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OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Groton Jr. Teeners Slides Into A Blow-Out Win Over Northville

Groton Jr. Teeners easily did away with Northville 12-2 on Thursday

Groton Jr. Teeners got things started in the first inning when.

Groton Jr. Teeners scored four runs in the sixth inning. The offensive onslaught by Groton Jr. Teeners was led by Teylor Diegel, Braxton Imrie, and Karsten Fliehs, all driving in runs in the frame.

Gavin Englund took the win for Groton Jr. Teeners. The righthander allowed three hits and one run over three innings, striking out six.

Gavin Lane took the loss for Northville. The hurler went four innings, allowing five runs on six hits, striking out four and walking one.

Imrie started the game for Groton Jr. Teeners. The righty surrendered one run on one hit over three innings, striking out three

Groton Jr. Teeners collected 12 hits. Diegel, Fliehs, and Imrie all collected multiple hits for Groton Jr. Teeners. Diegel went 3-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Jr. Teeners in hits.

Mac Heinz led Northville with two hits in two at bats. Northville was sure-handed and didn't commit a single error. Devin Fischbach made the most plays with six.

Late Score Costs Groton Jr. Teeners Against Northville

Groton Jr. Teeners lost the lead late in a 14-10 defeat to Northville on Thursday. Northville trailed 6-5 in the top of the fourth inning when Drew Bakeberg singled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring two runs.

Despite the loss, Groton Jr. Teeners did collect five hits in the high-scoring affair. Unfortunately, Northville had three hits on the way to victory.

Groton Jr. Teeners got on the board in the first inning. Korbin Kucker drove in two when Kucker singled.

Groton Jr. Teeners notched four runs in the fifth inning. Groton Jr. Teeners big bats were led by Teylor Diegel, Ryan Goldade, and Karsten Fliehs, who each had RBIs in the inning.

Devin Fischbach was the winning pitcher for Northville. The hurler allowed five hits and six runs over four innings, striking out seven. Jack Hanson and Rennan Bruns entered the game out of the bullpen and helped to close out the game in relief.

Caden Mcinerney took the loss for Groton Jr. Teeners. The righthander surrendered seven runs on one hit over two-thirds of an inning, striking out two.

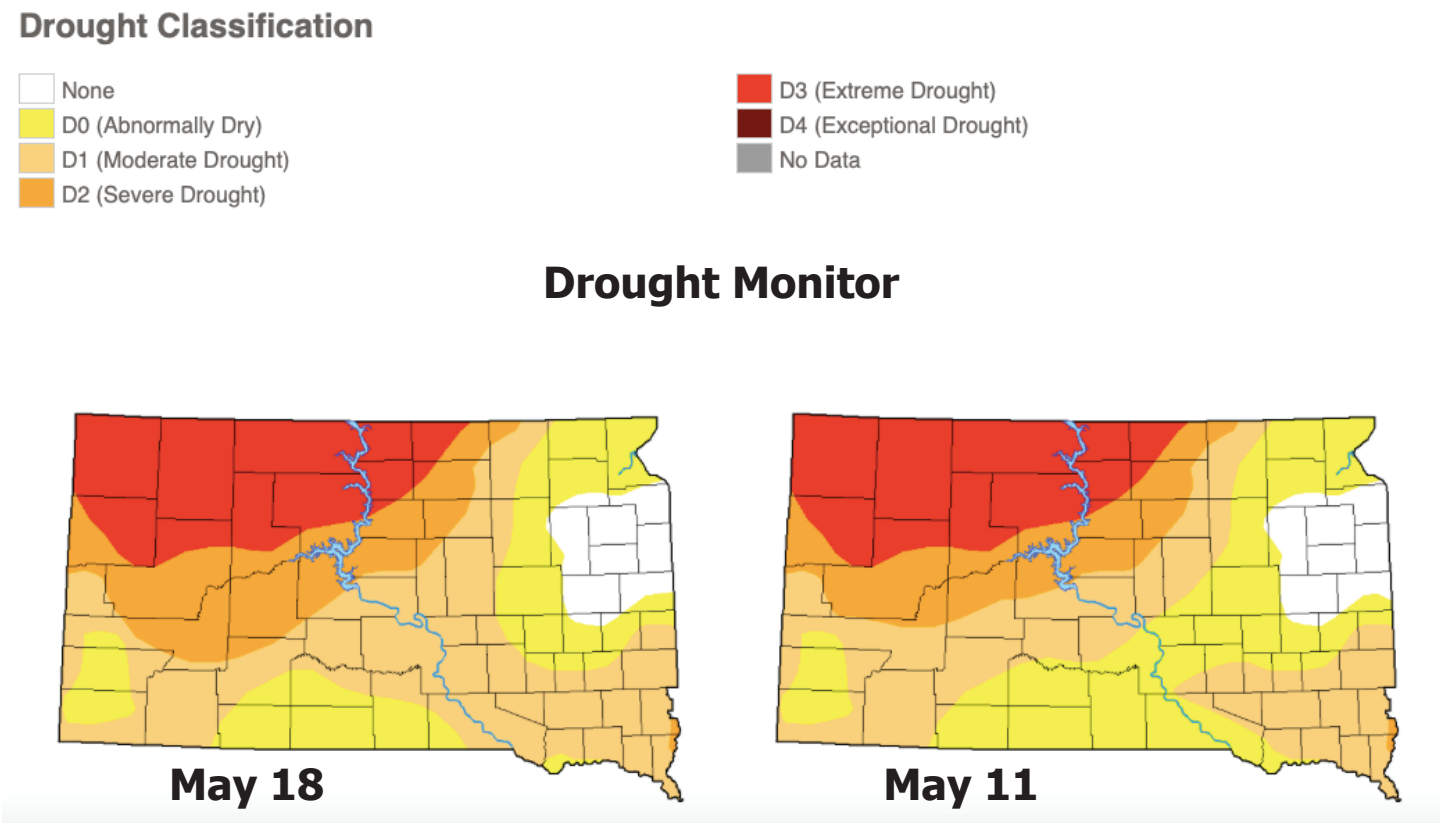
Kellen Antonsen started the game for Groton Jr. Teeners. Antonsen allowed two hits and five runs over three innings, striking out five

Brevin Fliehs, Braxton Imrie, Kucker, Carter Simon, and Drew Thurston each collected one hit to lead Groton Jr. Teeners.

Bakeberg went 2-for-4 at the plate to lead Northville in hits.

Sisseton Golf Meet

Groton Area's girls golf team took part in the Sisseton Invitational meet held Thursday. Carly Guthmiller placed 16th with a score of 111, Emma Schinkel was 23rd with a 121 and Shaylee Peterson was 27th with a score of 130.



High Plains

The High Plains Region was a tail of two extremes. From Nebraska southward, and westward to the Front Range saw widespread heavy precipitation (0.5 to 3 inches, with locally higher amounts of greater than 5 inches stretching from west to east across Kansas), leading to large reductions in D0 (abnormally dry) to D2 (severe drought) coverage in Colorado, Nebraska, and Kansas, with some D3 (extreme) reduction in southeastern Colorado. Some moderate precipitation also fell across portions of the Front Range of Wyoming also, further improving SWE across the Big Horn Basin. This warranted some improvements from D2 (severe drought) to D1 (moderate drought) along the east-facing slopes of the Absaroka and Wind River Ranges, and D1 was also improved to D0 for interior parts of the basin. In addition, AHPS percent of normal precipitation exceeds 150% for all periods going back at least 90 days, SPIs indicate near to abnormally dry conditions going back 180 days, and USGS 7-day and 28-day average stream flows are near normal. NASA SPoRT and NASA GRACE also show improvements in soil moisture and groundwater, respectively. Across the Dakotas, near to above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation this week warranted some further degradations. Targeted expansions of D1 and D2 drought occurred in South Dakota, as the state continues to fall behind during a climatologically wetter time of year, which are depicted in the 30-90 day SPIs. There are also continued reports of poor water quality in livestock water sources in northwestern parts of the state. In North Dakota, warm (2°F to 4°F positive average temperature anomalies), dry, and windy conditions continued. CPC soil moisture ranks in the bottom 1% across much of the state, USGS 7-day average stream flows are much below normal, and VegDRI and VHI indicate extreme stress on vegetation. As such, D4 (exceptional drought) was introduced for parts of north-central North Dakota. Furthermore, many farmers have been forced to plant in dry soils this year, but erosion and lack of rainfall have resulted in poor and/or a lack of germination. Fire also continues to remain a high risk across the state and most counties have imposed burn restrictions. Since the beginning of the year, there have been more than 1,000 fires reported across North Dakota, with over 100,000 acres burned.

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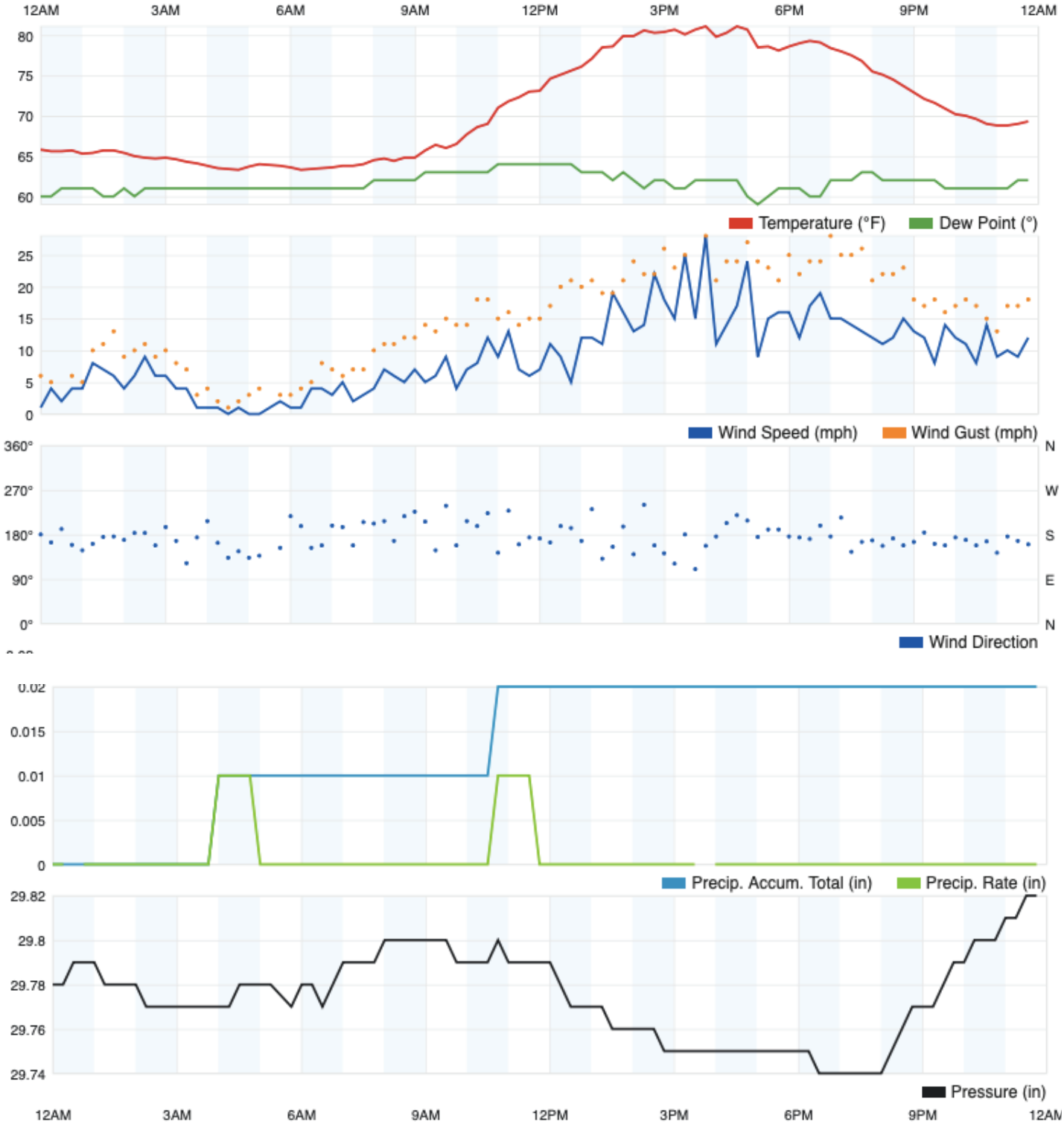
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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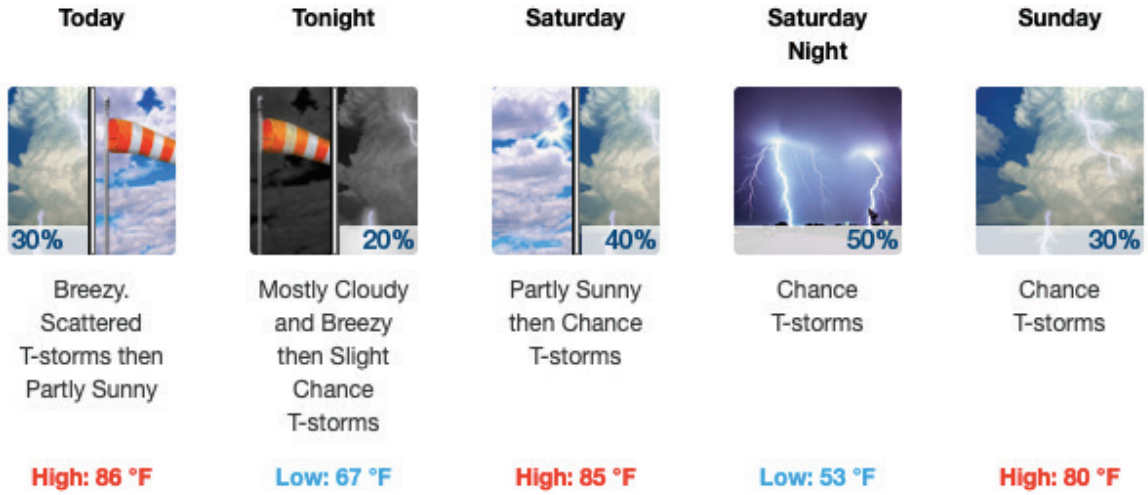

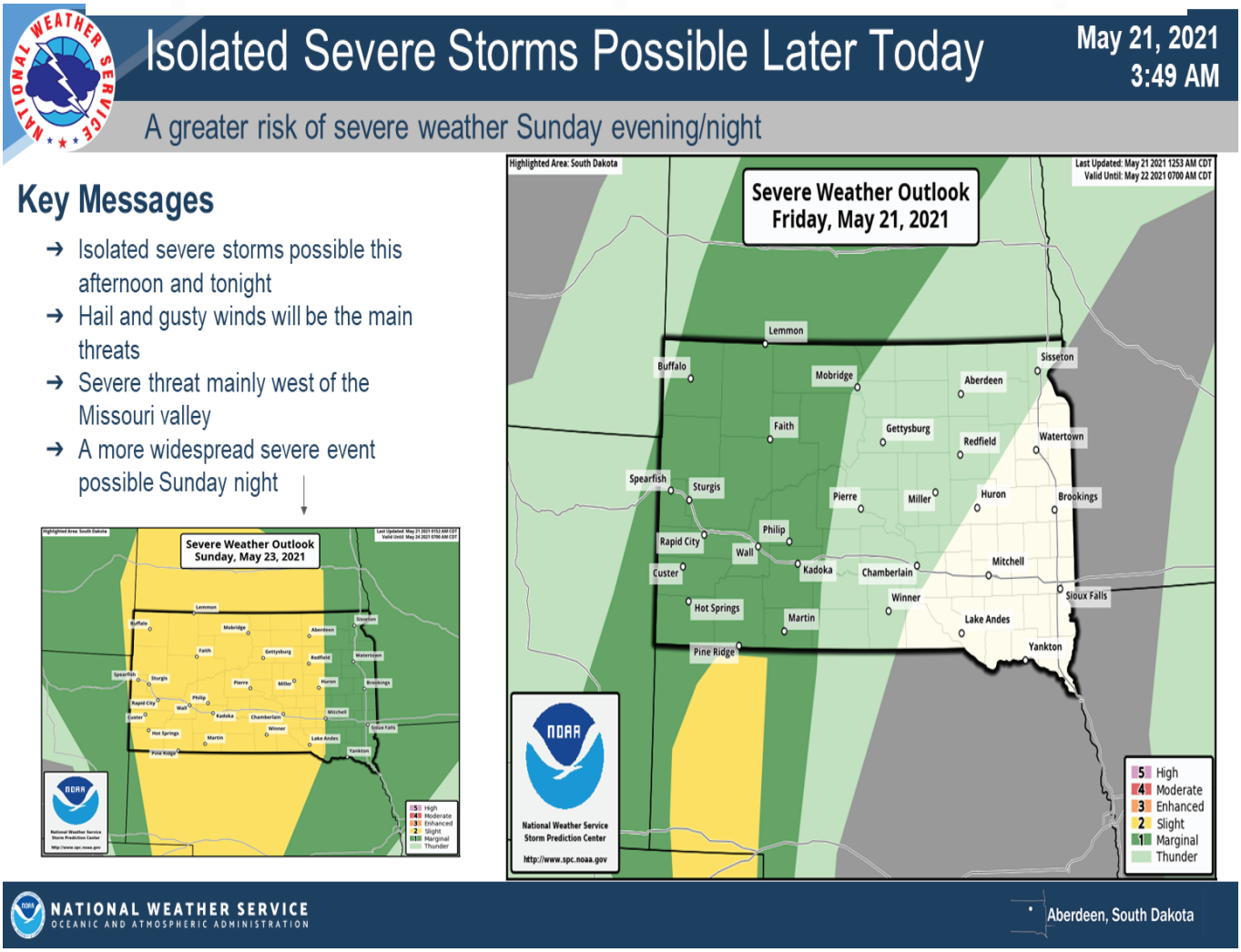

More showers and thunderstorms are expected today, with a marginal chance for severe this afternoon through tonight, mainly west of the Missouri River. A more widespread severe outbreak is expected Sunday afternoon/night. #sdwx #mnwx

Today in Weather History

May 21, 1977: Observers south of Clear Lake saw five tornadoes. One was five miles south of town moving northeast. Another was four miles south and one mile west of Clear Lake. Both destroyed trees and some small buildings. Three other tornadoes were sighted about two miles south of town. These touched down only momentarily with no damage occurring.

Two tornadoes were seen in southern Codington County. One was seen at Grover, and the other was five miles south of Watertown. No damage was reported.

A tornado was on the ground in the vicinity of Revillo. A few barns and some outbuilding were damaged.

May 21, 1992: A severe thunderstorm moved over Northwestern Edmunds County causing high winds and penny size hail. In Bowdle, there was considerable wind damage. Tree limbs more than five inches in diameter were broken off and fell on a car. Other tree branches went through the roof of a home. Two pickup trucks were rolled on their side. Three miles ENE of Bowdle a garage was moved 20 feet off its foundation and was stopped by a large tractor.

1881: Clara Barton and a circle of close friends found the American Red Cross. Click HERE for more information from the History Channel.

1949: A violent tornado crossed the Mississippi River from the St. Louis area into Wood River, then to Roxanna. This tornado damaged or destroyed 300 homes in these two towns, killing five people. Four people died in a destroyed restaurant in Palestine, Illinois; one body was recovered from a tree. A tornado causing estimated F4 damage killed five people and injured 55 in St. Louis and St. Charles counties in Missouri and Madison County in Illinois. This tornado was part of an outbreak that produced four different tornadoes and was responsible for five deaths and 57 injuries.

2001: Golfers participating in a golf tournament at the Majestic Golf Course in Hartland, Michigan received an urgent message on the G.P.S. on their carts. The message, relayed from the clubhouse, was that a tornado was bearing down on the course. Most of the golfers made it to safety in the clubhouse, although some had to take shelter on the course. Only one golfer suffered a minor injury. The F2 tornado damaged 70 cars in the parking lot along with numerous golf carts and a pontoon boat.

1860 - A swarm of tornadoes occurred in the Ohio Valley. Tornadoes struck the cities of Louisville, KY, Cincinnati, OH, Chillicothe, OH, and Marietta, OH, causing a million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1895 - The temperature at Norwalk, OH, dipped to 19 degrees to set a state record for the month of May. (The Weather Channel)

1896 - The mercury soared to 124 degrees at Salton, CA, to establish a U.S. record for May. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1980 - The temperature at Williston ND reached 102 degrees to set a record for May, and the next day the mercury hit 106 degrees. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Severe thunderstorms, developing along a sharp cold front crossing the central U.S., produced 60 mph winds and golf ball size hail at Sedalia, MO, and drenched Hagerstown, IN, with six inches of rain in one hour. Temperatures soared into the 90s ahead of the cold front. Paducah, KY, hit 94 degrees for the second day in a row. Light snow blanketed Montana, with three inches reported at Butte. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms swept across southern Louisiana during the morning hours spawning six tornadoes, and producing wind gusts to 88 mph at Jennings. Thunderstorms also produced five inches of rain in two hours at Lake Charles, causing local flooding. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms moving southeastward across the Central Plains Region into Oklahoma and Arkansas produced severe weather through the day and night. Thunderstorms spawned just four tornadoes, but there were 243 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Baseball size hail was reported at Augusta, KS, and thunderstorm winds gusted to 98 mph at Johnson, KS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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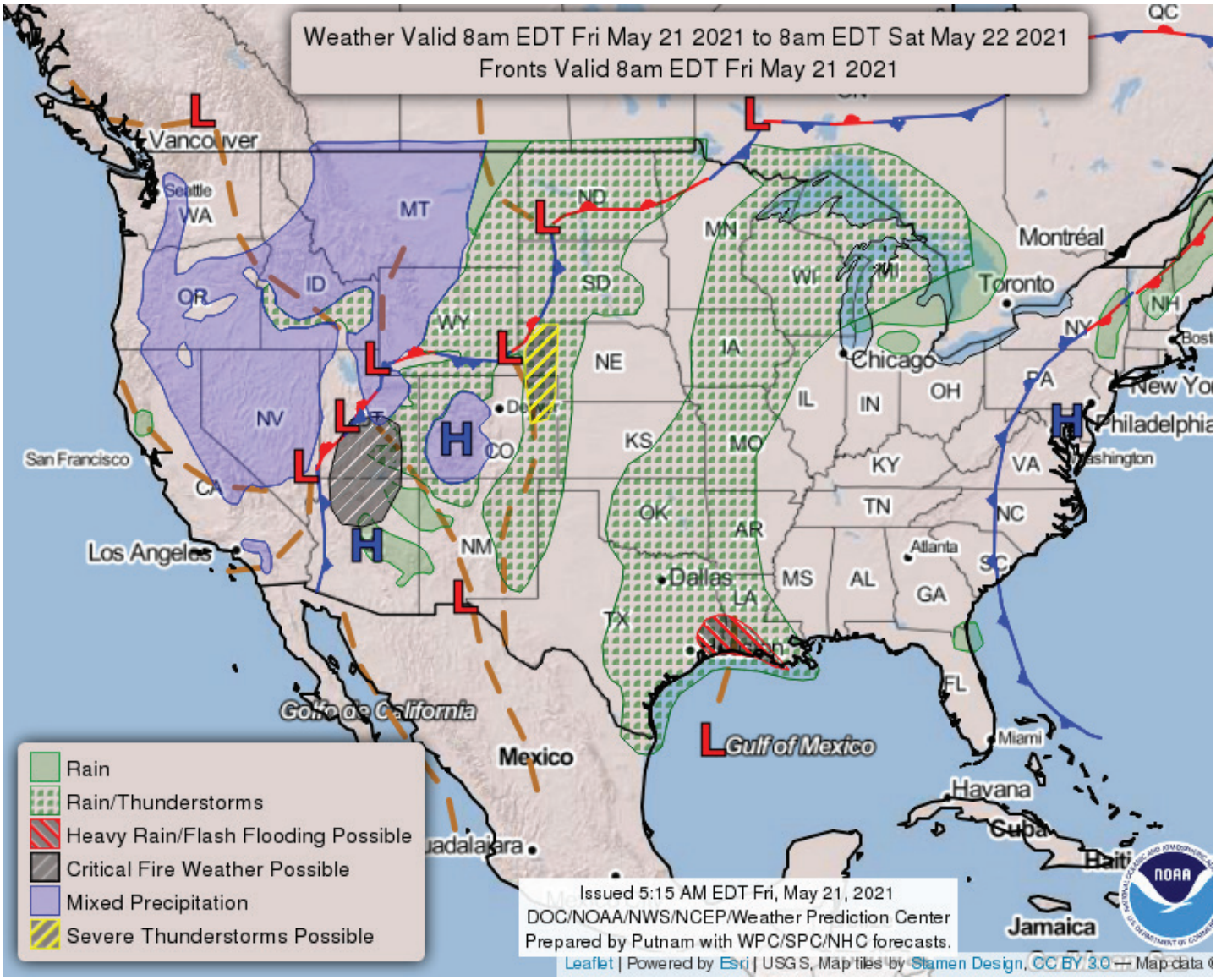
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 3:50 PM
Low Temp: 63 °F at 4:35 AM
Wind: 28 mph at 4:00 PM
Precip: .02

Today's Info

Record High: 94°in 1925
Record Low: 25° in 1895
Average High: 72°F
Average Low: 47°F
Average Precip in May.: 2.21
Precip to date in May.: 0.27
Average Precip to date: 6.18
Precip Year to Date: 3.04
Sunset Tonight: 9:05 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:56 a.m.



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WHAT DO I DO - WHERE DO I GO?

"I really need help. I do not even know how to explain it. Many people think my problems are insignificant and quite trivial. I can even understand that. I know some people that have been through so much more than me who have survived and have lived to tell their story. I really, really need help but don't know what to do or who to turn to." So went the story.

There are times in each of our lives, no doubt, when we have made similar statements or cried words that echoed the same desperate feelings. We were defeated by the demands of life and felt desperate and empty with no strength to go on. Our words were inadequate, our feelings unavailable to share our misery. And, if we were able to "get it out," would anyone understand our fears and frustrations? And if they did, would they extend a helping hand or offer a listening ear?

Sometimes we are threatened by people we vaguely know. We hear of their attacks through the warnings of others and for whatever reason they want to hurt us. Sometimes we know who our oppressors are yet can do nothing to eliminate the power they have over us.

David found himself in a similar situation. He looked around for help and deliverance and found no one ready to come to his rescue. But he knew that there was saving power in the name of God and cried out, "Surely God is my help; the Lord is the One Who sustains me."

Often God brings us to a place in our lives to force us to realize that He alone can save us!

