

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Governor Noem Responds to Decision on Mount Rushmore Fireworks

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem issued the following statement in response to the District Court decision on her lawsuit against the Biden Administration over their cancellation of the Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration:

“The Biden Administration cancelled South Dakota’s Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration on completely arbitrary grounds. I am disappointed that the court gave cover to this unlawful action with today’s decision. But rest assured, this fight is not over. My legal team will appeal this incorrect decision so that we can return the Fireworks Celebration to Mount Rushmore and celebrate our nation’s birthday at America’s Shrine to Democracy for next year and in the future.”



**CLOSED:** 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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**Jennifer Wells Wagemann was the guest speaker at the Columbia Memorial Day Program.** (Photo by Cara Dennert)



**Columbia junior members were doing the Ceremony of the Cross. Pictured are Alicia Davis, Lilly Davis, and Leslee Davis.** (Photo by Cara Dennert)



**20% off Annuals  
or  
Fill a flat for a  
discounted rate**

**Tuesday-Friday this week.**

**Exclusions do apply (no planters, trees, shrubs, or perennials)  
We will be closing Friday June 4th at 4:30 for the year.**

**Weber Landscaping Greenhouse**  
West Third Avenue, Groton



## Groton Chamber earns Never Satisfied Grant

The Groton Chamber of Commerce received a \$2,000 grant from Poet as part of the Never Satisfied Grant. The money will be used for new trash receptacles along with some courtyard planters on Main Street. Pictured are Kellie Locke, Hope Block, April Abeln, Carol Kutter, Kelly Kjelden from POET, Ashley Smith and Lori Westby. (Courtesy Photo)

## Groton Legion Post #39 Loses Lead Early In Defeat

Groton Legion Post #39 fell behind early and couldn't come back in a 13-0 loss to Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 on Wednesday. Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 scored on a triple by Aiden M and an error in the first inning.

The Groton Legion Post #39 struggled to contain the high-powered offense of Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021, giving up 13 runs.

In the first inning, Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 got their offense started when Aiden tripled on a 2-1 count, scoring one run.

A single by Alex Morris in the fourth inning was a positive for Groton Legion Post #39.

Aiden pitched Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 to victory. The hurler allowed zero hits and zero runs over three innings, striking out three and walking one. Max P and Nick C entered the game out of the bullpen and helped to close out the game in relief.

Peyton Johnson took the loss for Groton Legion Post #39. The lefthander surrendered seven runs on four hits over one and two-thirds innings, striking out four.

Morris went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Legion Post #39 in hits.

Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 racked up 13 hits on the day. Nick and Brock M all had multiple hits for Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021. Nick led Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 with three hits in four at bats. Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 didn't commit a single error in the field. Brian H had seven chances in the field, the most on the team.

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# Groton Transit

## FUNDRAISER

**Thursday, June 17, 2021**

**4 p.m. to 7 p.m.**

**Groton Community Transit**

**Downtown Groton**

*Tables will be set up outside*

*as in previous years!*

**We will be offering DRIVE-THRU**

**Service again on the**

**south side of the transit.**

*Please join us and help  
support Groton Transit!*

**FREE WILL OFFERING!**

**\* Food \* Fun \* Door Prizes \***

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## Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation

by Dorene Nelson

Baseball has been in Groton since 1886 when a team was first organized to play teams from other towns. In 1921 the Legion baseball team was started with Junior Legion baseball beginning in 1931. A softball team began in the 1930s with a few lights being installed for ball games held at night.

These baseball and softball games had originally been played on the Groton School athletic field until 1991 when the school made vast improvements to the football and track facilities.

Following this change, farmland on the west edge of Groton was purchased by the city. This area became the sports complex for baseball and soccer games and practices. Lights, improved dugouts, a grandstand, and concession stand have all been added to make this an outstanding facility.

The members of the baseball/softball foundation meet once a month. Most of the members have close connections to the baseball and softball programs from their younger years and like to see that continue on.

The club officers are Lars Hanson, president; Jarod Flihs, vice president; Tasha Dunker, secretary; Travis Antonsen, treasurer; Jessica Kroll, fundraising; Mike Imrie, communications; Doug Hamilton, Legion liaison; and David Blackmun, city liaison.

The purpose of the baseball/softball foundation is to support the baseball/softballs programs in Groton and continue to make improvements to the baseball/softball facility. Currently there are 127 baseball players and 46 softball players on Groton teams.

The baseball/softball foundation sponsor several events. One of their large fundraising events is Dueling Duo. They also sponsor youth baseball youth tournaments, Jr. Teener, Jr. Legion, and Legion Tournaments.

The dues are as follows: \$100 for Legion, Jr. Legion, and Jr. Teeners; \$50 for U8, U10, U12 Boys; \$30 for Girls Softball; and \$15 for T Ball.

Baseball is a big summer time activity in Groton, as is evident by the impressive baseball/softball complex on the west side of town. The complex features one main field and two smaller fields. Teams from Groton have a history of success and competitiveness and a vast array of teams and coaches. The Legion Baseball Team, for ages 17-19 is sponsored by the American Legion Post #39. The Legion team were back-to-back State champions in 2012 and 2013.



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and night  
shift  
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call Diane at 605-448-2929**

**Britton**



## Help Wanted at Groton Area

The Groton Area School District is seeking qualified and motivated individuals for the following position for the 2021-2022 school year.

**Transportation Director.** The Groton Area School District has an opening for the position of Transportation Director. This position is full-time year round with a comprehensive benefits package and salary dependent on education and experience. Criminal background check and pre-employment drug test required. Applicant must hold valid South Dakota Commercial Driver License with School Bus and Passengers endorsements and clean driving record. Interested parties should complete and submit the auxiliary staff application form. Open until filled.

**Elementary Special Education Paraprofessional.** The Groton Area School District is seeking applicants for the position of Special Education Paraprofessional. Starting salary is \$12.10/hour and position includes comprehensive benefits package. Criminal background check required. Interested parties should complete and submit the auxiliary staff application form. Open until filled.

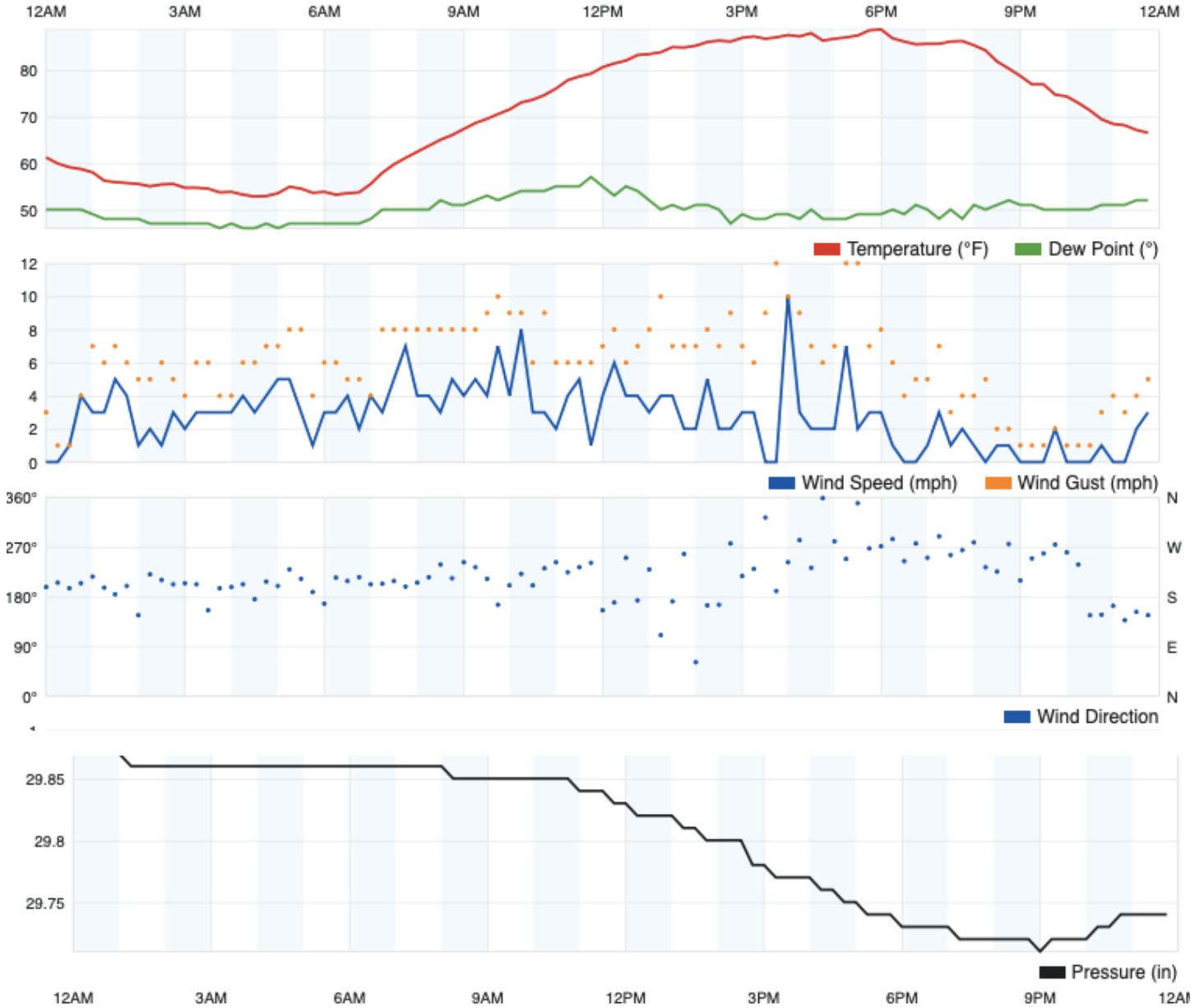
**MS/HS Special Education Paraprofessional.** The Groton Area School District is seeking applicants for the position of Special Education Paraprofessional. Starting salary is \$12.10/hour and position includes comprehensive benefits package. Criminal background check required. Interested parties should complete and submit the auxiliary staff application form. Open until filled.

Applications are available at [www.grotonarea.com](http://www.grotonarea.com) or at the district office – 502 N 2nd Street, Groton.

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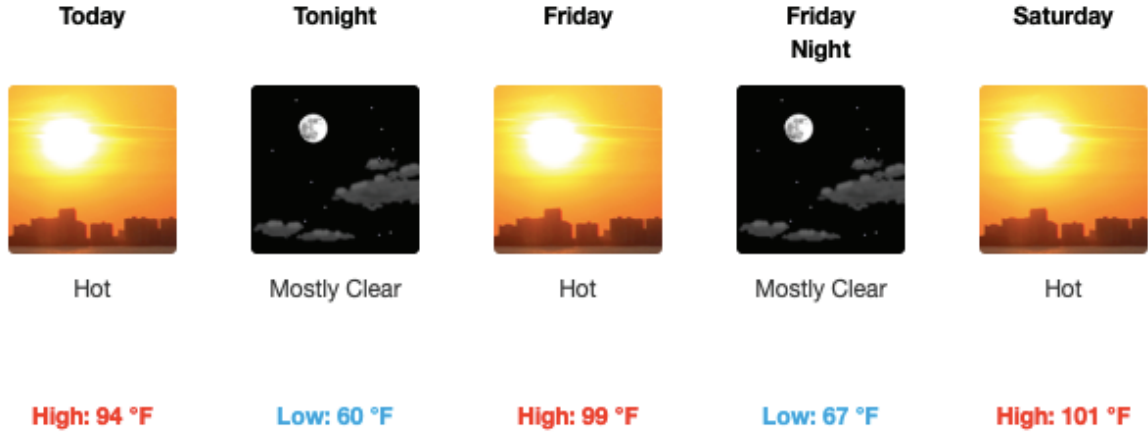
## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





# Groton Daily Independent

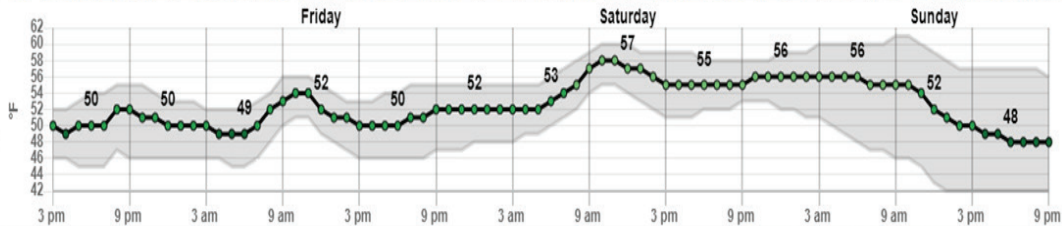
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**ISSUED: 3:57 PM - Wednesday, June 02, 2021** **Heat Will Be Here For Awhile**

|             | 6/3 Thu |     |      |     |     |     | 6/4 Fri |     |     |     |      |     | 6/5 Sat |     |      |     |     |     | 6/6 Sun |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |
|-------------|---------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
|             | 6am     | 9am | 12pm | 3pm | 6pm | 9pm | 12am    | 3am | 6am | 9am | 12pm | 3pm | 6pm     | 9pm | 12am | 3am | 6am | 9am | 12pm    | 3pm | 6pm | 9pm | 12am | 3am | 6am | 9am | 12pm | 3pm | 6pm | 9pm |
| Aberdeen    | 63      | 83  | 91   | 94  | 94  | 83  | 71      | 66  | 69  | 90  | 98   | 99  | 99      | 87  | 75   | 71  | 72  | 88  | 98      | 100 | 99  | 89  | 80   | 76  | 73  | 83  | 90   | 91  | 91  | 79  |
| Britton     | 63      | 81  | 90   | 92  | 92  | 79  | 69      | 66  | 69  | 86  | 95   | 96  | 95      | 84  | 74   | 71  | 72  | 87  | 96      | 98  | 98  | 87  | 79   | 75  | 74  | 83  | 87   | 89  | 88  | 76  |
| Eagle Butte | 63      | 80  | 86   | 90  | 90  | 79  | 70      | 66  | 67  | 84  | 92   | 96  | 96      | 84  | 73   | 68  | 69  | 83  | 91      | 95  | 95  | 83  | 73   | 68  | 64  | 72  | 79   | 82  | 81  | 72  |
| Eureka      | 63      | 82  | 89   | 92  | 92  | 79  | 69      | 65  | 69  | 88  | 96   | 98  | 97      | 84  | 73   | 70  | 71  | 88  | 96      | 98  | 98  | 85  | 74   | 69  | 65  | 77  | 84   | 86  | 85  | 72  |
| Gettysburg  | 64      | 80  | 86   | 89  | 89  | 79  | 68      | 65  | 67  | 85  | 92   | 95  | 95      | 84  | 74   | 69  | 69  | 84  | 92      | 96  | 96  | 84  | 75   | 71  | 67  | 77  | 83   | 86  | 85  | 75  |
| Kennebec    | 63      | 82  | 90   | 92  | 92  | 81  | 71      | 66  | 67  | 86  | 96   | 98  | 98      | 86  | 76   | 72  | 72  | 89  | 98      | 100 | 98  | 88  | 79   | 74  | 71  | 81  | 90   | 91  | 90  | 80  |
| McIntosh    | 63      | 80  | 86   | 89  | 89  | 80  | 69      | 64  | 66  | 83  | 91   | 94  | 94      | 83  | 74   | 68  | 68  | 81  | 87      | 90  | 90  | 79  | 69   | 65  | 61  | 71  | 77   | 80  | 80  | 71  |
| Milbank     | 67      | 83  | 89   | 91  | 91  | 80  | 70      | 69  | 72  | 88  | 94   | 96  | 95      | 84  | 75   | 73  | 74  | 89  | 96      | 97  | 96  | 87  | 78   | 76  | 74  | 84  | 90   | 91  | 87  | 77  |
| Miller      | 65      | 82  | 88   | 90  | 90  | 78  | 69      | 67  | 70  | 87  | 94   | 97  | 96      | 84  | 74   | 71  | 72  | 87  | 97      | 98  | 96  | 87  | 79   | 75  | 73  | 83  | 88   | 90  | 88  | 77  |
| Mobridge    | 62      | 81  | 91   | 94  | 94  | 81  | 71      | 67  | 68  | 87  | 95   | 99  | 99      | 85  | 74   | 70  | 70  | 86  | 95      | 98  | 97  | 84  | 74   | 69  | 65  | 77  | 84   | 87  | 86  | 74  |
| Murdo       | 63      | 81  | 88   | 90  | 90  | 78  | 70      | 66  | 66  | 86  | 94   | 97  | 97      | 85  | 75   | 71  | 71  | 87  | 96      | 98  | 97  | 85  | 77   | 72  | 67  | 76  | 84   | 87  | 86  | 77  |
| Pierre      | 63      | 81  | 89   | 92  | 92  | 82  | 71      | 66  | 68  | 87  | 96   | 99  | 99      | 87  | 76   | 72  | 71  | 88  | 97      | 100 | 99  | 88  | 78   | 75  | 68  | 79  | 86   | 88  | 88  | 78  |
| Redfield    | 63      | 82  | 90   | 92  | 92  | 81  | 71      | 66  | 69  | 88  | 96   | 98  | 97      | 86  | 75   | 70  | 71  | 87  | 98      | 100 | 98  | 88  | 80   | 75  | 73  | 84  | 89   | 91  | 90  | 80  |
| Sisseton    | 68      | 84  | 90   | 92  | 91  | 80  | 71      | 71  | 73  | 89  | 96   | 97  | 96      | 85  | 76   | 74  | 75  | 89  | 96      | 98  | 97  | 88  | 80   | 77  | 75  | 86  | 90   | 91  | 90  | 79  |
| Watertown   | 63      | 80  | 87   | 89  | 88  | 79  | 68      | 65  | 69  | 86  | 92   | 93  | 93      | 82  | 74   | 70  | 72  | 86  | 94      | 95  | 94  | 85  | 78   | 73  | 73  | 83  | 89   | 90  | 87  | 76  |
| Wheaton     | 66      | 84  | 89   | 92  | 91  | 80  | 70      | 66  | 71  | 89  | 96   | 97  | 96      | 85  | 74   | 71  | 74  | 89  | 97      | 98  | 96  | 87  | 78   | 74  | 74  | 86  | 91   | 91  | 90  | 79  |

## Dewpoint



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen South Dakota

We continue to focus on the upcoming heatwave that has already begun and will continue into next week. Not much for moisture potential either. Since we're focused on the heat, we'll also look at the humidity which will increase but generally dewpoints will not get much higher than 60 at the peak which, while getting a little stuffy, is mostly temporary with the humidity shifting south Sunday and the start of next week.

## Practice HEAT SAFETY Wherever You Are

Heat related deaths are preventable.  
Protect yourself and others from the  
impacts of heat waves.



[weather.gov/heat](https://www.weather.gov/heat)



### Job Sites

Stay hydrated and  
take breaks in the shade  
as often as possible.



### Indoors

Check up on the  
elderly, sick and those  
without AC.



### Vehicles

Never leave kids or  
pets unattended -  
LOOK before you LOCK



### Outdoors

Limit strenuous outdoor  
activities, find shade,  
and stay hydrated.

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## Today in Weather History

June 3, 1898: A violent windstorm passed over Aberdeen between 1 AM and 2 AM. Damage was confined to awnings, roofs of buildings, and plate glass windows.

June 3, 1933: This estimated F2 tornado moved ENE from 6 miles southwest of Wilmot, passing 3 miles south of town and dissipating at Big Stone Lake. A child was killed in a barn. Roof, barn, and church debris was scattered for miles, and over a dozen farms were heavily damaged. This tornado was estimated to be on the ground for about 15 miles.

June 3, 1975: Severe thunderstorms erupted across central sections of South Dakota. During the evening hours, the storms stretched from the southern border to the North Dakota state line and were packing high winds and large hail. In several areas, including Mobridge, hail as large as baseballs did damage to crops, homes, and vehicles and in some regions piled up to two feet deep. Strong thunderstorm winds also uprooted trees and damaged numerous farm buildings. Multiple funnels and small tornadoes were observed, including three in Charles Mix County.

June 3, 1997: Heavy rains of 2 to 4 inches through the early morning hours resulted in the flooding of some roads, fields, and creeks across parts of Jones and Lyman counties. In particular, the KOA campgrounds near Presho were heavily flooded. The KOA office and home had three and a half feet of water in them. Also, several homes near or in Presho received water and were heavily damaged. The Medicine and Stoney Butte creeks set record highs.

1860: Iowa's infamous Camanche Tornado, likely an F5 storm, kills 92 and injures 200. Every home and business were destroyed. It was one of the most damaging families of tornadoes ever to strike the US and resulted in more farm fatalities than any other tornado except for the Tri-State tornado.

1993: Early morning severe thunderstorms dumped huge hailstones across northern Oklahoma. Hail, up to 6 inches in diameter in Enid, went through roofs of homes, damaged three jets at Vance Air Force Base, and did \$500,000 in damage at a car dealership. Winds gusts reached 70 mph at Vance Air Force Base as well. Hail damage to the wheat crop was estimated at 70 million dollars.

1997: It was a chilly day in the East. The high temperature at Philadelphia International Airport was only 59 degrees, tying a record-low maximum for the date set back in 1881. The temperature at Middletown, Pennsylvania rose to 58 degrees, breaking the record-low maximum for the date of 59 degrees set back in 1915. Washington, DC only reached 58 degrees, breaking the old record-low maximum of 59 set back in 1915. Central Park in New York City only reached 61 degrees.

1921 - A cloudburst near Pikes Peak CO killed 120 people. Pueblo CO was flooded by a twenty-five foot crest of the Arkansas River, killing 70 persons. Fourteen inches of rain was reported at Boggs Flat, where a hard surface road through nearly level country was washed out to a depth of seven feet. (The Weather Channel)

1959 - Thunderstorms in northwestern Kansas produced up to eighteen inches of hail near Salden during the early evening. Crops were completely destroyed, and total damage from the storm was about half a million dollars. Hail fell for a record eighty-five minutes. The temperature dropped from near 80 degrees prior to the storm to 38 degrees at the height of the storm. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Six days of flooding in South Texas culminated with five to six inch rains from Bexar County to Bandera County, and five to nine inches rains in Gonzalez and Wilson Counties. Total crop damage was estimated at 500 million dollars. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Early morning thunderstorms in southern Texas produced wind gusts to 86 mph at Port Isabel, and wind gusts to 83 mph at South Padre Island. Unseasonably hot weather prevailed from the Southern Plateau Region to the Northern High Plains. Fourteen cities reported record high temperatures for the date. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing over the Southern Plains Region during the afternoon hours produced severe weather into the night. Thunderstorms spawned eleven tornadoes, and there were 169 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 mph at Newcastle, OK, and Wilson, OK. Softball size hail was reported at Monahans, Childress and Groesbeck TX. Monahans TX reported six million dollars damage. Five inches of rain deluged Geronimo OK. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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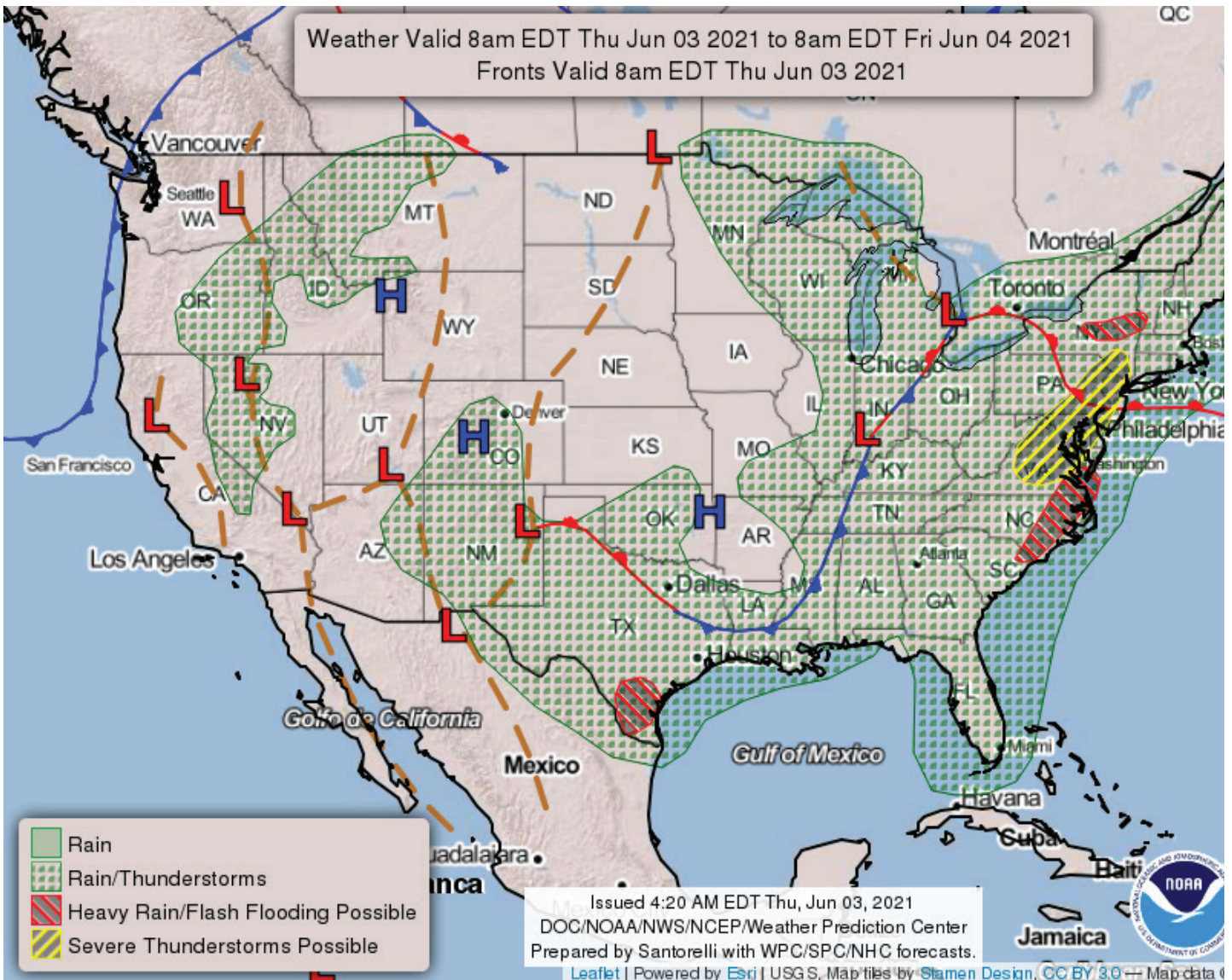
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 88.7 °F**  
**Low Temp: 52.8 °F**  
**Wind: 12 mph**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 100° in 1933**  
**Record Low: 34° in 1950, 1964**  
**Average High: 77°F**  
**Average Low: 52°F**  
**Average Precip in June.: 0.21**  
**Precip to date in June.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 7.46**  
**Precip Year to Date: 3.97**  
**Sunset Tonight: 9:17 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:47 a.m.**



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## **NOW GOD! RIGHT NOW!**

"Don't worry about the sweet by-and-by," said the president of the university I attended years ago. "That will be here soon enough. God has promised it and that is all we need to know about it. As sure as God has kept His Word in the past, He will honor it today, tomorrow, and every day from now until the sweet by-and-by is here. What we need to be constantly worried about is the nasty now-and-now."

That goes with the phrase we often hear: "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good."

While being concerned about and planning for the future makes good sense, we need to be much more concerned about what we might do every moment of every hour of every day to honor God. With that thought in mind, David said, "But I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and at noon I cry out in distress and He hears my voice."

Notice his priorities: He would not retire at night without going to God in prayer, asking for His forgiveness, peace, and protection so he might rest well and be at ease with God. Nor would he begin his day without asking God to guide him and guard him and give him His power and protection. And then – right in the middle of the day – he would stop everything and go to his Lord in prayer. He needed His help in the "now!"

Prayer, for David, was not a trivial ritual. It was his life – his source of strength. "I cry out...He hears!"

Prayer: May we, like David, Lord, recognize our need for constant, continual, and courageous prayer. Let it become the centerpiece of our lives and the very heart of all that we do. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and at noon I cry out in distress and He hears my voice. Psalm 55:16-17

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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

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

09-17-30-31-33

(nine, seventeen, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$37,000

Lotto America

31-34-36-45-50, Star Ball: 10, ASB: 2

(thirty-one, thirty-four, thirty-six, forty-five, fifty; Star Ball: ten; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$6.71 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$45 million

Powerball

06-07-11-66-67, Powerball: 19, Power Play: 3

(six, seven, eleven, sixty-six, sixty-seven; Powerball: nineteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$268 million

### Union considers strike at meat plant that was virus hotspot

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Workers at a South Dakota meatpacking plant that became a coronavirus hotspot last year are considering a strike after contract negotiations between Smithfield Foods and the union have stalled, the union said Wednesday.

The Sioux Falls chapter of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union threatened to move for a walkout and work stoppage if the Virginia-based company does not resume negotiations on a new four-year contract. The dispute has centered on the wages for meatpacking employees, health care costs and break times. The union said workers have risked their health and lives throughout the pandemic, arguing the company should do more for its employees.

The plant became an early indicator of just how vulnerable meatpacking plants were to the pandemic when a surge of infections surfaced among workers in April last year. Four plant workers died from COVID-19 and nearly 1,300 were infected. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited Smithfield Foods for failing to protect employees from exposure to the coronavirus at the plant.

"It is stunning that Smithfield still refuses to work together with UFCW Local 304A to reach an agreement that recognizes the incredible service of these dedicated South Dakotan workers," the local union president B.J. Motley said in a statement.

Union members will vote this week on the company's current contract offer. According to the union, the proposed contract starts employees off at \$18 an hour and cuts a 15-minute break period. The union is pressing to start employees at \$19 an hour, as well as avoid increases to employees' health insurance premiums and allow more time for medical leave.

Smithfield Chief Administrative Officer Keira Lombardo said in a statement that the union's comments were inaccurate. The company said that if union members rejected an offer scheduled for a vote Thursday, there were discussions about scheduling more meetings next week.

"It is unfortunate that the union has issued a statement that is, unquestionably, inaccurate," Lombardo said. "Such tactics during an active and ongoing contract negotiation are a disservice to our many hard-working employees."

