental effects of the virus. Help is coming through "long COVID" clinics, where medics, patients — and Britain's overstretched health system — are confronting the virus's enduring effects.

Plagues, fires, war — London has survived them all. But it has never had a year like this. The coronavirus has killed more than 15,000 Londoners and shaken the foundations of one of the world's great cities. Amid a fast-moving mass vaccination campaign, The Associated Press looks at the pandemic's impact on London's people and institutions and asks what the future might hold.

At King George Hospital in the east London district of Ilford, respiratory consultant Adam Ainley began noticing last summer that some coronavirus patients who had been discharged were not getting better. They had a wide range of symptoms, including fatigue, muscle pain, breathlessness, headaches, anxiety and depression.

The hospital serves an area dubbed the "COVID triangle," three outer London boroughs that have had some of Britain's highest infection rates. It's a multi-ethnic area, home to many Black and South Asian Londoners, groups that saw higher rates of serious COVID-19 illness and death than white Britons.

High rates of poverty, crowded housing and residents in frontline jobs — including medics, taxi drivers and retail workers — all helped the virus spread.

Ainley began drawing on the expertise of colleagues from multiple disciplines to treat what has been labeled "long COVID," or long-haul COVID. His clinic was one of the first of 83 set up across England, backed by the state-funded National Health Service.

Ainley said it aims to offer "a one-stop approach" to a complex problem.

"We will try and address all the components of your illness," he said. "When you get to the clinic you'll see myself, you'll see a physiotherapist, the occupational therapist, our clinical psychologist. I have access to other specialty members from cardiology, rheumatology, as I need to, based upon your symptoms."

Some patients have even been given singing lessons as therapy.

There is no universal definition of long COVID, a term applied to a range of persistent post-viral symptoms. While most people recover from coronavirus infections within a few weeks, Britain's statistics office says almost 14% still report symptoms 12 weeks later.

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Ainley's clinic has seen 700 patients, with another 120 on the waiting list. Their symptoms are often mental as well as physical. Psychologist Marc Kingsley said many experience memory loss and "brain fog," as well as loneliness and low moods.

"Some of the people I've spoken to have survivor guilt," Kingsley said. "They actually feel guilty about having survived where they saw people in front of them passing away.

"A lot of our patients say to us they don't feel that they can just talk to friends and family," he said. "They don't want to upset people."

As well as home visits from physiotherapists, Miller gets phone calls from a therapist where he can talk about the frustration he feels.

"It's nice to talk to other people and get a load off my chest," he said. "And to find out through her that there are people in the same boat as I am."

The U.K., which has seen almost 128,000 coronavirus-related deaths, has recorded almost 4.5 million infections, so long COVID is likely to be a burden for years to come. But the clinics face competition for resources in a health service facing a backlog of undiagnosed and untreated cancers and other ailments. Some long COVID sufferers say they can't get referred to one of the specialist clinics.

The NHS has allocated 34 million pounds (\$48 million) to the clinics, and chief executive Simon Stevens has promised more funds will be coming.

Britain was relatively quick to devote resources to long COVID, but it was still months before many patients received specialist help. The King George clinic is still treating patients who fell sick in spring 2020. Now it is starting to see those infected during Britain's even bigger winter outbreak.

"The first wave, I feel gutted for," said physiotherapist Jane Clark. "It is lovely to see them improve so quickly and you think, 'I just wish I was aware of you earlier.'"

Ainley says "there's no gold standard or evidence-based treatment yet for long COVID," but he's encouraged to see many patients getting better.

"I've followed some of their journeys from their first admission," he said. "People admitted last April we have now discharged from our clinic because now they're back to functioning in life. We've had people attend weddings ... people reunited with their families ... people who were essentially housebound, who are now going out."

Progress can feel agonizingly slow. Bwayla, 66, struggles with his breath and his memory and relies on around-the-clock support from his wife, Barbara.

"I never thought I would walk, but now at least I can walk with a stick," he said. "But at times I get so frustrated. ... I love my granddaughter, but I can't even play with her."

Miller, Bwalya and Patel all know many people — workmates, relatives, friends -- who became ill with COVID-19, and some who died.

"Sometimes it makes you wonder, how come I survived and a lot of people couldn't?" Patel said.

The 62-year-old supermarket cashier spent three months in King George Hospital with the virus last year, including six weeks in an induced coma.

Almost a year after being discharged, he still is short of breath and suffers from numbness in his feet. But he can make a cup of tea, and he's able to walk slowly around the block. He hopes to return to work next month.

"It's been a long haul, but I think I'm getting there," Patel said, defiantly optimistic. "I am seeing this as a second life."

Samsung thrives as Seoul mulls pardon of corporate heir

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Pressure is mounting on South Korean President Moon Jae-in to pardon Samsung heir Lee Jae-yong, who is back in prison after his conviction in a massive corruption scandal, even though business has rarely looked better at South Korea's largest company.

Lee is just the latest South Korean corporate boss to run his business from behind bars, communicating decisions through visiting company executives. But his imprisonment is causing national handwringing over

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the future of the technology giant in the country sometimes called the "Samsung Republic."

Many people — from business leaders and editorial writers to even Buddhist monks — have urged Moon to release Lee for the sake of an economy heavily dependent on Samsung's technology exports. They worry Lee's imprisonment could compromise Samsung's speed and decisiveness, hindering its competitiveness in the fast-changing technology business.

Lee has been in prison for nearly four months and few expect him to serve his full prison sentence through July 2022. There's speculation Moon could free him on Buddha's Birthday, which falls on Wednesday.

There's also Liberation Day in August, which celebrates Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule at the end of World War II. That also has often brought presidential pardons of high-profile politicians and businesspeople.

Moon's office said he will consider both the intensifying competition in the semiconductor market and public feelings about fairness before deciding whether to pardon Lee.

Lee runs Samsung as vice chairman. He's also the country's richest person. He is serving a 2 1/2-year sentence for bribing then-President Park Geun-hye and her close confidante, who are serving lengthier prison terms, to win government support for a 2015 merger between two Samsung affiliates that tightened his control over the corporate empire.

Samsung's latest results suggest it is doing just fine.

The company posted a near 50% jump in operating profit and its \$58 billion revenue was the highest ever in the first three months of the year. Demand for its mainstay computer memory chips, TVs and other products has surged as the pandemic has forced millions to stay home. And Samsung's sleek Galaxy smartphones and tablets are the biggest competition for Apple's iPhones and iPads.

Samsung has announced ambitious plans to expand its computer chip manufacturing. Last week it said it will invest 171 trillion won (\$151 billion) through 2030 in higher-margin logic chips and its foundry business for contract chipmaking as it expands beyond its dominance in memory chips. The company expects demand for advanced chips to soar in coming years, lifted by emerging technologies such as fifth generation (5G) wireless networks, artificial intelligence and self-driving cars.

Still, analysts say Samsung is increasingly falling behind Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. in the race for high-tech chips. The world's biggest contract chipmaker, TSMC controls 55% of the global foundry business versus Samsung's 17% share, according to South Korea's Trade Ministry.

Both could be threatened by U.S. efforts to reduce American dependence on Asian supply chains and rebuild the declining U.S. chip industry in response to chip shortages that have hobbled American auto manufacturing in recent months.

In a statement to The Associated Press, Samsung said Lee's role is to "contribute to the company's overall strategic direction, and make decisions related to the future growth through his insights and global network of business leaders." The company declined to comment on calls for Lee's release and also would not say how often company officials are visiting him.

"It's not difficult for Lee to manage the company from prison through his visitors, and it's not like he had ever run Samsung like an omnipotent king," said Chung Sun-sup, chief executive of corporate analysis firm Chaebul.com. Even though Lee is the grandson of Samsung's founder and is the family's third generation helmsman of the company, important decisions are still weighed by the board, he noted.

"But who knows what Samsung is missing when Lee isn't visiting business sites or traveling abroad for new opportunities?" he said.

Lee's imprisonment comes at a time when Samsung should be pushing for a major reshaping of its semiconductor business, said Lee Seung-woo, a senior analyst at Seoul-based Eugene Investment and Securities.

Samsung's rise as a global technology powerhouse drew from its dual strength in parts and finished products. But that's proving a disadvantage in its competition with TSMC as major clients like Apple shift orders to TSMC to avoid relying on chips manufactured by a competitor.

Samsung should be considering bold moves, such as splitting its foundry business into a separate com-

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pany and listing it on the U.S. stock market to ease the concern of clients, Lee said.

"Lee Jae-yong clearly has a role to do," he said. "Lee could be meeting (Apple CEO) Tim Cook asking Apple to invest in the new foundry company."

Samsung's daily operations are mainly handled by co-CEOs who each lead its semiconductor, smartphones and consumer electronics divisions. Samsung reaped robust profits during Lee's earlier stints in jail, in 2017 and 2018, when it finalized a deal to acquire American auto electronics firm Harman. That assuaged jitters about a possible void in decision making.

Legal troubles have long dogged the company. Lee's late father, its former chairman Lee Kun-hee, received suspended sentences in 1996 and 2008 for crimes including bribery and tax evasion.

The scandal that snagged Lee Jae-yong again underscored traditionally cozy ties between "chaebol," or South Korea's family-owned conglomerates, and the government. Park was ousted and jailed in 2017 following months of protests by millions.

Moon has been sidestepping the pardon issue for months, having taken office vowing to curb the excesses of chaebol families after winning the presidential by-election following Park's ouster.

South Korea has long been lenient toward white-collar crimes, letting convicted tycoons run their businesses from prison. Officials say that's best for the economy even though the crimes committed by chaebol bosses usually put their personal interests ahead of corporate concerns.

SK Group Chairman Chey Tae-won held nearly 1,800 meetings with his lawyers and other visitors in 17 months through July 2014 while serving a four-year prison term for embezzlement and other crimes, according to Justice Ministry comments to lawmakers.

Hyundai Motor Corp. reportedly set up a "liaison office" nearby to receive guests and staff visiting its former chairman Chung Mong-koo after he was arrested in 2006 on charges of embezzling company funds to bribe officials.

Chey and Chung received presidential pardons, as did Lee's father.

The calls for Lee's release show Samsung still holds excessive influence, said Park Sang-in, a professor of public enterprise policy at Seoul National University. He believes pardoning Lee would damage public trust.

"Was there ever a time when pardoning a chaebol boss really helped a company or the Korean economy? No, not even once," Park said.

US report: Allies of El Salvador's president deemed corrupt

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Allies of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, including his Cabinet chief, have been included in a list of senior officials in Central America deemed corrupt by the U.S. State Department, according to a copy of a report obtained by The Associated Press.