Prayer: What peace it is to know, Father, that in the middle of our messy lives You are there and will never leave us or forsake us or let any enemy destroy us .Thank You for being our Savior. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me. Psalm 54:4

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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
06/12/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
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

South Dakota surpasses 2,000 deaths from COVID-19

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's pandemic death toll surpassed 2,000 on Thursday as health officials reported seven new deaths from COVID-19.

The state's 2,001 total deaths are the 8th-lowest among U.S. states, but the eighth highest in terms of deaths per capita, according to Johns Hopkins University researchers. However, the rate of deaths has slowed significantly since peaking late last year. Health officials said they expect both hospitalizations and deaths to continue to drop as the number of cases decreases with widespread vaccination against the virus.

"We are looking at seeing those decrease with our decrease in case counts," state epidemiologist Josh Clayton said last week.

Clayton has said there is a lag between when someone dies from COVID-19 and when their death is reported.

Health officials also reported 55 people who had tested positive for the virus. The number of new cases has declined steadily in recent weeks, according to the Department of Health.

However, the state continued to see severe cases of the virus, reporting that 57 people are currently in the hospital. That was an increase of four from Wednesday, when the state saw the fewest number of people in the hospital since August last year, the Argus Leader reported.

Bear sightings in the Black Hills on the increase

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Wildlife officials are urging caution as the number of black bear sightings have increased in the Black Hills.

Bears have been recently been sighted in Lead, Spearfish, Johnson Siding and last weekend in Rapid City.

"Right now, with the information we have, it is pointing towards multiple bears. How many that is exactly, we're not sure. Right now we are fairly confident that we do have more than one bear," said Mike Klosowski, regional supervisor for South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks.

The number of confirmed sightings has been increasing 10 to 15 times in recent years, officials said, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"Right now, Game, Fish & Parks are really focusing on tracking down sightings of bears, listening to where the public is seeing them, and then going out and seeing what sort of activity we have out there," Klosowski said.

If wildlife workers are to locate a black bear, Klosowski said they will sedate the animal, tag the bear's ear and complete a health and wellness screening.

"The tagging of the bear would allow us to see if it is the same bear being observed in multiple areas," Klosowski said. "If we happen to find a bear in a populated or urban area, we would also sedate it and relocate it to another area further away."

Although observing a black bear in populated areas might be exciting, Klosowski warns the public to stay away from the predator and watch from a safe distance.

Bankers survey for parts of 10 states hits new record high

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states is booming and would be soaring even higher if not for a regionwide labor shortage, according to a monthly survey of bankers released Thursday that hit a new record high just two months after setting the previous record.

The overall index of the Rural Mainstreet Survey for May reached 78.8 — nearly 7 points higher than the previous record of 71.9 set in March and 10 points above April's 69.0.

Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Strong grain prices, the Federal Reserve's record-low interest rates and growing exports have under-

pinned the regional economy's growth, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the monthly survey.

But the survey shows the booming rural economy is being restrained by labor shortages, he added. Nearly 9 of 10 bank CEOs surveyed said that difficulty hiring at their banks and businesses in their areas was holding back growth. Despite that, the survey's new hiring index climbed to 72.7 from 62.5 in April, based mostly on hiring the farm sector.

Bankers' optimism grew with the economy. The survey's confidence index came in at 78.8 from April's 72.4.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

Homicide, DUI charges filed in fatal pedestrian crash

REDFIELD, S.D. (AP) — An Iroquois driver has been charged in the death of an elderly pedestrian in Spink County.

Ninety-one-year-old Donna Karr was struck last Friday night in Redfield. Karr was pronounced dead at Community Memorial Hospital.

Fifty-eight-year-old Ronald Frankfurth is charged with vehicular homicide and third offense drunken driving, both felonies. Frankfurth's bond was set at $50,000. It wasn't immediately clear if Frankfurth has an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Details about the crash have not been released. It remains under investigation by the Spink County Sheriff's Office and the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

Palestinians see victory in Gaza truce as Israel warns Hamas

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinians rallied by the thousands early Friday after a cease-fire took effect in the latest Gaza war, with many viewing it as costly but clear victory for the Islamic militant group Hamas. Israel vowed to respond with a "new level of force" to any further hostilities.

The 11-day war left more than 200 dead — the vast majority Palestinians — and brought widespread devastation to the already impoverished Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. But the rocket barrages that brought life to a standstill in much of Israel were seen by many Palestinians as a bold response to perceived Israeli abuses in Jerusalem, the emotional heart of the conflict.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday warned against any further attacks, saying "if Hamas thinks we will tolerate a drizzle of rockets, it is wrong." He vowed to respond with "a new level of force" against any aggression anywhere in Israel.

The Israeli leader, who has faced criticism from his hawkish base for ending the offensive prematurely, said Israel had done "daring and new things, and this without being dragged into unnecessary adventures." He added that Israeli forces had caused "maximum damage to Hamas with a minimum of casualties in Israel."

Israeli strikes killed more than 200 militants, including 25 senior commanders, and hit more than 100 kilometers (60 miles) of militant tunnels, Netanyahu said.

The truce faced an early test when clashes broke out between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police following Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a flashpoint holy site in Jerusalem that is sacred to Jews and Muslims. It was unclear what sparked the violence.

Police fired stun grenades and tear gas, and Palestinians hurled rocks after hundreds had taken part in a celebratory demonstration in which they waved Palestinian and Hamas flags and cheered the militant group. Clashes between protesters and police at the site earlier this month were one of the main triggers for the war.

Thousands took to the streets of Gaza as the cease-fire took hold at 2 a.m. Young men waved Palestinian and Hamas flags, passed out sweets, honked horns and set off fireworks. Spontaneous celebrations also broke out in east Jerusalem and across the occupied West Bank.

An open-air market in Gaza City that was closed throughout the war reopened and shoppers could be

seen stocking up on fresh tomatoes, cabbage and watermelons. Workers in orange traffic vests swept up rubble from the surrounding roads.

"Life will return, because this is not the first war, and it will not be the last war," said shop owner Ashraf Abu Mohammad. "The heart is in pain, there have been disasters, families wiped from the civil registry, and this saddens us. But this is our fate in this land, to remain patient."

There was little to celebrate in the hard-hit northern town of Beit Hanoun, where residents, many of whom had lost loved ones, surveyed the wreckage of their homes.

"We see such huge destruction here, it's the first time in history we've seen this," said Azhar Nsair. "The cease-fire is for people who didn't suffer, who didn't lose their loved ones, whose homes were not bombed."

Like the three previous wars between the bitter enemies, the latest round of fighting ended inconclusively. Israel claimed to have inflicted heavy damage on Hamas with hundreds of bruising airstrikes but once again was unable to halt the rockets.

Hamas also claimed victory, despite the horrifying toll the war took on countless Palestinian families who lost loved ones, homes and businesses. It now faces the daunting challenge of rebuilding in a territory already suffering from high unemployment and a coronavirus outbreak.

At least 243 Palestinians were killed, including 66 children and 39 women, with 1,910 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not break the numbers down into fighters and civilians. Twelve people in Israel, including a 5-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl, were killed.

In Gaza, rescue workers were still recovering bodies from areas that had been too dangerous to enter. The Red Crescent emergency service said it recovered five bodies in the southern town of Khan Younis on Friday, including the body of a three-year-old child.

The fighting began on May 10, when Hamas militants in Gaza fired long-range rockets toward Jerusalem. The barrage came after days of clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police at Al-Aqsa. Heavy-handed police tactics at the compound, and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers had inflamed tensions.

The competing claims to Jerusalem lie at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and have repeatedly triggered bouts of violence in the past.

The cease-fire was brokered by neighboring Egypt after the U.S. pressed Israel to wind down the offensive. Netanyahu announced that Israel had accepted the proposal late Thursday, while emphasizing that "the reality on the ground will determine the future of the campaign."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to visit the region in the coming days "to discuss recovery efforts and working together to build better futures for Israelis and Palestinians." the State Department said.

Hamas and other militant groups fired over 4,000 rockets at Israel throughout the fighting, launching the projectiles from civilian areas at Israeli cities. Dozens of projectiles flew as far north as Tel Aviv, the country's bustling commercial capital.

Israel, meanwhile, carried out hundreds of airstrikes targeting what it said was Hamas' military infrastructure, including a vast tunnel network.

The United States, Israel's closest and most important ally, initially backed what it said was Israel's right to self-defense against indiscriminate rocket fire. But as the fighting dragged on and the death toll mounted, the Americans increasingly pressured Israel to stop the offensive.

Biden welcomed the cease-fire. He said the U.S. was committed to helping Israel replenish its supply of interceptor missiles and to working with the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority — not Hamas — to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Netanyahu faced heavy criticism from members of his hawkish, nationalist base. Gideon Saar, a former ally who now leads a small party opposed to the prime minister, called the cease-fire "embarrassing." Itamar Ben Gvir, head of the far-right Jewish Power party, tweeted that the cease-fire was "a grave surrender to terrorism and the dictates of Hamas."

In a potentially damaging development for the Israeli leader, the Palestinian militants claimed Netanyahu had agreed to halt further Israeli actions at the Al Aqsa Mosque and to call off the planned evictions of

Palestinians in the nearby Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

An Egyptian official said only that tensions in Jerusalem "will be addressed." He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing behind-the-scenes negotiations and provided no details.

Some 58,000 Palestinians sought shelter in crowded United Nations schools at a time of a coronavirus outbreak. Thousands returned to their homes as the truce took hold.

Since the fighting began, Gaza's infrastructure, already weakened by a 14-year blockade, has rapidly deteriorated, and airstrikes have damaged schools and health centers.

Medical supplies, water and fuel for electricity are running low in the territory, on which Israel and Egypt imposed the blockade after Hamas seized power from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Since then, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has governed autonomous areas of the Israeli-occupied West Bank and has limited influence in Gaza.

The Latest: UN: Gaza has significant trauma, medical needs

By The Associated Press undefined

GENEVA — The World Health Organization has tallied "significant trauma needs" in Palestinian areas, where at least 243 people have been killed during 11 days of fighting between Palestinians and Israelis.

WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris said a total of 8,538 people had been injured across Palestinian areas during the violence, and 30 health facilities in Gaza had been damaged -- with one clinic fully destroyed and another sustaining significant damage. She said damage to infrastructure was impeding the access of ambulances.

The comments to a U.N. briefing in Geneva came as humanitarian aid workers assessed the fallout from the latest fighting between Hamas militant fighters and Israeli forces.

Fabrizio Carboni, regional director for the Near and Middle East at the International Committee of the Red Cross, estimated there were "several hundred" pieces of unexploded ordnance strewn about in Gaza and said medical supplies were a pressing need.

Matthias Schmale, Gaza director for UNRWA, the U.N. aid agency for Palestinian refugees, cited a "window" of several hours on Friday during which aid and supplies could be brought in through the Kerem Shalom crossing point into Gaza. Speaking by video from Gaza City, he noted that a central laboratory that carries out testing for COVID-19 had been "made dysfunctional by a massive bomb explosion."

Alluding to a cease-fire that took effect overnight, he said it "feels like a fragile cease fire" and lamented the "unbearable and unacceptable cost this has had for the civilian population. And I know that applies to people in Israel, too."

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TEHRAN — Iran's Revolutionary Guard has unveiled a new drone named "Gaza," amid heightened tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, the country's state TV reported Friday.

The report said the wide-body drone has a 35-hour flight duration and is capable of carrying 13 bombs more than 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles).

TV also said in addition to military surveillance, combat, reconnaissance missions, the Gaza drone can monitor forests, help rescue operations and providing assistance in natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes.

Gen. Hossein Salami, chief of the powerful Revolutionary Guard, said during the unveiling ceremony that "we called it Gaza so that God willing it can be an eternal honor for those who are resisting the Zionist invasion."

Iran does not recognize Israel and supports anti-Israeli militant groups like Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese's Hezbollah.

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ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey has welcomed the cease-fire in Gaza but is also calling for a two-state solution to ensure a permanent end to the conflict.

A Turkish Foreign Ministry statement on Friday said Turkey expects the international community, and

especially the U.N. Security Council, "to act in order to bring a complete end to the persecution" of Palestinians.

The ministry said: "In order to prevent the recurrence of the pain and tears in Palestine, it is necessary to ensure that Israel is made accountable internationally for its crimes and lifts the inhumane blockade imposed on Gaza."

The statement also called for an end to the "Israeli occupation" of Palestinian territories in order to achieve a lasting, fair and comprehensive solution, and added that Turkey would continue to support the Palestinians' "just cause."

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JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned Gaza's militant Hamas rulers against any further rocket attacks following a cease-fire.

In a speech hours after the truce took effect on Friday, he said, "if Hamas thinks we will tolerate a drizzle of rockets, it is wrong." He vowed to respond with "a new level of force against any expression of aggression against communities around Gaza and any other part of Israel."

Israel and Hamas fought an 11-day war, their fourth since the Islamic militant group seized power in Gaza from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

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COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Norway's foreign minister says her country is "very concerned" about the high casualty rates in Gaza, the suffering of the civilian population and the "great devastation."

Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soereide made the comments as her country announced stepping up humanitarian aid to Gaza by 30 million kroner ($3.6 million).

That comes on top of 71 million kroner ($8.5 million) in humanitarian aid to the Palestinians that the Scandinavian country has given so far in 2021. The money will be channeled through the United Nations and humanitarian organizations.

In a separate statement, Jan Egeland, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, said "now that the guns have finally gone silent, let us not mistake this calm for normality."

Egeland said that leaders in the U.S., Europe and the Arab world should "push Israel and the Palestinians to work out a way that will end this unsustainable injustice."

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BEIJING — China says it will offer cash and 200,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Palestinians caught up in the latest fighting in Gaza.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian on Friday told reporters that $1 million would be provided as emergency humanitarian assistance and another $1 million would go to UNRWA, the U.N. agency that provides vital assistance to the 75% of the enclave's population who are refugees.

China will "continue to provide humanitarian support within its capacity and actively participate in the reconstruction of Gaza according to the needs of the Palestinian side," Zhao said at a daily briefing.

The fighting has brought Gaza's health care system to the brink of collapse and its COVID-19 vaccination drive, already slow, has stopped, according to WHO's top official in Gaza, Sacha Bootsma. China has become a major exporter and donor of COVID-19 vaccines, taking a leading role in what some have termed "vaccine diplomacy."

China is a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause but also maintains robust ties with Israel.

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ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's foreign minister has welcomed a cease-fire between Israel and the Hamas-militant group that rules Gaza.

According to a Foreign Ministry statement, Shah Mahmood Qureshi said he hoped latest the cease-fire announcement could help revive efforts for a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian issue.

Qureshi's comments came Friday as Pakistanis across the country began gathering for anti-Israel rallies to express solidarity with Palestinians.

Pakistan is among few countries that do not have diplomatic ties with Israel.

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BRUSSELS — The European Union's top diplomat is welcoming the Gaza cease-fire, but he says only a revival of long-term peace talks can ensure that such fighting does not flare up again in the future.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Friday in a statement that "we commend Egypt, Qatar, United Nations, United States and others who have played a facilitating role in this."

Borrell says "the situation in the Gaza Strip has long been unsustainable. Only a political solution will bring sustainable peace and end once for all the Palestinian-Israeli conflict."

He says that "restoring a political horizon towards a two-state solution now remains of utmost importance" and that the EU stands ready to help both sides achieve that.

The EU's support for a two-state solution is long-standing, but the 27-nation bloc is divided over how to handle relations with Israel and the Palestinians. On Tuesday, Hungary blocked the publication of a joint statement on the conflict.

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PARIS — The French minister of foreign affairs is praising the Gaza cease-fire as the outcome of diplomatic efforts involving Europeans, the United States and several Arab countries.

In a statement, Jean-Yves Le Drian praised the "fundamental role" of Egypt in the talks that led to that result. He said the cessation of hostilities was the "absolute priority" to protect civilian populations and avoid an extension of the conflict.

The statement said France seeks to play a role in reviving peace talks between Israel and Palestinian authorities, and wants to see humanitarian aid resume to the region, particularly to Gaza.

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GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Palestinians rallied by the thousands early Friday after a cease-fire took effect in the latest Gaza war, with many viewing it as costly but clear victory for the Islamic militant group Hamas over a far more powerful Israel.

Thousands took to the streets of Gaza as the cease-fire took hold at 2 a.m. Young men waved Palestinian and Hamas flags, passed out sweets, honked horns and set off fireworks. Spontaneous celebrations also broke out in east Jerusalem and across the occupied West Bank.

The 11-day war left more than 200 dead — the vast majority Palestinians — and brought widespread devastation to the already impoverished Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

But the rocket barrages that brought life to a standstill in much of Israel were seen by many Palestinians as a bold response to perceived Israeli abuses in Jerusalem, the emotional heart of the conflict.

As pandemic spread pain and panic, congressman chased profit

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the early days of the pandemic, New Jersey Rep. Tom Malinowski scolded those looking to capitalize on the once-in-a-century health crisis.

"This is not the time for anybody to be profiting off of selling ventilators, vaccines, drugs, treatments, PPE (personal protective equipment), anywhere in the world," the two-term Democrat and former assistant secretary of state told MSNBC in April 2020.

He did not heed his own admonition.

Since early 2020, Malinowski has bought or sold as much as $1 million of stock in medical and tech companies that had a stake in the virus response, according to an analysis of records by The Associated Press. The trades were just one slice of a stock buying and selling spree by the congressman during that time, worth as much as $3.2 million, that he did not properly disclose.

The issue of congressional stock trading took on a new urgency last year when at least three senators were the subject of inquiries about whether they made financial decisions based on insider information. Though no one was charged, their dealings stirred outrage and highlighted the limitations of the Stock Act, a 2012 law intended to curtail stock market speculation by lawmakers.

Malinowski's trades received little attention at the time. Yet his subsequent failure to report his trading

activity to Congress as required by law, which was first reported by Business Insider, have made him the latest to face scrutiny, with two complaints filed against him with the Office of Congressional Ethics.

When millions were out of work and markets were hemorrhaging, Malinowski snapped up securities at bargain prices — profiting when valuations recovered. In other cases, he sold shares before they fell substantially, according to the AP's analysis of a list of trades that his office said he made in 2020.

He also engaged in the controversial practice of short-selling stocks, placing bets that the values of specific businesses would decline at a time when many companies were pleading with the government for a financial lifeline.

"It boggles my mind why he's doing it," said Richard Painter, a University of Minnesota law professor who served as President George W. Bush's ethics attorney and later ran for Senate as a Democrat. "It's a huge conflict of interest and not an acceptable situation."

There is no indication Malinowski acted on inside information to make his investment decisions. Still, it's difficult to assess the full scope of his financial activity. Nearly six months after 2020 drew to a close, mandatory reports to Congress detailing his trades have not been made public.

In an interview Thursday, Malinowski said his failure to file was "a mistake that I own 100%." He said the reports, some of which were due over a year ago, have been submitted though not released by the congressional ethics office, which did not respond to a request for comment.

Malinowski said his broker handles all of his trading decisions and he does not speak to the firm about specific transactions. His office provided a statement from the firm, Gagnon Securities, stating that it made trades "without Congressman Malinowski's input or prior knowledge."

"At no point in the last 25 years have I directed, suggested, or even asked questions about a particular trade being made by my brokerage firm," Malinowski said. He said the one exception was a request to sell stock that he was obligated to get rid of after joining President Barack Obama's State Department in 2014.

He also said he was in the process of setting up a blind trust to hold his financial portfolio, which he will have no control over. He said other members of Congress should do the same.

Painter noted that Malinowski had ultimate control over his account when the trades were made, a fact the congressman acknowledged.

"Of course he is going to say his broker makes all the decisions," Painter said.

The Stock Act, which proponents initially said would end stock speculation among members of Congress, passed with bipartisan support in 2012 in the wake of a stock trading scandal.

The law bars members from using inside information to make investment decisions and requires that all stock trades be reported to Congress within 45 days. Yet in the nearly 10 years since it was enacted, no one has been prosecuted under it even as many members continue to conspicuously trade.

"I thought no congressman or senator would want to get caught in that sort of controversy, even if it just had the appearance of insider trading," said Craig Holman, a lobbyist for the Washington-based government watchdog group Public Citizen. "But clearly there's still a significant number of members of Congress who still want to abuse their access to insider knowledge."

Trades by Malinowski follow a familiar, albeit less overt pattern when compared with others who have drawn scrutiny.

In March 2020, he bought between $190,000 and $625,000 worth of stock as the virus drove a market collapse, records show.

Some of the companies he invested in were developing COVID-19 testing or therapeutics to combat illnesses caused by the disease. Last June, he bought between $1,001 and $15,000 worth of shares of TFF Pharmaceuticals, which is developing an antibody treatment. They have nearly doubled in value since.

In November, he sold between $15,001 and $50,000 worth of stock in drug maker Merck, which he had not previously disclosed owning. The company's value tumbled two months later after it announced it would end its efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine.

In at least one case Malinowski benefited from exceptional timing.

In February 2020, days after members of Congress were briefed on the virus, records show Malinowski

sold between $1,001 and $15,000 shares in Kimco Realty, a company that owns shopping centers across the U.S. A month later, when the company's share price dropped nearly 50%, he bought back far more stock in the company, worth somewhere between $15,001 and $50,000. They've increased in value by 50% since.

"I don't think it would be possible for any investor in the market to instruct their broker not to take into account the most important thing happening in the economy," Malinowski said of the pandemic.

But it is Malinowski's short selling of stocks that government watchdogs find particularly troubling.

"A shorting congressman? It's just nuts," said Painter, the ethics lawyer.

A short sale is a stock transaction where an investor borrows shares in a company and sells them in hopes of buying them back later at a lower price and pocketing the difference. It's a practice that during the pandemic has come under criticism from some economists and academic experts because it has the potential to throttle existing market anxiety, drive rumors and lead to irrational buying decisions that could harm otherwise solid companies.

Xu Jiang, a Duke University business school professor, said members of Congress face a "moral responsibility" during such times.

"There is merit to banning short selling during a crisis period," said Xu Jiang. "It can drive rumors and take down viable firms."

Malinowski has been a prolific short seller throughout his time in Congress. It's unclear whether he short sold in 2020 because the list of stock transactions released by his office is incomplete. But a recent disclosure reveals he short sold between $62,000 and $230,000 worth of stock in at least six companies in 2021.

"It is part of how investment on the stock market works in our capitalist system," Malinowski said, later adding, "I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with Americans engaging in these kinds of normal investment activities."

Whether Malinowski's trading will pose a liability with voters will be tested as he campaigns for a third term and Democrats are on defense trying to hold their narrow House majority.

Republican Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, of Georgia, both lost their runoff bids for the Senate in January after their own stock trades became a major campaign issue, handing control of the chamber to Democrats. Both were investigated by the Justice Department, but ultimately cleared.

Perdue had dumped between $1 million and $5 million worth of stock in a company where he was formerly a board member. After markets crashed, he bought it back and earned a windfall after its price skyrocketed.

Loeffler and her husband, the CEO and chairman of the parent company of the New York Stock Exchange, dumped millions of dollars in stock following a briefing on the virus.

Republican Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina drew perhaps the most scrutiny for his trades. He stepped aside as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman after the FBI obtained a search warrant to seize a cellphone.

Burr and his wife sold between $600,000 and $1.7 million in more than 30 transactions in late January and mid-February, just before the market began to dive and government health officials began to sound alarms about the virus. Burr was captured in a recording privately warning a group of influential constituents in early 2020 to prepare for economic devastation.

The Justice Department investigated Burr's actions, but cleared him of wrongdoing.

Despite the spate of cases, congressional leaders have shown little appetite for strengthening stock trading rules. Yet the temptation to use insider information remains.

"We are constantly apprised, before the public has the information, about what specific provisions might benefit particular entities," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who sponsored a bill that would ban lawmakers from stock trading. "What you saw during COVID was one of the most horrific examples."

It's not the first time Malinowski has run afoul of government trading rules.

As an assistant secretary of state during the Obama administration, he agreed to sell shares held in CNinsure Inc. following his 2014 confirmation to the post. In a letter to a State Department ethics lawyer, he acknowledged that the investment in the Chinese insurance company, now known as Fanhua Inc.,

posed a "heightened prospect of a conflict of interest" given his work, which dealt heavily with human rights abuses, including those by China.

Yet the stock remained in his portfolio for over a year, well beyond a 90-day window to sell that he agreed to, records show. He sold it for more than he initially reported it to be worth, collecting somewhere between $15,001 and $50,000 in June 2015, following a period in which the stock's value was held down following allegations of fraud made against the company.

Malinowksi said he instructed his broker to sell the shares earlier, but it failed to do so. They were sold after he sent an June 2015 email inquiring about them.

"As we discussed last year, I can't hold Chinese stocks (or any stocks from countries that might pose conflicts with my State Department job, which, to be safe, would include any country outside Europe/Canada). Could you make sure this is sold?" he said, according to an email provided by his office.

Some members of Congress, acknowledging the shortcomings of the Stock Act, are proposing a bipartisan bill that would require lawmakers to place assets like stock in a blind trust.

"I don't know that you should be buying and selling stock when the people we represent are facing what will invariably be the most horrific and challenging years of their lives," said Rep. Abigail Spanberger, a Democrat from Virginia who is co-sponsoring the bill with Republican Rep. Chip Roy of Texas. "If you are not willing to make certain sacrifices to be in public service, then perhaps there might be a different job that's best for you."

BBC faces questions of integrity after Princess Diana report

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The BBC, seen as a respected source of news and information around the world, is facing questions about its integrity at home after a scathing report on its explosive 1995 interview with Princess Diana.

Britain's justice secretary said Friday that the government would review the rules governing oversight of the BBC after an investigation found that one of its journalists used "deceitful behavior" to secure the interview and the corporation obscured this misconduct for 25 years.

Princes William and Harry, Diana's sons, late Thursday excoriated the BBC, saying there was a direct link between the interview and their mother's death in a traffic accident two years later as she and a companion were being pursued by paparazzi.

The interview came under renewed scrutiny after Diana's brother, Charles Spencer, complained that journalist Martin Bashir used false documents and other dishonest tactics to persuade Diana to grant the interview. As a result, the BBC commissioned an investigation by retired Judge John Dyson, who released a 126-page report on his findings Thursday.

"It wasn't just the decision of a reporter or a production team, there were decisions made much further up the chain about the conduct of these individuals that have now proved, according to Lord Dyson, to be unfounded and wrong," Justice Secretary Robert Buckland told the BBC. "And therefore, government does have a responsibility to look very carefully to see whether the governance of the BBC does need reform in the light of these devastating findings."

The BBC, founded in 1922, is Britain's publicly funded but editorially independent national broadcaster. The rules governing its operations are set out in a royal charter that requires the corporation to be impartial, act in the public interest and be open, transparent and accountable. A mid-term review of the BBC's governance is scheduled to begin next year.