If the contract is not approved, union members could then vote to consider striking, but that would not

become an option until June 7, when a contract extension deadline expires.

Smithfield CEO Kenneth Sullivan has aggressively defended how the company handled the virus outbreak. Local union leaders have said that after the meatpacking plant shut down for several weeks last year amid the outbreak, the company implemented most of the measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But it has maintained that workers are still at risk to the virus as they work shoulder-to-shoulder on butchering lines.

"While vaccinations are increasing in South Dakota, the COVID risks these frontline workers face are still here and Smithfield must recognize this reality," Motley said.

## South Dakota officials hope to avoid medical pot ID delays

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon told lawmakers Wednesday she is trying to avoid missing a November deadline to start issuing medical marijuana ID cards by holding a series of meetings to head off any objections to its proposed rules.

As the state prepares for medical marijuana to be legalized this year, the Department of Health has found itself balancing concerns from medical pot advocates, physicians, law enforcement and government bodies. The department, which has been tasked with setting up much of the state's pot program under a law passed by voters last year, will hold a series of meetings and a telephone town hall as it seeks to address concerns before its rules go into effect.

During a legislative meeting Wednesday, Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck questioned whether objections to the rules could result in a delay of "weeks or months," but Malsam-Rysdon said she is hoping to avoid delays.

The department is aiming to have a "solid set of rules" in place by the fall but expects them to change over the next few years, she said. A legislative committee is also studying the issue to look at changing the law during coming sessions.

"We'll have a continual process of refinement," Malsam-Rysdon told lawmakers.

Gov. Kristi Noem has argued that the state doesn't have enough time to set up the program and tried but failed to delay implementation during this year's legislative session. She said hasty rollouts in other states have turned into a "mess."

Meanwhile, the Department of Revenue indicated it would charge sales tax on medical marijuana purchases. Although prescription drugs are exempt, the department's chief legal counsel, Michael Houdyshell, said the tax would apply because medical pot is not legally prescribed.

Instead, under the new law, physicians will issue a written certification that a patient has a "debilitating medical condition" that could benefit from medical pot use. The patients will then be able to obtain an ID card and purchase cannabis from state-licensed dispensaries.

## Federal judge declines to order fireworks at Mount Rushmore

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday rebuffed South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's efforts to force the National Park Service to grant the state permission to shoot fireworks from Mount Rushmore National Memorial to celebrate Independence Day this year.

Noem sued the U.S. Department of Interior in an effort to reverse the decision to deny the state's permit for the pyrotechnic display. The Republican governor successfully pushed last year for a return of the event after a decadelong hiatus. But the National Park Service denied it this year, citing safety concerns and objections from local Native American tribes.

The opinion and order from Chief Judge Roberto Lange of the federal district court of South Dakota meant that the night sky over Mount Rushmore will be devoid of the state's fireworks on Independence Day this year.

Noem has decried the decision to deny the fireworks permit as "political" and made a patriotic argument



for holding fireworks at the massive monument. The event last year gave former President Donald Trump an opportunity to make a fiery speech at the monument. The state had signed an agreement with the federal government under Trump to work towards having the fireworks display this year.

However, Noem's lawsuit also reignited legal skirmishing between her and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, which opposed the event on the grounds that the Black Hills, which contain Mount Rushmore, are sacred to the Lakota people.

In a statement responding to the judge's decision, Noem blamed President Joe Biden's administration for cancelling the fireworks, saying it was "on completely arbitrary grounds."

"But rest assured, this fight is not over," she said, promising to appeal the decision in an effort to restore the event next year.

In a 36-page opinion and order, Lange, who was nominated by former President Barack Obama, wrote that he liked the idea of having a fireworks display to celebrate Independence Day, but declined to order the National Park Service to allow it because it would "be improper judicial activism for this Court to disregard settled law" on how federal agencies are allowed to make decisions.

Lange wrote: "This country could use a good celebration of its foundational principles of democracy, liberty, and equal protection of law, after a pandemic that has disrupted society and business and has killed nearly 600,000 United States citizens to date, after an insurrection and physical incursion of the United States Capitol while Congress was convening to certify the outcome of the presidential election, and after this nation has become so sadly divided by the politicization of so many issues, likely to include even the outcome of this case."

## Lawmakers headed out of state for marijuana summer study

By JOE SNEVE Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Lawmakers in South Dakota want a firsthand look at how marijuana is grown and sold where it's already legal before cannabis prohibitions are loosened here this summer.

The South Dakota Legislature's interim study committee on marijuana met this week for the first time in Pierre, taking testimony from both advocates for medical and recreational marijuana as well as law enforcement and other public officials who aren't enthusiastic about cannabis legalization.

And while lawmakers are equally divided on the topic of marijuana legalization and the necessary level of legislative response to a pair of cannabis-related ballot measures adopted by voters last fall, the 24-member summer study group reached the consensus that site visits are needed for lawmakers to get a comprehensive understanding of the country's budding pot industry.

The topic is a very broad and diverse topic so our goal is to get everyone to a point where we can build on this information," said Sen. Bryan Breitling, the Miller Republican tapped to chair the summer study.

Medical marijuana is set to become legal July 1, while the future legal status of recreational marijuana remains unclear pending a South Dakota Supreme Court ruling.

But despite that uncertainty, the committee agreed the Legislature needs to be ready in the event the court upholds the constitutional amendment voters passed to legalize all adult pot use. So next month they will head out of state and onto tribal land where the drug is already legal, visiting professional cultivation and retail operations in Iowa, Colorado and the Flandreau Santee Sioux Reservation in Moody County.

Split into two subcommittees, one group will specifically study medical marijuana and visit a medical grow operation and dispensary, with a tour tentatively set for sometime between June 28 and July 1. The other intends to visit Colorado with a focus on recreational marijuana, those though dates aren't set and first require authorization from the Legislature's executive board due to the anticipated costs of the expedition.

Breitling said the committee is still working with officials with the Flandreau Santee Sioux tribe to determine a date for all of its members wishing to attend to tour cannabis grow operations there.

## Developer in tax fight over former Air Force base housing

By NATHAN THOMPSON Rapid City Journal

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BOX ELDER, S.D. (AP) — A series of lawsuits against Meade County for nearly a decade's worth of tax assessments of a housing development near Ellsworth Air Force Base may be heading toward a resolution.

The Meade County Board of Commissioners voted Tuesday to begin negotiations to resolve the lawsuits filed by Hunt Companies, Inc., an El Paso, Texas, company with a leaseholder interest in the 235-acre Antelope Ridge housing development, pending dismissal of the court cases.

The lawsuits, which span back to 2012, claim Meade County overvalued the leaseholder interest of 828 housing units built by Hunt in the 1990s on land owned by the United States government. In later lawsuits, Hunt Companies began claiming that their leaseholder interest is exempt from taxation since they were built on government land.

According to court records, the most recent lawsuit was filed on Nov. 3, 2020. In that complaint, Hunt Companies claim they should receive a "full refund of all property taxes assessed and paid" since the entire interest is tax exempt.

The last payment for the 2019 tax year from Hunt Companies was paid under protest to Meade County on Oct. 6, 2020. Court exhibits show the check was for \$270,221.90. It was one of two payments for 2019 taxes made, totaling \$540,443.80 in taxes paid for the year.

However, in May 2019, the South Dakota Supreme Court issued an opinion affirming a circuit court decision that Meade County's denial of abatement and refund for taxes overpaid in 2012, 2013 and 2014 was justified. The high court agreed that Meade County overvalued Hunt's leaseholder interest, but made no ruling on whether or not Hunt's interest was also tax exempt.

The Hunt Companies' development of Antelope Ridge, formerly known as Centennial Estates, presents unique challenges to state tax laws. A complex history on the housing project includes intervention from the U.S. Air Force to provide for a public-private partnership to build housing within Ellsworth Air Force Base.

In the late 1980s, the U.S. government set aside 235 acres of land within the boundary of Ellsworth to build base housing. In April 1990, Hunt Companies entered into a 40-year land lease to build 828 housing units for base personnel and their families. The agreement also required Hunt to build all the infrastructure, including roads, curbs and gutters, sidewalks, parks and storm drainage systems.

During the first 20 years of the development, the U.S. Air Force was responsible for the management and maintenance of the property since it was located within Ellsworth's secure fencing and gates. Meade County provided an assessed value of the property while it was within the boundaries of Ellsworth and the U.S. government would have been responsible for any payments of property taxes, if those payments were made.

A preliminary review of records by the Journal has not revealed any tax payments by the U.S. government for Antelope Ridge. The Journal is still in the process of reviewing records and court documents.

However, the South Dakota Constitution states, "The property of the United States and of the state, county and municipal corporations, both real and personal, shall be exempt from taxation." While it is unclear if Meade County billed the U.S. government for property taxes on Antelope Ridge for the first 20 years, court documents show the county did not assess taxes for Hunt Companies' leaseholder interests during that time.

By 2006, the Air Force ceased making most repairs or performing maintenance on the housing, court filings show, and because of the terms of the lease Hunt Companies was not permitted to repair or maintain Antelope Ridge.

In August 2011, Hunt Companies took over management of Antelope Ridge for the final 20-year term of the 40-year land lease. Per the terms of the agreement, Hunt was required to close the military checkpoint access to Antelope Ridge and relocate 1.25 miles of Ellsworth's security perimeter fence.

This caused the housing development to be divided into two portions and closed off direct access to Ellsworth. Court documents show the action "destroyed all access to, and rental of, 38 of the housing units." It also allowed Hunt to begin renting the remaining units to civilians, since the majority of the property was outside of Ellsworth's secure perimeter fence.

The land, however, still belongs to the U.S. government.

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Court records show the Antelope Ridge development was in a dilapidated condition after the Air Force ceased maintenance and upkeep. Hunt spent more than \$18 million to rehabilitate the property.

For the 2011, 2012 and 2013 tax years, Meade County assessed the value of Antelope Ridge at \$35,731,200. The county also sent its first tax bill to Hunt Companies.

When Hunt Companies began managing the housing development in 2011, Meade County assessed property taxes in 2011, 2012 and 2013 based on a valuation known as the "fee simple value," instead of a leaseholder interest valuation.

According to the Dictionary of Real Estate Appraisal, fee simple value is, "Absolute ownership unencumbered by any other interest or estate, subject only to the limitations imposed by the government powers of taxation, eminent domain, police power, and escheat."

Since the land is owned by the government, Hunt Companies does not hold absolute ownership of the property.

Hunt Companies paid the full taxes in 2012, 2013 and 2014, without invoking their rights under the pay-and-protest provisions of South Dakota law. That stipulation would have allowed Hunt to pay the amount billed and then protest the assessed value within 30 days. If it was determined that the tax was wrongfully collected in whole or part, Hunt could receive a refund.

According to court records, Hunt challenged the county's property tax valuations by appealing to the Meade County Board of Commissioners. The commissioners rejected Hunt's claims.

Hunt Companies appealed the valuation to the circuit court, filing separate cases for each of the three years. Those appeals were consolidated into one case. The consolidated appeal did not address the constitutional question of whether or not Hunt Companies leaseholder interest should be tax exempt since Antelope Ridge is built on government property.

The Fourth Judicial Circuit Court found that Meade County made an error in over-assessing Hunt's leaseholder interest by using the fee simple value of the property. The court found that the assessed value should be reduced to not include the value of the land and the depreciation of the property after the Air Force ceased maintenance and upkeep.

In the circuit court's June 2016 ruling, it reduced the assessed leaseholder interest value by more than half — \$14.1 million in 2012, \$15.5 million in 2013 and \$15.1 million in 2014. The court also ruled that Hunt was not entitled to a refund for those tax years because they did not pay under protest.

Hunt Companies appealed the circuit court's ruling to the South Dakota Supreme Court. In the appeal, lawyers also asked the court to examine the constitutional question of whether or not Hunt should be exempt from taxes since the development is on government-owned land.

On May 1, 2019, the state Supreme Court upheld the circuit court's decision to reset the assessed valuations. Justice Janine Kern, who wrote the majority opinion, said Hunt Companies' constitutionality argument wasn't presented properly before the Supreme Court or the circuit court.

In the majority opinion, Kern wrote, "We express no opinion here on the question of whether the leasehold interest was, in fact, taxable."

Justice Steven Jensen filed the dissent. He said the circuit court had previously determined the assessments were invalid. Jensen wrote that Hunt qualified for the tax exemption since the structures are built on government-owned property. He also said the company was entitled to request a tax refund.

Hunt Companies continued to file lawsuits against Meade County in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 regarding the tax bills — this time invoking their rights under the pay-under-protest provision of state law, and claiming the property is tax exempt. Those suits are all pending.

Former Meade County Treasurer Susan Boadwine, who was named in the lawsuits and notices of appeal in her official capacity as treasurer, submitted her resignation on March 23, with an effective date of May 1. Meade County Auditor Lisa Schieffer also submitted her resignation on May 11, effective May 31. Schieffer was named in a May 15, 2020, notice of appeal filed by Hunt Companies.

It is unknown if the resignations are related to the lawsuits.

Following a lengthy executive session on Tuesday, the Meade County Commission voted unanimously to

begin negotiations to resolve the lawsuits pending dismissal of the court cases.

## Man shot and killed by Pennington County deputies identified

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation has identified the man who was shot and killed by Pennington County deputies last month.

Ty Quinton Stilwell, 24, was shot outside his Rapid Valley home on May 14. Sheriff Kevin Thom said at the time that Stilwell raised a gun toward deputies and civilians and was shot.

Thom said a family member had called 911 to report that Stilwell was intoxicated and physically and verbally fighting with relatives.

Four deputies are on paid leave during the investigation. It was not yet clear whether all four fired their weapons.

Stilwell's obituary said he was an artist and a writer with a love for old houses and vehicles, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"Sharing a passion for the arts expressed through poems, stories, music, painting and drawings, he embraced his Native American Heritage and life with an adventurous spirit for 24 years," his family wrote in the obituary.

Stilwell displayed his work at art festivals and received a visual arts career development grant from the South Dakota Arts Council in 2017.

## Mafia hit man apologizes; Italians indignant at his release

ROME (AP) — The release from prison of one of Italy's most notorious mobsters-turned-informants generated more indignation Thursday, even after he was shown in an old jailhouse interview apologizing to his many victims for his role in "this factory of death."

Giovanni Brusca, 64, got out of prison this week after serving 25 years of a life term for some of Cosa Nostra's most heinous crimes. They include the 1992 car bomb slaying of Italy's leading anti-Mafia prosecutor and the 1996 kidnapping and murder of the 11-year-old son of a Mafia turncoat. The boy's strangled body was dissolved in a vat of acid.

Brusca reportedly admitted to participating in some 150 homicides as the right-hand man to Cosa Nostra's "boss of bosses," Salvatore "Totò" Riina, who died in prison in 2017.

Given the gravity of Brusca's crimes, his early release repulsed many Italians and prompted calls to reform laws that allow for reduced sentences for mafiosi who break the mobster "omerta," or wall of silence, and cooperate with investigators. But others, including the slain prosecutor's sister, defended it as a necessary way to entice mafiosi to collaborate with the justice system.

Italy's Corriere della Sera newspaper aired what it said were never-before-seen excerpts of a Jan. 10, 2016 jailhouse interview that Brusca gave to a French documentary filmmaker, Mosco Levi Boucault, in which he apologized for his crimes.

With his head covered, wearing dark glasses and gloves to disguise himself, Brusca said he agreed to the interview because he wanted to "ask forgiveness from all the relatives of the victims to whom I caused so much pain and sadness."

"I tried to give my contribution as much as possible and a minimum of explanation to all those who are looking for truth and justice," he said.

Brusca said his family had paid a price for his decision to become an informant, but said it was the right moral, legal and human thing to do.

"Because it allows me to put an end to this. I call Cosa Nostra a chain of death, a factory of death. Nothing more, nothing less," he said.

The interview and Brusca's release reopened old wounds for families of mob victims, who said he still hasn't come completely clean about the details of the killings.

Claudio Fava, a Sicilian politician whose father was killed by Cosa Nostra in 1984, said Brusca's release isn't what galls him, since the law allows for it.

"What isn't normal is that after 30 years, the truth about the massacres is still held hostage by reticence, cowardice and lies," Fava wrote on Facebook.

It wasn't immediately clear why Brusca's apology wasn't aired before. Levi Boucault's film "Corleone" came out in 2019.

## Netanyahu foes push for quick vote to end his 12-year rule

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's opponents on Thursday pushed for a quick parliament vote to formally end his lengthy rule, hoping to head off any last-minute attempts by the premier to derail their newly announced coalition government.

The latest political maneuvering began just hours after opposition leader Yair Lapid and his main coalition partner, Naftali Bennett, declared they had reached a deal to form a new government and muster a majority in the 120-member parliament, or Knesset.

The coalition consists of eight parties from across the political spectrum with the shared goal of toppling Netanyahu after a record-setting 12 years in power. The alliance includes hardliners previously allied with Netanyahu, as well as center-left parties and even an Arab faction — a first in Israeli politics.

Netanyahu lashed out at his foes on Thursday, signaling that he will continue to exert pressure on former ideological allies who joined the Lapid-Bennett coalition. "All members of Knesset who were elected with right-wing votes need to oppose this dangerous leftist government," he wrote on Twitter.

The anti-Netanyahu bloc announced the coalition deal just before a deadline at midnight Wednesday. The agreement triggered a complex process that is likely to stretch over the next week.

The coalition commands a razor-thin majority of 61 votes in parliament. Now the question is whether the group's votes will hold together to name a new parliament speaker. The speaker would preside over a Knesset vote required to confirm the new government.

The current parliament speaker is a Netanyahu ally who could use his position to delay the vote and give Netanyahu more time to sabotage the coalition.

As the Lapid-Bennett coalition was coming together in recent days, Netanyahu and his supporters ramped up a pressure campaign against former hawkish allies, including Bennett and his No. 2 in the Yamina party, Ayelet Shaked.

Netanyahu accused them of betraying right-wing values. His supporters launched vicious social media campaigns and staged noisy protests outside Shaked's home. The prime minister's Likud party also advertised a demonstration Thursday night outside the home of Yamina lawmaker Nir Orbach, urging him to quit the coalition.

That's a taste of the pressure to be expected for lawmakers on the right. And some on the left now have time to think about whether they will pay for this partnership in the next election.

"There will be a lot of pressure, especially on right-wingers, especially for religious right wingers," said Gideon Rahat, a political science professor at Hebrew University. "They will go to the synagogue and people will pressure them. It will be a nightmare for some of them."

Netanyahu and his supporters called a meeting later Thursday to discuss their next steps.

Under the coalition agreement, Lapid and Bennett will split the job of prime minister in a rotation. Bennett, a former ally of Netanyahu, is to serve the first two years, while Lapid is to serve the final two years — though it is far from certain their fragile coalition will last that long.

The historic deal also includes a small Islamist party, the United Arab List, which would make it the first Arab party ever to be part of a governing coalition.

Netanyahu, desperate to remain in office while he fights corruption charges, is expected to do everything possible in the coming days to prevent the new coalition from taking power. If he fails, he will be pushed into the opposition.

The deal comes at a tumultuous time for Israel, which fought an 11-day war against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip last month while also experiencing mob violence between Jews and Arabs in cities across

the country. The country also is emerging from a coronavirus crisis that caused deep economic damage and exposed tensions between the secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority.

## Uyghur exiles describe forced abortions, torture in Xinjiang

By AYSE WIETING Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Three Uyghurs who fled from China to Turkey have described forced abortions and torture by Chinese authorities in China's far western Xinjiang region, ahead of giving testimony to a people's tribunal in London that is investigating if Beijing's actions against ethnic Uyghurs amount to genocide.

The three witnesses include a woman who said she was forced into an abortion at 6 1/2 months pregnant, a former doctor who spoke of draconian birth control policies, and a former detainee who alleged he was "tortured day and night" by Chinese soldiers while he was imprisoned in the remote border region.

They spoke to The Associated Press of their experiences before testifying by video link to the independent U.K. tribunal, which is expected to draw dozens of witnesses when it opens four days of hearings on Friday.

The tribunal, which does not have U.K. government backing, will be chaired by prominent human rights lawyer Geoffrey Nice, who led the prosecution of ex-Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and worked with the International Criminal Court.

While the tribunal's judgment is not binding on any government, organizers hope the process of publicly laying out evidence will compel international action to tackle growing concerns about alleged abuses in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs, a largely Muslim ethnic group.

One witness, mother-of-four Bumeryem Rozi, said authorities in Xinjiang rounded her up along with other pregnant women to abort her fifth child in 2007. She said she complied because she feared that otherwise authorities would have confiscated her home and belongings and endangered her family.

"I was 6 1/2 months pregnant ... The police came, one Uyghur and two Chinese. They put me and eight other pregnant women in cars and took us to the hospital," Rozi, 55, told the AP from her home in Istanbul.

"They first gave me a pill and said to take it. So I did. I didn't know what it was," she continued. "Half an hour later, they put a needle in my belly. And sometime after that I lost my child."

Semsinur Gafur, a former obstetrician-gynecologist who worked in a village hospital in Xinjiang in the 1990s, said she and other female clinicians used to go from house to house with a mobile ultrasound machine to check if anyone was pregnant.

"If a household had more births than allowed, they would raze the home ... They would flatten the house, destroy it," Gafur said. "This was my life there. It was very distressing. And because I worked in a state hospital, people didn't trust me. The Uyghur people saw me as a Chinese traitor."

A third Uyghur exile, Mahmut Tevekkul, said he was imprisoned and tortured in 2010 by Chinese authorities who interrogated him for information about one of his brothers. Tevekkul said the brother was wanted partly because he published a religious book in Arabic.

Tevekkul described being beaten and punched in the face during questioning.

"They put us on a tiled floor, shackled our hands and feet and tied us to a pipe, like a gas pipe. There were six soldiers guarding us. They interrogated us until the morning and then they took us to the maximum-security area of the prison," he said.

The tribunal is the latest attempt to hold China accountable for alleged rights abuses against the Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim and ethnic Turkic minorities.

An estimated 1 million people or more — most of them Uyghurs — have been confined in re-education camps in Xinjiang in recent years, according to researchers. Chinese authorities have been accused of imposing forced labor, systematic forced birth control and torture, and separating children from incarcerated parents.

Beijing has flatly rejected the allegations. Officials have characterized the camps, which they say are now closed, as vocational training centers to teach Chinese language, job skills and the law to support economic development and combat extremism. China saw a wave of Xinjiang-related terror attacks through 2016.

The hearings' organizers said Chinese authorities have ignored requests to participate in the proceedings.

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The Chinese embassy in London did not respond to requests for comment, but officials in China have said the tribunal is set up by "anti-China forces" to spread lies.

"There is no such thing as genocide or forced labor in Xinjiang," the region's government spokesperson Elijan Anayat told reporters Thursday. "If the tribunal insists on going its own way, we would like to express our severe condemnation and opposition and will be forced to take countermeasures."

In April, Britain's parliament followed those in Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada in declaring that Beijing's policies against the Uyghurs amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity. The U.S. government has also done the same.

But Nice, the lawyer leading the tribunal, said so far those declarations of genocide have come with limited analysis of evidence about the intentions behind the Chinese government's policies.

"It is the mental state of those organs (of the Chinese government) that would have to be examined or established and proved if any finding of genocide is ever to be made," Nice said. "It's pretty obvious that purpose and intent is going to be critical."

Nice was one of nine British citizens sanctioned by China in March for spreading "lies and disinformation" about the country. The move came after the U.K. and other Western governments took similar measures against China over its treatment of the Uyghurs.

The lawyer said he isn't intimidated, but admitted that the sanctions have resulted in some participants withdrawing from the tribunal. Organizers also said they have been subjected to cyber targeting. They had to increase the event's security after about 500 of the hearings' free tickets were booked up by people with fake email addresses.

While her fellow exiles said they agreed to testify to seek justice, Rozi, the woman who reported the forced abortion, says she is motivated to speak out for a more personal reason. Her youngest son has been detained since 2015, when he was just 13, and she hopes the tribunal's work will help lead to his freedom one day.

"I want my son to be freed as soon as possible," she said. "I want to see him be set free."

## Belarusian journalist in prison video after flight diversion

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A dissident journalist arrested when Belarus diverted his flight said in a video from prison that he has been set up by an unidentified associate.

The footage of Raman Pratasevich was part of an hour-long TV program aired late Wednesday by the state-controlled ONT channel. In the film, the 26-year-old Pratasevich is also shown saying that protests against Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko are now pointless amid a tough crackdown and suggesting that the opposition wait for a more opportune moment.

A top associate of Pratasevich said the journalist was clearly speaking under duress.

The TV program claimed that the Belarusian authorities were unaware that Pratasevich was on board the Ryanair jet en route from Athens to Vilnius when flight controllers diverted it to Minsk on May 23 citing a bomb threat.

No bomb was found after the landing, but Pratasevich was arrested along with his Russian girlfriend. The flight's diversion outraged the European Union, which responded by barring the Belarusian flag carrier from its skies, telling European carriers to skirt Belarus and drafting new bruising sanctions against key sectors of the Belarusian economy.

Lukashenko, who has ruled the ex-Soviet nation of 9.3 million with an iron fist for more than a quarter-century, has accused the West of trying to "strangle" his country with sanctions.

Belarus has been rocked by months of protests fueled by his reelection to a sixth term in an August 2020 vote that was widely seen as rigged. Lukashenko responded with an increasingly harsh crackdown. More than 35,000 people have been arrested since the protests began, with thousands beaten.

Pratasevich, who left Belarus in 2019, has become a top foe of Lukashenko. He ran a widely popular

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channel on the Telegram messaging app that played a key role in helping organize the huge anti-government protests and was charged with inciting mass disturbances — accusations that carry a 15-year prison sentence.

Lukashenko last week accused Pratasevich of fomenting a “bloody rebellion.”

Speaking in the ONT film, Pratasevich acknowledged that the protests have fizzled and argued that the opposition should wait until economic problems foment broad public discontent.

“We need to wait until the economic situation worsens ... and people take to the street for a mug of soup, to put it bluntly,” he said.

Lukashenko has defended the Ryanair flight diversion as a legitimate response to the bomb threat. The ONT program appeared designed to back that contention by claiming that the Belarusian authorities were unaware that Pratasevich was on the plane when they diverted it.

In the video, the journalist said he put a notice about his travel plans on a chat with associates 40 minutes before his departure. He alleged that the bomb threat could have been issued by someone with whom he had a personal conflict. His remarks didn’t elaborate on the conflict.

Pratasevich charged that the perceived ill-wisher — whom he didn’t name — had links with opposition-minded hackers who have attacked Belarusian official websites and issued bomb threats in the past.

“The first thing I thought was that I have been set up,” he said.

“When the plane was on a landing path, I realized that it’s useless to panic,” Pratasevich said. Once the plane taxied to a parking spot, he described seeing heavily armed special forces waiting.

“It was a dedicated SWAT unit — uniforms, flak jackets and weapons,” he said.

Last month, Pratasevich noted he had a rift with Franak Viachorka, an adviser to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the main opposition candidate in the August presidential election who left after the vote for Lithuania under official pressure. Viachorka and Pratasevich both accompanied Tsikhanouskaya on a visit to Greece in May.

Asked about the video, Viachorka told The Associated Press that Pratasevich now is “a hostage under pressure” and insisted they have maintained friendly ties.

A day after his arrest, Pratasevich appeared in a video from detention that was broadcast on Belarusian state TV. Speaking rapidly and in a monotone, he said he was confessing to staging mass disturbances. His parents, who now live in Poland, said the confession seemed to be coerced.

In the ONT film, Pratasevich said he tried to stay away from his girlfriend after the landing, hoping that the authorities wouldn’t arrest her. Sofia Sapega didn’t feature in the new TV program but she was shown in a video from prison last week, confessing to running a channel that revealed personal data about Belarusian security officers.

## Military leaders wary of changes in sexual assault policy

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Military service leaders are privately expressing reservations about removing sexual assault cases from the chain of command, The Associated Press has learned, striking a note of caution as momentum builds toward changing a military justice system that has come under increasing criticism.

In memos to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, the service leaders laid out their concerns about the growing push to shift prosecution decisions on sexual assault and possibly other major crimes to independent judge advocates. They said the shift could decrease the number of prosecutions, delay cases and potentially provide less help for victims.

While they indicated they are open to changes and improvements in the justice system, most were worried about how that would be done while ensuring no unintended harm is done to unit leadership or readiness. Several said it would create additional burdensome bureaucracy, according to officials familiar with the memos.

Several officials described the memos to the AP on the condition of anonymity because they have not been made public. The memos submitted to Austin were from the civilian secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force and from the National Guard.



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The reservations expressed by service leaders could provide a measure of ammunition for those in Congress who oppose taking the chain of command out of sexual assault prosecutions. Supporters of change, however, argue that the current system has failed to address a problem that has long plagued the military.

Officials said that all service leaders recognize that change is virtually certain and that they agree more needs to be done to improve and professionalize the judge advocate corps. But they are concerned about how quickly changes are being made and whether there is room for negotiation about how they are implemented.

Earlier this year, an independent review commission created by Austin recommended that the prosecution of sexual assaults be shifted to judge advocates reporting to a civilian-led Office of the Chief Special Victim Prosecutor. The independent judge advocates would decide two key legal questions: whether to charge someone and whether that charge should go to a court martial.

Members of Congress are also pushing for a similar — and in some respects more expansive — change. Because any such change would amend military law, it will require an act of Congress and cannot be done unilaterally by Austin.

A longtime advocate for changing the policy is Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat, who now has bipartisan, filibuster-proof support for a bill that would take prosecution decisions out of the chain of command for major crimes, including sexual assault, rape and murder. The legislation has been stalled in a procedural struggle in the Senate that supporters see as an effort to delay and water down the bill.

In testimony on Capitol Hill last week, Austin said the military must not be afraid to change how it addresses the problem of sexual assault. He added: "Clearly what we've been doing hasn't been working."

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, previously opposed removing commanders from the process, but he told the AP and CNN recently that he had changed his mind. While he has not publicly endorsed any specific change, he said the time had come to try something different because "we've been at it for years, and we haven't effectively moved the needle."