The emergence of the list of purportedly five corrupt officials is likely to heighten tensions with Bukele, who is facing intense pressure from the Biden administration over the removal of several Supreme Court justices and El Salvador's attorney general. The U.S. has made strengthening democracy one of the pillars of its policy toward Central America, saying that rampant corruption is one of the root causes of illegal immigration.

A copy of the report, which was sent Monday to members of the U.S. Congress, was provided to The Associated Press by a Democrat staffer on the condition of anonymity because it has not been made public.

The list was originally included as a classified annex of a report sent to Congress in April in response to an appropriations request last year pushed by Rep. Norma Torres, a California Democrat who chairs the Central America caucus. That larger list contained the names of 12 Honduran and Guatemalan politicians accused of corruption or believed to have ties to drug trafficking organizations.

The list of five Salvadoran officials deemed to have "engaged in significant acts of corruption" during their terms in offices was declassified May 4, according to the new report. Unlike the bulk of Guatemalans and Hondurans on the list, none of the Salvadorans have been indicted or sanctioned in the U.S. and their inclusion on the list would appear to have no immediate legal consequences.

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It nonetheless is likely to further strain relations between the Biden administration and Bukele, who has shown no willingness to back away from his consolidation of power that has drawn condemnation from senior U.S. officials and lawmakers of both parties.

Bukele's fledgling New Ideas party swept February legislative elections by a landslide, taking control of the unicameral congress and immediately voting this month to remove the corruption-fighting top prosecutor and several high court magistrates who had blocked the president's agenda.

While Bukele remains wildly popular at home after decades of corrupt rule that followed the end of the country's bloody civil war, his critics in the U.S. say that in concentrating power he is undermining already fragile institutions.

"El Salvador is a sovereign country and President Bukele was democratically elected. He makes his own decisions," Sen. Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said Monday in a lengthy statement. "But the choices he and his allies in the Salvadoran Congress make, that are eviscerating El Salvador's democratic civilian institutions and empowering the armed forces, have consequences for U.S.-Salvadoran relations."

The most prominent official on the list is Bukele's Cabinet chief, Carolina Recinos, who has worked alongside the president since his entry into politics as a small town mayor for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front created by leftist guerrillas following the end of the civil war. There were no details of Recinos' alleged wrongdoing.

Also named is Rogelio Rivas, who last month was replaced as minister of security and justice. The State Department said Rivas allegedly awarded his own construction company several noncompetitive, unadvertised contracts to build police stations and other buildings that fell under his official capacity and then inflated the cost of materials.

Also included is lawmaker Guillermo Gallegos, a founder of the GANA party that broke with El Salvador's bipartisan system to support Bukele's presidential run in 2019.

Two former FMLN lawmakers — Sigfrido Reyes and Jose Luis Merino, the latter a former vice minister of foreign relations in the FMLN government that preceded Bukele's administration — are also included. Fourteen members of the U.S. Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, wrote letters to the State and Treasury departments in 2017 requesting that Merino be investigated and sanctioned for ties to regional criminal groups.

El Salvador's presidential office didn't respond to a request for comment from Bukele and said Recinos was not available. Rivas didn't respond to a request for comment and it was impossible to locate Merino.

Bukele, who has accused the U.S. of heavy handedness, used irony to dismiss the report, a copy of which circulated earlier Monday on social media. He said he was shocked that El Salvador's "friends" after checking their archives could not find a single instance of corruption inside the conservative ARENA party — a favorite target of his.

"Maybe they think they are all saints," he wrote on Twitter. "That's why they insist we return them to power."

Reyes, an opponent of Bukele who has sought exile in Mexico after being criminally charged in El Salvador for corruption from his time in the legislature, called the accusations "baseless and ridiculous."

The State Department "frequently lies to the world to meet its objectives. 18 years ago they swore that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. They are still searching for them!" he said on Twitter.

A State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the non-public report but said that fighting corruption is at the center of the Biden administration's approach to the so-called Northern Triangle countries of Central America since corruption inhibits democratic governances, undermines security and stifles economic growth.

Supreme Court to take up major abortion rights challenge

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court agreed Monday to a showdown over abortion in a case that

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could dramatically alter nearly 50 years of rulings on abortion rights.

With three justices appointed by President Donald Trump part of a 6-3 conservative majority, the court is taking on a case about whether states can ban abortions before a fetus can survive outside the womb.

Mississippi, which is asking to be allowed to enforce an abortion ban after 15 weeks of pregnancy, is not asking the court to overrule the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision confirming a woman's right to an abortion, or a decision 19 years later that reaffirmed it.

But abortion rights supporters said the case is a clear threat to abortion rights. "The court cannot uphold this law without overturning the principal protections of *Roe v. Wade*," Nancy Northup, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights, said in a call with reporters.

Even if the court does not explicitly overrule earlier cases, a decision favorable to the state could lay the groundwork for allowing even more restrictions on abortion, including state bans on abortion once a fetal heartbeat is detected, as early as six weeks.

The case probably will be argued in the fall, with a decision likely in the spring of 2022 during the campaign for congressional midterm elections.

Mississippi's ban had been blocked by lower courts as inconsistent with Supreme Court precedent that protects a woman's right to obtain an abortion before the fetus can survive outside her womb.

"States may regulate abortion procedures prior to viability so long as they do not impose an undue burden on the woman's right, but they may not ban abortions. The law at issue is a ban," Judge Patrick Higginbotham of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wrote in affirming a lower-court ruling that invalidated the law.

The Supreme Court had previously turned down state appeals over previability abortion bans.

More than 90% of abortions take place in the first 13 weeks of a woman's pregnancy, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

John Bursch, vice president of the anti-abortion Alliance Defending Freedom, said the high court has repeatedly held that states can regulate abortions later in pregnancy.

Viability "has never been a legitimate way to determine a developing infant's dignity or to decide anybody's legal existence," Bursch said.

The justices had put off action on the case for several months. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, an abortion rights proponent, died just before the court's new term began in October. Her replacement, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, is the most open opponent of abortion rights to join the court in decades.

Barrett is one of three Trump appointees on the Supreme Court. The other two, Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, voted in dissent last year to allow Louisiana to enforce restrictions on doctors that could have closed two of the state's three abortion clinics.

Chief Justice John Roberts, joined by Ginsburg and the other three liberal justices, said the restrictions were virtually identical to a Texas law the court struck down in 2016.

But that majority no longer exists, even if Roberts, hardly an abortion rights supporter in his more than 15 years on the court, sides with the more liberal justices.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the Biden administration backs legislation that would write the *Roe* decision into federal law, regardless of the outcome of the Supreme Court case. The legislation would put an end to state efforts to ban abortion, Northup said.

The Mississippi law was enacted in 2018, but was blocked after a federal court challenge. The state's only abortion clinic remains open. About 10% of its abortions are done after the 15th week, said Shannon Brewer, the clinic director at Jackson Women's Health Organization.

The case is separate from a fight over laws enacted by Mississippi and other states that would ban most abortions when a fetal heartbeat is detected. Mississippi also is among 11 states with a total abortion ban waiting to take effect if the Supreme Court overturns its *Roe* decision, according to NARAL Pro-Choice America.

A central question in the case is about viability — whether a fetus can survive on its own at 15 weeks. The clinic presented evidence that viability is impossible at 15 weeks, and the appeals court said that the

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state "conceded that it had identified no medical evidence that a fetus would be viable at 15 weeks." Viability occurs roughly at 24 weeks, the point at which babies are more likely to survive.

But the state argues that viability is an arbitrary standard that doesn't take sufficient account of the state's interest in regulating abortion.

The Mississippi law would allow exceptions to the 15-week ban in cases of medical emergency or severe fetal abnormality. Doctors found in violation of the ban would face mandatory suspension or revocation of their medical license.

Also on Monday the Supreme Court:

— Split 6-3 along conservative-liberal lines to rule that prisoners who were convicted by non-unanimous juries before the high court barred the practice a year ago don't need to be retried. The decision affects prisoners who were convicted in Louisiana and Oregon as well as the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, the few places that had allowed criminal convictions based on divided jury votes.

— Sided unanimously with a man who sued after police entered his home without a warrant and seized his guns. Police said that the man was potentially suicidal and that they were performing a "community caretaking" function. The justices said authorities can't use that justification to enter a home without a warrant.

— Ruled 7-1 that an appeals court should take another look at a lawsuit involving global warming that is in its early stages. Lawyers have been arguing over whether the case belongs in state or federal court.

88% of children covered by monthly payments starting in July

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Treasury Department said Monday that 39 million families are set to receive monthly child payments beginning on July 15.

The payments are part of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, which expanded the child tax credit for one year and made it possible to pre-pay the benefits on a monthly basis. Nearly 88% of children are set to receive the benefits without their parents needing to take any additional action.

"This tax cut sends a clear and powerful message to American workers, working families with children: Help is here," Biden said in remarks at the White House.

Qualified families will receive a payment of up to \$300 per month for each child under 6 and up to \$250 per month for children between the ages of 6 and 17. The child tax credit was previously capped at \$2,000 and only paid out to families with income tax obligations after they filed with the IRS.

But for this year, couples earning \$150,000 or less can receive the full payments on the 15th of each month, in most cases by direct deposit. The benefits total \$3,600 annually for children under 6 and \$3,000 for those who are older. The IRS will determine eligibility based on the 2019 and 2020 tax years, but people will also be able to update their status through an online portal. The administration is also setting up another online portal for non-filers who might be eligible for the child tax credit.

The president has proposed an extension of the increased child tax credit through 2025 as part of his \$1.8 trillion families plan. Outside analysts estimate that the payments could essentially halve child poverty. The expanded credits could cost roughly \$100 billion a year.

Biden boosting world vaccine sharing commitment to 80M doses

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Monday that the U.S. will share an additional 20 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines with the world in the coming six weeks as domestic demand for shots drops and global disparities in distribution have grown more evident.

The doses will come from existing production of Pfizer, Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine stocks, marking the first time that U.S.-controlled doses of vaccines authorized for use in the country will be shared overseas. It will boost the global vaccine sharing commitment from the U.S. to 80 million.

"We know America will never be fully safe until the pandemic that's raging globally is under control,"

Biden said at the White House.

The announcement comes on top of the Biden's administration's prior commitment to share about 60 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not yet authorized for use in the U.S., by the end of June. The AstraZeneca doses will be available to ship once they clear a safety review by the Food and Drug Administration.

Biden also tapped COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients to lead the administration's efforts to share doses with the world.