Even before the Dyson report, the BBC was under pressure from some members of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party, who complain that the broadcaster has a liberal bias.

London's police force, which in March ruled out a criminal investigation into allegations about the BBC interview, said Friday it would review the Dyson report "to ensure there is no significant new evidence."

In the interview, a major scoop for Bashir, Diana famously said that "there were three of us in this mar-

riage" — referring to Prince Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles.

Her candid account of her failing marriage to Charles was watched by millions of people and sent shockwaves through the monarchy.

Prince William, 38, said the interview had created a "false narrative" about Diana that should be corrected by the BBC and news organizations.

"It is my view that the deceitful way that the interview was obtained substantially influenced what my mother said," he said in a broadcast statement. "The interview was a major contribution to making my parents' relationship worse and has since hurt countless others."

William also criticized the BBC's "woeful incompetence" in investigating complaints about the program.

"What saddens me most is that if the BBC had properly investigated the complaints and concerns first raised in 1995, my mother would have known that she had been deceived," he said. "She was failed not just by a rogue reporter but by leaders at the BBC who looked the other way rather than asking the tough questions."

White House, GOP infrastructure talks reaching key stage

By LISA MASCARO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Negotiations between the White House and Republican senators over President Joe Biden's $2.3 trillion infrastructure plan are reaching a crucial stage before more talks Friday after the latest offer from GOP lawmakers left some dismay in the administration that there wasn't more movement from their initial $568 billion proposal.

Republicans did increase their plan and have worked in good faith with the White House, according to a Republican who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private talks.

But the slog of those negotiations is certain to mean new worries from Democrats that time is slipping to strike a compromise. The president's team had set a soft Memorial Day deadline to determine whether a deal was within reach.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said "productive conversations" are underway on Capitol Hill.

The White House team, including senior advisor Steve Ricchetti and head of legislative affairs Louisa Terrell, was expected to resume talks with the senators Friday. "We're looking forward to constructive conversations," Psaki said.

Securing a vast infrastructure plan is Biden's top priority as he seeks to make good on his campaign pledge to "build back better" in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis and the economic churn from a shifting economy. With narrow Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, the president is reaching out to Republicans for support on a potentially bipartisan approach rather than relying simply on his own party to muscle the proposal to passage. But Republicans are refusing Biden's idea of a corporate tax increase to pay for the package.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday on Fox News that higher taxes on corporations or the wealthiest Americans are nonstarters. Republicans are unwilling to undo the 2017 tax cuts, the party's signature domestic accomplishment under President Donald Trump. They reduced the corporate rate from 35% to 21%. Biden proposes lifting the corporate tax to 28%.

"If they're willing to settle on target a infrastructure bill without revisiting the 2017 tax bill we'll work with them," McConnell told Fox's Larry Kudlow, a former Trump adviser. But McConnell, R-Ky., said a package topping $2 trillion or more "is not going to have any Republican support."

The administration and the GOP senators have been in talks ever since Biden met with a core group of Republican negotiators last week over the possibility of working together on a plan. The White House dispatched the transportation and commerce secretaries and top aides to Capitol Hill to meet with the Republicans late Tuesday after the president asked the senators to provide more details on their initial offer.

The lead Republican negotiator, Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, was encouraged by the talks and expected the White House to be back in touch by week's end, her office said.

But there was "not a significantly changed offer" from the Republicans during their meeting with the

administration this week, according to a person who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private negotiations.

The White House's hopes for a bipartisan deal on infrastructure have cooled but they have not abandoned the effort, according to an administration official, who was not authorized to publicly discuss about the private conversations and spoke on condition of anonymity. There was some dismay that the Republican counteroffer did not substantially budge from the party's original $568 billion proposal, leaving it far short of the White House's plan, according to the official.

Biden has reveled in the face-to-face negotiations, aides said, and has expressed hope to bring Republicans along. West Wing officials have been hearted by the public comments made by some of the GOP negotiating team, including Capito, the official said.

But the outward talks of progress have not translated into the two sides getting much closer to a deal. Beyond the significant gap in the two sides' visions for the size of the package, there has been little discussion of how to reach an agreement on how to pay for it.

One GOP senator in the talks suggested tapping unspent funds from the massive COVID-19 aid package to help pay for the infrastructure investment. Other funds could be tapped from uncollected tax revenues or public-private partnerships.

One strategy that had gained momentum would be for Biden to negotiate a more limited, traditional infrastructure bill of roads, highways, bridges and broadband as a bipartisan effort. Then, Democrats could try to muscle through the remainder of Biden's priorities on climate investments and the so-called human infrastructure of child care, education and hospitals on their own.

But, administration aides believe, if such an "infrastructure only" bipartisan deal is far smaller than Biden's original proposal, the White House risks a rebellion from Democrats who could claim that the president made a bad deal and missed the moment to pass a sweeping, transformational package.

From Gaza to Chile, Biennale asks how we will live together

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

VENICE, Italy (AP) — In the time it has taken to prepare for the Venice Biennale, violence in the Middle East has overtaken a Palestinian family farm in Gaza featured in one of the exhibits. It gives real-time urgency to the question posed by the Biennale curator: "How will we live together?"

The 17th International Architecture Exhibition opens Saturday after a one-year pandemic delay, during which time architecture has emerged as one of the key disciplines in the global coronavirus response.

One exhibit "Border Ecologies and the Gaza Strip," looks at how Israeli control of the border impacts the Qudaih family farm in the Gaza village of Khuza'a. It recounts, for example, that 20 of the Qudaih family's olive trees were bulldozed to create a buffer zone, and a greenhouse necessary to grow tomatoes has been repeatedly destroyed.

Since 2014, the village had been "more or less" quiet, said curator Malkit Shoshan.

But as she prepared for the Biennale opening, violence erupted anew. The farm, near the border fence, has been destroyed by bombs and the family is sheltering in their home, which has been damaged by shells, about a mile away, said one of the sons, Amir Qudaih, who lives in the United States and who helped put the exhibit together.

Qudaih, a 27-year-old recent engineering graduate, was supposed to be in Venice for the opening. But he said he is too anguished by the bombing and uncertainty over his family's safety to travel. Communications are spotty due to interruptions in electricity and the internet, and his last contact was earlier in the week.

"My family cannot access the farm anymore because it is very close to the border and no one can leave the house. They are running out of the food," which mostly comes from the farm, Qudaih said by phone. "Every time I text them or call them, it could be the last call because things are happening 24/7 there. It is very stressful."

Not every exhibit in Biennale carries the same immediacy, but the issues driving it are fundamental to shared existence, also with other species.

The event curated by Hashim Sarkis also examines how architecture can address other global issues, ones that helped him formulate the title question well before the pandemic: climate change, political polarization, increasing inequalities and population displacement.

Exhibits look at how climate change and an international presence is affecting Antarctica; illustrate how global warming endangers sea life and how rising seas may be left as hollow spaces without life; and trace the architecture of man-made infrastructure on the outside of a globe, while making a more utopian proposal on the inside of how it might look under a regime of strategic preservation.

The strongest lens for this Biennale, though, is the pandemic.

"More than ever before, architecture is present in our lives, and in our thinking," said Sarkis, a Lebanese architect who is the dean of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's architecture and planning school. "We are now able to measure with our eyes what a meter is, what two meters are. That is a new skill everyone has had to acquire."

Some architectural responses to the pandemic have already emerged in everyday life: Zoom meetings have replaced conference rooms, giving new importance to virtual architecture, restaurant tables have taken over sidewalks, parking spots and traffic islands while public and private spaces from train stations to art galleries are being repurposed as vaccine centers. People are more aware of the impact of ventilation systems, and everyone has become an interior decorator, Sarkis noted.

Even the new rituals on public behavior that have emerged during the pandemic, and are part of Biennale protocols, signal a paradigm shift that emphasizes architecture: Visitors must maintain social distancing, have their temperatures checked and wear masks.

Some 112 architects from 46 countries are participating in the main show curated by Sarkis, while 61 countries have organized national pavilions. Some projects had to be rescaled, due to pandemic complications on shipping, with some architects sending plans for Italian artisans to construct projects out of locally sourced materials.

Due to rolling travel restrictions around the globe, a handful of pavilions will open late and the arrival of some participants and jury members has been delayed. Sarkis decided, as a result, to delay the awarding of prizes, which usually happens on opening weekend, until August. The Biennale runs until Nov. 21.

After a year when public assembly has been mostly outright banned, the idea of presence is key in several exhibits.

The Canadian pavilion is covered with a green textile, and visitors can download a smart phone application that uses CGI technology to transform the pavilion into the backdrop of a film that used a Canadian city as a stand-in for other places, from Tokyo to Moscow or Paris. The opening backdrop scene is from the "The Handmaid's Tale."

Germany facilitates virtual visits to its pavilion, which is empty apart from some QR codes on the interior walls, putting virtual users on the same footing as physical visitors. Both wander the virtual pavilion with avatars that can interact and even speak with each other.

The Venice Biennale also is seen as a neutral place that creates space for dialogue.

Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, who curated the 2016 event, has created a space where he hopes Chileans and the Mapuche indigenous people can meet to discuss age-old disputes over land.

The architecture created by his Elemental studio meets criteria stipulated by Mapuche tradition: that it be circular with an eastward orientation, and made of wood placed vertically. Aravena said the Mapuche accepted the design.

Aravena's team took wooden piles of the sort used to support Venetian palaces and criss-crossed them in a circular pattern to create an interior courtyard.

It has been built on the side of a canal inside the Arsenale, the spiked tops of its piles visible from a distance, with the hopes that both Mapuche and Chileans could travel to Venice and hold a parley, or traditional negotiation. But COVID has made that uncertain.

"It is not clear if they will come at some point during the Biennale. If not, this thing is traveling back to Chile in any case," Aravena said.

If all goes well, this could be one concrete legacy to the question: "How will we live together?"

Cooks, nurses guard inmates with US prisons down 6K officers

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

Nearly one-third of federal correctional officer jobs in the United States are vacant, forcing prisons to use cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard inmates.

At a federal penitentiary in Texas, prisoners are locked in their cells on weekends because there are not enough guards to watch them. Elsewhere in the system, fights are breaking out, several inmates have escaped in recent months and, in Illinois, at one of the most understaffed prisons in the country, five inmates have died in homicides or suicides since March 2020.

The Justice Department budgeted for 20,446 full-time correctional officer positions in 2020, but the agency that runs federal prisons said it currently employs 13,762 officers. The Bureau of Prisons insists that many of its facilities still have a full complement of officers who focus solely on maintaining order.

Decisions to use other staff as guards are based on a facility's needs and are made to ensure critical positions are covered, the agency said. Staff members also may be pressed into duty as correctional officers "during irregular periods such as a pandemic," the agency told The Associated Press.

For years, the Bureau of Prisons has been plagued by systematic failures, from chronic violence to high-profile deaths. But the staffing crisis is reaching a breaking point, and the pandemic hasn't helped. Nearly 7,000 employees were sickened with COVID-19. Officers were sent to hospitals to guard inmates being treated for the virus. Four staff members and 235 inmates died.

Overworked employees are burning out quickly and violent encounters are being reported on a near-daily basis. At a prison in Illinois, there are so few staff that officers are sometimes forced to work 60 hours of overtime in a week. At a facility in California, a fight broke out among inmates soon after a teacher was sent to fill in as an officer.

The expanded use of that practice, known as augmentation, is raising questions about whether the agency can carry out its required duties to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff members while also putting in place programs and classes such as those under the First Step Act, a criminal justice overhaul that received wide bipartisan support in Congress.

"You can't do programming, you can't have safety, you can't have a lot of things that make prisons operate without proper staffing," said Kevin Ring, the president of the advocacy group Families Against Mandatory Minimums.

The bureau insists everyone working at its facilities is a trained, sworn correctional worker, regardless of position or job title. All 35,000 employees are told when they are hired that they should expect to perform law enforcement functions, the agency said, even if they are signing on as counselors or teachers.

But pulling employees away from other duties up to twice a week means they have less time to do their regular jobs such as teaching classes, reviewing release paperwork and providing vital inmate services.

"When they augment you, you're not doing your job that you're hired for," said Jonathan Zumkehr, the union president at the federal penitentiary in Thomson. "If you're a counselor, you're not able to counsel the inmates. If you're a case manager, you're not able to do the First Step Act. Those are two days that you're not going to get back."

The issue came up when wealth financier Jeffrey Epstein took his own life while in one of the most secure jails in the country, the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York. One of the two prison workers assigned to guard Epstein the night he killed himself was a warehouse worker who was augmented to work as a correctional officer. Both were working overtime because of staffing shortages.

Union officials have raised the alarm about staffing problems, even holding a rally this week outside a medium-security prison in Mendota, California. But federal efforts to attract more workers with 25% recruitment bonuses have, so far, barely made a dent. Starting salary is just under $43,500, with some promises of making up to $62,615. But that's much less than what even some other federal agencies are offering, not to mention competition from police departments, state prisons, oil refineries, factories and

warehouses.

"We're tired of the agency putting a price tag on our lives," said Aaron McGlothin, the union president at FCI Mendota in California. "We've had staff members killed in the line of duty. We've had staff members injured in the line of duty. At what point do they realize they've got a problem to fix, and quit putting a Band-Aid over it?"

The bureau says it hired nearly 4,000 new staff members in 2020 — more than in prior years — and that more than 500 additional hires are on the way. The agency said it is offering retention incentives for hard-to-fill positions and to keep around employees who are eligible to retire, and holding recruiting events regularly.

The situation could become even more dire as federal prisons brace for an influx of inmates. Right now there are 152,376 prisoners in 122 facilities.

The Bureau of Prisons is ending contracts with private lockups — the Mendota prison was set to receive 400 inmates from a for-profit facility in Texas — and is likely to seek the return of nearly 5,000 people who were released on home confinement during the pandemic.

At the high-security penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois, where several inmates have been killed or killed themselves in recent months, about 20 nonofficer workers are augmented each day and officers are forced to work overtime in 16-hour days that sometimes add up to 60 hours or more of overtime per week.

Last week, the agency suddenly recalled correctional officers who had been temporarily reassigned to help out at some of the system's most understaffed facilities. Bureau officials said those employees were sent to "locations experiencing staff shortages, for training purposes, and to provide additional security as needed" and the jobs were never meant to be permanent.

People familiar with the matter said the decision to recall the staffers was driven by cost-cutting and came after a blistering internal financial review. The people were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Bureau of Prisons would not say how much money was spent on augmentation in the past few years. Records reviewed by the AP show skyrocketing costs from both augmentation and overtime. At the federal prison in Beaumont Texas, officials spent $8.1 million on overtime last year. The overall agency annual budget is close to $7.8 billion.

The bureau said it must rely on overtime and reassigning other staff members "when an insufficient number of correctional officers are available to cover an institution's critical custody posts."

"This is not a new practice," the agency said in a statement. "It is important to note that staff assigned to our institutions are professional law enforcement officers first, regardless of their occupation. All staff are trained accordingly and are expected to perform law enforcement functions during routine and non-routine situations."

But correctional officers say there's a difference between patrolling the same cell blocks each day — keeping skills and senses up — and moonlighting there periodically.

The staffing situation in Beaumont is so severe that prison officials have turned to just locking inmates in their cells on weekends because officials do not have enough officers to guard the prisoners. Visiting at the prison has been suspended until further notice.

On the sidelines, Hezbollah looms large over Gaza battle

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Ever since their last war in 2006, Israel and Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia have constantly warned that a new round between them is inevitable. Yet once again, a potential trigger has gone unpulled.

Hezbollah's shadow loomed large during Israel and Hamas' two-week battle, with the possibility it could unleash its arsenal of missiles - far more powerful than Hamas' - in support of the Palestinians.

Instead, Hezbollah stayed on the sidelines. And if a ceasefire that took effect early Friday holds, another Israel-Hamas war will have ended without Hezbollah intervention.

For now, both sides had compelling reasons not to clash, including - for Hezbollah - the bitter memory of Israel's punishing 2006 bombing campaign that turned its strongholds in Lebanon to rubble. Lebanon is also in the grips of an economic and financial collapse unparalleled in its modern history and can ill afford another massive confrontation with Israel.

For Israel, the Iranian-backed group in Lebanon remains its toughest and most immediate security challenge.

"Israel needs to manage the conflict in Gaza with a very open eye toward what is happening in the north, because the north is a much more important arena than Gaza," said Amos Yadlin, a former Israeli military intelligence chief who currently heads the Institute for National Security Studies. He spoke before the truce took effect at 2 a.m. Friday.

Hezbollah's reaction during the 11 days of Israeli bombardment that engulfed Gaza in death and destruction was relatively mute. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, did not make any public comments, even after a Hezbollah fighter was shot dead by Israeli soldiers at the border during a protest last week.

Late Thursday, Netanyahu's Security Cabinet approved a unilateral cease-fire to halt the Gaza operation, a decision that came after heavy U.S. pressure to stop the offensive. Hamas quickly followed suit and said it would honor the deal.

Throughout the current round of fighting, Hezbollah's show of solidarity — including unclaimed rocket barrages from south Lebanon into Israel on three separate occasions in the past week — appeared carefully calibrated for limited impact. Most landed in open areas or in the Mediterranean Sea. The rockets are believed to have been fired by Palestinian factions based in south Lebanon, likely with Hezbollah's blessing.

"The political message is 'we are here,' and safety for Israel from its northern border is not to be taken for granted and neither is the deterrent that was established in 2006" when the two sides fought each other to a draw, said Joyce Karam, an adjunct professor of political science at George Washington University.

At the tense Lebanon-Israel border, Hezbollah supporters wearing yellow hats organized daily protests over the past week. On at least one occasion, dozens of people breached the fence and crossed to the other side, drawing Israeli shots that struck and killed a 21-year-old. He was later identified as a Hezbollah fighter, and given a full-fledged funeral with hundreds in attendance.

Analysts said chances of Hezbollah joining in the fighting with Israel were low, particularly given the political and economic implosion happening in Beirut and the array of challenges the group faces internally with social tensions on the rise. Even among Hezbollah's supporters, there is no appetite for a confrontation as Lebanese suffer under an economic crash that has driven half of the population into poverty.

Also, Hezbollah's patron Iran is engaged in nuclear talks with the West, with growing hopes an agreement might be reached. Tehran has also been holding talks with longtime regional rival, Saudi Arabia, signaling a possible de-escalation following years of animosity that often spilled into neighboring countries.

"Hezbollah so far doesn't seem inclined to spoil Iran's talks with world powers on the nuclear front because it wants to see sanctions relief for its primarily political, military and financial backer," said Karam, who covers Mideast politics for the regional newspaper The National.

Speaking at a rally in south Beirut on Monday, senior Hezbollah official Hashem Safieddine bragged about the group's firepower, which he said has multiplied many times since the 2006 war, but suggested the time has not come for Hezbollah to get involved.

"We in Hezbollah look to the day where we will fight together, with you, side by side and shoulder to shoulder, on all fronts to extract this cancerous cell," he said, addressing Palestinians and referring to Israel's presence in the Arab world. "This day is coming, it's inevitable."

Hezbollah has grown considerably more powerful in the last decade and amassed a formidable army with valuable battlefield experience backing the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad in the neighboring country's civil war, Israeli defense officials say.

During the inconclusive, monthlong 2006 war, the group launched some 4,000 rockets into Israel - as many as Hamas and other Palestinian groups fired at Israel during the current round of fighting - most of them unguided projectiles with limited range. Today, Israeli officials say Hezbollah possesses some

130,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking virtually anywhere in Israel.

Yadlin, the former Israeli military intelligence chief, said all intelligence assessments, however, indicate that Hezbollah does not want a full-on conflict with Israel.

"Nasrallah is in the position that he doesn't want to repeat the mistake of 2006. He knows he won't be the defender of Lebanon, he will be the destroyer of Lebanon," said Yadlin. "He had a lot of opportunities and he hasn't taken them." He was referring to Israeli strikes targeting Hezbollah assets in Syria for which the group vowed to retaliate, but still has not.

Qassim Qassir, an analyst and expert on Hezbollah affairs in Lebanon, concurred that there seemed to be no intention to open the southern front because it would "lead to an all-out war with consequences no one can predict."

For now, both Israel and Hezbollah consider the deterrence established following the 2006 war to be holding, with Hezbollah threatening to strike deeper than ever inside Israel, including at its nuclear facilities, and Israel vowing to target civilian infrastructure, inflicting massive damage.

Karam said both Hezbollah and Israel have been saying since 2006 that round two is inevitable, but its cost has only gone up for both sides. For the moment, both seem satisfied with keeping their tensions on Syrian territory rather than having another war in Lebanon.

But each day brings closer the possibility of an unwanted conflict coming to bear.

"For now, this paradigm seems to hold," she said.

Migrant surge on Spain-Morocco border brings more suffering

By MOSA'AB ELSHAMY Associated Press

FNIDEQ, Morocco (AP) — They are desperate teenagers and jobless men. They come from Morocco's coastal towns, its mountainous east or even farther away — from sub-Saharan Africa. And they all converged on the border town of Fnideq this week, part of an extraordinary mass effort to swim or scale barbed-wire fences to get into Spain for a chance at a new life.

More than 8,000 migrants actually made it into the city of Ceuta, an enclave in North Africa that is separated from the rest of Spain by the Mediterranean — but for most of them, it was a short-lived success.

The extraordinary surge of migrants crossing from Morocco into Spain came amid the chaos of a diplomatic spat between the two countries.

Spanish troops forced over half of them back to Fnideq, putting additional strain on the Moroccan town whose limited resources are overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We will keep trying. We will find one way or another, even if the ocean turns into ice!" said 27-year-old Badreddine.

He and his fellow Moroccans — 22-year-old Salah and 24-year-old Hosam — all have diplomas but no jobs. Like most seeking to get into Spain, they spoke on condition their last names not be published for fear of their security because they are risking illegal migration.

Being stuck in Morocco "is like being dead, so why not risk your life anyway? We're currently living on streets, sleeping in the cold. Our parents know that we're here, they pray for us. They told us, 'Go, may Gold help you,'" Salah said.

They and others sleep in Fnideq's parks, on benches and outside mosques. Some hang out near hotels and restaurants, begging for food and whatever people can spare. Volunteers hand out bread and sandwiches.

Some have fled the impoverished countries of sub-Saharan Africa, but most are from Morocco, generally seen as one of the continent's economic engines that has made strides in lowering poverty in recent years.

Still, inequality is rife, the pandemic has worsened unemployment and average incomes are a fraction of those in Europe, which sits tantalizingly close — just across the Fnideq-Ceuta fence.

Amid tighter security by Spain in recent years, some would-be migrants have abandoned the effort, but others are determined to find a way around the security checkpoints or battle bad weather at sea.

"We want to leave (Morocco) because there is nothing left for us in the country, nothing to do, no future. We go to school but don't want to stay here," said 15-year-old Khalid.

This week, many of them saw an opportunity as word spread quickly in Morocco about the tensions with Spain.

When the government in Madrid gave medical treatment to a Western Saharan independence fighter that Morocco considers a terrorist, the decision led to chaos in Ceuta. The port city has always drawn those seeking to cross into Europe, but thousands were seen streaming toward Fnideq on highways and through forests and hills.

"Spain, here we come!" a group of Moroccans cried as they marched, singing soccer chants and hurling expletives at their native country. In central Fnideq, thousands lined the corniche that looks towards Ceuta, and they ended up swimming or taking small boats around breakwaters separating the countries.

While Moroccan security forces normally are spread out on the beach and in nearby hills patrolling a wide perimeter, there seemed to be fewer guards earlier this week. As large groups of youths scaled the fence and wrapped clothes on their hands to get over the barbed wire, Associated Press reporters saw border police standing by idly.

While Morocco has said little about the relaxed border controls, it was widely seen as retaliation for Madrid allowing militant leader Brahim Ghali, to receive medical treatment inside Spain. Two Moroccan officials made that link in comments Wednesday.

Spain eventually sent in military forces and pushed most of the migrants back to Morocco. The Red Cross says one young man died and dozens were treated for hypothermia.

Khalid, 15, and Amin, 16, came to Fnideq on Sunday in a bus with about 40 others from Temara, a coastal town outside the capital, Rabat. They said they managed to cross into Spain three times, but were pushed back. The last time, they were forced to swim back along the shore back to Morocco.

By Thursday, Moroccan border guards seemed to be back in their positions, but hundreds of youths have remained, and the men and boys in Fnideq haven't lost hope of crossing over.

"I am the eldest of my brothers, my mother sells vegetable in the market" and can't afford to support them, said Ayoub, in his early 20s, who arrived Thursday from the inland city of Meknes. "I had to try and help my mother."

While Morocco's government has focused on the Western Sahara in its limited public statements this week, it hasn't addressed the poverty and despair that is driving so many to want to leave the country.

Fnideq, meanwhile, is suffering under the sudden influx of would-be migrants.

The town relied heavily on trade with Ceuta before the pandemic, but Morocco's strict border closure since March 2020 has deprived residents of livelihoods and access to Spain. Protests broke out earlier this year by residents demanding government aid or an open border.

Human rights groups and opposition lawmakers accused the Moroccan government of using migrants as pawns instead of solving their problems. The opposition Istiqlal party urged "an economic alternative that guarantees the population their constitutional right to the necessities of a decent living."

Despite the scenes of tear gas and troops on the border this week, the dream of getting out of Morocco remains strong for many struggling youths, even in the relatively prosperous capital.

"If you ask anyone in Rabat ... that person will tell you that wants to go to Europe, I mean migrate. This is everyone's obsession," said street vendor Mohammed Ouhaddou. "Politicians are not doing anything. They are asleep and no one listens to us."

Israel, Hamas agree to cease-fire to end bloody 11-day war

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel and Hamas agreed to a cease-fire Thursday, halting a bruising 11-day war that caused widespread destruction in the Gaza Strip, brought life in much of Israel to a standstill and left more than 200 people dead.

At 2 a.m. local time, just as the cease-fire took effect, life returned to the streets of Gaza. People went out of their homes, some shouting "Allahu Akbar" or whistling from balconies. Many fired in the air, celebrating the truce.

Like the three previous wars between the bitter enemies, the latest round of fighting ended inconclusively. Israel claimed to inflict heavy damage on Hamas but once again was unable to halt the Islamic militant group's nonstop rocket barrages. Almost immediately, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced angry accusations from his hard-line, right-wing base that he stopped the operation too soon.

Hamas, the Islamic militant group sworn to Israel's destruction, also claimed victory. But it now faces the daunting challenge of rebuilding in a territory already suffering from poverty, widespread unemployment and a raging coronavirus outbreak.

