

Groton Daily Independent

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Attention U12 Baseball Parents:

The Game scheduled in Webster for June 18th has been move to June 21 @ 6:00 and will now be a doubleheader.

Attention Jr. Teener Parents:

There will be no game with Selby today. It has been moved to June 12. Schedule for June 12 will be this:
Groton vs Mobridge @ 1:00
Groton vs Selby @ 3:00
All Games in Selby
Also No Game June 8th in Selby, that game has been move to July 10 and will be in Groton @ 1:00



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Mobridge Almost Erases 4-Run Deficit In Loss To Groton Jr Legion

Groton Jr Legion got out to a four-run lead in the third inning and held on for a 5-4 victory over Mobridge on Thursday. Mobridge scored four runs in the failed comeback on a error in the sixth, a error in the sixth, and a single by Bryston G in the seventh.

Groton Jr Legion got things moving in the second inning. Cade L hit into a fielder's choice, scoring one run.

Ryan G was the winning pitcher for Groton Jr Legion. The hurler surrendered two runs on four hits over five and a third innings, striking out ten and walking zero. Braden A and Jordan B entered the game out of the bullpen and helped to close out the game in relief. Braden recorded the last three outs to earn the save for Groton Jr Legion.

Reinert took the loss for Mobridge. The hurler lasted six innings, allowing five hits and five runs while striking out two.

Logan R, Braden, Tate L, Colby D, and Dillon A all had one hit to lead Groton Jr Legion.

Z R led Mobridge with two stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with eight stolen bases.

Groton Jr Legion Grabs Lead In Fourth Inning To Defeat Frederick

Groton Jr Legion took the lead late in the game in a 2-1 victory over Frederick on Tuesday. The game was tied at one with Groton Jr Legion batting in the bottom of the fourth when Caleb H drew a walk, scoring one run.

The pitching was strong on both sides. Groton Jr Legion pitchers struck out nine, while Frederick pitchers sat down five.

Frederick opened up scoring in the first inning. Levi Little singled on a 3-2 count, scoring one run.

Jordan B was the winning pitcher for Groton Jr Legion. The pitcher surrendered zero runs on two hits over two and two-thirds innings, striking out four and walking zero.

Darrel Yost took the loss for Frederick. The hurler lasted three and a third innings, allowing one hit and two runs while striking out four and walking one.

Ryan G started the game for Groton Jr Legion. The hurler allowed three hits and one run over two and a third innings, striking out five and walking zero.

Colby D went 1-for-1 at the plate to lead Groton Jr Legion in hits. Groton Jr Legion didn't commit a single error in the field. Cade L had the most chances in the field with nine. Colby led Groton Jr Legion with two stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with five stolen bases.

Sam Vetter led Frederick with three hits in three at bats.

Four RBI Day For Tate L Brings In Win For Groton Jr Legion Over Frederick

Tate L was clutch at the plate with ducks on the pond on Tuesday, driving in four on three hits to lead Groton Jr Legion past Frederick 16-6 on Tuesday. Tate drove in runs on a double in the first, a single in the third, and a single in the fourth.

Groton Jr Legion grabbed an early lead. Groton Jr Legion scored on a double by Tate, a walk by Cole S, a double by Cade L, and a single by Jacob L in the first inning.

Dillon A led the Groton Jr Legion to victory on the pitcher's mound. The righty lasted three and two-thirds innings, allowing four hits and two runs while striking out seven and walking zero.

Sam Vetter took the loss for Frederick. The bulldog lasted two innings, allowing seven hits and nine runs while striking out three.

Kaleb H started the game for Groton Jr Legion. The pitcher went two and a third innings, allowing four runs on two hits and striking out three.

Groton Jr Legion totaled 14 hits in the game. Tate, Cade, Kaleb, and Braden A all managed multiple hits for Groton Jr Legion. Tate led Groton Jr Legion with three hits in three at bats. Tate led Groton Jr Legion with three stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with eight stolen bases.

Brayden Sumption went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Frederick in hits.

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Groton Jr Legion Takes Victory Over Lake Norden In A High-Scoring Affair

Both pitching staffs had their hands full on Wednesday in a high-scoring affair where Groton Jr Legion bested Lake Norden, 15-10.

Lake Norden opened up scoring in the first inning when Jameson Nebel drew a walk, scoring one run.

After Groton Jr Legion scored five runs in the top of the sixth, Lake Norden answered with five of their own. Groton Jr Legion scored when an error scored one run for Groton Jr Legion and Tate L doubled on a 1-1 count, scoring two runs. Lake Norden then answered when an error scored two runs for Lake Norden and Dawson Noem singled on a 2-2 count, scoring three runs.

