

# Groton Daily Independent

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**Groton Community Transit will be taking the bus to out of Town Legion Baseball games on 5/26 to Lake Norden**



**6/1 to Sisseton  
6/5 Milbank  
6/6 Milbank  
6/9 to Clark  
7/6 to Northville  
7/14 to Redfield.**



**If anyone is interested on riding or for more information, please call Groton Transit at 397-8661**



**OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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## Groton Area qualifies in seven events at state track meet

Groton Area has qualified in seven events at the state track meet to be held Friday and Saturday in Spearfish. This is the first year that Class A and Class B qualify for the state event by being in the top 24 seed in the state. Class AA has been doing this for a couple of years.

What that means is that there is no pre-qualifying for a state event with a time or distance. Also, regional track meets are basically no longer regional meets, but a last opportunity for someone to qualify for the state by sneaking into the top 24.

Kenzie McInerney qualified for the state in three events, Andrew Marzahn qualified in two events, Aspen Johnson qualified in one event and the boys 3200m relay team qualified as well.

Andrew Marzahn, seeded 11th, 100m Dash, 11.24.

Andrew Marzahn, seeded 20th, 200m Dash, 23.64

Boys 3200m Relay Team of Jacob Lewandowski, Keegan Tracy, Cole Simon, Isaac Smith, 9:04.94.

Kenzie McInerney, seeded 14th, long jump, 16-3.

Kenzie McInerney, seeded 15th, triple jump, 33-0.

Kenzie McInerney, seeded 13th, high jump, 4-11.

Aspen Johnson, seeded 22nd, triple jump, 32-2.25.



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## The Life of Grace Albrecht

The funeral service for Grace E. Albrecht, 97, of Aberdeen, SD, formerly of Columbia, SD, and Groton, SD, will be 1:30pm, Tuesday, June 1, 2021, at Columbia Congregational UCC with Pastor Eldon Reich and Pastor Sheila Apland-Ottenbacher officiating. Burial at Sunset Memorial Gardens. Grace died Tuesday, April 20, at Prairie Heights HealthCare, Aberdeen.

Visitation will be 3:00-7:00pm, Monday, May 31, with family present from 5:00-7:00pm. A prayer service will be at 7:00pm followed by an Eastern Star Service at Spitzer-Miller Funeral Home, 1111 South Main Street.

Female Borden, later named Grace Emmelene, was born to parents George and Erna (Achen) Borden on June 1, 1923. She grew up in the Hecla, SD, area, attending various country schools and Hecla High School.

Grace met the love of her life, Frederick Albrecht, at a St. Patrick's dance in Houghton, SD. He became her constant companion after their marriage on October 30, 1940, in Britton, SD. Together they began their life as farmers in the Columbia, SD, area. They eventually moved onto the Albrecht Farm Homestead in 1956. In 1975 they moved to Las Vegas, NV, for health reasons and returned to South Dakota in 1993 to Groton to be closer to family. They became the parents of five children: Lester (passed away at 2½ years), Beverly, Lavonne, Wilbur and Leland. They instilled in their children faith in God, strong family values and community service. Later they became foster parents to several children. Her foster son James Grace and his family have remained a part of Grace's family.

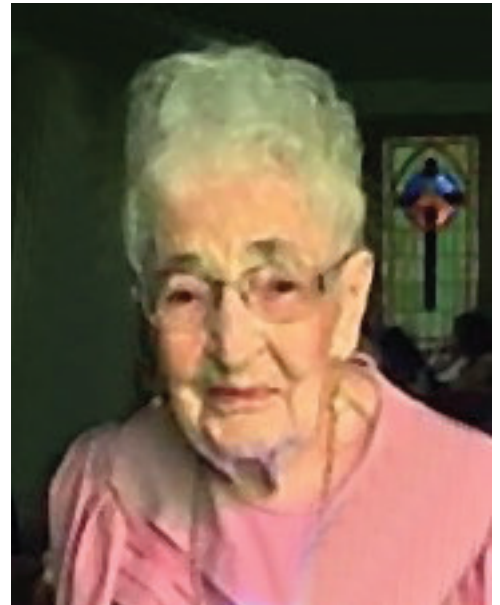
During her lifetime, Grace was a very busy and on-the-go lady. She was a member of Columbia United Church of Christ and the women's fellowship; Order of Eastern Star; and Groton Garden Club. She was also a member of Daughters of the Nile, where she was past Queen, Farmer's Union, where she served as a youth leader, Groton Senior Citizens, Andover Study Club, numerous bridge clubs, and Merry-Go-Round Extension Club until her health prevented her.

Grace was a 70-year member of Adah Chapter #52 Order of the Eastern Star in Claremont, SD. She started a legacy in the South Dakota OES Grand Chapter in 1956 when she was appointed to the office of Grand Esther and since that time, five members of her family have been appointed to the same office through the years. Grace truly enjoyed being active, but family remained most important to her. Her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren all know her love and support. She remembered the birthday date of every family member and attended as many activities as possible.

She was quite the lady who loved the color purple and will be missed by many.

Grace was talented at craft making, enjoyed vegetable and flower gardening, and food preservation. She was a coin collector. Her participation in several Columbia Community Plays in the 1950's helped to build the school auditorium. She liked traveling and she and Fred were Arizona snowbirds. Grace was an avid baseball fan, especially the Minnesota Twins.

Grateful for having shared Grace's life are children: Beverly Sombke, Groton, SD, Lavonne Gesling, Harrisburg, SD, Wilbur (Judy) Albrecht, Columbia, SD, and Leland (Vickie) Albrecht, Wisconsin Rapids, WI; foster son: James Grace, Sioux Falls, SD; grandchildren: Brad (Kristie) Sombke, Brenda (Brad) Waage, Todd



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(Tracie) Gesling, Chris (Michele) Gesling, Jon (Casey) Gesling, Mara (Kerry) Hart, Cherie (Mickie) Johnson, Shad Albrecht (friend Lisa Able and her son Gavin Younger); Carrie Lauersdorf, Jane (Gary) Mantolesky; foster grandchildren: Jodee Westerbur, Bobbie (Chris) Safar, Brandi Grace, and Amanda (Cameron) Benolkin; great-grandchildren: Kayla (Caleb) Egger, Elise Sombke (Fiancé Seth Hougesen), Tanner (Megan) Waage, Anthony Waage, Jake Gesling, Riley Gesling, Grace Gesling, Avery Gesling, Alyshia (Cory) Reiff, Jordan Gesling, Julia Gesling, Justin (Jessica) Hart, Travis (Shelby) Hart, Jamie Hart (Brandon Lewis), Cheyann (Scott) Mann, Camyjo (Hunter) Weber, Marqelle Albrecht (Michael Reide), Jade (Mikia) Albrecht, Maycee (Tyler) Hatzenbeller, Jeric Albrecht (Hailey Elsen), Breaden Lauersdorf, Ava Lauersdorf, Mia Lauersdorf, Emma Mantolesky, and Olivia Mantolesky; foster great-grandchildren: Justice Westerbur, Jackson Westerbur, Julia Westerbur, Taylor (Aaron) Engebretson, Tessa (Jordyn) Henderson, Kennedy Safar, Zoey Quincey, and Aiden Scott; great-great-grandchildren: Thomas Egger, Cole Reiff, Jaxon Hart, Bralyn White, Zoie Fischbach, Greyson Hart, Korbin Mann, Rylan Mann, Penelope Weber, Hank Reide, Vaela Albrecht, Roy Albrecht, and Regis Hatzenbeller; brother-in-law: James Fuerst; and many nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

Preceding Grace in death are her parents: George and Erna Borden; husband: Frederick Albrecht, son Lester Albrecht; grandchildren: Paul, Barry and Jenifer Sombke; sons-in-law: Darrel Sombke and Marshall Gesling; her siblings: Freda (Amundson) Fuerst, Betty Nundahl, and George Borden, Jr.; parents-in-law: Julius and Ruth (Morris) Albrecht; sisters-in-law: Bernis Smith, Esther Jeschke, Delores Berreth, Mary Albrecht, Elsie Albrecht, and Lorene Albrecht; and brothers-in-law: George Amundson, Orville Nundahl, Wilson Smith, Irvin Jeschke, Ed Berreth, Wayne Albrecht, Walter Albrecht, Merle Albrecht and Elmer Albrecht.

In lieu of flowers, the family prefers memorials.

When the Lord called Grace home, she leaves a gift of memories in exchange. Thank you, Grace, for the treasured memories! May God Bless your soul.

## Groton Jr. Teeners Falls To Milbank On Walk-Off

A walk-off left Groton Jr. Teeners on the wrong end of a 20-19 defeat to Milbank on Saturday. The game was tied at 19 with Milbank batting in the bottom of the fifth when an error scored one run for Milbank.

Groton Jr. Teeners collected nine hits and Milbank had four in the high-scoring affair.

In the first inning, Groton Jr. Teeners got their offense started when Braxton Imrie drew a walk, scoring one run.

Milbank scored eight runs in the fourth inning. The offensive firepower by Milbank was led by Dain Anderson, Ryan Ofarrell, Owen Fischer, Gage Anderson, Mason Meister, and Owen Tesch, who all drove in runs.

Jayce Jonason was on the hill for Milbank. The fireballer allowed four hits and nine runs over one inning, striking out three.

Karsten Flihs led things off on the mound for Groton Jr. Teeners. The bulldog lasted two and two-thirds innings, allowing zero hits and seven runs while striking out five. Drew Thurston and Carter Simon entered the game from the bullpen, throwing one inning and two-thirds of an inning respectively.

Groton Jr. Teeners collected nine hits. Teylor Diegel and Brevin Flihs each managed multiple hits for Groton Jr. Teeners. Diegel led Groton Jr. Teeners with three hits in four at bats.

Milbank had four hits in the game. Josh Pederson and Anderson all managed multiple hits for Milbank. Milbank stole ten bases during the game as two players stole more than one. Jonason led the way with two.

## Walk-Off Seals Win For Milbank Against Groton Jr. Teeners

It came down to the last play, but Groton Jr. Teeners was on the wrong end of a 15-14 defeat to Milbank on Saturday. The game was tied at 14 with Milbank batting in the bottom of the seventh when Josh Pederson singled on a 3-2 count, scoring one run.

Despite the loss, Groton Jr. Teeners did collect six hits in the high-scoring affair. Unfortunately, Milbank had eight hits on the way to victory.

Groton Jr. Teeners got on the board in the first inning when.

Milbank evened things up at 14 in the bottom of the sixth inning when Mason Meister homered on a 0-1 count, scoring two runs.

Groton Jr. Teeners put up six runs in the fifth inning. Braxton Imrie, Korbin Kucker, Carter Simon, Karsten Flihs, Caden Mcinerney, and Gavin Englund each drove in runs during the inning.

Milbank scored five runs in the sixth inning. Keegan Carlin, Owen Tesch, and Meister each had RBIs in the big inning.

Nollen Sheely got the start for Milbank. The fireballer allowed five hits and four runs over three innings, striking out one.

Kucker was on the pitcher's mound for Groton Jr. Teeners. The righty allowed two hits and four runs over three innings, striking out six. Teylor Diegel and Brevin Flihs entered the game as relief, throwing one and two-thirds innings and one and one-third innings respectively.

Groton Jr. Teeners collected six hits. Flihs and Kucker each collected multiple hits for Groton Jr. Teeners. Kucker and Flihs each collected two hits to lead Groton Jr. Teeners. Groton Jr. Teeners stole eight bases during the game as two players stole more than one. Flihs led the way with two.

Milbank totaled eight hits in the game. Carlin and Pederson each racked up multiple hits for Milbank. Carlin went 3-for-5 at the plate to lead Milbank in hits. Milbank tore up the base paths, as six players stole at least two bases. Meister led the way with four.

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## **Groton Jr. Teeners Overcomes Aberdeen B In Face Of Early 8-Run Inning**

Groton Jr. Teeners weathered a push by Aberdeen B in the fifth inning where Groton Jr. Teeners coughed up eight runs, but Groton Jr. Teeners still won 14-11 on Monday. Bryson Olson, Hayden Fritz, Hunter Herceg, Sam Larson, Aiden Posthumus, and Olson powered the big inning with RBIs.

Bats blistered as Groton Jr. Teeners collected eight hits and Aberdeen B tallied seven in the high-scoring game.

Groton Jr. Teeners got things moving in the first inning, when an error scored one run for Groton Jr. Teeners.

Groton Jr. Teeners scored six runs in the second inning. The offensive onslaught came from singles by Carter Simon and Brevin Fliehs and a home run by Korbin Kucker.

Nicholas Morris was the winning pitcher for Groton Jr. Teeners. The bulldog went three innings, allowing three runs on three hits, striking out four and walking one. Gavin Englund threw two innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Talon Dutenhoeffer took the loss for Aberdeen B. Dutenhoeffer went one and one-third innings, allowing eight runs on four hits and striking out two.

Groton Jr. Teeners tallied one home run on the day. Kucker put one out in the second inning.

Groton Jr. Teeners scattered eight hits in the game. Simon and Jarrett Erdmann each managed multiple hits for Groton Jr. Teeners. Erdmann and Simon each managed two hits to lead Groton Jr. Teeners.

Aberdeen B racked up seven hits. Olson and Larson each collected multiple hits for Aberdeen B.

## **Groton Jr. Teeners Defeats Aberdeen B In A Blow-Out Victory**

Groton Jr. Teeners cruised to an easy victory over Aberdeen B 11-5 on Monday

Aberdeen B opened up scoring in the first inning, when Talon Dutenhoeffer grounded out, scoring one run.

Jarrett Erdmann earned the victory on the pitcher's mound for Groton Jr. Teeners. The pitcher allowed zero hits and one run over one and one-third innings, striking out four. Braxton Imrie threw one inning in relief out of the bullpen.

Bryson Olson took the loss for Aberdeen B. Olson went one and one-third innings, allowing six runs on three hits and striking out two.

Kellen Antonsen started the game for Groton Jr. Teeners. Antonsen lasted two and two-thirds innings, allowing two hits and four runs while striking out five

Brevin Fliehs went 2-for-2 at the plate to lead Groton Jr. Teeners in hits. Fliehs led Groton Jr. Teeners with three stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with nine stolen bases.

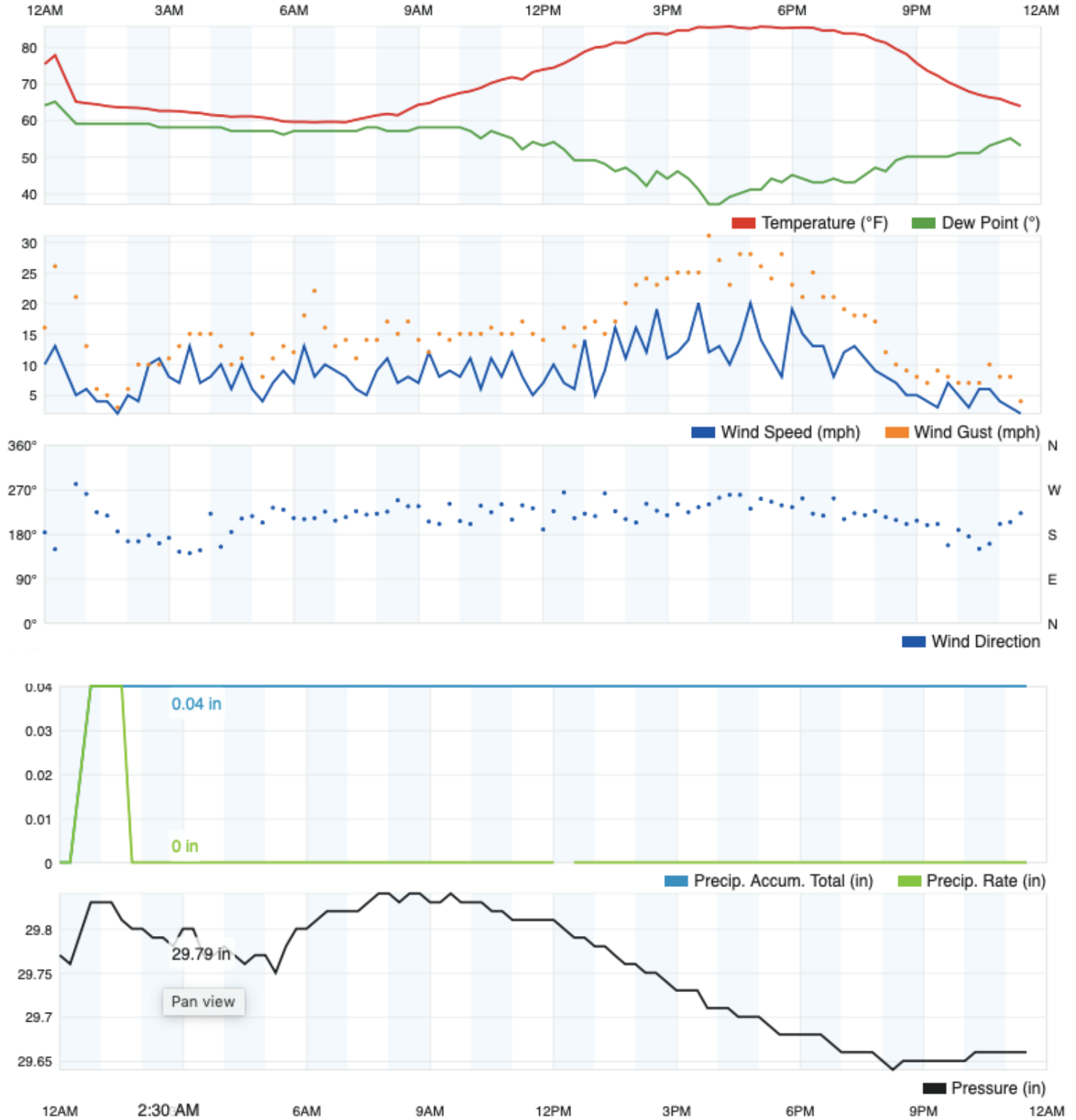
Aberdeen B tore up the base paths, as two players stole at least two bases. Aiden Posthumus led the way with three.

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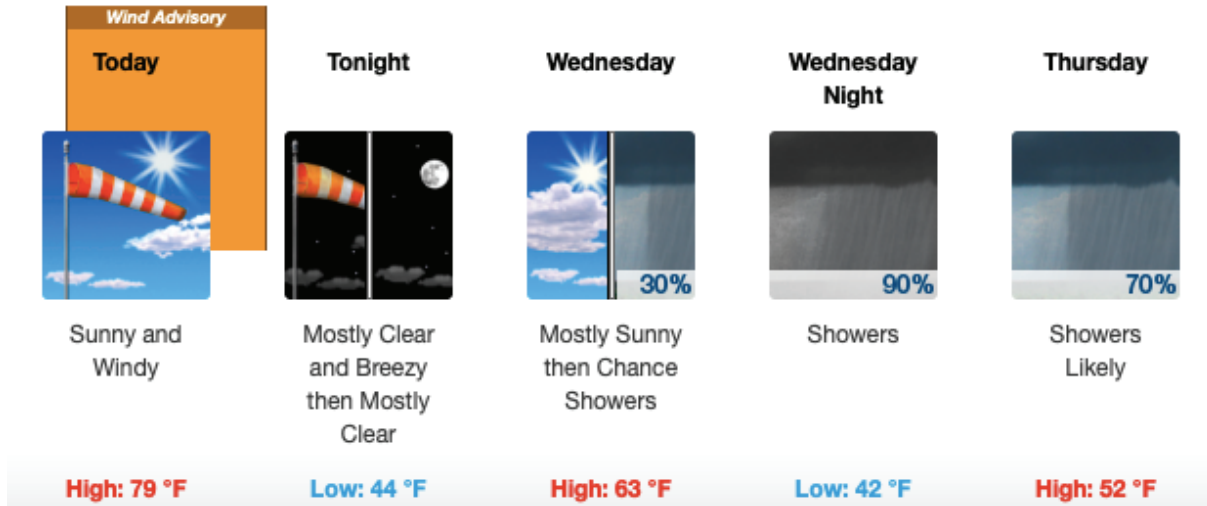
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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## WARM & WINDY TODAY

*Cooler & Wet Wednesday Afternoon*



**TODAY**

75 to 82° **Windy**

Strongest winds over northern SD, where winds will be out of the west 25 to 35 mph with **gusts up to around 45 mph.**

**WEDNESDAY**

60s

**Afternoon showers**, mainly west of the James River. Expanding across the rest of the area Wednesday Night.

National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

[weather.gov/Aberdeen](http://weather.gov/Aberdeen)



National Weather Service Aberdeen



@NWSAberdeen



Warm and Windy Today, with winds gusting up to around 45 mph over portions of northern South Dakota. Cooler, more moist air will return Wednesday. Afternoon showers Wednesday, mainly west of the James River, will expand over eastern SD and west central MN Wednesday night. A few thunderstorms are expected.



## Today in Weather History

May 25, 1880: An estimated F2 tornado moved northeast through the town of Mitchell. Two men were killed when they ran out the back door of a saloon to reach the cellar entrance. The caulk stone saloon was destroyed along with two homes and several businesses. This tornado was one of the first significant tornadoes on record for the state of South Dakota.

May 25, 1985: During the afternoon hours, thunderstorms developed along the east side of the Black Hills. The storms produced quite a bit of lightning and over the course of 2 hours started 18 small fires in the Black Hills. Fortunately, most of the fires were small and quickly contained. One unfortunate firefighter was struck by lightning as he was helping to extinguish a blaze that burned some 50 acres of grassland and forest. Thankfully, the man lived, but he did suffer several broken bones, burns, and major damage to his ears. The strike was so powerful that a man standing over 150 feet away was dropped to his knees.

1896: An estimated F5 tornado hit Oakwood, Ortonville, and Thomas, Michigan. Forty-seven people were killed, and 100 were injured. Trees were debarked "even to the twigs, as though done by the careful hand of an experienced artisan." Parts of houses were found up to 12 miles away.

1955: An estimated F5 tornado moved north and NNW through the heart of Blackwell, Oklahoma. About 400 homes were destroyed, and many were leveled and swept away. About 500 other homes were damaged. The tornado dissipated just over the Kansas border, as the Udall, Kansas tornado was forming to the east. The Blackwell tornado was accompanied by unusual electrical activity, with up to 25 discharges per second recorded on sferics equipment. The funnel was said to glow and have "arcs" of glowing light. The Udall, Kansas tornado was estimated to be an F5 as well. Over half of the population of Udall was killed or injured as the tornado completely devastated a large portion of town. Seventy-five people were killed, and many of the 270 injuries were serious.

1975: On Raccoon Lake, Indiana, lightning struck the motor of a speedboat and traveled up the control wires, killing the driver. The 38-year-old man was knocked into the water by the bolt. His wife and two children, also in the boat, were not injured.

2008: A rare, large and destructive EF5 tornado created a 43-mile long path across Butler and Black Hawk counties in Iowa. This tornado killed eight people, injured dozens and caused several millions of dollars in damage. The tornado was nearly three-quarters of a mile wide as it moved through the southern end of Parkersburg. A third of the town was affected by devastating damage with nearly 200 homes destroyed. This storm produced the first EF5 tornado in Iowa since 6/13/1976 and only the third EF5 tornado to occur in the United States in the past ten years.

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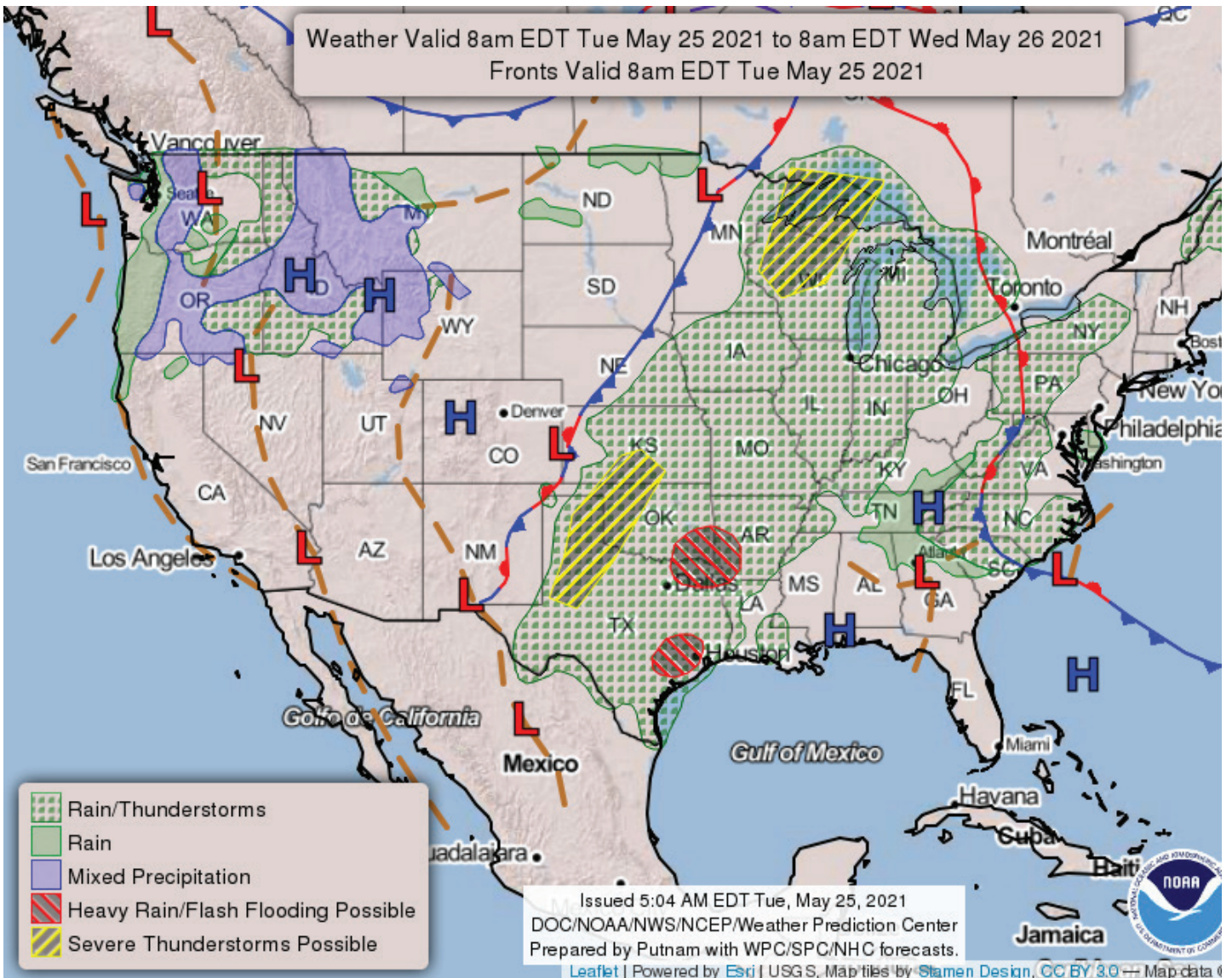
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 85.6 °F**  
**Low Temp: 59.4 °F**  
**Wind: 31 mph**  
**Precip: .04**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 94° in 2018**  
**Record Low: 29° in 1924**  
**Average High: 74°F**  
**Average Low: 48°F**  
**Average Precip in May.: 2.61**  
**Precip to date in May.: 0.31**  
**Average Precip to date: 6.58**  
**Precip Year to Date: 3.08**  
**Sunset Tonight: 9:09 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:52 a.m.**



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## GIVE IT UP!