"Our nation's going to be the arsenal of vaccines for the rest of the world," Biden said. He added that, compared to other countries like Russia and China that have sought to leverage their domestically produced doses, "we will not use our vaccines to secure favors from other countries."

The Biden administration hasn't yet said how the new commitment of vaccines will be shared or which countries will receive them.

To date, the U.S. has shared about 4.5 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine with Canada and Mexico. Additional doses of the Pfizer vaccine manufactured in the U.S. have begun to be exported as the company has met its initial contract commitments to the federal government.

The U.S. has faced growing pressure to share more of its vaccine stockpile with the world as interest in vaccines has waned domestically.

"While wealthy countries continue ramping up vaccinations, less than 1 percent of COVID-19 vaccine doses globally have been administered to people in low-income countries," said Tom Hart the acting CEO of the ONE Campaign. "The sooner the US and other wealthy countries develop a coordinated strategy for sharing vaccine doses with the world's most vulnerable, the faster we will end the global pandemic for all."

More than 157 million Americans have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 123 million are full vaccinated against the virus. Biden hopes the U.S. will have 160 million people fully vaccinated by July Fourth.

Globally, more than 3.3 million people are confirmed to have died from the coronavirus. The U.S. has seen the largest confirmed loss of life from COVID-19, at more than 586,000 people.

Arizona Republicans fight back against election fraud claims

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The top Republicans in Arizona's largest county gave an impassioned defense of their handling of the 2020 election Monday, calling on fellow members of the GOP and business leaders to speak out against an unprecedented partisan election audit.

The GOP-dominated Maricopa County Board of Supervisors cast the audit as a sham that's spun out of the control of the state Senate leader who's ostensibly overseeing it. Board Chairman Jack Sellers said Senate President Karen Fann is making an "attempt at legitimatizing a grift disguised as an audit."

After former President Donald Trump claimed without evidence that his loss was marred by fraud, Fann used the Senate's subpoena power to take possession of ballots and voting machines from Maricopa County, a longtime Republican stronghold that was won by Democrat Joe Biden last year. She turned all of it over to Cyber Ninjas, a small Florida-based cybersecurity firm owned by a Trump supporter who has promoted election conspiracies, to conduct an audit along with several subcontractors.

Last week, Fann sent a letter to Sellers questioning records that document the chain of custody of the ballots and accusing county officials of deleting data. The county on Monday sent a 12-page response vehemently denying wrongdoing, explaining its processes and accusing Cyber Ninjas of incompetence.

"They can't find the files because they don't know what they're doing," Sellers said during a public meeting held to refute Fann's allegations. "We wouldn't be asked to do this on-the-job training if qualified auditors had been hired to do this work."

Fann did not immediately comment but sent a tweet saying the media was given the county's letter before she was. She has said the audit is an effort to address concerns raised by many Trump supporters who worry the election was not conducted fairly and to find out whether the Legislature should change

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election laws.

Fann's accusations touched a nerve with county officials, who have grown increasingly exasperated with the audit. They said they won't appear in the Senate on Tuesday, as requested by Fann, to answer questions, and would not give in to Fann's demands for the county's internet routers, which county officials say would compromise sensitive data unrelated to elections.

Fann has also demanded an administrative password for vote-counting machines, but county officials say those are maintained by the system's manufacturer, Dominion Voting Systems Inc., which says it will only give such access to certified election vendors. None of the firms involved in the audit is certified.

On Monday, county Republicans threatened to sue if senators or auditors accuse them of breaking the law. And they implored elected officials who have doubts about the audit to stop keeping their criticisms to themselves.

"Elected Republicans, I think, are afraid of the next election and they can't be," said Bill Gates, the vice chairman of the Board of Supervisors. "They've got to stand for what is right. Otherwise, why did they run for office in the first place?"

Later, he lamented silence from business leaders and urged them to "contact those elected officials who they donate money to."

"This is creating a black eye to Arizona and I would think that those business leaders would want this to stop," Gates said.

County officials also highlighted the backlash they've experienced for speaking out, including death threats and protests at their homes.

Promoted heavily in right-wing media, the audit has become a cause celebre among some of Trump's most loyal fans, who believe it will uncover evidence of the former president's claim that he was the rightful winner of the election.

Trump sent a statement saying, in part, that "the entire Database of Maricopa County in Arizona has been DELETED! This is illegal and the Arizona State Senate, who is leading the Forensic Audit, is up in arms."

Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer, one of the county's top election officials, on Saturday called the statement "unhinged" and called on other Republicans to stop the unfounded accusations.

Richer was elected in the same election many in his party are now questioning, defeating an incumbent Democrat. As recorder, he oversees the voter registration database and the mail voting operation, including signature verification, while the county board oversees the team charged with election-day operations and counting ballots.

On Monday, he said he hoped that he and other county officials were making it easier for others to speak out against the narrative of election fraud.

"We're out here now. We've moved," Richer said. "I think you're going to see others joining. The water's warm. Come in."

New York suspends Bob Baffert pending Kentucky Derby probe

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Sports Writer

Bob Baffert was suspended Monday from entering horses at New York racetracks, pending an investigation into Kentucky Derby winner Medina Spirit's failed postrace drug test.

Baffert will temporarily not be allowed to stable any horses at Belmont Park, Aqueduct Racetrack and Saratoga Race Course or run any of his horses at the New York Racing Association's tracks. That ban includes races at Belmont Park, with the Belmont Stakes coming up June 5.

"In order to maintain a successful thoroughbred racing industry in New York, NYRA must protect the integrity of the sport for our fans, the betting public and racing participants," NYRA President and CEO Dave O'Rourke said. "That responsibility demands the action taken today in the best interests of thoroughbred racing."

Baffert had not committed to entering any horses in the third leg of the Triple Crown but had many in consideration for other races on Belmont Stakes day.

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NYRA officials say they took into account Baffert's previous penalties in Kentucky, California and Arkansas, along with the current situation with Medina Spirit, and expects to make a final determination about the length and terms of the suspension based in information revealed by Kentucky's ongoing investigation.

Baffert's attorney, Craig Robertson, said in an email to The Associated Press that he is reviewing NYRA's decision and will discuss the situation and legal options with his client before their camp makes any formal statement.

Kentucky Derby winner Medina Spirit tested positive for the steroid betamethasone in postrace testing and faces disqualification unless a second test comes back negative. Baffert on May 9 said 21 picograms of the corticosteroid, which can be used to help a horse's joints, showed up in the blood sample.

Baffert a day later said an ointment used to treat Medina Spirit for a skin condition daily up until the Derby included the substance. Even a trace amount of betamethasone in a horse's system is not allowed on race day in Kentucky, Maryland and New York.

Maryland officials required Medina Spirit and Baffert-trained Preakness runner Concert Tour and Black-Eyed Susan entrant Beautiful Gift undergo three rounds of prerace testing before they'd be allowed to run last weekend at Pimlico. All three passed and were cleared to race.

Medina Spirit finished third and Concert Tour ninth in the Preakness on Saturday. Beautiful Gift was seventh in the Black-Eyed Susan on Friday.

Baffert has had five violations involving impermissible levels of medication in his horses over the past 13 months. He was fined in Kentucky and Arkansas and avoided a suspension in Arkansas following appeal.

Activist Marty Irby of the Animal Wellness Action applauded NYRA's decision, saying the organization is "elated to see the State of New York continues to make the welfare of the horse, and eradicating cheaters from the industry, a top priority."

Giuliani lawyers: Feds treat him like drug boss or terrorist

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Attorneys for Rudy Giuliani say a covert warrant that prosecutors obtained for his Apple iCloud account in November 2019 and a raid last month by agents who seized his electronic devices show they are treating him more like a drug kingpin or terrorist than a personal lawyer to former President Donald Trump.

In a letter to a federal judge in Manhattan, the lawyers said that by secretly seizing Giuliani's cloud data files in 2019, investigators had improperly intruded on private communications with the president.

The seized files, they wrote, likely included "material relating to the impending impeachment, the welfare of the country, and to national security."

They asked the judge to unseal affidavits in support of the Nov. 4, 2019, search warrant. Reviewing the affidavits, the lawyers said, will help them expand their argument "that this unilateral, secret review was illegal" and that any evidence gathered from it should be suppressed.

The letter was sent to a Manhattan federal judge who is considering whether to appoint a "special master" to protect attorney-client privilege during a review of evidence gathered from raids on Giuliani's residence and office in April.

It was initially sent last week. A redacted version was made public Monday.

A spokesperson for prosecutors declined comment.

Federal prosecutors in New York are examining Giuliani's interactions with Ukrainian figures and whether he violated a federal law that governs lobbying on behalf of foreign countries or entities without registering with the U.S. government.

Any warrant issued in 2019 as part of that inquiry, or any other investigation, would have been approved by a neutral judge.

Giuliani, a Republican and former New York City mayor who represented Trump in the special counsel's Russia investigation, has not been charged with a crime.

He has said his activities in Ukraine were conducted on behalf of Trump. At the time, Giuliani was leading

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a campaign to press Ukraine for an investigation into Joe Biden and his son Hunter before the Democrat was elected president.

Some Ukrainians who dealt with Giuliani as he campaigned against the Bidens were also looking for his help with matters of their own, including arranging meetings with U.S. officials or pressuring the Trump administration to oust the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine.

Giuliani's lawyers have argued that the early morning April raids on his home and office were not necessary because he had made clear in 2019 that he would answer any questions without restrictions, except for privileged matters, as long as his lawyers knew what subjects would be discussed.

They said prosecutors instead "simply chose to treat a distinguished lawyer as if he was the head of a drug cartel or a terrorist, in order to create maximum prejudicial coverage of both Giuliani, and his most well known client – the former President of the United States."

In addition, the lawyers wrote, the original warrant for Giuliani's iCloud account contained a non-disclosure order based on an allegation made to a judge that Giuliani might destroy evidence or intimidate witnesses if he knew the warrant existed.

"Such an allegation, on its face, strains credulity. It is not only false, but extremely damaging to Giuliani's reputation. It is not supported by any credible facts and is contradicted by Giuliani's efforts to provide information to the Government. We should be allowed to question the Government as to what basis it had, if any, to make that assertion," they said.

Giuliani attorney Robert Costello said prosecutors have another week to respond to the letter.

In a separate letter dated last week but filed publicly Monday, lawyers for Victoria Toensing — a Washington lawyer whose phone was seized last month as part of the same investigation — asked a judge to order the Justice Department to return her cell phone as well as information collected from her iCloud and Google accounts from what they described as "covert warrants" in 2019.