Groton Jr Legion took the lead for good with eight runs in the third inning. In the third Groton Jr Legion scored on a stolen base during Braden A's at bat. Then Braden singled, driving in one, Tate doubled on a 2-1 count, scoring one run, Colby D singled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring one run, Logan R tripled on a 0-1 count, scoring one run, Cade L singled on a 1-0 count, scoring one run, Braden singled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring one run, and Tate drew a walk, scoring one run.

Tate was on the pitcher's mound for Groton Jr Legion. The pitcher went two innings, allowing three runs on zero hits and striking out one.

Rylee Warrington toed the rubber for Lake Norden. The bulldog allowed eight hits and nine runs over two and two-thirds innings, striking out two. Tyson Stevenson and Noem entered the game as relief, throwing two and a third innings and two innings respectively.

Groton Jr Legion racked up 14 hits in the game. Braden, Tate, Kaleb H, and Dillon A all managed multiple hits for Groton Jr Legion. Braden went 3-for-4 at the plate to lead Groton Jr Legion in hits. Groton Jr Legion stole 12 bases during the game as three players stole more than one. Kaleb led the way with five.

Smitty's Jr. Legion Runs Away With Early Lead In Victory

Groton Jr Legion watched the game slip away early and couldn't recover in a 15-1 loss to Smitty's Jr. Legion on Wednesday. Smitty's Jr. Legion scored on a groundout by Phillip Zens, a groundout by Jaiden Smith, a walk by Isaac Forest, and a walk by Andrew Richardson in the first inning.

The Groton Jr Legion struggled to put runs on the board and had a tough time defensively containing Smitty's Jr. Legion, giving up 15 runs.

Smitty's Jr. Legion scored five runs in the third inning. Smitty's Jr. Legion's big inning was driven by singles by Smith and Brenden Livermont, a walk by Zens, and an error on a ball put in play by Lemer.

Braxton Kusler led things off on the mound for Smitty's Jr. Legion. The fireballer surrendered one run on zero hits over two innings, striking out two and walking one.

Colby D was on the hill for Groton Jr Legion. The pitcher lasted two-thirds of an inning, allowing one hit and five runs. Cole S threw three and a third innings in relief.

Jordan B led Groton Jr Legion with one run batted in. Jordan went 0-for-2 on the day.

Zens led Smitty's Jr. Legion with two hits in three at bats.

H. Drives In Four Runs For Groton Jr Legion, But Smitty's Jr. Legion Takes The Game

Four RBIs from Kaleb H weren't enough as Groton Jr Legion fell to Smitty's Jr. Legion 20-11 on Wednesday. Kaleb drove in runs on a single in the second, a walk in the third, and a walk in the fourth.

Groton Jr Legion collected four hits and Smitty's Jr. Legion had 14 in the high-scoring affair.

Smitty's Jr. Legion took an early lead in the second inning. Kusler singled on the first pitch of the at bat, scoring two runs.

Smitty's Jr. Legion took the lead for good with two runs in the fourth inning. In the fourth Kusler singled on a 1-0 count, scoring one run and Jordan B induced Woehl to hit into a fielder's choice, but one run scored.

Groton Jr Legion put up four runs in the third inning. Kaleb, Jordan, and Tate L all moved runners across the plate with RBIs in the inning.

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Smitty's Jr. Legion scored nine runs in the second inning. Lemer, Zens, Carlson, Livermont, Kusler, and Lemer each had RBIs in the big inning.

Smith led things off on the hill for Smitty's Jr. Legion. The fireballer went one inning, allowing two runs on one hit and striking out one.

Tate was on the mound for Groton Jr Legion. The pitcher allowed five hits and six runs over one inning. Jordan, Ryan G, and Kaleb each contributed in relief for Groton Jr Legion.

Tate, Cade L, Kaleb, and Colby D all had one hit to lead Groton Jr Legion.

Smitty's Jr. Legion tallied 14 hits. Kusler, Zens, Lemer, and Woehl each managed multiple hits for Smitty's Jr. Legion. Kusler led Smitty's Jr. Legion with four hits in four at bats.

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Groton Jr. Teeners Drops Game To Webster VFW POST 4690 14U After Late Score

Groton Jr. Teeners lost the lead late in a 21-8 defeat to Webster VFW POST 4690 14U on Thursday. The game was tied at eight with Webster VFW POST 4690 14U batting in the bottom of the third when Trey Dunse doubled on a 2-1 count, scoring one run.

Groton Jr. Teeners collected six hits and Webster VFW POST 4690 14U had eight in the high-scoring affair.