Netanyahu's office said his Security Cabinet had unanimously accepted an Egyptian cease-fire proposal after recommendations from Israel's military chief and other top security officials. A statement boasted of "significant achievements in the operation, some of which are unprecedented."

It also included a veiled threat against Hamas. "The political leaders emphasized that the reality on the ground will determine the future of the campaign," the statement said.

The fighting erupted on May 10, when Hamas militants in Gaza fired long-range rockets toward Jerusalem. The barrage came after days of clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. Heavy-handed police tactics at the compound, built on a site holy to Muslims and Jews, and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinians by Jewish settlers had inflamed tensions.

The competing claims to Jerusalem lie at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and have repeatedly triggered bouts of violence in the past.

Hamas and other militant groups fired over 4,000 rockets into Israel throughout the fighting, launching the projectiles from civilian areas at Israeli cities. Dozens of projectiles flew as far north as Tel Aviv, the country's bustling commercial and cultural capital.

Thousands gathered Friday morning in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Younis outside the family house of Mohammed Dief, the shadowy Hamas commander who had ordered the rocket attacks. Supporters shouted "victory" and waved green Hamas flags.

Israel, meanwhile, carried out hundreds of airstrikes targeting what it said was Hamas' military infrastructure, including a vast tunnel network.

At least 230 Palestinians were killed, including 65 children and 39 women, with 1,710 people wounded, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not break the numbers down into fighters and civilians. Twelve people in Israel, including a 5-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl, were killed.

The United States, Israel's closest and most important ally, initially backed what it said was Israel's right to self-defense against indiscriminate rocket fire. But as the fighting dragged on and the death toll mounted, the Americans increasingly pressured Israel to stop the offensive.

In a rare public rift, Netanyahu on Wednesday briefly rebuffed a public call from President Joe Biden to wind things down, appearing determined to inflict maximum damage on Hamas in a war that could help save his political career.

But late Thursday, Netanyahu's office announced the cease-fire agreement. Hamas quickly followed suit. Militants continued to launch sporadic rocket at Israel early Friday, before the 2 a.m. cease-fire took effect.

In Washington, Biden hailed the cease-fire. "I believe we have a genuine opportunity to make progress, and I'm committed to working for it," he said.

Biden said the U.S. was committed to helping Israel replenish its supply of interceptor missiles for its Iron Dome rocket-defense system and to working with the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority — not Hamas — to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Netanyahu quickly came under heavy criticism from members of his hawkish, nationalist base. Gideon Saar, a former ally who now leads a small party opposed to the prime minister, called the cease-fire "embarrassing."

In a potentially damaging development for the Israeli leader, the Palestinian militants claimed Netanyahu had agreed to halt further Israeli actions at the Al Aqsa Mosque and to call off the planned evictions of Palestinians in the nearby Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

An Egyptian official said only that tensions in Jerusalem "will be addressed." He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was discussing behind-the-scenes negotiations and provided no details.

Itamar Ben Gvir, head of the far-right Jewish Power party, tweeted that the cease-fire was "a grave surrender to terrorism and the dictates of Hamas."

The cease-fire comes at a sensitive time for Netanyahu. In the wake of an inconclusive election in March, Netanyahu failed to form a majority coalition in parliament. His opponents now have until June 2 to form an alternative government of their own.

The war greatly complicated the efforts of his opponents, who include both Jewish and Arab parties and were forced to suspend their negotiations in such a fraught environment. But the inconclusive outcome of the war could give them renewed momentum to restart those talks.

Meanwhile in Gaza, a Hamas spokesman, Abdelatif al-Qanou, said Israel's announcement was a "declaration of defeat." Nonetheless, the group said it would honor the deal, which was to officially go into effect at 2 a.m.

Ali Barakeh, an official with Islamic Jihad, a smaller group that fought alongside Hamas, said Israel's declaration of a truce was a defeat for Netanyahu and "a victory to the Palestinian people."

Despite the claims, both groups appeared to have suffered significant losses in the fighting. Hamas and Islamic Jihad said at least 20 of their fighters were killed, while Israel said the number was at least 130 and probably higher.

Some 58,000 Palestinians fled their homes, many of them seeking shelter in crowded United Nations schools at a time of a coronavirus outbreak.

Since the fighting began, Gaza's infrastructure, already weakened by a 14-year blockade, has rapidly deteriorated.

Medical supplies, water and fuel for electricity are running low in the territory, on which Israel and Egypt imposed the blockade after Hamas seized power from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Since then, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has governed autonomous areas of the Israeli-occupied West Bank and has limited influence in Gaza.

Israeli attacks have also damaged at least 18 hospitals and clinics and destroyed one health facility, the World Health Organization said. Nearly half of all essential drugs have run out.

Israeli bombing has damaged over 50 schools across the territory, according to advocacy group Save the Children, destroying at least six. While repairs are done, education will be disrupted for nearly 42,000 children.

South Korea's Moon to nudge Biden on North Korea diplomacy

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

South Korean President Moon Jae-in is hoping Friday's White House meeting with President Joe Biden will lead to renewed diplomatic urgency by the U.S. on curbing North Korea's nuclear program. The White House, however, is signaling that it is taking a longer view on one of the most difficult foreign policy challenges Biden faces.

Ahead of Friday's meeting — just the second in-person foreign leader session for Biden because of the coronavirus pandemic — White House officials said North Korea will be a central focus of talks. Coordination on vaccine distribution, climate change and regional security concerns spurred by China are also high on the president's list.

The White House announced last month that it had completed a review of North Korea policy and that Biden would veer from the strategies of his two most recent predecessors, rejecting both Donald Trump's deeply personal effort to win over North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Barack Obama's more hands-off approach.

But the administration has yet to detail what its third-way effort to try to prod the North to abandon its nuclear program will look like.

Moon, who will leave office next May, is eager to resume stalled talks between Washington and Pyongyang and between Seoul and Pyongyang. But the Biden administration — which confirmed in March that it had made outreach efforts to the North without success — has been less enthusiastic about the idea

of direct negotiations in the near term.

Asked at Thursday's White House briefing whether Biden was open to holding direct talks with Kim, as Trump did twice, press secretary Jen Psaki demurred.

"I don't expect that to be top on his agenda," she said of Biden.

Still, Moon has made clear he plans to nudge Biden to renew diplomatic efforts with the North.

"I will not be pressed by time or become impatient during the remainder of my term. However, if there is an opportunity to restart the clock of peace and advance the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, I will do everything I can," Moon told reporters earlier this month. "I look forward to North Korea responding positively."

A senior administration official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and briefed reporters on Moon's visit on the condition of anonymity, sidestepped questions about whether the administration was willing to offer North Korea sanctions relief to begin dismantling its nuclear and ballistic weapons programs.

The official said the U.S. was hoping to chart a "flexible" way forward, well aware of where past efforts went awry.

In addition to talks about North Korea, Biden is expected to use the meeting to press South Korea to adopt a more ambitious 2030 target for curbing carbon emissions and to urge Seoul to play a greater role in countering China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Moon, meanwhile, is expected to seek Biden's assistance with helping South Korea boost its coronavirus vaccine supply. South Korea has vaccinated only about 5% of its population.

Biden is expected to lobby Moon to take a strong stance on China's activity toward Taiwan and other provocative moves Beijing has made in the region. Biden has sought to rally Pacific allies to coordinate on China, which Biden sees as the United States' fiercest economic competitor.

Biden, in the early going of his presidency, has spoken out about concerns with Beijing's trade policies and human rights record and has also highlighted regional allies' concerns about an increasingly assertive Chinese military.

Biden has taken note of Japan's concerns that China's growing military activity and broad territorial claims present a security threat. Japan is locked in a dispute with China over Beijing's claim to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands, called Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea. He's also looked to strengthen relations with India, which has been tested by a military standoff with China along their disputed border in eastern Ladakh.

But South Korea could be more reluctant to speak out about China, an important trading partner that it also sees as playing a key role in dealing with the Kim regime.

Michael Green, who served as senior director for Asia on the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration, said South Korea's situation is difficult.

"This South Korean policy of strategic ambiguity is proving increasingly awkward and almost untenable for Seoul because other middle powers that are not the U.S. or Japan ... are adjusting their China policies," said Green, who is senior vice president for Asia and Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Biden has also invited Moon to attend a White House Medal of Honor ceremony to honor retired Col. Ralph Puckett Jr. for heroic actions during the Korean War. Puckett, 94, will be cited for holding on to a strategic position near Unsan over two days in November 1950 while fighting off numerous attacks in which he suffered multiple wounds.

Moon on Thursday visited Arlington National Cemetery just outside Washington and laid a wreath at a memorial to Americans killed during the Korean War. He also made a visit to the U.S. Capitol to meet with the Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Hour-by-hour: Biden's behind-the-scenes push for cease-fire

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

The diplomatic flurry was over and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu was on the phone telling President Joe Biden that it appeared the furious fighting between Israel and Hamas was about to end.

But Biden remained wary even after the afternoon phone call. Things still could go crosswise with hours to go before the cease-fire took effect, his team reasoned.

Nervous White House aides dialed contacts in Tel Aviv and Cairo to suss out whether the truce would hold. Officials in both the U.S. and Israel worried that another barrage of Hamas rockets still could sink the Egyptian-brokered agreement, according to an official familiar with the conversations.

Then came another call from Netanyahu — his second to Biden in a matter of hours — with reassurances for the American president that the 11-day war really was halting.

Biden's first extended foreign policy crisis — one he handled largely by avoiding the cameras and maneuvering instead behind the scenes — had abated.

The president went before cameras in the Cross Hall of the White House to describe "intensive high-level discussions, hour by hour, literally" by the U.S. that involved Egypt, the Palestinian Authority and other Middle Eastern countries.

All of it, he said, came "with an aim of avoiding the sort of prolonged conflict we've seen in previous years when the hostilities have broken out."

Biden and Netanyahu's talks were just a small sample of the furious diplomacy that the White House conducted. The president and senior aides had over 80 engagements -- by phone or in person -- as it looked for an endgame to the fighting, according to the White House.

Biden's speech celebrating the cease-fire lasted just 3 ½ minutes — delivered just in time for evening news broadcasts. He reiterated his belief that Israel has a right to defend itself, expressed condolences for Palestinian civilians who died in the Israeli bombardment and promised that humanitarian aid to Gaza Strip was on its way.

It was an enigmatic, and perhaps fitting, bookend to the sort of messy Middle East crisis he had hoped to avoid, particularly early in a presidency already oversubscribed with managing the public health and economic tumult caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The conflict had also exposed a rift between Biden and members of his own party. The president who over nearly 50 years in national politics has burnished a reputation for unwavering support of Israel leads a Democratic Party that has trended toward a far more divided outlook on the correct path to peace between Israel and the Palestinians. And Republicans, for their part, were all too eager to use the raging violence as ammunition against Biden's presidency.

Biden had studiously avoided extensive public comment about the Israeli military strikes as the conflict raged. But as the days wore on, he was facing mounting pressure from fellow Democrats to speak out against the Israelis as the death toll climbed in Gaza and as tens of thousands of Palestinians were displaced by the aerial bombardment.

When it was over, Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut expressed relief at the cease-fire and commended Biden and his team for their work. But he also laid out ongoing worries, saying, "I am deeply concerned that without meaningful progress towards a two-state future, the conditions of despair will deepen, further fuel extremism and lead to a tragic renewal of the cycle of violence."

The cease-fire announcement came after Biden on Wednesday upped his pressure on Netanyahu, telling the Israeli leader in a phone call that he expected "significant de-escalation" of the fighting by day's end, according to the White House. But the prime minister came right back with a public declaration that he was "determined to continue" the Gaza operation "until its objective is achieved."

Biden's advisers were not overly concerned that Netanyahu's comments seemed to reject the president's public call to ease off, according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to publicly discuss private discussions.

U.S. officials believed Netanyahu did not want to telegraph to Hamas in advance that he was ready to accept terms to end the violence, and the Israeli leader also was sending a message to a domestic audience that had become traumatized by the barrage of rocket fire from Gaza.

But pressure was building on Biden, and he, in turn, was making that known to Netanyahu.

On Tuesday, while in Michigan to visit a Ford facility, Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib confronted Biden on the airport tarmac and called on him to speak out forcefully against the Israeli strikes. Also this week, Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York introduced resolutions to block the sale of $735 million in military weaponry to Israel that had already been approved by the Biden administration.

"Let us hope that the ceasefire in Gaza holds," Sanders tweeted Thursday evening. "But that's not enough. Our job now is to support desperately needed humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Gaza's people, and find a way to finally bring peace to the region."

Biden advisers had concluded in the first days of the crisis, as Hamas rained down hundreds of rockets on Israel, that a call from the president for Israeli restraint would have fallen flat. At the same time, early in the crisis, there was deep worry inside the White House that the fighting could morph into something that would take months to tamp down.

As the outside calls for Biden to speak out more forcefully grew, the president and top aides privately made the case to Israeli officials that time wasn't on their side.

Biden and Netanyahu have known each other for more than 30 years and have frequently butted heads. Their conversations throughout the crisis probed one another as they tried to game out a path forward, according to officials.

White House officials have pointed to some grim evidence to argue that Biden's attempts at behind-the-scenes diplomacy worked: The latest Israel-Hamas war — in which at least 230 people in Gaza and at least 12 in Israel died — was shorter and less blood was spilled than in some of the other recent major outbreaks of violence in the region.

Biden, in his brief remarks about the ceasefire, noted that but for the Iron Dome, a missile defense system developed by the U.S. and Israel, the body count would have been far worse. The system is designed to intercept and destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells. Biden said he assured Netanyahu that his administration would work to quickly replenish it.

He also pledged that humanitarian aid would quickly flow through the Palestinian Authority, which is in control of the West Bank but not Gaza.

"We will do this in full partnership with the Palestinian Authority, not Hamas … and in a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal," Biden said.

The details of missile system supplies and humanitarian aid, though, could wait for another day.

Biden ended on a hopeful note: "I believe we have a genuine opportunity to make progress, and I'm committed to working for it."

Old records shed new light on smallpox outbreaks in 1700s

By WILLIAM J. KOLE Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A highly contagious disease originating far from America's shores triggers deadly outbreaks that spread rapidly, infecting the masses. Shots are available, but a divided public agonizes over getting jabbed.

Sound familiar?

Newly digitized records — including a minister's diary scanned and posted online by Boston's Congregational Library and Archives — are shedding fresh light on devastating outbreaks of smallpox that hit the city in the 1700s.

And three centuries later, the parallels with the coronavirus pandemic are uncanny.

"How little we've changed," said CLA archivist Zachary Bodnar, who led the digitization effort, working closely with the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

"The fact that we're finding these similarities in the records of our past is a very interesting parallel," Bodnar said in an interview. "Sometimes the more we learn, the more we're still the same, I guess."

Smallpox was eradicated, but not before it sickened and killed millions worldwide. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say the last natural outbreak of smallpox in the United States occurred in

1949. In 1980, the World Health Organization's decision-making arm declared it eradicated, and no cases of naturally occurring smallpox have been reported since.

But in April 1721, after an English ship, the HMS Seahorse, brought it to Boston, it was a clear and present danger. By winter of 1722, it would infect more than half of the city's population of 11,000 and kill 850.

Much earlier outbreaks, also imported from Europe, killed Native Americans indiscriminately in the 1600s. Now, digitized church records are helping to round out the picture of how the colonists coped when it was their turn to endure pestilence.

The world's first proper vaccination didn't occur until the end of that century, when an English country doctor named Edward Jenner inoculated an 8-year-old boy against smallpox in 1796.

Before then, doctors used inoculation, or variolation as it was often called, introducing a trace amount of the smallpox virus into the skin. The procedure, or variations of it, had been practiced since ancient times in Asia. Jenner's pioneering of vaccination, using instead a less lethal strain of the virus that infected cows, was a huge scientific advance.

Yet just as with COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, some took a skeptical view of smallpox inoculations in the 18th century, digitized documents show.

The Rev. Cotton Mather, one of the era's most influential ministers, had actively promoted inoculation. In a sign of how resistant some colonists were to the new technology, someone tossed an explosive device through his window in November 1721.

Fortunately, it didn't explode, but researchers at Harvard say this menacing message was attached: "Cotton Mather, you dog, damn you! I'll inoculate you with this; with a pox to you."

Among the recently digitized Congregational Church records are handwritten diary entries scrawled by the Rev. Ebenezer Storer, a pastor in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On March 11, 1764, as smallpox once again raged through Boston, Storer penned a prayer in his journal after arranging to have his own children inoculated.

The deeply devout Storer, his diary shows, had faith in science.

"Blessed be thy name for any discoveries that have been made to soften the severity of the distemper. Grant thy blessing on the means used," he wrote.

Three weeks later, Storer gave thanks to God "for his great mercy to me in recovering my dear children and the others in my family from the smallpox."

For Bodnar, the archivist, it's a testament to the insights church records can contain.

"They're fascinating," he said. "They're essentially town records — they not only tell the story of the daily accounting of the church, but also the story of what people were doing at that time and what was going on."

'Like hell:' As Olympics loom, Japan health care in turmoil

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and KANTARO KOMIYA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — As she struggled to breathe, Shizue Akita had to wait more than six hours while paramedics searched for a hospital in Osaka that would treat her worsening COVID-19.

When she finally got to one that wasn't overwhelmed with other patients, doctors diagnosed severe pneumonia and organ failure and sedated her. Akita, 87, was dead two weeks later.

"Osaka's medical systems have collapsed," said her son, Kazuyuki Akita. He has watched from his home north of Tokyo as three other family members in Osaka have dealt with the virus, and with inadequate health care. "It's like hell."

Hospitals in Osaka, Japan's third-biggest city and only 2 1/2 hours by bullet train from Summer Olympics host Tokyo, are overflowing with coronavirus patients. About 35,000 people nationwide — twice the number of those in hospitals — must stay at home with the disease, often becoming seriously ill and sometimes dying before they can get medical care.

As cases surge in Osaka, medical workers say that every corner of the system has been slowed, stretched and burdened. And it's happening in other parts of the country, too.

The frustration and fear are clear in interviews by The Associated Press with besieged medical workers and the families of patients in Osaka. It's in striking contrast with the tone in the capital Tokyo, where Olympic organizers and government officials insist the July Games will be safe and orderly even as a state of emergency spreads to more parts of the country and a growing number of citizens call for a cancellation.

Some see Osaka as a warning for what could happen to the rest of Japan if the crisis worsens at a time when officials — and the world — are focused on the Olympics.

Osaka's struggles are a "man-made disaster," Akita told AP in a written message, caused in part by officials lifting an earlier state of emergency despite signs of a rebound in infections. He thinks his mother might have lived if she'd been treated sooner.

Many here are stunned by what's happening. Japan, after all, is the world's third-biggest economy and has, until now, managed the pandemic better than many other advanced nations. But the current surge has sent the daily tallies of the sick and dying to new highs.

The turmoil is most evident in Osaka.

Paramedics, clad in protective gear, cannot perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and must take extreme precautions to avoid exposure to aerosols, officials and health workers say. Disinfecting an ambulance takes an hour after it has carried a COVID-19 patient, keeping paramedics from rushing to the next call.

Emergency patients get only the treatment that happens to be available, not what's most likely to increase their chance of survival, medical experts say.

A patient suffering from heart failure, for example, was rejected by an advanced emergency hospital, and a child in critical condition could not find a pediatric hospital because they were all full, according to an Osaka paramedic who would only give his first name, Satoshi, because he is not authorized to talk to the media. The child later died, he said.

"Our job is to bring people who are dying and deteriorating to the hospital," he said. "In the current situation, we are not even able to do our job."

As emergency measures drag on amid surging cases, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has seen support for his government slide. While he insists Japan will safely hold the Olympics, polls show 60% to 80% are against pushing ahead with the Games.

There is no indication so far the Olympics will be canceled. The International Olympic Committee, which was wrapping up its final planning sessions on Friday with Tokyo Olympic organizers, has repeatedly said they are going ahead.

But the IOC's most senior member Richard Pound, in an interview with Japan's JiJi Press, said that the final deadline to call it off was "before the end of June." Pound repeated — as the IOC has said — that if the Olympics can't happen this summer they will be canceled, not postponed again.

Japanese medical groups say they cannot accommodate the possible health needs of the Olympics as pressure for coronavirus treatment rises and medical workers and government officials try to speed up a slow-moving vaccination rollout. Less than 2% of the total population has been fully vaccinated.

As the vaccination pace gradually picks up, the government plans to open two large inoculation centers Monday using Moderna shots, one of two new vaccines expected to be approved Friday.

This week Osaka passed Tokyo, the nation's biggest city, with the most total virus deaths, at 2,036. Of about 15,000 patients in Osaka, only about 12% landed at hospitals, while the rest had to wait at home or in hotels. The number of COVID-19 deaths that happened outside of hospitals in April tripled from March to 96, including 39 in Osaka and 10 in Tokyo, police statistics show.

Japan's daily cases and deaths are small by global standards, and the country has one of the world's largest per-capita numbers of hospital beds.

So why the struggles?

It is partly because unprofitable COVID-19 treatment is largely limited to public-run hospitals, which account for only about one-fifth of Japan's 8,000 hospitals. Private hospitals, many of them small, are hesitant or unprepared to deal with coronavirus cases.

The government has also significantly reduced local health centers, which are key to infectious disease prevention, from about 850 in the 1990s to 469 in 2020, causing bottlenecks because of staff shortages

and overwork.

Less than 5% of about 1.5 million hospital beds in Japan are set aside for COVID-19 treatment, an increase from less than 1,000 in April of last year, according to Health Ministry data, but still not enough.

The recent surge has seen more serious cases that have quickly filled hospital beds.

More than half of about 55 coronavirus deaths at the Osaka City Juso Hospital are from the latest surge, said Dr. Yukio Nishiguchi, head of the hospital. "It's like being hit by a disaster," he said.

Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura, criticized for being too slow, said he regretted not being able to predict the faster-than-expected surge of serious cases.

While acknowledging that Osaka's medical systems are severely strained, Yoshimura said that patients are being properly sorted by health centers and that those still at home are staying there "by consent."

Because hospital beds for serious cases have filled up, patients with milder symptoms, but still in need of hospitalization, have to stay home or at hotels. And people who need other, non-coronavirus treatment are also suffering.

Naoki Hodo, a funeral director in southern Osaka, said that in April an emergency operator refused to send an ambulance for his 85-year-old aunt, telling the family to call back when they found a hospital themselves. His aunt had a badly swollen eye and hadn't eaten for two days.

It took the family six hours of frantic calls to hospitals on a list given by the operator before they found one. The aunt is still hospitalized, and her doctor says she may never see again on one of her eyes.

Nishiguchi, who specializes in colorectal cancer surgery, said the pandemic has caused him to scale down or postpone operations for his cancer patients.

"Our priority is to save the lives under threat right now, and I hope people understand," he said.

Hodo, the mortician, wears full protective gear when he goes to collect COVID-19 victims' bodies at hospitals. The dead are placed in double waterproof body bags and then in coffins when they leave the hospital, so families cannot see their faces.

"They can't even have a proper farewell with their loved ones," Hodo said. "It's heartbreaking."

Rittenhouse due to make first in-person court appearance

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Kyle Rittenhouse, the Illinois man accused of killing two people during the chaotic protests that followed the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin, was due Friday to make his first in-person court appearance.

COVID-19 protocols in the Kenosha County courthouse have forced Rittenhouse to make all his court appearances since he was charged in August via video from his attorney's office. But those restrictions have lifted and he was expected to appear in person for a mid-morning status conference.

Attorneys and prosecutors were expected to iron out scheduling details ahead of Rittenhouse's November trial in what should be a routine proceeding. He faces multiple counts, including homicide and reckless endangerment.

Prosecutors say Rittenhouse, who was 17 at the time, shot and killed two people and wounded a third in August after traveling from his home in Antioch, Illinois, to Kenosha. The city was in the throes of several nights of sometimes violent demonstrations after Officer Rusten Sheskey shot Blake, leaving the Black man paralyzed from the waist down.

Rittenhouse and his attorneys have said he went to Kenosha to protect businesses. Video shows Rittenhouse, armed with an assault-style rifle, shooting Joseph Rosenbaum, Anthony Huber and Gaige Grosskreutz. Rosenbaum and Huber died. Grosskreutz survived his wounds.

Cellphone footage shows Rittenhouse, who is white, walking past police lines with his hands up and his rifle still slung over his shoulder even as protesters screamed that he had just shot people.

He turned himself in to police in Antioch several hours later, maintaining that the three men attacked him and he fired in self-defense.

He has since become a polarizing figure in the national conversation over police brutality and racism. Conservatives have held him up as a symbol for gun rights and praised him for pushing back against anti-

police protesters, even going so far as to raise $2 million to cover his bail. Others contend he escalated tensions by walking around the protest with a rifle.

Rittenhouse's attorney, Mark Richards, has said in court documents that Rittenhouse and his family have moved into an undisclosed safe house because they've received multiple threats.

Missouri family seeks answers in Black 19-year-old's death

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

Derontae Martin was a playful and outgoing 19-year-old, a former football standout and a "big kid" who looked out for his friends and family.

Now, his mother, grandmother and racial injustice activists are questioning the official account of how the young Black man ended up shot to death during a prom party inside the rural Missouri home of a middle-aged white man with a history of bigoted social media postings. They don't believe the findings of a preliminary investigation indicating that he took his own life inside the attic of that home.

"It's heartbreaking," Martin's grandmother Kimberly Lotts said. "He wasn't a kid that caused trouble, ran around or beat up folks, or robbed or stole. He wasn't that kind of a kid. He was a very loving, fun-filled kid. He was a loyal, faithful friend to those that he cared about."

Martin's family lived in the St. Louis area until about a decade ago, when they moved to Park Hills, a town of 8,500 residents in Missouri's Old Lead Belt region about 60 miles (97 kilometers) southwest of St. Louis.

Though that area of Missouri is about 95% white, Martin was popular and happy, his relatives said. Ericka Lotts recalled how her son donned bunny years during this year's Easter service to amuse the small children.

"He was just a big kid," she said. "I told him all the time he was 19, but inside he was about 12."

At Central High School, Martin was a star defensive tackle who earned a scholarship to a small out-of-state college. He graduated in 2020 but needed to bring up his entrance exam score before he could go to college. Ericka Lotts said he spent the past year working at a Walmart store and a restaurant.

Ericka Lotts recently bought a house in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, and Martin was living with her. But on the night of April 24 he was back in the Park Hills area. He went to a prom party at a home near the Madison County town of Fredericktown, 27 miles (43 kilometers) south of Park Hills.