Austin sought input from the service leaders on the review board's recommendations, and he is now assessing their memos before he reaches a conclusion on his own, final recommended change. He met with service secretaries and chiefs on Tuesday to discuss the issue. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Austin held a "listening session" to hear their concerns in person.

Officials said the Army expressed doubts about the accuracy of any data suggesting that removing commanders from the process will result in more sexual assault prosecutions. The acting Army secretary, John E. Whitley, in the memo, said that the change could reduce commander effectiveness and accountability and may reduce criminal convictions, officials said.

As a result, Whitley said, more cases may be settled with administrative discipline, and that can erode victims' trust in the system.

The Navy offered some support for the change. Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker, in his memo, said the Navy agrees with the concept of having an independent judge advocate. But he said there are a number of questions and concerns about how the change is implemented. A key Navy and Marine Corps concern is that the shift may cause delays in prosecutions, particularly since many sailors and Marines are deployed overseas or on ships for monthslong tours.

Acting Air Force Secretary John Roth also said the force was open to new approaches, including removing cases from the chain of command, officials said. But he cautioned that the change could inadvertently have a negative impact on commanders' leadership or accountability. The Air Force said commanders play a critical role in prevention, victim support and creating a respectful command climate, and any changes must not erode that.

Several expressed opposition to the recommendation that the new special victim prosecutor office be under the jurisdiction of the Defense Department, rather than having offices overseen by each military service.

The military service memos were signed by the three men serving as acting secretaries of the Army,

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Navy and Air Force — all holdovers from the Trump administration. Since then, Christine Wormuth has been confirmed as the Army's new secretary, but she took office after the memos had been finalized.

Wormuth has not specifically addressed the recommendations, but in a message to the force on Wednesday she said: "We must also eliminate harmful behaviors that undermine readiness. There is no place in our Army for sexual harassment and assault, domestic violence, extremism, or racism." During her recent Senate confirmation hearing she also said that the Army must put more focus on improving the command climate at all levels so younger soldiers feel safe and able to make complaints if needed.

Officials said the military chiefs of the services all participated in the discussions leading up to the secretaries' memos. Because the Marine Corps is part of the Department of the Navy, there was no separate Marine recommendation. And the Space Force was included as part of the Department of the Air Force.

There was broader agreement on other recommendations made by the independent review panel. The officials largely supported efforts to improve the judge advocate corps, and agreed that protective orders for victims should be handled more quickly.

## Talk of Trump 2024 run builds as legal pressure intensifies

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump was calling into yet another friendly radio show when he was asked, as he often is, whether he's planning a comeback bid for the White House. "We need you," conservative commentator Dan Bongino told the former president.

"Well, I'll tell you what," Trump responded. "We are going to make you very happy, and we're going to do what's right."

It was a noncommittal answer typical of a former president who spent decades toying with presidential runs. But multiple people who have spoken with Trump and his team in recent weeks say such remarks shouldn't be viewed as idle chatter. Instead, they sense a shift, with Trump increasingly acting and talking like he plans to mount a run as he embarks on a more public phase of his post-presidency, beginning with a speech on Saturday in North Carolina.

The interest in another run, at least for now, comes as Trump has been consumed by efforts to undo last year's election, advancing baseless falsehoods that it was stolen and obsessing over recounts and audits that he is convinced could overturn the results, even though numerous recounts have validated his loss. He's also facing the most serious legal threat of his career.

New York prosecutors have convened a special grand jury to consider evidence in their criminal investigation into his business dealings — seen by many as a sign that Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. is moving toward seeking charges in the two-year, wide-ranging investigation that has included scrutiny of hush money payments, property valuations and employee compensation.

Trump has slammed the probe as "purely political," and those around him insist he isn't concerned about potential legal exposure even as they suggest his political posture is evolving.

"I have definitely picked up a shift that there's more of an intentionality to be leaning on the side of it's going to happen than it's not," said Matt Schlapp, chair of the American Conservative Union, who is close to the former president. "I think it's a very real possibility."

Trump would face daunting headwinds in addition to his legal vulnerabilities. He would run with the legacy of being the only American president to be impeached twice. A campaign would almost certainly revive memories of the deadly insurrection he helped spark at the U.S. Capitol earlier this year, potentially dragging down other Republicans who have sought to move past the violence.

Beyond that, Trump would be 78 years old on Inauguration Day in 2025 — the same age as Democrat Joe Biden on his own Inauguration Day this year — and multiple Republicans are already making moves for runs of their own. Trump's former vice president, Mike Pence, is slated to visit the early voting state of New Hampshire on Thursday.

Trump has long dangled the prospect of presidential campaigns to gin up media attention and stay part of the conversation. And many had initially brushed off Trump's talk of another run as a tool to maintain

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relevance and his status as a GOP kingmaker. But there are tentative signs that he plans to follow through in more substantive ways to test his political strength, including by holding rallies this summer. His team is eyeing events in Ohio, Florida, Alabama and Georgia to bolster midterm candidates and energize voters.

Allies say Trump misses the office and is eager to return to the action — especially as he sees other potential candidates making moves. He has also felt emboldened by some recent developments, including the ouster of one of his chief critics, Republican Rep. Liz Cheney, from her House leadership position. And some see the presidency as offering potentially useful legal shelter as probes into him and his family business intensify.

“There’s a continued, enduring interest and folks encouraging him to run in 2024, but he’s in no rush to make a decision. And he’ll do that at the appropriate time,” said Trump spokesperson Jason Miller.

There is doubt, however, among some in Trump’s orbit that he will move forward unless he sees a clear path to victory, for fear of being stained by another loss.

For now, Trump remains obsessed with the 2020 election. One longtime ally said one reason Trump has not said he’s running outright is because he has refused to acknowledge the election is over. The person said he’s now going a step further by giving credence to a bizarre conspiracy theory that he could somehow be reinstated into the presidency in August.

There’s no constitutional or legal mechanism for Trump to return to the presidency absent winning another election in 2024. Trump’s argument that the last election was tainted has been roundly rejected by federal and state officials, including his own attorney general and Republican election leaders. Judges, including those appointed by Trump, also dismissed his claims.

The person who described his thinking, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

As Trump advances such baseless conspiracy theories, Republican state legislators are pushing what experts say is an unprecedented number of bills aimed at restricting access to the ballot box that could affect future elections. While Republicans say the goal is to prevent voter fraud, Democrats contend the measures are aimed at undermining minority voting rights.

Trump remains a commanding force in the Republican Party, despite his loss. A recent Quinnipiac University national poll found that 66% of Republicans would like to see him run for reelection, though the same number of Americans overall said they would prefer he didn’t — and there is no evidence that he has grown any more popular since losing by more than 7 million votes last November.

Supporters in early-voting states are anticipating another Trump run, even as a long list of other would-be contenders, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, have been making visits.

“He’s definitely laying the groundwork, keeping his powder dry for a run,” Josh Whitehouse, a former member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives who worked for Trump’s campaign and administration, said of the former president. “I’d expect nothing less, knowing who he is and having worked for him for so long.”

While voters will certainly hear out other candidates, he said that, at the end of the day, support will coalesce around Trump if he decides to run.

“The energy’s still there,” Whitehouse said. “You can’t replicate it.”

## Slow to start, China mobilizes to vaccinate at headlong pace

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — In the span of just five days last month, China gave out 100 million shots of its COVID-19 vaccines.

After a slow start, China is now doing what virtually no other country in the world can: harnessing the power and all-encompassing reach of its one-party system and a maturing domestic vaccine industry to administer shots at a staggering pace. The rollout is far from perfect, including uneven distribution, but Chinese public health leaders now say they’re hoping to inoculate 80% of the population of 1.4 billion by

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the end of the year.

As of Wednesday, China had given out more than 704 million doses — with nearly half of those in May alone. China's total is roughly a third of the 1.9 billion shots distributed globally, according to Our World in Data, an online research site.

The call to get vaccinated comes from every corner of society. Companies offer shots to their employees, schools urge their students and staffers, and local government workers check on their residents.

That pressure underscores both the system's strength, which makes it possible to even consider vaccinating more than a billion people this year, but also the risks to civil liberties — a concern the world over but one that is particularly acute in China, where there are few protections.

"The Communist Party has people all the way down to every village, every neighborhood," said Ray Yip, former country director for the Gates Foundation in China and a public health expert. "That's the draconian part of the system, but it also gives very powerful mobilization."

China is now averaging about 19 million shots per day, according to Our World in Data's rolling seven-day average. That would mean a dose for everyone in Italy about every three days. The United States, with about one-quarter of China's population, reached around 3.4 million shots per day in April when its drive was at full tilt.

It's still unclear how many people in China are fully vaccinated — which can mean anywhere from one to three doses of the vaccines in use — as the government does not publicly release that data.

Zhong Nanshan, the head of a group of experts attached to the National Health Commission and a prominent government doctor, said on Sunday that 40% of the population has received at least one dose, and the aim was to get that percentage fully vaccinated by the end of the month.

In Beijing, the capital, 87% of the population has received at least one dose. Getting a shot is as easy as walking into one of hundreds of vaccination points found all across the city. Vaccination buses are parked in high foot-traffic areas, including in the city center and at malls.

But Beijing's abundance is not shared with the rest of the country, and local media reports and complaints on social media show the difficulty of getting an appointment elsewhere.

"I started lining up that day at 9 in the morning, until 6 p.m., only then did I get the shot. It was exhausting," Zhou Hongxia, a resident of Lanzhou, in northwestern Gansu province, explained recently. "When I left, there were still people waiting."

Zhou's husband hasn't been so lucky and has yet to get a shot. When they call the local hotlines, they are told simply to wait.

Central government officials on Monday said they're working to ensure supply is more evenly distributed.

China has even focused on vaccinating its citizens abroad, donating vaccines to Thailand, some of which were used to inoculate its nationals before most Thais received their doses. Globally, it has vaccinated more than 500,000 overseas citizens under what it calls the "Spring Sprout" program.

Before the domestic campaign ramped up in recent weeks, many people were not in a rush to get vaccinated as China has kept the virus, which first flared in the country, at bay in the past year with strict border controls and mandatory quarantines. It has faced small clusters of infections from time to time, and is currently managing one in the southern city of Guangzhou.

Although there are distribution issues, it is unlikely that Chinese manufacturers will have problems with scale, according to analysts and those who have worked in the industry.

Sinovac and Sinopharm, which make the majority of the vaccines being distributed in China, have both aggressively ramped up production, building brand new factories and repurposing existing ones for COVID-19. Sinovac's vaccine and one of the two Sinopharm makes have received an emergency authorization for use from the World Health Organization, but the companies, particularly Sinopharm, have faced criticism for their lack of transparency in sharing their data.

"What place in the world can compare with China on construction? How long did it take our temporary hospitals to be built?" asked Li Mengyuan, who leads pharmaceutical research at Western Securities, a financial firm. China built field hospitals at the beginning of the pandemic in just days.

Sinovac has said it has doubled its production capacity to 2 billion doses a year, while Sinopharm has

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said it can make up to 3 billion doses a year. But Sinopharm has not disclosed recent numbers of how many doses it actually has made, and a spokesman for the company did not respond to a request for comment. Sinovac has produced 540 million doses this year as of late May, the company said on Friday.

Government support has been crucial for vaccine developers every step of the way — as it has in other countries — but, as with everything, the scope and scale in China is different.

Yang Xiaoming, chairman of Sinopharm's China National Biotech Group, recounted to state media recently how the company initially needed to borrow lab space from a government research center while it was working on a vaccine.

"We sent our samples over, there was no need to discuss money, we just did it," he said.

Chinese vaccine companies also largely do not rely on imported products in the manufacturing process. That's an enormous benefit at a time when many countries are scrambling for the same materials and means China can likely avoid what happened to the Serum Institute of India, whose production was hobbled because of dependence on imports from the U.S. for certain ingredients.

But as the availability of the vaccine increases so, too, can the pressure to take it.

In Beijing, one researcher at a university said the school's Communist Party cell calls him once a month to ask him if he has gotten vaccinated yet, and offers to help him make an appointment.

He has so far declined to get a shot because he would prefer the Pfizer vaccine, saying he trusts its data. He spoke on condition of anonymity because of concerns he could face repercussions at his job at a government university for publicly questioning the Chinese vaccines.

China has not yet approved Pfizer for use, and the researcher is not sure how long he can hold out — although the government has, for now, cautioned against making vaccines mandatory outright.

"They don't have to say it is mandatory," Yip, the public health expert, said. "They're not going to announce that it's required to have the vaccine, but they can put pressure on you."

## Amsterdam tests out electric autonomous boats on its canals

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — Electric cars, meet your competition. Electric boats are on the way.

Amsterdam didn't have to look very far when searching for a way to ease traffic on its congested streets. The Dutch capital's canals were used for transport long before cars and trucks powered by polluting internal combustion engines began clogging its narrow roads.

Already steeped in maritime history, the city's more than 100 kilometers (60 miles) of waterways are to start hosting prototypes of futuristic boats — small, fully-autonomous electric vessels — to carry out tasks including transporting passengers and picking up garbage.

The Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are collaborating on the Roboat project that aims to develop new ways of navigating the world's waterways without a human hand at the wheel.

Stephan van Dijk, director of innovation at the Amsterdam institute, said the technology is "very relevant in highly complex port operations, where you have a lot of vessels and a lot of ships and a lot of quays and piers. There you can really improve the safety with autonomous systems, but also make it more efficient and into a 24/7 operations approach."

At a recent demonstration, one 4-meter (13-foot) long electric boat sailed past a full-size replica of the 18th-century three-mast trading ship Amsterdam, providing a snapshot of the city's nautical past and its future.

Next, it has to learn to maneuver through traffic in Amsterdam's canals, which are full of private boats and canal cruises for tourists.

The Roboats have orange propellers and four thrusters that are powered by an electric battery. They can go about 4 mph (6 kph) and can run for 12-24 hours, depending on the battery type and cargo load.

They are steered remotely by a computer, which processes data from cameras and sensors that scan the areas around the vessel, detecting stationary and moving objects. The vessels are modular so they

can be easily adapted for different purposes, carrying cargo or workers.

Developers say they still need two-to-four years to perfect the self-steering technology.

"It's mostly because we want to be absolutely sure that we can navigate safely in the canals," said mechatronics engineer Rens Doornbusch. "Right now we have the autonomy in place, but one of the next steps is to make sure that we can actually handle any kind of situation that we might encounter in the canals."

Before the boats can be put to work, their developers also have to navigate legislative hurdles and privacy concerns.

"We are actively working together with the ministries and the legislators to identify what specific legal aspects have to be changed to allow for fully autonomous operation," Van Dijk said.

He says the boats' use of data from its cameras and scanners has been developed "in such a way that we are not identifying any persons that are walking on the roads. So in that sense, privacy is being secured."

## In Syria camp, forgotten children are molded by IS ideology

By HOGIR AL ABDO and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

AL-HOL, Syria (AP) — At the sprawling al-Hol camp in northeast Syria, children pass their days roaming the dirt roads, playing with mock swords and black banners in imitation of Islamic State group militants. Few can read or write. For some, the only education is from mothers giving them IS propaganda.

It has been more than two years since the Islamic State group's self-declared "caliphate" was brought down. And it has been more than two years that some 27,000 children have been left to languish in al-Hol camp, which houses families of IS members.

Most of them not yet teenagers, they are spending their childhood in a limbo of miserable conditions with no schools, no place to play or develop, and seemingly no international interest in resolving their situation.

Only one institution is left to mold them: remnants of the Islamic State group. IS operatives and sympathizers have networks within the camp, and the group has sleeper cells around eastern Syria that continue to wage a low-level insurgency, awaiting an opportunity for a revival.

Kurdish authorities and aid groups fear the camp will create a new generation of militants. They are pleading with home countries to take the women and children back. The problem is that home governments often see the children as posing a danger rather than as needing rescue.

"These children are ISIS's first victims," said Save the Children's Syria Response Director Sonia Khush. "A 4-year-old boy does not really have an ideology. He has protection and learning needs."

"The camps are no place for children to live or grow up," she said. "It does not allow them to learn, socialize or be children ... It does not allow them to heal from all that they have lived through."

In the fenced-off camp, row after row of tents stretch for nearly a square mile. Conditions are rough. Multiple families are often crammed together; medical facilities are minimal, access to clean water and sanitation limited; the tents flood in the winter, and fires have broken out from use of gas stoves for cooking or heat.

Some 50,000 Syrians and Iraqis are housed there. Nearly 20,000 of them are children. Most of the rest are women, the wives and widows of fighters.

In a separate, heavily guarded section of the camp known as the annex are housed another 2,000 women from 57 other countries, considered the most die-hard IS supporters, along with their children, numbering 8,000.

The IS influence was clear during a rare visit by The Associated Press to the camp last month. Around a dozen young boys in the annex hurled stones at the team, which was accompanied by Kurdish guards. A few waved sharp pieces of metal like swords.

"We will kill you because you are an infidel," screamed one child who looked around 10. "You are the enemy of God. We are the Islamic State. You are a devil, and I will kill you with a knife. I will blow you up with a grenade."

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Another child slid his hand across his neck and said, "With the knife, God willing."

At a market inside the annex where women sold shampoo, bottled water and used clothes, one woman looked at a reporter and said, "The Islamic State endures" — a slogan of the group.

During its nearly 5-year rule over much of Syria and Iraq, IS made a priority out of indoctrinating children in its brutal interpretation of Islamic law, aiming to entrench its "caliphate." It trained children as fighters, taught them how to carry out beheadings using dolls, and even had them carry out killings of captives in propaganda videos.

A Russian-speaking woman in the annex, who identified herself as Madina Bakaraw, said she feared for the future of the children, including her own son and daughter.

"We want our children to learn. Our children should be able to read, to write, to count," said the 42-year-old, who was fully covered in black, including her face and hands. She said her husband was dead but refused to say how. "We want to go home and want our children to have a childhood."

The women in the camp are a mix. Some remain devoted to IS, but others became disillusioned by its brutal rule or by its defeat. Others were never ideologically committed but were brought into the "caliphate" by husbands or family.

The camp began to be used to house the families of IS fighters in late 2018 as U.S.-backed Kurdish-led forces recaptured territory in eastern Syria from the militants. In March 2019, they seized the last IS-held villages, ending the "caliphate" that the group declared over large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014.

Since then, the Kurdish administrators running eastern Syria have struggled to repatriate camp residents in the face of local opposition to their return or because of the residents' own fears of revenge attacks. Earlier this year, hundreds of Syrian families left the camp after a deal was reached with their tribes to accept them. Last month, 100 Iraqi families were repatriated to live in a camp in Iraq, but still face sharp opposition among their neighbors.

Some former Soviet Union states have let back some of their citizens, but other Arab, European and African countries have repatriated only minimal numbers or have refused.

"Those children are there through no fault of their own, and they should not pay the consequences of their parents' choices," Ted Chaiban, Mideast and North Africa director of the U.N. children's agency, UNICEF, told the AP. Chaiban visited al-Hol in December.

The Kurdish-led administration says it doesn't have the resources to maintain and guard the camp.

If home countries won't repatriate, at least they should help set up facilities to improve children's lives, said Shixmus Ehmed, head of the administration's department for refugees and displaced.

"We have suggested schools be opened, as well as rehabilitation programs and fields to do sports," Ehmed said. "But so far, there is nothing."

In the camp's main section, UNICEF and Kurdish authorities had set up 25 learning centers, but they have been closed since March 2020 because of COVID-19. UNICEF and its partners have distributed books for kids to study on their own.

In the annex, authorities have been unable to set up learning centers. Instead, children there are largely taught by their mothers, mostly with IS ideology, according to U.N. and Kurdish officials.

Though the annex residents are considered the strongest IS supporters, the group has a presence in the main section housing Syrians and Iraqis as well.

In late March, the Kurdish-led forces assisted by U.S. forces swept through the camp, seizing 125 suspected IS operatives, including Iraqis and Syrians.

Those sleeper cells had been carrying out a campaign of killings against residents suspected of abandoning the group's ideology, working as informants or defying its rules by, for example, working as prostitutes for survival. At least 47 people were killed this year, according to Kurdish-led forces, while U.S. officials put the number at 60.

A Syrian woman who left the camp with her five grandchildren earlier this year told the AP she knew of several women killed for alleged prostitution. In each case, a masked man appeared at the woman's tent, identified himself as an IS member and shot the woman in front of neighbors or even her children, she said.

"The next morning, news spread around the camp," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity for

her security.

She said it was common even in the main part of the camp to see children chanting "the Islamic State endures" and carrying a stick with a black bag tied to it to symbolize an IS flag.

Amal Mohammed, a 40-year-old Iraqi in the camp, said her wish is to return to Iraq where her daughters can live a normal life.

"What is the future of these children?" she said. "They will have no future ... Here they are learning nothing."

## **Biden, GOP senator talk as time drags on infrastructure deal**

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — For nearly an hour, President Joe Biden and the top Senate Republican negotiating infrastructure met behind closed doors — two seasoned legislators engaged in another round of conversations, but emerging with few outward signs of tangible progress ahead of a deadline next week.

The White House billed the private meeting Wednesday as more of a conversation with West Virginia GOP Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, rather than a formal negotiation. No new offers were expected to be presented. More than anything, the session in the Oval Office was seen through the political lens of the president and Republicans trying to show the public what Americans say they want — a willingness to work together, even if no deal is within reach.

Biden and Capito had a "constructive and frank conversation," according to a White House official granted anonymity to discuss the private talks. The senator's office said she is encouraged by the ongoing conversations. The two agreed to reconnect Friday.

Still, talks over Biden's top legislative priority have been moving slowly, a daunting undertaking given the massive infrastructure investment, and time for a deal is running out. The administration has set a June 7 deadline to see clear direction and signs of progress.

"The fact that the president is having Sen. Capito here today and has been having ongoing discussions with Republicans in the Senate and that he's eager to find a path forward on bipartisanship work certainly tells you, I think, what you need to know about what he thinks about working with people even when there's disagreement," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said ahead of the afternoon session.

Privately, the president has sized up the GOP's latest \$928 billion offer as unworkable, in large part because it taps unused COVID-19 funds. Instead, Biden wants to hike the corporate tax rate — a nonstarter for Senate Republicans — to generate revenue for his \$1.7 trillion package.

The ongoing talks may take on new importance after Democrats suffered a setback Wednesday in their efforts to attempt to pass this and other Biden priorities on party-line votes. The Senate parliamentarian signaled new limits on how many times Democrats can use the budget reconciliation process that allows a 51-vote threshold, rather than the 60 votes typically needed to advance legislation. In a four-page memo, the parliamentarian made it clear Democrats will likely have only one more opportunity to use the budget process this year, essentially closing the door on a strategy they were eyeing for multiple votes.

Friday's next round of talks between Biden and the Republican senator would overlap with the release of the May jobs report, as private economists estimate a meaningful increase from the disappointing April figures. May's jobs figures could provide evidence as to whether Biden's earlier \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package has helped put the country on track to recover the jobs lost to the pandemic.

Heading into the meeting, Capito was expected to reup the GOP's push to repurpose the coronavirus relief fund to pay for infrastructure investments, said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who has tasked her to lead the discussions.

"That's the key to getting a bipartisan agreement," McConnell said at a press conference in Kentucky. He said he particularly wants to halt unemployment assistance that he says is preventing Americans from returning to work.

"The coronavirus is behind us. We need to get back to work," McConnell said.

Together, the president and the Republicans both have political incentives to negotiate a bipartisan ac-



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cord over his sweeping investment package, even if no deal is within sight. For Biden, reaching across the aisle and cutting deals in Congress is central to his brand of politics. Republicans can also score political gains by trying to work with a popular president.

Yet an initial Memorial Day deadline came and went without results, and in the latest round of talks, Biden and a core group of GOP senators appear to have pulled farther apart. Democrats, who hold slim majorities in the House and Senate, are watching warily as the White House and Republicans try to narrow the gap between the president's initial ideas for a massive investment in not just roads and bridges but the "human" infrastructure of hospitals and child and senior care facilities, and a GOP approach that is more focused on traditional infrastructure projects.

The White House has pared back the president's initial \$2.3 trillion bid, now tallied at \$1.7 trillion, with Biden proposing to fund the investment by raising the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%.

Without a bipartisan agreement with Republicans, Biden will be faced with trying to muscle support from Democrats alone. That approach also poses political challenges, particularly in the evenly split Senate, where the administration has no votes to spare if the president tries to push through the package under the budget rules that allow for a simple majority vote.

Psaki downplayed comments Biden had made Tuesday that were seen as critical of two Democrats, presumably Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Sen. Krysten Sinema of Arizona. Speaking in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he noted Democrats who don't always vote with the party, blaming them for stalling his agenda.

Psaki said the president considers both Manchin and Sinema "good working partners" and pointed to the Capito meeting as an example of his willingness to cross the divide to hash out issues.

Biden's own thinking is that the Republican proposal, while improved from an earlier \$568 billion opening bid, is unworkable because the Republicans want to tap unspent COVID-19 funds to pay for the spending.

The president, in meetings with his team, has zeroed in on the questions the GOP proposal raises — namely, which coronavirus relief funds to possibly shelve. Biden's view is that tapping the COVID-19 funds would unduly burden the middle class, including small business owners, who are receiving aid during the pandemic crisis.

For Republicans, the corporate tax hikes are a red line they will not cross. They instead want to pay for the infrastructure investment with virus aid money as well as gas taxes and other fees on consumers.

Congress is away for a weeklong Memorial Day break, but faces a deadline when lawmakers return next week.

The White House said the president is also eyeing action in the House next week, when the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is set to begin debating a big highway reauthorization bill that is being closely watched as a potential building block toward the broader package.

## Science chief wants next pandemic vaccine ready in 100 days

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The new White House science adviser wants to have a vaccine ready to fight the next pandemic in just about 100 days after recognizing a potential viral outbreak.

In his first interview after being sworn in Wednesday, Eric Lander painted a rosy near future where a renewed American emphasis on science not only better prepares the world for the next pandemic with plug-and-play vaccines, but also changes how medicine fights disease and treats patients, curbs climate change and further explores space. He even threw in a "Star Trek" reference.

"This is a moment in so many ways, not just health, that we can rethink fundamental assumptions about what's possible and that's true of climate and energy and many areas," Lander told The Associated Press.

Lander took his oath of office on a 500-year-old fragment of the Mishnah, an ancient Jewish text documenting oral traditions and laws. He is the first director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy to be promoted to Cabinet level.

Lander said President Joe Biden's elevation of the science post is a symbolic show "that science should have a seat at the table" but also allows him to have higher-level talks with different agency chiefs about

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making policy.

Lander is a mathematician and geneticist by training who was part of the human genome mapping project and directed the Broad Institute at MIT and Harvard. He said he is particularly focused not so much on this pandemic, but the lessons learned from this one to prepare for the next one.

"It was amazing at one level that we were able to produce highly effective vaccines in less than a year, but from another point of view you'd say, 'Boy, a year's a long time,'" even though in the past it would take three years or four years, Lander said. "To really make a difference we want to get this done in 100 days. And so a lot of us have been talking about a 100-day target from the recognition from a virus with pandemic potential."

"It would mean that we would have had a vaccine in early April if that had happened this time, early April of 2020," Lander said. "It makes you gulp for a second, but it's totally feasible to do that."

Scientists were working on so-called all-purpose ready-to-go platform technologies for vaccines long before the pandemic. They're considered "plug-and-play." Instead of using the germ itself to make a vaccine, they use messenger RNA and add the genetic code for the germ. That's what happened with the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 shots.

Beyond being optimistic about confronting future pandemics, Lander wonders about the implications for preventing cancer.

"Maybe the same sort of experience about moving so much faster than we thought is applicable to cancer," said Lander, who during the Obama administration was co-chair of the Presidential Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. A company already has been working on that.

For that matter, the pandemic and telehealth brought the doctor to patients in some ways. Lander said he is reimagining "a world where we rearrange a lot of things" to get more patient-centered health care, including community health workers checking up every few weeks on people about their blood pressure, blood sugar and other chronic problems.

Two of Lander's predecessors praised him. Neal Lane, President Bill Clinton's science adviser, said Lander is "perfect" for the pandemic because of the need for a strategy and international agreements. Obama's science chief, John Holden, called him "a Renaissance man."

Lander's nomination had been delayed for months as senators sought more information about meetings he had with the late Jeffrey Epstein, a financier who was charged with sex trafficking before his apparent suicide. Lander said he only met with Epstein twice, in 2012, and never requested or received funds from Epstein or his foundation. At his confirmation hearing, Lander also apologized for a 2016 article he wrote that downplayed the work of two Nobel Prize-winning female scientists.

Lander, who has visited Greenland on a balmy 72-degree day, told the AP he sees climate change as "an incredibly serious threat to this planet in many, many ways."

Still, Lander said he was more optimistic now than he and others were a decade ago because "I see a path to doing something about it."

Lander pointed to a drop of about 90% in solar and energy wind costs, making them now as cheap as fossil fuels that cause climate change. But he said what's also needed is "an explosion of ideas" to improve battery life and provide carbon-free energy that is not weather-dependent. Those innovations need federal incentives that are part of Biden's jobs package, he said.

Reducing methane is key to fighting climate change, Lander added, but first improvements are needed in technology to determine where methane is leaking from.

As for space, Lander said he was too new to comment on whether heading to the moon or Mars should be the goal. The Obama administration redirected NASA away from the Bush-era plan to send astronauts back to the moon and was more aimed for Mars or an asteroid. The Trump administration not only focused back on the moon but set a 2024 goal for a new moon landing.

"Are we going to go to the moon and are we going to go to Mars and are we going to moons of Jupiter? Sure. The exact order I think is great to think about or great to talk about," Lander said.

He quoted "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home," when Captain James T. Kirk's love interest asked if he was

from outer space. He responded: "I'm from Iowa, I only work in outer space."

Adds Lander: "That was a fun line in 'Star Trek IV,' but folks in Iowa are really going to say that."

## Drought ravages California's reservoirs ahead of hot summer

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

OROVILLE, Calif. (AP) — Each year Lake Oroville helps water a quarter of the nation's crops, sustain endangered salmon beneath its massive earthen dam and anchor the tourism economy of a Northern California county that must rebuild seemingly every year after unrelenting wildfires.