Webster VFW POST 4690 14U took an early lead in the first inning. Owen Edwards singled on a 1-0 count, scoring two runs.

Carter Williams was the winning pitcher for Webster VFW POST 4690 14U. Williams went two innings, allowing seven runs on six hits and striking out one. Jack Shoemaker threw two innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Karsten Flihs took the loss for Groton Jr. Teeners. Flihs went two innings, allowing 11 runs on three hits and striking out two.

Groton Jr. Teeners totaled six hits. Brevin Flihs and Teylor Diegel all had multiple hits for Groton Jr. Teeners. Diegel and Flihs each collected two hits to lead Groton Jr. Teeners.

Webster VFW POST 4690 14U racked up eight hits on the day. Karter Stoks and Edwards each collected multiple hits for Webster VFW POST 4690 14U. Williams led Webster VFW POST 4690 14U with two stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with seven stolen bases.

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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 ***



Roads Buckling from the heat in Fargo

Posted on the Fargo Police Department Facebook Page:

Our Truck Regulatory Officer is reporting some roadways in Fargo are heaving due to the heat. We are asking motorists, especially motorcyclists to be cautious. Pictured here is the 5600 block of Bishops Blvd.



Day shift
and night
shift
assemblers!

**Competitive starting wage
with monthly tier increases!
Full benefit package!**

**To apply:
www.uslbm.com/careers or
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 or at the district office – 502 N 2nd Street, Groton.



COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy is strong among South Dakota youths

Danielle Ferguson

South Dakota News Watch

Healthcare professionals say vaccinating young people against COVID-19 this summer is critical to reaching herd immunity against the virus and to protect youth against potentially devastating long-term effects of the virus.

But many teenagers in South Dakota and other states have been slow to warm to vaccination, with some facing hurdles that include peer pressure to not get vaccinated, differing parental opinions on vaccines and widespread anti-vaccination misinformation and sentiment.

South Dakota medical providers are trying to maintain momentum to keep getting shots in young arms knowing that the upcoming summer of warmer weather and outdoor activities may reduce COVID-19 infections but can also create a false sense of security that the pandemic is fully in the past.

As vaccination rates have tapered off among adults, medical experts say a strong vaccination rate among young people may be the only way to obtain the roughly 70% level of overall vaccinations needed to reach herd immunity, a situation where community spread is significantly reduced.

The medical community is also in a race against time to get more young people and teens vaccinated in order to avoid new outbreaks of COVID-19 or virus variants when school resumes in the fall and thousands of children return to in-class learning.

"I do think that it's still a fight on whether we can get enough people vaccinated by next fall before kids go back to school," said Dr. David Basel, vice president for clinical quality at Avera Health. "That's what keeps me up at night."



David Basel

While teens and young adults are less likely to have severe symptoms or die of COVID-19, they can still have serious, lingering symptoms and contribute to the spread of the virus, healthcare leaders say.

Months after being considered recovered from the disease, teens who were healthy before contracting COVID-19 reported brain fog, fatigue, continued loss of taste and smell and issues with their kidneys or heart, said Dr. Shankar Kurra, vice president of medical affairs for Monument Health.

"We're just beginning to understand better the [possible long-term effects of COVID-19] on children," Kurra said. "Vaccinating is one of the keys to our future. Especially the young, upcoming generations who are the future of our state. Opening this up is the best thing for our state."

Nikolos Sasse, a 16-year-old from Yankton, said his case of COVID-19 at first seemed like allergies. Diagnosed in December 2020, he had sniffles and headaches and felt very sick for about two weeks, but other effects have lingered.

Sasse said he felt achy and lacked energy for months after he was considered recovered. He almost passed out after his first wrestling match of the season because he couldn't breathe. A few pulmonary tests showed that he had developed asthma because of COVID-19.

When Sasse's age group was eligible for vaccines, he told his mom he wanted to get the shots.

"The big reason was for my family's and others' and

"It's still a fight on whether we can get enough people vaccinated by next fall before kids go back to school ... that's what keeps me up at night."

-- Dr. David Basel, Avera Health

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for my own health," he said. "I know us teens are some of the main spreaders."

After his second and final dose, he had minimal side effects, but he felt some of his long-term COVID-19 symptoms ease, he said. He was able to breathe better and get through a track season with less use of his inhaler. Sasse is now looking forward to football season where he can hopefully continue to breathe easier.

"Once I heard that I might have the possibility of getting back into what I love doing, and if it keeps my family safe and gets me back to doing what I love, then yeah, I'm going to get the vaccine," he said.