Years ago an elderly lady boarded a train for the very first time in her life. As she sat comfortably in her seat, she continued to clutch her small suitcase tightly, fearing something might happen to it.

As the train left the depot, a conductor came to her and said, "Madam, if you'll allow me, I'll place your suitcase under your seat so it won't burden you down. The train is perfectly capable of carrying you and your baggage."

"Oh, no," she objected. "I want to take care of my baggage by myself."

Many of us are like that gracious, yet frightened, elderly lady. We want to take care of our "baggage" by ourselves.

In the most loving and encouraging way David advised us to "Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall!" The word "care" in Hebrew means "what is given to you in life, your lot." And the word "sustain" means that He will "support and nourish" us.

When we throw our "lot" – or ourselves and all of its "contents" – on the Lord, He will not only hold us up and "sustain" us but he will "never let us fall!"

David was nearly destroyed by men who were out to get him and kill him. But it did not happen. He took all his pain and problems, his attackers and adversaries, his sins and shortcomings to the Lord and God upheld him and stabilized him and saved him! He will do the same for you!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the example You gave us in the life of David. Give us a faith like his that we may realize, understand, accept, and act upon to find hope and healing in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall. Psalm 55:22

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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  
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.  
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament  
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

## News from the Associated Press

### **Elected officials in Montana to see salary increase in July**

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Most of the statewide elected officials in Montana are expecting a salary increase soon under a state law that requires comparative pay raises every other year.

The Montana Legislature passed laws in 1995 that require the state Department of Administration to conduct surveys comparing the salaries of the state's elected executive branch officials and justices with the same positions in Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming, the Independent Record reported.

Under the law, the Supreme Court justices and district court judges will receive a 4.2% raise on July 1. The salary for the Supreme Court chief justice will increase from \$151,486 to \$157,784, or the average salary of the chief justices from the other states.

The lieutenant governor and Supreme Court clerk will not get a raise, according to the data.

The survey that determines any changes to the salary is conducted before the end of June each even-numbered year, officials said. The new salary then takes effect July 1 the following year.

The changes this year will be in effect until June 30, 2023. However, elected officials can choose to not accept all or part of the raise. It is not immediately known if any official has declined the raise.

Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte, who will receive a more than \$4,000 raise, said he will donate his entire salary to various philanthropies statewide. Those philanthropies have not yet been announced. His office released a statement on Friday saying he will make \$122,693, which will be donated on a quarterly basis.

Gianforte said state employees outside the survey will get a 55-cent-an-hour increase during the next fiscal year under different legislation.

### **South Dakota's Noem launches legal strategy to take on Biden**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem catapulted onto the list of conservative politicians favored by former President Donald Trump with her libertarian approach to the pandemic. With the virus waning, she may be seeking to stay there by picking some legal fights sure to please the right.

In recent weeks, Noem has gone to court to challenge President Joe Biden's administration for blocking an Independence Day celebration with fireworks at Mount Rushmore. She also joined a lawsuit from several states against the administration over climate change regulations — one of the only plaintiffs who doesn't hail from a state heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

Noem says she's simply acting in the state's interests, but the tactic has given her a chance to cast herself as one of Biden's most prominent foes. She went on Fox News to announce the lawsuit over Mount Rushmore fireworks, and later joined star host Sean Hannity for a podcast titled "Noem vs. Biden."

Noem told Hannity the only way "to get fairness on this issue" was to sue the Biden administration, and cast it as a fight not just for South Dakota but also for "our nation and the ability to celebrate our independence the way that our founders encouraged us to."

Instead of entrusting her attorney general with the lawsuits, Noem has filed them herself by tapping a state legal fund that has historically been used to defend against lawsuits, not launch them. Noem is taking a role usually played by the attorney general — she is the only governor to be listed alongside attorneys general from nine other states in the climate regulations lawsuit. In the Mount Rushmore lawsuit, Noem has the backing of Republican attorneys general from 16 other states.

By taking the lead on the state's legal matters, Noem has entered a see-sawing legal battle that has played out in recent years between the president in power and states controlled by the opposing party. Members of both parties, from California Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom to Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, have used a legal strategy to seize on national hot-button issues.

But launching lawsuits from the governor's office is a new strategy for Noem — and one that has drawn criticism from some other South Dakota Republicans.

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State Rep. Steve Haugaard, a former House speaker who has sparred with the governor, gave the Mount Rushmore lawsuit little chance of prevailing in court. The National Park Service, which controls the monument, cited the possible fire danger and objections from local Native American tribes for denying the state's application to hold fireworks this year.

"When the outcome is a foregone conclusion, then there is a better use for those funds," he said, adding that state "resources shouldn't be used for personal attention."

Noem hired a Washington-area law firm, Consovoy McCarthy, best known for representing Trump in fending off efforts to investigate his financial records. Noem spokesman Ian Fury said the firm was chosen for its "expertise." Its contract is capped at \$150,000, with the state paying \$600 an hour for partners and \$450 an hour for associates, according to Fury. He said the legal costs of joining the multistate lawsuit over Biden's climate change order should be "minimal."

Fury explained Noem filed the Rushmore lawsuit herself because she's the one who has pushed to return the fireworks celebration to Mount Rushmore. The administration has noted that the monument is a huge draw for the state's tourism industry, which is South Dakota's second-largest job provider.

Noem found an ally last year in then-President Trump, who cleared the way for fireworks at Rushmore despite longstanding concerns about fire danger. Trump joined Noem for a July 3 event that netted Noem pictures alongside the president, as well as a seat with him on Air Force One after the event.

Troy Jones, a business consultant in Sioux Falls and a Republican, said he had no problem with Noem's lawsuit, citing the importance of the monument.

"A decision's been made that is objectively bad for my state," Jones said of the government blocking fireworks.

Paul Nolette, a Marquette University political science professor who studies attorneys general, said it's unusual for a governor to represent a state in lawsuits against the federal government. He attributed the move to Noem's national ambitions — but also a rift with the state's GOP attorney general, Jason Ravnsborg, who has been charged in a crash that killed a pedestrian last year.

Noem called for Ravnsborg to resign. He refused, saying he can still carry out the duties of his office. But he has kept a low profile.

Noem has made it clear she won't be hindered by the attorney general's reticence. Courting a national profile is a priority for Noem, who became a frequent Fox News guest in the past year in part due to a hands-off approach to managing the coronavirus pandemic without requiring masks or imposing any significant restrictions. Noem has also traveled the country to appear at political fundraisers and at conservative events such as CPAC, and also campaigned as a surrogate for Trump and for the GOP Senate candidates who ultimately lost critical runoff elections in Georgia earlier this year.

Even some South Dakotans who enjoyed the Mount Rushmore fireworks said they would be watching to see if Noem's lawsuit holds up to judicial scrutiny.

Linda Johnson, an independent voter from Sioux Falls who considers herself "fiscally conservative," didn't take issue with Noem fighting for the fireworks, but she also cautioned the governor.

"She has to own the consequences of every battle that she is taking the taxpayers into," she said.

## Contempt hearing set over judge's order requiring vaccine

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — A federal judge in Aberdeen will decide whether three members of the U.S. Marshals Service should be found in civil contempt over his requirement to have everyone in his courtroom vaccinated for the coronavirus.

Judge Charles Kornmann notified courthouse employees in March that the vaccinations would be required in order to provide the safest environment for everyone.

The U.S. marshal for South Dakota, Daniel Mosteller, responded to the judge, telling him the U.S. Marshals Service is not requiring employees to get the vaccine and that they will not provide their vaccination status to the court.

Kornmann held his first courtroom session for the year on May 10. The U.S. marshal who brought the

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first defendant into the courtroom refused to disclose her vaccination status, Aberdeen American News reported. As a result, Kornmann told the marshal to leave and pulled in a different deputy marshal to sit in the courtroom.

Chief deputy marshal, Stephen Houghtaling, told Kornmann by phone that the remaining defendants scheduled for hearings had been removed from the courthouse because the marshals service didn't think it could keep the courtroom secure without two marshals in the room.

Kornmann noted that the marshals service hasn't followed that practice in the past.

The judge ordered Mosteller, Houghtaling and the chief of staff for the U.S. Marshals Service, John Kilgallon, to appear at a hearing June 14.

## **Blinken says US will aid Gaza without helping Hamas**

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed Tuesday to "rally international support" to aid Gaza following a devastating war there while keeping any assistance out of the hands of its militant Hamas rulers, as he began a regional tour to shore up last week's cease-fire.

The 11-day war between Israel and Hamas killed more than 250 people, mostly Palestinians, and caused widespread destruction in the impoverished coastal territory. The truce that came into effect Friday has so far held, but it did not address any of the underlying issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, something Blinken acknowledged after meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"We know that to prevent a return to violence, we have to use the space created to address a larger set of underlying issues and challenges. And that begins with tackling the grave humanitarian situation in Gaza and starting to rebuild," he said.

"The United States will work to rally international support around that effort while also making our own significant contributions." He added that the U.S. would work with its partners "to ensure that Hamas does not benefit from the reconstruction assistance."

Blinken will not be meeting with Hamas, which does not recognize Israel's right to exist and which Israel and the U.S. consider a terrorist organization.

Blinken addressed the larger conflict, saying "we believe that Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely and securely, to enjoy equal measures of freedom, opportunity and democracy, to be treated with dignity."

But the top U.S. diplomat faces the same obstacles that have stifled a wider peace process for more than a decade, including a hawkish Israeli leadership, Palestinian divisions and deeply rooted tensions surrounding Jerusalem and its holy sites. The Biden administration had initially hoped to avoid being drawn into the intractable conflict and focus on other foreign policy priorities before the violence broke out.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, is fighting for his political life after a fourth inconclusive election in two years. He faces mounting criticism from Israelis who say he ended the offensive prematurely, without forcibly halting rocket attacks or dealing a heavier blow to Hamas.

Netanyahu hardly mentioned the Palestinians in his remarks, in which he warned of a "very powerful" response if Hamas breaks the cease-fire.

Netanyahu spoke of "building economic growth" in the occupied West Bank, but said there will be no peace until the Palestinians recognize Israel as a "Jewish state." The Palestinians have long objected to that language, saying it undermines the rights of Israel's own Palestinian minority.

The war was triggered by weeks of clashes in Jerusalem between Israeli police and Palestinian protesters in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site revered by Jews and Muslims that has seen several outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian violence over the years. The protests were directed at Israel's policing of the area during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers.

The truce remains tenuous since tensions are still high in Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinian families is not yet resolved.

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The evictions were put on hold just before the Gaza fighting erupted, but the legal process is set to resume in the coming weeks. Police briefly clashed with protesters at Al-Aqsa on Friday, hours after the cease-fire came into effect.

Adding to the tensions, an Israeli soldier and a civilian were stabbed and wounded in east Jerusalem on Monday before police shot and killed the assailant in what they described as a terrorist attack.

Then, early Tuesday, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by undercover Israeli forces near the West Bank city of Ramallah, according to the Wafa news agency. Pictures circulating online appeared to show the man bloodied and lying in the street. The Israeli army referred questions to the Border Police, which did not respond to requests for comment.

Blinken will head to Ramallah later Tuesday to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who has no power in Gaza and was sidelined by recent events. Abbas heads the internationally backed Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank but whose forces were driven from Gaza when Hamas seized power there in 2007.

Abbas, who called off the first Palestinian elections in 15 years last month when it appeared his fractured Fatah movement would suffer an embarrassing defeat, is seen by many Palestinians as having lost all legitimacy. A crowd of worshippers at Al-Aqsa chanted against the Palestinian Authority and in support of Hamas on Friday.

But Abbas is still seen internationally as the representative of the Palestinian people and a key partner in the long-defunct peace process. The Palestine Liberation Organization, the umbrella group led by Abbas, recognized Israel decades ago, and the Palestinian Authority maintains close security ties with Israel.

Blinken will also visit neighboring Egypt and Jordan, which have acted as mediators in the conflict. Egypt succeeded in brokering the Gaza truce after the Biden administration pressed Israel to wind down its offensive.

The administration had been roundly criticized for its perceived hands-off initial response to the deadly violence, including from Democratic allies in Congress who demanded it take a tougher line on Israel. Biden repeatedly affirmed what he said was Israel's right to defend itself from rocket attacks from Gaza.

The administration has defended its response by saying it engaged in intense, but quiet, high-level diplomacy to support a cease-fire.

Blinken has said the time is not right for an immediate resumption in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but that steps could be taken to repair the damage from Israeli airstrikes, which destroyed hundreds of homes and damaged infrastructure in Gaza.

The narrow coastal territory, home to more than 2 million Palestinians, has been under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power. Israel says the blockade is needed to keep Hamas from importing arms, while the Palestinians and human rights groups view it as a form of collective punishment.

## Iran approves 7 for presidential vote, bars Rouhani allies

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran named the hard-line cleric running its judiciary and six others Tuesday as approved candidates in its June 18 presidential election, barring prominent candidates allied to its current president amid tensions with the West over its tattered nuclear deal.

The announcement carried by state television puts judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, who is linked to mass executions in 1988, in the dominant position for the upcoming vote. He's the most-known candidate of the seven hopefuls, with opinion polling previously showing his anti-corruption campaign drew Iranian support. He's also believed to be a favorite of Iran's 82-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

But perhaps most notable was who Iran's Guardian Council barred from running. Chief among them was former parliament speaker Ali Larijani, a conservative who allied with Rouhani in recent year. Larijani had been positioning himself as a pragmatic candidate who would back Rouhani's signature 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. That accord is now in tatters as diplomats in Vienna try to negotiate a return of both Iran and the U.S. to the agreement.



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Larijani seemingly signaled he wouldn't fight the decision.

"I have done my duty before God and the dear nation, and I am satisfied," Larijani wrote on Twitter. "Thank you to all those who expressed their gratitude and I hope you will participate in the elections for the promotion of an Islamic Iran."

Also barred was former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Rouhani's senior Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri, a reformist. Ahmadinejad ignored a warning from Khamenei in 2017 and registered, only to be rejected then as well by the Guardian Council, a 12-member panel under Khamenei.

During an earlier session of parliament Tuesday, lawmaker Ahmad Alirezabeigi described Ahmadinejad's home as being "under siege" by security forces since the day before. He also warned that the decision would suppress turnout. Iran's theocracy since its 1979 Islamic Revolution has based its legitimacy in part on turnout in elections.

State TV earlier quoted Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei, the spokesman of the Guardian Council, as saying "only seven" had been approved out of some 590 who registered by the panel of clerics and jurists overseen by Khamenei. In 2017, 1,630 hopefuls registered to run.

Raisi wrote on Twitter — a service technically banned by Iran since the 2009 unrest that surrounded Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election — that he wanted authorities to reconsider the decision to bar some of the candidates.

"I have made contacts and I am holding consultations to make the election scene more competitive and participatory," he wrote.

As the head of the judiciary, Raisi oversees a justice system in Iran that remains one of the world's top executioners. United Nations experts and others have criticized Iran for detaining dual nationals and those with ties abroad to be used as bargaining chips in negotiations with the West.

Then there's the 1988 mass executions that came at the end of Iran's long war with Iraq. After Iran's then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini accepted a U.N.-brokered cease-fire, members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, heavily armed by Saddam Hussein, stormed across the Iranian border in a surprise attack.

Iran ultimately blunted their assault, but the attack set the stage for the sham retrials of political prisoners, militants and others that would become known as "death commissions." Some who appeared were asked to identify themselves. Those who responded "mujahedeen" were sent to their deaths, while others were questioned about their willingness to "clear minefields for the army of the Islamic Republic," according to a 1990 Amnesty International report.

International rights groups estimate that as many as 5,000 people were executed, while the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq puts the number at 30,000. Iran has never fully acknowledged the executions, apparently carried out on Khomeini's orders, though some argue that other top officials were effectively in charge in the months before his 1989 death.

Raisi, then a deputy prosecutor in Tehran, took part in some of the panels at Evin and Gohardasht prisons. A tape of a meeting of Raisi and his boss meeting prominent Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri leaked out in 2016, with Montazeri describing the executions as "the biggest crime in the history of the Islamic Republic."

Raisi never publicly acknowledged his role in the executions while campaigning for president in 2017. After his loss, Khamenei appointed him as head of the judiciary in 2019.

Others named as candidates Tuesday include Saeed Jalili, a former nuclear negotiator; Mohsen Rezaei, a former Revolutionary Guard commander; Ali Reza Zakani, a former lawmaker; Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh, a current lawmaker; Mohsen Mehralizadeh, a former provincial governor; and Abdolnasser Hemmati, the current head of Iran's Central Bank.

## **Mali's president and PM remain detained by mutinous soldiers**

By BABA AHMED Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — Mali's transitional president and prime minister remain detained Tuesday after be-

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ing taken by force to the military headquarters hours after a government reshuffle left out two members of the junta that had seized power in a coup nine months ago.

The African Union, the United Nations, the West African regional bloc known as ECOWAS and other members of the international community called for the immediate release of President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, who were taken to the Kati military headquarters along with others late on Monday. The garrison town sits about 15 kilometers from the capital and is the former stronghold of the junta.

Those who signed on to the joint statement called for Mali's political transition "to resume its course and conclude within the established timeframe."

"The international community rejects in advance any act of coercion, including forced resignations," the statement said. "They emphasize that the ill-considered action taken today carries the risk of weakening the mobilization of the international community in support of Mali."

A delegation from ECOWAS will visit Bamako on Tuesday, the joint statement said.

The military has not yet issued a statement about its actions. Bamako remained calm into Tuesday. Mali state TV only rebroadcast the official statement announcing the new government members.

The developments raise new alarm about whether the transitional government will be able to move ahead freely as promised with plans to organize new democratic elections by next February in Mali, where the U.N. is spending \$1.2 billion a year on a peacekeeping mission.

The two leaders were sworn in last September after the ruling military junta, under growing international pressure, agreed to hand over power to a civilian transitional government.

The junta had grabbed power a month earlier after mutinous soldiers encircled the home of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and fired shots into the air. He later resigned on national television under duress, saying he did not want blood to be shed in order for him to stay in office.

The soldiers then went on state television calling themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People and promising a swift return to civilian rule. However, Monday's developments appeared to throw that promise into question.

The arrests came just an hour or so after a new government Cabinet was announced. Notably it did not include Interior Security Minister Modibo Kone or Defense Minister Sadio Camara, both junta supporters. No reason was given for their exclusion, but the move suggested mounting divisions within the transitional government.

There has been widespread concern the upheaval in Mali over the past year has further set back efforts to contain militants linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State groups.

Islamic extremists took control of major towns in northern Mali after the 2012 coup. Only a 2013 military intervention led by former colonial power France pushed extremists out of those towns. France and a U.N. force have continued to battle the extremist rebels, who operate in rural areas and regularly attack roads and cities.

## **It's not just Arizona: Push to review 2020 ballots spreads**

By KATE BRUMBACK and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Six months after Donald Trump's loss, conspiracy theorists and Trump backers are continuing their push for repeated examinations of ballots and finding limited successes.

A Georgia judge last week awarded a group the chance to review mail ballots in a large Georgia county that includes Atlanta. Officials in a rural Michigan county have expressed interest in a review of their voting machines. A similar debate has caused sharp divisions in a New Hampshire town. In some cases, the efforts have been inspired by an audit of the votes in Arizona's Maricopa County, an elaborate exercise engineered by the GOP-led state Senate.

The efforts are unlikely to yield any new revelations about President Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election. The votes have been counted — and often recounted — and certified by local officials. Still, the lingering debate and legal wrangling have propelled suspicions and advanced debunked theories. And

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their sometimes misleading conclusions have been amplified by Trump, whose false allegations of election fraud sparked the push.

The profusion of audits alarms election experts, who note that the Arizona audit has set a troubling new precedent of third-party, partisan review of the ballots, long after elections are over.

"This is bad enough to see it happen once," said Eddie Perez, an expert on voting systems at the OSET Institute, said of Arizona, but seeing it elsewhere in the country is "dangerous for democracy."

The audits are serving a clear political purpose in firing up the Republican Party's base. At a rally outside Phoenix last week featuring GOP Reps. Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene, references to the Arizona audit drew much more enthusiastic applause than even immigration, normally the top hot-button issue on the right in the border state.

In a statement Monday night, Trump criticized Republican Party leaders for not doing more about "what went on" in November. He cited the ballot reviews underway and promised "more to follow."

The Arizona audit has been cited as a template for the others, although each is distinct. In Arizona, the Republican-controlled state Senate subpoenaed more than 2 million ballots and voting machines from Arizona's most populous county, which includes Phoenix, and gave control of the review to a small cybersecurity firm whose founder, Doug Logan, had tweeted pro-Trump election conspiracies.

Logan has ties to the Michigan effort as well. In April, Logan and another cybersecurity expert involved in the Arizona audit, Ben Cotton, filed separate expert witness reports alleging security problems in voting machines in a lawsuit filed in rural Antrim County, Michigan, that sought to compel a statewide election audit there. That case was dismissed by a judge last week — one of more than 60 court losses for pro-Trump groups in lawsuits challenging the 2020 election.

But Logan's and Cotton's claims were used by a Michigan attorney to bolster the case for a "forensic audit" of voting machines in rural Cheboygan County, in northern Michigan, earlier this month.

"If you don't have your vote counted as it was intended to count, we don't have a free country," attorney Stefanie Lambert, who had filed an appeal of the dismissal of a separate, unsuccessful lawsuit challenging Trump's loss in Michigan, told the Cheboygan County elections committee. She offered to provide auditors free of charge.

Arizona has also inspired calls by pro-Trump groups to push for their own pick to take over a post-election audit of a statehouse race in Windham, New Hampshire — home of former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski.

But the biggest new entry into the audit field is in Georgia's Fulton County, where a judge on Friday ruled that plaintiffs could inspect 147,000 mail ballots as part of their lawsuit alleging fraud in the most populous county in the state.

The lawsuit was spearheaded by Garland Favorito, a longtime skeptic of Georgia's voting systems who has embraced conspiracy theories about 9/11, Clinton-era scandal and Supreme Court justices. Favorito says he voted for Don Blankenship, the U.S. Constitution Party candidate, last year.

"Our ultimate objective is the truth. What is the truth of this election?" Favorito said in an interview. "Don't tell us what the results are and then hide it from us and pretend we have to accept whatever you tell us."

Fulton County Chairman Robb Pitts said in a statement: "It is outrageous that Fulton County continues to be a target of those who cannot accept the results from last year's election. The votes have been counted multiple times, including a hand recount, and no evidence of fraud has been found."

Both sides are scheduled to meet Friday to discuss how to review the mail ballots. Favorito said Jovan Pulitzer, an inventor and key figure in the pro-Trump movement to overturn the 2020 election, may be one of the people he consults for the ballot examination.

Pulitzer had pushed unsuccessfully for a statewide audit of Georgia's election results, even after two recounts by the Republican secretary of state confirmed that Biden won the state. That finding infuriated Trump, who has slammed both Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and the state's Republican governor, Brian Kemp.

Former state Rep. Vernon Jones, a Trump backer who is challenging Kemp in the GOP primary, held a

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news conference outside the state Capitol last week to hammer the governor for not commissioning a statewide audit. "There's a dead cat on the end of this line, and we just want to find out what it is, that's all," Jones said. "People have a right to know. What are you hiding?"

That's the sort of sentiment that alarms Tammy Patrick, who used to oversee post-election audits in Maricopa County. Those examinations are essential, she argued, but must be done by election experts, not ideologically interested novices, and should be completed soon after voting.

"In a healthy democracy, you have an auditing process, you have legal recourse, and when that period is over, all the candidates who have won take over and you move on," said Patrick, an adviser at The Democracy Fund, adding that the people calling for audits clearly want only one result.

"They are not going to be satisfied," Patrick said. "This is just going to play out in perpetuity."

## European planes skirt Belarus amid fury at dissident arrest

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — European airlines began skirting Belarus on Tuesday at the urging of the European Union, which also imposed new sanctions to punish the ex-Soviet nation's forced diversion of a passenger jet to arrest an opposition journalist.

In unusually swift action at a summit in Brussels, EU leaders agreed Monday to ban Belarusian airlines from using the airspace and airports of the 27-nation bloc, imposed sanctions on officials linked to Sunday's flight diversion, and urged the International Civil Aviation Organization to start an investigation into the episode some described as state terrorism or piracy.

On Sunday, Belarusian flight controllers told the crew of a Ryanair jetliner flying from Greece to Lithuania that there was a bomb threat against the plane as it was crossing through Belarus airspace and ordered it to land. A Belarusian MiG-29 fighter jet was scrambled to escort the plane in a brazen show of force by President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country with an iron fist for over a quarter-century.

Belarus authorities then arrested 26-year-old journalist and activist Raman Pratasevich and his Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega. Pratasevich was later seen in a brief video clip shown on Belarusian state television, speaking quickly and saying that he was giving testimony about organizing mass disturbances.

Pratasevich, who left Belarus in 2019 and ran a popular messaging app that played a key role in helping organize huge protests against Lukashenko, has been charged in absentia with staging mass riots and fanning social hatred. Those charges carry a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

The Telegram messaging app's Nexta channel that he co-founded has been labeled as "extremist" by the Belarusian authorities, and some fear Pratasevich could face more serious charges, including some that carry the death penalty.

U.S. President Joe Biden said late Monday that he asked his team to develop appropriate options to hold accountable those responsible, in close coordination with the European Union, other allies and partners, and international organizations.