Given the breadth of the warrants, the lawyers wrote, "it is virtually certain that the materials the Government received included substantial privileged and confidential information concerning clients and criminal matters that have nothing to do with this investigation, privileged and confidential information concerning unrelated other matters that are actively before the DOJ, and privileged and confidential information that is the subject of the warrants."

The defense lawyers said the government has so far declined to reveal what materials a specialized filter team has acquired, reviewed or turned over to the investigative team.

Biden raises cease-fire, civilian toll in call to Netanyahu

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW LEE and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

President Joe Biden expressed support for a cease-fire between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers in a call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, but stopped short of demanding an immediate stop to the eight days of Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rocket barrages that have killed more than 200 people, most of them Palestinian.

Biden's carefully worded statement, in a White House readout of his second known call to Netanyahu in three days as the attacks pounded on, came with the administration under pressure to respond more forcefully despite its determination to wrench the U.S. foreign policy focus away from Middle East conflicts.

Biden's comments on a cease-fire were open-ended, and similar to previous administration statements of support in principle for a cease-fire. That's in contrast to demands from dozens of Democratic lawmakers and others for an immediate halt by both sides. But the readout of the call to the Israeli leader showed increased White House concern about the air and rocket attacks — including Israeli airstrikes aimed at weakening Hamas — while sticking to forceful support for Israel.

The U.S. leader "encouraged Israel to make every effort to ensure the protection of innocent civilians," the White House said in its readout.

An administration official familiar with the call said the decision to express support and not explicitly demand a cease-fire was intentional. While Biden and top aides are concerned about the mounting blood-

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shed and loss of innocent life, the decision not to demand an immediate halt to hostilities reflects White House determination to support Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the private deliberations.

Netanyahu told Israeli security officials late Monday that Israel would "continue to strike terror targets" in Gaza "as long as necessary in order to return calm and security to all Israeli citizens."

As the worst Israeli-Palestinian fighting since 2014 raged, the Biden administration has limited its public criticisms to Hamas and has declined to send a top-level envoy to the region. It also had declined to press Israel publicly and directly to wind down its latest military operation in the Gaza Strip, a six-mile by 25-mile territory that is home to more than 2 million people. Cease-fire mediation by Egypt and others has shown no sign of progress.

Separately, the United States, Israel's top ally, blocked for a third time Monday what would have been a unanimous statement by the 15-nation U.N. Security Council expressing "grave concern" over the intensifying Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the loss of civilian lives. The final U.S. rejection killed the Security Council statement, at least for now.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki and national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the United States was focusing instead on "quiet, intensive diplomacy."

Biden has been determined to wrench U.S. foreign policy away from Middle East and Central Asia conflicts, including withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan and ending support for a Saudi-led war in Yemen, to focus on other policy priorities. Internationally for the U.S., that means confronting climate change and dealing with the rise of China, among other objectives.

That shift carries risks, including weathering flaring violence as the United States steps back from hotspots.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking in Denmark on the first stop of an unrelated tour of Nordic countries, said Monday the United States was ready to spring in to help if Israel and Hamas signal interest in ending hostilities — but that the U.S. wasn't demanding that they do so.

"Ultimately it is up to the parties to make clear that they want to pursue a cease-fire," Blinken said. He described U.S. contacts to support an end to the fighting, including the calls he was making midair between his Nordic stops.

Blinken defended the U.S. handling of the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict as America works to push for climate accord deals, withdraw troops from Afghanistan, and turn U.S. attention to what Biden sees as the nation's most pressing foreign policy priorities.

It's "a big world and we do have responsibilities," he said.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Monday joined dozens of Democratic lawmakers — and one Republican, and independent Sen. Bernie Sanders — in calling for the cease-fire by both sides. A prominent Democrat, Rep. Adam Schiff, the House intelligence committee chairman, pressed the U.S. over the weekend to get more involved.

Progressive Democrats have been more outspoken in demanding pressure on Israel — and Republicans and conservative Democrats comparatively quiet, for a politically fraught U.S. issue like support for Israel — as the death toll has mounted.

Rep. Cori Bush, a Missouri Democrat, linked Palestinian issues to those of Black Americans.

"We oppose our money going to fund militarized policing, occupation, and systems of violent oppression and trauma," Bush tweeted.

But Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, took the Senate floor on Monday to assail lawmakers for including Israel in their demands for a cease-fire.

"To say that both sides, both sides need to de-escalate downplays the responsibility terrorists have for initiating the conflict in the first place and suggests Israelis are not entitled to defend themselves against ongoing rocket barrages," McConnell said.

In a shot at Democrats, McConnell said, "The United States needs to stand foursquare behind our ally, and President Biden must remain strong against the growing voices within his own party that create false equivalence between terrorist aggressors and a responsible state defending itself."

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Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., led 19 Republican senators releasing a resolution supporting Israel's side of the fighting. They plan to try to introduce the legislation next week.

Blinken also said Monday he had asked Israel for any evidence for its claim that Hamas was operating in a Gaza office building housing The Associated Press and Al Jazeera news bureaus that was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike over the weekend. But he said that he personally had "not seen any information provided."

Ariana Grande, Dalton Gomez tie the knot

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Ariana Grande is a newlywed.

A representative for the singer confirmed that she recently married real estate agent Dalton Gomez.

Grande's rep told People that they tied the knot in a small and intimate wedding, where less than 20 people attended. It wasn't clear when the wedding took place.

"The room was so happy and full of love. The couple and both families couldn't be happier," the rep told People.

Grande, 27, and Gomez, 25, announced their engagement in December. They began dating in January 2020 and quarantined together during the pandemic.

Grande is currently on the pop charts with the hits "34+35," "Positions," "pov" and the "Save Your Tears" remix with The Weeknd. She will work as a coach on "The Voice" in the fall.

Bidens paid 25.9% rate and earned \$607,336, tax returns show

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden restored a long-standing presidential tradition Monday by releasing his tax returns, showing that 25.9% of the first couple's income went to the federal government in 2020. The average federal income tax rate is just over 14%.

Biden and his wife, Jill, a teacher, earned \$607,336 last year while he was running for president. That is down from \$985,223 in 2019, when they primarily earned money from book sales, speeches and positions at the University of Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia Community College. Those income opportunities diminished because of the campaign.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, declined to release his tax returns, a precedent that the new administration rejected.

"I would expect that we will continue to release the president's tax returns, as should be expected by every president of the United States," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Monday ahead of the release.

The Bidens donated \$30,704 to 10 charities last year. The largest gift was \$10,000 to the Beau Biden Foundation, a nonprofit focused on child abuse that is named after the president's deceased son. The president separately released his financial holdings through the Office of Government Ethics and has assets worth between \$1.2 million and \$2.88 million.

Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Douglas Emhoff, also released their 2020 tax filings. They paid a rate of 36.7% on income of \$1,695,225 and contributed \$27,006 to charity. Harris was previously a U.S. senator representing California, while Emhoff was a Los Angeles-based entertainment lawyer. He now teaches law at Georgetown University.

Harris also made public her financial holdings through the Office of Government Ethics, showing her assets valued at between \$1 million and \$2.4 million. Harris also listed just under \$359,000 in advance payments for her 2019 memoir, "The Truths We Hold."

Biden campaigned on the transparency of his personal finances, releasing 22 years' worth of tax filings ahead of the 2020 election. It was a direct challenge to Trump, who claimed for several years that an audit prevented him from releasing his taxes — even though the IRS had mandated for more than four decades that the tax returns of a sitting president and vice president be audited.

The New York Times later obtained the tax records of the reputed billionaire and reported that he paid

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just \$750 in federal income taxes during his first year in the White House. IRS figures indicate that the average tax filer paid roughly \$12,200 in 2017, about 16 times more than what the former president paid.

"You have not released a single solitary year of your tax returns," Biden told Trump at one of their presidential debates. "What are you hiding?"

Trump claimed — without evidence — that he had prepaid his taxes and that he thought the \$750 was a filing fee.

The IRS does not charge filing fees.

Israel strikes Gaza tunnels as truce efforts remain elusive

By FARES AKRAM and RAVI NESSMAN Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Israeli military unleashed another heavy wave of airstrikes Monday on the Gaza Strip, saying it destroyed militant tunnels and the homes of nine Hamas commanders. International diplomacy to end the weeklong war that has killed hundreds appeared to make little headway.

Israel has said it will press on for now with its attacks against Hamas, the militant group that rules Gaza, and the United States signaled it would not pressure the two sides for a cease-fire even as President Joe Biden said he supported one.

The latest attacks destroyed the five-story building housing the Hamas-run Religious Affairs Ministry, a building Israel said housed the main operations center of Hamas' internal security forces. Israel also killed a top Gaza leader of Islamic Jihad, another militant group whom the Israeli military blamed for some of the thousands of rocket attacks launched at Israel in recent days. Israel said its strikes destroyed 15 kilometers (9 miles) of tunnels used by militants.

At least 212 Palestinians have been killed in the week of airstrikes, including 61 children and 36 women, with more than 1,400 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Ten people in Israel, including a 5-year-old boy and a soldier, have been killed in the ongoing rocket attacks launched from civilian areas in Gaza toward civilian areas in Israel.

Violence has also erupted between Jews and Arabs inside Israel, leaving scores of people injured. On Monday, a Jewish man attacked last week by a group of Arabs in the central city of Lod died of his wounds, according to police.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with top security officials on Monday evening and later said Israel would "continue to strike terror targets" in Gaza. "We will continue to operate as long as necessary in order to return calm and security to all Israeli citizens," he said.

The new airstrikes, which hit Gaza overnight Monday and again in the evening, hollowed out one floor of a multistory concrete building and killed five people. A woman picked through clothing, rubble and splintered furniture in a room that had been destroyed. One strike demolished the wall of one room, leaving untouched an open cabinet filled with bedding inside. Children walked over debris in the road.

A car in the street that witnesses said was hit by an airstrike was bent and torn, its roof ripped back and what was left of the driver's side door smeared with blood. A beachside cafe the car had just left was splintered and on fire. Rescue workers tried to put out the blaze with a small fire extinguisher.

Gaza City's mayor, Yahya Sarraj, said the strikes had caused extensive damage to roads and other infrastructure. He said water supplies to hundreds of households were disrupted. "We are trying hard to provide water, but the situation remains difficult," he said.

The U.N. has warned that the territory's sole power station is at risk of running out of fuel. 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 three days.

Palestinian officials said Israel pledged to open its only cargo crossing with Gaza for several hours Tuesday to allow humanitarian aid — including fuel, food and medicine — to enter.