Sasse was one of hundreds of Yankton High School students who walked out to their vehicles in the school parking lot in May to find anti-vaccination fliers on their windshields. The fliers were printed from a Utah-based website and included now-debunked myths of side effects from the COVID-19 vaccine, including that the vaccine causes cancer, asthma, sterility and auto-immune brain damage. Sasse said he was "very confused" about the fliers and said he didn't know why a group would want to "spread lies" to young adults.

Sasse said many in his network of friends are considering getting a vaccine, though that is not the case among many other young people in South Dakota.

Randi Baker of Sioux Falls said her 16-year-old son, Sebastian, doesn't want to get a COVID-19 vaccine, and neither do any of his friends. The few teens who Baker heard wanted to get a vaccine couldn't get parental permission.



Sebastian Baker, 16, of Sioux Falls, has decided not to get a COVID-19 vaccine. Many of his friends have also chosen not to receive a vaccine. Photo: Courtesy of Randi Baker



Nikolos Sasse, 16, shown at far right with his family members, had COVID-19 in December and felt achy, fatigued and was out of breath for months after he was technically recovered. He developed asthma after catching COVID-19, and decided to get the vaccine when it became available. Photo: Courtesy of Tina Sasse

"He doesn't know anyone his age who's getting it," Baker said.

Her son said he knows that younger people have a better shot at surviving the virus without major symptoms, and has not had any friends become ill from the virus.

"I could take away the internet and he still wouldn't get it. He's morally set against it," said Baker. "He's old enough to make the decision."

Risk to children small, but serious illness can occur

As of June 2, about 4,980 South Dakota children aged 12 to 15 had received at least one dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, or about 10% of that age group. South Dakota healthcare providers are optimistic that opening up COVID-19 vaccines to that age group has helped curb a slump in vaccination rates across the state.

South Dakota falls in the middle of the pack in terms

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of youth vaccination rates of surrounding states. As of June 2, Minnesota leads the Great Plains region at 27% of children aged 12 to 15 with at least one dose. Montana has vaccinated about 18% of its 12-17 population and North Dakota was at 14%. Nebraska had 5.2% of that age group vaccinated and Iowa had given one dose to 2.5% of those 12 to 17.

The South Dakota Department of Health reports that about 55% of the state's adult population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine as of early June. That does not include data from the Indian Health Service, which did not provide vaccination rates for this story. To reach herd immunity, or when enough people are vaccinated or have had the illness to significantly slow its spread, at least another 15% of the South Dakota population will need to be vaccinated.

"Can we get that last 15% vaccinated? Then I think we've got a pretty good chance [of reaching herd immunity]," Basel said.

South Dakota teens are still a contributor to community transmission, medical experts said. A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics found that children under 18 made up 24% of new U.S. COVID-19 cases for the week ending May 6.

Most children who contract COVID-19 have few if any mild symptoms. In South Dakota, no one under the age of 19 has been reported to have died due to the virus, according to the department of health. Eight people in their 20s have died with COVID-19 in South Dakota.

Nationally, the CDC has reported about 3,700 cases of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children, or MIS-C, which causes different body parts to become inflamed, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes, or gastrointestinal organs. The cause for MIS-C is unknown; however, the CDC says that "many children" with MIS-C had COVID-19 or were exposed to it.



Jeremy Cauwels

Vaccinating children 12 to 17 can help eliminate the number of school days students miss and could protect them against variants that appear to spread easier among that age group, said Dr. Jeremy Cauwels, Sanford Health Chief Physician. One of his own children missed 60 days of school or sports practice because of quarantine orders, he said.

So far, no U.S. state has made the COVID-19 vaccine a requirement to attend school. South Dakota requires nine vaccines for school admission, such as vaccines for measles, mumps and rubella. In-person learning in schools has not been associated with substantial community transmission of COVID-19, the CDC said.

Many teenagers are not as motivated to get the COVID-19 vaccine as older populations, and the desire for a shot varies by community, Cauwels said. That could be because the vaccine itself is newer than other vaccines and some parents, who need to sign off on the vaccine appointment, are hesitant for their children to receive it.

In South Dakota, more than 77% of people older than 75 are fully vaccinated, according to the state COVID-19 dashboard. About 37% of people 25 to 39 in the state are fully vaccinated. In those aged 18 to 24, the rate is about 31%.

Basel, at Avera Health, said the average age of those being hospitalized with COVID-19 has decreased as vaccinations in older age groups have increased. Across the Avera health system, the average age of hospitalization in November was 67. In April, it had fallen to 58, Basel said.

"We're kind of a victim of our own success with a lot of our vaccines. People just don't remember what it's like to get these vaccine-preventable illnesses," he said. "I can remember early on in my career taking care of children dying from meningitis that was preventable. It's a terrible way to die. I've seen that happen. A lot of younger people don't realize just what a miracle [vaccines] are."