But now the mighty lake — a linchpin in a system of aqueducts and reservoirs in the arid U.S. West that makes California possible — is shrinking with surprising speed amid a severe drought, with state officials predicting it will reach a record low later this summer.

While droughts are common in California, this year's is much hotter and drier than others, evaporating water more quickly from the reservoirs and the sparse Sierra Nevada snowpack that feeds them. The state's more than 1,500 reservoirs are 50% lower than they should be this time of year, according to Jay Lund, co-director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at the University of California-Davis.

Over Memorial Day weekend, dozens of houseboats sat on cinderblocks at Lake Oroville because there wasn't enough water to hold them. Blackened trees lined the reservoir's steep, parched banks.

In nearby Folsom Lake, normally bustling boat docks rested on dry land, their buoys warning phantom boats to slow down. Campers occupied dusty riverbanks farther north at Shasta Lake.

But the impacts of dwindling reservoirs go beyond luxury yachts and weekend anglers. Salmon need cold water from the bottom of the reservoirs to spawn. The San Francisco Bay needs fresh water from the reservoirs to keep out the salt water that harms freshwater fish. Farmers need the water to irrigate their crops. Businesses need reservoirs full so people will come play in them and spend money.

And everyone needs the water to run hydroelectric power plants that supply much of the state's energy.

If Lake Oroville falls below 640 feet (195 meters) — which it could do by late August — state officials would shut down a major power plant for just the second time ever because of low water levels, straining the electrical grid during the peak demand of the hottest part of the summer.

In Northern California's Butte County, low water prompts another emotion: fear. The county suffered the deadliest U.S. wildfire in a century in 2018 when 85 people died. Last year, another 16 people died in a wildfire.

Walking along the Bidwell Canyon trail last week, 63-year-old Lisa Larson was supposed to have a good view of the lake. Instead, she saw withered grass and trees.

"It makes me feel like our planet is literally drying up," she said. "It makes me feel a little unsettled because the drier it gets, the more fires we are going to have."

Droughts are a part of life in California, where a Mediterranean-style climate means the summers are always dry and the winters are not always wet. The state's reservoirs act as a savings account, storing water in the wet years to help the state survive during the dry ones.

Last year was the third driest year on record in terms of precipitation. Temperatures hit triple digits in much of California over the Memorial Day weekend, earlier than expected. State officials were surprised earlier this year when about 500,000 acre feet (61,674 hectare meters) of water they were expecting to flow into reservoirs never showed up. One acre-foot is enough water to supply up to two households for one year.

"In the previous drought, it took (the reservoirs) three years to get this low as they are in the second year of this drought," Lund said.

The lake's record low is 646 feet (197 meters), but the Department of Water Resources projects it will dip below that sometime in August or September. If that happens, the state will have to close the boat ramps for the first time ever because of low water levels, according to Aaron Wright, public safety chief for the Northern Buttes District of California State Parks. The only boat access to the lake would be an old dirt road that was built during the dam's construction in the late 1960s.

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"We have a reservoir up there that's going to be not usable. And so now what?" said Eric Smith, an Oroville City Council member and president of its chamber of commerce.

The water level is so low at Lake Mendocino — a reservoir along the Russian River in Northern California — that state officials last week reduced the amount of water heading to 930 farmers, businesses and other junior water-rights holders.

"Unless we immediately reduce diversions, there is a real risk of Lake Mendocino emptying by the end of this year," said Erik Ekdahl, deputy director for the State Water Board's Division of Water Rights.

Low water levels across California will severely limit how much power the state can generate from hydroelectric power plants. When Lake Oroville is full, the Edward Hyatt Power Plant and others nearby can generate up to 900 megawatts of power, according to Behzad Soltanzadeh, chief of utility operations for the Department of Water Resources. One megawatt is enough to power between 800 and 1,000 homes.

That has some local officials worrying about power outages, especially after the state ran out of energy last summer during an extreme heat wave that prompted California's first rotating blackouts in 20 years. But energy officials say they are better prepared this summer, having obtained an additional 3,500 megawatts of capacity ahead of the scorching summer months.

The low levels are challenging for tourism officials. Bruce Spangler, president of the board of directors for Explore Butte County, grew up in Oroville and has fond memories of fishing with his grandfather and learning to launch and drive a boat before he could drive a car. But this summer, his organization has to be careful about how it markets the lake while managing visitors' expectations, he said.

"We have to be sure we don't promise something that can't be," he said.

Low lake levels haven't stopped tourists from coming yet. With coronavirus restrictions lifting across the state, Wright — the state parks official for Northern California — said attendance at most parks in his area is double what it normally is this time of year.

"People are trying to recreate and use facilities even more so (because) they know they are going to lose them here in a few months," he said.

## Guatemalan lives upturned by failed immigration bids

By SONIA PÉREZ D. Associated Press

TIZAMARTE, Guatemala (AP) — Alvina Jerónimo Pérez tries to avoid going out. She doesn't want to see neighbors. She's even changed the chip in her cellphone since her failed journey to the United States.

The 42-year-old woman is fearful her unsuccessful migration could cost her more than she can bear — even the single-story concrete block house her husband built on land passed down from her great grandparents in this mountaintop hamlet in south-central Guatemala.

Her husband, Anibal García, had recently added another room onto the back. The family had borrowed money to pay for the addition and was having trouble paying. Jerónimo thought she might be able to find the money if she migrated.

From afar, it seemed a safe bet. Many others in town, even in her own family, had made similar journeys. "Since people were passing (the border), we thought they were going to let us pass," Jerónimo said.

The smuggler told her to bring her daughter to make it a sure thing, banking on the idea U.S. authorities wouldn't deport a minor or her parent.

He promised her a job in the U.S. that would allow her to pay her debt.

So she put the house up as collateral to pay the smuggler \$7,700. "The deal was that when we had arrived there, we were going to pay that money and they would return (the deed), but it wasn't possible," she said.

In March 2020, she and her daughter Yessenia, then 14, left Tizamarte. Three weeks later they were caught entering Texas. They were deported a week after that.

When Jerónimo realized they would be sent back, she cried. "I thought of everything the trip had cost me. I asked myself 'What am I going to do?' I've lost everything."

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Jerónimo's story is similar to that of thousands of Guatemalans who scramble to gather the money needed to migrate to the United States. Often it comes from relatives already living in the U.S. or networks of informal lenders. Sometimes migrants must sell their possessions, including their homes, or like Jerónimo, use the deeds as collateral. They are driven by the chance of breaking the cycle of poverty that affects 60% of the country's population.

The COVID-19 pandemic initially blunted migration to the U.S. last year, but numbers were soon on the rise again. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported more than 30,000 encounters with Guatemalan migrants at the Southwest border this April.

President Joe Biden put Vice President Kamala Harris in charge of finding ways to address the root causes of migration and Harris was scheduled to arrive in Guatemala on Sunday.

She has been talking with officials and nongovernmental groups about the forces at play, including poverty, corruption, violence and climate change. She has also expressed interest in groups historically facing discrimination including indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and LGBTQ communities.

The Biden administration fears that an unmanageable number of migrants, especially children and families at the southwest border, will distract from its domestic policy goals even as it tries to present a more compassionate face than its predecessor.

Jerónimo is among more than 228,000 Guatemalans deported by the United States since 2015. For many of those, the dream failed. They were sent home with the stigma of failure and staggering debts that can't be paid in a country where the minimum wage is about \$11 per day.

She, like many others, sees no way out but to try again.

There's an old and rusting white refrigerator in Jerónimo's house, though most of the time it's not plugged in: She often has no food that needs cooling and has to save money on electricity. Most of the time it just serves as a stand for the television perched on top.

In the dry winter months, the house is dark and cold under its corrugated tin roof. In the rainy season, it is hot and stifling. It sits tight to the dirt road at the entrance to Tizamarte, a village of some 110 families, about 700 people.

A five-hour drive from Guatemala's capital, Tizamarte is in the so-called "dry corridor," a swath of land extending from southern Mexico to Panama where climate change has evolved into a series of punishing droughts and devastating tropical storms.

For people in Tizamarte and other settlements, that means eking out a living with subsistence agriculture to feed their families while harvesting coffee for cash to pay school fees or medicine.

Chiquimula, the department or state, where Tizamarte is located, accounts for 10% of Guatemala's exported coffee, according to the National Coffee Association, Anacafé.

During the coffee harvest from November to February, the village comes alive with an influx of cash, albeit modest. A picker makes about \$8 per sack harvested and can usually fill one or two per day.

Jerónimo's husband makes a little extra money by cooking up orders of fried chicken and french fries on a stove at home and selling them for a little under \$2 to the pickers. Jerónimo sells basic groceries to passersby from a tiny store in the house's front room.

The couple doesn't pick coffee and does not have land to grow it. García raises corn and beans for their own consumption on a small rented plot. They typically get by on two meals a day of corn tortillas, beans and coffee.

Their home is unusual in town for having running water. Women and children line up at Tizamarte's five public spigots to fill containers.

As in many other parts of Central America, migration to the north has become a tradition. Someone in nearly every family in town has gone to the U.S. or tried to.

"Anyone who has the opportunity should go," said Adán Rivera, a 40-year-old farmworker. "Migrating isn't easy; you put yourself in danger. But there is need."

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Rivera himself takes his three young sons to harvest coffee because together they can fill three big sacks in a day, earning \$24 versus just one he could fill alone.

"With that, you can buy more food," Rivera said. But when the harvest is over, there's little work, so people leave.

So many have left that much of the country survives on remittances they send home. Last year, that accounted for more than 14% of Guatemala's gross domestic product — a flow of money that trickles broadly through villages across the nation.

In Tizamarte, it's during the hot months from March to October after the harvest is over, when wages and water dry up and food grows scarce, that people migrate. Last year, Jerónimo decided to join them.

She and her daughter left early one morning; she won't say exactly how. Jerónimo carried a change of clothes in a small knapsack and 500 quetzales — about \$65. It was the first time Jerónimo had traveled outside the department of Chiquimula near the Honduras border.

For three weeks mother and daughter walked, rode on buses and in cars. Jerónimo says she doesn't recall the details of their route, but also clearly did not want to share them. What stuck in her memory was concern for her daughter, recalling a time when another migrant, frustrated that the girl's weariness might slow the group, had threatened her. She remembered nights spent awake making sure no one tried to harm the teenager.

At the Mexico-U.S. border — Jerónimo says she doesn't remember what part — they spent days locked inside a safe house before crossing into Texas, only to be apprehended hours after entering the U.S.

The U.S. Border Patrol held them together for seven days and put them on a plane back to Guatemala City. It was the first time Jerónimo set foot in her country's capital.

Jerónimo said neither she nor her daughter were tested for COVID after being detained or flown back — something that led to widespread complaints against the Trump administration's deportation flights during the pandemic.

Guatemala's health minister said in April 2020 — the same month Jerónimo and her daughter were deported — that deportees from the United States were driving up the country's COVID-19 caseload, adding that on one flight some 75% of the deportees tested positive for the virus.

Last year, while much of the world was donning protective masks and learning about social distancing, life went on as usual in Tizamarte. There were few confirmed cases in the area — none in Tizamarte — and Jerónimo didn't wear a mask until she was in Border Patrol custody. Guatemala has limited health services, especially in rural communities like Tizamarte, and has struggled to obtain COVID-19 vaccine. By the end of May, only 133 of the 61,000 residents in the municipality that includes Tizamarte, had been vaccinated.

Jerónimo finally arrived back home without a cent. She had to ask a relative in the U.S. to wire her \$50 to buy bus tickets back to Tizamarte.

Others in her family had migrated successfully in past years, though at least one attempt ended in tragedy.

Jerónimo's son-in-law Santiago de León left in December 2018 with his 5-year-old son Wilman. They made it to the U.S. But when he found work, De León had no way to care for his son and sent him home to his wife on a commercial flight with a friend who had a visa.

Wilman was one of at least four children sent back to Tizamarte after helping their parents enter the U.S. in 2019 and 2020, residents recalled. De León sends his wife \$125 each month to support their three children.

Encouraged by his brother's successful journey, 16-year-old Juan de León left on his own for the U.S. in April 2019. Tránsito Gutiérrez, Juan's mother, said he had left because he wanted to help the family, which sometimes had nothing to eat.

"Juanito" made it into Texas, but was detained by Border Patrol. While in custody he fell ill, was hospitalized and died in Corpus Christi. Guatemalan authorities said he died from a brain infection. He was sent back to Guatemala and buried in Tizamarte.

Still, nearly a year later, Jerónimo decided she had to go.

She has been with García since they were teenagers. They have three children together, two of whom, Yessenia and her 20-year-old brother, live with them.

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"The house is hers, the land is hers," he said. "I built it, but there's nothing in my name. She decided to go."

With debts now hanging over the family, Jerónimo's mind this past March turned again toward leaving. The coffee harvest — and her husband's side business — have ended. Soon food would become scarce again.

"If I could, I would go," Jerónimo said.

Fried chicken and frugality helped the family pay \$650 toward the loan on the home addition, which was destroyed by tropical storms last year. But they still owe more on that. And there's the \$7,700 due for the failed migration attempt.

Smugglers in recent years have promised would-be migrants three tries at successfully crossing the U.S. border — an acknowledgment that it's a large investment that doesn't always pan out.

But Jerónimo had hired the smuggler through an intermediary — a neighbor who lives about 100 yards away — who apparently pocketed a significant portion of the fee, according to Jerónimo. So the smuggler refused to take her again.

That neighbor also had arranged a loan for Jerónimo — turning to a migrant living in the U.S. and his father, who lives in a town not far away.

Those lenders call and send text messages from time to time asking when she will pay. The first deadline was last October and Jerónimo asked for more time. The threats of seizing her house then became so frequent that Jerónimo changed the chip in her phone.

The anxiety of potentially losing the house affects Yessenia as well. The teenager says she's willing to take the risk of trying on her own to return to the U.S.

"Losing the house and being left without anything scares me more," she said.

Yessenia has been out of school for two years, because even before the pandemic her parents couldn't afford the school fees. She used to dream of being a police officer and fantasizes about being able to study again and buy new clothes, but the risk to the house looms over everything.

"I want to save the house and the deed to not be in the hands of someone else, but in our hands," she said. "So to help my mom I'm going."

Yessenia's parents disagree. If there's a way, even if it means risking more debt, Jerónimo said she herself will go.

"That is what makes you desperate enough to migrate," she said. "It's pure necessity."

## After pandemic pause, Avengers swing, soar into Disneyland

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — Now that it's getting safer to assemble, the Avengers are at last descending on Disneyland.

A Spider-Man ride that lets visitors blast bots with virtual webs from their bare hands and a show of strength from the royal guard of Wakanda are among the highlights of the new Avengers Campus at Disney's California Adventure Park, whose debut was paused for about a year by the coronavirus pandemic before it opens to the public Friday.

The Avengers Campus seeks to be an immersive experience that allows guests to become super-heroic across a series of rides, shows and eateries from the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

"We're excited to finally open up the gates and let everybody in," Scot Drake, a portfolio creative executive with Walt Disney Imagineering, said at the park Wednesday. "We had 70-plus years of stories and amazing characters to pull from, 23 epic films, and for us it was, 'What is the best way to get our guests right in the middle of those stories, right in the middle of the action?'"

Central to that aim is "WEB SLINGERS: A Spider-Man Adventure," which combines classic ride structure with an array of cameras that capture guests' body motion and allows them to play Peter Parker.

They're asked to help onscreen Spidey Tom Holland fight an outbreak of small, smart and powerful Spider-bots, creations that he and a team of inventive teens developed but lost control of in an old building donated by Tony Stark.

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The experience resembles the videogame competition of Disneyland's Buzz Lightyear ride, but the action and the tech behind it are in a different galaxy. With no equipment necessary (though enhancement gadgets for the wrist can be bought next door), riders can blast swarms of the little spider-bots (which can also be purchased next door), and a couple of not-so-little ones.

"What was really important to us was to try and make the interface disappear so the guests just had the superpowers themselves," said Brent Strong, executive creative director of Walt Disney Imagineering. "So in order to do that we did a whole bunch of invention to try and make the technology as un-obvious as possible."

Journalists got to take the ride for a few spins Wednesday. With each pass the experience changes, as guests start to master their web-slinging and figure out they can do more than just blast away with their powers.

"You can start to grab on to shipping containers, open doors, grow things and shrink things," Strong said. "We've hidden a million Easter eggs and fun little surprises in there."

Elsewhere, majestic music blasts to announce the marching arrival of the Dora Milaje — the royal guard that protects T'Challa in "Black Panther." With their leader Okoye, the shaven-headed women of Wakanda twirl their spears and explain their principles to give wannabe warriors in the audience a lesson in the fighting arts.

The show includes something rare for a day at Disneyland: a moment of silence for the dead. While Okoye tells the crowd she seeks to honor fallen kings and ancestors, the ritual, in a time of many such moments, feels like an acknowledgment of the many deaths during the pandemic that kept the park dark for more than a year. (It also feels like an acknowledgement of "Black Panther" star Chadwick Boseman, whose death last year stunned the world.)

Disney's two Anaheim parks reopened with restrictions on April 30 and will reopen at something nearing normal on June 15.

The new section was also built to incorporate "Guardians of the Galaxy – Mission: Breakout!" a drop-tower ride with funky tunes in place since 2017.

The storytelling on the Avengers campus even extends to the food, including an outlet of the Shawarma joint that Iron Man suggests his allies hit up after the Battle of New York depicted in 2012's "The Avengers." It was open for sampling Wednesday and as Tony Stark promised, it is, indeed, good.

Another Avengers Campus is planned for Disneyland Paris. The California version will have major additions. Other heroes, including Thor and Iron Man, will make appearances, and Doctor Strange will work his wizardry in his Ancient Sanctum several times a day.

Some of those heroes, in Marvel's movies, are dead, and for those who follow the events of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with near-religious precision, it can be tough to tell what time period the campus is set in.

The creators say don't overthink it.

We've summoned heroes from across all of space and time," Strong said. "Time is a lot more squishy than any of us think. Trying to put a specific date to it can be challenging. But to us, Avengers Campus is here and now."

## China's silencing of Tiananmen tributes extends to Hong Kong

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — For years, China has quashed any discussion on the mainland of its bloody 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, nearly erasing what happened from the collective consciousness. Now it may be Hong Kong's turn, as China's ruling Communist Party pulls the city more directly into its orbit.

The semi-autonomous territories of Hong Kong and nearby Macao were for years the last places on Chinese soil allowed to publicly mark the events of June 4, 1989, when the People's Liberation Army opened fire on student-led protesters in a crackdown that left hundreds, if not thousands, dead.



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Before last year, tens of thousands gathered annually in Hong Kong's Victoria Park, lighting candles and singing songs to remember the victims. But authorities, citing the coronavirus pandemic, are banning that vigil for the second straight year. And a museum dedicated to the event suddenly closed Wednesday, just two days before Friday's anniversary, after authorities investigated it for lacking the necessary licenses to hold a public exhibition.

Hong Kong's security minister warned residents last week against taking part in unauthorized assemblies.

In mainland China, younger generations have grown up with little knowledge of or debate about the crackdown, but the efforts to suppress commemorations in Hong Kong reflect another turn of the screw in Beijing's ever-tightening control over Hong Kong following massive anti-government protests in 2019. Those demonstrations evolved into months of sometimes violent clashes between smaller groups of protesters and police. And they have led to a broader crackdown on dissent in the former British colony, which was long an oasis of capitalism and democracy and was promised that it would largely maintain its freedoms for 50 years when it was returned to China in 1997.

Since the protests, China has imposed a sweeping national security law aimed in part at stiffening the penalties for the actions that protesters engaged in, and authorities have sought to arrest nearly all of the city's outspoken and prominent pro-democracy figures. Most are either behind bars or have fled the city.

Despite the restrictions this year, there are calls for Hongkongers to remember the 1989 crackdown in private, with vigil organizers calling on residents to light a candle at 8 p.m. Friday no matter where they are.

Online calls circulating on social media also urged residents to dress in black on Friday. Local newspaper Ming Pao last week published an article suggesting that residents write the numbers six and four on their light switches — a nod to the June 4 date — so each flip of the switch is also an act of remembrance.

For decades, Chan Kin Wing has regularly attended the vigil in Hong Kong.

"I was lucky to have been born in Hong Kong. If I had been born on the mainland, I could have been one of the students in Tiananmen Square that day," said Chan, whose parents had fled to Hong Kong from the mainland in the 1960s.

"When June 4, 1989, happened, all of Hong Kong witnessed the indelible historical event of students massacred by a corrupt regime," Chan said.

This year, Chan plans to remember the event privately, dressing in black and changing his profile picture on social media to an image of a lit candle in the dark.

"I've resolved to never forget about June 4, and strive to pass on memories of it to ensure it's never forgotten," he said.

In mainland China, the group Tiananmen Mothers that represents victims' relatives published an appeal on the Human Rights in China website urging the party to heed their long-held demands for a complete release of official records about the crackdown, compensation for those killed and injured, and for those responsible to be held to account.

"We look forward to the day when the CPC and the Chinese government can sincerely and courageously set the record straight and take up their due responsibility for the anti-human 1989 massacre in accordance with the law and the facts," the statement said.

The government, however, seems intent on running out the clock on such appeals.

While Tiananmen Mothers said 62 of its members have died since the group was founded in the late 1990s, many young Chinese, it said, have "grown up in a false sense of prosperous jubilation and enforced glorification of the government (and) have no idea of or refuse to believe what happened on June 4, 1989, in the nation's capital."

In Hong Kong, the recent arrests and convictions of prominent activists have had a chilling effect on those who participated in the vigil in the past, said Chow Hang Tung, the vice chair of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, which operates the June 4 museum.

"There will obviously be fear and people cannot just assume that they can come and express their remembrance for the Tiananmen massacre victims and be unscathed," she said.

Chow said that what keeps her going is the dream that China and Hong Kong can both have democracy

one day. The tide, though, appears to be going in the other direction.

"This is something worth fighting for," she said. "If one day we cannot talk about Tiananmen that would signify that Hong Kong is totally assimilated into Chinese society."

## George P. Bush running for attorney general in Texas

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — George P. Bush on Wednesday launched his next political move: a run for Texas attorney general in 2022 that puts the scion of a Republican dynasty against a GOP incumbent shadowed by securities fraud charges and an FBI investigation.

Bush, who has served as Texas' land commissioner since 2015, is the son of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and the nephew and grandson of two former presidents. He is the last of the Bush family still in public office — and was the first to break with them over supporting former President Donald Trump, who has mocked the family that was once the face of the Republican Party.

He is now launching the first major challenge against embattled Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who has spent six years in office under felony indictment over accusations of defrauding investors, and more recently was accused of bribery by his own former top aides.

"Here in Texas, we have a scandal that is plaguing one of our highest offices. And I believe conservatives should have a choice," Bush said at a campaign kickoff rally in Austin.

Bush, 45, said he spoke with Texas' two previous attorneys general prior to Paxton — Republican Gov. Greg Abbott and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn — after the latest accusations surfaced but would not go into details. "There's concern there, and that's why I'm willing to go out there and offer myself because everybody else has been quiet and afraid to tell the truth about this guy," Bush said.

Paxton's campaign responded with a statement that made no mention of the accusations against him.

"Texans know Attorney General Paxton's rock-solid conservative record," Paxton spokesman Ian Prior said.

Bush's bid to move up Texas' political ladder sets up a potentially bruising primary that will test GOP voters' appetite for the Bush name, and the durability of a two-term attorney general who is embroiled in legal trouble, but was embraced by conservatives last November after bringing a failed lawsuit to the Supreme Court that sought to overturn President Joe Biden's victory.

Asked if he supported Paxton's efforts to overturn Biden's win, Bush faulted Paxton's legal strategy and claimed there were irregularities, but acknowledged Biden's victory. No widespread corruption was found, and Trump's allegations of massive voting fraud also have been dismissed by a succession of judges and refuted by state election officials.

On Tuesday, Trump endorsed Abbott for a third term but has not weighed in on Texas' attorney general race, which Bush had signaled for months he would enter.

Hours ahead of Bush's announcement, Paxton's office publicized a court brief that denies claims of impropriety leveled by top-level deputies who were fired after taking part in an extraordinary revolt against Paxton last fall. Eight staffers accused Paxton of abusing his office in the service of a wealthy donor, which is now the target of an FBI investigation.

Paxton called the accusations an "unsubstantiated smear campaign" and has separately pleaded not guilty in his securities fraud case that has languished since 2015. He has also used his office in ways that have benefited allies and other donors.

Bush, meanwhile, enters the race at a moment of intense scrutiny and bipartisan outrage in Houston over his General Land Office announcing the city wouldn't get a cent of the initial \$1 billion in federal funding that was promised to Texas following Hurricane Harvey. He has also angered conservative activists over a renovation plan for the Alamo, the revered Texas shrine.

The race is pivotal for Bush's political future in Texas, where he has aligned himself with Trump unlike his famous relatives. Bush has carefully sidestepped Trump's antagonism toward his family, which included taunting his father as "low energy" during the 2016 presidential campaign. His late grandfather, George H.W. Bush, had said he voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016, while George W. Bush said he voted for "none

of the above.”

During a visit to Texas in 2019, Trump called George P. Bush “the only Bush that likes me.”

## Duke’s Krzyzewski to coach 1 final year, hand off to Scheyer

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Mike Krzyzewski will make a final run at a national championship with Duke.

The Hall of Famer and winningest coach in the history of Division I men’s basketball announced Wednesday that next season will be his last with the Blue Devils program he has built into one of college basketball’s bluebloods. The school also named former Duke player and associate head coach Jon Scheyer as Krzyzewski’s successor for the 2022-23 season.

“My family and I view today as a celebration,” Krzyzewski said in a statement released Wednesday evening.

Stadium first reported news of the 74-year-old Krzyzewski’s final season with Duke, which he has led to five national championships, most recently in 2015. He has 1,170 career wins going back to his time at Army, with 1,097 wins coming during 41 years with the Blue Devils and their frantic fans who have made playing at famously hostile Cameron Indoor Stadium so difficult.

Now Krzyzewski will have make a final lap — “The Last Ride,” as the program billed it in a social-media post — around the Atlantic Coast Conference and the sport where he has piled up an incredible run of success before handing off to Scheyer, currently 33.

“He is clearly ready for this opportunity and has shown it repeatedly throughout his playing career and as a coach on our staff the past eight seasons,” Krzyzewski said. “Jon is a rising star in our profession and Duke basketball could not be in better hands in the future.”

The school has scheduled a news conference for Krzyzewski on Thursday at Cameron, followed by one Friday for Scheyer.

Krzyzewski has led the Blue Devils to 12 Final Four appearances and a record 15 ACC Tournament championships, while his teams have spent a record 126 weeks ranked at No. 1 in the AP men’s college basketball poll.

Hired at Duke in March 1980, “Coach K” won national championships in 1991, 1992, 2001, 2010 and 2015. He broke Army mentor Bob Knight’s career victory record in November 2011.

Krzyzewski has tailored his approach to adapt with the times and his personnel. He won that 2010 title with a senior-laden roster, then claimed the 2015 one after pivoting to more “one-and-done” talent that headed to the NBA after a lone college season.

His image became synonymous both with the elite private university in Durham, North Carolina, and the sport as a whole. And along the way, he took over the U.S. men’s national team — with NBA All-Star rosters featuring names such as the late Kobe Bryant and LeBron James — and led it to Olympic gold in Beijing in 2008, London in 2012 and Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

“What he means to the countless players he has coached, both collegiately and professionally, is simply immeasurable,” ACC commissioner Jim Phillips said in a statement.

Duke missed the NCAA Tournament this past season for the first time since 1995, but the Blue Devils welcome one of the nation’s top recruiting classes for the coming season.

Scheyer played for Krzyzewski from 2006-10, with his last season resulting in his mentor’s fourth NCAA title. Scheyer joined the Duke staff for the 2013-14 season and rose to his current role following the 2017-18 season.

Scheyer served as interim coach last year for Duke when Krzyzewski was sidelined for a January win against Boston College due to COVID-19 protocols. Scheyer has never been a college head coach.

“Duke University has been a central part of my life for more than a decade, and I could not ask for a better place to continue my career,” Scheyer said in a statement. “This is absolutely humbling. ... (Krzyzewski) has set a standard that every coach at every level should strive to achieve.”

The news comes almost two months to the day that another Hall of Famer in the state — North Carolina’s Roy Williams — announced his retirement after 33 seasons as a head coach with Kansas and the

rival Tar Heels. UNC also turned to a former player on the bench, elevating Hubert Davis to take over in his first time as a major college head coach.

## Science chief wants next pandemic vaccine ready in 100 days

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The new White House science adviser wants to have a vaccine ready to fight the next pandemic in just about 100 days after recognizing a potential viral outbreak.

In his first interview after being sworn in Wednesday, Eric Lander painted a rosy near future where a renewed American emphasis on science not only better prepares the world for the next pandemic with plug-and-play vaccines, but also changes how medicine fights disease and treats patients, curbs climate change and further explores space. He even threw in a "Star Trek" reference.

"This is a moment in so many ways, not just health, that we can rethink fundamental assumptions about what's possible and that's true of climate and energy and many areas," Lander told The Associated Press.

Lander took his oath of office on a 500-year-old fragment of the Mishnah, an ancient Jewish text documenting oral traditions and laws. He is the first director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy to be promoted to Cabinet level.

Lander said President Joe Biden's elevation of the science post is a symbolic show "that science should have a seat at the table" but also allows him to have higher-level talks with different agency chiefs about making policy.

Lander is a mathematician and geneticist by training who was part of the human genome mapping project and directed the Broad Institute at MIT and Harvard. He said he is particularly focused not so much on this pandemic, but the lessons learned from this one to prepare for the next one.

"It was amazing at one level that we were able to produce highly effective vaccines in less than a year, but from another point of view you'd say, 'Boy, a year's a long time,'" even though in the past it would take three years or four years, Lander said. "To really make a difference we want to get this done in 100 days. And so a lot of us have been talking about a 100-day target from the recognition from a virus with pandemic potential."

"It would mean that we would have had a vaccine in early April if that had happened this time, early April of 2020," Lander said. "It makes you gulp for a second, but it's totally feasible to do that."