The home is owned by a man who on Facebook has mocked foreign accents and defended the Confederate flag. He recently posted a meme showing a hand flipping the finger. It reads: "Here's my apology for being white."

Because the man is not charged with a crime, The Associated Press is not naming him. He does not have a listed phone number.

Madison County Sheriff Katy McCutcheon declined to comment, but a brief news release said deputies and EMTs were called to the rural home at 3:01 a.m. on April 25. They found Martin in the attic, dead.

McCutcheon said an initial autopsy indicated Martin died of a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Her news release did not say who owned the gun, or how Martin got it.

The Missouri State Highway Patrol was asked to review Madison County's investigation, and concurred with the initial finding of suicide, though additional witnesses are still being sought, patrol Sgt. Clark Parrott said.

The investigation has been met with broad skepticism among racial injustice activists, about 100 of whom staged a protest march in Fredericktown last week. The Rev. Darryl Gray, a St. Louis activist leader, said counter-protesters tossed two nooses at protesters and yelled racial slurs. That area of Missouri was home to Frank Ancona, a Missouri Ku Klux Klan leader shot to death by his wife in 2017.

Gray said that despite the slurs and the threats, activists won't rest until the mysteries of Martin's death are solved.

"The whole thing is that it was a suspicious death," Gray said. "How and why did Derontae end up in the house at this party, and how did he end up in the attic? At the very least ... there is negligence here."

Gray and Ericka Lotts met last week with Madison County Prosecuting Attorney M. Dwight Robbins, who

asked the Missouri attorney general's office to investigate. A spokesman for Attorney General Eric Schmitt, a Republican who is running for the U.S. Senate, declined to say if the office would get involved.

Ericka Lotts questioned how Martin, who was right-handed, could shoot himself with a full cast on his broken right arm. She said she's heard several different accounts about what really happened and doesn't know what to believe.

"All I do know is that somebody shot him," Lotts said.

White House, GOP infrastructure talks hit crucial stage

By LISA MASCARO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Negotiations between the White House and Senate Republicans over President Joe Biden's $2.3 trillion infrastructure plan are hitting a crucial stage ahead of talks Friday after the latest GOP offer left some dismay in the administration that there wasn't more movement off the Republicans' initial $568 billion proposal.

Republicans did increase their offer and have been working in good faith with the White House, according to a Republican granted anonymity to discuss the private talks.

But the slog of the closed-door talks is certain to spark fresh worries from Democrats that time is slipping to strike a compromise. The president's team had set a soft Memorial Day deadline to determine if a deal was within reach.

At the White House, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said "productive conversations" are underway on Capitol Hill.

The White House team is expected to resume talks with the senators Friday. "We're looking forward to constructive conversations," Psaki said.

Securing a vast infrastructure plan is Biden's top priority as he seeks to make good on his campaign pledge to "build back better" in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis and the economic churn from a shifting economy. With narrow Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, the president is reaching out to Republicans for support on a potentially bipartisan approach rather than relying simply on his own party to muscle the proposal to passage. But Republicans are refusing Biden's idea of a corporate tax hike to pay for the investments.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell reiterated Thursday on Fox News that tax hikes on corporations or the wealthiest Americans are nonstarters. Republicans are unwilling to undo their signature domestic accomplishment with Trump, the 2017 tax cuts, which reduced the corporate rate from 35% to 21%. Biden proposes lifting the corporate tax to 28%.

"If they're willing to settle on target a infrastructure bill without revisiting the 2017 tax bill we'll work with them," McConnell told Fox's Larry Kudlow, a former Trump adviser. But he said a package topping $2 trillion or more "is not going to have any Republican support."

The administration and the GOP senators have been in talks ever since Biden met with a core group of Republican negotiators last week over the possibility of working together on a plan. The White House dispatched the Transportation and Commerce secretaries and top aides to Capitol Hill to meet with the Republicans late Tuesday after the president asked the senators to provide more details on their initial offer.

The lead Republican negotiator, Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, was encouraged by the talks and expected the White House to be back in touch by week's end, her office said.

But there was "not a significantly changed offer" from the Republicans during their meeting with the administration this week, according to a person granted anonymity to discuss the private negotiations.

The White House's hopes for a bipartisan deal on infrastructure have cooled but they have not abandoned the effort, according to an administration official not authorized to speak publicly about the private conversations. There was some dismay that the Republican counteroffer did not substantially budge from the party's original $568 billion proposal, leaving it far short of the White House's plan, according to the official.

A team of West Wing officials, including senior advisor Steve Ricchetti and head of legislative affairs Louisa Terrell, were expected to talk Friday with Republicans on the proposal.

The administration had set a soft deadline of Memorial Day to gauge if enough progress had been made to forge a bipartisan deal or whether it would need to proceed along party lines. Biden has reveled in the face-to-face negotiations, aides said, and has expressed hope to bring Republicans along. And West Wing officials have been hearted by the public comments made by some of the GOP negotiating team, including Capito, the official said.

But the outward talks of progress have not translated into the two sides getting much closer to a deal. Beyond the significant gap in the two sides' visions for the size of the package, there has been little discussion of how to reach an agreement on how to pay for it.

One GOP senator in the talks suggested tapping unspent funds from the massive COVID-19 aid package to help pay for the infrastructure investment, the Republican said. Other funds could be tapped from uncollected tax revenues or public-private partnerships.

One strategy that had gained momentum would be for Biden to negotiate a more limited, traditional infrastructure bill of roads, highways, bridges and broadband as a bipartisan effort. Then, Democrats could try to muscle through the remainder of Biden's priorities on climate investments and the so-called human infrastructure of child care, education and hospitals on their own.

But, administration aides believe, if such an "infrastructure only" bipartisan deal is far smaller than Biden's original proposal, the White House risks a rebellion from Democrats who could claim that the president made a bad deal and missed the moment to pass a sweeping, transformational package.

For now, Republicans and the White House are tangled over the definitions of infrastructure as Biden seeks new investments in hospitals, child care centers and electric vehicles for this first bill, and Republicans remain more narrowly focused on traditional roads, bridges and other "hard" infrastructure projects. McConnell has said they could go as high as $800 billion on a package.

But House and Senate Democrats say much of what Republicans proposed so far is simply existing spending and nowhere near that amount.

At the same time, House Republicans are working on their own alternative to Biden's plan.

CNN: Trump Justice Department seized reporter phone records

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration Justice Department secretly obtained the 2017 phone records of a CNN correspondent, the network said Thursday in revealing the existence of another apparent leak investigation aimed at identifying a journalist's sources.

The revelation comes two weeks after The Washington Post disclosed that the Justice Department had last year seized phone records belonging to three of its journalists who covered the Russia investigation.

CNN said the Justice Department informed Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr in a May 13 letter that it had obtained phone and email records covering a two-month period between June 1 and July 31, 2017.

"CNN strongly condemns the secret collection of any aspect of a journalist's correspondence, which is clearly protected by the First Amendment," CNN President Jeff Zucker said in a statement published by the network. "We are asking for an immediate meeting with the Justice Department for an explanation."

The Justice Department confirmed that the records were formally sought last year, though it did not reveal anything else about the investigation and what story might pertain to. CNN said that in the two-month period listed in the letter, Starr's reporting included stories on Syria and Afghanistan and coverage of U.S. military options in North Korea that were being offered to President Donald Trump.

"The records at issue relate to 2017 and the legal process to seek these records was approved in 2020," Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said in a statement. "Department leadership will soon meet with reporters to hear their concerns about recent notices and further convey Attorney General (Merrick) Garland's staunch support of and commitment to a free and independent press."

The letter indicated that the government sought records of Starr's Pentagon phone extension, the CNN Pentagon booth phone number and her home and cellphone records. The government also said it had obtained "non-content information" from her emails, which would include information about the senders

and recipients but not the actual content of the communications.

The Justice Department under former Attorney General Eric Holder announced revised guidelines for obtaining records from the news media during criminal leak investigations, removing language that news organizations said was ambiguous and requiring additional levels of review before a journalist could be subpoenaed.

The updated policy was a response to outrage among news organizations over Obama administration tactics seen as overly aggressive and hostile toward newsgathering.

Bruce Brown, the executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said Thursday that the phone record seizure amounted to a "big story that just got bigger."

"That a journalist from another news organization had communications records seized by the Trump Justice Department suggests that the last administration's efforts to intrude into reporter-source relationships and chill newsgathering is more sweeping than we originally thought," Brown said.

He called for the Justice Department to explain exactly what happened and "how it plans to strengthen protections for the free flow of information to the public."

EXPLAINER: How Congress' Jan. 6 commission would work

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An independent commission to study the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection would be modeled after a similar panel that studied the 9/11 terrorist attacks and has long been hailed as a bipartisan success.

But bipartisanship isn't always popular these days, especially in the wake of the deadly siege by a mob of former President Donald Trump's supporters, which has left tensions between the two parties more raw than ever on Capitol Hill.

Democrats and Republicans who support the idea are struggling to push a bill that would create the commission to the finish line. The House passed it easily, with 35 Republicans signing on. Its fate is less clear in the evenly divided Senate, where Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he will vote against it. McConnell called the bipartisan panel "slanted" and "unbalanced" and said that Democrats had negotiated in bad faith.

A look at the facts of the proposed Jan. 6 commission, and the politics surrounding it:

A BIPARTISAN APPROACH

Republicans have tried to paint the commission as partisan, even though the bill passed by the House would give Republicans and Democrats an equal number of members. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, who opposed the legislation, has called it "the Pelosi commission," after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

In fact, the bill is the product of bipartisan negotiations by House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and the top Republican on that panel, New York Rep. John Katko. The commission would have ten members — five appointed by Democrats and five appointed by Republicans. The chairperson would be appointed by Democrats and the vice chairperson would be appointed by Republicans. Subpoenas could only be issued if there is agreement between those two heads or by a vote of a majority of the commission.

The final version was changed from Pelosi's first draft, in which Democrats would have appointed more members and had sole subpoena power.

Some Republicans, including McConnell and Maine Sen. Susan Collins, have raised objections to the way the panel would appoint staff, suggesting it would make the panel unbalanced. The legislation calls for the chairperson to hire staff "in consultation with the vice chairperson, in accordance with rules agreed upon by the commission."

Pelosi suggested Thursday that if staff is Republicans' biggest problem, it's easily solved. "Of course they can hire staff," Pelosi said of the Republican commissioners. "That's never even been a question."

DISAGREEMENTS OVER SCOPE

The early draft of the bill by Pelosi included a series of findings that quoted FBI Director Christopher Wray saying that racially motivated violent extremism, and especially white supremacy, is one of the biggest threats to U.S. security. Some of the rioters supportive of Trump were linked to white supremacist groups.

Republicans immediately objected to the language. They also disagreed with the legislation's broad latitude to investigate the causes of the insurrection, saying that it should also be focused on other types of violence in the country, including riots in cities after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police last summer.

The bill negotiated by Thompson and Katko removed the quotes from Wray and it contains far more specific language about the scope of the investigation, keeping the focus to Jan. 6. Republicans, including Trump, have argued that the scope of the investigation is reason to oppose the bill.

SHIFTING POSITIONS

McCarthy and McConnell have each suggested in recent months that they might be open to a commission. McCarthy sent Pelosi a letter in February saying that any legislation to form the panel should have commissioners evenly divided by party, equal party signoff on subpoena power and no predetermined findings or conclusions — all of which were satisfied in the final bill. McConnell signaled he might be willing to vote for it just days ago, saying on Tuesday that he was "open" to the bill.

By Wednesday, both men had come out against it, and rank and file Republican senators gave a variety of shifting explanations for why they opposed it. Many said they had not read it.

Even as the House passed the bill with the support of almost three dozen Republicans, it became clear that it will be difficult for Senate Democrats to win the 10 GOP votes they will need for passage. Several Senate Republicans now say they believe the commission would be duplicative because two Senate committees are conducting their own bipartisan investigation.

Still, some support it.

Utah Sen. Mitt Romney said Tuesday that given the violent attack, "we should understand what mistakes were made and how we could prevent them from happening again." Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy said he doesn't agree with McConnell that the bill is slanted toward Democrats and "I'm inclined to support it."

THE TRUMP FACTOR

The Republicans' evolving positions came as Trump came out against the panel, calling it a "Democrat trap."

Most congressional Republicans remain loyal to the former president, even after he told his supporters that day to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat and to march to the Capitol as Congress certified Biden's win. The rioters brutally beat police officers and broke into the Capitol through windows and doors, sending Republicans and Democrats alike running for their lives.

While most Republicans condemned the rioters that day and many criticized Trump for his role in it, some Republicans have begun to downplay the violence. This has frustrated Democrats and even some in their own party who want to see a full accounting of what happened.

"I encourage all members, Republicans and Democrats alike, to put down their swords for once, just for once, and support this bill," Katko said before the House approved the measure.

CONGRESSIONAL ALTERNATIVES

Pelosi has suggested she is playing a long game in trying to form a commission, reminding reporters on Thursday that it took more than a year to pass legislation creating the 9/11 panel almost two decades ago. "It takes time," she said.

Pelosi has suggested that Democrats may form their own separate panel in Congress to investigate the riots if they can't get a commission. But she's made clear she'd prefer a bipartisan, independent body.

At the White House, press secretary Jen Psaki said "we're not at that point yet" when she was asked about the possibility of a partisan congressional panel doing the work.

"The attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6 was an unprecedented assault on our democracy," Psaki said, reiterating Biden's support for the commission. "It demands a full, independent investigation into what happened."

'I was afraid': Prince Harry, Oprah discuss mental health

By ALICIA RANCILIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — For Harry, returning to London to attend Prince Philip's funeral last month meant once more facing a place where he felt trapped and hunted by cameras. It would be a test of his ability to cope with the anxiety that was bubbling up again.

"I was worried about it, I was afraid," Harry told The Associated Press during a recent joint interview with Oprah Winfrey to promote a mental-health series they co-created and co-executive produced for Apple TV+.

He was able to work through any trepidation using coping skills learned in therapy.

"It definitely made it a lot easier, but the heart still pounds," said Harry, the Duke of Sussex and grandson of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and her late husband Philip.

In "The Me You Can't See," which debuted Thursday night on Apple's streaming service, Harry reveals that he first saw a therapist approximately four years ago at the encouragement of then-girlfriend Meghan. They'd had an argument and she recognized his anger seemed misplaced.

The series is another chapter in the unprecedented openness that Harry has brought to his life and his royal family relationships since stepping away from his duties and moving with his wife to California. In March, he and Meghan gave a headline-making interview to Winfrey that elicited a rare public response from the palace.

Harry's self-work may be relatively recent but he and older brother William, The Duke of Cambridge, have long championed the importance of mental health. In 2016, Harry, William and his wife Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, launched Heads Together, an initiative to speak up and not be ashamed to ask for help when mental well-being is at stake.

Their collective work led to interactions with people across the globe, from all walks of life, and they recognized a common thread. "Sharing your story in order to be able to save a life or help others is absolutely critical," said Harry.

Harry is practicing what he preaches and laying bare his own struggles with trauma and grief. He describes in "The Me You Can't See," the instances of feeling helpless as a young boy while riding in the car with his mother, Princess Diana, who cried as they were surrounded by paparazzi and she struggled to drive.

Years later, Diana was killed in Paris after the car she and friend Dodi Fayed were riding in, crashed during a high-speed chase to flee cameras. Harry was 12 and suppressed his own feelings to meet the mourning public gathered outside Kensington Palace.

Cameras rolled and snapped away as he walked behind her casket to Diana's funeral, alongside William, father Prince Charles, Philip and Diana's brother Charles Spencer.

Harry's revelations coincide with Queen Elizabeth's official confirmation a few months ago that he and Meghan will not return to their senior royal positions within the family, following a one-year trial period.

The couple now lives about 90 minutes north of Los Angeles in an exclusive area near Santa Barbara called Montecito. They count Winfrey, Katy Perry and Orlando Bloom as neighbors. The paparazzi still lurks but it's less intense than in Los Angeles.

This new, outspoken prince who shares his emotions is a contrast to the "never complain, never explain," "keep calm and carry on" mantras that are part of the prototypical British way.

The British tabloids have had a field day picking apart his statements. Some royal commentators have also cried foul over a contradiction between seeking a private life yet granting interviews and revealing family strife.

Harry appears to be cautious in choosing what he wants to speak about, and neither he nor Meghan seem interested in sharing their every move with the world. They do not operate a social media account.

He is undeterred by naysayers, he says, because there's a greater good in being honest about his struggles. "I see it as a responsibility. I don't find it hard to open up," he said. "Knowing the impacts and the positive reaction that it has for so many people that also suffer, I do believe it's a responsibility."

Winfrey was already working with Apple to develop a series on mental health when a conversation with Harry sparked the idea to join forces.

"We were having a conversation and I asked him, 'What are the two most important issues you think facing the world today?' And he said immediately, 'climate change and mental health.' She mentioned the project and Winfrey recalls him later saying , 'Oh, by the way, if you ever need any help with that … give me a call.' And I went and turned around and said, 'What's your number?'"

Winfrey's existing partnership with Apple created a rare opportunity to reach the vast number of people who use the company's devices, Harry said.

"If that's in a billion pockets on a billion screens, then maybe we can really start a global conversation about this," he said.

Winfrey recalls some of her own childhood traumas in "The Me You Can't See." In addition to her and Harry's stories, the series also features accounts from both regular people and celebrities including Lady Gaga and Glenn Close, who speak candidly about their own experiences with mental illness.

Winfrey said Harry pushed to present a global perspective. "This has got to be a world thing and not just a U.S. thing,'" she recounted him saying, adding: "I think we've accomplished that really well."

Harry jokes he's "slowly catching up" to Winfrey's decades of inner-work and encouragement of others to do the same whether on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" or her "Super Soul Sunday" interviews on OWN. Even Winfrey said she's had a lot to learn.

"I have dealt personally with one of the girls from my school (Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa), who had schizophrenia," Winfrey said. "Only after hearing the doctor say that 'it's a diagnosis. It's not your life, it's not who you are,' that I had my great awakening about it. … 'That is not you. You are a person who has a diagnosis of schizophrenia.' That is powerful."

Biden hails Israel-Hamas cease-fire, sees 'opportunity'

By AAMER MADHANI and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday hailed the cease-fire in the fighting between Israel and Hamas, saying he sees a "genuine opportunity" toward the larger goal of building a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Biden credited the Egyptian government with playing a crucial role in brokering the cease-fire and said he and top White House aides were intensely involved in an "hour by hour" effort to stop the bloodletting.

"I believe the Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely and securely and enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity and democracy," Biden said. "My administration will continue our quiet, relentless diplomacy toward that."

The president spoke soon after Israel and Hamas announced a cease-fire would go into effect at 2 a.m. local time Friday, ending an 11-day war that caused widespread destruction in the Gaza Strip and brought life in much of Israel to a halt. The fighting killed at least 227 in Gaza and 12 in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Israel accepted the Egyptian proposal after a late-night meeting of his Security Cabinet. Hamas quickly followed suit and said it would honor the deal.

Biden, who spoke to Netanyahu six times in the last 11 days, said Thursday the prime minister credited the Iron Dome missile defense system with limiting the death toll inside Israel. The system is designed to intercept and destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells. Biden said he assured Netanyahu that his administration would work to quickly restock the missile defense system.

Biden and Netanyahu spoke twice Thursday, first after the Israeli Cabinet decided to accept the Egyptian proposal, according to an official familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition on anonymity. There was still about 2½ hours to go before the cease-fire went into effect and both U.S. and Israeli officials were concerned that Hamas could fire another barrage of rockets and unravel the agreement.

As the deadline drew near, Netanyahu called Biden again to let him know he believed the cease-fire was moving forward.

The cease-fire was announced one day after Biden told Netanyahu in a telephone call that he expected

"significant de-escalation" of the fighting by day's end, according to the White House. But the prime minister came right back with a public declaration that he was "determined to continue" the Gaza operation "until its objective is achieved."

Hours before the cease-fire agreement was reached, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the Israelis had "achieved significant military objectives" in their strikes intended to degrade Hamas military capabilities and reiterated that Biden expected the Israelis to start "winding down" their operations.

"We believe the Israelis have achieved significant military objectives that they laid out to achieve in relation to protecting their people and to responding to the thousands of rocket attacks from Hamas," Psaki said.

The White House, according the official, was not concerned by Netanyahu's comments that seemed to contradict Biden's call to de-escalate. The prime minister, administration officials believed, did not want to telegraph to Hamas that he was ready to accept terms to end the violence and was also sending a message to a domestic audience that had become traumatized by the barrage of rocket fire.

Biden, who studiously avoided extensive public comment about the Israeli military strikes through the 11-day conflict, was facing mounting pressure from fellow Democrats to speak out against the Israelis as the death toll climbed in Gaza and tens of thousands of Palestinians were displaced by the aerial bombardment.

Throughout the crisis, Biden, in carefully-worded statements and brief exchanges with reporters, underscored Israel's right to defend itself. But as the death toll and suffering of innocent bystanders in Gaza spread, the position was becoming more difficult to sustain with his Democratic caucus and the international community.

On Tuesday, while in Michigan to visit a Ford facility, Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib confronted Biden on the Detroit airport tarmac and called on him to speak out forcefully against the Israeli strikes. Meanwhile, Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York introduced resolutions to block the sale of $735 million in military weaponry to Israel that's already been approved by the Biden administration.

As the outside calls for Biden to speak more forcefully grew, Biden and top aides privately made the case to Israeli officials that time wasn't on their side in the court of public opinion.

Biden and Netanyahu have known each other for more than 30 years and have frequently butted heads. Their conversations through the crisis were far from scripted and they probed each other on how they were gaming the path forward, according to the official familiar with the leaders' conversations.

Administration officials pointed to Hezbollah's stature rising in the region after their 34-day war with Israel in 2006 to make the case for limiting the time of the military action. Israeli officials pushed back that a slightly prolonged campaign to degrade Hamas' military capabilities was necessary and in their interest, according a person familiar with the talks who was not authorized to discuss them publicly.

Hamas had sought to portray their rocket barrages as a defense of Jerusalem. Israeli officials made the case to the White House that Hamas' message lost resonance as mob violence against Arabs in mixed Israeli cities, including Lod, was tamped down.

Biden, in his remarks Thursday, reiterated that United States continues to "fully support Israel's right to defend itself against indiscriminate rocket attacks" by Hamas and other Gaza-based militants.

Biden also offered condolences for Palestinian lives lost during the conflict and vowed humanitarian aid would quickly flow through the Palestinian Authority, which is in control of the West Bank but not Gaza.

"We will do this in full partnership with the Palestinian Authority, not Hamas ... and in a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal," Biden said.

Experts raise concerns after Texas execution without media

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — While officials with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice are blaming miscommunication for preventing reporters from witnessing the state's first execution in nearly a year, legal and death penalty experts worry it's another example of what they see as a lack of transparency and competency in how the death penalty is carried out in the U.S.

Two reporters, including one with The Associated Press, had been set to witness Wednesday's execution of Quintin Jones at the state penitentiary in Huntsville. But they were not escorted into a viewing room adjacent to the death chamber because a call was never made to summon them.

Jones, condemned for the September 1999 killing of his great-aunt, Berthena Bryant, was executed with no media present. The previous 570 executions carried out since Texas resumed capital punishment in 1982 all had at least one media witness — and it was often an AP journalist.

The AP aims to cover every U.S. execution, one of the gravest procedures carried out by governments, and has for decades because the public has the right to know about all stages of the criminal justice process. The AP often is the sole media presence at U.S. executions, and explains the American death penalty process to the world.

Media witnesses hold government officials accountable when executions are flawed. In recent years, reporters have been able to witness and tell the public about botched or problematic executions in Alabama, Arizona, Oklahoma and Ohio, where inmates could be seen gasping for breath for long periods of time or writhing and clenching their teeth while on the gurney. Reporters have also highlighted efforts by states to prevent the public from knowing the source of lethal injection drugs they use.

An investigation into what led to the miscommunication in Texas continued Thursday, said state Department of Criminal Justice spokesman Jeremy Desel. It was unknown how long the investigation would take to complete.

"We are taking steps to ensure that what happened doesn't happen again in the future," he said.

Desel said the prison agency does not believe any state laws were violated by not having media witness the execution.

The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure does not specifically mention media in connection with witnessing an execution, Desel said.

A part of the Texas Administrative Code — rules and regulations that govern state agencies — lists individuals who are authorized to witness an execution, including a media pool consisting of five reporters. The AP is specifically designated as one of the five pool reporters. Desel said the administrative code "does not mention or use the word must in any way, just that the following persons may be authorized to witness."

In a Thursday tweet, state Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, welcomed the investigation.

"It was 'a mistake' and/or 'a miscommunication' is not acceptable. This is an unfathomable, colossal screw-up and we need answers," he said.

The office of Gov. Greg Abbott did not immediately reply to an email seeking comment.

Robert Dunham, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, said while the administrative code is written in a way to give the state has some deniability as to whether it violated the law, not letting reporters witness Wednesday's execution was a violation of the law and "describing it as anything but that is parsing words."

The mistakes that led to what happened on Wednesday speak to the ability of Texas and the 23 other states that currently have the death penalty to carry out executions, said Dunham, whose group takes no position on capital punishment but has criticized the way states carry out executions.

"Texas has more experience in carrying out executions than any other jurisdiction in the Western Hemisphere and if Texas can make a mistake like this, what confidence can the public have in what other states are doing?" he said.

Joseph Larsen, a Houston attorney who is also on the board of directors of the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas, called the lack of media witnesses "inexcusable" and executions "must be done with complete transparency to maintain the integrity of the judicial process."

"It is not different from requiring that the trial of the person charged be public and witnessed," he said. "Texas officials would like to restrict media access to the extent (most) possible, mostly for political reasons."

Larsen also believes the Texas Department of Criminal Justice violated state law by not having media witnesses on Wednesday.

Executions were once held in front of courthouses and often turned into public spectacles but since they became "more solemn and somber activities" within prison walls, the media has functioned as a way "to

ensure public accountability and to report if anything goes wrong," Dunham said.

No reporters during Wednesday's execution also meant the public wasn't able to get firsthand details from the media about several changes that have been made in the execution procedure.

Accommodations have been made to allow an inmate's spiritual adviser in the death chamber. Last month, prison officials reversed a two-year ban on advisers created after the U.S. Supreme Court halted the execution of an inmate who had argued his religious freedom was being violated because his Buddhist spiritual adviser wasn't allowed to accompany him.

The death chamber has also undergone some renovations, including soundproofing and new paint and carpet.

Dunham said states and the media have an uneasy relationship when it comes to executions as states need the media to preserve the legitimacy of executions while they try to also avoid accountability when things go wrong.