"This outrageous incident and the video Mr. Pratasevich appears to have made under duress are shameful assaults on both political dissent and the freedom of the press," Biden's statement said.

Belarus has been rocked by months of protests, which were triggered by Lukashenko's reelection to a sixth term in an August 2020 vote that the opposition rejected as rigged. More than 34,000 people have been arrested in Belarus since then, and thousands beaten.

## Japan says US travel warning for virus won't hurt Olympians

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The Japanese government Tuesday was quick to deny a U.S. warning for Americans to avoid traveling to Japan would have an impact on Olympians wanting to compete in the postponed Tokyo Games.

U.S. officials cited a surge in coronavirus cases in Japan caused by virus variants that may even be risks to vaccinated people. They didn't ban Americans from visiting Japan, but the warnings could affect insurance

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rates and whether Olympic athletes and other participants decide to join the games that begin July 23. Most metro areas in Japan are under a state of emergency and expected to remain so through mid-June because of rising serious COVID-19 cases that are putting pressure on the country's medical care systems. That raises concern about how the country could cope with the arrival of tens of thousands of Olympic participants if its hospitals remain stressed and little of its population is vaccinated.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told a regular news conference Tuesday that the U.S. warning does not prohibit essential travel and Japan believes the U.S. support for Tokyo's effort to hold the Olympics is unchanged.

"We believe there is no change to the U.S. position supporting the Japanese government's determination to achieve the games," Kato said, adding that Washington has told Tokyo the travel warning is not related to participation of the U.S. Olympic team.

The United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee said it still anticipates American athletes will be able to safely compete at the Tokyo Games.

Fans coming from abroad were banned from the Tokyo Olympics months ago, but athletes, families, sporting officials from around the world and other stakeholders still amount to a mass influx of international travelers. The Japanese public in opinion surveys have expressed opposition to holding the games out of safety concerns while most people will not be vaccinated.

The U.S. warning from the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said: "Because of the current situation in Japan even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants and should avoid all travel to Japan."

The State Department's warning was more blunt. "Do not travel to Japan due to COVID-19," it said.

## Families separated at Mexico border build new American life

By CLAUDIA TORRENS Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — In a cramped house with mice in the kitchen and music booming from cars outside, Keldy Mabel Gonzales Brebe lays bare her three-year journey from Honduras to the United States and all that lies ahead to adapt to life as an immigrant.

She fled the Central American nation with her family and a price on her head to seek asylum at the U.S. border. Instead, U.S. officials separated her from her children, jailed and deported her under President Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy to prosecute adults entering the country illegally. While the boys were allowed to live with relatives in Philadelphia, their mother made her way back to Mexico, where she fought to join them.

Keldy missed celebrating birthdays and holidays together. She watched from afar as her teenagers filled out and grew facial hair.

"There were times I thought I would never see them again," she said.

Three years later, America has jettisoned many of Trump's hardline immigration policies.

Keldy was one of four parents who returned to the United States during the first week of May with temporary legal status to join their children in what Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said was "just the beginning" of a broader effort to reunify families separated during Trump's presidency — more than 5,500 children. Her family's ups and downs illustrate what many parents and children encounter as they try to make up for lost time.

Keldy counts her blessings to be together as a family, free from death threats in Honduras and the pain of separation.

Yet now they face new difficulties. Keldy's son, Mino, dropped out of school to help pay the rent on the house that six of them share where Keldy sleeps on the living room sofa. She wants to get a job, but is caring for her 7-year-old autistic niece and an unsteady 75-year-old mother, along with cooking and cleaning for the family. She sees drug use on the streets of the Kensington section of Philadelphia where they live.

"I hear gunshots sometimes. With my sister, when we run a quick errand, I look around to see whether

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someone was killed," Keldy said. "La Ceiba, where I grew up, was like that."

Honduras, a mountainous nation located between Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, is beautiful but broken, Keldy says.

She and her family lived on the north Caribbean shore of Honduras, a tourist area. Her husband was a guide, taking American tourists to a region of tropical rainforest, pine savannah and marsh called La Mosquitia, or whitewater rafting on the Cangrejal River.

Keldy described herself as middle-class housewife. She would cook for the tourists on the expeditions.

Drug trafficking gangs controlled some areas and required payments from businesses and people for protection. For those who didn't pay, the penalty was death.

Hit men killed one of her brothers in 2006, she said. He was a bus driver.

"He had no money. The owner of the bus was the one who was supposed to pay, not him. He was just the bus driver. But they killed him," she said.

In 2011, her family and other families decided to try to buy some parcels of land to live on and grow crops. Gangs, however, did not agree with the purchase and threatened one her brothers, then killed him after he reported the threats to authorities. He was one of four siblings killed by gangs.

Keldy testified in open court against the killers. She received numerous threats and was told there was a price on her head.

The whole family fled to Mexico in 2013 but were deported by the Mexican government right away.

Back in Honduras, they fled to a rural mountainous area called El Naranjo in attempt to hide from the gangs. But in 2017, neighbors told her there were people asking about her schedule: when did she usually leave the house and when did she usually get back? The fear returned, and the family left for the United States.

She crossed the border with her youngest son Erick, now 17, and her middle child Mino, now 19, in the fall of 2017.

The family planned to apply for asylum, so Keldy flagged down a Border Patrol cruiser in the New Mexico desert. She and her sons were taken together to a cell in a detention center in Deming, New Mexico, 35 miles north of the border. They thought they'd be released at some point, and would meet up with her oldest son, who crossed the same day in Arizona, and other family in Philadelphia.

But unknown to them, President Trump had imposed extraordinary measures to limit asylum, criminally prosecuting everyone who entered the United States illegally from Mexico and resulting in the separation of thousands of children from their parents. The government was unable to reunify them after criminal cases ended because its tracking systems failed to link parents to their children.

Less than two days after the family had arrived in the U.S., Keldy was handcuffed and separated from the boys.

"I felt helpless, like there was nothing I could do. And then I blamed myself because I brought my kids to uncertainty, into a situation in which they were taken from me, they were taken from my arms and I couldn't do anything," she said.

The kids were frightened to be separated from their mother.

"We started crying, my brother and I, because we were left alone in there. And it was very cold. They only gave us a small blanket," recalled Erick, who was 13 then. His brother Mino was 15.

The boys were moved to a shelter for minors.

Mino, who wears glasses and smiles often, said he did not want to do anything at the time, just cry. He felt lost at the shelter, with the other unaccompanied minors.

"They did not feel what I was going through because they had come alone. They did not come with their mother. They did not feel the pain I felt when I was separated from her," he said.

The children were both soon released, and family members paid for their flight to Philadelphia. Their older brother, Alex, now 21, eventually became the legal guardian of his brothers and cared for them while they went to school, working construction.

But Keldy was not released. She was kept in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility

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in El Paso, Texas, for a year and a half and then deported to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in January 2019. She immediately traveled back north and settled in Tapachula, Ascención and then Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, waiting for a chance to enter the United States.

In Mexico, Keldy got by with money sent to her by her kids, her sisters and her husband. She video chatted with her boys, and remembers with pain of missing graduations and other big moments: This January, Erick did not want to come out of his room on his 17th birthday.

"He felt alone," Keldy said. "I wasn't there".

Online learning during the pandemic was a problem for both boys, who say they no longer understand classes. Mino dropped out in December. They say they can read English but they don't speak it.

In Ciudad Juarez, Keldy walked each morning toward the border, where she could see the bridges heading toward El Paso, Texas, and prayed.

Known to others as "la pastora", she delivered sermons and benedictions to other migrants and at migrant shelters, listening to others who were in pain, like her.

"I would tell others in my prayers to believe, to never doubt, answers were going to come to our lives," she said.

The answer she'd been waiting for arrived last month. Linda Corchado, director of legal services at the non-profit Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, contacted her: Biden's task force was working to reunite families separated at the border. Keldy needed to get passport photos.

Corchado had been trying obtain a humanitarian parole for Keldy, and finally found success.

"I realized then these were the final steps the attorney was doing to get me in," she said. "Later she told me I would probably enter on May 4 at 8 am. I kept asking God for it to be true."

It was.

She entered on May 4, with Corchado, through the Bridge of The Americas.

The Honduran mother took a plane to Dallas and then another one to Philadelphia. While flying, all she thought about were the first words she would tell her kids.

"They ended up being 'I love you'. Those are the words I wanted to tell my kids, that I loved them," she said.

A video shows the family reunion on May 4 in the Philadelphia home of a niece, with Keldy crying while her kids hug her. "Hola mi amor, amor mio ("Hello my love, my love")," the video shows her saying, her face buried in the arms of her sons.

They are together, yet life still isn't easy.

Since her arrival, the Honduran mother has been inside the home, cleaning and cooking. When she speaks there is relief but also anxiety in her voice. She said she wonders about the sturdiness of the house, with stairs that feel unstable.

She doesn't venture out much. Opioid use has taken root in Kensington, which has been singled out, nationwide, as an example of the effects of underinvestment, crime, and drug use.

She misses small-town life south of the border; the close buildings of Kensington make her feel trapped.

Keldy is thinking about finding a job, but she worries about leaving her mother, who forgot she was cooking the other day until there was fire in the stove. Keldy burned her hand putting it out leaving marks on her skin.

"I don't know what I am going to do. I would like to work but who is going to take care of my mother and Dana?" she said of the niece who she adopted as a baby.

Keldy's husband crossed the border five years ago. He lives in Texas and sends money to the family.

Las Americas has connected them to mental health specialists who will speak online with Keldy and her sons to help them cope with the trauma of separation.

Corchado, the attorney, said Keldy has been granted humanitarian parole for three years but she hopes the Task Force puts her on a pathway for citizenship before that. She is also trying to make sure she is all right.

"We don't just want the door open for Keldy. We want her to be successful in the United States," Corchado said. "She shouldn't be sleeping on a couch after all the horrible experiences she went through."

But for Keldy, it's enough, now, to be with her children. She knows that is more than many of her fellow migrants have.

"Everyday I pray to God for other mothers to be able to come in. They cry for their kids", she said. "They ask me 'do you know anything new?' and I tell them to have patience. And I tell them they will succeed."

## Vatican issues a street art stamp, ends up getting sued

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — One night in early 2019, Rome street artist Alessia Babrow glued a stylized image of Christ she had made onto a bridge near the Vatican. A year later, she was shocked to learn that the Vatican had apparently used a reproduction of her image, which featured her hallmark heart emblazoned across Christ's chest, as its 2020 Easter postage stamp.

Babrow sued the Vatican City State's telecommunications office in a Rome court last month, alleging it was wrongfully profiting off her creativity and was violating the original intent of her artwork. The lawsuit, which is seeking nearly 130,000 euros in damages, said the Vatican never responded officially to Babrow's attempts to negotiate a settlement after she discovered it had used her image without her consent and then allegedly sold it.

"I couldn't believe it. I honestly thought it was a joke," Babrow told The Associated Press in an interview, steps from St. Peter's Square. "The real shock was that you don't expect certain things from certain organizations."

The Vatican is home to some of the greatest artworks ever made, and it vigorously protects its right to reproduce them by enforcing its copyright over everything from the Sistine Chapel to Michelangelo's Pieta. But now the tables have turned, and the Vatican stands accused of violating the intellectual property rights of a street artist.

Copyright lawyers familiar with the case say it is an important benchmark for Italy and evidence of the increasing appreciation for Banksy-style street art and the belief that even anonymous "guerrilla art" deserves protection against unauthorized corporate merchandising. Or, in this case, church merchandising.

Massimo Sterpi, whose Rome firm has represented Banksy's Pest Control agency in copyright cases, said intellectual property law in much of Europe and the U.S. protects artists' rights even if the artwork was created on public or private property illegally.

"The law considers it irrelevant if the work is made on paper, canvas or a wall or a bridge," Sterpi said. People who then commercialize the work without making good-faith efforts to find the artist and negotiate use of the image "do so at their own risk and peril," he said.

The Vatican stamp office declined to comment on the lawsuit, said the stamp office chief, Massimo Olivieri. The Vatican press office also declined requests for comment.

The artwork in question is a 35-centimeter-high printed picture of Christ styled on the famous work by the 19th-century German painter Heinrich Hoffmann. On Christ's torso is Babrow's telltale tag: An image of a human heart with the words "JUST USE IT" written graffiti-style across.

The work is part of Babrow's "Just Use It" project, which began in 2013 and has included similar hearts on Buddhas, the Hindu deity Ganesha and the Virgin Mary that can be found on walls, stairwells and bridges around Rome, as well as on a huge version gracing a palazzo scaffolding.

The concept of the project, Babrow says, is to "promote the intelligence and the brain of the heart" in a holistic, non-judgmental way. Lawyer Mauro Lanfranconi argued in the lawsuit that by appropriating the image to promote the Catholic Church, the Vatican "irrevocably distorted" Babrow's artistic intent and message that there are no universal truths.

Babrow says she created the Christ image on Feb. 19, 2019, and glued it soon thereafter onto a travertine marble wall just off the main bridge that leads to the Vatican, one of a dozen or so pieces of poster art she put up that night around central Rome. The work bears her scripted initials inside the heart.



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She found out it had been used as the Vatican stamp when a well-known Rome street art photographer saw it and immediately recognized it as Babrow's handiwork.

Olivieri, the Vatican's numismatic chief, has told an Italian journalist that he took a photo of the Christ when he saw it while riding his moped one day and decided to use the image for the Easter stamp in an apparent attempt to appeal to a new generation of stamp enthusiasts.

In comments reported by the journalist in the online arts blog "Artslife.com," Olivieri said he feared the Holy See higher-ups might resist using a hip, graffiti-style stamp for Easter. Normally the Vatican might select an Old Master to reproduce from the Vatican Museums.

"Instead, the acceptance was immediate and convinced," Olivieri was quoted as saying.

The Vatican printed an initial 80,000 stamps of the Christ at 1.15 euros apiece, according to the lawsuit. The stamps and a commemorative folder were still on sale at the Vatican post office last week and were prominently featured at the cashier's desk as a promotional item for sale.

Babrow's lawyers sent a registered letter and an email to the philatelic and numismatic office identifying Babrow as the artist, the lawsuit says, but there was no written response to her request to negotiate terms of use, prompting her to sue.

"I thought they were acting in good faith, that it was true they were looking for me, like had been written in the papers," she said. "Only it seems it wasn't that way because they never wanted to meet with me."

Babrow stressed that the lawsuit wasn't an attack on the Catholic Church or Vatican, but rather an attempt to protect her rights and make sure her artwork wasn't being used to finance things outside her control.

Copyright lawyers said the Vatican's status as a sovereign state likely wouldn't protect it from an Italian court's jurisdiction, given the commercial activity occurred in Italy.

The case is somewhat surprising, given the Vatican is well-versed in intellectual property rights and has shown its eagerness to protect its own copyright over everything from the pope's words to its vast art collections.

Years ago, the Vatican's publishing house demanded royalties from journalists who wrote books reprinting Pope Benedict XVI's homilies. The Vatican Museums has long required media covering news events in the museum to agree to turn over the copyright of their images, lest anyone try to reproduce a Raphael without the pope's authorization.

Enrico Bonadio, professor of intellectual property law at the University of London's City Law School, said street artists can use those same protections for their own creations.

"The law does not discriminate," Bonadio said in a phone interview. "Copyright laws do not subject the protection of an artwork to the fact that it is in a gallery or a museum."

## Threats mount up against top European beauty spot in Hungary

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

SZIGLIGET, Hungary (AP) — Fishermen in small, wooden boats drift among the reeds and placid waters of Lake Balaton, the largest lake in Central Europe and one of Hungary's natural treasures.

Like many of the villages dotted along the shoreline of what is popularly known as the "Hungarian sea," the quaint village of Szigliget has against the odds maintained and nurtured its traditional character for centuries.

Its towering fortress, whitewashed peasant homes and small vineyards on gentle slopes have remained virtually unchanged despite two world wars, 45 years of Communism, and Hungary's transition to a market economy.

New and formidable threats are looming, however. Real estate speculation, clearance of the countryside to improve access for tourists and climate change are combining to cast a shadow over this whole area.

Many of the lake's settlements have already fallen prey to speculative property development. The mayor of Szigliget, Daniel Balassa, says a recent surge of construction makes him fear his village's idyllic atmosphere could soon make it the next target.

"We don't need huge buildings here, or for the whole shoreline to be built upon. We have a beach and a

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marina, we don't need anything else," Balassa told The Associated Press beside a reed bed on the lakeshore.

The lake is nearly 50 miles (80 kilometers) long and has 120 miles (200 kilometers) of shoreline. With its silty bottom and shallow waters — the average depth is only about 10 feet (3 meters) — the lake is home to a delicate ecology that provides a seasonal destination for a variety of migratory birds.

But Hungary's government views the lake as a potential goldmine for domestic and international tourism.

In 2016, it designated the region as a priority tourism development area, and earmarked 365 billion forints (\$1.27 billion) of Hungarian and European Union funds for railroad improvements, roads, marinas and the renovation and construction of hotels and guesthouses.

According to the Hungarian Tourism Agency, 232 such projects have been undertaken in 56 settlements in recent years.

"There is huge destruction of the environment. Trees are being cut and good quality reeds are disappearing, threatening the whole ecosystem," Angela Badzso, co-chair of citizens' action group Unity for the Balaton, told the AP.

The reeds serve to maintain a healthy balance in the water and ensure a vibrant habitat.

"As the reeds are disappearing, they are less able to filter Lake Balaton's water. This is one of the reasons why algae growth is higher and fish die," Badzso says.

Zoltan Kun, a conservationist and environmental protection expert, said that while Balaton's water quality has significantly improved since the 1990s, the decreased reed coverage threatens to throw the complex ecosystem into imbalance.

"The unfortunate truth in Hungary ... is that we measure the success of development in the square meters of concrete, rather than the number of certain birds or square meters of reeds around the lake," Kun said.

After Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his ruling Fidesz party took power in 2010, the government dissolved the country's environmental protection ministry. Kun says that significantly reduced the state's ability to look after its natural resources.

The conservation regulations that do exist are often selectively enforced, Kun said, or involve meager fines only after damage has already been done.

Istvan Boka, chairman of the Lake Balaton Development Council and a governing party lawmaker, contends that existing environmental regulations are enough to prevent the destruction of untouched portions of the lake.

Recent developments, he says, "have all taken place on shoreline that is already developed."

During Hungary's socialist era, Lake Balaton was a popular getaway for many workers who could enjoy vacations subsidized by their labor unions. Citizens of both East and West Germany could also visit the lake, making it a common meeting place for families with members living on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Since then, it has remained an affordable destination for Hungarians of nearly all economic backgrounds, though much of the infrastructure built during the socialist period has become dilapidated and requires renewal.

But now luxury accommodation is on the rise and plans are afoot to increase sailboat traffic on the lake, directed at wealthier tourists.

Balassa, the local mayor, said that while the magic of the lake and its villages makes a growth in tourism and development to some degree unavoidable, it should be conducted on a "human scale" that respects the area's natural and cultural integrity.

"Not every new project is necessarily a terrible thing. You just have to find common ground that is satisfactory for everyone," Balassa said.

## Factory boss defiant as sanctions bite in China's Xinjiang

By KEN MORITSUGU and DAKE KANG Associated Press

AKSU, China (AP) — A backlash against reports of forced labor and other abuses of the largely Muslim Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang is taking a toll on China's cotton industry, but it's unclear if the pressure will compel the government or companies to change their ways.

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Li Qiang, general manager of the Huafu Fashion yarn factory in Xinjiang, told reporters that even though the company lost money in 2020 for the first time in its 27-year history, it bounced back by shifting to domestic orders.

"This is now in the past," Li said. "We've turned things around in the first quarter of this year."

Li blamed a sharp fall in foreign orders, as customers including Adidas and H&M cut ties, on "fake news" in a 2019 Wall Street Journal story that said brand name apparel makers and food companies were entangled in China's campaign to forcibly assimilate its Muslim population. Huafu also cited U.S. sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic.

In a crackdown since 2017 after a series of militant attacks, the Chinese government has detained a million or more people in Xinjiang, a major cotton-producing region in China's northwest that is home to the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups. Critics also accuse it of torture, forced sterilization and cultural and religious suppression.

Apart from cotton, much of the world's polysilicon for photovoltaic cells comes from Xinjiang. The U.S. is now weighing sanctions over the alleged use of forced labor in the production of solar panels.

Xinjiang officials deny the charges and brush off Western criticism. They recently took about a dozen foreign journalists to the sprawling Huafu complex in Aksu city, where 780,000 spindles churn out 100,000 tons of colored yarn annually for sportswear and other items.

The company said in a preliminary estimate last month that it earned 120 million-150 million yuan (about \$20 million) in the first three months of this year, after a 405 million yuan (\$63 million) loss in 2020 as sales fell 10 percent.

Evidence of forced labor comes from people who have left China and government documents, but it is difficult to prove definitively at specific factories since human rights experts and others are unable to investigate freely. Diplomats and journalists traveling independently to Xinjiang are followed, and most residents, wary of getting in trouble, are unwilling to talk critically.

"The government doesn't want information flowing out of the region and they've done a good job of making that difficult," said Scott Nova, the executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium in Washington.

An ethnic Kazakh woman from Xinjiang who fled to Kazakhstan said she was forced to work for a week sewing uniforms in a factory in 2018 after spending almost a year in detention.

Dina Nurdybai ran a clothing business with 30 employees before she was detained. She said the factory work was not voluntary. She was released after authorities realized she was not on a list of long-term detainees.

"If they say they are taking you to a factory, you say 'yes,' " she said. "If you don't go, they'll say you have problematic thoughts and persecute you."

Others also have said they or their relatives were coerced to work in factories.

The government says such testimonies are fabrications. One worker, Paziliya Tursan, said above the hum of spindles at Huafu that reports of forced labor are nonsense. As officials listened in, she said people at the factory stick together like pomegranate seeds, echoing a metaphor used by President Xi Jinping to describe ethnic unity in China.

The U.S. decided last year that the evidence was strong enough to ban imports of clothing, cotton, hair products and computer parts from about a half dozen companies. In January, it expanded the ban to all cotton and tomato products from Xinjiang, which produces processed foods such as tomato paste and about one-fifth of the world's cotton.

U.S. customs denied a request this month from Japanese retailer Uniqlo to release a shipment of men's shirts that had been stopped at a southern California port under the sanctions.

Guixiang, a Communist Party spokesperson in Xinjiang, said companies may lose customers in the short run but eventually become stronger as they and their employees work harder and find new markets. "In some sense, the stress can be transformed into a driving force for the companies," he said.

China has a huge domestic market and demand is growing in Southeast Asia, the Mideast, Africa and Eastern Europe, said Peng Bo, a senior vice president at Founder CIFCO Futures, a financial derivatives

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firm in Beijing. Chinese manufacturers also have gained market share as the pandemic hobbled competitors in other countries.

"Though the international market is important to domestic brands, it is not irreplaceable, particularly the European and American markets," he said.

On top of import bans, the U.S. Commerce Department has blocked the sale of U.S. technology and parts to more than two dozen companies linked to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including Huafu. That adds to pressure to stop dealing with the company.

Technology companies have also been targeted. Commerce added Nanchang O-Film Tech, whose customers have included Apple and Lenovo, to the blacklist last July. The company has employed Uyghur workers brought to Nanchang from Xinjiang, some 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) away, under restrictive conditions.

Its parent OFILM Group said it lost 1.9 billion yuan (\$300 million) last year because overseas customers dropped contracts. It did not say which customers.

The forced labor allegations extended to cotton picking late last year with a BBC story and a report by U.S.-based researcher Adrian Zenz. His study, based largely on publicly-available Chinese government documents, found "strong indications" of coercion and concluded that "it must be assumed that any cotton from Xinjiang may involve coercive labor, with the likelihood of coercion being very high."

China accused Zenz and the British public broadcaster of anti-China bias. Foreign journalists were taken to a 40-hectare (100-acre) cotton field that was being planted by machine, and officials said mechanization has eliminated the need for most workers.

Picking cotton is more difficult than planting it, though, and where it is mechanized in Xinjiang, it often depends on American technology in the form of John Deere machines. Deere said in a statement that U.S. sanctions have affected its business but declined to provide specifics.

The government says 70% of harvesting is mechanized, but that varies from place to place. Use of machine picking is more common in the north. In southern Xinjiang plots tend to be smaller and more scattered, with 53% of total acreage harvested by machine in 2020, up from 35% in 2019, according to the government. It acknowledged that farmers still plant and harvest by hand in many places.

Nova of the Workers Rights Consortium said companies should not buy from Xinjiang because of the "substantial risk" of forced labor at any factory and the inability to conduct a proper inspection.

"A Uyghur worker cannot speak freely and candidly about forced labor, particularly if they are a victim of forced labor," he said. "And so when you've got a combination of risk and the inability to manage that risk via labor rights due diligence, the only responsible approach . . . is not to source from that particular place."

## Thousands evacuated in India as strong cyclone inches closer

NEW DELHI (AP) — Tens of thousands of people were evacuated Tuesday in low-lying areas of two Indian states and moved to cyclone shelters to escape a powerful storm barreling toward the eastern coast.

Cyclone Yaas is set to turn into a "very severe cyclonic storm" with sustained wind speeds of up to 177 kilometers per hour (110 miles per hour), the India Meteorological Department said. The cyclone is expected to make landfall early Wednesday in Odisha and West Bengal states.

The cyclone coming amid a devastating coronavirus surge complicates India's efforts to deal with both just 10 days after Cyclone Tauktae hit India's west coast and killed more than 140 people.

Thousands of emergency personnel have been deployed in coastal regions of the two states for evacuation and any possible rescue operations, said S.N. Pradhan, director of India's National Disaster Response Force. India's air force and navy were also on standby to carry out relief work.

Fishing trawlers and boats have been told to take shelter until further notice as forecasters warned of high tidal waves.

In West Bengal, authorities were scrambling to move tens of thousands of people to cyclone shelters. Officials said at least 20 districts in the state will feel the brunt of the storm.

Last May, nearly 100 people died in Cyclone Amphan, the most powerful storm in more than a decade to hit eastern India, including West Bengal state. It flattened villages, destroyed farms and left millions

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without power in eastern India and Bangladesh.

"We haven't been able to fix the damage to our home from the last cyclone. Now another cyclone is coming, how will we stay here?" said Samitri, who uses only one name.