Scientists were working on so-called all-purpose ready-to-go platform technologies for vaccines long before the pandemic. They're considered "plug-and-play." Instead of using the germ itself to make a vaccine, they use messenger RNA and add the genetic code for the germ. That's what happened with the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 shots.

Beyond being optimistic about confronting future pandemics, Lander wonders about the implications for preventing cancer.

"Maybe the same sort of experience about moving so much faster than we thought is applicable to cancer," said Lander, who during the Obama administration was co-chair of the Presidential Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. A company already has been working on that.

For that matter, the pandemic and telehealth brought the doctor to patients in some ways. Lander said he is reimagining "a world where we rearrange a lot of things" to get more patient-centered health care, including community health workers checking up every few weeks on people about their blood pressure, blood sugar and other chronic problems.

Two of Lander's predecessor praised him. Neal Lane, President Bill Clinton's science adviser, said Lander is "perfect" for the pandemic because of the need for a strategy and international agreements. Obama's science chief, John Holden, called him "a Renaissance man."

Lander's nomination had been delayed for months as senators sought more information about meetings he had with the late Jeffrey Epstein, a financier who was charged with sex trafficking before his apparent suicide. Lander said he only met with Epstein twice, in 2012, and never requested or received funds from Epstein or his foundation. At his confirmation hearing, Lander also apologized for a 2016 article he wrote

that downplayed the work of two Nobel Prize-winning female scientists.

Lander, who has visited Greenland on a balmy 72-degree day, told the AP he sees climate change as “an incredibly serious threat to this planet in many, many ways.”

Still, Lander said he was more optimistic now than he and others were a decade ago because “I see a path to doing something about it.”

Lander pointed to a drop of about 90% in solar and energy wind costs, making them now as cheap as fossil fuels that cause climate change. But he said what’s also needed is “an explosion of ideas” to improve battery life and provide carbon-free energy that is not weather-dependent. Those innovations need federal incentives that are part of Biden’s jobs package, he said.

Reducing methane is key to fighting climate change, Lander added, but first improvements are needed in technology to determine where methane is leaking from.

As for space, Lander said he was too new to comment on whether heading to the moon or Mars should be the goal. The Obama administration redirected NASA away from the Bush-era plan to send astronauts back to the moon and was more aimed for Mars or an asteroid. The Trump administration not only focused back on the moon but set a 2024 goal for a new moon landing.

“Are we going to go to the moon and are we going to go to Mars and are we going to moons of Jupiter? Sure. The exact order I think is great to think about or great to talk about,” Lander said.

He quoted “Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home,” when Captain James T. Kirk’s love interest asked if he was from outer space. He responded: “I’m from Iowa, I only work in outer space.”

Adds Lander: “That was a fun line in ‘Star Trek IV,’ but folks in Iowa are really going to say that.”

## **Biden, GOP senator talk as time drags on infrastructure deal**

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — For nearly an hour, President Joe Biden and the top Senate Republican negotiating infrastructure met Wednesday behind closed doors — two seasoned legislators engaged in another round of conversations, but emerging with few outward signs of tangible progress ahead of a deadline next week.

The White House billed the private meeting as more of a conversation with West Virginia GOP Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, rather than a formal negotiation. No new offers were expected to be presented. More than anything, the session in the Oval Office was seen through the political lens of the president and Republicans trying to show the public what Americans say they want — a willingness to work together, even if no deal is within reach.

Biden and Capito had a “constructive and frank conversation,” according to a White House official granted anonymity to discuss the private talks. The senator’s office said she is encouraged by the ongoing conversations. The two agreed to reconnect Friday.

Still, talks over Biden’s top legislative priority have been moving slowly, a daunting undertaking given the massive infrastructure investment, and time for a deal is running out. The administration has set a June 7 deadline to see clear direction and signs of progress.

“The fact that the president is having Sen. Capito here today and has been having ongoing discussions with Republicans in the Senate and that he’s eager to find a path forward on bipartisanship work certainly tells you, I think, what you need to know about what he thinks about working with people even when there’s disagreement,” White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said ahead of the afternoon session.

Privately, the president has sized up the GOP’s latest \$928 billion offer as unworkable, in large part because it taps unused COVID-19 funds. Instead, Biden wants to hike the corporate tax rate — a nonstarter for Senate Republicans — to generate revenue for his \$1.7 trillion package.

The ongoing talks may take on new importance after Democrats suffered a setback Wednesday in their efforts to attempt to pass this and other Biden priorities on party-line votes. The Senate parliamentarian signaled new limits on how many times Democrats can use the budget reconciliation process that allows a 51-vote threshold, rather than the 60 votes typically needed to advance legislation. In a four-page memo, the parliamentarian made it clear Democrats will likely have only one more opportunity to use

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the budget process this year, essentially closing the door on a strategy they were eyeing for multiple votes.

Friday's next round of talks between Biden and the Republican senator would overlap with the release of the May jobs report, as private economists estimate a meaningful increase from the disappointing April figures. May's jobs figures could provide evidence as to whether Biden's earlier \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package has helped put the country on track to recover the jobs lost to the pandemic.

Heading into the meeting, Capito was expected to reup the GOP's push to repurpose the coronavirus relief fund to pay for infrastructure investments, said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who has tasked her to lead the discussions.

"That's the key to getting a bipartisan agreement," McConnell said at a press conference in Kentucky. He said he particularly wants to halt unemployment assistance that he says is preventing Americans from returning to work.

"The coronavirus is behind us. We need to get back to work," McConnell said.

Together, the president and the Republicans both have political incentives to negotiate a bipartisan accord over his sweeping investment package, even if no deal is within sight. For Biden, reaching across the aisle and cutting deals in Congress is central to his brand of politics. Republicans can also score political gains by trying to work with a popular president.

Yet an initial Memorial Day deadline came and went without results, and in the latest round of talks, Biden and a core group of GOP senators appear to have pulled farther apart. Democrats, who hold slim majorities in the House and Senate, are watching warily as the White House and Republicans try to narrow the gap between the president's initial ideas for a massive investment in not just roads and bridges but the "human" infrastructure of hospitals and child and senior care facilities, and a GOP approach that is more focused on traditional infrastructure projects.

The White House has pared back the president's initial \$2.3 trillion bid, now tallied at \$1.7 trillion, with Biden proposing to fund the investment by raising the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%.

Without a bipartisan agreement with Republicans, Biden will be faced with trying to muscle support from Democrats alone. That approach also poses political challenges, particularly in the evenly split Senate, where the administration has no votes to spare if the president tries to push through the package under the budget rules that allow for a simple majority vote.

Psaki downplayed comments Biden had made Tuesday that were seen as critical of two Democrats, presumably Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Sen. Krysten Sinema of Arizona. Speaking in Tulsa, Okla., he noted Democrats who don't always vote with the party, blaming them for stalling his agenda.

Psaki said the president considers both Manchin and Sinema "good working partners" and pointed to the Capito meeting as an example of his willingness to cross the divide to hash out issues.

Biden's own thinking is that the Republican proposal, while improved from an earlier \$568 billion opening bid, is unworkable because the Republicans want to tap unspent COVID-19 funds to pay for the spending.

The president, in meetings with his team, has zeroed in on the questions the GOP proposal raises — namely, which coronavirus relief funds to possibly shelve. Biden's view is that tapping the COVID funds would unduly burden the middle class, including small business owners, who are receiving aid during the pandemic crisis.

For Republicans, the corporate tax hikes are a red line they will not cross. They instead want to pay for the infrastructure investment with virus aid money as well as gas taxes and other fees on consumers.

Congress is away for a weeklong Memorial Day break, but faces a deadline when lawmakers return next week.

The White House said the president is also eyeing action in the House next week, when the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is set to begin debating a big highway reauthorization bill that is being closely watched as a potential building block toward the broader package.

## Ally Bank ends overdraft fees, a first for large US banks

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

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NEW YORK (AP) — Ally Financial said Wednesday that it is ending overdraft fees entirely on all of its bank products, becoming the first large U.S. bank to end overdraft fees across its entire business.

It's a major move by Ally, one of the nation's largest banks, and for the industry, which has been reliant on overdraft fees for decades to boost profits, often at the expense of poorer Americans who can't afford to pay such fees in the first place.

Critics of the practice often cite what they call the \$38 cup of coffee, where a bank customer uses a debit card to buy a coffee, overdrafts, and ends up paying a \$35 fee on top of the \$3 drink.

In its announcement, Detroit-based Ally cited specifically the impact that overdraft fees have on Black and Latino households, which are historically poorer than their white counterparts and are hit with overdraft fees more often. It's also a common reason why Black and Latino households choose to be "unbanked," that is being without a bank account, in order to avoid the fees that often come with these accounts.

"Overdraft fees can be a major cause of anxiety," said Diane Morais, president of consumer and commercial banking at Ally Bank, in a statement. "It became clear to us that the best way to relieve that anxiety was to eliminate those fees."

The announcement affects roughly 3.6 million checking, savings and money market accounts, the bank said.

Ally did not earn significant fees from overdrafts. The most Ally charged each customer for overdrafting an account was \$25 per day, instead of per transaction. Morais said roughly one out of every 12 Ally bank customers overdrafted at some point. Ally does not expect that scrapping overdraft fees will have a major impact on the company's full-year profit forecasts.

Customers who do overdraft with Ally will get their transactions approved at the bank's discretion, with the smaller transactions likely to be approved. Customers will have six days to bring the account back into positive territory.

The pressure to end overdraft fees has been intensifying for years. Politicians such as Rep. Katie Porter, D-Calif., Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif. and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., have used their positions in Congress to push bank CEOs to reconsider their usage of the fees. Regulators such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency have also pushed banks to come up with solutions to stop charging customers \$35 for an overdraft.

In response, the industry has been inching away from overdraft fees, albeit reluctantly. Large banks like Bank of America and Wells Fargo both now offer products without overdraft fees, although they come with more limited features than their other accounts. Many banks suspended overdraft fees early last year when the pandemic struck. Other banks, like regional banking giant PNC, have introduced features to their bank products to help avoid the fees in the first place.

However, Ally is the first big U.S. bank to get rid of overdraft fees altogether.

But banks are still heavily reliant on overdraft fees for revenue. The industry collected more than \$12 billion in overdraft fee revenue last year alone, according to industry research.

## Netanyahu opponents reach coalition deal to oust Israeli PM

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's opponents announced Wednesday that they have reached a deal to form a new governing coalition, paving the way for the ouster of the longtime Israeli leader.

The dramatic announcement by opposition leader Yair Lapid and his main coalition partner, Naftali Bennett, came shortly before a midnight deadline and prevented what could have been Israel's fifth consecutive election in just over two years.

"This government will work for all the citizens of Israel, those that voted for it and those that didn't. It will do everything to unite Israeli society," Lapid said.

The agreement still needs to be approved by the Knesset, or parliament, in a vote that is expected to take place early next week. If it goes through, Lapid and a diverse array of partners that span the Israeli

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political spectrum will end Netanyahu's record-setting but divisive 12-year rule.

Netanyahu, desperate to remain in office while he fights corruption charges, is expected to do everything possible in the coming days to prevent the new coalition from taking power. If he fails, he will be pushed into the opposition.

The deal comes at a tumultuous time for Israel, which fought an 11-day war against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip last month while also experiencing mob violence between Jews and Arabs in cities across the country. The country also is emerging from a coronavirus crisis that caused deep economic damage and exposed tensions between the secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority.

Under the agreement, Lapid and Bennett will split the job of prime minister in a rotation. Bennett, a former ally of Netanyahu, is to serve the first two years, while Lapid is to serve the final two years — though it is far from certain their fragile coalition will last that long.

The historic deal also includes a small Islamist party, the United Arab List, which would make it the first Arab party ever to be part of a governing coalition.

In the coming days, Netanyahu is expected to continue to put pressure on hard-liners in the emerging coalition to defect and join his religious and nationalist allies. Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, may also use his influence to delay the required parliamentary vote. There was no immediate comment from Netanyahu or Likud.

Lapid called on Levin to convene the Knesset for the vote as soon as possible.

Netanyahu has been the most dominant player in Israeli politics over the past three decades — serving as prime minister since 2009 in addition to an earlier term in the late 1990s.

Despite a long list of achievements, including last year's groundbreaking diplomatic agreements with four Arab countries, he has become a polarizing figure since he was indicted on charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in 2019.

Each of the past four elections was seen as a referendum on Netanyahu's fitness to rule. And each ended in deadlock, with both Netanyahu's supporters as well as his secular, Arab and dovish opponents falling short of a majority. A unity government formed with his main rival last year collapsed after just six months.

The new deal required a reshuffling of the Israeli political constellation. Three of the parties are led by hard-line former Netanyahu allies who had personal feuds with him, while the United Arab List made history as a kingmaker, using its leverage to seek benefits for the country's Arab minority.

"This is the first time an Arab party is a partner in the formation of a government," said the party's leader, Mansour Abbas. "This agreement has a lot of things for the benefit of Arab society, and Israeli society in general."

Among the concessions secured by Abbas were agreements for legal recognition of Bedouin villages in southern Israel, an economic plan for investing 30 billion shekels (\$9.2 billion) in Arab towns and cities, and a five-year plan for combating violent crime in Arab communities, according to Army Radio.

Lapid, 57, entered parliament in 2013 after a successful career as a newspaper columnist, TV anchor and author. His new Yesh Atid party ran a successful rookie campaign, landing Lapid the powerful post of finance minister.

But he and Netanyahu did not get along, and the coalition quickly crumbled. Yesh Atid has been in the opposition since 2015 elections. The party is popular with secular, middle-class voters and has been critical of Netanyahu's close ties with ultra-Orthodox parties and said the prime minister should step down while on trial for corruption charges.

The ultra-Orthodox parties have long used their outsize political power to secure generous budgets for their religious institutions and exemptions from compulsory military service. The refusal of many ultra-Orthodox Jews to obey coronavirus safety restrictions last year added to widespread resentment against them.

Bennett, 49, is a former top aide to Netanyahu whose small Yamina party caters to religious and nationalist hard-liners. Bennett was a successful high-tech entrepreneur and leader of the West Bank settler movement before entering politics.

In order to secure the required parliamentary majority, Lapid had to bring together eight parties that



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have little in common.

Their partners include a pair of dovish, left-wing parties that support Palestinian independence and three hard-line parties that oppose major concessions to the Palestinians and support West Bank settlements. Lapid's Yesh Atid and Blue and White, a centrist party headed by Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and the United Arab List are the remaining members.

The coalition members hope their shared animosity toward Netanyahu will provide enough incentive to find some common ground.

"Today, we succeeded. We made history," said Merav Michaeli, leader of the dovish Labor Party.

The negotiations went down to the wire, with Labor and Yamina feuding over the makeup of a parliamentary committee.

Earlier this week, when Bennett said he would join the coalition talks, he said that everyone would have to compromise and give up parts of their dreams.

In order to form a government, a party leader must secure the support of a 61-seat majority in the 120-seat parliament. Because no single party controls a majority on its own, coalitions are usually built with smaller partners. Thirteen parties of various sizes are in the current parliament.

As leader of the largest party, Netanyahu was given the first opportunity by the country's figurehead president to form a coalition. But he was unable to secure a majority with his traditional religious and nationalist allies.

After Netanyahu's failure to form a government, Lapid was then given four weeks to cobble together a coalition. That window was set to expire at midnight.

Lapid already faced a difficult challenge bringing together such a disparate group of partners. But then war broke out with Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip on May 10. The fighting, along with the eruption of Arab-Jewish mob violence in Israeli cities during the war, put the coalition talks on hold.

But after a cease-fire was reached on May 21, the negotiations resumed, and Lapid raced to sew up a deal. He reached a breakthrough on Sunday when Bennett agreed to join the opposition coalition.

## Lebanese leaders exchange barbs as country sinks into crisis

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Lebanon's president and prime minister-designate traded barbs Wednesday, accusing one another of obstruction, negligence and insolence in a war or words that has for months obstructed the formation of a new government as the country sinks deeper into economic and financial crisis.

The power struggle between the premier-designate, Saad Hariri, on one side and President Michel Aoun and his son-in-law Gebran Bassil on the other, has worsened despite warnings from world leaders and economic experts of the dire economic conditions tiny Lebanon is facing. The World Bank on Tuesday said Lebanon's crisis is one of the worst the world has seen in the past 150 years.

In a reflection of the growing turmoil, scores of Lebanese lined up in front of ATM machines late on Wednesday, after a top court suspended a Central Bank decree that allowed them to withdraw from dollar deposits at a rate two and a half times better than the fixed exchange rate.

In a late night burst of anger, protesters blocked main roads in Beirut and north of the capital. A young activist told a local TV station the protest was against the constant humiliation of Lebanese who line up to fill their cars with fuel, increasing power cuts, search for medicine and deal with confused banking decisions that are robbing thousands of their savings.

The Lebanese pound, pegged to the dollar for 30 years at 1,507, has been in a free fall since late 2019. It is now trading at nearly 13,000 to the dollar at the black market.

Lebanon is governed by a sectarian power sharing agreement but as the crisis deepens, members of the ruling elite bicker over how to form a government that will have to make tough decisions.

Hariri, who was tasked by Aoun to form a Cabinet seven months ago, blames the president for the months-long delay, accusing him of insisting on having veto power in the upcoming government.

Aoun, an ally of the powerful militant Hezbollah group, has said that Hariri did not shoulder his respon-

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sibilities in forming a government they both can agree on. There is no legal avenue for the president to fire the prime minister-designate, who is chosen to the post by a majority of lawmakers.

The rift has paralyzed the cash-strapped country, delaying urgently needed reforms. The economic crisis, which erupted in 2019, has been compounded by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Lebanon and a massive blast at Beirut's port last year that killed over 200 people and defaced a big section of the capital.

The crisis has driven more than half of the population into poverty, caused the local currency to lose more than 85% of its value, and prompted banks to lock deposits through informal capital controls, eroding trust in a once-thriving banking sector.

The country's highest administrative court on Tuesday ordered the temporary suspension of a Central Bank circular that gave depositors a chance to withdraw at a rate better than the pegged rate.

The Central Bank announced late Wednesday it was accepting the decision, prompting the queues outside ATMs. One man said he went from one ATM to another to withdraw as much as he could. Another complained that people's savings are at the mercy of corrupt politicians.

"This is not resilience. We got used to being humiliated and controlled this much by the politicians," said Mustafa Taoush, a 23-year-old who failed to withdraw more than a weekly limit imposed on withdrawals.

A statement from Aoun's office on Wednesday accused Hariri of trying to usurp presidential powers, and coming up with "delusional propositions and insolent expressions."

"The prime minister-designate's continuous evading of responsibilities ... constitutes a persistent violation of the constitution and national accord," it added.

Hariri and his political group, the Future party, responded by saying the presidency is "hostage to the personal ambitions" of Bassil, Aoun's son-in-law, alluding to his alleged presidential aspirations.

High-level mediation efforts from France and local powerful players, including the parliament speaker and the head of the Maronite Church, have faded without a breakthrough in the face of intransigence from the rival parties in Lebanon.

Amid the Aoun-Hariri barbs, caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab warned that a collapse of Lebanon could have consequences beyond its borders, hinting at a possible massive exodus of refugees.

Diab, whose Cabinet resigned days after the port explosion, appealed on politicians to make concessions so that a new Cabinet could be formed — one that could resume talks with the International Monetary Fund on how to get out of the crisis.

"The collapse, if it happens, God forbid, will have very grave consequences not only for the Lebanese or those living here but also on friendly countries from the land and sea," Diab said. "No one will be able to control what waves the sea bring."

## Arizona GOP election audit draws more Republican politicians

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Three Pennsylvania lawmakers were in Arizona on Wednesday to check out the state Senate GOP's partisan audit of the 2020 election.

They're the latest Republicans to make a pilgrimage to Phoenix, ground zero in the "stop the steal" movement's push to find support for conspiracy theories suggesting the election was stolen from former President Donald Trump.

U.S. Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz cheered the audit at a rally just outside Phoenix last month. The next day, several prominent Trump supporters and conspiracy promoters were advertised as speakers at a Phoenix megachurch. Enrique Tarrío, leader of the Proud Boys extremist group, recently posted a short video of himself at the Arizona Capitol.

Political pilgrimages are nothing new to Arizona, where Republican politicians have long enjoyed photo ops in front of the Mexico border wall. But now, the draw is the Arizona State Fairgrounds, site of a former basketball arena where a Trump supporter who has promoted election conspiracies is overseeing a hand recount of 2.1 million ballots from Maricopa County.

The latest visitors are Pennsylvania Sens. Doug Mastriano and Cris Dush, and Rep. Rob Kauffman. They

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met with Arizona legislators at the Capitol before traveling to the audit site to get a briefing from the auditors.

"We'll bring the information back to the Senate leadership, we'll back-brief them on the way ahead and then hopefully we can come up with an approach here to make sure every person in Pennsylvania can rest assured they have one vote and it counts," Mastriano told a radio host from WEEO-FM.

The Pennsylvania lawmakers and others in their delegation spent about 20 minutes on the arena floor, where volunteers counted and photographed ballots. Doug Logan, the head of Cyber Ninjas, the firm leading the audit, led them around.

Afterward, Mastriano spoke to conservative media outlets but ignored journalists from the Associated Press and other mainstream news sources.

Asked by a reporter if he wants to see the Arizona audit replicated in Pennsylvania, Dush said, "Without question. Absolutely."

As Trump and his allies claimed without evidence last year that his Arizona loss was marred by fraud, the Arizona Senate GOP used its subpoena power to get access to all ballots, counting machines and hard drives full of election data in Maricopa County, home to Phoenix and 60% of Arizona's voters.

They handed all of it over to a team led by Cyber Ninjas, a small consulting firm with no prior election experience for a hand recount and analysis of vote-counting machines and data.

The effort will not change President Joe Biden's victory, and election experts have pointed to major flaws in the process. But it's become a model for Republicans in other states hoping to turn up evidence supporting conspiracy theories.

"It's my belief that Arizona will be the launch pad for elections audits and election integrity efforts all over this great country," Gaetz said. He listed the swing states where Trump lost in 2020.

Greene said the audit was the reason she and Gaetz chose Mesa, a Phoenix suburb, for the second stop on their tour of America First rallies.

"Matt said, 'You been following that Arizona audit?'" Greene said. "I said, 'Yeah I've been following it.' He said, 'Lets go to Arizona.' I said, 'Count me in.'"

Mastriano has become a one-man force in conservative politics in Pennsylvania, leading anti-mask protests last year, pushing to overturn Trump's reelection loss and showing up outside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 riot.

In November, Mastriano organized a hearing in Gettysburg that featured Rudy Giuliani and a phone call appearance by Trump in which the president claimed the election was rigged and urged state lawmakers to overturn the result.

All three visiting Pennsylvania lawmakers were among the 64 Republican legislators who signed a letter asking the state's congressional delegation to object to Pennsylvania's electoral college votes being cast for Biden.

## Texas push to close shelters for migrant kids alarms groups

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A move by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to shutter more than 50 shelters housing about 4,000 migrant children could seriously disrupt a national program that already faces strained capacity to properly care for minors crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which cares for migrant children, said Wednesday that it did not intend to close any facilities but that it was "assessing" the Republican governor's late Tuesday disaster declaration. The proclamation directs a state agency to deny or discontinue within 90 days licenses for child care facilities sheltering migrant children.

Groups that represent migrant children and reunite them with their families said the order could be harmful because it may mean more minors are sent to mass-scale, unlicensed facilities that attorneys and advocates say endanger their health and safety. Abbott argues that the federal government can't force Texas to keep issuing state licenses in response to a federal problem.

The U.S. government funds 56 shelters in Texas, out of about 200 licensed shelters in the country. The

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last census taken on May 19 showed 4,223 children in 52 of those state-licensed shelters, according to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

The agency was directed to remove the licenses and sent a notice to providers Wednesday telling them to wind down operations by Aug. 30.

After that date, it says, "if you are still providing care for individuals who are not lawfully present in the United States under a contract with the federal government, HHSC will take necessary steps to comply with the proclamation."

The highly unusual move to order a disaster declaration — usually reserved for natural disasters or health crises — comes amid Abbott's criticism of record numbers of border crossings in recent months. He has increased the presence of the Texas Department of Public Safety and National Guard in south Texas.

Abbott also has been critical of emergency facilities that lack state licenses, which may end up taking in more children if his order succeeds in shuttering smaller shelters.

In April, Texas officials announced they were investigating three reports alleging abuse and neglect at a San Antonio coliseum holding more than 1,600 migrant teens. There also have been abuse or neglect investigations at state-licensed facilities, and Texas lists 18 total citations between April and May.

Some critics worry the disaster declaration could set a precedent for other Republican governors to thwart efforts by the Biden administration to increase capacity in a network of licensed shelters. Governors in Iowa and Nebraska have rejected federal requests to house migrant children, saying they oppose President Joe Biden's stance on caring for minors before they are reunited with family in the U.S.

"This is a transparent and troubling ploy to politicize a humanitarian crisis," Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, head of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said in a statement. "Because Texas-based shelters comprise a significant portion of U.S. capacity, this order could do real damage, and to the serious detriment of children's well-being."

The increasing arrival of migrant children has tested the Biden administration, with the U.S. government picking up nearly 19,000 children traveling alone across the Mexican border in March and more than 17,000 in April.

The record-setting numbers come as the administration decided to exempt unaccompanied children from federal pandemic-related powers to immediately expel most migrants from the country without giving them an opportunity to seek asylum.

The pandemic also has meant less capacity at small and medium-size shelters that care for minors. The program lost thousands of beds due to COVID-19 restrictions, bringing down the tally to about 7,100 by February.

With fewer beds in smaller shelters and growing numbers of children crowding U.S. Border Patrol stations, the Biden administration awarded huge contracts to private companies to set up unlicensed emergency facilities at convention centers, military bases and other large venues in March. These venues resemble hurricane evacuation shelters with little space to play and no privacy, and critics say the contractors are not equipped to adequately care for the minors.

Health and Human Services has refused access to news media once children are at the facilities, citing the pandemic and privacy restrictions. Advocates and lawmakers who have been allowed to visit have expressed concerns about children's mental health at the sites where hundreds can sleep in cots in large tents. These facilities require fewer youth care workers and clinicians per child and no traditional legal oversight, skirting state regulations.

The Biden administration has maintained that the sites provide "lifesaving services" for children, with officials assuring lawmakers that minors would be kept in large-scale settings no more than two weeks, then placed with family in the U.S. or sent to a permanent licensed facility. But some children have been at the large venues much longer.

Doing away with more state-licensed shelters is a "wrongheaded approach," said Wendy Young, president of Kids in Need of Defense, which provides legal services to immigrant children.

"At a time when the United States needs far more licensed placement settings for unaccompanied mi-

grant children, the order threatens to leave the nation with far less," Young said.

## **EXPLAINER: Why ransomware is so dangerous and hard to stop**

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

Recent high-profile "ransomware" attacks on the world's largest meat-packing company and the biggest U.S. fuel pipeline have underscored how gangs of extortionist hackers can disrupt the economy and put lives and livelihoods at risk.

Last year alone in the U.S., ransomware gangs hit more than 100 federal, state and municipal agencies, upwards of 500 health care centers, 1,680 educational institutions and untold thousands of businesses, according to the cybersecurity firm Emsisoft. Dollar losses are in the tens of billions. Accurate numbers are elusive. Many victims shun reporting, fearing the reputational blight.

More recent known targets include a Massachusetts ferry operator, the Irish health system and the Washington, D.C., police department. But the broadly disruptive hacks on Colonial Pipeline in the U.S. in May and Brazilian meat processor JBS SA this week have drawn close attention from the White House and other world leaders, along with heightened scrutiny of the foreign safe havens where cybercriminal mafias operate.

### WHAT IS RANSOMWARE? HOW DOES IT WORK?

Ransomware scrambles the target organization's data with encryption. The criminals leave instructions on infected computers for negotiating ransom payments. Once paid, they provide decryption keys for unlocking those files.

Ransomware crooks have also expanded into data-theft blackmail. Before triggering encryption, they quietly copy sensitive files and threaten to post them publicly unless they get their ransom payments. That can present problems even for companies that diligently back up their networks as a hedge against ransomware, since refusing to pay can incur costs far greater than the ransoms they might have negotiated.

### HOW DO RANSOMWARE GANGS OPERATE?

The criminal syndicates that dominate the ransomware business are mostly Russian-speaking and operate with near impunity out of Russia and allied countries. Though barely a blip three years ago, the syndicates have grown in sophistication and skill. They leverage dark web forums to organize and recruit while hiding their identities and movements with sophisticated tools and cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin that make payments — and their laundering — harder to track.

Some top ransomware criminals fancy themselves software service professionals. They take pride in their "customer service," providing "help desks" that assist paying victims in file decryption. And they tend to keep their word. They have brands to protect, after all.

The business is now highly specialized. An affiliate will identify, map out and infect targets using ransomware that is typically "rented" from a ransomware-as-a-service provider. The provider gets a cut of the payout; the affiliate normally takes more than three-quarters.

Other subcontractors may also get a slice. Those can include the authors of the malware used to break into victim networks and the people running so-called "bulletproof domains" behind which the ransomware gangs hide their "command-and-control" servers. Those servers manage the remote sowing of malware and data extraction ahead of activation, a stealthy process that can take weeks.

### WHY DO RANSOMS KEEP CLIMBING? HOW CAN THEY BE STOPPED?

Colonial Pipeline confirmed that it paid \$4.4 million to the gang of hackers who broke into its computer systems last month.

The FBI discourages paying ransoms, but a public-private task force including tech companies and U.S., British and Canadian crime agencies says it would be wrong to try to ban ransom payments altogether. That's largely because "ransomware attackers continue to find sectors and elements of society that are woefully underprepared for this style of attack."

The task force recognizes that paying up can be the only way for an afflicted business to avoid bankruptcy. Worse, the sophisticated cybercriminals often have done their research and know a victim's cybersecurity

insurance coverage limit. They've been known to mention it in negotiations.

That degree of criminal savvy helped drive average ransom payments to more than \$310,000 last year, up 171% from 2019, according to Palo Alto Networks, a task force member.