"It's a balance between legitimacy and accountability," he said. "States need the media, but they also want to restrict it."

Reporter's driverless van ride: Cool tech, freaky turns

By JACQUES BILLEAUD Associated Press

CHANDLER, Ariz. (AP) — The annoyed shopper paced around and knocked on the windows of a minivan blocking him from leaving his Costco parking spot. He didn't seem to notice, or care, that there was no one inside.

A colleague and I had called for the Waymo ride — our first in a fully driverless vehicle — and quickly encountered a hiccup: figuring out how to tell it to meet us at the curb.

We ended up spotting the minivan across the bustling parking lot, and hurried over. As we pulled away, the shopper raised his arm and extended his middle finger.

Welcome to the United States' first large-scale ride-hailing service with no backup drivers, which Waymo recently launched in suburban Phoenix.

An AP photographer and I took it for a spin and discovered some impressive technology. Waymo's minivans skillfully adhere to traffic laws and can detect people, vehicles and objects from several hundred yards away.

But amid the advances lurk challenges that developers face as they race to bring autonomous cars to the masses: adapting the machinery to human behavior — and getting passengers to feel at ease without a person behind the wheel.

"The technology is great, but the experience isn't there yet," said Andrew Maynard, a professor at Arizona State University's College of Global Futures who studies the social and ethical aspects of autonomous vehicles and other emerging technologies.

Waymo, a unit of Google parent Alphabet Inc., is one of several companies testing driverless vehicles in the U.S. While there are some low-speed driverless shuttle services in operation, Waymo is the first offering lifts to the public at roadway speeds with no human in the driver's seat who can take over in sticky situations.

During our rides, the minivans slowed for speed bumps and carried out a textbook right-on-red turn. Most impressive was a careful maneuver at a green light where a woman with a walker stood dangerously close to the corner.

But customers in crowded parking lots might find it hard to pinpoint pickup locations without drivers who can call, text or simply watch for them.

A Waymo minivan also made an aggressive turn at a green light that we would have never taken. Another failed to go the requested location, dropping us off about a four-minute walk away.

And watching the wheel turn by itself was, well, eerie.

The company said it is listening closely to customer feedback and acknowledges it needs to improve passenger pickups. It's also working to set the proper expectations with riders and has launched a cam-

paign that provides tips.

Automakers and tech companies were moving quickly to put self-driving vehicles in action in 2018, but a fatal crash involving an Uber test vehicle in Tempe slowed development.

Only recently did the industry show signs of recovery. Still, most experts believe there won't be widespread use for another five years or so, and autonomous vehicles won't be in every major city until at least late this decade.

Waymo started offering autonomous rides to a limited number of customers during 2019 in an early testing program in Arizona. Last fall, it opened its ride-hailing program to anyone seeking a ride within its 50-square-mile (129-square-kilometer) service area covering parts of Chandler, Tempe and Mesa.

Our trip began with a welcome from the minivan — an automated voice correctly pronounced my French first name, which people often mangle. A partition separated the empty front seats from the rest of the vehicle, with a sign saying, "Don't touch the steering wheel."

I felt uneasy as the minivan crept into an intersection and waited for oncoming traffic to pass before making a left turn. It was as if a ghost was handling the steering wheel.

My jitters lifted until minutes later, when we made a bold left turn at another green light.

With several oncoming cars zipping toward us, the minivan darted across the road into a parking lot. Though we didn't come close to crashing, the turn frightened us.

Waymo later examined the maneuver, saying the cameras and remote-sensing technology in a dome atop the minivan had detected the oncoming cars, knew their speed and understood that the vehicle could make the turn safely.

"In your case, it was certainly safe," Saswat Panigrahi, a senior product manager at Waymo, told me.

The company said customers' comments are being used to refine its autonomous driving systems and user interfaces to address such safety concerns.

Its ride-hailing program serves hundreds of passengers each week and offers prices in line with Uber and Lyft. Waymo runs 300 to 400 vehicles in Arizona for the program and testing.

We hailed another Waymo minivan to a public library, but were dropped off on a nearby private street instead. Panigrahi believes the minivan might have been rerouted due to traffic or a road closure in the area.

From there, we tried to catch a ride back to Costco, but Waymo canceled four trip requests and stopped accepting my credit card as a fraud prevention measure, because several requests had been made in a matter of minutes.

With my Waymo account locked up, I requested a ride from another ride-hailing service with a human driver. He warmly chitchatted about his career plans but, when first picking us up, carefully avoided trying to pronounce my name.

Trustee: Nonacademic background halted Hannah-Jones tenure

By TOM FOREMAN Jr. Associated Press

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (AP) — Investigative journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones' tenure application at the University of North Carolina was halted because she didn't come from a "traditional academic-type background," and a trustee who vets the lifetime appointments wanted more time to consider her qualifications, university leaders said Thursday.

The trustee who leads the subcommittee that considers tenure applications, Charles Duckett, chose in January to postpone the review of Hannah-Jones' submission, said Richard Stevens, the chairman of the board of trustees for the Chapel Hill campus. It was never brought before the full board for approval, and instead the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist accepted a five-year appointment to the faculty of the journalism school.

"We're talking about a lifetime position here, so they're not entered into lightly," Stevens told reporters. "And it's not unusual for a member of the board, or in particular the chair of the committee, to have questions for clarification about background, particularly candidates that don't come from a traditional academic-type background. In this case, Chair Duckett asked for a little bit of time to be able to do that."

Faculty members at the university's Hussman School of Journalism already slammed that reasoning in an open letter Wednesday, noting that the last two professors who held Hannah-Jones' chaired position were given tenure when appointed. They said the journalism school's strength lies in its roster of longtime professionals who worked in the industry.

The foundation that endows Hannah-Jones' position, the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism, also urged the school to reconsider its decision.

Stevens and Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said Hannah-Jones could be considered again for tenure before the end of her current five-year contract.

Duckett didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

The university announced in April that Hannah-Jones, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her work on The 1619 Project for The New York Times Magazine, will be joining the faculty in July. Some conservatives have complained about the project, which focuses on the country's history of slavery.

Knight Foundation President Alberto Ibargüen issued a statement noting that while the foundation respects the independence of the universities where it endows chairs, he hopes UNC will reconsider its decision to offer Hannah-Jones a contract position instead of tenure.

"It is not our place to tell UNC or UNC/Hussman who they should appoint or give tenure to," Ibargüen said. "It is, however, clear to us that Hannah-Jones is eminently qualified for the appointment and would urge the trustees of the University of North Carolina to reconsider their decision within the timeframe of our agreement."

The foundation said it established the chaired professorship at UNC in 1984 with a focus on advertising that was later changed to its current subject matter.

Hannah-Jones didn't respond to an email asking for comment. But on Thursday, she tweeted: "I have been overwhelmed by all the support you all have shown me. It has truly fortified my spirit and my resolve. You all know that I will OK. But this fight is bigger than me, and I will try my best not to let you down."

The 1619 Project is an initiative of The New York Times Magazine that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. The magazine describes the project as being designed to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans "at the very center of our national narrative."

The project was converted into a popular podcast. Materials were developed for schools to use and The Pulitzer Center partnered with the Times to develop 1619 Project lesson plans. However, objections to The 1619 Project have morphed into legislative efforts to prevent its presentation in public schools.

US ends use of 2 immigration jails accused of mistreatment

By BEN FOX and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A detention facility in Georgia where women claim they were subjected to unwanted medical procedures and a Massachusetts jail that has drawn complaints of inhumane conditions will no longer be used to detain immigrants, the Biden administration said Thursday.

The Department of Homeland Security said it would terminate contracts with the local government agency that runs the detention center in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, and with the private operator of the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a part of DHS, has already significantly reduced the detainee population at both facilities. Any detainees the U.S. believes should remain in custody will be transferred elsewhere, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in announcing the move, which had been sought by immigrant advocates.

"Allow me to state one foundational principle," Mayorkas said, "We will not tolerate the mistreatment of individuals in civil immigration detention or substandard conditions of detention."

Mayorkas said ending the use of the facilities is part of an effort to make "lasting improvements" to a detention system that advocates have long argued detains people for civil immigration offenses for too long and in inappropriately harsh conditions.

It also reflects a broader effort to roll back the anti-immigrant policies that characterized U.S. policy

under President Donald Trump.

ICE holds about 19,000 noncitizens for removal at about 200 facilities around the country, down about a quarter from a year earlier. About 73 percent of those in custody have no criminal record and many others have only minor offenses, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data-gathering organization at Syracuse University.

DHS suggested additional detention facilities could close in a statement that noted that it would "review concerns" about other centers.

"Today's announcements show the Biden administration's willingness to decisively break from the immigrants' rights abuses of prior administrations," said Naureen Shah, senior advocacy and policy counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union, which recently called for the closure of 39 immigration detention centers around the country.

The ACLU has called for an end to the "default incarceration" of immigrants and an end to the agreements with state and local authorities that enable prisoners who are noncitizens to be transferred into ICE custody for deportation upon release.

Mayorkas has led an effort to soften some immigration policies but has insisted that noncitizens who pose a threat to the public and have committed serious crimes should be detained pending their removal from the country.

The Bristol County Sheriff's Office operated the Massachusetts immigration detention center jail under an agreement with DHS. The Georgia facility was run by a private company under contract with the government.

Members of Congress and advocates have called for the closure of the Georgia facility since last year after women held there told of being forced into unnecessary gynecological procedures amid unsanitary conditions.

DHS and the Justice Department are investigating the allegations of medical mistreatment, which a doctor involved in their treatment has denied, and Mayorkas said that steps will be taken to preserve evidence.

Immigrants held at Irwin also had broader complaints about overall conditions, alleging that authorities at the detention center failed to take adequate measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"Given its extensively documented history of human rights violations, Irwin should have been shut down long ago," said Azadeh Shahshahani, legal and advocacy director for Project South, an advocacy group that has pressed for ICE and the company that runs the facility to compensate any women subjected to unwanted procedures there.

The facility in Ocilla, about 200 miles (320 kilometers) south of Atlanta, has been used to house men and women for ICE as well as inmates for the U.S. Marshals Service and Irwin County. It's run by the private LaSalle Corrections, a Louisiana company.

ICE declined to say how many people are currently being held at Irwin. It has had an average daily population of just under 300 detainees so far in fiscal year 2021, down from an average of over 500 detainees a day two years ago, according to an ICE spokesman.

The company did not immediately respond Thursday to voicemail, email and text messages seeking comment.

Immigrants held at the Massachusetts jail, known formally as the C. Carlos Carreiro Immigration Detention Center, have also complained about a lack of COVID-19 precautions as well as overcrowding and excessive use of force.

The Massachusetts attorney general's office issued a scathing report in December, determining that officers violated the rights of detainees and used excessive force during a disturbance there earlier in the year.

Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson, a Republican who served as honorary chairman of Trump's reelection campaign in Massachusetts, dismissed Thursday's decision as a "political hit job" by the administration and said it puts people at risk of being victimized by immigrants.

There are 7 detainees currently held at the Bristol County jail, down from about 150 early in the pandemic, according to Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, head of Lawyers for Civil Rights, which filed suit against the

government last year to address what it said were unsafe and overcrowded conditions.

Immigrant rights groups have frequently clashed with Hodgson over conditions at the jail, about 60 miles (95 kilometers) south of Boston near Cape Cod, and they cheered the decision as long overdue.

"Sheriff Hodgson has inflicted grievous harm on vulnerable immigrants in his custody for years," said Espinoza-Madrigal. "And we enthusiastically applaud the Biden Administration's decision to put an immediate end to the abuse."

Nervous workers struggle to adjust to new mask policies

By ALEXANDRA OLSON, JOSEPH PISANI AND ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Business Writers

An abrupt relaxation of mask policies has left workers at supermarkets and other stores reeling as they try to sort out what the new environment means for their own safety and relationship with customers.

Kroger, the country's largest grocery chain, became one of the latest to announce that, starting Thursday, workers and customers can stop wearing masks in states where mandates are no longer in effect. Other companies that have adopted similar changes include Amazon, Walmart, Best Buy, Macy's, Costco, Home Depot, Trader Joe's and Target, following updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control.

Some workers have taken to social media to cheer, but many others protested. Some don't trust customers — or their co-workers — to be truthful about their vaccination status since most companies are not requiring proof. Others fear they will be judged if they leave their own masks on, even though their reasons for doing so are varied.

William Stratford, 29, won't be fully vaccinated until next month, but shoppers and co-workers at the home improvement store where he works had been coming in without a mask even before the CDC put out its latest guidance.

He has complained to management and eats lunch in his car to avoid mask-less people in the breakroom. He gets stares from shoppers and co-workers.

"I know for a fact people have a negative opinion of me," said Stratford of Valley Center, California, who asked that the store where he works not be named out of fear of reprisal. "It's become a divisive issue in the workplace."

The CDC last week said fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their final dose of a COVID-19 vaccine — can stop wearing masks outdoors and in most indoor settings. The guidance still calls for people who are not fully vaccinated to continue wearing masks indoors, and for everyone to wear them in crowded indoor settings like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters.

That has left grocery stores, discount chains, restaurants and other employers scrambling to decide whether and how to adjust their own policies. Some companies, including Trader Joe's and Macy's, are allowing vaccinated customers to drop their masks but not employees. Meanwhile, some grocery chains like Safeway are leaving their mask requirements in place.

Some workers worry they have been left to bear the fallout of a confusing jumble of policies. John Bartlett, a meat manager at a Safeway in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, said he is personally relieved that, for now, his store is still requiring masks for everyone but he worries that the policy will make dealing with anti-mask customers even more difficult.

"We have customers who literally cuss at us," said Bartlett, recalling an incident where a man stormed out of the store shouting obscenities after Bartlett pleaded with him to wear a mask. "The country should just have one policy. It would make it easier because we wouldn't have deal with customers who are so rude and awful to us."

The Biden administration had faced pressure to ease restrictions on vaccinated Americans, in part to show the benefits of getting the shot at a time when vaccine demand has started to plateau. Companies are also trying to incentivize their employees to get vaccinated with measures ranging from bonus payments to on-site vaccination drives.

It's unclear if the relaxed mask restrictions will motivate unvaccinated workers to now get their shot. Some may feel more at risk of contracting COVID-19 but others may believe they can enjoy the same

privileges as vaccinated workers because no one is checking.

Amazon is among the few companies requiring employees to show proof they got the shot before going mask-less, asking them to upload a picture of their vaccine card by mid-June. At Walmart, workers who don't wear masks must confirm they are vaccinated by filling out a daily questionnaire, though it is not requiring proof. Still, the company will have some insight into who is vaccinated because workers must show documentation to get a $75 bonus offered to those who get the shots.

Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial International Union, said about 40% of workers who participated in a recent union survey said they were vaccinated. He acknowledged that some many never get the shots, but he said the CDC and companies should have waited a few months to give people more time before shifting the guidance for indoor settings.

Workplace experts warn that a two-tiered mask policy risks sowing resentment and suspicions if not properly implemented.

Kristin White, a workplace safety attorney at law firm Fisher & Phillips LLP, in Denver, Colorado, believes employers should request workers to show proof of vaccination and says that many don't realize they are legally permitted to do so.

"The honor system carries more risk," said White, who has been advising companies on masks during the pandemic.

Interrogating workers on why they are or aren't wearing masks raises privacy concerns.

"Some of those employees may be wearing a mask because they have a disability and they can't get vaccinated; someone may be wearing a mask that is vaccinated but they feel more comfortable wearing a mask," White said.

She is recommending that her clients have a written policy for employees to not ask their peers why they're wearing a face covering. She also says that workers should be trained not tell on each other.

For Bill Easton, the concern is around customers. Easton has been working as a cashier at a Safeway in Aurora, Colorado, for 27 years and he already feels helpless when customers defy his store's mask policy. He fears they will become more emboldened now that mask policies are being relaxed around the country, even though they remain in place in his store.

On the other hand, some of his friendlier, longtime customers announce to him that they are fully vaccinated and give him a big hug. Easton, too, is vaccinated and even though he appreciates the show of affection, it makes him nervous.

"You wonder, do they really have their COVID shot?" he said.

William, Harry condemn BBC over 'deceitful' Diana interview

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince William and his brother Prince Harry on Thursday issued strongly worded statements criticizing the BBC and British media for unethical practices after an investigation concluded that one of the broadcaster's journalists used "deceitful behavior" to secure Princess Diana's most explosive TV interview in 1995.

The circumstances surrounding the interview from more than 20 years ago came under scrutiny after Diana's brother, Charles Spencer, made renewed complaints that journalist Martin Bashir used false documents and other dishonest tactics to persuade Diana to agree to the interview.

The BBC appointed a retired senior judge in November to lead an investigation into the matter. On Thursday, a report from the inquiry said Bashir acted in a deceitful way and breached BBC rules by mocking up fake bank statements and showing them to Charles Spencer to gain access to the princess.

The report also criticized the BBC for covering up what it knew about Bashir's actions, and said the corporation's own probe into the matter fell short of its usual standards of integrity and transparency.

In his statement, William, 38, said the BBC's failures contributed to the deterioration of his parents' marriage and worsened Diana's feelings of paranoia.

"The interview was a major contribution to making my parents' relationship worse and has since hurt

countless others," he said. "It brings indescribable sadness to know that the BBC's failures contributed significantly to her fear, paranoia and isolation that I remember from those final years with her."

In the interview, a major scoop for Bashir, Diana famously said that "there were three of us in this marriage" — referring to Prince Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles. Her candid account of her failing marriage with Charles was watched by millions of people and sent shockwaves through the monarchy.

William alleged that "the deceitful way the interview was obtained substantially influenced what my mother said." He went on to say that Diana "would have known that she had been deceived" had the BBC properly investigated the concerns first raised in 1995.

Harry, meanwhile, said the issue was bigger than just the BBC - and that "the ripple effect of a culture of exploitation and unethical practices ultimately took her life."

"To those who have taken some form of accountability, thank you for owning it. That is the first step toward justice and truth," he wrote. "Yet what deeply concerns me is that practices like these—and even worse—are still widespread today."

The two brothers' relationship has been strained since Harry stepped down from royal duties and moved to the U.S. with his family last year. But both share an almost lifelong difficult relationship with the media, and their statements on Thursday were coordinated for release at the same time.

The BBC's chairman, Richard Sharp, said the corporation accepts the investigation's findings, adding "there were unacceptable failures." The broadcaster has written to the royal family to apologize.

Bashir, who was the BBC News religion editor, left the corporation last week on health grounds. The 58-year-old journalist has been seriously unwell with COVID-19-related complications.

In a statement, he said he deeply regretted faking the bank statements, calling it "a stupid thing to do." But he added that he felt it had "no bearing whatsoever on the personal choice by Princess Diana to take part in the interview."

Spencer alleged Bashir showed him forged bank documents relating to his sister's former private secretary and another former royal household member that falsely suggested the individuals were being paid for keeping the princess under surveillance.

He accused Bashir of using the documents to gain his trust so he would introduce Diana to the journalist. He also alleged that Bashir made up stories about the royal family to strengthen Diana's belief there was a conspiracy against her.

As part of the recent inquiry, a note written by Diana in December 1995 was published for the first time. The note said she had consented to the BBC interview "without any undue pressure" and that she had "no regrets concerning the matter."

John Birt, director-general of the BBC at the time of the interview, called Bashir a "rogue reporter" who "fabricated an elaborate, detailed but wholly false account of his dealings with Earl Spencer and Princess Diana."

"This is a shocking blot on the BBC's enduring commitment to honest journalism; and it is a matter of the greatest regret that it has taken 25 years for the full truth to emerge," he said.

Diana divorced from Charles in 1996 and died in a Paris car crash in 1997 as she was pursued by paparazzi. Charles, the heir to the throne, married Camilla, now the Duchess of Cornwall, in 2005.

"In most organizations, the police would have been called to see if Martin Bashir should have been prosecuted for forgery, and he would have been instantly dismissed for deceit," media lawyer Mark Stephens of law firm Howard Kennedy, who is not involved in the case, said. "Instead, the BBC made him their religious correspondent."

The report released Thursday means the BBC will be subjected to more public scrutiny, he added.

House narrowly approves $1.9B to fortify Capitol after riot

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House on Thursday narrowly approved $1.9 billion to fortify the Capitol after the Jan. 6 insurrection, as Democrats pushed past Republican opposition to try to harden the complex with

retractable fencing and a quick-response force following the most violent domestic attack on Congress in history.

The bill's 213-212 passage came a day after the House approved the formation of an independent commission to investigate the deadly mob siege by President Donald Trump's supporters, who battled police to storm the building in a failed attempt to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's election.

The two measures now face an uncertain outcome in the evenly divided Senate as most Republicans have objected to both. Tensions are running high at the Capitol, with Democrats growing exasperated with Republicans who refuse to acknowledge the severity of the insurrection because of what appears to be their devotion to Trump — and fears of crossing him.

"We have a major political party in the country that's ignoring it — we're trying to solve a problem, they clearly don't want to sit down and talk about it," said Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, chairman of an appropriations subcommittee handling legislative branch security.

At the same time, the idea of bolstered security at the Capitol saddened many lawmakers who said they see no other choice because of the ongoing threats on Congress. Several leading liberal Democrats opposed the security money over concerns about policing, as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic leaders worked the floor during votes to ensure passage.

Together, the package of bills stemming from the domestic assault by Trump supporters on the Capitol reminded some lawmakers of the changes that emerged from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Then, a landmark commission investigated the attack's root causes and authorities hardened the security apparatus across the federal government.

Thursday's vote capped two days of emotionally wrenching debate as the political divide, particularly in the House, has widened in the months since the January assault.

House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro recalled her own experience being trapped in the House gallery that day as the attackers tried to break in, calling her husband to tell him she was OK after Capitol Police told her to duck on the floor.

"This bill is not about politics, it's not about settling scores," DeLauro said. "It's about ensuring that every person who comes into the Capitol is safe and is protected."

Republicans argued that the spending bill is too expensive and no fencing is needed. Many of them said lawmakers should be spending money on border security, not Capitol security.

Rep. Lance Gooden, R-Texas, contended that Democrats would rather spend money on a wall "around this building in D.C." than they would on finishing a border wall advocated by Trump.

Already, National Guard troops have been protecting the building for months and public access is severely limited. Though razor-wire-topped fencing that stood as a stark reminder of the siege has been removed, an extended perimeter fence remains in place, cutting off access to the lush grounds popular with the public.

The Democrats who opposed the security legislation were some of the most liberal in the House. Some have expressed the view that police treat people of color unfairly. Democratic Reps. Cori Bush of Missouri, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota voted against it.

Omar said she had "not been convinced of the importance of the money."

Democratic Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Jamaal Bowman of New York and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan voted "present," effectively saving the measure from going down to defeat.

The chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington, said the lawmakers "wanted to make sure that there were accountability measures" on the security funds. She voted for the bill.

Senate Democrats will not be able to pass either bill on their own in the evenly split 50-50 Senate and could have trouble persuading enough Republicans to vote with them after Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell announced he would oppose the inquiry. Ten GOP senators would need to join Democrats to meet the 60-vote threshold needed to advance legislation. Changes could be made to win over their support.

Months in the making, the emergency spending package incorporates the recommendations from an outside panel of experts to beef up security after the mob attack.

The bill includes money for new fencing — either retractable or "pop in," according to Democrats — that

would protect the grounds. The legislation bars money from being used for permanent above-ground fencing, reflecting the wishes of most members of Congress that the area should be open to the public.

Other changes would fortify windows and doors, install new security vestibules and cameras, and protect members with increased security at home and in Washington, as threats against them have doubled in the last year. There is also money to protect federal judges who are prosecuting the rioters and have received threats, and to repay the Capitol Police and other federal agencies for their efforts on Jan. 6.

Some lawmakers have objected to the proposal for the National Guard to maintain a "quick response force" nearby after it took hours for Guard troops to arrive Jan. 6 as attackers were brutally beating officers.

Leading Republicans on the armed services committees in the House and Senate oppose relying on the troops for the work of protecting the Capitol.

The National Guard Association of the United States said in a statement that the Guard should only be used for law enforcement as a "last resort."

Democrats said they, too, are uneasy with many of the military-like measures, but say they have little choice but to protect the building. The delays in sending the Guard to the Capitol have been blamed in part for the failure to contain the violence. Five people died, including a Trump supporter shot and killed by police as she tried to climb through a broken window to access the House chamber, and a police officer who fought off the mob and died later.

"We've never had a quick response for us here — you know, we've never had an insurrection, either," Ryan said. "So thinking has to evolve in order to try to solve some of these problems."

US jobless claims fall again as some states end federal aid

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer Americans sought unemployment benefits last week — the latest encouraging sign for the rebounding U.S. economy — just as Republican-led states are moving to cut off a federal benefit for the jobless.

Twenty-two states, from Texas and Georgia to Ohio and Iowa, plan to begin blocking a $300-a-week federal payment for the unemployed starting in June, according to an Associated Press analysis. All have Republican governors and legislatures.

Recipients have been able to receive the $300 federal benefit on top of their regular state unemployment aid. The payment, which lasts nationwide until Sept. 6, was included in President Joe Biden's $1.9 trillion financial rescue package.

The states that plan to cut off the federal benefit represent nearly every one that is controlled fully by Republicans. Florida is considering ending the supplemental payment. And Nebraska, which officially has a nonpartisan legislature, has said it will maintain the payments while it evaluates all pandemic-related jobless benefits.

The move is also being considered in two additional states that have Democratic governors, Kansas and Wisconsin, though the Wisconsin governor is likely to veto any rollback passed by the legislature. As a result of the action, about 3.5 million people will have their benefits reduced in the coming months, according to Oxford Economics.

Those cutoffs coincide with a steady decline in the number of Americans seeking unemployment aid, which fell last week to 444,000, a new pandemic low, the Labor Department said Thursday. Jobless claims have now dropped in five of the past six weeks, a sign that the economy keeps strengthening as consumers spend freely again, viral infections drop and business restrictions ease.

In addition to ending the extra payment, most of the same states are also withdrawing from programs that provide jobless aid to self-employed or gig workers and to people who have been unemployed for more than six months.

Among them is Latricia Hampton, who worries that without the $300 weekly federal check, she will fall behind on her mobile phone and internet bills.

"Those smaller bills are what I'm going to have to get rid of," said Hampton, 40, who lives in Gary, In-

diana. "That might not sound like much to some people, but that's another barrier to me finding work. That's my kids who can't do schoolwork at home on the computer."

Hampton had worked at a hair salon near Gary until last April, when it shut down because of the pandemic. Now, she spends hours a day applying for jobs on her phone but has yet to make it past the interview stage. She also has had trouble finding jobs that fit with her two young children's schedules, who are 4 and 8.