Israel also said it targeted what it suspected was a Hamas submersible weapon preparing for an attack on Israel's coast.

The war broke out May 10, when Hamas fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem after weeks of clashes in

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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.

More protests were expected across the region Tuesday in response to a call by Palestinian citizens of Israel for a general strike. The protest has the support of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party.

The Biden administration has declined so far to publicly criticize Israel's part in the fighting or send a top-level envoy to the region. On Monday, the United States again blocked a proposed U.N. Security Council statement calling for an end to "the crisis related to Gaza" and the protection of civilians, especially children.

The White House said Monday evening that Biden expressed "support" for a cease-fire during a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But Secretary of State Antony Blinken signaled earlier that the U.S. did not intend to pressure the two sides.

"Ultimately it is up to the parties to make clear that they want to pursue a cease-fire," Blinken told reporters during a trip to Denmark.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who spoke Monday with Netanyahu, emphasized her country's solidarity with Israel, condemned the continued rocket attacks from Gaza, and expressed hope for a swift end to the fighting, according to her office.

Hamas' top leader, Ismail Haniyeh, who is based abroad, said the group has been contacted by the United Nations, 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."

Since the fighting began, the Israeli military has launched hundreds of airstrikes it says are targeting Hamas' militant infrastructure. Palestinian militants in Gaza have fired more than 3,200 rockets into Israel. Israeli military officials said Hamas had stockpiled about 15,000 rockets before the war started. Rocket attacks continued Monday, with one hitting a building in the city of Ashdod that caused injuries, the Israeli police said.

Israel's military said six rockets launched from Lebanon late Monday apparently fell inside Lebanese territory, and artillery returned fire into southern Lebanon.

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.

Netanyahu alleged that Hamas military intelligence was operating inside the building and said any evidence would be shared through intelligence channels. Blinken said he hasn't yet seen any evidence supporting Israel's claim.

AP President Gary Pruitt called for an independent investigation into the attack.

"As we have said, we have no indication of a Hamas presence in the building, nor were we warned of any such possible presence before the airstrike," he said in a statement. "This is something we check as best we can. We do not know what the Israeli evidence shows, and we want to know."

The Israeli military said it struck 35 "terror targets" Monday 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. They included a strike against a building that housed the Qatari Red Crescent, Qatar said. That attack killed a man and a 12-year-old girl.

The tunnels extend for hundreds of kilometers (miles), with some more than 20 meters (yards) deep, according to an Israeli Air Force official who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity, in keeping with regulations. The official said Israel was not trying to destroy all the tunnels, just chokepoints and major junctions.

The military also said it struck nine houses in different parts of northern Gaza that belonged to "high-ranking commanders" in Hamas. Islamic Jihad said a strike killed Hasam Abu Harbid, the militant group's commander for the northern Gaza Strip.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad say at least 20 of their fighters have been killed, while Israel says the number

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is at least 130 and has released the names of and photos of more than two dozen militant commanders it says were "eliminated." The Gaza Health Ministry, which is controlled by Hamas, does not give a breakdown of how many casualties were militants or civilians.

EXPLAINER: How AT&T-Discovery deal affects consumers, rivals

By MAE ANDERSON AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — AT&T said Monday it will combine its massive WarnerMedia media assets, which includes HBO and CNN, with Discovery Inc. to create a new media heavyweight in a \$43 billion deal.

The deal, which isn't slated to close until next year, will create new publicly traded company that will enter a streaming arena that has been flooded in the past two years with new players including those owned by AT&T and Discovery, which operate HBO Max and Discovery+, respectively. Bigger and more established services, such as Netflix, Disney, and Amazon, remain the ones to beat. Netflix has more than 200 million subscribers globally, and Disney has more than 100 million.

It is a major directional shift for AT&T, which squared off with the Justice Department less than three years ago in an antitrust fight when it wanted to acquire Time Warner Inc. for more than \$80 billion. It also marks the second time this year AT&T is divesting a business not directly related to its core broadband and wireless business. In February, the company spun off DirecTV for a fraction of the \$48.5 billion it paid for the satellite TV service in 2015.

The deal still needs approval from Discovery shareholders and regulators before it can be finalized. AT&T stockholders don't need to vote on the transaction.

Here's a look at how the combination is likely to affect viewers, investors, employees and competitors.

VIEWERS

Nothing is likely to change for HBO Max and Discovery+ subscribers for now. AT&T executives said on a call with investors that their plans for HBO Max remain in place. That includes a rumored \$10-a-month ad-supported version of the service, expected to be announced this week, and a June rollout in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Going forward, the services could be combined in a number of ways. They could become part of a bundle, as Disney has done with its separate services Disney+, Hulu and ESPN+. They could remain separate, or combined into one mega service. Geography will be a factor as well. Discovery CEO David Zaslav said in a call with investors that the company will figure out what to do in each market "and we'll probably experiment in a lot of markets."

Jeff Wlodarczak, principal analyst at Pivotal Research Group, said he believes a combination of both services is a likely outcome, but it won't happen for a couple of years.

"You do not want to potentially disenfranchise the standalone Discovery + customers, and to be fair, the average HBO Max customer and Discovery + subscriber today is probably quite different," he said, noting Discovery+ focuses on reality programs and HBO Max has more scripted shows.

Pricing is also a big question mark. HBO Max costs \$15 a month while Discovery+ is \$5 a month, or \$7 without ads.

INVESTORS

If the deal goes through, AT&T shareholders would own 71% of the new company, and shareholders of Discovery would own 29%.

AT&T, long known for a hefty dividend, said it plans to "reset" the dividend after the deal goes through. It will lower the dividend payout ratio, which is the percent of net income paid to shareholders in dividends, from about 60% to around 40%.

That means less of an immediate payout to shareholders, said Neil Begley, senior vice president at Moody's Investors Service. But it will free up money for AT&T to invest in 5G and other broadband initiatives, which will lead to better performance in the long run.

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"If you're there for the income (from dividends) you're probably not thrilled," he said. "But over the longer term it's better for shareholders."

AT&T's stock fell 2.7% on Monday.

EMPLOYEES

AT&T and Discovery said the combination will save \$3 billion annually that can be plowed into investments in content and its streaming service. That likely means layoffs when the departments are combined and restructured.

"Unquestionably there's going to be some layoffs," said CFRA analyst Tuna Amobi.

Since being acquired by AT&T, WarnerMedia has already been through two rounds of layoffs, including a 5% to 7% cut in November, about 1,000 jobs.

On the other hand, after being run by a company with little entertainment experience, being under the helm of an established media company could be a welcome change for WarnerMedia employees, Moody's analyst Begley said.

"They will feel more of the traditional media culture back again," he said.

COMPETITORS

Netflix still dominates the streaming-service sector, being the most established player with more than 200 million subscribers globally. Amazon and Disney+ round out the top three.

The WarnerMedia and Discovery combination could make it a "Big 4," of general entertainment streamers, said Tim Hanlon, CEO of consulting firm The Vertere Group.

"The belief is this combination is a legitimate possibility for these two streaming services to rise up into the top 'must-have' tier," he said.

That will probably lead to more consolidation among the smaller players remaining, including NBCUniversal's Peacock, ViacomCBS' Paramount+ and others. There are about 150 to 200 niche streaming services in the U.S. alone, Hanlon said.

"I don't think we're done seeing deals yet, there's plenty more consolidation in the streaming space to come," Hanlon said.

Gaetz associate pleads guilty to sex trafficking charges

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — A Florida politician who emerged as a central figure in the Justice Department's sex trafficking investigation into Rep. Matt Gaetz pleaded guilty Monday to six federal charges and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors as part of a plea deal.

Joel Greenberg, a longtime associate of Gaetz's, appeared in federal court in Orlando. He pleaded guilty to six of the nearly three dozen charges he faced, including sex trafficking of a minor, and he admitted that he had paid at least one underage girl to have sex with him and other men.

Gaetz was not mentioned in the plea agreement or during the court hearing. But Greenberg's cooperation — as a key figure in the investigation and a close ally of Gaetz's — may escalate the potential legal and political liability that the firebrand Republican congressman is facing.

Federal prosecutors are examining whether Gaetz and Greenberg paid underage girls and escorts or offered them gifts in exchange for sex, according to two people familiar with the matter. Investigators have also been looking at whether Gaetz and his associates tried to secure government jobs for some of the women, the people said. They are also scrutinizing Gaetz's connections to the medical marijuana sector, including whether his associates sought to influence legislation Gaetz sponsored.

The people had knowledge of the investigation but were not allowed to publicly discuss the ongoing investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

Gaetz has denied the allegations and any accusation of wrongdoing and has said repeatedly he will not resign from Congress. A spokesperson for the congressman has said Gaetz "never had sex with a minor

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and has never paid for sex.”

During the nearly hourlong hearing Monday, Greenberg, 36, acknowledged he understood the charges he was pleading guilty to and the possible punishment he faced and told the judge he was of a sound frame of mind.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Leslie Hoffman told Greenberg that even though prosecutors may request some leniency from his sentencing judge because of his cooperation, there was no guarantee a judge would agree to the prosecutors’ recommendations and Greenberg would be unable to change his plea. No sentencing date was immediately set.

Monday’s court appearance marked the first time Greenberg has been seen in court since the Gaetz investigation blew into the public spotlight in March. Outside the courthouse, a plane flew over during the hearing pulling a banner that read: “TICK TOCK MATT GAETZ.”

After the hearing Greenberg was taken back to jail in handcuffs and shackles, wearing a dark inmate uniform and looking worn down.

“Mr. Greenberg has pleaded guilty subject to a plea agreement that has certain requirements and obligations on him, and he intends to honor them,” Fritz Scheller, Greenberg’s attorney, said after the hearing. “He definitely feels a sense of remorse.”

Asked if Gaetz should be nervous, Scheller said, “I will leave that up to Matt Gaetz’s attorneys to answer.”

As part of his plea deal, Greenberg, a Republican who served as the tax collector in Seminole County, admitted he recruited women for commercial sex acts and paid them more than \$70,000 from 2016 to 2018, sometimes through online payment services like Venmo. They include at least one underage girl he paid to have sex with him and others, the plea agreement says.

Prosecutors wrote in the plea agreement that Greenberg had introduced the girl to others, who also “engaged in commercial sex acts” with her. The agreement does not identify the men.

Greenberg first met the girl online from a website where she was posing as an adult and first paid her \$400 after a meeting on a boat, the documents said. He later invited her to hotels in Florida where he and others would have sex with her and supplied her and other people with ecstasy, according to the plea deal.