WHAT'S BEING DONE ABOUT IT?

President Joe Biden signed an executive order in May meant to strengthen U.S. cybersecurity defenses, mostly in response to Russia's hacking of federal agencies and interference in U.S. politics. But headline-grabbing ransomware attacks on private companies have started to dominate the cybersecurity conversation as Biden prepares for a June 16 summit with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

White House principal deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said this week that the ransom demand of JBS meat came from a "criminal organization likely based in Russia." She said the White House "is engaging directly with the Russian government" and "delivering the message that responsible states do not harbor ransomware criminals."

The new industry task force set up to combat ransomware says it's important to have concerted diplomatic, legal and law enforcement cooperation with key allies.

Ransomware developers and their affiliates should be named and shamed — though they're not always easy to identify — and regimes that enable them punished with sanctions, its report urges.

It calls for mandatory disclosure of ransom payments and a federal "response fund" to provide financial assistance to victims in hopes that, in many cases, it will prevent them from paying ransoms. And it wants stricter regulation of cryptocurrency markets to make it more difficult for criminals to launder ransomware proceeds.

The task force also calls for something potentially controversial: amending the U.S. Computer Fraud and Abuse Act to let private industry actively block or limit online criminal activity, including of botnets, the networks of hijacked zombie computers that ransomware criminals use to sow infections.

## Free beer, other new incentives for Biden's 'vaccine sprint'

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dangling everything from sports tickets to a free beer, President Joe Biden is looking for that extra something — anything — that will get people to roll up their sleeves for COVID-19 shots when the promise of a life-saving vaccine by itself hasn't been enough.

Biden on Wednesday announced a "month of action" to urge more Americans to get vaccinated before the July 4 holiday, including an early summer sprint of incentives and a slew of new steps to ease barriers and make getting shots more appealing to those who haven't received them. He is closing in on his goal of getting 70% of adults at least partially vaccinated by Independence Day — essential to his aim of returning the nation to something approaching a pre-pandemic sense of normalcy this summer.

"The more people we get vaccinated, the more success we're going to have in the fight against this virus," Biden said from the White House. He predicted that with more vaccinations, America will soon experience "a summer of freedom, a summer of joy, a summer of get togethers and celebrations. An All-American summer."

The Biden administration views June as "a critical month in our path to normal," Courtney Rowe, the director of strategic communications and engagement for the White House COVID-19 response team, told the AP.

Biden's plan will continue to use public and private-sector partnerships, mirroring the "whole of government" effort he deployed to make vaccines more widely available after he took office. The president said he was "pulling out all the stops" to drive up the vaccination rate.

Among those efforts is a promotional giveaway announced Wednesday by Anheuser-Busch, saying it will "buy Americans 21+ a round of beer" once Biden's 70% goal is met.

"Get a shot and have a beer," Biden said, advertising the promotion even though he himself refrains from drinking alcohol.

Additionally, the White House is partnering with early childhood centers such as KinderCare, Learning

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Care Group, Bright Horizons and more than 500 YMCAs to provide free childcare coverage for Americans looking for shots or needing assistance while recovering from side effects.

The administration is also launching a new partnership to bring vaccine education and even doses to more than a thousand Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons, building on a successful pilot program in Maryland.

They're the latest vaccine sweeteners, building on other incentives like cash giveaways, sports tickets and paid leave, to keep up the pace of vaccinations.

"The fact remains that despite all the progress, those who are unvaccinated still remain at risk of getting seriously ill or dying or spreading the disease to others," said Rowe.

Aiming to make injections even more convenient, Biden is announcing that many pharmacies are extending their hours this month — and thousands will remain open overnight on Fridays. The White House is also stepping up its efforts to help employers run on-site vaccination clinics.

Biden will also announce that he is assigning Vice President Kamala Harris to lead a "We Can Do This" vaccination tour to encourage shots. It will include first lady Jill Biden, second gentleman Doug Emhoff and Cabinet officials. Harris' travel will be focused on the South, where vaccination rates are among the lowest in the country, while other officials will travel to areas of the Midwest with below average rates.

To date 62.9% of the adult U.S. population have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 133.9 million are fully vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed to an average below 555,000 per day, down from more than 800,000 when incentives like lotteries were announced, and down from a peak of nearly 2 million per day in early April when demand for shots was much higher.

The lengths to which the U.S. is resorting to convince Americans to take a shot stands in contrast to much of the world, where vaccines are far less plentiful. Facing a mounting U.S. surplus, the Biden administration is planning to begin sharing 80 million doses with the world this month.

"All over the world people are desperate to get a shot that every American can get at their neighborhood drugstore," Biden said.

"Incentives can work, and I think the White House's focus on making vaccination the easy and convenient choice is important," said Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician, public health professor at George Washington University and former Baltimore health commissioner.

"It's the height of American exceptionalism that we are having to beg people to get a life-saving vaccine, when healthcare workers and vulnerable people around the world are dying because they can't get access to it," she added.

Thanks to the vaccinations, the rate of cases and deaths in the U.S. are at their lowest since the beginning of the pandemic last March, averaging under 16,000 new cases and under 400 deaths per day.

As part of the effort to drive Americans to get shots, the White House is borrowing some tools from political campaigns, including phone banks, door-knocking and texting. The administration says more than 1,000 such events will be held this weekend alone. Additionally, it is organizing competitions between cities and colleges to drive up vaccination rates.

Other new incentives include a \$2 million commitment from DoorDash to provide gift cards to community health centers to be used to drive people to get vaccinated. CVS launched a sweepstakes with prizes including free cruises and Super Bowl tickets. Major League Baseball will host on-site vaccine clinics and ticket giveaways at games. And Kroger will give \$1 million to a vaccinated person each week this month and dozens of people free groceries for the year.

The fine print on the Anheuser-Busch promotion reveals the benefits to the sponsoring company, which will collect consumer data and photos through its website to register for the \$5 giveaway. The company says it will hand out credits to however many people qualify.

## NASA picks Venus as hot spot for two new robotic missions

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA is returning to sizzling Venus, our closest yet perhaps most over-

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looked neighbor, after decades of exploring other worlds.

The space agency's new administrator, Bill Nelson, announced two new robotic missions to the solar system's hottest planet, during his first major address to employees Wednesday.

"These two sister missions both aim to understand how Venus became an inferno-like world capable of melting lead at the surface," Nelson said.

One mission named DaVinci Plus will analyze the thick, cloudy Venusian atmosphere in an attempt to determine whether the inferno planet ever had an ocean and was possibly habitable. A small craft will plunge through the atmosphere to measure the gases.

It will be the first U.S.-led mission to the Venusian atmosphere since 1978.

The other mission, called Veritas, will seek a geologic history by mapping the rocky planet's surface.

"It is astounding how little we know about Venus," but the new missions will give fresh views of the planet's atmosphere, made up mostly of carbon dioxide, down to the core, NASA scientist Tom Wagner said in a statement. "It will be as if we have rediscovered the planet."

NASA's top science official, Thomas Zurbuchen, calls it "a new decade of Venus." Each mission — launching sometime around 2028 to 2030 — will receive \$500 million for development under NASA's Discovery program.

The missions beat out two other proposed projects, to Jupiter's moon Io and Neptune's icy moon Triton.

The U.S. and the former Soviet Union sent multiple spacecraft to Venus in the early days of space exploration. NASA's Mariner 2 performed the first successful flyby in 1962, and the Soviets' Venera 7 made the first successful landing in 1970.

In 1989, NASA used a space shuttle to send its Magellan spacecraft into orbit around Venus.

The European Space Agency put a spacecraft around Venus in 2006.

## Medina Spirit drug test confirmed; Baffert suspended 2 years

By GARY B. GRAVES and STEPHEN WHYNO AP Sports Writers

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Bob Baffert is on track to have his record seventh Kentucky Derby victory taken away and won't be able to run any horses in the prestigious race for the next two years.

Churchill Downs on Wednesday suspended the Hall of Fame trainer for two years after an additional drug test of Medina Spirit confirmed the presence of the steroid betamethasone in the Kentucky Derby winner's system. The next step could be the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission disqualifying Medina Spirit, and now Baffert won't be able to enter any horses in the Derby or other races at the storied track through the spring of 2023.

"Reckless practices and substance violations that jeopardize the safety of our equine and human athletes or compromise the integrity of our sport are not acceptable and as a company we must take measures to demonstrate that they will not be tolerated," Churchill Downs Inc. CEO Bill Carstanjen said in a statement. "Mr. Baffert's record of testing failures threatens public confidence in thoroughbred racing and the reputation of the Kentucky Derby. Given these repeated failures over the last year, including the increasingly extraordinary explanations, we firmly believe that asserting our rights to impose these measures is our duty and responsibility."

Churchill Downs initially suspended Baffert indefinitely pending the investigation and now said it reserves the right to extend Baffert's suspension if he has any other violations in other states. Baffert has had five in the past 13 months.

Maryland racing officials allowed Medina Spirit and Baffert-trained Concert Tour to run in the Preakness on May 15 only after undergoing three rounds of prerace testing. New York banned Baffert indefinitely and prevented him from entering any horses in the Belmont Stakes.

The stunning ban by Churchill Downs could have a domino effect that takes off the trail completely the only trainer to win the Triple Crown since 1978.

A Maryland Jockey Club spokesman did not expect to make any kind of formal announcement Wednesday. New York Racing Association spokesman Patrick McKenna said its suspension remains in effect and



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that the NYRA "will make a determination regarding the length and terms of Mr. Baffert's suspension at the appropriate time and based on information generated by the ongoing investigation in Kentucky."

Earlier Wednesday, lawyers for Baffert and Medina Spirit owner Amr Zedan confirmed the split-sample test came back positive for betamethasone.

Baffert's attorney, Craig Robertson, said the second test showed 25 picograms of the steroid, after 21 picograms were found in the first sample. Even a trace amount of betamethasone — a picogram is a trillionth of one gram — is prohibited on race day in Kentucky, Maryland and New York, which are home to the sport's Triple Crown races, and considered a violation.

Robertson said additional testing is being conducted to try to trace the source of the drug to an ointment to treat a skin infection and not an injection. He and Zedan attorney Clark Brewster said they expect tests to show the ointment is responsible and not injections into one of the horse's joints.

"I think that will shed the light most prominently on the issue here for us," Brewster told The Associated Press by phone. "The whole basis for listing betamethasone is because it's injected into a joint and they want you not to inject the joints too close to the race, so the whole substantive basis is out the window if it's a salve, and it can be proven scientifically and empirically to be the salve."

Rules in Kentucky do not differentiate punishment based on the source of the substance, which can be given to horses to help their joints and Baffert believes came from the dermatitis ointment. Churchill Downs said Medina Spirit would be disqualified if the split sample came back positive for betamethasone.

A spokeswoman for the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation. Sherelle Roberts-Pierre said the commission "values fairness and transparency and will provide information to the media and public at the close of an investigation."

Brewster said he hoped the additional tests would come back in a week to 10 days.

"At the end of the day, we anticipate this case to be about the treatment of Medina Spirit's skin rash with Otomax," Robertson said. "We will have nothing further to say until the additional testing is complete."

If Medina Spirit is disqualified, Mandaloun would be elevated as the winner of the May 1 Kentucky Derby.

"I can't control the outcome of that, so it's something I give very, very little thought to," said Brad Cox, who trains Mandaloun and would be the first trainer from Louisville to win the race.

Baffert initially denied wrongdoing in a May 9 news conference announcing the positive result, which he called "the biggest gut-punch in racing for something that I didn't do." He later cited the antifungal ointment as a potential cause.

Asked if he thought tests showing evidence of the steroid coming from an ointment would change the outcome, Brewster said: "You're asking me to predict the behavior and the decision-making of others, but if you ask me 'should' — absolutely."

This would be the second Derby disqualification in three years after 2019 winner Maximum Security was DQ'd for interference following the race and Country House declared the winner. The only previous time that a Derby winner was disqualified after the fact for failing a postrace drug test was 1968 with Dancer's Image.

## Hundreds of lakes in U.S., Europe are losing oxygen

By DREW COSTLEY AP Science Writer

Oxygen levels have dropped in hundreds of lakes in the United States and Europe over the last four decades, a new study found.

And the authors said declining oxygen could lead to increased fish kills, algal blooms and methane emissions.

Researchers examined the temperature and dissolved oxygen — the amount of oxygen in the water — in nearly 400 lakes and found that declines were widespread. Their study, published Wednesday in the journal Nature, found dissolved oxygen fell 5.5 % in surface waters of these lakes and 18.6% in deep waters.

The authors said their findings suggest that warming temperatures and decreased water clarity from human activity are causing the oxygen decline.

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"Oxygen is one of the best indicators of ecosystem health, and changes in this study reflect a pronounced human footprint," said co-author Craig E. Williamson, a biology professor at Miami University in Ohio.

That footprint includes warming caused by climate change and decreased water clarity caused in part by runoff from sewage, fertilizer, cars and power plants.

Dissolved oxygen losses in Earth's water systems have been reported before. A 2017 study of oxygen levels in the world's oceans showed a 2% decline since 1960. But less was known about lakes, which lost two to nine times as much oxygen as oceans, the new study's authors said.

Prior to this study, other researchers had reported on oxygen declines in individual lakes over a long period of time. But none of have looked at as many lakes around the world, said Samuel B. Fey, a Reed College biology professor who studies lakes and was not involved in this study.

"I think one of the really interesting findings here is that the authors were able to show that there's this pretty pronounced decline in dissolved oxygen concentrations in both the surface and (deep) parts of the lake," Fey said.

The deep water drop in oxygen levels is critical for aquatic organisms that are more sensitive to temperature increases, such as cold water fish. During summer months, they depend on cooler temperatures found deeper in the water, but if deep waters are low on oxygen, these organisms can't survive.

"Those are the conditions that sometimes lead to fish kills in water bodies," said study co-author Kevin C. Rose, a professor of biology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. "It really means that a lot of habitats for cold water fish could become inhospitable."

Other organisms, Rose said, are more tolerant of warmer temperatures found at the surface level and can get enough oxygen by remaining near the surface, where water meets air.

About a quarter of the lakes examined actually showed increasing oxygen in surface waters, which Rose says is a bad sign because it's likely attributable to increased algal blooms — sudden growth of blue green algae.

In these lakes, he said, dissolved oxygen was "very low" in deep waters and was unlivable for many species.

And the sediment in such oxygen-starved lakes tends to give off methane, a potent greenhouse gas, research shows.

Lakes examined in the new study were in the U.S. or Europe, except for one in Japan and a few in New Zealand. The authors said there was insufficient data to include other parts of the world.

Rose said lakes outside the study area probably are experiencing drops in dissolved oxygen, too. The reason, he said, is that warmer temperatures from climate change reduce the ability of oxygen to dissolve in water — its solubility.

"We know that most or many places around the planet are warming," he said. "And so we would expect to see declining solubility."

## AP FACT CHECK: Manchin, Sinema do not vote with GOP more

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is stretching the facts when he suggests that two moderate Democrats in the Senate might be a reason why his legislative agenda, such as a sweeping voting rights bill, isn't quickly getting done on Capitol Hill.

In a Senate divided 50-50 where legislation effectively needs 60 votes to pass, Biden points to an obstacle that doesn't exist. He said the lawmakers, Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, actually "vote more with my Republican friends."

That's not true.

BIDEN: "June should be a month of action on Capitol Hill. I hear all the folks on TV saying, 'Why doesn't Biden get this done?' Well, because Biden only has a majority of, effectively, four votes in the House and a tie in the Senate, with two members of the Senate who vote more with my Republican friends." — remarks Tuesday in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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THE FACTS: His implication about their voting records is wrong.

While Manchin and Sinema have indeed been more likely than other Democrats in either the Senate or House to cross party lines, it's not true they vote more often with Republicans than with fellow Democrats. And they haven't done so in Biden's presidency. So far, they've aligned with Biden 100% of the time.

According to CQ Roll Call, Manchin voted against his party's majority 38.5% of the time last year, while Sinema did so for 33.1% of the votes. Democratic Sen. Doug Jones of Alabama, who lost his reelection race in November to Republican Tommy Tuberville, was third at 32.2%.

In the House, Rep. Ben McAdams, D-Utah, most frequently voted last year against his party, at 27.3%, followed by Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., at 23.7%. Both lost to Republican challengers in November.

Manchin and Sinema have also supported Biden's position in every instance so far this year, including numerous confirmation votes on Biden nominees, COVID-19 relief and the commission to investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection, according to FiveThirtyEight's count. Sinema was not in town for last week's vote on the Jan. 6 commission, citing a family matter, but said she would have backed it if she were.

The two senators, however, are opposed to eliminating the 60-vote filibuster, a procedural hurdle that effectively requires a supermajority to pass legislation. They are now being pressed anew to reconsider their opposition after too few Republicans joined with Democrats to create the bipartisan Jan. 6 commission.

Manchin also opposes the election overhaul bill that would expand and mandate early voting, same-day registration and other long-sought changes that Republicans reject.

Still, it's not just Manchin and Sinema who oppose doing away with the filibuster. As many as 10 Democratic senators are reluctant to change the rules even for key legislation such as the voting rights bill. Biden himself has not said he wants to end the filibuster.

Manchin's office declined to comment on Biden's remarks, and Sinema's office didn't respond to messages. In a statement last month, Manchin said he was proud of CQ's latest ranking showing him to be the most "bipartisan" lawmaker in the Senate.

Biden didn't identify the two senators by name, but there was no mistaking whom he meant. White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Wednesday said Biden was not criticizing them in his remarks but was instead explaining the process to pass legislation in the Senate. She added that they would no doubt be proud of their "independent streaks" and their votes representing their states.

"He considers them both friends," Psaki said. "He considers them both good working partners. And he believes that in democracy, we don't have to see eye to eye on every detail of every single issue in order to work together. And he certainly thinks that reflects their relationship."

## **For Black Voters Matter, the goal is greater community power**

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

LaTosha Brown opened with a song.

Speaking about voting rights one recent spring day in Selma, Alabama, the Black activist delivered the civil rights anthem "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" in a voice showcasing her background as a jazz singer. She told her audience, through music, that the fight for equal access to the ballot box was as urgent as ever.

The song drew cheers from a few dozen listeners, young and old, who had gathered before the brown-bricked African Methodist Episcopal church in a city known for its poverty as much as for its troubled racial past.

For Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter, the song served to introduce a question.

"Close your eyes," she said. "What would America look like without racism?"

"How will we ever create what we're not even envisioning? There was nothing that was brought into the real world that was not first envisioned."

A year after the police killing of George Floyd galvanized public attention to racial injustices, amid a barrage of restrictive voting laws being passed by state legislatures, Brown's group is redoubling its march toward its North Star: increasing the political power of Black communities.

Like many groups that serve predominantly Black communities, the organization was flooded with donations after Floyd's death. A year later, the impact is visible: The group says it gave \$10 million to 600

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community-based groups in 15 states, mostly in the South, who, among other things, registered voters, distributed flyers about the importance of voting, held phone banks, sent millions of text messages, canvassed communities reminding people to vote and rented buses to drive people to the polls.

Those efforts are widely credited with helping fuel Black voter turnout in Georgia, which, in part, led to Democrats scoring victories in the presidential and U.S. Senate races that gave them control of both houses of Congress and helped President Joe Biden enact his legislative agenda. Now, in the face of new restrictions on voting in areas heavily populated by people of color, new challenges are emerging.

Brown estimates that Black Voters Matter, which received more than \$30 million in donations last year, has about 90,000 unique donors. Most of its donations were small gifts from ordinary Americans.

The group's operations are run through two channels. One is the Black Voters Matters Fund, a social welfare organization that can engage in political activity, like lobbying. The other is the Black Voters Matters Capacity Building Institute, a nonprofit that funds voter education, registrations and other programs to expand access to voting. (Contributions to the Capacity Building Institute are tax-deductible; donations to the Fund are not).

After the racial justice protests, most of the donations flowed into the Capacity Building Institute, which from June 2020 to the end of last year received \$18 million — a jump of more than 400% from the amount it collected in 2019, according to Alexis Buchanan Thomas, Black Voters Matter's development director, though the increase was driven in part by the 2020 elections.

Brown says \$3 million earmarked for advocacy work was distributed to several dozen community-based groups. An additional \$7 million was given to help local organizations, like the Alabama Association for the Arts, run their own operations and conduct voter engagement work, including voter registrations.

Using a \$17,000 grant from Black Voters Matter, the Alabama-based group funded a project called Lift Our Vote. It rented buses to help Alabamans get to polling locations, said Jessica Fortune Barker, the project's co-founder. On Election Day, they drove 10 routes across north Alabama.

An additional \$6 million was used to support Black Voters Matter's own get-out-the-vote activities and its 21 state staffers who coordinate with local groups. The funding also went toward providing local organizations vans for transportation, graphics support and radio advertising expenses, among other needs. The main goal for Black Voters Matter, Brown says, has been to strengthen these organizations for the long run.

The roots of Black Voters Matter date to 2016, borne of the painful frustration Brown says she and the organization's other co-founder, Cliff Albright, felt about the "nationalist, racist rhetoric" of former President Donald Trump and a "national discourse that didn't include Black folks." In philanthropy circles, Black Voters Matter is what's called an intermediary — an organization that donors can turn to when they want to fund nonprofits but lack the expertise or connections to do so directly.

In the South, Black Voters Matter has become the powerful heart of an ecosystem of community-based organizations that are often too small for institutional funders to notice — church groups involved in voter engagement, for example, or informal group of women with backgrounds in voter drives.

"This really provides an important infrastructure to touch places, and communities, that national philanthropy has not necessarily been able to engage in deeply," said Jerry Maldonado, the director of the Cities and States program at the Ford Foundation, which, in 2020, donated \$1.8 million to the nonprofit. "The South is a region that is growing tremendously and shifting tremendously. But it's also, unfortunately, a hotbed for regressive innovation, such as efforts restricting voting rights."

Many restrictive voting laws have been passed in Southern states since a 2013 Supreme Court ruling threw out a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The provision had required officials in jurisdictions with a history of discriminatory practices to receive federal approval before making changes to the voting process.

This year, Republican lawmakers in Georgia, Florida and other states have passed new voting restrictions, based largely on unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud by Trump and his allies. Supporters say the overhauls strengthen election security. But critics, backed by many election experts, argue that the new laws mainly serve to suppress minority votes.

In Georgia, Black Voters Matter's advocacy wing worked with its partners, and other civil rights organiza-

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tions, like the Georgia NAACP, to design a campaign that urged corporations based in the state to publicly oppose the law and divest from politicians who sponsored it.

Under pressure from activists and Black executives, Coca-Cola and Delta issued statements opposing the law. But their statements came days after the bill was passed. The Black Voters Matter Fund, along with other organizations, has since filed a lawsuit challenging the Georgia and Florida laws.

Brown's trip to Selma was part of a national event in support of a federal bill, named after John Lewis, to re-establish the mandatory federal oversight that was thrown out by the high court. The event, the "John Lewis Advancement Act Day of Action," was also intended to advocate for a federal overhaul of elections proposed by congressional Democrats.

The group's voter engagement work is slated to receive more money. Last year, the Capacity Building Institute was chosen as one of 10 Black-led organizations that will receive a total of \$36 million over three years from the Democracy Frontlines Fund. It's a strategy developed by 12 foundations to fund Black-led groups that are fighting for "free and fair elections," among other priorities.

The donations, in part, help the group hold events to benefit local communities. To counteract food insecurity, for example, Black Voters Matter and its partners have held free grocery distributions. In Georgia, Brown says it distributed free groceries to 200,000 families last year.

In Selma, when Brown finished her speech about voting rights, Black Voters Matter staffers and their partners hopped on the group's tour bus for a distribution event in Montgomery. After an hour-long drive, the vehicle stopped at a parking lot across from a distribution site that its partners had set up.

Soon, Montgomery residents began lining up cars, waiting to pick up collard greens, toys and Black Voters Matter merchandise, from T-shirts and masks to hand fans. For the nonprofit, it was also a way to obtain contact information from attendees, who had to scan a QR code after getting their items.

Alabama will always be special to Brown. It's where her grandmother, whom she calls her "soulmate," was barred from voting for most of her life under Jim Crow laws. And, it's where she lost a close Democratic primary race in 1998 for a seat on the Alabama State Board of Education.

After a weeklong vote count, Brown failed to oust the Democrat incumbent by barely more than 200 votes. But minutes after the election was certified, Brown says she received a call from the state Democratic leader, telling her that a sheriff from a county she had overwhelmingly carried had found about 800 uncounted votes in a safe. Yet at that point, her only recourse was to file a lawsuit, which she could not afford.

"After that experience, I understood the impact and the power of voting, and voter suppression in ways that I had never experienced before," she said. "I became more committed than ever that I would not allow anybody to take away my agency, the agency of the people that I love, or my community."

More than two decades later, well into Brown's career in philanthropy, her work is now most pronounced in Georgia, where the organization is based. Its work in the state, alongside organizations like Stacey Abrams' Fair Fight and the New Georgia Project, has been credited with helping flip Georgia blue during the 2020 presidential election and in the subsequent U.S. Senate runoffs.

Sekou Franklin, who teaches political science at Middle Tennessee State University, says this was due, in part, to the group's network of activists and organizations in dozens of cities, from Savannah and Albany, to Atlanta.

"They laid some of this groundwork in the 2018 election, so they have history in these communities," said Franklin, who worked with the fund that year on a campaign that called for a civilian oversight board for Nashville's police department. "I deem them just as important to Georgia transitioning from a red, to purple, swing state as Abrams."

For Brown and Albright, the focus of the work is not only on presidential and state-wide elections but also local races that often have a more direct impact on communities.

In Brunswick, a Georgia city where three white men are charged with the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, Black Voters Matter supports A Better Glynn. That nonprofit, launched last year by local minister Elijah Henderson and his friends after Arbery's slaying drew international headlines, seeks to advance equity in Glynn County beyond the Arbery case. It counts the ousting of Jackie Johnson, a

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Republican prosecutor criticized for her office's response to the fatal shooting of Arbery, as one of their successes.

Henderson says that while the nonprofit didn't endorse independent candidate Keith Higgins for the Brunswick Judicial Circuit Court, it worked hard to get people to sign a petition to put him on the ballot. Then, they went out nearly every day, and registered voters.

That's the kind of intensity Black Voters Matter wants to keep one year after Floyd's murder.

"As we got further and further away from the protest, a lot of organizations, including us, saw those donations going down on a daily basis," said Cliff Albright. "We would like for people to continue to have structural racism and racial justice on the top of their minds, just as much as they did in the summer of protest."

Black Voters Matter will continue to pursue three things Brown often mentions: organizing people, organizing money and organizing ideas. Ultimately, Albright says, it would like to work toward self-sufficiency and reduce its reliance on donors.

"We understand that any given month or any given year, the funding world, or individual donors, might be looking for the next shiny thing," he said. "We know that we have to find ways to be independently self-sustaining."

Brown and Albright's trip to Alabama ended with a block party at a Montgomery park. Police blocked off traffic, allowing two truck vendors selling pasta and other food to set up. Flanked by "Black Voters Matter" signs, community members lined up and, at one point, cheered on a man whose dance moves to Usher's "Yeah" captured attention.

Attendees were offered free Black Voters Matter merchandise. And they could register to vote. Near the end of the event, Brown once again came before an audience to speak about voting rights.

This time, she opened with another civil rights anthem: "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round."

## Prosecutors drop case against man charged in Capitol riot

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and JACQUES BILLEAUD Associated Press

Federal prosecutors have dropped the criminal case against a New York man who was accused of participating in the riot at the U.S. Capitol, in what appears to be the first such move by the Justice Department in its sprawling Jan. 6 prosecution.

The dismissal of the case against Christopher M. Kelly was disclosed on Wednesday, the same day prosecutors secured a second guilty plea by one of the more than 450 Capitol riot defendants.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Zia Faruqui agreed to dismiss the case against Kelly after prosecutors said in a court filing on Tuesday that they discussed the merits of the case with Kelly's lawyer and decided that ending the prosecution "serves the interests of justice" based on "the facts currently known to the government."

The filing doesn't elaborate on the decision, and the Department of Justice refused to provide more information. An attorney for Kelly didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Faruqui agreed to dismiss the charges "without prejudice," which means the Justice Department could attempt to revive the case.

Kelly was arrested in New York on Jan. 20 and faced charges of obstructing an official proceeding, aiding and abetting, violent entry and disorderly conduct, and unlawful entry to restricted buildings or grounds.

In an affidavit, an FBI agent said it appeared that Kelly used a Facebook account to inform "associates" that he had breached the Capitol and was inside the building. Two days before the attack, he told another Facebook user that he planned to be in Washington "with ex NYPD and some proud boys," the agent said.

More than two dozen leaders, members and associates of the far-right Proud Boys group have been charged in the riots, which interrupted the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory over then-President Donald Trump in the 2020 election. Kelly has a brother who is a retired New York City police officer, the FBI agent noted.

Meanwhile, a Florida man who carried a Trump 2020 flag while in the U.S. Senate during the Jan. 6 riot pleaded guilty on Wednesday to a felony charge of obstructing an official proceeding.

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Paul Allard Hodgkins, 38, of Tampa, wore protective goggles under his chin and a Trump shirt while standing nearby as other rioters prayed and shouted from the Senate dais. Trump had told his supporters before the siege to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat.

Prosecutor Mona Sedky said Hodgkins knew he wasn't supposed to be in the Capitol and acted with intent to corruptly influence a government proceeding.

The judge asked whether the description of facts read aloud by the prosecutor was correct. "Yes, Your Honor," Hodgkins said.

Hodgkins, who has no prior convictions, faces 15 to 21 months in prison under the sentencing guidelines. His sentencing was set for July 19.

The first person to plead guilty in the riot was a member of the Oath Keepers far-right militia group. Jon Ryan Schaffer, a heavy metal guitarist, has also agreed to cooperate with the government's investigation in the hopes of getting a lighter sentence.

Schaffer pleaded guilty in April to two counts: obstruction of an official proceeding and entering and remaining in a restricted building with a dangerous or deadly weapon. He admitted being one of the first people to forcibly enter the Capitol after the mob broke open a set of doors guarded by Capitol Police.