"It's not like I can just go pick up a job at McDonald's, and that'll solve my problems," she said. "I have two young kids. They need me, and when I'm not there, they need to be cared for. I'm a working-class single parent. We still need help in this pandemic, not pushed off the edge of a cliff and told to fly again."

About 16 million people were receiving unemployment benefits during the week ending May 1, the latest period for which data is available, the government said Thursday. That is down from 16.9 million in the previous week, and it suggests that some Americans who had been receiving aid have found jobs.

In Oklahoma, Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt said this week that the state will end the federal benefit on June 26. That was unhappy news for Gilbert Cruz and his wife, Marrissa Enloe-Cruz, whose graphic design company in Tulsa has suffered a collapse in business since the pandemic struck.

Both received jobless aid under the program for self-employed. Now, they're unsure what they'll do, especially because they're uneasy about sending their 7-year-old son back to school before being vaccinated.

"It's going to mean picking and choosing what bills to pay, or getting behind on things," Enloe-Cruz said. "It will mean whether or not we're able to put food on the table."

Eliminating the $300-a-week payment is one of several measures that states have taken to restrict or eliminate jobless aid and press more recipients to seek work. That trend gained momentum after the April jobs report, released earlier this month, showed that employers added far fewer jobs than expected, in part because many couldn't find enough workers.

Research suggests that roughly half the unemployed are receiving more income from jobless benefits, when you include the weekly $300 federal supplement, than their former jobs paid them. An analysis by Bank of America found that people who earned under $32,000 at their old jobs are likely now receiving more in unemployment aid than they did from working.

Yet some point to the steady decline in the number of Americans receiving jobless benefits as evidence that most of the unemployed are still willing to take jobs when they're available.

"Today's data indicates that unemployment aid is not keeping workers on the sidelines," said Andrew Stettner, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation. "Emergency unemployment aid is doing what it is meant to do: Serving as a temporary lifeline while workers search for and return to work."

In July last year, four months after the pandemic tore through the economy, roughly twice as many people as now — 32 million — were receiving some form of unemployment benefit, though that figure was likely inflated by fraud. As recently as late February this year, about 20 million people were receiving aid.

Even so, 19 states say they will also cut off all benefits for the self-employed and gig workers, who became newly eligible for jobless aid under a relief package that was enacted in March last year. They will also drop out of a federal program for people who have been out of work for more than six months.

Those moves will end all benefits for approximately 3.6 million of the nearly 16 million people receiving aid — about one in four of current recipients — according to the Century Foundation.

In addition, 35 states have reinstated a requirement that jobless aid recipients search for work in order to keep receiving benefits. That requirement had been suspended at the start of the pandemic, when many businesses were closed and Americans were encouraged to stay at home.

In Dayton, Ohio, work evaporated for Terri Ashman, a house painter, and her husband, Steve, a remodeler, after the pandemic hit in March of last year. They struggled to obtain unemployment benefits because of delays that resulted from a flood of applicants that overwhelmed many state workforce agencies.

Eventually, they did receive aid and began to save money, in part because of the $300-a-week federal payment. By then, they had moved in with Terri's mother after a period of homelessness.

They now have nearly the entire $8,000 payment they need for their new home in Celina, near Dayton. They are required to pay a year's rent because of their credit problems.

But the two have little else saved and were counting on the continued federal payments through September to pay bills. Terri Ashman, 54, just received her second coronavirus vaccine shot, but she struggles with asthma and high blood pressure. She said she is willing to work even minimum wage jobs. But first she needs to get back on her feet.

"We finally were almost able to crawl out of this hole," she said. "Without (the $300), we're going to be living on the edge of the cliff."

Warm welcome for oat milk maker Oatly in Wall Street debut

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Oatly, the world's largest oat milk company, raised $1.4 billion in an initial public offering Thursday on the Nasdaq stock exchange, capitalizing on a global surge in demand for its products.

Oatly priced its shares at $17 apiece ahead of the IPO, giving the company a valuation of nearly $10 billion. It's trading under the ticker symbol "OTLY."

Oatly's shares rose nearly 19% to close at $20.20 Thursday.

It's the latest milestone in the rapid rise of oat milk, which is winning consumers __ and famous investors like Oprah Winfrey __ with the message that it's healthier and more environmentally sustainable than cow's milk. Once a niche product designed for people who were lactose intolerant, Oatly oat milk is now on the menu at Starbucks, in the grocery aisle at Target and sold online by Alibaba in China.

And Oatly, which is based in Malmo, Sweden, thinks oat milk has a lot more growth ahead. Global sales of plant-based dairy substitutes reached $18 billion in 2020, or just 3% of the $600 billion dairy industry, according to Euromonitor.

"The runway's massive," Oatly CEO Toni Petersson said Thursday during a conference call with media.

Like the flexitarians who have fueled the rise of plant-based meat alternatives __ and the successful 2019 IPO of Beyond Meat __ Oatly says more and more consumers are giving its oat-based drinks, yogurt and ice cream a try. In the last three months, between 35% to 40% of adults in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Germany, China and Sweden purchased plant-based milk alternatives, Oatly said.

Oat milk's growth is surpassing other plant-based drinks. U.S. sales of oat milk jumped 131% over the last year, to $304 million, according to Nielsen. U.S. sales of soy milk, rice milk and coconut milk fell over the last year, while almond milk sales rose 9%.

Overall U.S. sales for dairy alternatives grew 15% to nearly $2.2 billion in the 52 weeks ending May 1, according to Nielsen. Almond milk held the largest share of those sales, at 68%. Oat milk was second with a 14% share and soy milk held an 8% share. Coconut milk and rice milk each had less than a 4% share.

Competitors have been watching closely. Greek yogurt maker Chobani began selling oat-based yogurt, oat milk and other products last year. Silk, which started as a soy milk maker in 1977, introduced oat milk in 2018.

Companies are also experimenting with other varieties. Nestle recently launched a milk made from peas, while startups in Israel and Singapore are making cow's milk from cells.

But Petersson said he's confident that oat milk has staying power.

"We're been scanning the world for crops for 30 years and there's nothing more premium out there. We know that oat delivers," Petersson said.

Cara Rasch, an analyst with the market research company Packaged Facts, said oat milk's mild and pleasant flavor __ which blends well with coffee __ is one reason for its success.

Rasch said many consumers also see it as a healthier alternative to dairy milk. One cup of Oatly whole milk has fewer calories, less fat, lower sodium and lower cholesterol than a comparable serving of whole cow's milk. But cow's milk has higher protein, lower carbohydrates and more naturally occurring vitamins and minerals.

Oat milk takes less land and energy to produce than dairy milk, and emits fewer greenhouse gases. But it also beats other plant-based milk alternatives in its environmental impact, according to a 2018 Oxford University study. Rice farming leads to more fertilizer runoff than oat milk, for example, and almond milk requires more water because almond trees are primarily grown in drought-prone California.

"'We're here to make the world better. I know it sounds stupid, but it's true," Petersson said.

Oatly's roots date to 1995, when a group of scientists at Lund University developed the world's first oat milk. The group began selling its milk under the Oatly name in 2001 and gradually added other products, like ice cream and yogurt.

The company grew slowly until 2012, when it appointed a new management team led by Petersson, an outsider who had led several startups. Oatly entered the U.S. market in 2017 and China in 2018.

In 2020, Oatly's revenue more than doubled to $421.4 million. Petersson said Oatly took a hit from the closure of coffee shops due to the coronavirus, but surging grocery and e-commerce sales more than made up for that.

Oatly's full year net loss widened to $60.4 million __ from $35.6 million in 2019 __ as it spent heavily on marketing and increasing production. Oatly currently has four manufacturing plants worldwide, with three more planned or under construction. Petersson said the IPO proceeds will be used to expand production capacity.

A total of 84.4 million Oatly shares were offered in Thursday's IPO. Oatly offered just over 64 million shares, while some of the company's shareholders offered the rest.

Last July, Oatly sold a 10% stake in the company for $200 million to a group of investors led by Blackstone Group. Among those investors are Winfrey, actress Natalie Portman, former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz and Roc Nation, Jay-Z's entertainment company.

Hero intern who helped save Giffords will run for her seat

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Daniel Hernandez Jr., the intern hailed as a hero for helping save the life of then-U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords following an attempted assassination a decade ago, announced Thursday he's running to represent her former district in Congress.

Hernandez was a 20-year-old college student in his first week interning for Giffords when he went to her "Congress on your corner" constituent event where a gunman opened fire killing six and injuring 13, including Giffords, in 2011. He kept the congresswoman conscious and applied pressure to her head wound until paramedics arrived.

His actions were widely praised during a period of shock and unity that gripped the nation. Then-President Barack Obama called Hernandez a hero at a memorial for the victims and also while he a guest at the State of the Union address weeks later.

A Democrat, Hernandez currently represents parts of Tucson in the state House of Representatives. He's developed a moderate profile as one of a handful of Democrats who occasionally cross the aisle to work with Republicans, sometimes to the frustration of more progressive members of his party.

"Gabby Giffords continues to inspire me and I strive to follow her example of service for our community," Hernandez said in a statement announcing his candidacy.

A trauma surgeon who operated on Giffords that day, Dr. Randy Friese, is also running for the former Giffords seat. He now serves with Hernandez in the House. State Sen. Kirsten Engel is also seeking the Democratic nomination.

Arizona's 2nd Congressional District has historically been one of the most competitive in the state. It currently covers parts of Tucson, stretching to the state's borders with Mexico and New Mexico, but the boundaries will change before next year's election due to the every-decade redistricting.

Experts predict busy Atlantic storm season but not like 2020

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The Atlantic hurricane season will be busier than normal, but it's unlikely to be as crazy as 2020's record-shattering year, meteorologists said Thursday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration forecasted that the hurricane season, which runs from June through November, will see 13 to 20 named storms. Six to 10 of those storms will become hur-

ricanes and three to five will be major hurricanes with winds of more than 110 mph (177 kilometers per hour), the agency predicted.

Since 1990, a typical season sees 14 named storms, seven hurricanes and three major hurricanes — a climate normal that has increased in recent decades. There's a 60% chance that this hurricane season will be busier than normal and only a 10% chance it will be below normal, NOAA said.

Lead agency forecaster Matthew Rosencrans said the season looks to be busy because of warmer water, which fuels storms; reduced cross winds that decapitate storms; and more seeds of stormy weather coming off the coast of Africa. There is also no El Nino weather event, the natural temporary warming of the central Pacific that squelches Atlantic hurricane activity, he said.

Atlantic waters are nearly 0.68 degrees (0.38 degrees Celsius) warmer than normal, which is not as hot as 2020 when they were 1 degree (0.56 degrees Celsius) above normal, Rosencrans said.

Last year, there were 30 named storms — so many that meteorologists ran out of names and dipped into the Greek alphabet to identify them. There were 14 hurricanes last year, seven of them major.

Earlier this year, meteorologists decided to ditch the Greek alphabet after the normal list of names runs out, instead creating a special overflow list. Seven of last year's storms caused more than $1 billion in damage.

As if on cue, stormy weather popped up northeast of Bermuda this week, with the National Hurricane Center giving the system a 90% chance of becoming a named storm in the next five days. It would be called Ana and is likely to be short-lived and keep away from land. About half the years in the last decade have had named storms before the June 1 start of hurricane season, Rosencrans said.

Several universities and private weather companies also make hurricane season forecasts, with all of them echoing NOAA's predictions. They predicted 16 to 20 named storms, seven to 10 hurricanes and three to five major hurricanes.

"The latest data and forecasts suggest a slightly more aggressive forecast for 2021 is in order, although still nothing close to what happened in 2020," said Todd Crawford, chief meteorologist at The Weather Company, which is forecasting 19 named storms and four major hurricanes.

The Colorado State University forecast, which is the longest-running seasonal forecast, cited the same reasons as NOAA in predicting 17 named storms, eight hurricanes and four major hurricanes. It says there is a 69% that a major hurricane will hit somewhere in the U.S. coastline this season, which is higher than the average of 52% for the last century. It gives Florida and the Gulf coast a nearly 50-50 chance of being hit by a major hurricane.

The head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency urged Americans in hurricane-prone areas to prepare now, not later. Deanne Criswell said that includes people who live inland because storms are dropping more rain and causing more flooding due to climate change.

Climate change has increased storm's rainfall about 3%, and in the future it could be as much as 10%, Rosencrans said.

Warmer water from climate change increases the number of the strongest hurricanes, but research doesn't show a change in the overall number of named storms from global warming, Rosencrans said.

University of Arizona forecast chief Xubin Zeng said the last decade has been unusually active in the Atlantic.

"We need to ask ourselves if this is part of the natural variability of the system of if we are already seeing impacts of global warming," Zeng said in a press release. "If this is part of the natural variability, then after some overactive seasons, we'd expect activity to quiet down, but every year is kind of crazy in the past few years."

Vax and scratch: NY offers $5M lottery for newly vaccinated

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Anyone who gets vaccinated at select state-run vaccination sites in New York next week will receive a lottery scratch ticket with prizes potentially worth millions, as Gov. Andrew Cuomo tries to boost slowing vaccination rates.

The pilot program will offer prizes from $20 up to $5 million and run from Monday, May 24 to Friday, May 28 at 10 state-run sites, Cuomo said Thursday.

"It's a situation where everyone wins," Cuomo said at a press conference in Buffalo.

The governor said there's a one in nine chance of winning a scratch ticket prize in New York, which is joining other states, including Ohio, with similar lottery incentives. Only residents 18 and older are eligible, according to a press release.

New York also plans to set up pop-up vaccination sites at seven airports across the state for U.S. residents, including airport workers.

New York has fully vaccinated about 43% of its 20 million residents, above the national average of 37.8%.

Still, Cuomo said the pace of vaccinations has slowed: New York has recorded an average of 123,806 daily shots in arms over the past 14 days. That's down 43% from 216,040 as of April 12.

Justice delayed? In wealthy California town, officer kills 2

By JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

DANVILLE, Calif. (AP) — Just past the Village Theatre and a quaint corner chocolate shop is the intersection where Officer Andrew Hall shot and killed a 33-year-old mentally ill man in 2018.

History repeated itself this spring, when Hall fired his gun and killed another 33-year-old mentally ill man on the streets of this wealthy San Francisco suburb.

The Town of Danville is not accustomed to gun violence. This well-manicured place of multimillion-dollar homes regularly tops lists of the safest and wealthiest places to live in California. The two fatal shootings by the same officer in a 2 1/2-year span have now cast a spotlight on Danville, where criminal justice activists say the wheels of justice turned far too slowly and had deadly consequences.

Many of the questions residents are posing at Danville town council meetings and in emotionally charged neighborhood conversations echo those America is asking of policing nationwide. Was the officer's use of deadly force justified or excessive?

Was the officer held accountable? Did racism play a role when Hall, who is white, shot nine bullets into Laudemer Arboleda, an unarmed Filipino man, in 2018, or when he fired a single shot to the head of Tyrell Wilson, a Black homeless man?

And then there's the question that haunts both men's families: Would Wilson be alive today if the criminal justice system had moved faster?

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Around lunchtime on March 11, Wilson was holding a bag from Lucky Supermarket and about to cross a busy intersection when Hall shouted to him.

"Hey buddy. Come here for real quick," the officer yelled. The intersection was empty of cars, and Wilson cut diagonally through it to avoid Hall.

Seconds earlier, Hall had pulled up in his patrol car, responding to three 911 calls the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office said it received about a person throwing rocks off a nearby overpass. The Associated Press reconstructed the encounter, and earlier incidents, through police video footage, interviews and documents including investigation transcripts obtained through public record requests. The Danville police chief, the Contra Costa County sheriff, the county's district attorney and Hall's lawyer declined to be interviewed for this story.

It remains unclear if Wilson was the person throwing rocks, but Hall assumed he was.

"You're jaywalking. You're throwing rocks," Hall said.

Wilson was apparently familiar to Danville police and many in the community as one of the few homeless people, and one of very few Black men, in the town of 45,000. He slept on a bus stop bench in a parking lot; that was the direction Wilson headed as he walked away.

As a boy growing up in a middle-class neighborhood in Riverside, Orange County, Wilson had a promising future, his parents said. He was a good student and excelled at sports, especially track and football; he made the varsity football team as a sophomore.

He was handsome and a bit shy, with "big brown puppy eyes," said his father, Marvin Wilson, a retired correctional officer with the Orange County sheriff's department. As a child he wanted to be "a fireman and a preacher, because he said he wanted to save lives and save souls," his mother, Diane, a retired postal worker, recalled.

But everything changed after a tragic car crash in high school. Wilson and a friend headed one winter afternoon to Big Bear Mountain, about an hour's drive, to go snowboarding, and on the way got hit head-on by a semi truck, his father said. His friend died and Wilson was hospitalized with serious head injuries. After that, he lost his motivation for school, lost his passion for sports. "He lost his joy," his mother said. As an adult, "he just could never stay on track," his father said.

In the months before his death, Wilson's family knew he was homeless and had been prescribed medication for depression or paranoia, they think, which he didn't like taking.

Several Danville residents who would see Wilson at the bus stop described him in interviews as a friendly, peaceful and polite person who usually kept to himself and listened to music. Others objected to his presence, and had urged police on Nextdoor, the social media platform, to remove him from Danville. One resident sympathized with police in a Feb. 10 post, saying the homeless weren't easy to evict: "We can't get rid of homeless people like we exterminate rats."

The next day, on Feb. 11, Danville Police Chief Allan Shields addressed the complaints in a weekly online video chat, where residents asked about "the person at the bus stop." Shields said police had spoken "many, many times" with him, and offered food, shelter and medical help.

Police could not just "move him along" if he hasn't committed a crime, Shields said. "If there was a need to act on that we would, but there is not." Shields did not respond to numerous requests for an interview.

Exactly one month later, Hall confronted Wilson.

The officer radioed for backup as Wilson evaded him. Hall quickened his pace, narrowing the distance between them to several feet. "We're not playing this game, dude," he told Wilson, who turned to face Hall and is seen on video holding a knife.

Wilson kept the knife at his side and verbally challenged Hall but never lunged at him.

"Touch me and see what's up," Wilson said. Hall ordered him to drop the knife and pointed his gun.

"Kill me," Wilson responded, tapping his chest and taking a small step forward.

"Drop the knife," Hall yelled for a second, then third time. Then he fired, a single shot to the face. Wilson fell to the ground and lay motionless as blood pooled around him. His grocery bag fell to the side.

A clerk at Lucky's said earlier that day Wilson bought a cherry pie, a knife and Cheetos, attorneys representing his family said.

Just 32 seconds elapsed from the moment Hall first spoke to Wilson to the moment he fired.

Six weeks later, on April 21, Contra Costa District Attorney Diana Becton announced charges against Hall for manslaughter and assault with a semi-automatic firearm — for the death of Laudemer Arboleda in 2018.

The announcement, a day after a jury convicted Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin of killing George Floyd, came two years and five months after Arboleda's shooting.

And six weeks too late for Wilson, his mother said.

"Why was he still on the street?" Diane Wilson said of Hall. "If they had pulled him off the street until this was settled with the DA, Tyrell would still be here with us now."

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Why did it take so long?

That's the question being asked by the families of Arboleda and Wilson, who have never met but are now united by trauma and a desire to see Hall behind bars.

"He struck again. He killed another person," said Arboleda's mother, Jeannie Atienza, seated in the office of civil rights attorney John Burris. "All this time, there is no justice for my son. And now this."

Burris, whose roster of high-profile police violence cases includes Rodney King and Oscar Grant, is also representing Wilson's family. A year after Arboleda was shot and killed, Burris sent letters in December 2019 to District Attorney Becton, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Francisco and urged them to prosecute Hall.

"I said, 'This looks like murder.' I never heard back from them," Burris said.

Floyd's murder last May sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and racial injustice and prompted more intense scrutiny of police misconduct. Now Burris asks: "Did the wheels move faster because of George Floyd?"

Burris is lobbying the U.S. Department of Justice to examine the two shootings to see if they show a pattern of misconduct and racism by Hall.

"All I know is a Black man and a Filipino man were both killed in a town that is predominantly white," said Burris. The two are the only police shootings in Danville in at least a decade. "This man should be prosecuted, and like Chauvin, he should be in handcuffs for what he did."

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The shootings of Laudemer Arboleda and Tyrell Wilson bear similarities.

In both cases, police were responding to routine calls that escalated quickly when Hall arrived, said Burris. For Wilson, it was not established he had thrown rocks from the overpass, and there were no reports of injuries or accidents from the rock throwing.

"How do you go from reasonable suspicion to murder?" asked Burris. "It's an outrageous shooting, he did not have to kill this man."

In Arboleda's case, police responded on Nov. 3, 2018, to a call about a "suspicious" person knocking on doors in a Danville cul-de-sac. The slim, 5-foot-5 Arboleda, dressed in a gray sweatshirt and black pants, was ringing doorbells and "lingering in the area," the district attorney said in a news release.

Arboleda was driving away when officers tried to initiate a traffic stop. Like Wilson, he tried to avoid police.

Arboleda led officers on a nine-minute, slow-speed chase through tree-lined residential streets. Hall was not involved in the initial pursuit but stopped his vehicle at an intersection to block Arboleda's car, then jumped out and opened fire.

Contra Costa County Sheriff David Livingston, who declined to be interviewed, publicly defended Hall, saying Arboleda was "trying to run down and murder" the officer. A nine-month investigation by the sheriff's office, which contracts police services to Danville, cleared Hall in the shooting with no discipline, finding that Hall used "deadly force to protect his life" and followed department policies.

It was not the first time Hall was investigated and exonerated by the sheriff's office. In 2014, Hall was accused of "brutally attacking" an inmate when he worked at a county jail in the city of Martinez. The inmate, identified as a 6-foot-3 Black man in his booking sheet, said Hall rammed him face-first into a door while he was handcuffed and repeatedly punched him in the face and side. The inmate was treated for a fractured eye socket and needed stitches in his lip. An internal probe by the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office found no evidence of unreasonable force.

In contrast to the account by Hall and the sheriff's office, police video shows that Hall stepped into the path of Arboleda's moving car at the last moment, as he was slowly maneuvering around Hall's vehicle. Hall fired 10 shots into Arboleda's windshield and passenger window. Nine bullets hit Arboleda; the fatal shot pierced his heart, the coroner's report said.

Hall noted that Arboleda appeared "very dazed" as if he was "mentally not understanding what was going on," he told investigators, according to an interview transcript. He said he feared Arboleda was "going to ram into me and kill me."

District Attorney Becton, who declined to be interviewed, said in a statement accompanying the April 21 charges that Hall's actions underscore the need to improve de-escalation training and response to people suffering from mental illness.

"Officer Hall used unreasonable and unnecessary force when he responded to the in-progress traffic pursuit involving Laudemer Arboleda, endangering not only Mr. Arboleda's life but the lives of his fellow officers and citizens in the immediate area," the statement said.

Two experts on police use of force, who analyzed the video of both shootings, told the AP that Hall made a series of poor tactical decisions.

"In my opinion, in both cases the use of force was not necessary," said Timothy T. Williams Jr., who spent nearly 30 years with the Los Angeles Police Department.

In Wilson's case, "There was a threat, he had the knife in his hand, but it wasn't an imminent threat that justified lethal force," Williams said.

A 2019 California law restricts officers from using deadly force unless it's necessary to prevent an immediate threat to someone's life or to catch a person fleeing after committing a violent felony.

In Arboleda's case, Hall placed himself in harm's way then used lethal force, Williams said.

Brian Higgins, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and a former police chief in Bergen County, New Jersey, agreed.

"The general rule is you don't shoot at moving vehicles," Higgins said, adding that in this case Hall appeared to have put his fellow officers in the line of fire. Contra Costa County bans shooting at moving vehicles except to save an officer's life or that of another person.

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Nobody knows exactly why Arboleda or Wilson ended up in Danville. In both cases, their families say, mental illness played a role.

Arboleda was working long hours as an Amazon courier and taking online coding classes that he hoped would help him get a job at Kaiser Permanente, where his mother worked for years as a medical secretary. The schedule was wearing him down, physically and mentally, said his sister, Jennifer Leong.

"He was overwhelmed and tired, he was working so hard," Leong said.

At the same time, Arboleda wanted more independence. He was living with his mother in Newark, California, and wanted his own apartment. His family believes that's why he went to Danville, about an hour's drive away, ringing doorbells and searching for the property manager of his mother's condominium, who lived there.

Arboleda had periodically shown signs of depression, but only began displaying concerning behavior in the months before his death. At times he would wrap himself in plastic bags, put duct tape on his forehead if he had a headache; he told his family he was hearing voices and once, in April 2018, he uncharacteristically threatened to hurt his mother.

His mother called police, who took Arboleda to a psychiatric hospital where he was involuntarily committed for three weeks and prescribed medication for psychosis and schizophrenia.

"When he came out, he was different," his sister said. Arboleda disliked how the medication made him feel and refused to take it.

Troubling behavior continued, along with more calls to police. When officers would arrive, Arboleda would run away, his mother said. He feared they would force him to return to the hospital.

His family is not surprised that Arboleda fled the police in Danville. "He was afraid of police. I know that he was just trying to get away," said his mother. "He is like a child, he just wanted to get away from the situation."

Wilson's parents believe he chose Danville because it reminded him of home.

"He grew up in a really quiet neighborhood, where you see kids playing in the middle of the street, the type where you see people after the sun goes down walking their dogs at 11 at night," his mother said.

"The environment where Tyrell was killed was the environment he grew up in. He felt comfortable there."

EXPLAINER: How did Hamas grow its arsenal to strike Israel?

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — In this fourth war between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers, the Islamic militant group has fired more than 4,000 rockets at Israel, some hitting deeper in Israeli territory and with greater accuracy than ever before.

The unprecedented barrages reaching as far north as the seaside metropolis of Tel Aviv, coupled with drone launches and even an attempted submarine attack, have put on dramatic display a homegrown arsenal that has only expanded despite the choke hold of a 14-year Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the coastal strip.

"The magnitude of (Hamas) bombing is much bigger and the precision is much better in this conflict," said Mkhaimar Abusada, a professor of political science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza City. "It's shocking

what they've been able to do under siege."

Israel has argued that the blockade — which has caused severe hardship for more than 2 million Palestinians in Gaza — is essential for preventing a Hamas arms build-up and cannot be lifted.

Here's a look at how, despite intense surveillance and tight restrictions, Hamas managed to amass its cache.

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FROM CRUDE BOMBS TO LONG-RANGE ROCKETS

Since the founding of Hamas in 1987, the group's secretive military wing — which operates alongside a more visible political organization — evolved from a small militia into what Israel describes as a "semi-organized military."