In total, prosecutors say Greenberg had sex with the girl at least seven times.

Greenberg’s legal scrutiny began when he was arrested last summer on charges of stalking a political opponent, Brian Beute. Prosecutors said he mailed fake letters to the school where his opponent worked, signed by a nonexistent “very concerned student,” who alleged the opponent had engaged in sexual misconduct with another student.

“I wouldn’t want to be him,” Beute, who showed up at the courthouse on Monday, said after the hearing.

Greenberg also is accused of embezzling \$400,000 from the Seminole County tax collector’s office, according to the indictment filed against him.

Oprah and CNN: AT&T is merging media business with Discovery

By DAVID BAUDER and MAE ANDERSON Associated Press Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — The merger of Discovery and AT&T’s WarnerMedia operations, marrying the likes of HBO and CNN with HGTV and Oprah Winfrey, is another illustration of the head-spinning speed in which streaming has transformed the media world.

The companies are essentially placing a \$43 billion bet that they’ll still be in the mix when consumers decide how to spend their monthly entertainment budgets.

The agreement was announced Monday after AT&T CEO John Stankey and his Discovery counterpart, David Zaslav, worked out the details in Zaslav’s Manhattan brownstone over the past two months.

“I think, together, the combination makes us the best media company in the world,” said Zaslav, who will run the new company if approvals are granted, probably sometime next year.

The deal also represents a strategic retreat for AT&T.

The hope for the newly merged company is that, with a wider array of material than either can offer on its own, it can join Netflix, Amazon and Disney in the widely acknowledged top tier of streamers.

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Analysts say it also makes it imperative that services below that tier — think Paramount+ or Peacock — find some way to ramp up or risk being left behind.

WarnerMedia and Discovery both launched their own streaming services, HBO Max and Discovery+, within the past two years. It's still not clear whether the merger will result in a single streaming service or several bundled together, but it will have a vast array of content to offer: scripted and reality TV, movies, sports including the NBA and NCAA men's basketball tournament, and news with CNN.

With consumers figuring out which streaming services they use regularly and which they can give up, that depth means a better chance they will use this new one regularly, said Raj Venkatesan, professor of business administration at the University of Virginia. The average U.S. household spends \$40 a month on streaming services.

"It either has something for everyone in the family, or is so diverse that it is hard to explain," said Jim Nail, an analyst for Forrester Research.

David Schweidel, a business professor at Emory University, questioned whether consumers will be better off with the deal.

"If I do decide to cut the cord and I need three to five services to get what I had before, that bill could easily approach what I was paying for cable before," Schweidel said. "This may end up hurting consumers."

HBO Max and HBO have a combined global subscriber base of about 63.9 million, and Discovery+ has about 15 million subscribers. That compares with Netflix, which has more than 200 million subscribers worldwide, and Disney+, which counts over 100 million.

In a call with investors, Zaslav said he believes that the standalone company could garner "200, 300, 400 million" subscribers at some point in the future, but there were no details regarding a timeline.

The deal is a stark reminder of how much the entertainment world has changed, said Tim Hanlon, CEO of the media consultants Vertere Group.

"I think most consumers now look at live television as being something of an anachronism," he said.

While it increases the pressure on smaller streaming services like Peacock or Paramount+ to find partners, those two are affiliated with the NBC and CBS television networks — so doing so would require a rethinking of the broadcast industry regulatory process, Hanlon said.

It's the second time this year that AT&T has calved off a major acquisition as it navigates a rapidly evolving media landscape. In February, the company spun off satellite TV service DirecTV for a fraction of the \$48.5 billion it paid in 2015.

Dallas-based AT&T acquired the former company Time Warner for more than \$80 billion less than five years ago in a bid to control both sides of the entertainment process: the broadband and wireless services that help deliver entertainment to homes, and the entertainment itself. But the costs involved in trying to do both became a burden.

"That vision clearly has not panned out," said CFRA analyst Tuna Amobi.

The new company will be able to cut costs by \$3 billion annually, the companies said, money that could go toward original streaming content. It will house almost 200,000 hours of programming and bring together more than 100 brands under one global portfolio, including DC Comics, Cartoon Network, Eurosport, Magnolia, TLC and Animal Planet.

That likely means layoffs as the companies consolidate.

The deal is also likely to force major decisions on familiar brands. For instance, CNN Chief Executive Jeff Zucker said he expected to leave at the end of the year. But with the new company being led by Zaslav — who worked with Zucker at NBC in the 1990s — that equation could change.

Zaslav called Zucker an extraordinary talent. "It's all about the talent, and so we'll be figuring out how do we get the best people to stay," he said.

Shares of Discovery Inc., which is based in Silver Spring, Maryland, fell \$1.80, or 5%, to close Monday at \$33.85 after initially jumping to \$39.70. AT&T's shares finished the day down 87 cents, or 2.7%, at \$31.37, down from a session high of \$33.88.

High court won't make unanimous jury requirement retroactive

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court ruled Monday that prisoners who were convicted by non-unanimous juries before the high court barred the practice a year ago don't need to be retried.

The justices ruled 6-3 along conservative-liberal lines that prisoners whose cases had concluded before the justices' 2020 ruling shouldn't benefit from it. The decision affects prisoners who were convicted in Louisiana and Oregon as well as the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, the few places that had allowed criminal convictions based on divided jury votes.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote for the conservative majority that the court's "well-settled retroactivity doctrine" led to the conclusion that the decision doesn't apply retroactively. The decision "tracks the Court's many longstanding precedents on retroactivity," he wrote.

In a dissent joined by her two liberal colleagues, Justice Elena Kagan wrote that as a result of the ruling, "For the first time in many decades ... those convicted under rules found not to produce fair and reliable verdicts will be left without recourse in federal courts."

During arguments in the case in December, which were held by phone because of the coronavirus pandemic, the justices were told that ruling in favor of the prisoners could mean retrials for 1,000 to 1,600 people in Louisiana alone. States and the Trump administration had urged the court not to give more prisoners the benefit of the ruling, saying doing so would be "massively disruptive" in both Louisiana and Oregon and might mean "the release of violent offenders who cannot practically be retried."

As a result of the high court's 2020 ruling, juries everywhere must vote unanimously to convict. But that decision affected only future cases and cases in which the defendants were still appealing their convictions when the high court ruled. The question the high court was answering in the current case was whether the decision should be made retroactive to cases that were final before the ruling.

During arguments, several justices noted the very high bar past cases have set to making similar new rules retroactive.

Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry, a Republican, praised the ruling.

"Today, the Supreme Court reaffirmed long-final convictions involving rape, murder, child molestation, and other violent crimes," he said in a statement. "At a time when crime rates are through the sky and attempts to erode law and order are incessant, it is assuring that the Supreme Court upheld the rule of law."

The case the justices ruled in involves Louisiana prisoner Thedrick Edwards. A jury convicted Edwards of rape and multiple counts of armed robbery and kidnapping. The jury divided 10-2 on most of the robbery charges and 11-1 on the remaining charges. Edwards, who had confessed to police, was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Edwards, who is Black, has argued among other things that prosecutors intentionally kept Black jurors off the case; the lone Black juror on the case voted to acquit him.

In a statement, Edwards' attorney André Bélanger said he was "disappointed in the Court's ruling." But he said the "fight is not over," explaining that rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution are just a minimum standard and Louisiana is free to apply the Supreme Court's 2020 ruling retroactively as a matter of state law. "This is obviously something that will be litigated moving forward," he said.

Advocates for people in Oregon convicted by non-unanimous juries also said they would pursue possible relief through state courts.

"My office remains committed to reviewing every case presented to us that involves a request for a new trial," Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, a Democrat, said in a statement, adding that her office is reviewing Monday's decision and "will be working expeditiously on a plan for addressing these cases going forward."

The case is Edwards v. Vannoy, 19-5807.

EXPLAINER: Do I still have to wear a mask? What about kids?

By The Associated Press undefined

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The government's new guidance on masks for vaccinated people has left some Americans confused and sent businesses and states scrambling to adjust their rules.

Target and CVS on Monday became the latest retailers to say vaccinated shoppers and workers don't have to wear masks in stores. New York said it will adopt the new mask advice this week, while California said it will wait a month.

About 123 million Americans — 37% of the population — are fully vaccinated against coronavirus, and more than 157 million, or 47%, have received at least one dose.

WHAT'S THE NEW ADVICE?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week said people who are fully vaccinated no longer need to wear a mask indoors or outdoors and can stop social distancing in most places. Fully vaccinated means two weeks after the second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, or two weeks after the one-dose Johnson & Johnson shot.

"If you are vaccinated, we are saying you are safe, you can take off your mask, and you are not at risk of severe disease or hospitalization from COVID-19," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC director, said on "Fox News Sunday." "If you are not vaccinated, you are not safe. Please go get vaccinated or continue to wear your mask."

ARE THERE EXCEPTIONS?

Yes. The CDC says everyone — vaccinated or unvaccinated — should continue to wear a mask in certain places. Masks are still required on public transportation — buses, trains and planes — and in other settings like hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters. Some states and businesses and stores are dropping their mask rules for fully vaccinated people because of the CDC change, while others are keeping them in place. California is waiting until next month to give the public and businesses time to prepare.

WHY THE CHANGE?

The CDC director says there was new science in recent weeks that supported easing the advice on masks and social distancing. She said there was new evidence that COVID-19 vaccines work in real-world settings, are effective against virus variants and prevent the spread of the virus. In announcing the new advice, she also cited the drop in infections in the U.S., the wide availability of vaccines and the expansion to ages 12 and up for the shots.

"I want to be clear that we followed the science here," she said at a White House briefing.

WHAT ABOUT KIDS?

Children who haven't been vaccinated should still wear masks and keep 6 feet apart. The CDC recommends masks for children age 2 and older in public settings and when with people outside their household. Masks are also advised in schools. That won't change for the rest of this school year and "we'll be working on school guidance for the fall," Walensky said on Fox. Child care and camp guidance will also be updated, she said.

She noted that some children may not understand why they have to wear a mask if the rest of the family isn't. "I think that that's going to have to be a family by family decision," she said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

CAN I STILL WEAR A MASK ANYWAY?

Sure. Even though the guidance has changed, "there's no need for everybody to start ripping off their masks," Walensky said on NBC.

"Those behaviors are going to be really hard to change, and there is no mandate to take it off," she said. "What we're saying is, now this is safe."

WHO'S GOING TO BE CHECKING?