## Lufthansa gets green light to resume flights to Russia

BERLIN (AP) — German airline Lufthansa said late Wednesday that it has received the green light from Russia to resume flights there, after being briefly denied permission, which resulted in a reciprocal blocking of flights by Germany.

In a statement, Lufthansa said Russian authorities had issued approval for its flights from Frankfurt to Moscow and St. Petersburg for the month of June.

Lufthansa had been forced to cancel two flights Tuesday and Wednesday after failing to get approval from Russia's aviation authority FATA.

"Due to the underlying reciprocal practice, the German Federal Aviation Authority also did not issue any further permits for flights of the Russian carriers as long as the permits were pending on the Russian side," Germany's Transport Ministry said in a statement.

The move affected connections operated from Russia by Aeroflot and budget carrier S7.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the green light for Lufthansa would prompt German authorities in turn to issue approval for Russian airlines to resume flights to Germany.

But the ministry had stated that "as soon as the FATA approvals for Lufthansa flights are granted by the Russian side, the flights of Russian companies will also be approved."

The tit-for-tat spat comes amid mounting tension between Russia and the European Union over Moscow's support for Belarus.

The 27-nation bloc and the United States last week introduced fresh sanctions against Belarus after authorities there diverted an international flight to arrest a dissident journalist. The sanctions come on top of those already imposed on Belarusian officials, including its authoritarian leader, President Alexander Lukashenko, for rigging elections and clamping down on protests last year.

## NFL pledges to halt 'race-norming,' review Black claims

By MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The NFL on Wednesday pledged to halt the use of "race-norming" — which assumed Black players started out with lower cognitive function — in the \$1 billion settlement of brain injury claims and review past scores for any potential race bias.

The practice made it harder for Black retirees to show a deficit and qualify for an award. The standards were created in the 1990s in hopes of offering more appropriate treatment to dementia patients, but critics faulted the way they were used to determine payouts in the NFL concussion case.

Wednesday's announcement comes after a pair of Black players filed a civil rights lawsuit over the practice, medical experts raised concerns and a group of NFL families last month dropped 50,000 petitions at

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the federal courthouse in Philadelphia — where the lawsuit had been thrown out by the judge overseeing the settlement.

Senior U.S. District Judge Anita B. Brody later took the unusual step of asking for a report on the issue. Black retirees hope it will include a breakdown of the nearly \$800 million in payouts so far by race. They fear the data will never come to light.

“Words are cheap. Let’s see what they do,” said former Washington running back Ken Jenkins, whose wife Amy Lewis led the petition drive on behalf of NFL friends struggling with cognitive problems. Jenkins, an insurance executive, has so far been spared.

According to the NFL, a panel of neuropsychologists formed recently to propose a new testing regime to the court includes two female and three Black doctors.

“The replacement norms will be applied prospectively and retrospectively for those players who otherwise would have qualified for an award but for the application of race-based norms,” the NFL said in a statement issued Wednesday by spokesman Brian McCarthy.

Lead players lawyer Christopher Seeger, who negotiated the 2013 settlement with the NFL, said earlier this year that he had not seen any evidence of racial bias in the administration of the settlement fund. He amended those remarks Wednesday, apologizing for any pain the program has caused.

“I am sorry for the pain this episode has caused Black former players and their families. Ultimately, this settlement only works if former players believe in it, and my goal is to regain their trust and ensure the NFL is fully held to account,” Seeger said in a statement.

The NFL noted that the norms were developed in medicine “to stop bias in testing, not perpetrate it.” And both Seeger and the league said the practice was never mandatory, but left to the discretion of doctors taking part in the settlement program.

However, the NFL appealed some claims filed by Black players if their scores were not adjusted for race.

“If it wasn’t for the wives, who were infuriated by all the red tape involved, it never would have come to be,” Jenkins said of the attention being paid to the issue, three years after lawyers for former Pittsburgh Steelers Kevin Henry and Najeh Davenport say they first raised it.

The binary race norms, when they are used in the testing, assumes that Black patients start with worse cognitive function than whites and other non-Blacks. That makes it harder for them to show a deficit and qualify for an award. Henry and Davenport, for instance, were denied awards but would have qualified had they been white, according to their lawsuit, which Brody dismissed in March, calling it an improper “collateral attack” on the settlement. They have appealed the ruling.

More than 2,000 NFL retirees have filed dementia claims, but fewer than 600 have received awards, according to the most recent report. More than half of all NFL retirees are Black, according to lawyers involved in the litigation.

The awards so far have averaged \$516,000 for the 379 players with early-stage dementia and \$715,000 for the 207 players with moderate dementia. Retirees can also seek payouts for Alzheimer’s disease and a few other diagnoses. The settlement ended thousands of lawsuits that accused the NFL of long hiding what it knew about the link between concussions and traumatic brain injury.

## Japan’s vaccine push ahead of Olympics looks to be too late

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — It may be too little, too late.

That’s the realization sinking in as Japan scrambles to catch up on a frustratingly slow vaccination drive less than two months before the Summer Olympics, delayed by a year because of the coronavirus pandemic, are scheduled to start.

The Olympics risk becoming an incubator for “a Tokyo variant,” as 15,000 foreign athletes and tens of thousands officials, sponsors and journalists from about 200 countries descend on — and potentially mix with — a largely unvaccinated Japanese population, said Dr. Naoto Ueyama, a physician, head of the Japan Doctors Union.



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With infections in Tokyo and other heavily populated areas currently at high levels and hospitals already under strain treating serious cases despite a state of emergency, experts have warned there is little slack in the system.

Even if the country succeeds in meeting its goal of fully vaccinating all 36 million elderly by the end of July — already a week into the Games — about 70% of the population would not be inoculated. And many have dismissed the target as overly optimistic anyway.

To meet it, Japan is vowing to soon start administering 1 million doses daily. It currently is only giving 500,000 per day, already a big improvement after Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga called on military doctors and nurses and started making legal exceptions to recruit other vaccinators in order to boost the drive.

“Vaccinations under the current pace are not going to help prevent infections during the Olympics,” Tokyo Medical Association Chairman Haruo Ozaki said. “The Olympics can trigger a global spread of different variants of the virus.”

The International Olympic Committee says more than 80% of athletes and staff staying in the Olympic Village on Tokyo Bay will be vaccinated — and they are expected to remain largely in a bubble at the village and venues. On Tuesday, Japan started vaccinating athletes who will go to the Games, the Japanese Olympic Committee said.

But vaccination rates are not clear for others involved in the Games who are coming from abroad, including hard-hit regions, and experts warn that even strict rules won't prevent all mingling, especially among non-athletes. Spectators from overseas have been barred.

Prominent medical journals have questioned the wisdom of pushing ahead with the Tokyo Games and the Asahi Shimbun — the country's second-largest newspaper — has called for them to be canceled, reflecting widespread opposition to holding the Olympics now among the Japanese population.

But the government has said it's determined to push ahead, with the viability of Suga's leadership and geopolitical competition with rival Beijing, the next Olympics host, as well as the health of millions, on the line.

“By using a new weapon called vaccines and taking firm preventive measures, it is fully possible” to hold the Olympics safely, Suga told a parliamentary session Tuesday.

Officials are now desperately trying to think of ways to increase the shots at a time when medical workers are already under pressure treating COVID-19 patients. Many say they have no extra resources to help with the Olympics, if, for instance, the boiling Japanese summer causes widespread cases of heat stroke. Some local leaders in and around Tokyo have rejected the Olympics organizers' requests to set aside beds for athletes.

Dr. Shigeru Omi, former World Health Organization regional director and a head of a government taskforce, said it is crucial to start inoculating younger people, who are seen as likely to spread the virus, as soon as possible.

More than three months into Japan's vaccination campaign, only 2.7% of the population has been fully vaccinated. The country started its rollout with health care workers in mid-February, months behind many other countries because Japan required additional clinical testing here, a step many experts say was medically meaningless.

Inoculations for the elderly, who are more likely to suffer serious problems when infected, started in mid-April, but were slowed by initial supply shortages, cumbersome reservation procedures and a lack of medical workers to give shots.

But there are signs of improvement. The vaccine supply has increased and despite earlier expectations of a hesitant response to vaccines in general, senior citizens fearful of the virus are rushing to inoculation sites.

Since May 24, Japan has deployed 280 military doctors and nurses in Tokyo and the badly hit city of Osaka. More than 33,000 vaccination sites now operate across Japan, and more are coming, said Taro Kono, the minister in charge of vaccinations.

In Sumida, a district in downtown Tokyo where boxing events will be held, vaccinations for its 61,000 elderly residents began on May 10, and within two weeks, 31% of them had gotten their first shots, com-

pared to the national average of 3.7%. Sumida is now looking to start inoculating younger people later this month, well ahead of schedule.

Close coordination among primary care doctors, hospitals and residents, as well as flexibility, have contributed to smooth progress, Sumida district spokesperson Yosuke Yatabe said.

"It's like a factory line," Yatabe said.

Ryuichiro Suzuki, a 21-year-old university student in Tokyo, said he is frustrated with Japan's lagging vaccination campaign.

"I saw that some of my friends overseas have been vaccinated, but my turn won't come until later this summer," he said. "The risk-averse government took extra caution even when our primary goal was to get back to normal as soon as possible."

Kono, the vaccine minister, said more large-scale inoculation centers are getting underway, including at hundreds of college campuses and offices to start vaccinating younger people from June 21.

Beyond the concerns about the Olympics and despite the fact that Japan has seen fewer cases and deaths compared to the United States and other advanced nations, the country's slow pace of vaccinations and its prolonged, often toothless state of emergency could also delay its economic recovery for months, said Masaya Sasaki, senior economist at the Nomura Research Institute.

And despite repeated expressions of official government confidence in the Games being safe, there are fears here of what might happen if vaccinations don't pick up.

"The Olympics, billed as a recovery Games, can trigger a new disaster," said Ueyama, of the Japan Doctors Union.

## Gaza's bereaved civilians fear justice will never come

By KARIN LAUB and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The al-Kawlaks, a family of four generations living next door to each other in downtown Gaza City, were utterly unprepared for the inferno.

Like others, they were terrified by the heavy bombing in Israel's fourth war with Gaza's Hamas rulers that began May 10. The explosions felt more powerful than in previous fighting. At night, parents and children slept in one room so they would live or die together.

Yet the relatively well-to-do Rimal neighborhood where the family lived in a cluster of apartment buildings seemed somewhat safer than areas along Gaza's border with Israel, which had been devastated in this and past fighting.

Then one night disaster struck. Azzam al-Kawlak's four children had gone to bed, and he and his wife were preparing to join them.

At around 1 a.m. on May 16, a thunderous boom shook his top-floor apartment, followed quickly by a second and third. "The floor cracked below our feet and the furniture was thrown to the wall," the 42-year-old engineer said.

The four-story building collapsed, with Azzam's apartment dropping to the ground. The family escaped through the kitchen balcony, now almost ground level. Bizarrely, the laundry hanging on a clothesline seemed untouched.

It took a day for the full horror to emerge, as bodies and survivors were pulled from the rubble. The family and neighbors used ropes to clear chunks of concrete, working alongside ill-equipped rescue teams.

By nightfall, the family's death toll stood at 22. Eight bodies were dug out of Azzam's building and 14 from the one next door. The dead included 89-year-old family patriarch Amin, his son Fawaz, 62, his grandson Sameh, 28, and his great-grandson, 6-month-old Qusai.

Just a day earlier, Qusai's parents had celebrated a small milestone, his first tooth. Azzam's two younger brothers were killed. Three nieces — 5-year-old Rula, 10-year-old Yara and 12-year-old Hala — were found in a tight embrace, their bodies the last to be pulled out, said Azzam's surviving older brother, Awni.

The bombing along several hundred meters (yards) of al-Wahda Street took just minutes. In all, it brought

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down three houses — two in the al-Kawlak compound and one nearby — and killed a total of 43 people, making it the single deadliest air raid of the 11-day war.

Israel said the target was a Hamas tunnel underneath the street, part of what it called a roughly 350-kilometer-long (220-mile) underground network. The tunnels served offensive and defensive purposes, military officials said, accusing Hamas of using civilians as human shields.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said during a war-time briefing that the military target in Rimal collapsed, causing nearby houses and their supporting structures to collapse as well. "That caused a large amount of civilian casualties, which were not the aim," he said.

He said the army was reviewing the incident and "adjusting the analysis and the ordnance used in the future" to prevent similar events from occurring again. "It's not a totally mathematic exercise in choosing the ordnance," he said.

He said Israel carried out dozens of airstrikes in areas just as densely populated, with far fewer casualties.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz told foreign journalists this week that Israel does everything it can to avoid civilian casualties, but Gaza's crowded urban landscape makes it virtually impossible to avoid them altogether.

"Hamas is aiming to hit civilians by purpose and we are trying our best for that not to happen," he said.

The fighting began May 10 after Hamas fired rockets toward Jerusalem in support of Palestinian protests against Israel's heavy-handed policing of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims, and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers. In all, Hamas fired more than 4,000 rockets toward Israel during the war, while Israel said it struck hundreds of targets linked to militants in Gaza.

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At Gaza City's main police compound, Capt. Mohammed Meqdad picked through pieces of bomb fragments in a cardboard box labeled "al-Wahda Street."

Two had serial numbers identifying them as fitted with Joint Direct Attack Munition kits manufactured by Boeing Co. at its factory in St. Charles, Missouri, to make them so-called "smart bombs," able to be guided to a target by GPS or lasers. Boeing did not answer questions about the bombing, only saying in a statement: "In accordance with U.S. law, the U.S. government authorizes and provides strict oversight for all defense exports."

Meqdad said that based on the fragments, the bombs that brought down the al-Kawlak homes were likely GBU-31s, packed with 430 kilograms (945 pounds) of high explosives. The GBU-31 typically is used for large buildings, but also can destroy underground targets, said N.R. Jenzen-Jones, the director of Armament Research Services, a specialist arms investigations firm.

The bombs carry a powerful blast, meaning surveillance, intelligence-gathering, pre-planning and the correct choice and explosive punch of the weapon should be carefully considered before an attack, he said.

"The intrinsic wide-area effects of large explosive munitions mean they must be used judiciously in the urban environment," he said.

The Israeli military did not respond when asked what bombs were used in the al-Wahda Street strikes.

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Earlier this year, the International Criminal Court began investigating Israel and Hamas for possible war crimes going back to the previous 2014 war. This includes random Hamas rocket fire toward Israeli communities — widely seen as a violation of the rules of war — and some of Israel's deadliest practices, such as the toppling of high-rises that killed entire families in pursuit of militants.

Two Gaza rights groups — al-Mezan and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights — have been documenting Israel's strikes and incursions for years. This time, they again interviewed survivors, including the al-Kawlaks, visited hospitals, took photos and collected death certificates, in preparation for possible new submissions to the ICC.

Samir Zakout of al-Mezan and Mohammed al-Alami of PCHR said they believe the al-Wahda Street bombings — along with other deadly airstrikes — violated the laws of war, arguing the value of any possible

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military target was dwarfed by significant harm to civilians.

Zakout accused Israel of intentionally using excessive firepower to sow fear, saying it was "one of the direct goals of the war."

The Israeli military does not recognize the ICC, but says its airstrikes are cleared by lawyers to make sure they comply with international standards. During the fighting the military released video of what it said were air force teams calling off strikes because they spotted children in the vicinity. In many cases, it ordered occupants to evacuate buildings before bombing them.

International law professor Paola Gaeta said that "certainly we are witnessing something which is wrong," referring to civilian deaths, but there is a high threshold for proving a war crime. This includes proving disproportionate use of force and intentional targeting of civilians, said Gaeta, who teaches at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

If Israel says it made a reasonable mistake in calculating the amount of explosives in the al-Wahda Street strike, this could serve as a defense, she said.

In all, 254 people were killed in Gaza in this war, including 67 children and 39 women, according to the Gaza health ministry. Hamas has acknowledged the deaths of 80 militants. Twelve civilians, including two children, were killed in Israel, along with one soldier.

Awni al-Kawlak keeps 22 death certificates in a briefcase, along with the deeds for the two destroyed homes. A third family house was damaged and awaits demolition. The family business, a generator repair shop, was also destroyed. Two apartment buildings, including Awni's home, remain intact.

Sitting in a courtyard behind the rubble, the 49-year-old shrugged when told of Israel's apparent acknowledgement of error. "What will I do with this information?" he said. "I lost my livelihood and I lost my brothers and their children."

The fear that justice will never come makes it harder for the family to deal with loss, he said. He worries that Gaza and its problems, including a suffocating blockade enforced by Israel and Egypt since 2007 to contain Hamas, will soon sink back into oblivion.

"We know that the world is now empathetic, but after a while it will forget our problem," he said. "Even when they remember us again, they will remember us as numbers."

## UK hits vaccine milestone, warns of 'deadly' misinformation

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Three-quarters of Britain's adult population has received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, the government said Wednesday, as it warned that "deadly" misinformation was undermining the global inoculation effort.

The Department of Health said that 75.2% of people 18 and over in the U.K. have received a shot, and 49.5% are fully vaccinated after two doses.

Britain is racing to vaccinate all adults and curb a more contagious delta variant of the virus, which was first identified in India and is spreading rapidly in the U.K.

The U.K. has recorded almost 128,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe. A mass vaccination campaign that started in December has brought new infections and deaths down sharply, but confirmed cases are once again rising, though daily deaths remain low.

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock called the 75% milestone a big step forward, but he warned that "a worldwide pandemic of misinformation" threatened the vaccination campaign.

"The speed of misinformation is a deadly threat," Hancock said at an international meeting organized by Britain to encourage vaccine uptake.

The one-day Vaccine Confidence Summit, attended virtually by diplomats, politicians and academics who included U.S. coronavirus response chief Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers of Disease Control.

Heidi Larson, a professor of anthropology who leads the Vaccine Confidence Project at the London School

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of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said the pandemic had heightened issues around vaccine misgivings that had “been brewing for a while.”

“COVID has laid bare a lot of underlying issues of trust and distrust” Larson said, At the same time, the digital revolution sped information and misinformation around the world.

She said when European nations flip-flopped on administering AstraZeneca shots — which has been withdrawn or limited in some countries because of a link to rare blood clots — it “shook the confidence of a number of African countries” in the vaccine.

“That global knock-on effect is another phenomenon we’re seeing in a different light,” said Larson, who spoke at Wednesday’s meeting.

She said the best thing governments could do was to bridge “the massive divide in access to vaccines” around the world.

Wealthy countries have scooped up hundreds of millions of doses, while supply problems and reluctance by nations, including Britain, to share doses before their own populations are fully inoculated has slowed a United Nations-backed effort to distribute vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.

Vaccine supplies will be high on the agenda when Hancock meets Thursday with health ministers from the Group of Seven rich nations at Oxford University, where the AstraZeneca vaccine was developed. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is due to host U.S. President Joe Biden and the other G-7 leaders at a summit in southwest England next week.

Britain’s government has faced strong criticism for missteps in handling the pandemic, including hesitation about putting the country into lockdown in March 2020 and testing failures that saw people with the virus released from hospitals to nursing homes, where thousands of residents died.

But its vaccination campaign has been widely praised. Britain secured early contracts for multiple vaccines — four of which have been approved for use — and has used medics, soldiers and volunteers to give more than 65 million doses at thousands of sites.

Hancock said Britain had bolstered vaccine confidence by using “trusted voices” — including naturalist David Attenborough and Queen Elizabeth II — to disclose that they had received a shot and to deliver a pro-vaccine message.

He said another key factor was ensuring the process was fair, by giving vaccines first to the elderly and those at most risk, then moving down the age groups in an orderly way.

“We Brits love queuing,” Hancock said. “And there’s nothing more upsetting than someone jumping the queue.”

## Iran’s largest warship catches fire, sinks in Gulf of Oman

By AMIR VAHDAT and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — The largest warship in the Iranian navy caught fire and later sank Wednesday in the Gulf of Oman under unclear circumstances, the latest calamity to strike one of the country’s vessels in recent years amid tensions with the West.

The blaze began around 2:25 a.m. and firefighters tried to contain it, the Fars news agency reported, but their efforts failed to save the 207-meter (679-foot) Kharg, which was used to resupply other ships in the fleet at sea and conduct training exercises. State media reported 400 sailors and trainee cadets on board fled the vessel, with 33 suffering injuries.

The ship sank near the Iranian port of Jask, some 1,270 kilometers (790 miles) southeast of Tehran on the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf. Satellite photos from Planet Labs Inc. analyzed by The Associated Press showed the Kharg off Jask with no sign of a fire as late as 11 a.m. Tuesday.

Photos circulated on Iranian social media showed sailors wearing life jackets evacuating the vessel as a fire burned behind them. Fars published video of thick, black smoke rising from the ship early Wednesday morning. Satellites from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that track fires from space detected a blaze near Jask that started just before the time of the fire reported by Fars.

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Iranian officials offered no cause for the fire aboard the Kharg, though they said an investigation had begun.

Meanwhile, a massive fire broke out Wednesday night at the oil refinery serving Iran's capital, sending thick plumes of black smoke over Tehran. It wasn't immediately clear if there were injuries or what caused the blaze at the Tondgooyan Petrochemical Co., though temperatures in the capital reached nearly 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) and hot summer weather in Iran has caused fires in the past.

The fire Wednesday aboard the Kharg warship follows a series of mysterious explosions that began in 2019 targeting commercial ships in the Gulf of Oman. The U.S. Navy accused Iran of targeting the ships with limpet mines, timed explosives typically attached by divers to a vessel's hull.

Iran denied that, though U.S. Navy footage showed Revolutionary Guard members removing one unexploded limpet mine from a ship. The attacks came amid heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran after then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. Negotiations on saving the accord continue in Vienna.

In April, an Iranian ship called the MV Saviz believed to be a Guard base and anchored for years in the Red Sea off Yemen was targeted in an attack suspected to have been carried out by Israel. It escalated a yearslong shadow war in the Mideast between the two countries, ranging from strikes in Syria, assaults on ships and attacks on Iran's nuclear program.

The Israeli prime minister's office did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday regarding the Kharg. Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the U.S. was aware of the loss of the ship, but declined to comment further.

State TV and semiofficial news agencies on Wednesday referred to the Kharg, named after the island that serves as the main oil terminal for Iran, as a "training ship." The vessel often hosted cadets from the Imam Khomeini Naval University on the Caspian Sea.

Like much of Iran's major military hardware, the Kharg dated back to before Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The warship, built in Britain and launched in 1977, entered the Iranian navy in 1984 after lengthy negotiations. That aging military equipment has seen fatal accidents as recently as Tuesday, when a malfunction in the ejector seats of an Iranian F-5 dating back to before the revolution killed two pilots while the aircraft was parked in a hangar.

In recent months, the navy converted a slightly larger commercial tanker called the Makran to use it as a mobile launch platform for helicopters. The Kharg also could launch helicopters on a smaller scale.

But the newer vessel likely can't fill the role of the Kharg, which could handle both refueling and replenishing supplies of ships at sea, said Mike Connell of the Center for Naval Analysis, an Arlington, Virginia-based federally funded nonprofit that works for the U.S. government.

The Kharg also was seaworthy enough to sail through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea and into South Asia in the past and could lift heavy cargo.

"For the regular Iranian navy, this vessel was very valuable because it gave them reach," Connell said. "That allowed them to conduct operations far afield. They do have other logistics vessels, but the Kharg was kind of the most capable and the largest."

The sinking of the Kharg marks the latest naval disaster for Iran. In 2020, during an Iranian military training exercise, a missile mistakenly struck a naval vessel near Jask, killing 19 sailors and wounding 15. Also in 2018, an Iranian navy destroyer sank in the Caspian Sea.

## Vaccine protection may diminish need for yearly boosters

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Scientists have found clues that the world's leading COVID-19 vaccines offer lasting protection that could diminish the need for frequent booster shots, but they caution that more research is needed and that virus mutations are still a wild card.

Critical studies are underway, and evidence is mounting that immunity from the mRNA vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna does not depend exclusively on antibodies that dwindle over time. The body has

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overlapping layers of protection that offer backup.

Pfizer and Moderna have fueled booster questions by estimating that people might need yearly shots, just like with flu vaccinations, and the companies are working to have some candidates ready this fall. But companies will not decide when boosters get used. That will be up to health authorities in each country.

Other experts say boosters may be needed only every few years.

"I would be surprised if we actually needed a yearly booster shot," said Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine specialist at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia who advises the Food and Drug Administration.

They point to ways the immune system remembers the coronavirus so that once original antibodies fade, the body's defenses can swing back into action if a person is exposed again.

"I'm pretty optimistic. I wouldn't rule out the need for boosters, but the immune response so far looks actually quite impressive," University of Pennsylvania immunologist John Wherry said.

Antibodies that form after vaccination or natural infection do wane naturally, but there's evidence that those levels remain strong for at least six to nine months after mRNA vaccination and possibly longer. They also appear effective against worrisome virus mutants, at least for now.

Scientists do not yet know what's called the correlate of protection, the level below which antibodies cannot fend off the coronavirus without additional help.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's leading infectious disease expert, told a Senate subcommittee last week that vaccine protection would not be infinite.

"I would imagine we will need, at some time, a booster," Fauci said. "What we're figuring out right now is what that interval is going to be."

To date, 62.8% of the adult U.S. population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 133.6 million, or more than 40 percent, are full vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed to an average below 600,000 per day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's closing in on President Joe Biden's goal of 70% with at least one inoculation by July 4.

Infections and deaths continue to fall. The nation's seven-day average for daily new cases fell to less than 17,300 on Tuesday, down from more than 31,000 two weeks ago. Daily deaths declined to 588, down from 605, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. In all, the virus has killed more than 595,000 people in the U.S.

So-called long-lived plasma cells are one of the body's backups. Immunologist Ali Ellebedy at Washington University in St. Louis found that nearly a year after people recovered from mild COVID-19, those plasma cells had migrated to the bone marrow where they were continuing to secrete antibodies. That's why although antibodies do diminish with time, they have not disappeared.

Now Ellebedy is hunting for the same cells in vaccine recipients, and while the research isn't finished, he's finding hints that they're forming.

An even more important backup system comes in the form of memory B cells. If existing antibodies are not enough to stop the coronavirus, memory B cells are poised to churn out large numbers of new antibodies, Ellebedy explained. Numerous studies have found those memory cells after COVID-19 vaccination.

And if the virus makes it past those defenses, yet another immune branch — the memory T cells — jumps in to eliminate infected cells and prevent severe illness.

With different coronaviruses that cause common colds, people tend to get re-infected every two to five years, Wherry noted.

Based on natural immunity against those related viruses, "we are sort of expecting our immunity may decline," he said. "But we don't know. For these mRNA vaccines, we may be doing better than nature, better than a natural infection."

So far, health authorities agree that the most common COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. and Europe protect against the virus mutations that are currently circulating, though not as strongly as they guard against the original virus.

Why? The vaccines mimic the protein that covers the outer surface of the coronavirus, and only certain spots of that protein are mutating, said FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks. The mRNA vaccines in particu-

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lar make antibody levels skyrocket after the second dose. Those levels are so high that they offer some protection even when the vaccine and the variant are not a perfect match.

With so many people still unvaccinated, opportunities abound for more mutations to occur. The biggest sign that a booster might be necessary would be a jump in COVID-19 cases in fully vaccinated people, especially severe illnesses and especially if the infections are caused by a new variant.

To get ready, people vaccinated a year ago as part of the first Pfizer and Moderna vaccine trials now are being enrolled in studies of additional shots — either a third dose of the original or versions that have been updated to match a variant that first emerged in South Africa. Moderna says preliminary findings are promising. More results are due this summer.

The National Institutes of Health also just began testing a system in which patients are given a different brand of booster than their original vaccination, to see if it is effective.

Most of the world's population has yet to receive a first dose. With different countries using different kinds of vaccines, decisions on booster shots may vary widely. Already, the United Arab Emirates has offered a third dose to recipients of a Chinese-made shot, the first formal introduction of any kind of booster.

If boosters eventually are called for, they will not be needed all at once because antibodies fade gradually rather than disappearing suddenly.

"Even if we require boosters or get to the point where we see immunity waning a little bit, we still are going to be far better off than we were a year ago," Wherry said.

## **A year later, racial reckoning yields uncertainty in giving**

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

One year ago, as protesters filled America's streets demanding justice after George Floyd's murder by police, corporations and major philanthropists pledged an outpouring of donations for racial equity causes.

Billions of dollars were committed to new philanthropic initiatives. Billions more were directed to new business practices designed to aid minority communities. From poverty and police conduct to housing and education, the causes ranged broadly, with many donors looking to address the underfunding of nonprofits, especially in Black communities.

Those causes may yet receive the money they were pledged. Yet a tangle of complex tax rules and the absence of a framework to track funding for racial equity programs — or even a consensus on what a "racial equity program" is — have made it all but impossible to assess the overall effectiveness of the donations.

A year later, racial justice retains its high profile across the country, even if protests are now fewer and smaller. And though discussion about increasing diversity in all aspects of American life goes on and some changes have been adopted, advocates so far see little systemic progress.

"The events of last year have changed the way some foundations work," said Aaron Dorfman, CEO of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a research and advocacy group. "You're going to see higher raw-dollar figures and higher percentages explicitly intended to benefit Black communities and other communities of color. A lot of us who are proponents of racial justice and social justice are really hoping that this newfound commitment continues. It's an open question as to if it really will."

In a joint reporting effort, The Associated Press and The Chronicle of Philanthropy are examining how money pledged and donated in the name of racial justice has actually been used so far. Many nonprofits that received money after the Floyd protests channeled it into programs that serve minority communities.

Such successes are important, experts say, because even though philanthropic groups overwhelmingly say they want to help foster racial justice, many of them are unsure of exactly what to do.

"Foundations themselves told us they weren't sure which changes were going to continue," said Ellie Buteau, the Center for Effective Philanthropy's vice president of research, who surveyed more than 800 foundations last summer about their plans for racial equity. "They did realize they have a lot more progress to make."

Nearly 90% of the 236 foundations that responded to Buteau's survey said they had launched programs to help make the response to COVID-19 more equitable, according to the Center for Effective Philanthropy's



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“Foundations Respond to Crisis: Toward Equity?” report. More than 75% said they had initiated efforts to support nonprofits that serve communities of color.