In its early days, the group carried out deadly shootings and kidnappings of Israelis. It killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings during the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, which erupted in late 2000.

As violence spread, the group started producing rudimentary "Qassam" rockets. Powered partly by molten sugar, the projectiles reached just a few kilometers (miles), flew wildly and caused little damage, often landing inside Gaza.

After Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Hamas assembled a secret supply line from longtime patrons Iran and Syria, according to Israel's military. Longer-range rockets, powerful explosives, metal and machinery flooded Gaza's southern border with Egypt. Experts say the rockets were shipped to Sudan, trucked across Egypt's vast desert and smuggled through a warren of narrow tunnels beneath the Sinai Peninsula.

In 2007, when Hamas fighters pushed the Palestinian Authority out of Gaza and took over governing the coastal strip, Israel and Egypt imposed their tight blockade.

According to the Israeli military, the smuggling continued, gaining steam after Mohammed Morsi, an Islamist leader and Hamas ally, was elected president of Egypt in 2012 before being overthrown by the Egyptian army.

Gaza militants stocked up on foreign-made rockets with enhanced ranges, like Katyushas and the Iranian-supplied Fajr-5, which were used during the 2008 and 2012 wars with Israel.

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A HOMEGROWN INDUSTRY

After Morsi's overthrow, Egypt cracked down on and shut hundreds of smuggling tunnels. In response, Gaza's local weapons industry picked up.

"The Iranian narrative is that they kick-started all the missile production in Gaza and gave them the technical and knowledge base, but now the Palestinians are self-sufficient, said Fabian Hinz, an independent security analyst focusing on missiles in the Middle East. "Today, most of the rockets we're seeing are domestically built, often with creative techniques."

In a September documentary aired by the Al-Jazeera satellite news network, rare footage showed Hamas militants reassembling Iranian rockets with ranges of up to 80 kilometers (50 miles) and warheads packed with 175 kilograms (385 pounds) of explosives. Hamas militants opened unexploded Israeli missiles from previous strikes to extract explosive materials. They even salvaged old water pipes to repurpose as missile bodies.

To produce rockets, Hamas chemists and engineers mix propellant from fertilizer, oxidizer and other ingredients in makeshift factories. Key contraband is still believed to be smuggled into Gaza in a handful of tunnels that remain in operation.

Hamas has publicly praised Iran for its assistance, which experts say now primarily takes the form of blueprints, engineering know-how, motor tests and other technical expertise. The State Department reports that Iran provides $100 million a year to Palestinian armed groups.

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THE ARSENAL ON DISPLAY

The Israeli military estimates that before the current round of fighting, Hamas had an arsenal of 7,000 rockets of varying ranges that can cover nearly all of Israel, as well as 300 anti-tank and 100 anti-aircraft

missiles. It also has acquired dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles and has an army of some 30,000 militants, including 400 naval commandos.

In this latest war, Hamas has unveiled new weapons like attack drones, unmanned submarine drones dispatched into the sea and an unguided rocket called "Ayyash" with a 250-kilometer (155-mile) range. Israel claims those new systems have been thwarted or failed to make direct strikes.

The Israeli military says its current operation has dealt a tough blow to Hamas' weapons research, storage and production facilities. But Israeli officials acknowledge they have been unable to halt the constant barrages of rocket fire.

Unlike guided missiles, the rockets are imprecise and the vast majority have been intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. But by continuing to frustrate Israel's superior firepower, Hamas may have made its main point.

"Hamas is not aiming for the military destruction of Israel. Ultimately, the rockets are meant to build leverage and rewrite the rules of the game," Hinz said. "It's psychological."

Big gaps in vaccine rates across the US worry health experts

By COLLIN BINKLEY, JAY REEVES and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. (AP) — A steady crowd of people flowed into the New England Patriots' stadium for their second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine this week in Massachusetts, which is nearing its goal of vaccinating more than 4 million and plans to close its biggest clinics in little more than a month.

In the Deep South, meanwhile, one of the largest clinics in Alabama shut down Wednesday and others will follow in the coming weeks because demand for the shot has plunged.

"They didn't have long enough to test it," said James Martin, 68, explaining why he has no plans to get the vaccine as he stopped for cigarettes at a convenience store in Clanton, Alabama. "They don't know what the long-term effect is. That's what makes me skeptical."

A month after every adult in the U.S. became eligible for the vaccine, a distinct geographic pattern has emerged: The highest vaccination rates are concentrated in the Northeast, while the lowest ones are mostly in the South.

Experts say the gap reflects a multitude of factors, including political leanings, religious beliefs, and education and income levels.

Close to 160 million Americans -- 48% of the population -- have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 125 million are fully vaccinated against the virus.

New England and Northeastern states account for eight of the top 10 in vaccination rates, with Vermont No. 1 as of last Friday, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nearly 64% of its population has received as least one dose.

Following right behind are Massachusetts, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New Mexico, all of them at 54% or higher.

Eight Southern states are in the bottom 10, all of which are under 40%. Mississippi was dead last at 32%, followed by Louisiana, Alabama, Wyoming, Idaho, Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, West Virginia and South Carolina.

Closing the gaps is vital to controlling the virus that has killed 588,000 people in the U.S., health experts say. The vaccination drive has helped drive U.S. cases down to their lowest level since last June, at around 30,000 a day on average, and reduced deaths to about 570 a day, a level not seen since last July.

"Low vaccination rates will leave room for the virus to circulate, re-emerge and possibly form new variants," said Tara Kirk Sell, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "High vaccination rates are critical to keeping the disease under control, especially when we get back to the fall and winter."

The divides aren't just limited to states — there are marked differences between urban and rural places, from county to county and from one neighborhood to another.

The disparities are even more glaring when looking at individual places around the U.S.: Vermont has four counties where 75% of the residents have had at least one dose, while there are 11 Mississippi coun-

ties with under 25% vaccinated.

Roddy Carroll has seen both sides from where he works in technology sales in Atlanta and where he grew up in northern Georgia. "There's a pretty stark difference," he said.

Back home in rural Murray County, only 1 in 4 residents have rolled up their sleeves for a shot. Carroll blames conservative politicians for sowing doubts that have made people reluctant.

"They're more willing to listen to conspiracy theorists than doctors who know how vaccines work," he said. "You're talking about people you've known all their life. But you hear them say those things, and you think, `How well did I know them?'"

Those anti-vaccine beliefs have led to some uncomfortable conversations with his family, Carroll said. "I don't know anybody who hasn't had tense moments like that," he said.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said the gaps in COVID-19 vaccination can be traced directly to political influences, particularly what he called "anti-science" attitudes among Republican leaders, who were skeptical about the value of masks, too.

Getting more people vaccinated will take continued education, incentives and "head-on" confrontation of misinformation, Topol said.

He expects U.S. regulators to grant full approval to the vaccines soon, which will give employers, the military and health systems the green light to require vaccination. "That will make the biggest difference," Topol said.

Gail Borel, of Plymouth, Massachusetts, a nurse who arrived with her husband at Gillette Stadium on Wednesday to get their second doses, said she was initially reluctant. But she said she decided to go through with it after her employer said she could be held liable if she refused the vaccine and got patients sick.

Her husband, Tom, didn't share her concern.

"Everybody I know just wants to get it over with. If this is the path to get it over with, then this is what we're willing to do," he said. "I just want this to be over. It's how we stop wearing masks and how people stop getting sick."

In Massachusetts, where 62% have had at least one dose, there has been little resistance to public health orders during the pandemic, and state leaders have kept tight restrictions on gatherings and businesses, drawing praise from officials such Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert.

Some credit the success to the state's deep ties to education and health care. The Boston area alone has dozens of universities, including Harvard and MIT, and scores of biotechnology companies, including the vaccine maker Moderna.

Nationwide, rural counties are behind urban places in their COVID-19 vaccination efforts — 39% of adults in rural counties had received at least one shot compared with 46% in urban counties as of April 10, according to an analysis released Tuesday by the CDC.

The rural-urban gap exists among women, men and both younger and older adults, the CDC said.

In Alabama's Chilton County, a peach-farming area, the longtime mayor of Clanton died of the virus last year along with 85 others in the county. Yet less than 17% of its population is fully vaccinated, giving it one of the lowest rates in the state.

Store clerk Kim Pierce said she isn't getting a shot despite knowing as many as 30 people who developed COVID-19 and two who died. Besides, Pierce said, she hasn't gotten sick despite not wearing a mask and working in a busy gas station just off Interstate 65.

"Basically I think it's just scamming. I don't think it's any worse than the flu," she said.

Recent high school graduate Abby Calhoun said she sees few people wearing masks these days.

"We are from Alabama and we are in the country, so these older folks don't believe in COVID-19," she said.

Calhoun got sick and lost her sense of taste and smell in the fall, forcing her to quarantine for two weeks. She is among the unvaccinated, but she might get a shot before going to college in the fall.

"I just haven't had time to stop by and get it," she said.

DIARY: Fleeing bombs, trying to endure in a city under fire

By FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Are the Israeli airstrikes following us? If you're in Gaza City these days, no matter who you are, that's an easy thing to believe.

No one knows where the next explosion will be, or when. Getting an hour's notice from the Israeli military may save some lives, but not all airstrikes are preceded by warnings. And the constant sound of bombing fuels the pervasive dread that at any moment, any place — including the one right where you're standing — could become the next target and, shortly afterward, be wiped from the landscape.

In the past week, I have lost my family farm to an airstrike. The building I worked in for many years — longtime location of The Associated Press and Al-Jazeera in my native Gaza City — was leveled an hour after the Israeli military ordered occupants to evacuate. We managed to flee and escape unscathed, at least physically.

And on Wednesday morning, as another day of bombardment in Gaza began — as Israel and Hamas continued to exchange fire — I thought I was going to lose my home, too.

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Shortly after 9 a.m., my cellphone rang and awakened me. I looked at the number. It was my mother, calling from the apartment next door, where she lives.

I wondered through my grogginess: Why is she calling me at this time? She knows I stay up until dawn filing news reports about the ongoing war.

As I prepared to answer, I realized: Not only was my mother calling me, but she was standing right in front of me in my bedroom, too. She'd come directly in, through the apartment door that I leave unlocked in case there's an emergency and my family can't reach me by phone.

Something was amiss. I saw immediately what she was carrying: the "emergency bag" found in every house in Gaza. Such bags are filled with passports, IDs, personal items and the things we don't want to lose under the rubble if the house is bombed.

Al-Andalus Tower is being targeted, my mother said. If true, this was very bad news.

The imposing building sits just 30 meters (yards) from the apartment building where my mother, various uncles, cousins and I live — the only central location in my life still intact after the past week of disarray. Our building is six floors high; if the 15-story Al-Andalus was brought down, it could fall on our home and crush it.

That's not just idle speculation. For us, there's terrifying precedent behind it.

In the 2008-09 war, Israel bombed Al-Andalus repeatedly, destroying half of it (it was later rebuilt). We had evacuated our building back then because a ground invasion was underway and tanks were close.

When we returned after the January 2009 cease-fire took effect, our building had been damaged badly. Windows were blown out. Flying debris had torn the curtains. Light fixtures were smashed and furniture broken.

All of this ricocheted through my mind on Wednesday morning as my mother's words sank in. I rose, gathered myself, dressed and moved fast. My extended family was in peril. They needed me.

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Sometimes, you downplay the danger. Sometimes it's simply what you have to do.

That's what I did this time with my uncles and their children when I found them all in the stairwell, hurrying down, deeply uncertain. Go to the basement, I exhorted: Maybe this is just a rumor. It might be a false warning. I told them I'd stay upstairs, seek out the facts and make sure that everything was OK.

Everything should be fine, I told them. I wondered when I would actually feel as confident as I was trying to sound.

They headed downstairs, leaving behind apartments with the front doors left open to reduce the concussive effects of bombs and the air they might push through the doorways. I stayed in my mother's apartment next door to mine. It had a view, and I am, after all, a person whose job it is to observe and chronicle what is happening.

Shortly afterward, I was speaking with an editor about coverage plans. Suddenly, my world shook. An

explosion. I looked out the window and saw smoke rising from the roof of Al-Andalus. I hung up and realized it was time for me to go to the basement, too. More explosions were coming.

Understand: At this moment, I was not directly worried about my own building. The Israelis say they are looking for Hamas targets. There is no Hamas in my apartment house. Of this I am certain.

Everyone in our building is known. We don't have strangers who could be potential targets. I know my cousins. I know my uncles. I know everyone. They are my family. They are not part of any factions. They are not members of Hamas. Some of them have permits to enter Israel.

Because of all this, I have held to a belief that my building is safe. But I cannot speak for the buildings nearby. I have no idea who lives in Al-Andalus or why the building — which has remained largely empty since it was rebuilt — might have been targeted. And as I have come to believe, there is no safe place in Gaza.

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I ran down to the basement and was astonished to find it empty. I was confused. That's where they had all been headed. Where had they gone? Were they safe? Or had they fled and been caught up in some of the chaos?

I rushed outside, looked around. I was worried, nervous, afraid — but not frantic. Being frantic does you no good in a place where frantic things can be visited upon you from the sky at unexpected moments.

I found my family outside, in the open street, about 200 yards (meters) away from the building. It was not far, but it was far enough to be out of reach of what was happening to Al-Andalus, which was being targeted for sure.

As we watched, another powerful explosion hit the structure. More black smoke rose, but the building still stood. There was none of the heavy damage that an F-16 bomb would do — as it had with our office building just four days earlier.

The building's roof and some apartments on its top floor had been hit from the side furthest from our building. And our apartments? They were intact, untouched, left to stand at least another day.

Some of my younger relatives were terrified, including my little 5-year-old nephew. We sent him to my sister's house, driven there by my brother. And the rest of us? Slowly, deliberately, tentatively, we carried our emergency bags back into our building. And we contemplated the words that are shaping our days: Evacuate. Flee. Bomb. Explosion.

We wanted to nudge things back toward normal. We realized that we had no power to do so.

And so we watch, emergency bags packed, wondering when the next word of an explosion will turn out to be only a rumor — or, worse, when the next rumor moving from one set of lips to another set of ears will become a real explosion that will change more lives here forever.

Putin to would-be aggressors: 'Will knock their teeth out'

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin alleged Thursday that some of the country's foreign foes dream about biting off pieces of the country's vast territory, warning that Moscow would "knock their teeth out" if they ever try.

In strong remarks during a conference call with officials, the Russian president noted that foreign efforts to contain Russia date from centuries ago.

"In all times, the same thing happened: once Russia grew stronger, they found pretexts to hamper its development," Putin said, alleging that some critics of Russia who he didn't name have argued that it's unfair for it to keep its vast natural riches all to itself.

"Everyone wants to bite us or bite something off us, but those who would like to do so should know that we would knock their teeth out so that they couldn't bite," the Russian leader said. "The development of our military is the guarantee of that."

The Kremlin has made the modernization of the country's armed forces a top priority amid tensions in relations with the U.S. and its allies. Russia-West ties have sunk to post-Cold War lows over Moscow's

2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, accusations of Russian meddling in elections, hacking attacks, and other issues.

Putin said that Western sanctions against Russia are continuing a longtime historic trend of containing a powerful rival, citing Russian Czar Alexander III who charged that "everyone is afraid of our vastness."

"Even after we lost one-third of our potential" when former Soviet republics became independent after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, "Russia is still too big for some," Putin said.

"No matter what we do, no matter how we try to satisfy the appetites of those who are trying to contain us, the containment will continue because many of our opponents just don't want such a country as Russia," Putin said. "But we, citizens of the Russian Federation need it, and we will do everything to not just preserve but strengthen it."

He claimed that Russia now has the most modern strategic nuclear forces compared to other nuclear powers, including such state-of-the-art weapons as the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle.

The military has said that the Avangard is capable of flying 27 times faster than the speed of sound and making sharp maneuvers on its way to target to dodge the enemy's missile shield.

It has been fitted to the existing Soviet-built intercontinental ballistic missiles instead of older type warheads, and the first unit armed with the Avangard entered duty in December 2019. The military said that in the future Avangard could be fitted to the prospective heavy missile called Sarmat that is under development.

Putin has also touted other prospective weapons, including the Poseidon atomic-powered underwater drone armed with a nuclear weapon that is capable of generating devastating tsunami waves near an enemy coast. Its tests are continuing.

Putin has charged that the country has succeeded in revamping its arsenals without inflicting too heavy a burden on the national economy by carefully choosing the military priorities.

He noted that Russia this year is set to spend an equivalent of $42 billion on defense, compared to the Pentagon's budget topping $700 billion.

"We have managed to support our armed forces without militarizing the state budget, and we will continue doing so," Putin said.

Teen baker sweetens lives making desserts for those in need

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and EMILY LESHNER Associated Press

Vedika Jawa's mission to sweeten the lives of those in need began when she was just 13, on a family trip to San Francisco. She could not help but see the multitudes living on the streets.

She returned home to Fremont, California, determined to help. Reaching out to homeless shelters, she offered to bake sweet treats. Some managers ignored her; others told her to come back when she was older. But she persisted.

Jawa organized a neighborhood bake sale, collected ingredients in her school and contacted a shelter's CEO, who eventually allowed her to bake for residents. That was the start of Bake4Sake, her student-run nonprofit that distributes desserts to those in need.

During the pandemic, the project expanded from a handful of friends who helped her bake in her hometown to more than 100 volunteers who now work with 15 homeless shelters in 10 locations across the United States.

"Even though these people get access to meals from food banks and shelters, they often don't have access to desserts," said Jawa, now a 16-year-old high school junior .

"We know that they're going through a really difficult time at this moment. And so, we just want to add a little bit of joy in their lives and show them that they're cared for and loved."

At the onset of the pandemic, her work seemed to come to a halt. Some shelters could no longer take the baked goods because they needed to follow regulations to curb the spread of COVID-19.

But she didn't let it stop her. Through the local food bank South Hayward Parish, she eventually was allowed to deliver the desserts. She also created an Instagram Bake4Sake account, hoping to find more

volunteers.

"Instead of just getting responses from my classmates, I actually started getting responses from high schoolers in different states, in different cities," she said.

Now, she hopes that even more people will be encouraged to join her project and open their own chapters of Bake4Sake at a time when illness, job loss and business closures across America have caused a food insecurity crisis.

"So many people have lost their loved ones due to this pandemic. So many people have lost their jobs," Jawa said. "We think that a simple act of kindness can go a long way for someone who is facing such a difficult time."

Justin Fairfax's bid for governor has observers asking: Why?

By SARAH RANKIN Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Virginia's lieutenant governor, Justin Fairfax, has long had lofty political ambitions, and even after being accused by two women of sexual assault he's pressing forward with a bid for governor.

The women's allegations, which he's spent two years trying to refute, are a dark cloud over what might have otherwise been a strong campaign, making it nearly impossible to fundraise or secure endorsements. Outside observers say there's no way he can win, raising the question of why he's running.

Fairfax's first answer when asked: "I think it's important to stand up for the truth."

His team acknowledges that the allegations, which exploded into public view in 2019 and have not resulted in criminal charges, have changed the state of the race. But Fairfax insists voters, particularly those who are Black like him, will see through what he insists -- without proof -- is a smear campaign.

"I've had many African American mothers and grandmothers, come up to me and say, you know, I've lived through this. I've seen men marched out of homes on false accusations and we never hear from them again. So there is a particular history here," Fairfax said.

To his critics, Fairfax's candidacy is just an attempt to regain legitimacy and rehab his image.

"He's running to try to clear his name and at the same time wield even greater power over his accusers and those who have criticized him," said Adele McClure, his former policy director, who resigned over the allegations.

A former federal prosecutor and civil litigator, Fairfax unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for attorney general in 2013, then won the race for lieutenant governor in 2017. The job pays about $36,000 a year and involves considerable tedium as the procedural conductor of the Senate, a task Fairfax handles with verve and efficiency. It's one of only three statewide elected offices in Virginia, and can be a launching pad to higher office.

For a brief period in 2019 — when Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam became engulfed in a scandal over a racist photo on his medical school yearbook page — Fairfax seemed poised to become governor without ever running. Northam faced nearly unanimous calls to resign.

Then Fairfax's accusers came forward.

Vanessa Tyson said Fairfax -- at the time a Columbia Law School student serving as an aide to Democratic vice presidential nominee John Edwards -- forced her to perform oral sex in his hotel room during the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004. Two days after Tyson's statement, Meredith Watson issued her own, accusing Fairfax of raping her in 2000, when they were students at Duke University.

The Associated Press generally does not name people who say they are victims of sexual assault, but both women came forward publicly.

Fairfax adamantly denied the allegations, saying the encounters were consensual. He refused loud calls to resign and now says he's done all he can to clear his name.

He's requested law enforcement investigations, which were never opened as far as he knows. He's taken lie-detector tests and released the results. He's talked relentlessly about the situation, including in hours of on-the-record interviews for this story. He's filed a federal defamation lawsuit against CBS News over

its interview with his accusers, now pending before a federal appeals court.

He also decided to share a sensitive detail: He says a third person was in the room for the entirety of the encounter with Watson, who has also accused another Duke student of rape.

Fairfax says the other person in the room spoke with him and several of his friends after Watson raised her allegations, saying they were false. This person has not responded to interview requests from the AP, which could not independently confirm the claim that there was an eyewitness. The friends Fairfax cited couldn't be reached by the AP.

Watson and her attorney have not commented on whether a third person was present and a spokesman did not respond to an inquiry from AP for this story. The outcome has been the same with other news outlets that have asked.

Fairfax calls the nondenial exonerating.

"It's dramatically unfair what's been done — to publicly accuse someone of something so serious, for it to be false, and then to simply walk away," he said.

As for Tyson, who also declined an interview request through her attorneys, Fairfax says they stayed in touch after the encounter and she once asked him to meet her mother. In her initial statement, Tyson said they never spoke again.

Most Democrats, including his opponents in the race, don't seem to want to talk about Fairfax. He finds himself stuck in a kind of political limbo, dancing around the edges of the establishment -- like when he shared an elbow bump with Northam at a recent event celebrating marijuana legalization — but not fully welcomed back into the fold. Some of his critics have asked why he's even been invited to fundraising events and debates.

While some polling has shown the 42-year-old married father of two running a distant second to former Gov. Terry McAuliffe in the five-way Democratic field, his fundraising has been bleak. He raised around $25,000 in cash in the last quarter, while McAuliffe raised more than $4 million. Also competing are state Sen. Jennifer McClellan, former Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy and Del. Lee Carter.

Fairfax has a tiny campaign staff, no big endorsements, a mostly empty website and a fairly quiet social media presence.

"I just cannot construct a scenario where he's competitive," said Quentin Kidd, a political science professor at Christopher Newport University.

During their first debate, it was Fairfax who raised the allegations in headline-grabbing fashion.

While answering a question about the future of law enforcement, he said: "Everyone here on this stage called for my immediate resignation, including Terry McAuliffe three minutes after a press release came out. He treated me like George Floyd, he treated me like Emmett Till, no due process, immediately assumed my guilt."

The comparison to the victims of extrajudicial killings was not well received.

Tyson, now a political science professor at Scripps College in California who in 2019 mounted an unsuccessful bid for a California Assembly seat, tweeted that night in response: "My primary concern was (and remains) the good people of the Commonwealth of Virginia. I believe they deserve better, and that they have a number of phenomenal candidates to choose from."

Voters will get a chance to decide soon: The primary is June 8.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, May 21, the 141st day of 2021. There are 224 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 21, 1932, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean as she landed in Northern Ireland, about 15 hours after leaving Newfoundland.

On this date:

In 1471, King Henry VI of England died in the Tower of London at age 49.

In 1542, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto died while searching for gold along the Mississippi River.

In 1868, Ulysses S. Grant was nominated for president by the Republican national convention in Chicago.

In 1881, Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross.

In 1910, a year-old Jewish settlement near the port city of Jaffa adopted the name Tel Aviv (Hebrew for "Hill of Spring").

In 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh landed his Spirit of St. Louis monoplane near Paris, completing the first solo airplane flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 33 1/2 hours.

In 1941, a German U-boat sank the American merchant steamship SS Robin Moor in the South Atlantic after the ship's passengers and crew were allowed to board lifeboats.

In 1955, Chuck Berry recorded his first single, "Maybellene," for Chess Records in Chicago.

In 1972, Michelangelo's Pieta, on display at the Vatican, was damaged by a hammer-wielding man who shouted he was Jesus Christ.

In 1979, former San Francisco City Supervisor Dan White was convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the slayings of Mayor George Moscone (mahs-KOH'-nee) and openly gay Supervisor Harvey Milk; outrage over the verdict sparked rioting. (White was sentenced to seven years and eight months in prison; he ended up serving five years and took his own life in 1985.)

In 1982, during the Falklands War, British amphibious forces landed on the beach at San Carlos Bay.

In 1991, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated during national elections by a suicide bomber.

Ten years ago: Shackleford won the Preakness, holding off a late charge from Kentucky Derby-winner Animal Kingdom to win as a 12-1 underdog.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama departed on a weeklong, 16,000-mile trip to Asia, part of his effort to pay more attention to the region and boost economic and security cooperation. The U.S. conducted a drone strike in Afghanistan that killed Taliban leader Mullah Mansour.

One year ago: President Donald Trump visited a Ford Motor Co. plant outside Detroit that had been repurposed to manufacture ventilators; he did not publicly wear a face mask but said he had worn one while out of public view. A Michigan judge sided with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in a challenge by Republican lawmakers to her authority to order sweeping restrictions during the coronavirus outbreak. The government said nearly 39 million Americans had been thrown out of a job since the coronavirus crisis began. A sharply divided Senate confirmed John Ratcliffe as director of national intelligence. President Donald Trump's former personal lawyer and fixer, Michael Cohen, was released from federal prison to serve the rest of his sentence at home because of the pandemic. (Cohen would briefly return to prison in July, but was set free by a judge who said his return to prison was retaliation for his plan to release a book critical of Trump.)

Today's Birthdays: R&B singer Ron Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 80. Musician Bill Champlin is 74. Singer Leo Sayer is 73. Actor Carol Potter is 73. Former Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., is 70. Actor Mr. T is 69. Music producer Stan Lynch is 66. Actor Judge Reinhold is 64. Actor-director Nick Cassavetes is 62. Actor Lisa Edelstein is 55. Actor Fairuza Balk is 47. Rock singer-musician Mikel Jollett (Airborne Toxic Event) is 47. Rapper Havoc (Mobb Deep) is 47. Rock musician Tony LoGerfo (Lukas Nelson & Promise of the Real) is 38. Actor Sunkrish Bala is 37. Actor David Ajala is 35. Actor Ashlie Brillault is 34. Country singer Cody Johnson is 34. Actor Scott Leavenworth is 31. Actor Sarah Ramos is 30.