In Odisha, a state already battered by coronavirus infections, authorities evacuated nearly 15,000 people living along the coast and moved them to cyclone shelters, senior officer Pradeep Jena said.

In a televised address Monday, the state's chief minister, Naveen Patnaik, appealed to people being moved to cyclone shelters to wear double masks and maintain social distancing. He asked authorities to distribute masks to the evacuated people.

"We have to face both the challenges simultaneously," Patnaik said.

## Mysterious air base being built on volcanic island off Yemen

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A mysterious air base is being built on a volcanic island off Yemen that sits in one of the world's crucial maritime chokepoints for both energy shipments and commercial cargo.

While no country has claimed the Mayun Island air base in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, shipping traffic associated with a prior attempt to build a massive runway across the 5.6-kilometer (3.5 mile)-long island years ago links back to the United Arab Emirates.

Officials in Yemen's internationally recognized government now say the Emiratis are behind this latest effort as well, even though the UAE announced in 2019 it was withdrawing its troops from a Saudi-led military campaign battling Yemen's Houthi rebels.

"This does seem to be a longer-term strategic aim to establish a relatively permanent presence," said Jeremy Binnie, the Mideast editor at the open-source intelligence company Janes who has followed construction on Mayun for years. It's "possibly not just about the Yemen war and you've got to see the shipping situation as fairly key there."

Emirati officials in Abu Dhabi and the UAE's Embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

The runway on Mayun Island allows whoever controls it to project power into the strait and easily launch airstrikes into mainland Yemen, convulsed by a yearslong bloody war. It also provides a base for any operations into the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and nearby East Africa.

Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc. obtained by The Associated Press showed dump trucks and graders building a 1.85 kilometer (6,070-foot) runway on the island on April 11. By May 18, that work appeared complete, with three hangars constructed on a tarmac just south of the runway.

A runway of that length can accommodate attack, surveillance and transport aircraft. An earlier effort begun toward the end of 2016 and later abandoned had workers try to build an even-larger runway over 3 kilometers (9,800 feet) long, which would allow for the heaviest bombers.

Military officials with Yemen's internationally recognized government, which the Saudi-led coalition has backed since 2015, say the UAE is building the runway. The officials, speaking to the AP on condition of anonymity as they didn't have authorization to brief journalists, say Emirati ships transported military weapons, equipment and troops to Mayun Island in recent weeks.

The military officials said recent tension between the UAE and Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi came in part from an Emirati demand for his government to sign a 20-year lease agreement for Mayun. Emirati officials have not acknowledged any disagreement.

The initial, failed construction project came after Emirati and allied forces retook the island from Iranian-backed Houthi militants in 2015. By late 2016, satellite images showed construction underway there.

Tugboats associated with Dubai-based Echo Cargo & Shipping LLC and landing craft and carriers from Abu Dhabi-based Bin Nawi Marine Services LLC helped bring equipment to the island in that first attempt, according to tracking signals recorded by data firm Refinitiv. Satellite photos at the time show they offloaded the gear and vehicles at a temporary beachside port.

Echo Cargo & Shipping declined to comment, while Bin Nawi Marine Services did not respond to a re-

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quest for comment. Recent shipping data shows no recorded vessels around Mayun, suggesting whoever provided the sealift for the latest construction turned off their boats' Automatic Identification System tracking devices to avoid being identified.

Construction initially stopped in 2017, likely when engineers realized they couldn't dig through a portion of the volcanic island's craggy features to incorporate the site of the island's old runway. The building restarted in earnest on the new runway site around Feb. 22, satellite photos show, several weeks after President Joe Biden announced he would end U.S. support for the Saudi-led offensive against the Houthis.

The apparent decision by the Emiratis to resume building the air base comes after the UAE dismantled parts of a military base it ran in the East African nation of Eritrea as a staging ground for its Yemen campaign.

While the Horn of Africa "has become a dangerous place" for the Emiratis due to competitors and local war risks, Mayun has a small population and offers a valuable site for monitoring the Red Sea, said Eleonora Ardemagni, an analyst at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies. The region has seen a rise in attacks and incidents.

"The Emiratis have been shifting from a power-projection foreign policy to a power-protection foreign policy," Ardemagni said. It increases "their capacity to monitor what happens and to prevent possible threats by non-state actors close to Iran."

The expeditionary Quds Force of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was said to run a similar operation on a cargo ship long stationed nearby off Yemen before being apparently targeted by an Israeli attack.

Mayun, also known as Perim Island, sits some 3.5 kilometers (2 miles) off the southwestern edge of Yemen. World powers have recognized the island's strategic location for hundreds of years, especially with the opening of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

The British kept the island up until their departure from Yemen in 1967. The Soviet Union, allied with South Yemen's Marxist government, upgraded Mayun's naval facilities but used them "only infrequently," according a 1981 CIA analysis. That's likely due to needing to bring water and supplies onto the island. That will affect the new air base as well as Mayun has no modern port, said Binnie, the Janes analyst.

The base still may interest American forces, however. U.S. troops operated from Yemen's al-Anad Air Base running a campaign of drone strikes targeting al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula until the Houthi advance forced them to withdraw in 2015. The Defense Department later acknowledged on-the-ground American troops supported the Saudi-led coalition around Mukalla in 2016. Special forces raids and drones also have targeted the country.

The U.S. military's Central Command did not respond to a request for comment. The CIA declined to comment.

## Who's an astronaut as private spaceflight picks up speed?

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — As more companies start selling tickets to space, a question looms: Who gets to call themselves an astronaut?

It's already a complicated issue and about to get more so as the wealthy snap up spacecraft seats and even entire flights for themselves and their entourages.

Astronauts? Amateur astronauts? Space tourists? Space sightseers? Rocket riders? Or as the Russians have said for decades, spaceflight participants?

NASA's new boss Bill Nelson doesn't consider himself an astronaut even though he spent six days orbiting Earth in 1986 aboard space shuttle Columbia — as a congressman.

"I reserve that term for my professional colleagues," Nelson recently told The Associated Press.

Computer game developer Richard Garriott — who paid his way to the International Space Station in 2008 with the Russians — hates the space tourist label. "I am an astronaut," he declared in an email, explaining that he trained for two years for the mission.

"If you go to space, you're an astronaut," said Axiom Space's Michael Lopez-Alegria, a former NASA

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astronaut who will accompany three businessmen to the space station in January, flying SpaceX. His \$55 million-a-seat clients plan to conduct research up there, he stressed, and do not consider themselves space tourists.

There's something enchanting about the word: Astronaut comes from the Greek words for star and sailor. And swashbuckling images of "The Right Stuff" and NASA's original Mercury 7 astronauts make for great marketing.

Jeff Bezos' rocket company, Blue Origin, is already calling its future clients "astronauts." It's auctioning off one seat on its first spaceflight with people on board, targeted for July. NASA even has a new acronym: PAM for Private Astronaut Mission.

Retired NASA astronaut Mike Mullane didn't consider himself an astronaut until his first space shuttle flight in 1984, six years after his selection by NASA.

"It doesn't matter if you buy a ride or you're assigned to a ride," said Mullane, whose 2006 autobiography is titled "Riding Rockets." Until you strap into a rocket and reach a certain altitude, "you're not an astronaut."

It remains a coveted assignment. More than 12,000 applied for NASA's upcoming class of astronauts; a lucky dozen or so will be selected in December.

But what about passengers who are along for the ride, like the Russian actress and movie director who will fly to the space station in October? Or Japan's moonstruck billionaire who will follow them from Kazakhstan in December with his production assistant tagging along to document everything? In each case, a professional cosmonaut will be in charge of the Soyuz capsule.

SpaceX's high tech capsules are completely automated, as are Blue Origin's. So should rich riders and their guests be called astronauts even if they learn the ropes in case they need to intervene in an emergency?

Perhaps even more important, where does space begin?

The Federal Aviation Administration limits its commercial astronaut wings to flight crews. The minimum altitude is 50 miles (80 kilometers). It's awarded seven so far; recipients include the two pilots for Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic who made another test flight of the company's rocket ship Saturday.

Others define space as beginning at an even 100 kilometers, or 62 miles above sea level.

Blue Origin's capsules are designed to reach that threshold and provide a few minutes of weightlessness before returning to Earth. By contrast, it takes 1 1/2 hours to circle the world. The Association of Space Explorers requires at least one orbit of Earth — in a spacecraft — for membership.

The Astronauts Memorial Foundation honors all those who sacrificed their lives for the U.S. space program even if they never reached space, like Challenger schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe and the test pilot killed in a 2014 Virgin Galactic crash. Also on the Space Mirror Memorial at NASA's Kennedy Space Center: X-15 and F-104 Air Force pilots who were part of a military space program that never got off the ground.

The astronaut debate has been around since the 1960s, according to Garriott. His late father, Owen Garriott, was among the first so-called scientist-astronauts hired by NASA; the test pilots in the office resented sharing the job title.

It might be necessary to retire the term altogether once hundreds if not thousands reach space, noted Fordham University history professor Asif Siddiqi, the author of several space books. "Are we going to call each and every one of them astronauts?"

Mullane, the three-time space shuttle flier, suggests using astronaut first class, second class, third class, "depending on what your involvement is, whether you pull out a wallet and write a check."

While a military-style pecking order might work, former NASA historian Roger Launius warned: "This gets really complicated really quickly."

In the end, Mullane noted, "Astronaut is not a copyrighted word. So anybody who wants to call themselves an astronaut can call themselves an astronaut, whether they've been in space or not."

## In NYC's furthest flung neighborhood, vaccine a tough sell

By ARIJETA LAJKA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — If there's one place where people could fear the coronavirus more than a vaccina-

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tion needle, it's the Far Rockaway section of Queens: Nearly 460 residents of the seaside neighborhood have died of COVID-19.

That's one out of every 146 people who live there, making for one of New York City's highest death rates. And yet, no other place in the city has a lower percentage of vaccinated people.

As of Monday, only 29% of people living Far Rockaway's ZIP code, 11691, had received even one vaccine dose, according to data from the New York City Health Department. That compares to a rate of 49% citywide and nationally.

The situation in the community of around 67,000 people illustrates the challenges facing health officials in many places as they try to overcome hesitancy fueled by mistrust, misinformation and fear.

"We have a good amount of people that still don't want to get vaccinated, for whatever reason," said Diana Catalan, a health clinic manager involved in the Far Rockaway inoculation effort whose father, a neighborhood resident, died of the virus in February.

Some people want to wait a few months to see how vaccinated friends and family respond to the shots, she said. Some have heard unfounded conspiracy theories that the vaccine is dangerous. Others just feel no urgency, having escaped serious harm so far.

Catalan said she was anxious to get her father a shot at the Joseph P. Addabbo Family Health Center, where she works. But he got the virus before the vaccine became available to people in his age group. He was 62.

"He was very young and he had no chronic illnesses," Catalan said. "He was nothing but a hard-working man."

More than an hour's subway ride from Manhattan, Far Rockaway sits between a bay and a strip of urban beach on the eastern end of Queens seashore, beneath the flight path for nearby Kennedy Airport.

Like a lot of places where vaccination rates lag, a majority of residents are Black and Hispanic. Among some Black Americans, there's documented distrust in the medical establishment and government because of a history of discriminatory treatment.

"People are naturally going to be scared of anything offered by the medical community, especially because of what we've seen through health care and what that has looked like for low-income black and brown communities disadvantaged in the state," Khaleel Anderson, a state Assembly member who represents the area explained.

For some Latinos, delaying the vaccine often comes down to logistics, such as work schedules or fear of negative immigration consequences. A section of the neighborhood is also home to a community of Orthodox Jews, a group that, like white evangelical Christians, is also experiencing more vaccine skepticism.

Initially developed in the 19th century as a beach resort community, Far Rockaway today is poorer than most parts of the city, a mix of public housing, seaside apartment towers and suburban-style single-family homes, all physically isolated. Its inoculation rate stands in stark contrast with the situation a few miles west in Breezy Point, a whiter, more affluent section of the Rockaway Peninsula where 75% of people have received their first dose.

"Far Rockaway is always the forgotten community," said Michelle Chester, who was raised in the neighborhood and also happened to administer the very first COVID-19 vaccine dose in the state.

Local officials initially said limited access to vaccination sites is one factor contributing to the low numbers, though throughout May, there were at least four places where people were able to get shots in the 3 square miles (8 square kilometers) that constitute Far Rockaway. A large, state-run mass vaccination site is also just a few subway stops away, at Aqueduct Racetrack.

Still, Chester, who no longer lives in Far Rockaway but visits her mother there on weekends, said in early May that if there are convenient sites, "that information is not getting to the community."

The city opened a new vaccination hub near the neighborhood in April, hoping to boost access.

"Having the permanent site really helps push us in the right direction," Anderson said, but maintained that residents' hesitancy is driven by being "genuinely concerned."

Misinformation has complicated vaccination efforts, especially among residents who are skeptical of the



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speed with which the vaccine was manufactured.

Marimar Alvarado, 24, has decided against getting the COVID-19 vaccine, along with the rest of her family. In Spanish, she referred to the vaccine as the "Mark of the Beast," an ominous sign in the New Testament's Book of Revelation, signaling the end times. The fringe conspiracy theory has spread among some Christians.

Somer Saleh, a family therapist at New Horizon Counseling Center in Far Rockaway, said that she noticed, among her vaccine-hesitant clients, that there's "misinformation on what the actual vaccine contains" and "wild conspiracy theories."

In Far Rockaway's Jewish community, some women are fearful of getting the vaccine because of debunked claims the vaccine affects fertility, said Moshe Brandsdorfer, executive director of the Jewish Community Council of the Rockaway Peninsula, which provides vaccine education through online outreach. He also noted that those who already had COVID-19 don't really feel the "urge" to get vaccinated.

People without legal status in the U.S. are also fearful of getting vaccinated because they're hesitant to give personal information, local health workers told The Associated Press. The brief pause on Johnson & Johnson's one-shot dose, while health authorities considered a potential link to rare blood clots, also turned people away, they said.

Some progress is being made. The Addabbo center's Far Rockaway branch has been vaccinating between 30-80 people a day. Earlier this month, it began offering additional vaccine slots on weekends, which is "helpful to capture the working-class people who can't afford to take off a weekday," Anderson said. Addabbo is seeing results from the weekend sessions. In one weekend alone in mid-May, more than 200 people got the vaccine at the clinic's Far Rockaway location.

Angelita Ramos, a 47-year-old Spanish teacher, recently got her second Moderna jab. She initially delayed vaccination.

"I was scared," she said. "To be honest, I said, 'Let me see how it's going to work out.'"

Ramos said seeing other teachers getting vaccinated convinced her to get the shot.

Elva Rosario, 79, also received her second dose recently, saying she often walked by the vaccine site but didn't think the vaccine was necessary since she was never infected.

Rosario said she wasn't afraid of COVID-19, saying at her age the virus "hits you like a rock."

In some parts of New York, the city has hired people to go door-to-door promoting the shots. The state and city have also been offering incentives, ranging from free fries at Shake Shack to a week of free subway rides. To really ramp up vaccination rates, personalized outreach in the community is necessary, said Addabbo CEO, Miriam Vega.

"This final batch of people that we want to reach in order to reach herd immunity is going to take a lot of work," she said.

Things like advertisements alone won't do the trick.

"It's the human one-on-one interaction that matters," she said.

Queens Borough President Donovan Richards agreed.

In a tight-knit community like Far Rockaway, "if they don't see their neighbor getting the vaccine," he said, "they aren't getting it."

## As deadlines slip, Biden agenda faces crucial assessment

By LISA MASCARO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan is hitting roadblocks. A policing overhaul after the killing of George Floyd is up in the air. Even a seemingly bipartisan effort to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol faces the blockade of Republican opposition in Congress.

It's a pivotal time for many aspects of Biden's ambitious agenda. Rounding the first quarter of his presidency, the White House and Congress have been unable to meet key Memorial Day deadlines set by the administration on crucial priorities.

While lawmakers quickly approved Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue package and senators confirmed

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the top ranks of the administration with Biden's nominees, the next legislative priorities on the White House's agenda will be a longer slog.

The sweeping infrastructure investment, in particular, faces a crucial moment: The White House is assessing whether the president can strike a bipartisan deal with Republicans on his American Jobs Plan, a top domestic priority, or try to go it alone with Democrats if no progress is made over the next week. Biden's allies in the House and Senate are preparing for all scenarios.

"This is going to feel like a tightrope walk all the way until it gets to Biden's desk," said Jim Kessler, executive vice president of Third Way, a centrist think tank.

Presidents are often judged not only by the goals they achieved, but whether their proposals were popular with the public and the leadership in trying to muscle the bills into law. The White House appears to be taking those factors to heart as Biden makes his case to the public and conducts extensive outreach for his agenda on Capitol Hill.

The administration is signaling that it's important not just whether Biden can push his infrastructure and other proposals into law, but how he does it. By this reasoning, voters — and some moderate Democratic lawmakers — are more likely to be on board if Biden at least tries for bipartisanship.

The White House said Monday that Biden is awaiting an infrastructure counteroffer from Senate Republicans after a core group of GOP negotiators rejected his latest \$1.7 trillion proposal, leaving the fragile talks on a compromise at a standstill.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the president is "eager to engage" and would welcome more talks with the senators. But she said the Republicans have "a ways more to go" to find common ground. Biden dropped \$500 billion from his initial \$2.3 trillion offer, and Psaki said the Republicans raised their \$568 billion offer by about \$50 billion. Republicans have rejected Biden's plan to pay for the road and broadband spending with a corporate tax increase.

"The ball is in the Republicans' court," Psaki said at the White House briefing.

At the same time, key congressional negotiators are working behind the scenes on a bipartisan police overhaul in response to a nationwide reassessment of law enforcement practices sparked by Floyd's death a year ago Tuesday in Minneapolis. Biden had hoped to have the legislation ready by the anniversary.

In a rare joint statement Monday, negotiators Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., and Rep. Karen Bass, D-Calif., said, "This anniversary serves as a painful reminder of why we must make meaningful change. While we are still working through our differences on key issues, we continue to make progress toward a compromise and remain optimistic about the prospects of achieving that goal."

But other priorities on gun violence, voting rights and immigration law face long odds with the narrowly split Congress and robust opposition from Republicans. Democrats hold only a slim majorities in the House and evenly divided Senate, and much of Biden's agenda would require broader support to reach the 60 votes under the rules to advance past a Senate filibuster.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has said repeatedly that "100% of my focus" is on stopping Biden's agenda.

The West Wing believes its bargaining position is strong. Aides point to Biden's high poll numbers and the popularity of his proposals, all while believing that they have the option of muscling the infrastructure plan to passage under special budget reconciliation rules that require only a party-line vote.

But there is a growing sense of urgency within the White House and among Democrats. After a burst of legislative accomplishment, including the sweeping COVID relief bill, the pace has slowed dramatically. And the future may hinge on a few select senators.

After Biden was elected on the heels of a campaign promise to work with Republicans, the White House has been quick to defend his bipartisan record of accomplishment.

Aides have pointed to how quickly the president's Cabinet was confirmed — one choice, Neera Tanden, withdrew after it was clear she would not get support.

Along with Biden's chocolate-chip cookie diplomacy — inviting lawmakers to the White House, treating them with sweets on the way out — the administration has been conducting vigorous outreach to Capitol Hill. The White House has had nearly 1,000 phone calls or meetings with lawmakers or their staffs, including

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more than 200 with Republicans on the jobs plan and the related American Families Plan — the president's stalled proposal to invest in preschool, child tax credits and other so-called human infrastructure.

Still, the partisan tensions are stark, showing the limits of Biden's ability to bridge the divide.

This week, legislation passed by the House to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol is likely to face a filibuster by Republicans in the Senate. GOP leaders argue the panel is unneeded as they try to move past the deadly riot by supporters of Donald Trump who laid siege to the Capitol in a failed effort to overturn Biden's election.

As the administration assesses next steps on Biden's infrastructure proposal, White House aides have not thrown in the towel on landing a bipartisan agreement with the GOP senators, but their optimism cooled, according to Biden advisers. The group led by Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., rejected Biden's counteroffer in a sharply worded statement late last week.

Psaki insisted no decisions had been made on whether the administration will go it alone as it awaits a counteroffer from Republicans. "We're not quite there yet," she said. "We're eager to see their proposal and see what they have to offer."

The GOP senators have not said if they were preparing another proposal, but kept the door open late Monday.

"I'm not ready to call it quits," Capito told reporters on Capitol Hill.

## 'Turning mourning into dancing': Festival to remember Floyd

By DOUG GLASS Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The intersection where George Floyd took his final breaths was to be transformed Tuesday into an outdoor festival on the one-year anniversary of his death, with food, children's activities and a long list of musical performers.

"We're going to be turning mourning into dancing," rapper Nur-D tweeted. "We're going to be celebrating 365 days of strength in the face of injustice."

Floyd, 46, who was Black, died on Memorial Day 2020 after then-Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck, pinning him to the ground for about 9 1/2 minutes. Chauvin, who is white, was convicted last month of murder and faces sentencing June 25. Three other fired officers still face trial.

The site of Floyd's death, 38th and Chicago, was taken over by activists soon after and remains barricaded to traffic. The "Rise and Remember George Floyd" celebration, including a candlelight vigil at 8 p.m., caps several days of marches, rallies and panel discussions about his death and where America is in confronting racial discrimination.

Many members of the Floyd family were scheduled to be in Washington on Tuesday, in a private meeting with President Joe Biden, who called family members after the Chauvin verdict and pledged to continue fighting for racial justice.

Nur-D, whose real name is Matt Allen, took to the Minneapolis streets in the days after Floyd's death, often providing medical assistance to protesters who were shot or gassed in confrontations with police. He eventually founded an organization, Justice Frontline Aid, to support safe protest.

He described the past year as "like we've lived 20 years inside of one" and hoped that people would feel "honesty and a real sense of togetherness" during Tuesday's celebration at what's informally known as George Floyd Square.

"If you're angry, you can be angry. If you're sad, you can be sad," Nur-D said in a follow-up interview. "If you're feeling some sense of joy over the verdict and some sort of like step in the right direction, and you want to celebrate that, do that as well."

The event was organized by the George Floyd Global Memorial. Angela Harrelson, an aunt of Floyd's and a member of the board of directors. The organization has stockpiled 3,000 items surrounding Floyd's death — things like artwork left behind in the square — and will display some of them in a pop-up gallery.

The event was due to start at 1 p.m., the same time Gov. Tim Walz asked Minnesotans to pause for a moment of silence to honor Floyd. Walz asked that the moment last for 9 minutes, 29 seconds — the length

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of time that prosecutors say Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck.

Walz's proclamation says Chauvin's guilty verdict was a step in the right direction, "but our work to dismantle systemic racism and discrimination has not ended. True justice for George Floyd will come only through real, systemic change to prevent acts like this from happening again — when every member of every community, no matter their race, is safe, valued, and protected."

## Stephen Colbert says he's going back before live audiences

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In one more step toward a reopened entertainment world, CBS said Monday that Stephen Colbert's late-night show will return on June 14 to episodes with a full studio audience.

Audience members will have to provide proof that they have been vaccinated against COVID-19 before attending shows at New York's Ed Sullivan Theater. Face masks will be optional.

Since the COVID shutdown in March 2020, Colbert has produced 205 episodes without a live audience, taping his first monologue from the bathtub of his South Carolina home. In August, he moved to a small studio at the Sullivan Theater offices, usually only with the show's executive producer, stage manager and occasionally Colbert's wife watching.

Watching NBA playoff games and "Saturday Night Live" before audiences this past weekend was a reminder that those in attendance aren't just watching, they are participants in events that make a big difference for performers, said Bill Carter, executive producer of CNN's current documentary series, "The Story of Late Night."

Telling jokes into a void has been especially hard for late-night performers, who depend upon the rhythm of the audience's response to their material, he said.

"Colbert bringing back a real live audience is a moment to be celebrated — not just for him and the other hosts who can now resume regular programming, but to the audience at home who can share a bit in the enthusiasm of those on the scene," Carter said.

The return of entertainment audiences "is something the country needs deeply," he said. "It's a release that has been pent up in the nation's long-abused psyche for song long. Of course it's going to feel liberating."

Despite Colbert's announcement on Monday, he may not be the first late-night host back before a full house.

Jimmy Fallon has taped NBC's "Tonight" show before a partial studio audience of about 40 percent capacity at Rockefeller Center since March 22. NBC said Monday that Fallon plans to have a full audience, fully vaccinated, in early June.

ABC's Jimmy Kimmel has been doing shows back in his regular studio, and at least some people are watching him, but it isn't clear how many and who they are.

Comedy Central's Trevor Noah has been recording socially distant versions of "The Daily Show" from his home without an audience. Currently on hiatus, the show plans to keep operating from Noah's home when it returns on June 7, a spokeswoman said.

Fox News Channel's Greg Gutfeld started a late-night comedy show during the epidemic, with a small audience of about 15 people.

Colbert is the top-rated late-night performer, and his announcement Monday sends a clear message.

"I look forward to once again doing show for an audience I can smell and touch," Colbert said.

## EU leaders agree on Belarus sanctions after plane diversion

By RAF CASERT, SAMUEL PETREQUIN and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union agreed Monday to impose sanctions on Belarus, including banning its airlines from using the airspace and airports of the 27-nation bloc, amid fury over the forced diversion of a passenger jet to arrest an opposition journalist.

Reacting to what EU leaders called a brazen "hijacking" of the Ryanair jetliner flying from Greece to Lithuania on Sunday, they also demanded the immediate release of the journalist, Raman Pratasevich, a

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key foe of authoritarian Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

"We won't tolerate that one can try to play Russian roulette with the lives of innocent civilians," said EU Council chief Charles Michel, who presided over the EU meeting.

A brief video clip of Pratasevich, who ran a popular messaging app that played a key role in helping organize huge protests against Lukashenko, was shown on Belarusian state television Monday night, a day after he was removed from the Ryanair flight.

Sitting at a table with his hands folded in front of him and speaking rapidly, Pratasevich said he was in satisfactory health and said his treatment in custody was "maximally correct and according to law." He added that he was giving evidence to investigators about organizing mass disturbances.

In their unusually swift action in Brussels, the EU leaders also urged all EU-based carriers to avoid flying over Belarus, decided to impose sanctions on officials linked to Sunday's flight diversion, and urged the International Civil Aviation Organization to start an investigation into what they viewed as an unprecedented move and what some said amounted to state terrorism or piracy.