Many of the foundations Buteau spoke with told her they were “trying to learn more about racism” and were trying to “self-reflect” about hiring and grantmaking practices. Fewer foundations, though, were making permanent structural changes.

“Increasing the diversity of the board was something that only a couple of foundations even raised with us,” Buteau said, adding that if a foundation is committed to being more diverse and inclusive, “it’s integral to have the board be more diverse — with more diverse thinking and experiences as well.”

For Dana Lanza, CEO of the Confluence Philanthropy, a network of foundations, donors and advisors that are trying to align their investment decisions with their values, the fact that more philanthropic organizations haven’t taken that first step in the year after Floyd’s murder is worrisome.

“We can’t solve racial equity until we change the dynamics of who gets to make decisions,” Lanza said. “about how these enormous sums of capital are being deployed.”

“It’s all about opening people’s minds and opening their hearts,” she said.

With that in mind, Confluence Philanthropy created the 2020 Belonging Pledge last June, which asked investors to commit to discuss racial equality at their next investment committee meeting. It’s a first step that has drawn 185 signatories, including Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and The California Endowment, which have \$1.8 trillion in assets under management.

“I think it was a wake-up call for philanthropy,” Lanza said. “After all these decades of grantmaking on racial justice and racial equity, how could this be where we are?”

The pledge, which will likely be expanded this fall, even raised issues among those that didn’t sign it.

“A firm that manages close to a trillion dollars wanted to sign the pledge and they got pushback from management because they realized that they hadn’t done a demographic survey internally in years,” Lanza said “You can’t have a racial justice grantmaking program if you’re not practicing racial equity in the investment practices of your endowment.”

Starting the process in this way seemed more productive than looking at the broader issues exemplified in Floyd’s murder, including the prevalence of police brutality.

“Black Lives Matter was trying to wake people up for years about this issue,” Lanza said. “I was telling friends and colleagues for a long time, ‘This is incredible and it’s scary.’ And people just didn’t want to talk about it.”

For many people and foundations, Floyd’s death and the protests that followed thrust the issue to the center of public consciousness for the first time.

Studies by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy show that specific discussions and goals tend to make an impact.

“Being intentional in your strategies is the best way to do this kind of equitable grantmaking,” Ryan Schlegel, the committee’s research director. “While it’s great that a lot of community foundations, for example, fund around poverty in their community, it’s really important that we also ask them ‘OK, what are you doing for Black people specifically?’”

It is important, especially now, for all sorts of groups to work on fostering racial justice from a variety of angles, experts said.

“There is a really important role for Black-led groups to play,” Dorfman said. “They will identify different solutions to the pressing problems than non-Black-led organizations might. They have been underfunded for so long that I think it’s really important at this time to be identifying those organizations to move resources to them.”

In a report, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy found that between 2016 and 2018, the last three full years for which data was available, funding earmarked specifically for Black communities represented just a tiny sliver — roughly 1% — of the grants made by 25 community foundations. That was true even though 15% of the population of the cities these foundations served was Black.

Though several foundations complained that the report did not count funding that helped Black communities if it wasn’t explicitly categorized for them, few questioned the report’s finding that these com-

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munities have been underfunded.

Citing the needs of people of color, Dorfman said:

"Donors should invest in those kinds of groups to really drive change. This is a moment of both urgent needs and great opportunities to reshape society, and so higher spending is warranted."

To achieve racial equity gains, those investments should be directed into sustainable projects in challenged communities.

"We really need groups that are grounded in the local communities to be building their own capacity, because the challenges facing our society aren't going away," Dorfman said. "An important piece of that puzzle is funding Black-led organizations."

## Even after Madoff's death, work to unwind epic fraud goes on

By TOM HAYS and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Epic Ponzi scheme mastermind Bernard Madoff is dead. But the effort to untangle his web of deceit lives on.

More than 12 years after Madoff confessed to running one of the biggest financial fraud in Wall Street history, a team of lawyers is still at work on a sprawling effort to recover money for the thousands of victims of his scam.

Their labors, which have already secured \$14.5 billion of the estimated \$17.5 billion investors put into Madoff's sham investment business, didn't cease with the financier's death in prison in April.

Ongoing litigation by Irving Picard, a court-appointed trustee for the liquidation of Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities, and his chief counsel, David Sheehan, could potentially pull in billions of dollars more.

"You don't like to see anyone die. But in this case, it wasn't going to have any impact on what we're doing," Picard told The Associated Press. "Our work goes on."

### WHERE IT STARTED

The painstaking process of trying to unwind Madoff's fraud began not long after the money manager's arrest in December 2008.

His downfall came as a result of a national financial crisis in which banks that had made reckless bets on mortgage-backed securities collapsed and investors scrambled to pull money out of the stock market.

Spooked investors started making withdrawals from Madoff's investment fund, too, but he ran out of money to give them. While his books said his fund was worth \$60 billion, most of that money didn't exist. He'd never actually invested the cash clients gave him.

When clients cashed out fictitious profits, Madoff simply stole from other clients to cover withdrawals.

Picard was given the task of separating the "net losers" — Madoff clients who didn't cash out of their accounts — from those who did.

Over time, net losers with approved claims have quietly seen an average of 70% of their investments returned. Net winners were subjected to so-called "clawbacks." Not only did they lose money they thought they had in their accounts, they had to pay back profits they had withdrawn over the years.

"Those people felt as though, and rightfully so, that they had been damaged twice -- first by Madoff and then by this trustee saying 'give me your profit,'" Sheehan said.

The process was difficult for everyone. Some Madoff investors had retired early. Some had bought nice homes in expensive locales. Some had made large charitable donations, confident their nest egg was secure.

### THE PAIN HITS HOME

Gordon Bennett, thinking his account with Madoff was worth \$3 million, did heavy renovations on a home in Marin County north of San Francisco.

When he learned Madoff was arrested, he told his wife, "Kate, we just lost the house."

The financial shock worsened months later when he learned that 25 years of annual withdrawals of up to 10% meant he'd taken out more than he'd put in.

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Picard's collectors wanted his profits. Suddenly, Bennett was in danger of being added to the bucket of wealthy individuals and institutions the trustee was suing, claiming they knew or should have known their returns were fraudulent.

"That was quite scary," he said. "We eventually worked out an arrangement with the trustee and we sent him all our documents and said: 'Look, you know, we don't have any money.' So he eventually said: 'OK, I'll go after bigger fish.'"

And Picard did, with some help from federal prosecutors. The biggest single chunk came in late 2010 when the widow of a Florida philanthropist agreed to return a staggering \$7.2 billion that her husband, businessman Jeffrey Picower, had pocketed. Months later, another \$1 billion was secured from one of the many feeder funds that the trustee accused of ignoring red flags about Madoff.

These days, Bennett, 74, finds solace in the same home after a friend bought it and rented it back to him.

"So we don't have \$3 million dollars now, but you know what, we don't need \$3 million dollars," he said.

Some victims contacted by The AP said that the news that Madoff had died at age 83 while serving a 150-year prison term served only as a sad reminder of crimes that altered their lives.

Richard Shapiro, 68, of Hidden Hills, California, said he lost a "very significant" amount of his net worth. In a panic, he briefly put his house up for sale and un-retired to earn money again as a commercial real estate development manager.

Picard's quick success at recovering some money spawned a mini-industry of firms offering Madoff victims immediate cash in return for their rights to whatever the trustee recovered.

Shapiro pounced on that opportunity, selling one of his Madoff funds for much less than it was worth, and another for closer to what Picard might eventually fetch, enabling him to save his home and start rebuilding his life.

"I do have my life back together now," he said. "And I'm sure that's the case with every Madoff victim. I don't think anybody walked away from it unscathed."

Another victim who lost money, 59-year-old Charles Gervitz, recalled feeling the payout formula was a raw deal.

"I was kind of angry at the trustee," said Gervitz, an engineer from Detroit. "He didn't even try to come up with a more reasonable settlement."

Still, Gervitz found a larger lesson to the pain: "You don't get something for no nothing. Basically, if it's too good to be true, it is."

## LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

Picard and Sheehan carry their own memories of the Madoff saga. Sheehan recalled how there was one person who didn't offer any help over the years: a delusional Madoff.

"He actually would complain to me that the people who got the false profits were making money, so why were they complaining? He was doing them a favor," Sheehan said in describing his interactions with the disgraced financier, including prison visits. "It was stolen money. It wasn't much of a favor."

Then there was the artwork recovered from Madoff's office and sold at auction, including an infamous 4-foot sculpture depicting a screw — titled "The Soft Screw" -- and bull lithographs by Roy Lichtenstein. All brought in more cash through auctions.

"There were lots of assets we could sell that you wouldn't find in the typical case," Picard said. "Here they had other people's money to spend, and they did."

Asked whether the recovery effort was winding down, the lawyers predicted it will go on at least another two to three years — something they've been saying for a decade.

The trustee still has the financial backing of the non-profit Securities Investor Protection Corporation (SIPC) to keep global litigation going against the remaining clawback holdouts — including feeder funds and other sophisticated money managers who failed to detect the fraud.

But Picard assured, "Someday it will come to an end."

## Russian opposition activist sent to jail amid crackdown

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Russian court on Wednesday sent a prominent opposition activist to jail pending a probe, as authorities continue to crack down on dissent ahead of September's parliamentary election.

In the southern city of Krasnodar, a court ordered Andrei Pivovarov, the head of the Open Russia movement that has just disbanded itself, to be held for two months pending an investigation, rejecting the defense's appeal against his arrest.

Last week, Open Russia's leaders dissolved the group to protect its members from prosecution after Russian authorities designated it as an "undesirable" organization along with more than 30 others, using a 2015 law that made membership in such organizations a criminal offense.

Pivovarov rejected the charges and pointed out during the court hearing that the criminal probe against him was opened two days after Open Russia shut down.

He was pulled off a Warsaw-bound plane at St. Petersburg's airport just before takeoff late Monday and taken to Krasnodar, where authorities accused him of supporting a local election candidate last year on behalf of an "undesirable" organization.

On Wednesday, a court in Moscow is also set to consider investigators' request to lock up Dmitry Gudkov, a former Russian lawmaker who has aspired to run again for a parliament seat. Gudkov was detained Tuesday on financial charges that he and his supporters allege were trumped up.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, rejected suggestions of political motives for the investigations of Gudkov and Pivovarov, telling reporters that "the accusations filed by law enforcement agencies have no relation to politics."

Open Russia was financed by Russian tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who moved to London after spending 10 years in prison in Russia on charges widely seen as political revenge for challenging Putin's rule.

Speaking to The Associated Press in a Zoom interview on Tuesday, Khodorkovsky said that the recent crackdown on dissent reflects the authorities' concern about the waning popularity of the main Kremlin-directed party, United Russia.

"The authorities don't feel that confident about the results they can get in September," Khodorkovsky told the AP. "That's why the Kremlin is trying to steamroll all potential political opponents."

Putin spoke to United Russia candidates in September's vote via a video call Wednesday, hailing the party's role in helping the population and businesses amid the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

Putin's most determined political foe, Alexei Navalny, was arrested in January upon his return from Germany, where he had spent five months recuperating from a nerve agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin — accusations that Russian officials dismiss. He was given a 2 1/2-year prison sentence in February for violating terms of a suspended sentence stemming from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that he denounced as politically motivated.

A court in the town of Petushki, in the Vladimir region east of Moscow, on Wednesday rejected Navalny's appeal asking to halt the hourly night-time checks he has been subjected to in his penal colony.

Speaking to the court in a video link from prison, Navalny charged that the checks "effectively amount to torture" and argued that he has done nothing that would warrant the authorities' decision to designate him as a flight risk that has resulted in checks.

He went on a 24-day hunger strike in prison to protest the lack of medical treatment for severe back pain and numbness in his legs, ending it last month after getting the medical attention he demanded.

In remarks given to his lawyers and posted on his Instagram account Wednesday, Navalny denounced the criminal charges against Pivovarov and Gudkov as "a sham and a crime."

"This disgusting deceitful government is also quite cowardly, and it's going to gobble people up one by one to scare all others," he said, urging Russians not to be afraid of repression. "They live by our fear, don't feed them," he added.

With Navalny in prison, prosecutors have asked a Moscow court to designate his Foundation for Fighting Corruption and his network of regional offices as extremist groups. At the same time, a bill approved

by the lower house of the Russian parliament bars members, donors and supporters of extremist groups from seeking public office — a measure that would keep Navalny's associates from running for parliament in September.

Khodorkovsky argued that the Sept. 19 parliamentary election is important for Putin to cement his rule ahead of the 2024 Russian presidential election. The 68-year-old Putin, who has been in power for more than two decades, pushed through constitutional changes last year that would potentially allow him to hold onto power until 2036.

## Eye exams seek to improve outlook for rural Romanian kids

By STEPHEN McGRATH AND ANDREEA ALEXANDRU Associated Press

NUCSOARA, Romania (AP) — Sometimes, one simple test can change a life.

Dozens of Romanian children had their eyes examined for the first time in a remote area of the southern Carpathian Mountains.

The humanitarian organization Casa Buna, or Good House, arranged the eye tests in Nucsoara, which comprises several villages. Routine eye exams are recommended from early infancy, but many children in the impoverished rural community had never been screened by an ophthalmologist.

"Given that out of 30 children tested, 20 needed glasses, I think such ophthalmic caravans are needed in as many villages in the country as possible," Mioara Marinescu, the volunteer ophthalmologist at Saturday's event, told The Associated Press.

The importance of testing children's eyes is not limited to needing corrective lenses. Amblyopia, the condition known as "lazy eye," is estimated to affect 1% to 5% of children worldwide, and missed cases can lead to long-term problems.

While examining children, Marinescu found three with amblyopia, a disorder she says can "limit access to certain professions in adulthood."

"Unfortunately in our country, children do not receive education or health equally," the eye doctor said.

Valeriu Nicolae, who founded Casa Buna in 2007, comes from a poor Roma community himself. Poor eyesight can have a serious, negative impact on children's educational outcomes, he said.

"Teachers think the kids hate to read, but in fact, they hate to read because they cannot read because their eyesight is poor," Nicolae said. "Kids who cannot read because their eyes are really bad are useless in the educational process. They get fed up and they drop out."

The volunteer organization supports more than 300 children and their families, putting a strong emphasis on encouraging the children to pursue education. The group has played a prominent role in supporting children throughout the pandemic.

Casa Buna arrived in Nucsoara, 200 kilometers (120 miles) northwest of the capital Bucharest, more than a year ago. Volunteers visit every two weeks, bringing aid to 94 children and their families.

"It was the start of the pandemic, and practically none of these kids had internet or computers. We put computers in all of their houses, made sure they have internet ... and all they need to stay online to continue their education," Nicolae said.

Dozens of volunteers participated in the eye-screening event, including motorcyclists from the group Bikers for Humanity. The volunteers organized activities and games to entice as many children as possible. Casa Buna also brought youngsters gifts for International Children's Day, held on June 1.

"We'll do (eye testing) this year in nine villages. We hope to make anywhere between 600 to 1,000 pairs of glasses," said Nicolae, whose tireless campaigning for better children's education has won him international awards.

Romania, which has a population of more than 19 million, has the highest percentage of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the entire 27-nation European Union — 35.8% compared to an EU-wide average of 22.5%, according to statistics agency Eurostat.

Child poverty is most prevalent in the country's rural communities, where one in two children lives in poverty.

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"From birth, we should all have equal opportunities in education and access to health care," ophthalmologist Marinescu said. "Regardless of the geographical area in which we are born."

## Charges after US Capitol insurrection roil far-right groups

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

Former President Donald Trump's lies about a stolen 2020 election united right-wing supporters, conspiracy theorists and militants on Jan. 6, but the aftermath of the insurrection is roiling two of the most prominent far-right extremist groups at the U.S. Capitol that day.

More than three dozen members and associates across both the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers have been charged with crimes. Some local chapters cut ties with national leadership in the weeks after the deadly siege. The Proud Boys' chairman called for a pause in the rallies that often have led to clashes with anti-fascist activists. And one Oath Keeper has agreed to cooperate against others charged in the riot.

Some extremism experts see parallels between the fallout from the Capitol riot and the schisms that divided far-right figures and groups after their violent clashes with counter-protesters at the "Unite the Right" white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. The white supremacist "alt-right" movement fractured and ultimately faded from public view after the violence erupted that weekend.

"I think something kind of like that is happening right now in the broader far-right movement, where the cohesive tissue that brought them all together — being the 2020 election — it's kind of dissolved," said Jared Holt, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

"Like 'Unite the Right,' there is a huge disaster, a P.R. disaster, and now they've got the attention of the feds. And it's even more intense now because they have the national security apparatus breathing down their necks," he added.

But others believe President Joe Biden's victory and the Jan. 6 investigation, the largest federal prosecution in history, might animate the militia movement — fueled by an anti-government anger.

"We're already seeing a lot of this rhetoric being spewed in an effort to pull in people," said Freddy Cruz, a Southern Poverty Law Center research analyst who studies anti-government groups. "It's very possible that people will become energized and try to coordinate more activity given that we have a Democratic president in office."

The insurrectionists who descended on the nation's capital briefly disrupted the certification of Biden's presidential win and sent terrified lawmakers running for their lives.

The mob marched to the Capitol and broke through police barricades and overwhelmed officers, violently shoving their way into the building to chants of "Hang Mike Pence" and "Stop the Steal." Some rioters came prepared with pepper spray, baseball bats and other weapons.

Members of the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers make up just a small fraction of the more than 400 people charged so far. Prosecutors have narrowed in on the two extremist groups as they try to determine how much planning went into the attack, but authorities have said they're intent on arresting anyone involved in the riot.

More than two dozen Proud Boys leaders, members or associates are among those arrested. The group of self-described "Western chauvinists" emerged from far-right fringes during the Trump administration to mainstream GOP circles, with allies like longtime Trump backer Roger Stone. The group claims it has more than 30,000 members nationwide.

In the sustained protests last summer over police brutality, their counter demonstrations often devolved into violence. Law enforcement stepped in during a protest in Michigan. Members were accused of vandalizing property in Washington, D.C. Then, during a presidential debate with Biden, the group gained greater notoriety after Trump refused to condemn white supremacist groups and told the Proud Boys directly to "stand back and stand by."

Chairman Henry "Enrique" Tarrío hasn't been charged in the riot. He wasn't there on Jan. 6. He'd been arrested in an unrelated vandalism case as he arrived in Washington two days before the insurrection and was ordered out of the area by a judge. Law enforcement later said Tarrío was picked up in part to

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help quell potential violence.

Tarrio insists the criminal charges haven't weakened or divided the group. He says he has met with leaders of chapters that declared their independence and patched up their differences.

"We've been through the wringer," Tarrio said in an interview. "Any other group after January 6th would fall apart."

But leaders of several local Proud Boys chapters, including in Seattle, Las Vegas, Indiana and Alabama, said after Jan. 6 that their members were cutting ties with the organization's national leadership. Four leaders, including national Elders Council member Ethan Nordean, have been charged by federal officials with planning and leading an attack on the Capitol. One of Nordean's attorneys said he wasn't responsible for any crimes committed by other people.

The Las Vegas chapter's statement on the instant messaging platform Telegram in February didn't mention Jan. 6 directly, but it claimed the "overall direction of the organization" was endangering its members.

The Alabama group expressed concern about reports that Tarrio had previously been a federal informant. It was revealed in court records recently that Tarrio had worked undercover and cooperated with investigators after he was accused of fraud in 2012.

"We reject and disavow the proven federal informant, Enrique Tarrio, and any and all chapters that choose to associate with him," the Alabama group posted online in February.

Tarrio said he suspended national Proud Boy rallies shortly after Jan. 6 in part to focus on helping members facing criminal charges. Tarrio described Jan. 6 as "horrible" but said authorities overcharged his jailed lieutenants and are politically persecuting them.

Meanwhile, 16 members and associates of the Oath Keepers — a militia group founded in 2009 that recruits current and former military, police and first responders — have been charged with conspiring to block the certification of the vote. The group's founder and leader, Stewart Rhodes, has said there were as many as 40,000 Oath Keepers at its peak, but one extremism expert estimates the group's membership stands around 3,000 nationally.

Rhodes has not been charged, and it's unclear if he will be. But he has repeatedly come up in court documents as "Person One," suggesting he's a central focus of investigators.

Days after the election, Rhodes instructed his followers during a GoToMeeting call to go to Washington to let Trump know "that the people are behind him," and he expressed hope that Trump would call up the militia to help the president stay in power, authorities say. Rhodes warned they could be headed for a "bloody, bloody civil war, and a bloody — you can call it an insurrection or you can call it a war or fight," according to court documents.

On Jan. 6, several Oath Keepers, wearing helmets and reinforced vests, were seen on camera shouldering their way up the Capitol steps in a military-style stack formation. Rhodes was communicating that day with some Oath Keepers who entered the Capitol and was seen standing with several of the defendants outside the building after the riot, prosecutors say.

Rhodes has sought to distance himself from those who've been arrested, insisting the members went rogue and there was never a plan to enter the Capitol. But he has continued in interviews with right-wing hosts since Jan. 6 to push the lie that the election was stolen, while the Oath Keepers website remains active with posts painting the group as the victim of political persecution.

Messages left at numbers listed for Rhodes weren't immediately returned.

Court documents show discord among the group as early the night of the attack. Someone identified in the records only as "Person Eleven" blasted the Oath Keepers in a Signal chat with Rhodes and others as "a huge f—n joke" and called Rhodes "the dumbass I heard you were," court documents say.

Two months later, Rhodes lamented in a message to another Oath Keeper that the national team had gotten "too lax" and "too complacent." He pledged to "tighten up the command and control" in the group — "even if it means losing some people," according to court documents.

After the riot, the North Carolina Oath Keepers branch said it was splitting from Rhodes' group. Its president, who didn't return messages from the AP, told The News Reporter newspaper it wouldn't be "a part of anything that terrorizes anybody or goes against law enforcement."

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A leader of an Arizona chapter also slammed Rhodes and those facing charges, saying on CBS' "60 Minutes" that the attack "goes against everything we've ever taught, everything we believe in."

The Oath Keepers' leader has also suggested the group may be facing financial pressures. In an interview posted on the Oath Keepers' website, Rhodes said it has been difficult for the group to raise money as it's been kicked off certain websites.

The group also lost the ability to process credit card payments online after the company demanded that Rhodes disavow the arrested members and he refused, Rhodes said in a March interview for far-right website Gateway Pundit. The Oath Keepers website now says it cannot accept new memberships online because of "malicious leftist attacks" and instructs people to mail in applications and dues.

A member of the Oath Keepers was the first defendant to plead guilty in the riot. Jon Ryan Schaffer has also agreed to cooperate with the government's investigation. The Justice Department has promised to consider putting him in the witness security program, suggesting it sees him as a valuable cooperator in the Jan. 6 probe.

## Herzog, scion of prominent Israeli family, elected president

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Isaac Herzog, a veteran politician and the scion of a prominent Israeli family, was elected president Tuesday, a largely ceremonial role that is meant to serve as the nation's moral compass and promote unity.

Herzog is set to become Israel's 11th president after securing 87 votes in a secret ballot among the 120 members of the Knesset, or parliament. He will succeed Reuven Rivlin, who leaves office next month at the end of a seven-year term.

"I intend to be the president of everyone," Herzog said after the votes were tallied. "We must defend Israel's international status and its good reputation in the family of nations, fight antisemitism and hatred of Israel, and preserve the pillars of our democracy."

Herzog, 60, is a former head of Israel's Labor Party and opposition leader who unsuccessfully ran against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

He comes from a prominent Zionist family. His father, Chaim Herzog, was Israel's ambassador to the United Nations before being elected president. His uncle, Abba Eban, was Israel's first foreign minister and ambassador to the United Nations and United States. His grandfather was the country's first chief rabbi.

Herzog defeated Miriam Peretz, 67, an educator who was seen as a down-to-earth outsider close to the country's dominant conservative and nationalist political camp.

Herzog has served as head of the Jewish Agency, a nonprofit that works closely with the government to promote immigration to Israel, for the past three years since resigning from parliament. He was widely seen as the favorite because of his deep ties to the political establishment. He will hold office for a single seven-year term starting July 9.

The president is tasked with tapping a political party leader to form governing coalitions after parliamentary elections. Israel has held four national elections in the past two years amid a protracted political crisis.

Netanyahu's opponents faced a midnight deadline Wednesday to put together a new coalition government. If they fail, the country could be plunged into another election campaign.

The president also has the power to grant pardons — creating a potentially sensitive situation as Netanyahu stands trial for a series of corruption charges.

"The title of 'first citizen' and the task of guarding the character of the state of Israel, particularly at this point in time, are heavy responsibilities," Rivlin said in a statement congratulating his successor. "I have no doubt that you will bear them superbly."

Peretz immigrated from Morocco as a child and has worked as a teacher, educator and lecturer on Judaism, Zionism and grief. Two of her sons died serving in the Israeli military. In 2018 she was awarded the Israel Prize, the country's top award, for lifetime achievement.

She would have been the first woman and the first settler to hold the office.



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She and her family lived in one of Israel's settlements in the Sinai Peninsula until a peace treaty was struck with Egypt in 1979 and the territory was returned. Peretz then moved to the settlement of Givat Zeev, in the occupied West Bank just north of Jerusalem.

Most of the world considers Israel's West Bank settlements illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians, who seek the territory as part of a future state.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, June 3, the 154th day of 2021. There are 211 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 3, 1989, Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, died. On the same day, Chinese army troops began their sweep of Beijing to crush student-led pro-democracy demonstrations.

On this date:

In 1621, the Dutch West India Co. received its charter for a trade monopoly in parts of the Americas and Africa.

In 1861, Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, the Democratic presidential nominee in the 1860 election, died in Chicago of typhoid fever; he was 48.

In 1937, Edward, The Duke of Windsor, who had abdicated the British throne, married Wallis Simpson in a private ceremony in Monts, France.

In 1943, Los Angeles saw the beginning of its "Zoot Suit Riots" as white servicemen clashed with young Latinos wearing distinctive-looking zoot suits; the violence finally ended when military officials declared the city off limits to enlisted personnel.

In 1948, the 200-inch reflecting Hale Telescope at the Palomar Mountain Observatory in California was dedicated.

In 1962, Air France Flight 007, a U.S.-bound Boeing 707, crashed while attempting to take off from Orly Airport near Paris; all but two of the 132 people aboard were killed.

In 1965, astronaut Edward H. White became the first American to "walk" in space during the flight of Gemini 4.

In 1977, the United States and Cuba agreed to set up diplomatic interests sections in each other's countries; Cuba also announced the immediate release of 10 Americans jailed on drug charges.

In 2004, President George W. Bush announced the resignation of CIA Director George Tenet amid a controversy over intelligence lapses about suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the September 11 terrorist attacks.

In 2008, Barack Obama claimed the Democratic presidential nomination, speaking in the same St. Paul, Minnesota, arena where Republicans would be holding their national convention in September 2008.

In 2010, BP sliced off a pipe with giant shears to make way for a cap in the latest bid to curtail the worst oil spill in U.S. history. Emmy-winning actor Rue McClanahan, 76, died in New York.

In 2016, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali died at a hospital in Scottsdale, Arizona, at age 74.

Ten years ago: Former Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards admitted he had "done wrong" and hurt others but strongly denied breaking the law after federal prosecutors charged him with using \$925,000 in under-the-table campaign contributions to hide his mistress and baby during his 2008 White House run. (After a 2012 trial in North Carolina, jurors acquitted Edwards on one count of accepting illegal campaign contributions and deadlocked on five other counts; prosecutors decided against retrying the case.) Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was wounded when rebel rockets barraged his palace; he later went to Saudi Arabia for treatment. Physician-assisted suicide advocate Dr. Jack Kevorkian died at a Michigan hospital at 83. Actor James Arness (TV: "Gunsmoke"), 88, died in Brentwood, California.

Five years ago: Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump was quoted in The Wall Street Journal as saying that U.S. District Judge Gonzalo Curiel, who was presiding over a lawsuit brought by former Trump

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University students, had an "absolute conflict" in handling the case because he was "of Mexican heritage."

One year ago: Prosecutors charged three more police officers in the death of George Floyd and filed a new, tougher charge of second-degree murder against Derek Chauvin, the officer who was caught on video pressing his knee to Floyd's neck. (Chauvin would be convicted on all charges.) Defense Secretary Mark Esper took issue with President Donald Trump's threats to use the full force of the military to quell street protests. Trump's former defense secretary, James Mattis, denounced Trump's heavy-handed use of military force to quell protests near the White House. Seattle officials abruptly ended a city-wide curfew that had been in place for days amid massive demonstrations over the death of George Floyd. Enforcing a curfew, police in New York City moved in on crowds of demonstrators, at times blasting people with pepper spray. Results published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that hydroxychloroquine, a malaria drug promoted by President Donald Trump to prevent COVID-19, was no better than placebo pills in preventing illness from the coronavirus.

Today's Birthdays: The former president of Cuba, Raul Castro, is 90. Actor Irma P. Hall is 86. Rock singer Ian Hunter (Mott The Hoople) is 82. World Golf Hall of Famer Hale Irwin is 76. Actor Penelope Wilton is 75. Singer Eddie Holman is 75. Actor Tristan Rogers is 75. Musician Too Slim (Riders in the Sky) is 73. Singer Suzi Quatro is 71. Singer Deneice Williams is 71. Singer Dan Hill is 67. Actor Suzie Plakson is 63. Actor Scott Valentine is 63. Rock musician Kerry King (Slayer) is 57. Actor James Purefoy is 57. Rock singer-musician Mike Gordon is 56. TV host Anderson Cooper is 54. Country singer Jamie O'Neal is 53. Writer-director Tate Taylor is 42. Singers Gabriel and Ariel Hernandez (No Mercy) are 50. Actor Vik Sahay is 50. R&B singer Lyfe Jennings is 48. Actor Arianne Zucker is 47. Actor Nikki M. James is 40. Tennis player Rafael Nadal is 35. Actor Josh Segarra is 35. Actor-singer Lalaine is 34. Actor Sean Berdy is 28. Actor Anne Winters is 27.