In general, there's no system yet for checking vaccination records of those not wearing masks. Schools, businesses and other places may require proof of vaccination. The federal government has no plans for a "vaccine passport."

"What we are really asking the American people to do is to be honest with themselves and to not remove their masks until they are safe," Walensky said on Fox.

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Yes: Marv Albert, NBA's 'soundtrack,' retiring before Finals

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — From Michael Jordan soaring through the air to Willis Reed simply walking onto the court, Marv Albert supplied the sound that went with the sights.

Albert has called numerous sports during a Hall of Fame career that spans nearly 60 years, though he is mostly linked to basketball.

"There is no voice more closely associated with NBA basketball than Marv Albert's," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement released Monday by Turner Sports.

Albert plans to retire after calling the NBA's Eastern Conference finals, ending a career that began on the radio in 1963.

Albert will call the series for TNT. He has been with Turner for 22 years, 19 as an NBA play-by-play announcer.

"My 55 years of broadcasting the NBA has just flown by and I've been fortunate to work with so many wonderful and talented people," Albert said. "Now, I'll have the opportunity to hone my gardening skills and work on my ballroom dancing."

Albert, known for his signature "Yes!" call, turns 80 next month. He has covered everything from football and boxing to hockey, baseball and tennis.

But his voice is known to most through basketball, having called 13 NBA Finals and 25 All-Star Games for NBC and Turner, along with the Dream Team's romp to the gold medal in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

Silver said his earliest memories of basketball were listening to Albert call Knicks games. Many fans who came to the game during Jordan's run to six championships in the 1990s heard the same voice first.

"From his remarkable run as play-by-play announcer for the Knicks to his prominent national roles calling our marquee games on NBC and Turner Sports, Marv has been the soundtrack for basketball fans for nearly 60 years," Silver said.

Albert became the voice of the New York Rangers in 1965 and the Knicks two years later. He was on the radio call in 1970 when the Knicks won their first championship, a memorable moment in NBA history after an injured Reed emerged from the locker room moments before Game 7 against the Los Angeles Lakers at Madison Square Garden.

"And here comes Willis, and the crowd is going wild!" Albert said.

He began doing Knicks games on TV for MSG Network in 1986 until he and the organization parted in 2004 over disagreements with his salary and style.

Albert was also fired by NBC in 1997 after pleading guilty to assault in a lurid sex case, when a longtime lover accused him of biting her on the back more than a dozen times and forcing her to perform oral sex.

Albert also called eight Super Bowls and eight Stanley Cup Finals.

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

By DANICA KIRKA and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Drinks were raised in toasts and reunited friends hugged each other as thousands of U.K. pubs and restaurants opened Monday for indoor service for the first time since early January. Yet the prime minister sounded a cautious tone, warning about a more contagious COVID-19 variant that threatens reopening plans.

Theaters, leisure venues and museums were also reopening as part of the latest step in easing nationwide restrictions, raising hopes that Britain's economy may soon start to recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic.

Andy Frantzeskos, a chef at Nopi, an upmarket Mediterranean restaurant in London's Soho district, said he felt "a bit of anxiousness ... but more excitement than anything."

"It's been a long time coming since lockdown, so we're all happy to be back and want to cook some good food," he said.

The government also relaxed guidance on close personal contact — meaning people can hug friends and

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family they don't live with — and lifted a ban on foreign holidays, although only 12 countries and territories are on the list of "safe" destinations that don't require 10 days of quarantine upon return. Thousands of Britons got up early to check in for the first flights to Portugal, which is on the safe list.

But the rapid spread of a variant first discovered in India is tempering the optimism amid memories of how the U.K. variant swept the country in December, triggering England's third national lockdown. Public health officials are urging people to continue to observe social distancing, even though the situation is different now because almost 70% of British adults have received at least one vaccine dose.

"Please, be cautious about the risks to your loved ones," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a Twitter video. "Remember that close contact such as hugging is a direct way of transmitting this disease."

Monday's reopening allows people in England to go out for a drink or a meal without shivering in rainy outdoor beer gardens. Rules were also being eased in Scotland and Wales, with Northern Ireland to follow next week.

The next phase in Britain's reopening is scheduled for June 21, when remaining restrictions are set to be removed. Johnson has warned that a big surge in COVID-19 cases could scuttle those plans.

Confirmed new virus cases have risen over the past week, though they remain far below the winter's peak. New infections averaged about 2,200 per day over the past seven days compared with nearly 70,000 a day at the peak in January. Recent deaths averaged just over 10 a day, down from 1,820 on Jan. 20.

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

Scientists say the new variant, formally known as B.1.617.2 and first found in India, is more transmissible than the U.K.'s main strain, though it is unclear by how much.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the variant from India had been found in at least 86 local areas. The largest concentration was in Bolton and Blackburn in northwest England, where health officials, backed by the army, are carrying out surge testing and surge vaccinations.

Hancock said it was "reassuring" that early data suggests existing vaccines work against the variant from India. He said most people hospitalized with the new strain had been eligible for a vaccine but had not gotten a shot.

Kate Nicholls, chief executive of trade group UKHospitality, said almost 1 million people were returning to work on Monday, but that businesses were counting on the final step out of lockdown taking place on June 21.

"We've already lost 12,000 businesses," she said. "There's been an almost 1-in-5 contraction in restaurants in city centers, 1-in-10 restaurants lost over the whole of the country. So these are businesses clinging on by their fingertips, and they have no fuel left in the tank. If those social distancing restrictions remain, they are simply not viable."

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."

Other Britons couldn't wait to leave altogether.

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 off-chance" 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."

Powerful cyclone hits land in India amid deadly virus surge

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — A powerful cyclone that emerged in the Arabian Sea made landfall on India's western coast on Monday, hours after authorities evacuated hundreds of thousands of people and suspended COVID-19 vaccinations in one state.

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Cyclone Tauktae, the most powerful storm to hit the region in more than two decades, came ashore in Gujarat state with heavy rain, a battering storm surge and sustained winds of up to 165 kilometers (103 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.

Twelve people were reported dead before the storm hit land and hundreds of thousands were evacuated, a process complicated by the coronavirus pandemic.

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

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, six people were killed, the Press Trust of India news agency reported. The state's capital, Mumbai, was lashed by heavy rain and strong winds, forcing authorities to suspend operations at the city's main airport.

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

Rain from the storm earlier killed six people in Kerala, Karnataka and Goa states over the weekend before it moved along the western coastline.

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. Damage from the storm is also likely to particularly hurt the poor, who are already stretched to the limit by the economic impact of the virus.

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.

Eurovision Song Contest is back, ready to defy the 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 the grand final on Saturday 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

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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 Maitland Jones from flying to Rotterdam. The Netherlands is hosting the event because the country won the last time the contest was held, in 2019.

Maitland Jones 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.

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 Diablo," which she performs flanked by four dancers in skin-tight red cos-

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tunes, 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."

'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."

"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

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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.

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

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other witnesses. Eighteen months and two lacrosse seasons went by.

Finally, before Keeler left for Spain her junior year, Adams County District Attorney Shawn 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 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

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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 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."

Dogged by Mideast, Blinken aims to revive US-Denmark ties

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Confronting multiple unrelated international crises, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken sought Monday to revive strained ties with Denmark, pledging renewed cooperation with the country over climate change, Arctic policy and Russia.

As calls in Washington and around the world grew for the Biden administration to take a tougher, more active stance on increasing Israeli-Palestinian violence, Blinken largely held to his initial agenda in meetings with Danish leaders and officials from Greenland and the Faeroe Islands. He cancelled only one scheduled event to make calls on the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Blinken's talks in Copenhagen came ahead of his first face-to-face encounter with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a time of significantly heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow. That

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meeting is set for Wednesday in Iceland on the sidelines of a meeting of the Arctic Council. It will set the stage for a planned summit next month between President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

While the deteriorating situation in the Middle East cast a shadow over his trip, Blinken brought a message of renewed U.S. cooperation to Denmark. Denmark was one of several European countries that felt slighted by former President Donald Trump and expressed clear relief at the change in administrations.

"Today America is back, and in more ways than one," said Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod. "And, let me tell you, America has been missed."

At a joint news conference with Blinken, Kofod rattled off a litany of issues on which the Biden administration has reversed course from the Trump era to Denmark's delight. Those included rejoining the Paris climate accord and World Health Organization and re-engaging with the UN Human Rights Council and the World Trade Organization.

Kofod had met less than a year ago with Blinken's predecessor, Mike Pompeo, amid lingering mistrust created by Trump's desire to buy the Danish territory of Greenland and his cancellation of a state visit to Denmark in 2019 after his suggestions were flatly rejected.

"I am resolutely focused on today and tomorrow, not yesterday," Blinken said, adding that the United States would pursue "new partnerships" with Denmark and other countries on climate change and work more closely with like-minded nations to confront threats posed by an increasingly assertive Russia and China.

But, he said that: "Across the board, I think you've seen a few short months a determination by the United States to reinvigorate its alliances and partnerships and also our engagement with international institutions." And, he appealed for Europeans to embrace the Biden administration's policy shifts. "Judge us not by what we say, but by what we do," Blinken said.

Climate change dominated 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 her meeting with Blinken, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also 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

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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 if 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. 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 ef-

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ficiently 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 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.

Ex-rebel capitalizes on Colombia unrest by showing restraint

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — As the streets of Colombia smolder amid the biggest antigovernment unrest in decades, a former rebel leader who would undo antinarcotics cooperation with the U.S. is looking to capitalize on the growing discontent and ride it to the presidency next year.

In a long political career that included a stint as Bogota's mayor, Sen. Gustavo Petro has earned a reputation as Colombia's perennial rabble-rouser with a silver tongue admired — when not feared — by friends and foes alike.

But he's adopted a decidedly low-key approach to the recent protests, apparently believing that he must win over some of his many conservative skeptics to prevail in what would be his third run for Colombia's

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presidency.

The protests began April 28 after President Ivan Duque attempted to ram through a tax increase amid a pandemic that has left millions without work or food. Although he quickly backed down, protesters have remained on the streets, broadening their fight to include grievances ranging from the decrepit state of Colombia's health care and education systems to the slow implementation of a 2016 peace deal with Marxist rebels.

Duque has accused the nation's many cocaine cartels and criminal mafias of adding fuel to the fire, although so far he's presented no evidence to back the claim. But the culture of political violence that has long plagued Colombia has taken a toll: to date, at least 42 people have been killed, with police accused of scores of abuses.

Many of the young activists on the streets hail from Colombia's left, where Petro, 61, has been a fixture for decades.