The leaders called on their council "to adopt the necessary measures to ban overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines and prevent access to EU airports of flights operated by such airlines." In addition calling for the release of Pratasevich, they also urged authorities in Minsk to free his Russian girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, who was taken off the plane with him.

The text was endorsed quickly by the leaders who were determined to respond with a "strong reaction" to the incident because of the "serious endangering of aviation safety and passengers on board by Belarusian authorities," said an EU official with direct knowledge of the discussions who was not authorized to speak publicly about the private talks.

At least one European airline already diverted a flight around Belarus. British Airways flight 3599, which on Saturday and Sunday crossed over Belarus, bypassed the country Monday by using Russian airspace instead, according to the website Flightradar24.

Ryanair said Belarusian flight controllers told the crew there was a bomb threat against the plane as it was crossing through Belarus airspace Sunday and ordered it to land. A Belarusian MiG-29 fighter jet was scrambled to escort the plane in a brazen show of force by Lukashenko, who has ruled the country with an iron fist for over a quarter-century.

Belarus authorities then arrested the 26-year-old activist, journalist and prominent Lukashenko critic. Pratasevich and his Russian girlfriend were taken off the plane shortly after it landed, and authorities haven't said where they're being held. Ryanair Flight FR4978, which began in Athens, Greece, was eventually allowed to continue on to Vilnius, Lithuania.

"This is an attack on democracy," said Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the executive European Commission. "This is an attack on freedom of expression. And this is an attack on European sovereignty. And this outrageous behavior needs a strong answer."

Von der Leyen added that a €3 billion EU investment and economic package for Belarus will remain on hold until Belarus "turns democratic."

U.S. President Joe Biden said late Monday that he asked his team to develop appropriate options to hold accountable those responsible, in close coordination with the European Union, other allies and partners, and international organizations.

"This outrageous incident and the video Mr. Pratasevich appears to have made under duress are shameful assaults on both political dissent and the freedom of the press. The United States joins countries around the world in calling for his release, as well as for the release of the hundreds of political prisoners who are being unjustly detained by the Lukashenka regime," Biden's statement said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier that National Security adviser Jake Sullivan raised the issue in a call with the secretary of the Russian Security Council.

Two U.S. senators urged the Biden administration to prohibit U.S. airlines from entering Belarus airspace because of the incident. "We must protect innocent passengers from despotic regimes and stand in solidarity with dissidents who are being targeted," Sens. Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, and Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, said in a joint statement.

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EU leaders were particularly forceful in their condemnation of the arrest and the move against the plane, which was flying between two of the bloc's member nations and was being operated by an airline based in Ireland, also a member.

EU leaders have tried to bring Belarus closer to the bloc — to encourage democratic reforms and reduce the influence of Russia — but have failed so far.

British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said he instructed the U.K. Civil Aviation Authority "to request airlines avoid Belarusian airspace in order to keep passengers safe." He added he was suspending the permit allowing Belavia to operate in the U.K.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy ordered officials to move to cut the air link with Belarus and ban Ukrainian flights via the neighbor's airspace.

The U.S. and the EU have imposed sanctions on top Belarusian officials amid months of protests, which were triggered by Lukashenko's reelection to a sixth term in an August 2020 vote that the opposition rejected as rigged. More than 34,000 people have been arrested in Belarus since then, and thousands beaten.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry bristled at what it described as "belligerent" EU statements, insisting Minsk acted "in full conformity with international rules."

It ordered all Latvian diplomats out of the country after the Belarusian flag was replaced Monday with the white-and-red one used by the opposition at the world ice hockey championship in Riga, Latvia. The event was moved from Minsk amid the international outcry over the crackdown.

Lufthansa said a flight from Minsk to Frankfurt with 51 people aboard was delayed Monday following a "security warning." It was allowed to depart after the plane, passengers and cargo were searched.

On Sunday, flight tracker sites indicated the Ryanair flight was about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the Lithuanian border when it was diverted. There were conflicting reports on what exactly happened.

Belarusian transport ministry official Artem Sikorsky said the Minsk airport had received an email about the bomb threat from the Palestinian militant group Hamas.

But Ryanair said in a statement that Belarusian air traffic control instructed the plane to divert to the capital. The plane was searched, and no bomb was found. Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary described the move as "a case of state-sponsored hijacking ... state-sponsored piracy."

Passengers described Pratasevich's shock when he realized the plane was going to Minsk.

"He freaked out when the pilot said the plane is diverted to Minsk. He said there's death penalty awaiting him there," passenger Marius Rutkauskas said after the plane finally arrived in Vilnius.

Pratasevich was a co-founder of the Telegram messaging app's Nexta channel, which played a prominent role in helping organize the anti-Lukashenko protests. Nearly 2 million Belarusians in the nation of 9.3 million people have followed the channel. Belarus authorities have labeled the channel "extremist" and charged Pratasevich in absentia of inciting mass riots and fanning social hatred. He could face 15 years in prison.

Amid the international outrage, Moscow quickly offered a helping hand to its ally.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the episode needs to be investigated — but that it couldn't be rushed. Moscow and Minsk have close political, economic and military ties, and Lukashenko has relied on Russian support amid Western sanctions.

## Families urge legal changes to prevent more police killings

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Parents and siblings of Black men killed by police urged people during a discussion in the city where George Floyd was killed a year ago to join them in pursuing legal changes they say can make similar deaths less likely in the future.

The panel, convened Monday in Minneapolis and organized by the George Floyd Memorial Foundation founded by Floyd's sister Bridgett and moderated by prominent Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson, was part of a series of events marking the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death on May 25.

Family members of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Daunte Wright and other Black men slain by police gathered for a discussion about the state of policing in the U.S. and racial inequities in the frequency of

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fatal encounters with law enforcement.

The families also discussed the role of lawmakers in making changes to hold police accountable and how community members can support the loved ones of those killed by police.

"You don't have to actually lose a child in order for you to have that passion," said Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin. "We need allies, we need people to support us and lift us up when we've fallen down and when you all have fallen down we need to lift you all up."

Gwen Carr, Garner's mother, described her meetings and conversations with lawmakers over six years to get legislation passed that bans the use of chokeholds, among other measures, after an officer used the technique in the death of her son. One instance involved Carr and other mothers in New York bringing makeshift coffins to the state Capitol in 2015 after failed attempts to meet with Gov. Andrew Cuomo in person.

"I don't believe in writing letters. I don't believe in phone calls. I do like to get right up in their face... I tell them what my demands are — not my asks, but my demands," she said.

Several states moved to prohibit or severely limit the use of chokeholds and neck restraints after Floyd's death last year. At least 17 states, including Minnesota, have enacted legislation to ban or restrict the practice, according to data provided to The Associated Press by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The families also discussed the rarity of convictions in cases of Black men killed by police and whether convictions alone amount to substantial accountability. Allisa Findley, whose brother Botham Jean was killed in his own home in September 2018 by ex-Dallas officer Amber Guyger, said the families, activists and citizens need to "keep applying pressure" despite the conviction of Derek Chauvin — who was convicted of murder and manslaughter last month — for Floyd's death to prevent similar killings in the future.

"I don't look at a conviction as justice. The conviction is accountability and what should happen," she said. "The fact that we celebrate the few convictions is sad. A conviction should be mandatory if you commit murder so I think there's still a lot of work left to be done."

Later in the day, outside the Capitol in St. Paul, a handful of activists and family members of victims held a news conference and demanded that lawmakers pass legislation that holds authorities accountable in the future and reopens police abuse cases from the past.

"There are so many things up on the table now that people can be passing and signing to prevent stuff like this from happening," said Katie Wright, Daunte Wright's mother. "But everyone is just taking their time on it. And if we continue to take our time and we continue to stay silent, I don't want somebody else's family to stand here with me next week or the week after because it's happened to them."

Johnathon McClellan, president of the Minnesota Justice Coalition, complained that Congress has failed to pass the George Floyd Justice and Policing Act and Minnesota lawmakers have failed to make any substantive changes "despite being ground zero."

Following the speeches, dozens of protesters led by a group of Native American dancers began a march around the Capitol grounds and streets in the area, starting with the chant, "No justice, no peace."

## As deadlines slip, Biden agenda faces crucial assessment

By LISA MASCARO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan is hitting roadblocks. A policing overhaul after the killing of George Floyd is up in the air. Even a seemingly bipartisan effort to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol faces the blockade of Republican opposition in Congress.

It's a pivotal time for many aspects of Biden's ambitious agenda. Rounding the first quarter of his presidency, the White House and Congress have been unable to meet key Memorial Day deadlines set by the administration on crucial priorities.

While lawmakers quickly approved Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue package and senators confirmed the top ranks of the administration with Biden's nominees, the next legislative priorities on the White House's agenda will be a longer slog.

The sweeping infrastructure investment, in particular, faces a crucial moment: The White House is as-

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sessing whether the president can strike a bipartisan deal with Republicans on his American Jobs Plan, a top domestic priority, or try to go it alone with Democrats if no progress is made over the next week. Biden's allies in the House and Senate are preparing for all scenarios.

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"The ball is in the Republicans' court," Psaki said at the White House briefing.

At the same time, key congressional negotiators are working behind the scenes on a bipartisan police overhaul in response to a nationwide reassessment of law enforcement practices sparked by Floyd's death a year ago Tuesday in Minneapolis. Biden had hoped to have the legislation ready by the anniversary.

In a rare joint statement Monday, negotiators Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., and Rep. Karen Bass, D-Ca., said, "This anniversary serves as a painful reminder of why we must make meaningful change. While we are still working through our differences on key issues, we continue to make progress toward a compromise and remain optimistic about the prospects of achieving that goal."

But other priorities on gun violence, voting rights and immigration law face long odds with the narrowly split Congress and robust opposition from Republicans. Democrats hold only a slim majorities in the House and evenly divided Senate, and much of Biden's agenda would require broader support to reach the 60 votes under the rules to advance past a Senate filibuster.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has said repeatedly that "100% of my focus" is on stopping Biden's agenda.

The West Wing believes its bargaining position is strong. Aides point to Biden's high poll numbers and the popularity of his proposals, all while believing that they have the option of muscling the infrastructure plan to passage under special budget reconciliation rules that require only a party-line vote.

But there is a growing sense of urgency within the White House and among Democrats. After a burst of legislative accomplishment, including the sweeping COVID relief bill, the pace has slowed dramatically. And the future may hinge on a few select senators.

After Biden was elected on the heels of a campaign promise to work with Republicans, the White House has been quick to defend his bipartisan record of accomplishment.

Aides have pointed to how quickly the president's Cabinet was confirmed — one choice, Neera Tanden, withdrew after it was clear she would not get support.

Along with Biden's chocolate-chip cookie diplomacy — inviting lawmakers to the White House, treating them with sweets on the way out — the administration has been conducting vigorous outreach to Capitol Hill. The White House has had nearly 1,000 phone calls or meetings with lawmakers or their staffs, including more than 200 with Republicans on the jobs plan and the related American Families Plan — the president's stalled proposal to invest in preschool, child tax credits and other so-called human infrastructure.



Still, the partisan tensions are stark, showing the limits of Biden's ability to bridge the divide.

This week, legislation passed by the House to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol is likely to face a filibuster by Republicans in the Senate. GOP leaders argue the panel is unneeded as they try to move past the deadly riot by supporters of Donald Trump who laid siege to the Capitol in a failed effort to overturn Biden's election.

As the administration assesses next steps on Biden's infrastructure proposal, White House aides have not thrown in the towel on landing a bipartisan agreement with the GOP senators, but their optimism cooled, according to Biden advisers. The group led by Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., rejected Biden's counteroffer in a sharply-worded statement late last week.

Psaki insisted no decisions had been made on whether the administration will go it alone as it awaits a counteroffer from Republicans. "We're not quite there yet," she said. "We're eager to see their proposal and see what they have to offer."

The GOP senators have not said if they were preparing another proposal, but kept the door open late Monday.

"I'm not ready to call it quits," Capito told reporters on Capitol Hill.

## **Mali's president and PM arrested by mutinous soldiers**

By BABA AHMED and KRISTA LARSON Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — Mutinous soldiers arrested Mali's transitional president and prime minister Monday hours after a government reshuffle left out two members of the junta that had seized power in a coup nine months earlier, the African Union and United Nations said.

A joint statement issued along with the West African regional bloc known as ECOWAS and other members of the international community called for the immediate release of President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, who were taken to the Kati military headquarters.

Those who signed on to the joint statement called for Mali's political transition "to resume its course and conclude within the established timeframe."

"The international community rejects in advance any act of coercion, including forced resignations," the statement said. "They emphasize that the ill-considered action taken today carries the risk of weakening the mobilization of the international community in support of Mali."

The developments raised new alarm about whether the transitional government would be able to move ahead freely with plans to organize new democratic elections as promised by next February in Mali, where the U.N. is spending \$1.2 billion a year on a peacekeeping mission.

The two leaders were sworn in last September after the ruling military junta agreed to hand over power to a civilian transitional government under growing international pressure.

The junta had grabbed power a month earlier after mutinous soldiers encircled the home of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and fired shots into the air. He later resigned on national television under duress, saying he did not want blood to be shed in order for him to stay in office.

The soldiers then went on state television hours later calling themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People and promising a swift return to civilian rule. However, Monday's developments appeared to throw that promise into question.

The arrests came just an hour or so after a new government Cabinet was announced. Notably it did not include Interior Security Minister Modibo Kone or Defense Minister Sadio Camara, both junta supporters. No reason was given for their exclusion, but the move suggested mounting divisions within the transitional government.

There has been widespread concern the upheaval in Mali over the past year has further set back efforts to contain the militants linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State groups.

Islamic extremists took control of major towns in northern Mali after the 2012 coup. Only a 2013 military intervention led by the former colonial power France pushed extremists out of those towns. France and a U.N. force have continued to battle the extremist rebels, who operate in rural areas and regularly attack

roads and cities.

## **AP: Top cop in Black man's deadly arrest withheld cam video**

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — In perhaps the strongest evidence yet of an attempted cover-up in the deadly 2019 arrest of Ronald Greene, the ranking Louisiana State Police officer at the scene falsely told internal investigators that the Black man was still a threat to flee after he was shackled, and he denied the existence of his own body camera video for nearly two years until it emerged just last month.

New state police documents obtained by The Associated Press show numerous inconsistencies between Lt. John Clary's statements to detectives and the body camera footage he denied having. They add to growing signs of obfuscation in Greene's death, which the white troopers initially blamed on a car crash at the end of a high-speed chase and is now the subject of a federal civil rights investigation.

The highly secretive case has drawn national attention since last week when the AP began publishing graphic body camera videos that showed troopers repeatedly jolting Greene with stun guns, putting him in a chokehold, punching him and dragging him by his ankle shackles. And like George Floyd's death a year ago, it once again highlighted the importance of video as key evidence in police misconduct cases.

"Video doesn't lie, and the best way to protect the integrity of law enforcement agencies is with body camera footage," said Rafael Goyeneche, a former prosecutor who is president of the Metropolitan Crime Commission, a New Orleans-based watchdog group.

But Clary, the highest-ranking officer among at least six state troopers at the scene of Greene's May 10, 2019, arrest, told investigators later that day that he had no body camera footage of the incident — a statement proven to be untrue when his 30-minute body camera video of the arrest emerged last month.

Clary, who arrived at the scene just seconds after troopers stunned, choked and punched Greene to get him into handcuffs, told investigators that Greene "was still, yelling and screaming ... and he was still resisting, even though he was handcuffed. He was still trying to get away and was not cooperating."

Investigators wrote in a six-page report filed less than three weeks ago that Clary's description of Greene's demeanor after he was cuffed on a dark roadside near Monroe was clearly a mischaracterization. Though they did not state it explicitly, the false statements were apparently intended to justify further uses of force by troopers against the prone Greene that included dragging him facedown by his ankle shackles and spraying him in the face with pepper spray.

"The video evidence in this case does not show Greene screaming, resisting or trying to get away," Detective Albert Paxton wrote in the new report. "The only screams revealed by the video were when Greene responded to force applied to him."

The report added that Clary's own video, published last week by the AP and later released by the state, shows Greene "lying on the ground, face down, handcuffed behind his back, leg shackles on his ankles, uttering the phrases, 'I'm sorry', or 'I'm scared' or 'Yes sir' or 'Okay.'"

Clary's video shows troopers ordering the heavysset, 49-year-old Greene to remain facedown on the ground with his hands and feet restrained for more than nine minutes — a tactic use-of-force experts criticized as dangerous and likely to have restricted his breathing. Greene can be seen on Clary's footage struggling to prop himself up on his side.

"Don't you turn over! Lay on your belly! Lay on your belly!" Trooper Kory York yells before briefly dragging Greene by the chain that connects his ankle shackles.

"Lt. Clary's video clearly shows Greene to be suffering," Paxton wrote in the new report, adding that the handcuffed man can be heard "gasping for air."

Though what happens to Greene next cannot be seen on the video, investigators wrote that "Greene's eyes are squeezed shut as he shakes his head back and forth moaning in pain, movements consistent with having been sprayed in the face with (pepper) spray."

The records noted that around this time Trooper York asked Greene if he has his attention now and a local deputy assisting in the arrest added, "Yeah, that sh-- hurts, doesn't it?"

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Another false statement noted in the report was when Clary told investigators that his troopers sat Greene up and "immediately held his head up so he could get a clear airway."

Clary's video, however, showed troopers saying they didn't want to sit Greene up because they were afraid he would spit blood on them.

"Then don't do that," Clary tells them.

Even after Greene became unresponsive and troopers sat him up, his head was slumped down on his chest and they did not make a move to lift his head to make a clear airway for nearly six minutes.

"The officers have the duty and obligation to ensure that he is capable of breathing ... and they chose not to do that," said Andrew Scott, a former Boca Raton, Florida, police chief who testifies as an expert in use-of-force cases.

"When he was in handcuffs, he was completely compliant. The only thing he wanted to do was turn over onto his side," Scott added. "He couldn't resist. He was incapable of resisting."

Clary, who has been with the Louisiana State Police for 31 years, has not faced any discipline for his role in the Greene case. He did not return phone and text messages seeking comment Monday.

State police spokesman Capt. Nick Manale said internal reviews are ongoing to determine why the Clary video was not identified during the original criminal investigation.

Union Parish District Attorney John Belton, who is pursuing a state investigation of the troopers' actions, told the AP he only became aware of Clary's footage recently.

Clary cannot claim he was unaware his body camera was recording, the investigators noted, citing a moment on his video when he points to his own camera in an apparent warning to one of his troopers at the scene of Greene's arrest. At another point, the records say, a trooper "pointed out that Lt. Clary's body camera was recording, causing Lt. Clary to immediately turn it off."

The concealed video is only the latest anomaly in the law enforcement response to Greene's death. Troopers initially told Greene's family he died in a car crash, and later the state police issued a brief statement acknowledging there was a struggle with officers and that Greene died on the way to the hospital. There was no mention made of any use of force by troopers.

State police also did not open an administrative investigation into the troopers' use of force until 474 days after Greene's death. And Louisiana officials from Gov. John Bel Edwards on down repeatedly refused to publicly release any body camera video of Greene's arrest for more than two years, until last week after AP began publishing videos it obtained.

The AP last week also obtained a 10-page autopsy report that shows state police failed to turn over to forensic pathologists even the most routine documents relating to Greene's arrest, including police reports, collision details or emergency medical records.

"The lack of transparency reeks of a potential cover up," Goyeneche said. "If the Louisiana State Police were vigilant and on top of its game, there would have been discipline and terminations years ago in this case."

## Biden doubling spending to prepare for hurricanes, storms

By MATTHEW DALY and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Monday that he's doubling U.S. emergency spending to help communities prepare for hurricanes and other extreme weather events, while launching a new effort at NASA to better understand and track the impact of climate change.

The \$1 billion in spending is a small fraction of what the U.S. spends on weather-related disasters. Last year alone, the nation endured 22 weather and climate-related disasters with losses greater than \$1 billion each. The disasters, including wildfires, hurricanes and snowstorms, had a cumulative price tag of nearly \$100 billion.

2021 has already had significant winter storms that caused a deadly blackout in Texas and other states, and officials expect an ongoing severe drought in the West to fuel another destructive summer of wildfires following one of the worst fire years on record in 2020. Forecasters predict a busy hurricane season

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along the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, but perhaps not as severe as 2020's record-shattering year. "We all know that the storms are coming, and we're going to be prepared," Biden said during a visit to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Washington headquarters. "We have to be ready."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said last week that the hurricane season, which runs from June through November, will likely see 13 to 20 named storms, including at least six that will become hurricanes and three to five categorized as major hurricanes with winds of more than 110 mph (177 kilometers per hour).

Biden, during his visit to FEMA, received a briefing on this year's outlook for the Atlantic hurricane season. As climate change threatens to bring more extreme events such as increased floods, sea level rise and intensifying droughts and wildfires, the White House said it is the government's responsibility to better prepare and support communities before disasters occur, rather than simply respond afterward.

FEMA will provide \$1 billion for the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, or BRIC program, which helps states, local communities, tribes and territories to develop projects to prepare for and reduce risks from disasters and natural hazards.

"We're going to spare no expense, no effort, to keep Americans safe and respond to crises when they arise," Biden said. "And they certainly will."

The White House also said it will develop a new NASA mission concept for an Earth System Observatory that will forecast and monitor natural disasters. The Earth System Observatory will deploy advanced technology in space to improve understanding of interactions between Earth's atmosphere, land, ocean and ice, helping determine how climate change will play out in the near and long term.

The steps announced Monday are part of Biden's pledge to elevate climate change as a major priority. Biden has set a target to cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by up to 52% below 2005 levels by 2030. He also has said he expects to adopt a clean energy standard that would make electricity carbon-free by 2035, along with the wider goal of net-zero carbon emissions economywide by 2050.

Just last week, Biden directed federal agencies to develop a comprehensive strategy to identify and manage financial risks to government and the private sector posed by climate change. An executive order he issued Thursday calls for concrete steps to mitigate climate risks and could result in new regulations on the banking, housing and agriculture sectors, among others.

At the end of his visit to FEMA, Biden addressed agency employees and thanked them for their efforts in recent months. In addition to natural disasters, FEMA is playing a central role in the federal government's effort to distribute COVID-19 vaccines in hard-to-reach areas of the country. The agency in March was also called to help support the processing of the surge of unaccompanied migrant children arriving at the U.S. southern border.

"I've asked you to do an awful lot since I became president," Biden said.

Dan Kaniewski, who served as FEMA's deputy administrator for resilience during the Trump administration, hailed the funding announcement, which significantly expands a program begun under President Donald Trump.

"BRIC was a shot in the arm for communities throughout the country, but this will be an early second dose," said Kaniewski, now a consultant at Marsh McLennan.

The new funding should help more communities receive needed funding to build climate resilience, he said.

## Judge digs into Apple app store policies as Epic trial ends

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN RAMON, Calif. (AP) — The judge who will decide a case challenging Apple's stranglehold on its iPhone app store indicated on Monday she would like to promote more competition but without dismantling a commission system that reaps billions of dollars for the technology powerhouse.

U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers isn't likely to issue a decision until this summer. But she opened a window into her thoughts during a three-hour session with lawyers for Apple and its adversary, Epic Games, during the final day of a three-week trial in Oakland, California.

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Gonzalez Rogers' line of questioning suggested she sides with much of the defense that Apple has mounted to justify the 15% to 30% commissions it collects for in-app transactions on the iPhone to help pay for the technology powering its devices.

Epic Games, the maker of the popular videogame Fortnite, has been trying to prove the fees are the price-gouging tool of a monopoly hatched within the "walled garden" Apple has built around the iPhone, the app store, its software and other devices such as the iPad and iPod.

To loosen Apple's tight-fisted control, Epic wants Gonzalez Rogers to issue an order that would require Apple to open the iPhone and its other mobile products to rival app stores. Those alternatives would include Epic's still-unprofitable app store, which charges a commission of just 12%.

Apple's app store, in contrast, has become far more profitable than its late co-founder, Steve Jobs, ever envisioned when he opened it 13 years ago. Precisely how profitable wasn't revealed in the trial, although an Apple executive conceded the company had brought in at least \$20 billion as of June 2017.

Gonzalez Rogers doesn't seem to believe the fees are unreasonable, let alone illegal. That's in part because Apple's commissions mirror those charged on in-app commissions by the app store feeding about 3 billion devices powered by Google's Android software, as well as those imposed by major video game consoles — Sony's PlayStation, Microsoft's Xbox and Nintendo's Switch.

The judge also seemed to support Apple's right to maintain a rigidly controlled ecosystem of products that has won over consumers around the world, including many who pay more than \$1,000 to buy an iPhone.

"Your formulation seems to ignore the reality that customers choose an ecosystem," Gonzalez Rogers told Epic lawyer Gary Bornstein. "It is Apple's business strategy to create a particular type of ecosystem that is incredibly attractive to purchasers, to its consumers. So if those consumers choose to enter into an ecosystem ... that's what you know you're buying into."

Bornstein countered that most consumers don't understand the extent they will be locked into Apple's ecosystem and often pay scant attention to the costs of in-app purchases that are tiny compared to the price of an iPhone.

That still didn't seem to convince Gonzalez Rogers that Apple is running on monopoly, but other statements made it clear she still might find the company is engaging in anticompetitive behavior. During some points in the trial, she has seemed troubled by a provision in Apple stores that forbids in-app notices that purchases can also be made through web browsers and other means that evade Apple's commissions.

Apple contends allowing in-app links to other payment options besides its own would expose iPhones and other mobile devices to security and privacy threats. When facing some tough questioning from Gonzalez Rogers during his four-hour appearance on the witness stand Friday, Apple CEO Tim Cook also conceded that allowing links within apps to other payment options would undercut the company's profits.

The judge revisited the issue during Monday's session. At one point, she wondered aloud whether Apple could just allow apps to insert a notice reminding consumers that payments can be made in web browsers, without posting a direct link to the checkout stand. That sort of notice, she mused, wouldn't be much different than a merchant's display of the different credit cards — Visa, Mastercard, America Express or Discover — that has long been a staple at cash registers.

During the course of their closing arguments, the lawyers for Epic and Apple each made dramatic pitches in an attempt to get Gonzalez Rogers to see things their respective ways.

Bornstein repeatedly asserted that Apple is trying to paint itself as a "benevolent overlord" acting in the best interests of consumers and the developers of the 1.8 million apps now in the store, up from just 500 in 2008. "But it's not enough to say, 'We're a great company, we're doing well, and we're a nice guy,'" Bornstein argued.

Apple lawyer Richard Doren reminded the judge that opening the iPhone to other app stores would weaken a security system that protects consumers and developers alike. Epic "wants Apple to drop its gloves, stand in the middle of the arena and take malware attacks through unreviewed apps," Doren argued.

Gonzalez Rogers said last week that she hoped to issue her decision by Aug. 13. But on Monday she warned she may need even more time to review thousands of pages of information submitted during the case.

## Nonpartisan budget report says future nuke costs are rising

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The projected cost of modernizing the U.S. nuclear force is escalating, including billions of dollars more to operate nuclear-armed submarines and to update Energy Department nuclear weapons laboratories and production facilities, according to a new analysis by the Congressional Budget Office.

Critics of nuclear modernization are likely to seize on the new figures to bolster their argument for more modest upgrades.

The nonpartisan CBO said Monday that operating and modernizing the nuclear force will cost \$634 billion in the 2021-2030 period. That is an update to CBO's previous estimate of \$494 billion, which covered a different 10-year period — 2019 to 2028. Most of the \$140 billion increase reflects the fact that the new estimate covers a different, more expensive period in the development and fielding of a new generation of nuclear weapons, as well as inflation.

The effort to modernize the nuclear force, which began under the Obama administration and was advanced by the Trump administration, is generally supported by Congress, although some lawmakers are critical of the enormous costs.

The extent of President Joe Biden's commitment to the nuclear modernization project that began during his time as vice president may be reflected in the 2022 budget his administration is scheduled to send to the Congress on Friday.

Sen. Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who is a longstanding critic of nuclear weapons modernization, said in a statement Monday that Biden has an opportunity to scale back the program and save billions.

"The United States can deter our adversaries and reassure our allies without making an insane investment in nuclear weapons overkill, including capabilities that may invite rather than prevent a nuclear exchange," he said.

The new Congressional Budget Office estimate includes significantly higher costs for modernizing the Energy Department's outdated laboratories and production plants, which are central to the broader plan for replacing current nuclear weapons and warheads. CBO projected a \$23 billion increase in those costs for the eight-year period from 2021 to 2028.

Similarly, it projected a \$15 billion increase in the cost of operating the current fleet of Ohio-class nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines over the next eight years. It said this mainly reflects the Navy's plan to operate some submarines longer than previously planned. Those submarines eventually will be replaced with a new fleet of Columbia-class vessels.

In addition to modernizing nuclear warheads, which is done under the purview of the Energy Department, the Defense Department is planning to replace each of the three "legs" of the nuclear triad — the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, the Air Force long-range nuclear bombers, and the Minuteman 3 land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs.

## US warns against all travel to Japan as Olympics loom

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health officials and the State Department on Monday warned Americans against travel to Japan because of a surge in coronavirus cases in the country, which is preparing to host the Olympics in just two months.

The twin alerts don't ban U.S. citizens from visiting the country, but they could have an impact on insurance rates for travelers and may factor into decisions by Olympic athletes and spectators on whether to compete in or attend the games, which are due to start in July. There was no immediate indication as to what effect the warnings might have on would-be Olympic-goers.

"Travelers should avoid all travel to Japan," the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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said in a new COVID-19 update. "Because of the current situation in Japan even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants and should avoid all travel to Japan."

The State Department's warning, which followed the CDC alert, was more blunt. "Do not travel to Japan due to COVID-19," it said in the announcement, which raised the department's travel alert from Level 3 — Reconsider travel — to Level 4 — Do not travel. The previous alert was issued on April 21.

The United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee said it still anticipates that American athletes will be able to safely compete at the Tokyo Games.

"We feel confident that the current mitigation practices in place for athletes and staff by both the USOPC and the Tokyo Organizing Committee, coupled with the testing before travel, on arrival in Japan, and during Games time, will allow for safe participation of Team USA athletes this summer," the committee said in a statement Monday.

Earlier Monday, Japan mobilized military doctors and nurses to give shots to older adults in two major cities, as the government tried desperately to accelerate its vaccination rollout and curb coronavirus infections before it hosts the Olympics. That move came amid growing calls for the games to be canceled.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is determined to hold the Olympics in Tokyo beginning on July 23, after a one-year delay, and has made an ambitious pledge to finish vaccinating the country's 36 million older people by the end of July.

Japan has recorded just over 12,000 COVID-19 deaths — good by global standards, but poor in Asia — but Tokyo and Osaka and several other areas are under a state of emergency until May 31 that is likely to be extended.

There is fear of new variants spreading, with only a tiny percentage of the Japanese — estimated at 2% to 4% — vaccinated.

## Gaza-based journalists in Hamas chat blocked from WhatsApp

By FARES AKRAM and AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — A few hours after the latest cease-fire took effect in the Gaza Strip, a number of Palestinian journalists in the coastal enclave found they were blocked from accessing WhatsApp messenger — a crucial tool used to communicate with sources, editors and the world beyond the blockaded strip.

The Associated Press reached out to 17 journalists in Gaza who confirmed their WhatsApp accounts had been blocked since Friday. By midday Monday, only four journalists — working for Al Jazeera — confirmed their accounts had been restored.

The incident marks the latest puzzling move concerning WhatsApp's owner Facebook Inc. that's left Palestinian users or their allies bewildered as to why they've been targeted by the company, or if indeed they'd been singled out for censorship at all.

Twelve of the 17 journalists contacted by the AP said they had been part of a WhatsApp group that disseminates information related to Hamas military operations. Hamas, which rules over the Gaza Strip, is viewed as a terrorist organization by Israel and the United States, where WhatsApp owner Facebook is headquartered.

It's unclear if the journalists were targeted because they'd been following that group's announcements on WhatsApp.

Hamas runs Gaza's Health Ministry, which has a WhatsApp group followed by more than 80 people, many of them journalists. That group, for example, has not been blocked.

Hassan Slaieh, a freelance journalist in Gaza whose WhatsApp account is blocked, said he thinks his account might have been targeted because he was on a group called Hamas Media.

"This has affected my work and my income because I lost conversations with sources and people," Slaieh said.

Al Jazeera's chief correspondent in Gaza, Wael al-Dahdouh, said his access to WhatsApp was blocked around dawn on Friday before it was reinstated Monday. He said journalists subscribe to Hamas groups

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only to get information needed to do journalistic work.

A WhatsApp spokesperson said the company bans accounts to comply with its policies "to prevent harm as well as applicable law." The company said it has been in touch with media outlets over the last week about its practices. "We will reinstate journalists if any were impacted," the company said.

Al Jazeera said that when it sought information regarding its four journalists in Gaza impacted by the blockage, they were told by Facebook that the company had blocked the numbers of groups based out of Gaza and consequently the cell phone numbers of Al Jazeera journalists were part of the groups they had blocked.

Among those affected by the WhatsApp blockage are two Agence France-Presse journalists. The Paris-based international news service told the AP it is working with WhatsApp to understand what the problem is and to restore their accounts.

The 11-day war caused widespread destruction across Gaza with 248 Palestinians, including 66 children and 39 women, killed in the fighting. Israel says 12 people in Israel, including two children, also died.

It's not the first time journalists have been suddenly barred from WhatsApp. In 2019, a number of journalists in Gaza had their accounts blocked without explanation. The accounts of those working with international media organizations were restored after contacting the company.

Facebook and its photo and video-sharing platform Instagram were criticized this month for removing posts and deleting accounts by users posting about protests against efforts to evict Palestinians from their homes in east Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. It prompted an open letter signed by 30 organizations demanding to know why the posts had been removed.

The New York Times also reported that some 100 WhatsApp groups were used by Jewish extremists in Israel for the purpose of committing violence against Palestinian citizens of Israel.

WhatsApp said it does not have access to the contents of people's personal chats, but that they ban accounts when information is reported they believe indicates a user may be involved in causing imminent harm. The company said it also responds to "valid legal requests from law enforcement for the limited information available to us."

The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, or 7amleh, said in a report published this month that Facebook accepted 81% of requests made by Israel's Cyber Unit to remove Palestinian content last year. It found that in 2020, Twitter suspended dozens of accounts of Palestinian users based on information from the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs.

Al-Dahdouh, the Al Jazeera correspondent, said although his account was restored, his past history of chats and messages was erased.

"The groups and conversations were back, but content is erased, as if you are joining a new group or starting a new conversation," he said. "I have lost information, images, numbers, messages and communications."

Al Jazeera said its journalists in Gaza had their WhatsApp accounts blocked by the host without prior notification.

"Al Jazeera would like to strongly emphasize that its journalists will continue to use their WhatsApp accounts and other applications for newsgathering purposes and personal communication," the news network told the AP. "At no time, have Al Jazeera journalists used their accounts for any means other than for personal or professional use."

The Qatar-based news network's office in Gaza was destroyed during the war by Israeli airstrikes that took down the high-rise residential and office tower, which also housed The Associated Press offices. Press freedom groups accused the military, which claimed the building housed Hamas military intelligence, of trying to censor coverage of Israel's offensive. The Israeli military telephoned a warning, giving occupants of the building one hour to evacuate.

Sada Social, a West Bank-based center tracking alleged violations against Palestinian content on social media, said it was collecting information on the number of Gaza-based journalists impacted by the latest WhatsApp decision.



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## Grim western fire season starts much drier than record 2020

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

As bad as last year's record-shattering fire season was, the western U.S. starts this year's in even worse shape.

The soil in the West is record dry for this time of year. In much of the region, plants that fuel fires are also the driest scientists have seen. The vegetation is primed to ignite, especially in the Southwest where dead juniper trees are full of flammable needles.

"It's like having gasoline out there," said Brian Steinhardt, forest fire zone manager for Prescott and Coconino national forests in Arizona.

A climate change-fueled megadrought of more than 20 years is making conditions that lead to fire even more dangerous, scientists said. Rainfall in the Rockies and farther west was the second lowest on record in April, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"It means that the dice are loaded toward a lot of forest fire this year," said Park Williams, a UCLA climate and fire scientist, who calculated that soil in the western half of the nation is the driest it has been since 1895. "This summer we're going into fire season with drier fuels than we were at this time last year."

In addition, the western drought is deepening week by week.

In late March, less than one-third of California was suffering extreme or exceptional drought. Now more than 73% is, according to the National Drought Monitor, which is based on precipitation, temperature, soil moisture and streamflow measurements. A year ago, heading into the record-smashing 2020 fire year when more than 4% of California burned, just 3% of the state was in extreme or exceptional drought.

But the outlook is worse elsewhere.

"I think the Southwest is really primed for a bad fire season," University of Utah fire scientist Phil Denison said. That's because last year's normal monsoon season, which brings much of the year's rainfall, never showed up.

A year ago, none of Arizona, Nevada and Utah was in extreme or exceptional drought, but now more than 90% of Utah, 86% of Arizona and 75% of Nevada is in those highest drought categories, according to the drought monitor. New Mexico jumped from 4% extreme or exceptional drought a year ago to more than 77% now.

UCLA meteorologist Daniel Swain, who also works for the National Center for Atmospheric Research and The Nature Conservancy, said key factors going into fire season are soil and plant wetness.

"So is soil moisture very low? Is vegetation extremely dry? Absolutely, yes. Unequivocally, yes. Pretty much everywhere in California and the Southwest," Swain said. "So that box is checked big time in a way that is going to massively increase the potential background flammability ... given a spark, given extreme weather conditions."

This doesn't necessarily ensure the 2021 fire season will be worse than 2020. Last year more than 15,800 square miles (40,960 square kilometers) of the United States burned, an area about the size of Maryland and Delaware combined. Several scientists said last year's fires were stoked not just by hot, dry conditions, but by unusual situations that made a bad year horrific:

Two intense heat waves — one that nearly set a record for hottest temperature on Earth in Death Valley — set the stage, and a freak California lightning barrage provided lots of spark.

The lightning outbreak was the type that has happened only a few times in history and is unlikely to occur two years in a row, Swain said.

"Maybe it won't be the hottest summer," he said, adding. "I'm really grasping at straws here. All we have going for us is dumb luck."

When the scientists see extremely dry or dying trees, they get even more worried.

In Arizona, junipers are succumbing to the 20-year drought and its two-year intensification, said Joel McMillin, a forest health zone leader for the U.S. Forest Service there. Officials haven't done a precise count but anecdotally the die-off is 5% to 30% with some patches up to 60%.

Until the dead needles drop to the ground, which takes a year or so, the fire hazard increases, fire manager Steinhardt said. "So you have something that's highly flammable and it's ... 20-, 30-, 40-foot tall and every single one of those needles on there now becomes an ember that can be launched."

"This is probably one of the driest and potentially most challenging situations I've been in," said the veteran of 32 fire seasons.

In California, normally drought-tolerant blue oaks are dying around the San Francisco Bay Area, said Scott Stephens, a fire science professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "They don't have access to water. Soil moisture is so low. When you start to see blue oak dying, that gets your attention."

Human-caused climate change and decades of fire suppression that increases fuel loads are aggravating fire conditions across the West, scientists said.

Global warming has contributed to the megadrought and is making plants more prone to burning.

Normally a good part of the sun's energy removes water from plants and soil, but when they are already dry, that energy instead makes the air hotter, which creates a feedback loop, Swain said.

And drier conditions lead to beetle infestations that further weaken and kill trees, said University of Utah's Dennison.

For decades, U.S. firefighting agencies have tried to put out fires as quickly as possible, and that's usually worked, UCLA's Williams said. But the practice resulted in the buildup of dense trees, brush and other potential fire fuels.

"Fire is escaping our control increasingly frequently," he said. "And some of the reason for that might be because of increasing density of fuels. But we also see that these fires are escaping our control during record-breaking heat waves — and it's the warmest, driest years when we have the hardest time controlling fires."

## **Watchdog: US forced deported parents to leave kids behind**

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A government watchdog says the Trump administration, under its practice of separating families at the border, forced migrant parents to leave the U.S. without their children, contradicting claims by officials that parents were willingly leaving them behind.

The Department of Homeland Security Inspector General said in a report released Monday that it found at least 348 cases in which Immigration and Customs Enforcement had no records showing migrants wanted to leave their children in the U.S. It also found "some" cases in which agency officials deported parents even while knowing they wanted to take their children with them.

That contradicted assertions by senior DHS officials that parents were choosing to leave their children in the U.S. to stay with family or for other reasons while they were deported in 2017 and 2018 as the administration sought to enforce a hard-line approach to immigration enforcement.

The findings, issued by Trump-appointed Inspector General Joseph Cuffari, provide new insight into a policy that became a significant political crisis for the previous administration and a continuing challenge for the current one, which is working to reunite children who remain separated even now.

"Those who conceived of this travesty will have to live with the memory of their cruelty for the rest of their lives," said Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat who is chair of the Judiciary Committee and requested the report.

The Trump administration separated thousands of migrant parents from their children since the summer of 2017 as it moved to criminally prosecute people for illegally crossing the southwest border. Minors could not be held in criminal custody with their parents and were transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services.

The mass separation of families sparked public outrage and a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, which also collected reports of parents being deported without the opportunity to take their children with them.

"Throughout the litigation, we learned that some parents were even told their child would join them on the plane only to have the plane take off without the child," ACLU attorney Lee Gelernt said.

That contradicts what DHS officials were telling the public.

Then-DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, according to the report, testified to Congress in December 2018

that “every parent” had a choice to take their child back to their country and those who did not “made the choice not to have the child accompany them.”

Nielsen told Congress in March 2019 that there has been “no parent who has been deported, to my knowledge, without multiple opportunities to take their children with them.”

Nielsen did not immediately respond to a request for comment. She has said previously that her agency did not set out to intentionally separate families but had no choice because the administration was criminally prosecuting border-crossers.

Trump issued an executive order halting the practice of family separations in June 2018, days before a federal judge’s ruling that did the same and demanded that separated families be reunited.

In response to the report, ICE said it concurred with the findings and is working to address the issues around recordkeeping raised in the report.

Shortly after taking office, President Joe Biden set up a task force to reunite hundreds of children who remain separated. It announced the first four reunifications this month.

That effort is going on as the Biden administration confronts an increase in the number of migrants under 18 attempting to cross the southwest border by themselves.

The administration has transferred about 19,000 to facilities overseen by HHS. Those children are being allowed to remain in the U.S. while the government decides whether they have a legal claim to residency through a citizen parent or for some other reason.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration continues to turn back adult migrants, including asylum-seekers, and many families crossing together under a public health order issued at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Belarus president signs tough new law on media restrictions**

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The authoritarian president of Belarus on Monday signed a law sharply restricting news media activities and allowing them to be shut down without a court hearing.

The move by President Alexander Lukashenko came a day after the arrest of a prominent opposition journalist whose commercial flight was forcibly diverted to Belarus because of an alleged bomb threat. The arrest and flight diversion was condemned by Western countries and drew new attention to Belarus’ crackdown on media since widespread protests against Lukashenko arose last year.

Under the new law, news media are banned from making live reports on unauthorized mass gatherings. It also allows the Information Ministry to order a media outlet’s closure; previously media closures required a court decision.

Other strictures include prohibiting publication of the results of opinion polls that aren’t authorized by the government.

“This is the most repressive media law in Europe, which turns the work of journalists in Belarus into a minefield,” said Andrei Bastunets, president of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Widespread protests rocked Belarus for weeks last year, following an allegedly fraudulent election that gave Lukashenko a sixth term in office. More than 30,000 people were arrested in the protests, many of them beaten by police.

The country has steadily cracked down on journalists, including blocking several major news websites and declaring opposition-minded messaging app channels to be extremist.

## **Cosmic 2-for-1: Total lunar eclipse combines with supermoon**

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The first total lunar eclipse in more than two years coincides with a supermoon this week for quite a cosmic show.

This super “blood” moon will be visible Wednesday across the Pacific — offering the best viewing — as well as the western half of North America, bottom of South America and eastern Asia.

Better look quick: The total eclipse will last about 15 minutes as Earth passes directly between the moon

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and the sun. But the entire show will last five hours, as Earth's shadow gradually covers the moon, then starts to ebb. The reddish-orange color is the result of all the sunrises and sunsets in Earth's atmosphere projected onto the surface of the eclipsed moon.

"Hawaii has the best seat in the house and then short of that will be California and the Pacific Northwest," said NASA's Noah Petro, project scientist for the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter. New Zealand and Australia also will have prime viewing.

Circling the moon for 12 years, the orbiter will measure temperature changes on the lunar surface during the eclipse. Telescopes atop Hawaii's Mauna Kea also will monitor the moon, Petro said.

The moon will be setting and the sun rising along the U.S. East Coast, leaving skygazers — Petro in Virginia included — pretty much out of luck. Europe, Africa and western Asia will miss everything. There will be livestreams available.

Everyone everywhere, though, can still soak in the brighter than usual moon, weather permitting.

The moon will be more than 220,000 miles (357,460 kilometers) away at its fullest. It's this proximity, combined with a full moon, that qualifies it as a supermoon, making it appear slightly bigger and more brilliant in the sky.

Last month's supermoon, by contrast, was 96 miles (155 kilometers) more distant.

Unlike a solar eclipse, there's no harm in looking at an eclipsed moon.

More lunar shows are on the horizon.

"For people who might feel like we're missing out, set your calendars for Nov. 19 of this year," Petro said. This will be a nearly total eclipse where the moon dims but doesn't turn red.

The next total lunar eclipse will be May 2022. The last one was January 2019.

## India virus death toll passes 300,000, 3rd highest in world

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India crossed another grim milestone Monday with more than 300,000 people lost to the coronavirus, while a devastating surge of infections appeared to be easing in big cities but was swamping the poorer countryside.

The milestone, as recorded by India's Health Ministry, comes as slowed vaccine deliveries have marred the country's fight against the pandemic, forcing many to miss their shots, and a rare but fatal fungal infection affecting COVID-19 patients has worried doctors.

India's death toll is the third-highest reported in the world after the U.S. and Brazil, accounting for 8.6% of the nearly 3.47 million coronavirus fatalities globally, though the true numbers are thought to be significantly greater.

The Health Ministry on Monday reported 4,454 new deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing India's total fatalities to 303,720. It also reported 222,315 new infections, which raised the overall total to nearly 27 million since the pandemic began. Both are almost certainly undercounts.

From the remote Himalayan villages in the north, through the vast humid central plains and to the sandy beaches in the south, the pandemic has swamped India's underfunded health care system after spreading quickly across the country.

In the capital, New Delhi, residents have died at home with no oxygen as hospitals exhausted limited supplies. In Mumbai, COVID-19 patients have died in crowded hospital corridors. In rural villages, fever and breathlessness took people before they were even tested for coronavirus.

While the megacities have seen signs of improvement in recent days, the virus isn't finished with India by any means. It appears to have already taken a ghastly toll in the country's vast rural areas, where a majority of the people live and where health care is limited.

In recent weeks, hundreds of bodies have washed up on the banks of the Ganges River in Uttar Pradesh state. Many others have been found buried in shallow graves along its sandy banks. It has prompted concerns that they're the remains of COVID-19 victims.

India's vaccination drive has also slowed recently, and many states say they don't have enough vaccines

to administer.

The world's largest vaccine-producing nation has fully vaccinated just over 41.6 million people, or only 3.8% of its nearly 1.4 billion people. On Monday, the federal government enabled walk-in registration at government-run vaccination centers for those aged between 18 to 44 to "minimize vaccine wastage."

The first known COVID-19 death in India happened on March 12, 2020, in southern Karnataka state. It took seven months to reach the first 100,000 dead. The official toll hit 200,000 deaths in late April. The next 100,000 deaths were recorded in just 27 days after new infections tore through dense cities and rural areas alike and overwhelmed health care systems on the brink of collapse.

Average daily deaths and cases have slightly decreased in the past few weeks and the government on Sunday said it is conducting the highest number of COVID-19 tests, with more than 2.1 million samples tested in the previous 24 hours.

## After another war, displaced in Gaza face familiar plight

By FARES AKRAM Associated Press

BEIT HANOUN, Gaza Strip (AP) — It took Ramez al-Masri three years to rebuild his home after it was destroyed in a 2014 Israeli offensive. When war returned to the area last week, it took just a few seconds for the house to be flattened again in an Israeli airstrike.

The despondent al-Masri once again finds himself among the thousands of Gazans left homeless by another war between Israel and the territory's Islamic militant Hamas rulers. He and the 16 others who lived in the two-story structure are scattered at relatives' homes, uncertain how long they will remain displaced as they wait with hope for international aid to help them rebuild the home.

"My children are scattered — two there, three here, one there. Things are really very difficult," he said. "We live in death every day as long as there is an occupation," he said, referring to Israel's rule over Palestinians, including its blockade of Gaza.

The United Nations estimates that about 1,000 homes were destroyed in the 11-day war that ended last Friday. Lynn Hastings, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for the region, said hundreds of additional housing units were damaged so badly they are likely uninhabitable.

The destruction is less extensive than in the 50-day war of 2014, in which entire neighborhoods were reduced to rubble and 141,000 homes were either wiped out or damaged.

But following that war, international donors quickly pledged \$2.7 billion in reconstruction assistance for the battered enclave. It remains unclear this time around whether the international community, fatigued from the global COVID-19 crisis and years of unsuccessful Mideast diplomacy, will be ready to open its wallet again.

It was 3 a.m. on Wednesday when the phone call from Israel came to a neighbor ordering everyone in the area to evacuate. "Leave your homes, we are going to bomb," al-Masri says they were told.

The neighborhood is home to members of al-Masri's extended family. At the time of the warning, he said no one knew which house might be targeted. But he could not believe that the airstrike hit the two-floor home where he lived with his eight children, his brother's family and their mother.

"If we knew someone was wanted, we would not have stayed here from the outset," he said. Al-Masri, who owns a small grocery store, said neither he nor his brother have anything to do with militant groups.

The airstrike turned his home into a crater. On Sunday, the massive hole was filled with murky water spewing from broken water and sewage lines.

Seven adjacent homes belonging to relatives were badly damaged. Their walls were blown up, exposing the colorful interior decorations of the living and bedrooms. The blast was so powerful that concrete support beams were weakened and the houses are likely beyond repair.

On Sunday, a mobile pump was deployed to suck the stinky water out as bulldozers worked to reopen streets. City workers were removing damaged power lines. But much of the rubble remained uncleared.

After the 2014 war, al-Masri bounced around between rental homes and "caravans" — small metal huts that dotted hard-hit areas of Gaza like shantytowns. He dreads the thought of returning to the temporary

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shelters.

"Life was disastrous in the caravans. We were living between two sheets of tin," he said.

He said he hopes the international community "will stand by us, try to help us so we can rebuild quickly."

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request seeking comment on why the home had been targeted.

Throughout the fighting, it accused Hamas of using residential areas as cover for rocket launches and other militant activity. The army says its system of warnings and evacuation orders is meant to prevent civilians from being harmed.

During the recent fighting, Israel unleashed hundreds of airstrikes across Gaza at what it said were militant targets. Hamas and other armed groups fired more than 4,000 rockets toward Israeli cities, most of which were intercepted or landed in open areas.

The fighting began 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 true costs of the war will not be known for some time. Palestinian health officials said 248 Palestinians, including 66 children and 39 women, were killed in the fighting.

Twelve people in Israel, including two children, also died in the fighting.

On Sunday morning, hundreds of municipal workers and volunteers started a one-week campaign to clear rubble from Gaza City's streets.

Outside a flattened high-rise building, workers loaded rubble into donkey carts and small pickup trucks. Next to a destroyed government building, children collected cables and whatever recyclable leftovers they could sell for a few shekels.

In Beit Hanoun, one of the homes that was struck last week belonged to Nader al-Masri, Ramez's cousin and a long-distance runner who participated in dozens of international competitions. Since he lost his house in the 2014 war, Nader, 41, has lived in the second of floor of a three-floor home belonging to relatives.

The third and the first floors sustained heavy hits. A room filled with medals and trophies that Nader collected through his 20-year career was damaged. Fortunately, he said, many of his mementos survived.

Nader al-Masri is familiar with loss. Beit Hanoun, situated just along the frontier with Israel, has frequently been the scene of heavy fighting, and his home has been damaged two previous times.