"If there's someone in Colombia who has consistently been paying attention to young people and the issue of economic inequality, it's Petro," said Sandra Borda, a political analyst at Bogota's Andes University.

In the past, Petro hasn't hesitated to take to Twitter — where his 4.2 million followers almost double those of Duque — to fan protests, blast opponents as "fascists" or spread baseless claims that the 2018 election he lost by more than 2 million votes was marred by vote buying.

But this time, Petro has projected restraint, in counterpoint to the growing rejection of Duque as a weak, flailing leader.

On April 27, the night before the start of a national strike, he delivered what he dubbed an "address to the Colombian nation" in which he appealed for calm and urged protesters to wear masks and maintain social distancing while on the streets.

"The police aren't the enemy," he said in the video published on social media. "The enemy is the tax reform."

So far, he's avoided appearing alongside protesters, in part for fear of being cast as a firebrand. In a leaked audio recording from a private meeting with peace activists, he suggested strikers should have gone home once Duque buried the tax hike.

"That's when they should've declared a triumph and put a stop to it," he can be heard saying in May 5 online meeting. "In other words, accumulate strength for what comes next."

Petro didn't respond to repeated requests for an interview.

But Jorge Rojas, a longtime aide, said Petro's cautious approach is deliberate.

Owing to his youthful militancy in the M-19 rebel movement, Petro has long battled conservative attempts to brand him as Colombia's harbinger of "Castro-Chavismo" who would follow the path of the late Cuban and Venezuelan revolutionaries Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez.

"He knows that he has to behave like a statesman to fill the void left by Duque," said Rojas.

However, younger voters less shaped by the ideological battles of the Cold War appear to be more forgiving.

In the central city of Bucaramanga, Laura Velazco, 26, said she doesn't fear Petro so much as the status quo — her inability to find work since graduating from college three years ago with a degree in psychology.

"We're becoming Venezuela and we're not even governed by the left," said Velazco, who voted for Petro in 2018 and says she will consider doing so again next year — if she doesn't emigrate first.

"If I have to wash dishes, I'll do so because I have a daughter to take care of," she added.

But the more violent and disruptive the protests become, there's a risk Petro would be blamed, said Borda. Already law-and-order allies of Duque have urged the president to deploy the military, suspend civil liberties and decree a state of "internal commotion" to control the unrest.

Petro rose to prominence 15 years ago leading a crusade to expose the alliance between conservative allies of then-President Alvaro Uribe and right-wing paramilitary groups. In mesmerizing televised speeches from the Senate floor, he revealed evidence that spurred the arrest of dozens of members of Congress for criminal ties to the paramilitaries.

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The signing of a peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2016 created space for leftist politics that Petro has been quick to seize on. Several opinion polls show him as the clear frontrunner to win next May's presidential election, in some cases quadrupling the support of his nearest rival.

But some fellow leftists say his ego can get in the way of shrewd political instincts. He's also lost support among women because of his staunch defense of a former aide accused of domestic abuse. In 2018, a decade-old video surfaced showing him receiving stacks of cash from a government contractor.

Despite that, Petro has managed to maintain a lock on the left and distance himself from the rest of Colombia's discredited political establishment. And now, members of the country's business elite in recent weeks have been requesting meetings with Petro to learn more about his policies, said Rojas. A trip to Washington is planned this year, he added.

"I still believe that Petro is perhaps the only politician who has a coherent program to offer a country submerged in a deep social crisis," said Maria Mercedes Maldonado, who distanced herself from Petro after serving as his top policy adviser in the 2018 campaign, complaining that he doesn't listen to grassroots activists.

As mayor of Colombia's capital, he racked up enemies by banning bullfights, cutting bus fares and transferring control of private garbage collection to a city agency — a move for which he was briefly ousted by the nation's inspector general in 2014.

U.S. officials at times have viewed Petro as a radical populist in the mold of Chavez, according to a 2006 secret U.S. Embassy cable published by pro-transparency group Wikileaks. But two years later, Ambassador William Brownfield in another cable described him as "pragmatic."

If he were elected, it would likely upend Colombia's role as the U.S.' caretaker in the war on drugs, the linchpin of more than two decades of close bilateral cooperation, said Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington. Frictions with the U.S. could also emerge if he takes a softer approach to neighboring Venezuela and engages more with China, Shifter said.

"A Petro administration would probably mean heightened tensions with the U.S. on drug policy, sharp conflicts with the (Drug Enforcement Administration) and the end of forced eradication" of coca crops, Shifter said.

Nonetheless, he said Petro understands the importance of maintaining good relations with the U.S. "It's hard to see how hostile bilateral ties would advance his policy priorities."

Blinken hasn't seen any evidence on AP Gaza building strike

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Monday he hasn't yet seen any evidence supporting Israel's claim that Hamas operated in a Gaza building housing The Associated Press and other media outlets that was destroyed by an Israeli airstrike. Blinken said he has pressed Israel for justification.

Blinken spoke at a news conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, a day after The Associated Press' top editor called for an independent investigation into the Israeli airstrike over the weekend 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.

Israel destroyed a building housing The Associated Press and Al Jazeera and claimed that Hamas used the building for a military intelligence office.

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 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.

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Blinken said he personally has not seen any Israeli evidence of Hamas operating in the building and has asked Israel for justification for the strike.

"Shortly after the strike we did request additional details regarding the justification for it," Blinken said from Copenhagen, Denmark. He declined to discuss specific intelligence, saying he "will leave it to others to characterize if any information has been shared and our assessment that information."

But he said, "I have not seen any information provided."

On Sunday, Conricus, the Israeli military spokesman said, "We're in the middle of fighting. 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."

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, Izhaar 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.

"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

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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 faint signs 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, reported 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 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 Shriv-

astav, 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.

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.

Hong Kong security minister John Lee dismissed concerns that the freezing of Lai's assets was an attack on press freedom and said that under the national security law, he is able to freeze assets if there are reasonable grounds to suspect they are related to offenses that endanger national security.

"The action that we have taken is acting in accordance with the laws to tackle crimes that are endangering national security. It's not directly related to journalism," he said to reporters Monday.

"It is illegal activities that we are dealing with. It is not press work. In regard to timing for my issuing of notices, I will issue it when I have reasonable suspicion that the power should be exercised," Lee said.

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 are to 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 previously legal. The law broadly criminalizes secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign collusion, and police have arrested more than a hundred people under the legislation.

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

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.

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By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, May 18, the 138th day of 2021. There are 227 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 18, 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, endorsed "separate but equal" racial segregation, a concept renounced 58 years later by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

On this date:

In 1642, the Canadian city of Montreal was founded by French colonists. (On this date in 1765, one-quarter of Montreal was destroyed by a fire.)

In 1652, Rhode Island became the first American colony to pass a law abolishing African slavery; however, the law was apparently never enforced.

In 1863, the Siege of Vicksburg began during the Civil War, ending July 4 with a Union victory.

In 1910, Halley's Comet passed by earth, brushing it with its tail.

In 1927, in America's deadliest school attack, part of a schoolhouse in Bath Township, Michigan, was blown up with explosives planted by local farmer Andrew Kehoe, who then set off a bomb in his truck; the attacks killed 38 children and six adults, including Kehoe, who'd earlier killed his wife. (Authorities said Kehoe, who suffered financial difficulties, was seeking revenge for losing a township clerk election.)

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a measure creating the Tennessee Valley Authority.

In 1944, during World War II, Allied forces occupied Monte Cassino in Italy after a four-month struggle with Axis troops.

In 1953, Jacqueline Cochran, 47, became the first woman to break the sound barrier as she piloted a Canadair F-86 Sabre jet over Rogers Dry Lake, California.

In 1973, Harvard law professor Archibald Cox was appointed Watergate special prosecutor by U.S. Attorney General Elliot Richardson.

In 1980, the Mount St. Helens volcano in Washington state exploded, leaving 57 people dead or missing.

In 1981, the *New York Native*, a gay newspaper, carried a story concerning rumors of "an exotic new disease" among homosexuals; it was the first published report about what came to be known as AIDS.

In 2015, President Barack Obama ended long-running federal transfers of some combat-style gear to local law enforcement in an attempt to ease tensions between police and minority communities, saying equipment made for the battlefield should not be a tool of American criminal justice.

Ten years ago: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, resigned, saying he wanted to devote all his energy to battling the sexual assault charges he faced in New York. (The charges were later dropped.) The United States slapped sanctions on Syrian President Bashar Assad and six others for human rights abuses over their brutal crackdown on antigovernment protests.

Five years ago: In an unusual move, Republican Donald Trump released a list of 11 potential Supreme Court justices he would consider if elected president (not included was Trump's eventual first pick for the nation's highest bench, Neil Gorsuch).

One year ago: President Donald Trump said he'd been taking a malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, and a zinc supplement to protect against the coronavirus despite warnings from his own government that the drug should be administered only in a hospital or research setting. Moderna announced that an experimental vaccine against the coronavirus showed encouraging results in early testing. The World Health Organization agreed to launch an independent probe into how it managed the international response to the coronavirus. A federal judge in Virginia ruled that a salvage firm could retrieve from the wreckage of the Titanic the Marconi wireless telegraph machine that broadcast distress calls. Ken Osmond, the actor best known for playing teenage scoundrel Eddie Haskell on TV's "Leave it to Beaver," died in Los Angeles at 76.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Priscilla Pointer is 97. Actor Robert Morse is 90. Actor Dwayne Hickman is 87. Baseball Hall of Famer Brooks Robinson is 83. Actor Candice Azzara is 80. Bluegrass singer-musician Rodney Dillard (The Dillard's) is 79. Baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson is 75. Former Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., is 73. Country singer Joe Bonsall (The Oak Ridge Boys) is 73. Rock musician Rick Wakeman (Yes) is 72.

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Rock singer Mark Mothersbaugh (Devo) is 71. Actor James Stephens is 70. Country singer George Strait is 69. Actor Chow Yun-Fat is 66. International Tennis Hall of Famer Yannick Noah is 61. Rock singer-musician Page Hamilton is 61. Contemporary Christian musician Barry Graul (MercyMe) is 60. Contemporary Christian singer Michael Tait is 55. Singer-actor Martika is 52. Comedian-writer Tina Fey is 51. Rock singer Jack Johnson is 46. Country singer David Nail is 42. Actor Matt Long is 41. Actor Allen Leech is 40. Christian singer Francesca Battistelli is 36. Actor Spencer Breslin is 29. Actor Violet Beane is 25. Actor Hala Finley is 12.