"I had over 150 trophies. In each of the previous wars, I lost one or two or three," he said. Some 20 glass awards have been shattered over the years. "Each war the number drops," he said, showing a medal from the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

As a world-class runner from 1998 to 2018, Nader was one of Gaza's most famous residents, especially after Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade on Gaza following Hamas' takeover of the territory in 2007.

The blockade often prevented him from traveling abroad to compete. In many cases, he arrived just in time for his races.

On Sunday, debris filled his apartment. The ceiling of his daughters' bedroom was cracked. The bright layers of paint had fallen off, exposing gloomy, dark plaster. School backpacks lay on the ground among shards and debris.

Nader, now a coach with the Palestinian Athletics Federation, moved his five children to their uncle's house.

"I'm an athlete and have nothing to do with politics," he said. "Things are difficult because we cannot build a home every day."

## Floyd's death laid bare the 'Minnesota Paradox' of racism

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — George Floyd's death under a white Minneapolis police officer's knee severely tarnished Minnesota's reputation as a progressive state on matters of race. Many Black residents say it was never deserved in the first place.

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The state's seemingly polite exterior, exemplified by the nickname "Minnesota Nice," has long concealed some of the country's worst racial disparities — especially when it comes to employment, housing and education. As the state on Tuesday marks the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death, residents are still debating whether anything has changed — or will.

Marvin Anderson, 81, an activist working to revive the historically Black neighborhood of Rondo in St. Paul, endured explicit acts of racism while living in the Deep South, then returned to his native Minnesota, where he and other Black residents were subjected to less-confrontational slights and microaggressions. He saw Floyd's tragic death a year ago as an opportunity to repair the "mildew and rotting timber" of America's foundation, but now questions whether Minnesota — despite its progressive reputation — will be able to lead the way.

"Minnesota has the capacity, the skill, the intelligence to do better, and that's what hurts more than anything," Anderson said. "If there's one state where you might be able to solve these problems and set an example that other states could follow, it would be Minnesota."

Samuel Myers Jr., director of the Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice at the University of Minnesota, has spent years documenting what he calls "The Minnesota Paradox."

The state boasts high levels of educational attainment, world-class medical care such as the Mayo Clinic, shopping magnets such as the Mall of America, a vibrant arts scene, and big philanthropy-minded employers like 3M, Best Buy, General Mills and Target.

All that helps make Minnesota a great place for white residents. But Myers has also documented how different it is for many Black residents:

— The graduation rate for high school students hit a historic high of nearly 84% in 2019. But for Black students, it was below 70%. And while two-thirds of white students met state reading proficiency standards, only a third of Black students did.

— Minnesota had the highest rate of home ownership in the nation at nearly 73% according to a 2013 report. For U.S.-born Black Minnesota residents, it was just 26%.

— The median household income for Minnesota in 2019 was \$77,000 for white households and about \$42,000 for Black households.

"When they say a Minnesota that works for all of us, they're not talking about me. They're not talking about people that look like me," said state Rep. John Thompson, 40.

Thompson, like many Black Minnesotans, can recount stories of being stopped by police for no good reason. It happened when he was 18, he said, when he and three friends — also Black — were stopped by officers and frisked when they left a family barbecue and walked down an alley to buy chips. More recently, he said, he was handcuffed by an officer after demanding his money back at a car wash that had malfunctioned — and after Thompson said he himself had called police.

Thompson eventually became an activist after the high-profile killing of another Black man, his friend Philando Castile, by a police officer in 2016 in the St. Paul suburb of Falcon Heights. As he fights for police accountability and economic equity in the Legislature, he said he has even been accused of racism by some white lawmakers.

"How on earth can you call a Black man racist for calling out racism?" he said.

Walt Jacobs, who chaired the African American & African Studies department at the University of Minnesota before becoming the social sciences dean at San Jose State University, edited a collection of essays on racial dynamics after Floyd's death that was published this month. Its title: "Sparked: George Floyd, Racism, and the Progressive Illusion."

"The whole thing of 'Minnesota Nice' — we talk about the weather and other surface level things, but it's harder to talk about those bigger issues that might be divisive," he said. "You're expected to be polite, to not have any hostility to folks who are different from you, but you're not going to tackle these potentially explosive issues, not going to get to know people outside your immediate circle of family and friends."

That's been changing since Floyd's death and former police Officer Derek Chauvin's conviction, he said, with ordinary Minnesotans starting to have those conversations.

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"Change will come out of this," Jacobs said. "The question is how much change? What will the extent of the change be?"

The Rev. Sarah Campbell, a minister at Mayflower Church in Minneapolis, said Floyd's death caused "deep soul searching" within her progressive but mostly white faith community, part of the United Church of Christ. She said it opened some people's eyes to privilege, hidden bias and unfairness in the state's economic and educational systems.

Mayflower was already politically active, but Floyd's death and the protests that followed have led to something new, she said.

"What feels significantly different now is that we're not just doing political organizing, turnout, education," she said. "It feels like it's really going to another place... our psyches, our souls, our spirits."

Anderson spends his time these days trying to make change happen by working to restore the city's Rondo neighborhood, where he grew up, a community ripped in half by the construction of Interstate 94 in the 1960s. For Anderson, it was all the more painful because he and others saw Rondo as a respite from a "hostile and oftentimes racist world."

"What made Rondo so unique was that it provided a haven where it was kept to an absolute minimum," Anderson said. It was a nurturing place where people were called "mister" instead of "boy," he said, where children heard stories from their elders in the barber or beauty shops that prepared them for the racism of the world outside.

Thompson and other Black state lawmakers elected after Floyd's death don't see today's Minnesota as such a haven. They have only to look at the fate of police accountability legislation, which stalled out this year amid Republican opposition.

Democratic freshman Rep. Cedrick Frazier, of suburban New Hope, sought to ban police officers from affiliating with white supremacist groups. During one contentious negotiating session, Frazier angered a powerful white senator after Frazier told him, "We live in the same Minnesota, but I gotta tell you, I do absolutely experience this Minnesota differently than you do, and a large part is because of my skin color."

He said the testy reaction showed how defensive Minnesotans can get.

"My colleagues who don't look like me and live in a different ZIP code, they need to acknowledge it," Frazier said. "We're absolutely not there yet."

## Rare protests in Oman over jobs draw massive police response

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Scattered protests in Oman over layoffs and poor economic conditions drew a massive police presence Monday in at least two cities in the sultanate, with protesters throwing stones at one point and police firing tear gas.

Videos posted to social media show several dozen Omanis in the city of Sohar trailed by a long line of riot police vehicles. Other images appear to show a line of dozens of officers in riot gear near a government labor office in the city, some 200 kilometers (125 miles) northwest of the capital, Muscat.

Other images appear to show Omanis fleeing smoking tear gas canisters and others being arrested by nightstick-wielding riot police. The images correspond to known landmarks around Sohar, the first major city people enter in the sultanate after crossing the border from neighboring United Arab Emirates.

Other videos showed demonstrators in Salalah, a city some 850 kilometers (525 miles) southwest of Muscat.

Similar scattered protests in Sohar on Sunday also brought a mass police presence, activists said online. That demonstration was acknowledged by Oman's Labor Ministry in a tweet, which said it was aware of people gathering there to try to "find new job vacancies and to solve the problems of those who were fired."

It was not immediately clear if there had been a major layoff in Sohar, which is home to a key port, as well as plants producing aluminum and steel. In 2011 during the Arab Spring, protesters in Sohar demanding higher pay, jobs for the unemployed and the sacking of government ministers set fire to a supermarket.

Oil and gas remains a major industry in Oman. Its tourism sector has been hard hit by the coronavirus



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pandemic and repeated lockdowns in the sultanate.

Oman's state TV on Monday afternoon acknowledged that jobless people had been coming to Labor Ministry offices to "expedite the treatment of their conditions." It also showed an image from one of the peaceful protests.

The Royal Oman Police did not acknowledge making any arrests. Oman's Information Ministry and the Omani Embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

The demonstrations mark the first major unrest for Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, who took over in January 2020 after the death of the long-ruling Sultan Qaboos bin Said. State media on Monday referred to employment as "among the most important priorities" of Sultan Haitham.

Oman faces billions in looming loan repayments, including from China, and needs even more money as its youthful population wants jobs and its government cannot afford the cradle-to-grave benefits given in other Gulf Arab nations.

## A little US city, battered by the virus, tells its stories

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

CENTRAL FALLS, R.I. (AP) — The beleaguered people of Central Falls moved quickly through the high school gym's injection stations and then to rest on dozens of metal folding chairs, borrowed from the Knights of Columbus.

Immunity was at hand, but no one was celebrating.

Central Falls — the poorest and smallest city in the nation's smallest state — is also among the hardest hit by COVID-19. Sorrow reaches across the city: The dead husband. The mother who came from Guatemala in search of a better life, only to die in a new land. The Polish priest who buried parishioner after parishioner.

The city has endured repeated waves of illness, with rates of confirmed cases that often dwarfed cities across New England.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Another in an occasional series, COVID's Scars, looking at how some of those battered by the pandemic are trying to recover after a year of pain and loss.

But the troubles of Central Falls extend far back, long before the coronavirus arrived: Moonshine in the 1920s, cocaine in the 1980s. Illegal gambling dens in the 1940s, when policemen who tried to shut them down were fired for misconduct. Cascading mill and factory closures in the years after World War II, starting an inexorable slide into poverty and, finally, city bankruptcy in 2011.

So the people of Central Falls — mostly Latin Americans these days, and before that immigrant waves of French Canadians, Irish, Greeks, Syrians and others — are accustomed to hard times. But in the gym on this dreary Saturday, they were mostly stoic. A few gossiped quietly. Some stared at their phones.

If you asked, though, they would tell you their stories of their COVID year — how they suffered, how they rose to the occasion and how they failed, what they lost.

Off to the side, sitting almost beneath the basketball hoop, was Christine McCarthy. McCarthy was relieved to get her shot. She's 65, has diabetes and knows what COVID-19 could do to her.

But mostly she wanted to talk about her husband, John, and how after nearly 40 years of marriage — after three children, some tough financial years and too many illnesses — he'd still sing to her. He'd sit on the bed, lean over his acoustic guitar, and his voice would fill the room. Sometimes it was Steely Dan. Sometimes Soul Asylum.

But in 2020 he mostly stuck to a couple Beatles' classics. They now echo with pain.

"A love like ours  
Could never die  
As long as I  
Have you near me."

On Jan. 1, at 9:39 p.m., John McCarthy died of complications of COVID-19.

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"That's my story," she said, choking back tears. "Aren't you glad you came to talk to me?"

The 911 call came around dinner time from a small, ground-floor apartment, on yet another crowded Central Falls street.

It was the end of March 2020.

When firefighter Andres Nunes went through the door, this is what he saw: A two-bedroom apartment packed with humanity, packed with stuff. Clothes and sheets and blankets piled in the living room. The kitchen table shoved aside to create more space. There weren't enough beds, so at least one person was sleeping on the sofa.

Sitting in a conference room in the city's firehall more than a year later, Nunes recalled that this was the moment when he knew: "This was coming for us."

America's first reported COVID-19 death had come a few weeks earlier. By the end of March, the world was watching as New York City's streets echoed with the wail of ambulances.

And in a little city little known outside this corner of New England, coronavirus was starting to burn through the streets like a firestorm.

Seven or eight people from an extended family were living in the apartment, Nunes said. Five were sick. Symptoms ranged across the coronavirus spectrum: Body pain, headaches, coughing.

The family, immigrants from Guatemala who didn't speak English, refused to go to the hospital unless they all could go. That was impossible because of the hospital's coronavirus restrictions. Because no one was in immediate danger, the medical crews left information on COVID-19 tests, and what to do if anyone got sicker.

No one died that evening. No one was taken to the hospital. But the crews left shaken.

"That was when we realized we had something big," Nunes said.

Nunes knew what would happen in Central Falls when coronavirus took root. He's lived here since he was 15, and graduated from Central Falls High School. His family is in the city, nearly all his friends. He was born in Colombia, and knows what life is like here for many immigrants.

It's an ideal place for the virus to spread.

Central Falls is crowded — 20,000 people in 1.3 square miles — and filled with street after street of triple deckers, narrow three-story apartment buildings ubiquitous in working-class Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Those apartments are often full to bursting, with parents, grandparents, children, cousins and friends often crowded together.

Buildings are so close together that you can often lean out the window of one apartment and touch the one next door. Many properties don't have a blade of grass.

Then there are the job realities.

Central Falls is a deeply working-class city, a place of janitors, warehouse workers, cashiers and others who can't work from home. With a virus that disproportionately hits the poor, more than 30% of the city lives below the poverty line.

Nunes believes the virus had been snaking through the city since early February, when there had been a glut of calls about people suffering flu-like symptoms.

"We just didn't know what to call it."

The husband — always a worrier — brought the strange news home.

"He was talking about this pandemic going around," said Marcelina Hernandez, a 36-year-old mother of four with a huge smile and a deep well of Catholicism. "I told him: 'You're crazy! You always think everything is bad!'"

Mauricio Pedroza is a burly 41-year-old whose size belies a gentle friendliness. He smiled bashfully as his wife spoke, both to acknowledge his pessimism and maybe to gloat a little because he'd been right to worry.

A few weeks later, the virus began sweeping through the city. Schools shut. Stores. Bars. Restaurants. For seven months, they barely let their 13-year-old twins out of the house.

They live in yet another triple decker, in a top-floor apartment scattered with crucifixes, religious prints

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and avalanches of pink plastic toys for their baby daughter.

On the front porch, a long row of mailboxes spills over with residents' names.

Like so many in Central Falls, they arrived following a network of family and friends, part of the large Latin American influx over the past 30 years. They come because rents are cheap, commutes are easy to cities from Boston to Providence, and plenty of people speak only Spanish. Restaurants serve memories of home, from Colombian-style ceviche to beef tripe soup.

For the couple, who emigrated from rural Guatemala more than 20 years ago but met in Central Falls, it has become home. Their families are nearby. There are parks for family reunions. There are decent schools. There are plenty of jobs for people willing to work hard.

This is a city that understands hard work. Pedroza has two jobs: a store janitor in the mornings, and a forklift operator at a warehouse in the evenings.

Unemployment skyrocketed here after the pandemic struck, jumping from 6% in January 2020 to 20% two months later (it had settled to 9% by March 2021). Demand at food pantries exploded with the unemployment rate, in part because undocumented workers couldn't get most government assistance.

Pedroza was lucky. He lost only a few weeks of work.

But he never stopped worrying: "I was always overthinking," he said, as a cage of parakeets chirped and screeched in the kitchen.

The family went into a hard lockdown. In a culture where social distancing from relatives can seem like a betrayal, they retreated into their apartment and stopped seeing family.

He was scared, constantly watching news reports and social media rumors. Work became terrifying. He rarely went out.

Still, a few days after Christmas, he began feeling sick: exhausted, sore throat, headache. Then Hernandez got it. Then the baby.

The next few weeks were a blur. New Year's, a big holiday for the extended family, was just food dropped off at the bottom of the stairs. They couldn't taste it.

In the end they were lucky.

Both were sick for just a couple weeks. Neither had to go to the hospital.

And maybe, just maybe, all the vaccinations mean the extended family can have their annual Fourth of July reunion, gathering in a park on Naragansett Bay.

"I don't know when it will be normal," Hernandez said, as the baby started to squall. "Someday, I hope."

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Back when he was younger, John McCarthy had been a carpet installer. A great carpet installer.

He'd worked in the mansion-museums of Newport, Rhode Island, where Gilded Age industrial barons had spent their summers, and in the locker room of the New England Patriots, where he'd helped craft the team logo out of carpeting. He'd worked in houses and businesses across Rhode Island and Massachusetts, a craftsman of carpet fabric who dreamed of opening his own design studio.

"He was the best. The absolute best," said Christine.

Things changed in the early 1990s, when a pancreatic crisis and a highly complex surgery meant his working days were over. Later there were other medical issues, including chronic lung problems.

Finances weren't always easy, and there were three kids to raise.

But the connections to Central Falls remained deep. John grew up in the city, hanging out on Dexter Street. He graduated from Central Falls High School, as did all three children. Christine got a job working as a secretary for the city's schools. There were friends and family nearby.

Around Christmas, though, things started to look grim for John McCarthy. He had been hospitalized twice for low hemoglobin levels, and was awaiting results from a coronavirus test.

On Christmas Day, everyone kept their masks on. "He stayed in the bedroom. I brought him his gifts. One of the kids might have popped their head in the bedroom, but nobody went in there and he didn't come out," she said.

Two days later, with John's breathing increasingly labored, he asked Christine to take him to the hospital. When they got there, though, and found people lined up outside the emergency room, he couldn't face

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going in.

"Forget it," he told her. "Just bring me home."

Hours later, feeling even worse, he told her to call an ambulance. He would never come home again.

He tested positive for COVID-19. On New Year's Day, the doctors called to say John's medical troubles were overwhelming: kidney failure, pneumonia, internal bleeding, blood clots, brain damage.

Christine and one of her daughters had tested positive by then, so they couldn't go inside the hospital to see him. Her other daughter and son went in.

The doctors asked what they should do.

"I think it's time we say goodbye," she told their children. "So they went and they got the chaplain. And the chaplain did his thing."

"Then they unplugged him."

It was hard not to think about what might have been if John had survived long enough for a vaccination.

"If he had only gotten through those last weeks," she said, her voice trailing off.

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When the state designated extra doses to Central Falls because it had been hit so hard, Mayor Maria Rivera helped create an aggressive vaccination program, with weekly jab days and city-organized health ambassadors going door to door and stopping people on the streets, encouraging them to get shots. A local doctor worked to ensure that undocumented immigrants weren't overlooked.

In late February, Central Falls had one of the highest vaccination rates in the U.S.

"We're blowing everyone else out of the water," crowed Dr. Michael Fine, the city's chief health strategist. But he warned that herd immunity wouldn't come easy. "At a certain point we're going to hit the people who aren't so interested in vaccination."

Which is exactly what has happened. Just as the pace of vaccination has decelerated across the United States, it has slowed even at a COVID ground zero.

There has been a precipitous decline in the number of people showing up at the high school gym for vaccinations. And there has been a noticeable increase in risky behavior: When the fire alarm went off in a Cape Verdean club on recent night, firefighters found dozens of people crowded inside. No one was wearing masks.

And yet the mayor remains upbeat. Rivera, 44, is a standard-bearer of a new Central Falls. There is still much poverty, but the city emerged from bankruptcy in 2012 and had a budget surplus in 2013. The cocaine reputation is gone.

Rivera was sworn in as Rhode Island's first Latina mayor on Jan. 4, 2021. She is popular, unrelentingly energetic and a constant presence around the city. She is an indefatigable cheerleader for vaccination, and for a city she says is rising like a phoenix from COVID's ashes.

"This isn't rocket science," Rivera said. "We know what we need."

## Iran agrees to extend deal on cameras at its nuclear sites

By PHILIPP JENNE and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Iran and the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog agreed Monday to a one-month extension to a deal on surveillance cameras at Tehran's atomic sites, buying more time for ongoing negotiations seeking to save the country's tattered nuclear deal with world powers.

The last-minute discussions, including the International Atomic Energy Agency pushing back a statement planned for Sunday, further underscored the narrowing window for the U.S. and others to reach terms with Iran as it presses a tough stance with the international community over its atomic program. The Islamic Republic is already enriching and stockpiling uranium at levels far beyond those allowed by its 2015 nuclear deal.

Speaking at a news conference Monday in Vienna, IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi told journalists that came after a discussion with Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's civilian nuclear program. He acknowledged that challenges remain, however, as the agency still can't access images taken by its

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cameras.

"I'd want to stress this is not ideal," Grossi said. "This is like an emergency device that we came up with in order for us to continue having these monitoring activities."

Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's representative to the IAEA, acknowledged the deal at the same time on Twitter. He said Tehran's civilian nuclear agency, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, would keep the material already recorded by the IAEA cameras.

"We recommend the negotiating countries to seize the extra opportunity provided by Iran in good faith for the complete lifting of sanctions in a practical and verifiable manner," Gharibabadi wrote.

Under a confidential agreement called an "Additional Protocol" with Iran, the IAEA collects and analyzes images from a series of surveillance cameras installed at Iranian nuclear sites. Those cameras helped it monitor Tehran's program to see if it is complying with the nuclear deal.

Iran's hard-line parliament in December approved a bill that would suspend part of U.N. inspections of its nuclear facilities if European signatories did not provide relief from oil and banking sanctions by February.

The IAEA then struck a three-month deal with Iran in February to have it hold the surveillance images, with Tehran threatening to delete them afterward if no deal had been reached.

Iran since has broken all the deal's limits after then-President Donald Trump in 2018 unilaterally withdrew America from the accord. Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's civilian program, said Monday that Tehran had stockpiled 5 tons of uranium enriched up to 5% purity, 90 kilograms (198 pounds) enriched up to 20% and 2.5 kilograms (5.5 pounds) up to 60%.

That's still below weapons-grade levels of 90% purity. Iran long has maintained its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. The West fears it could be used to help Tehran potentially obtain an atomic bomb, though U.S. intelligence agencies say they "assess that Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities ... necessary to produce a nuclear device."

Negotiations continue in Vienna to see if both the U.S. and Iran can re-enter the deal, which limited Tehran's enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. Iran and the U.S. aren't directly negotiating, however.

Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's ambassador to the IAEA, called Monday's agreement "commendable."

"It will help maintain businesslike atmosphere at the Vienna talks on #JCPOA and facilitate a successful outcome of the diplomatic efforts to restore the nuclear deal," he wrote on Twitter, using an acronym for the deal.

But if a deal isn't reached in a month's time, that footage again would be in jeopardy.

Asked about that, Grossi simply said: "We are going to discuss that when we get to that point."

He also acknowledged Iran's upcoming June 18 presidential election could mean new faces at the negotiating table. So far, Grossi has been dealing with the administration of the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani, which clinched the nuclear deal. Analysts believe hard-liners have an edge going into the vote.

"We deal with Iran and the Iranian people will give itself its new government in the next elections," Grossi said. "So I'm not worried and I'm confident that whoever comes next will, of course, continue cooperating with the IAEA. I think it's in everybody's interests."

## UK Black activist critical in hospital after shooting

LONDON (AP) — An activist who has played a leading role in anti-racism demonstrations in Britain was in critical condition in a London hospital on Monday after being shot.

The Taking the Initiative Party said Sasha Johnson, who played a leading role in Black Lives Matter protests last year, was shot in the head on Sunday. Police and a friend said it did not appear to be a targeted attack, though the party said Johnson had received "numerous death threats" related to her activism.

The party said Johnson was "a strong, powerful voice for our people and our community."

The Metropolitan Police force said officers were called to reports of gunshots in the Peckham area of the city just before 3 a.m. on Sunday. Police said the shooting took place near a house where a party

was taking place.

The police statement said a 27-year-old woman was in a hospital in critical condition after being shot. It did not identify her, but said "there is nothing to suggest it was a targeted attack or that the woman had received any credible threats against her before this incident."

Detectives have appealed for witnesses and have not made any arrests.

A friend, Imarn Ayton, said she did not believe Johnson was the intended target.

"As far as we are aware, she was at a party," she told the BBC. "There was a rival gang that may have heard about someone being in that party that they didn't feel quite comfortable with or trusted and so they resorted to driving past and shooting into the garden, and one of those shots obviously hit Sasha Johnson.

"But I don't believe she was the intended victim."

Like other countries, Britain has faced an uncomfortable reckoning with race since the death of George Floyd, a Black American, at the knee of a U.S. policeman in May 2020 sparked anti-racism protests around the world.

Large crowds at Black Lives Matter protests across the U.K. called on the government and institutions to face up to the legacy of the British Empire and the country's extensive profits from the slave trade. Johnson was a speaker at rallies last summer and is a leader of the newly founded, Black-led Taking the Initiative Party.

## Justices reject case of retired cop put in police chokehold

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Monday rejected an appeal from a retired federal law enforcement officer who was put in a chokehold and wrestled to the ground at a VA hospital security checkpoint.

The justices did not comment in refusing to revive a lawsuit filed by Jose Oliva, 76, against three officers who violently detained him in an altercation that was captured on camera. Oliva was 70 at the time of the incident in El Paso, Texas.

A Vietnam veteran who spent 25 years in federal law enforcement, Oliva had an appointment for dental work at the VA facility in 2016. The officers said he failed to produce identification, which Oliva said he already had put in a bin that was about to be scanned.

He underwent shoulder surgery and treatment for his throat, hand and ear after the altercation.

A trial judge allowed his civil rights lawsuit to go forward, but a federal appeals panel reversed the initial ruling.

## On a mission to heal after exposing her dad to deadly virus

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

SHARON, Mass. (AP) — For a year, Michelle Pepe awoke every day, recited the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, and kissed a photo of her father. And coped with her guilt.

"Dad," she says, "I'm so sorry that this happened."

"This" was COVID-19. In March 2020, just as the pandemic bloomed in the United States, Pepe traveled from Boston to Florida for her mother's 80th birthday. She believes she gave the coronavirus to her father; Bernie Rubin died weeks later.

"At the beginning, people would say, 'Well, how did he get it?' From me. That's how he got it — he got it from me," Pepe says, sobbing.

"Nobody's ever said, 'This is your fault and you gave it to him,' but I know it's true. I know I couldn't save him. It's just something I'm going to have to go to the grave with."

Hers is a common sorrow of the times. Around the world, countless people are struggling to shake off the burden of feeling responsible for the death of a loved one due to COVID-19. They regret a trip or feel anguish over everyday decisions that may have spread the disease — commuting to work, hugging parents, even picking up food.

On the eve of the anniversary of her father's death, Pepe's hands tremble as she holds a framed portrait

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of Bernie and Phyllis Rubin, smiling and surrounded by their 10 grandchildren. Taken on March 8, 2020, it's one of the last images of the couple with their family.

After the celebration, Pepe stayed in Florida to take care of them during the pandemic. She believes she caught the virus while shopping for groceries for her parents. Then her father and mother sickened. Worried about his worsening condition, she called 911. He died alone at Delray Medical Center; family members were unable to visit him.

"I shouldn't have given up and called the ambulance," she says. "That's what haunts me, and thinking about him, alone in that room ... I know he was terrified."

There was just a brief, socially distanced graveside burial. Pepe watched on Zoom while she continued to care for her mother, who has multiple sclerosis and was recovering from COVID-19.

Pepe has been battling despair ever since.

"I was in a real funk for a real long time," she says. "And then one of my daughters said to me, 'Mommy, we thought that we lost our grandfather, but ... we didn't realize we also lost our mom.' I figured I have to snap out of it."

Pepe joined online support groups where she met other grieving survivors; went to a psychic medium, searching for signs; and sought guidance from a rabbi who taught her how to recite the Kaddish.

On April 13, she awakens to say the prayer and light a yahrzeit candle marking the one-year anniversary of her father's death. "We just have to get through this day," she repeats on the drive to the cemetery. She wears her father's gold chain and high school graduation ring.

At his grave, she places yellow flowers on a tombstone that reads: "Loving husband, father, pup" — his nickname — "and great grandfather." In the Jewish tradition, family members leave behind small stones.

They remember a man who adored his grandchildren, calling them daily to catch up on the latest Red Sox news or to invite them to games at Fenway Park. In recent years, "he couldn't walk very fast — unless it was for a baseball game. Then he'd turn into Carl Lewis!" says Bob Pepe, Michelle's husband, who worked with his father-in-law and remained his close friend for 30 years.

The furniture store that Rubin founded with his wife in 1983 grew into the Bernie & Phyl's Furniture chain, with nine locations across New England.

The couple were featured in TV commercials best-known for their catchy jingle. Strangers would often recognize them at restaurants and recite the catchphrase: "Oh, are you Bernie from Bernie and Phyl's, quality, comfort and price?"

And Bernie Rubin would chime in, as in the ads: "That's nice!"

After the cemetery, Pepe visits the company's headquarters in Norton. She admires the walls adorned with hundreds of autographed photos of baseball players her dad began collecting as a kid. She takes a deep breath and walks into his office, decorated with another, equally prized collection: photos of his family on cruise vacations, at bar mitzvahs, college graduations and weddings.

She picks up her dad's work phone, leaning in close to take a whiff as she often does with his wallet, his shirts and his cologne, hoping to sense his presence. But she smells nothing — COVID-19 robbed her of her senses of smell and taste.

At lunch, the family walks to Rubin's favorite restaurant and orders the "Bernie Reuben," a sandwich named after him. Every day, Rubin would walk into Kelly's Place to order a cheese omelet and go through the same comedic routine with a waitress.

"Carol, I have to stand here for 20 minutes? There's 10 empty tables. How do you run a business like this?" Bob Pepe says, imitating Bernie's voice. "And she'd go: 'Will you shut up? You know where you're sitting, go sit down!'"

Sitting next to her husband, Michelle Pepe bursts into laughter. Later, she wipes away tears.

"It was torture," she says. "But a year later, here I am, and I can laugh at these stories."

The next day, she awakens to kiss her father's photo. She looks at the calendar and heaves a sigh of relief. The ritual year of mourning is over.

"My father would be so tortured if he thought about how tortured I was, and I want him to be happy

and at peace," she says. "And he's only going to be that way if I'm that way here."

## Italy investigators probe why cable car brake 'didn't work'

By NICOLE WINFIELD and CHARLENE PELE Associated Press

STRESA, Italy (AP) — The investigation into Italy's cable car disaster that killed 14 people will focus on why the lead cable snapped and why the emergency brake didn't engage and prevent the cabin from careening back down the mountain until it pulled off the support line and crashed to the ground, the lead prosecutor said Monday.

Verbania Prosecutor Olimpia Bossi outlined the contours of her investigation based on what she said was objective, empirical fact of what occurred: "The brakes of the security system didn't work. Otherwise the cabin would have stopped," she said. "Why that happened is naturally under investigation."

Bossi spoke to reporters as the lone survivor of Sunday's horrific tragedy, a 5-year-old Israeli boy living in Italy, remained hospitalized in Turin in intensive care with multiple broken bones.

The Israeli foreign ministry identified him as Eitan Biran. His parents, younger brother and two great-grandparents were among the dead, the ministry said, correcting an earlier statement that had included Eitan among the victims.

Italian media identified all the other victims as residents of Italy.

The disaster, in one of the most picturesque spots in northern Italy — the Mottarone mountaintop overlooking Lake Maggiore and other lakes near Switzerland — raised questions anew about the quality and safety of Italy's transport infrastructure.

Transport Minister Enrico Giovannini visited the site Monday and announced a commission of inquiry to investigate the "technical and organizational causes" of the disaster, while prosecutors will focus on any criminal blame.

Giovannini told reporters in Stresa, the lakefront town at the foot of the Mottarone peak, that the aim of the investigative commission would be to "ensure this never happens again."

The transport ministry said a preliminary check of the cable line's safety and maintenance record show that the whole lift structure underwent a renovation in August 2016, and that a full maintenance check was performed in 2017 and more inspections last year.

In November and December 2020, other checks were performed on the cables themselves, including magnetic inspections on the primary cables of the lift: the cable that pulls the cabin up the mountain, the support cable that holds the car and the rescue cables. In December another visual check was performed, the ministry said.

The mayor of Stresa, Marcella Severino, quoted witnesses as saying they heard a "loud hiss," apparently when the lead cable snapped. She said the cabin reeled back down the line until it apparently hit a pylon and then plummeted to the ground. It rolled over two or three times before crashing into trees, she said.

Some of the bodies were thrown from the car and were found amid the trees, rescue workers said.

In on-camera comments to LaPresse news agency and other reporters in her office, Bossi noted that the emergency brake had engaged on the other cable car that was traveling in the opposite direction, down the mountain.

She said the possible crimes that are being investigated are multiple manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and an "attack on public transport." She acknowledged the transport crime was an unusual hypothesis, but justified it by recalling that a cable car up and down a mountain is a form of public transportation.

The funicular line is popular with tourists and locals alike to scale Mottarone, which reaches a height of 1,491 meters (4,900 feet) and overlooks several picturesque lakes and the surrounding Alps of Italy's Piedmont region. The mountain hosts a small amusement park, Alpyland, that has a children's rollercoaster, and the area also has mountain bike paths and hiking trails.

It only reopened a few weeks ago after Italy's wintertime coronavirus lockdowns lifted, and officials hypothesized that families were taking advantage of a sunny Sunday to visit the peak and take in the view.

The mayor declared a day of mourning for Stresa, which like tourist destinations around the country



had suffered from COVID-19 lockdowns that not only slashed foreign tourism but cut local day-trip visits by Italians.

The Israeli foreign ministry identified the five Israelis killed as Eitan's parents, Amit Biran and Tal Peleg-Biran, an Israeli-born couple studying and working in Pavia. Biran's Facebook page identifies him as a medical student at the University of Pavia.

Their 2-year-old son, Tom Biran, died at the scene, as were Peleg-Biran's grandparents, Barbara and Yitzhak Cohen. The ministry said they had arrived in Italy on May 19 to visit their granddaughter and great-grandchildren.

Amit Biran's sister, Aya, wasn't involved in the crash and was at the bedside of Eitan at Turin's Regina Margherita hospital, the foreign ministry said, adding that other family members were flying to Italy from Israel to join her.

In a tweet Tuesday, Italy's national firefighting squad said they were cheering for Eitan even as they mourned the others: "Forza Eitan (Go Eitan), all the firefighters are with you."

The head of intensive care at the Turin hospital, Dr. Giorgio Ivani, said Eitan was sedated and intubated after surgery to repair his broken bones. An MRI scan was planned for Monday to assess any brain injury, though hospital officials have noted that he was conscious when he arrived.

Among the other victims were an Italian researcher, Serena Consentino, and her Iranian-born companion, Mohammadreza Shahaisavandi, according to a statement from Italy's National Council of Research, where Consentino had a research grant.

Also killed at the scene were Vittorio Zorloni and his wife, Elisabetta Persanini. Their 6-year-old son, Mattia, died at Regina Margherita after multiple efforts to restart his heart, hospital officials said.

A young couple, Silvia Malnati and Alessandro Merlo, were killed while Malnati's brother stayed down in town and frantically tried to call her, Italy's La Stampa newspaper reported, quoting the brother.

Another couple, Roberta Pistolato and Angelo Vito Gasparro were celebrating Gasparro's 45th birthday. La Stampa said Roberta texted her sister in Puglia right before the tragedy: "We're going up in the funicular. It's paradise here."

## George Floyd's family holds rally, march in brother's memory

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Members of George Floyd's family, and others who lost loved ones to police encounters, joined activists and citizens in Minneapolis for a march that was one of several events planned nationwide to mark the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death.

Hundreds of people gathered for the rally Sunday in front of the courthouse in downtown Minneapolis where former police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted last month in Floyd's death. Many carried signs with pictures of Floyd, Philando Castile and other Black men killed by police.

Amid chants of "no justice, no peace!" and "Say his name," Gov. Tim Walz, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter watched alongside a dozen of Floyd's family members as speakers called for justice for families of Black men slain by police.

"It has been a long year. It has been a painful year," Floyd's sister Bridgett told the crowd on Sunday. "It has been very frustrating for me and my family for our lives to change in the blink of an eye — I still don't know why."

Tuesday will mark one year since Floyd, who was Black, died after former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck as he pleaded for air. Floyd's death sparked worldwide protests and calls for change in policing in the U.S. Chauvin, who is white, was convicted of murder and manslaughter in his death.

Speakers at the event included several local activists, Floyd family attorney Ben Crump, and the Rev. Al Sharpton, who called on the U.S. Senate to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. The legislation, which would bring about the most significant changes to policing on the federal level, would ban the use of chokeholds and establish a national database of police misconduct.

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"We want something coming out of Washington. We want something that will change federal law," Sharpton said. "There's been an adjournment on justice for too long. It's time for them to vote and make this the law."

The George Floyd Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit based in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where Floyd was born, was hosting a series of events in Minneapolis to honor Floyd on the anniversary.

The nonprofit was launched in Floyd's honor by his siblings in September 2020 to help combat racial inequities in Black and brown communities.

Other events in Minneapolis ahead of the anniversary include a virtual "day of action" that encourages people to organize remotely and two panels with the families and other activists on Monday, followed by a community festival and candlelight vigil on Tuesday.

In New York on Sunday, Floyd's brother, Terrence, attended a gathering in Brooklyn in his brother's memory organized by Sharpton. Terrence Floyd told supporters not to forget his brother or victims of racist violence.

"If you keep my brother's name ringing, you're going to keep everybody else's name ringing," he said. "Breonna Taylor, Sean Bell, Ahmaud Arbery, you could go through the whole list. There's a lot of them."

Executive director Jacari Harris said the group has received donations from the Minneapolis Foundation, Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation and athletic shoe and apparel retailer Finish Line, among others. Despite large grants from corporations and other organizations, Harris the average donation to the nonprofit was \$47.

Harris said the group has also funded an initiative in Fayetteville to help reduce homelessness, a scholarship program for law school students and an internship program at Texas A&M University, where Floyd went to school.

## US reaches out to Palestinian leaders many angrily reject

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — After weeks of unrest and a devastating 11-day war in Gaza, the U.S. and the international community plan to engage with the Palestinians to revive peace efforts.

But when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits on Tuesday, he will meet with Palestinian leaders who were sidelined by the protests and outmaneuvered by the militant Hamas group — and who seem to be more despised by Palestinians than at any time in their long reign.

The Palestinian Authority is no closer to statehood than it was when Mahmoud Abbas, now 85, was elected president in 2005 after the death of Yasser Arafat, and the Palestinians are far more deeply divided. Abbas called off the first elections in 15 years last month, when it looked like his splintering Fatah party would suffer an embarrassing defeat.

However, the PA maintains close security ties with Israel and is deeply invested in the idea of a two-state solution. Internationally, that's seen as the only way to resolve the conflict, even though there have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade.

The Islamic militant group Hamas won a landslide victory in the last elections in 2006 and was poised to do well again. But it does not recognize Israel's right to exist and is blacklisted as a terrorist organization. The protests in Jerusalem and elsewhere are mostly leaderless.

"The option is either to engage with Hamas or an incredibly unrepresentative and defunct governing — somewhat of a governing — authority that holds absolutely no legitimacy," said Tahani Mustafa, an analyst at the Crisis Group, an international think tank.

Israel and the U.S. appear to be taking the second route, with officials in both countries saying they hope to strengthen the PA at the expense of Hamas, something that has been tried and failed repeatedly since Hamas seized power in Gaza from Abbas' forces in 2007.

Many Palestinians have come to see the PA as part of an entrenched and increasingly unbearable system of Israeli domination that extends far beyond the occupied West Bank, where the PA administers major population centers under overarching Israeli control.

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Their anger boiled over last month with protests and clashes in Jerusalem that eventually spread across the region, drawing in Palestinian citizens of Israel and triggering the Gaza war.

It was on vivid display at Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the combustible holy site at the heart of the recent unrest, when thousands of Palestinian worshippers chanted "Dogs of the authority, get out!" in response to a sermon from a PA-appointed mufti.

That was in sharp contrast to raucous rallies held at Al-Aqsa and elsewhere in support of Hamas and Mohammed Deif, the shadowy commander of the group's armed wing.

Unlike the PA, which released sternly-worded statements against Israel's policing of Al-Aqsa and attempts by Jewish settlers to evict dozens of families from a nearby neighborhood, Deif issued an ultimatum. When time ran out, Hamas fired long-range rockets that disrupted an Israeli parade celebrating its claims to the city.

That triggered a devastating Gaza war that killed more than 250 people, the vast majority of them Palestinians, and caused widespread destruction in the impoverished territory.

But it also allowed Hamas to portray itself as a wily defender of Jerusalem, to which both sides in the Middle East conflict have deeply emotional ties, and to say it had struck a blow against the far more powerful Israel.

Mkhaimar Abusada, a political science professor at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, says that even there support for Hamas has risen amid widespread disappointment with the PA.

"At the end of the day, it's Israel that destroyed these buildings," he said. "We suffer because of Israeli occupation, we suffer because of Israeli oppression... The Palestinians are not going to blame Hamas."

Hanan Ashrawi, a former senior Palestinian official and veteran of the peace process who broke with the Palestinian leadership last year, partly blames Israel for the downfall of the PA, saying it "sabotaged" attempts at a two-state solution, including by expanding settlements.

"The more this happened, the more (Palestinian leaders) were seen as helpless before Israeli violations," she said. "Israel proceeded with full impunity to make life more and more miserable for Palestinians."

Israel says it made various proposals over the years for a Palestinian state in most of the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem — territories it seized in the 1967 war — that were rejected. The Palestinians, negotiating from a position of weakness, said the offers did not go far enough.

Khalil Shikaki, a respected pollster who has been surveying Palestinian public opinion for more than two decades, said Hamas' popularity normally rises during periods of confrontation only to return to normal when things settle down. But he says the PA's crisis of legitimacy is real.

"This last war between Israel and Hamas has shown that the emperor is truly naked," he said.

Hamas was able to argue that it defended Jerusalem when no one else — neither Abbas, nor Arab countries, nor the international community — was willing to do anything, Shikaki said.

"This narrative is absolutely fantastic in terms of its effectiveness, and Hamas got away with it because Abbas has zero credibility among Palestinians," he said.

That won't keep Abbas from welcoming Blinken to the presidential palace in Ramallah this week as the leader of the Palestinians, even though he administers less than 40% of the West Bank and his presidential mandate expired more than a decade ago. His forces have no presence in Gaza, and with the elections cancelled, are unlikely to return anytime soon.

For that reason, it's widely expected that any rebuilding money will go through the U.N. and Qatar. They were already funneling aid to Gaza and carrying out humanitarian projects there as part of informal cease-fires between Israel and Hamas — the only meaningful Israeli-Palestinian agreements reached in recent memory.

## As Congress returns to funding earmarks, who will benefit?

By KEVIN FREKING and JOHN MONE Associated Press

HUFFMAN, Texas (AP) — Don't tell Laura Fields that providing \$1.7 million to her flood-prone neighborhood would be wasteful spending. Her home in a Houston-area subdivision was filled with 10 inches (25

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centimeters) of water during Hurricane Harvey.

"The stress of that was just horrific," Fields said. "You know, to see fish swimming through your house, it's not a good feeling."

The money sought by her congressman, Republican Rep. Dan Crenshaw, to improve drainage and flood prevention in Huffman, Texas, is among thousands of requests that lawmakers have submitted as Congress begins to lift a moratorium on targeted federal spending, often referred to as earmarks.

Earmarking — often called "pork barrel" spending because lawmakers would divert funds to pet projects in their states — was put on hold a decade ago. Critics thought too many projects went to a handful of powerful lawmakers and fostered a "pay to play" culture in which campaign contributions were often solicited from lobbyists and others.

Now, earmarks are marking a sudden and robust return, revamped and renamed. Lawmakers in both parties have grown frustrated by their inability to shape spending legislation and worry that Congress has ceded too much of the power of the purse to the executive branch.

The experiment could rise or fall on the reaction from voters, particularly in places skeptical of Washington spending. Many Republicans in Congress are refusing to earmark as a matter of principle, characterizing it as graft. Crenshaw said in a statement that he was "proud" to advocate for resources that would help his constituents and that the flood control earmark "will ensure that we don't have to spend even more resources recovering from future flood events."

"This is not wasteful spending, no, sir, not at all," Fields said. "These are our homes. This is where we're supposed to feel safe and secure and not have to worry about every time a storm comes through."

About \$14 billion, or 1% of discretionary spending, will be devoted to earmarks in this year's spending bills. The requests that lawmakers made, listed on the House Appropriations Committee website, go beyond the roads, bridges and research grants earmarked in the past.

Republican Rep. Garret Graves of Louisiana, for example, wants \$775,000 for a mobile medical clinic offering free cancer screenings to rural residents in his district.

And Democratic Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon of Pennsylvania wants \$650,000 for mental health professionals to team up with police or to intervene when someone is experiencing a mental health crisis.

It remains to be decided which projects will get funded. Lawmakers have been told they can put in up to 10 requests, but "nobody will be getting 10 requests," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the Democratic chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee.

Supporters of earmarks have set up guardrails to curb the complaints of corruption and waste that flared in the past. Still, more than 100 House Republicans and one Democrat have declined to participate in what is now being called "community project funding."

Graves said he requested money for the mobile cancer screening unit because some communities in his district experience a higher rate of cancer than the national average.

"You hear over and over again, lack of access to care, difficulty getting appointments, affordability," Graves said. "This kind of addresses all those historic deficiencies or challenges because it is the provider coming to you — sort of the 2021 version of the doctor with his or her little black bag doing house calls."

Graves voted against reviving earmarks when members of the House GOP conference changed their rules earlier this year. He said the process could still be improved, but in the end, it's better than letting federal agencies dictate where money goes. And he said there's more accountability when lawmakers have to disclose their requests and defend them.

In one of her requests, Scanlon drew on the experiences of the past summer as people in Philadelphia and elsewhere protested the death of George Floyd and other African Americans at the hands of police.

"You know, we hear stories all the time about people calling 911 when someone is in mental health distress, and then police arrive and there's misunderstandings and there can be fatal mistakes made," Scanlon said.

Scanlon cited the death in Philadelphia of Walter Wallace Jr., who was fatally shot last year after he ignored orders to drop a knife. His mother said she had warned police her son was in the throes of a

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mental health crisis.

"Police arrived on the scene. They were not equipped with tasers," Scanlon said. "It appears that they did not know how to de-escalate the situation, and within a minute, Walter Wallace had been shot multiple times and he died."

She said that county law enforcement officials and the local emergency medical system asked for funding to help integrate mental health specialists with law enforcement. It was one of 10 projects she selected from about 60 applicants. The House Appropriations Committee will winnow that list even further.

"Setting the expectations very low because we don't know if we'll get anything has been part of the challenge of rolling out the program," Scanlon said.

Earmarks still have many detractors in Congress. About half of House Republicans declined to request funding for local projects, including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

Club for Growth, a conservative group, said its report card grading member's votes would include whether they signed a letter from Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, pledging to abstain from earmark requests.

The group said earmarks are used as "legalized bribery" to get lawmakers to support big spending elsewhere.

"By virtue of members of Congress saying, 'I'm going to get my bridge' or 'I'm going to get my museum,' or 'I'm going to get' whatever it is, you're kind of beholden," Roy said. "That's what I think is the most problematic."

Senate Republicans have maintained their conference rules banning earmarks, but lawmakers are not bound by them.

Separately, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will include earmarks in a bill reauthorizing money for roads, bridges and transit programs. Democrats requested money for 1,775 projects and Republicans requested money for 605 projects.

As part of the vetting process, lawmakers must provide evidence of community support for the earmarks they seek.

In Texas, Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia said 40% of the homes in the Huffman neighborhood have flooded, some repeatedly.

Garcia said the money would be used to improve and widen existing roadside ditches and culverts that drain water, moving it to bayous and other waterways. The improvements are among the flood control projects that Harris County voters approved in 2018 through a \$2.5 billion bond measure. In March, county commissioners said they were facing a \$1.4 billion shortfall to fully fund the bond program's flood control projects.

The federal money, Garcia said, will help close the gap.

"We've been waiting for four years (since Hurricane Harvey). We can't wait any longer," Garcia said. "Mother Nature is not going to give us any more of a reprieve."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, May 25, the 145th day of 2021. There are 220 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black man, died when a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for about 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and pleading that he couldn't breathe; Floyd's death, captured on video by a bystander, would lead to worldwide protests, some of which turned violent, and a reexamination of racism and policing in the U.S.

On this date:

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention began at the Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall) in Philadelphia after enough delegates had shown up for a quorum.

In 1935, Babe Ruth hit his last three career home runs — Nos. 712, 713 and 714 — for the Boston Braves

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in a game against the Pittsburgh Pirates. (The Pirates won, 11-7.)

In 1946, Transjordan (now Jordan) became a kingdom as it proclaimed its new monarch, Abdullah I.

In 1959, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *State Athletic Commission v. Dorsey*, struck down a Louisiana law prohibiting interracial boxing matches. (The case had been brought by Joseph Dorsey Jr., a Black professional boxer.)

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy told Congress: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth."

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, ordered the Virginia county to reopen its public schools, which officials had closed in an attempt to circumvent the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* desegregation ruling.

In 1965, Muhammad Ali knocked out Sonny Liston in the first round of their world heavyweight title rematch in Lewiston, Maine. (Ali's victory generated controversy over whether he'd truly connected when he sent Liston crashing to the canvas with a right to the head, or whether it was a "phantom punch," implying that the fight had been fixed.)

In 1977, the first "Star Wars" film (later retitled "Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope") was released by 20th Century Fox.

In 1979, 273 people died when an American Airlines DC-10 crashed just after takeoff from Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Six-year-old Etan Patz (AY'-tahn payts) disappeared while on his way to a school bus stop in lower Manhattan. (In April 2017, former store clerk Pedro Hernandez, convicted of killing Etan, was sentenced to at least 25 years in prison.)

In 1992, Jay Leno made his debut as host of NBC's "Tonight Show," succeeding Johnny Carson.

In 2008, NASA's Phoenix Mars Lander arrived on the Red Planet to begin searching for evidence of water; the spacecraft confirmed the presence of water ice at its landing site.

In 2018, Harvey Weinstein was charged in New York with rape and another sex felony in the first prosecution to result from the wave of allegations against him; the once-powerful movie producer turned himself in to face the charges and was released on \$1 million bail after a court appearance. (Weinstein was convicted of rape and sexual assault; he is serving a 23-year prison sentence.)

Ten years ago: A judge in Salt Lake City sentenced street preacher Brian David Mitchell to life in prison for kidnapping and raping Elizabeth Smart, who was 14 at the time of her abduction in 2002. A judge in Tucson, Arizona, ruled that Jared Lee Loughner, the man accused of wounding U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and killing six in a shooting rampage, was mentally incompetent to stand trial.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama wrapped up his historic visit to Vietnam before heading to Japan, the site of a two-day summit of wealthy nations. It was announced that about a dozen states were suing the Obama administration over its directive to U.S. public schools to let transgender students use the bathrooms and locker rooms that matched their gender identity. (A federal judge put the directive on hold after the suit was filed; the Trump administration lifted the Obama guidelines in February 2017.) Actor Johnny Depp's wife, Amber Heard, filed for divorce in Los Angeles, citing irreconcilable differences after 15 months of marriage.

One year ago: President Donald Trump threatened to pull the Republican National Convention from North Carolina if the state's Democratic governor would not agree to allow a full-capacity gathering. (Charlotte would host a scaled-back portion of events; prime-time speeches were delivered from Washington and elsewhere to a largely virtual audience.) Trump made Memorial Day visits to Arlington National Cemetery and Baltimore's Fort McHenry; Democrat Joe Biden chose Memorial Day to make his first public appearance in two months; he placed a wreath at a park near his Delaware home. Americans observed Memorial Day with small processions and online tributes that also remembered those lost to the coronavirus. A white woman, Amy Cooper, called 911 to claim she was being threatened by "an African American man," Christian Cooper, who had confronted her for walking her dog without a leash in New York's Central Park. (After a video of the confrontation was widely circulated, Amy Cooper lost her job with investment firm Franklin Templeton and was charged with filing a false police report; the charge was dismissed after she

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completed a counseling program.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ann Robinson is 92. Former White House news secretary Ron Nessen is 87. Country singer-songwriter Tom T. Hall is 85. Actor Sir Ian McKellen is 82. Country singer Jessi Colter is 78. Actor-singer Leslie Uggams is 78. Movie director and Muppeteer Frank Oz is 77. Actor Karen Valentine is 74. Actor Jacki Weaver is 74. Rock singer Klaus Meine (The Scorpions) is 73. Actor Patti D'Arbanville is 70. Playwright Eve Ensler is 68. Musician Cindy Cashdollar is 66. Actor Connie Sellecca is 66. Rock singer-musician Paul Weller is 63. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., is 61. Actor-comedian Mike Myers is 58. Actor Matt Borlenghi is 54. Actor Joseph Reitman is 53. Rock musician Glen Drover is 52. Actor Anne Heche (haych) is 52. Actors Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush (TV: "Little House on the Prairie") are 51. Actor-comedian Jamie Kennedy is 51. Actor Octavia Spencer is 51. Actor Justin Henry is 50. Rapper Daz Dillinger is 48. Actor Molly Sims is 48. Actor Erinn Hayes is 45. Actor Cillian Murphy is 45. Actor Ethan Suplee (soo-PLLEE') is 45. Rock musician Todd Whitener is 43. Actor Corbin Allred is 42. Actor-singer Lauren Frost is 36. Actor Ebonee (cq) Noel is 31. Musician Guy Lawrence (Disclosure) is 30. Olympic gold medal gymnast Aly Raisman is 27.