Three in 10 parents said they would vaccinate their children right away if a COVID-19 vaccine became authorized for children, according to a national poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation released days before



Some members of the Kraft family of Timber Lake, shown here, became infected with COVID-19. Some of the children in the family decided to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, while others have decided against it, said their mother, Bobbi Kraft. Photo: Courtesy

of Bobbi Kraft

the Pfizer vaccine was authorized for those 12 and up in May. Of parents surveyed, 25% said they will wait a while to see how the vaccine is working, 18% said they would get their child vaccinated if their school requires it and nearly a quarter said they will definitely not get their child vaccinated.

According to a University of Michigan survey of about 1,000 people in October 2020, 76% of teens and young adults said they were willing to get vaccinated. Nearly half said their decision would ultimately depend on getting more information about the vaccines. At that time, 20% of young people said they were unwilling to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

Many factors in vaccine decisions

Many young people in Timber Lake, South Dakota, don't plan to get a vaccine, said resident Bobbi Kraft. As of Tuesday, Dewey County, where Timber Lake is the county seat, had no active COVID-19 cases and no community spread. As of June 1, 306 of the county's roughly 5,800 residents, or about 5%, have received a COVID-19 vaccine. That does not include numbers from Indian Health Service, which did not provide

vaccination data for this story.

"The popular thing in Timber Lake is to not get it," Kraft said.

Most members of Kraft's family became infected with COVID-19 in the past year. Her husband was in and out of the emergency department, receiving nebulizer treatments and steroids. Her 17-year-old daughter had a 102-degree fever for three days. Her 15-year-old son also had the virus.

When the COVID-19 vaccine became available, Kraft, a nurse-turned-restaurateur, made an appointment for herself as soon as she could, but her children were divided on whether to get the shot.

Her two daughters, 17 and 18, received the vaccine as soon as they were able. Her sons, ages 22 and 15, did not want to get vaccinated.

Kraft and her husband closed their restaurant, the R Rockin Bar on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, at the beginning of the pandemic, and she went to work for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe doing field contact studies and COVID-19 testing. They reopened the restaurant in February.

Kraft's oldest daughter, Molly, 18, said her friend group is split on the vaccine. Half of them are interested in receiving it; others think the vaccine was approved too quickly and are more wary of long-term side effects from the vaccine than from the virus itself.

Some of Heidi Haugan's friends in Sioux Falls have similar concerns. Haugan, a mother of four, said her friends are divided in their opinions on the vaccine. They've all managed to keep conversations civil, but it's been difficult, she said.

"It's been challenging," she said. "You can find anything you want on social media. There are a lot of conspiracy theories and misinformation out there. I understand as a mom it is scary with the unknown."

Her 11-year-old son, Liam, was the only child in his grade to wear a protective mask at a private Sioux Falls school. The other students had questions about why he was wearing a mask, Liam said, but then got used to him wearing it. He plans to get the vaccine after his 12th birthday in July.

Liam came home in the winter and said a friend at school told him that "the vaccine has little computers in it" and that infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci "is going to control your thoughts" with the vaccines.

"We sat down and talked about that," Heidi Haugan said. She and her husband talked with their children



Heidi Haugan's son, Liam, 11, wants to get the COVID-19 vaccine after he turns 12 in July. Liam is protective of his little brother, Lincoln, who has kidney issues that could potentially be exacerbated by COVID-19. Photo:

Courtesy of Heidi Haugan

openly about the pandemic and shared what they had learned from research from multiple sources. "The misinformation is out there."

Many families are worried about long-term effects of the vaccine or the immediate side effects they may experience after they get the shot. Side effects can occur from the vaccine, such as fatigue, sore arm, a fever and flu-like symptoms typically for a day or two. Other more serious effects can occur, too, doctors say, but are rare.

The CDC looked into reports that a small number of teenagers and young adults who received a COVID-19 vaccine experienced heart problems, but did not yet determine if the vaccine was the direct cause of the issues. Blood clots occurred in about 30 of the more than 8 million people who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, leading the CDC to temporarily pause its use. The vaccine was recommended to be put in use again after the CDC determined that "known and potential benefits outweigh its known and potential risks for those recommended to receive it."

Physicians have found that one-on-one conversations with patients are the most beneficial when it comes to working through concerns and making good decisions.

"This vaccine is safe. This vaccine is effective," said Kurra, of Monument Health. "Vaccines we've had in the past are similar to this vaccine. They are the reason we don't see deaths from other infectious diseases. We need to continue to remind folks this is the best thing we can do for their children and for themselves."



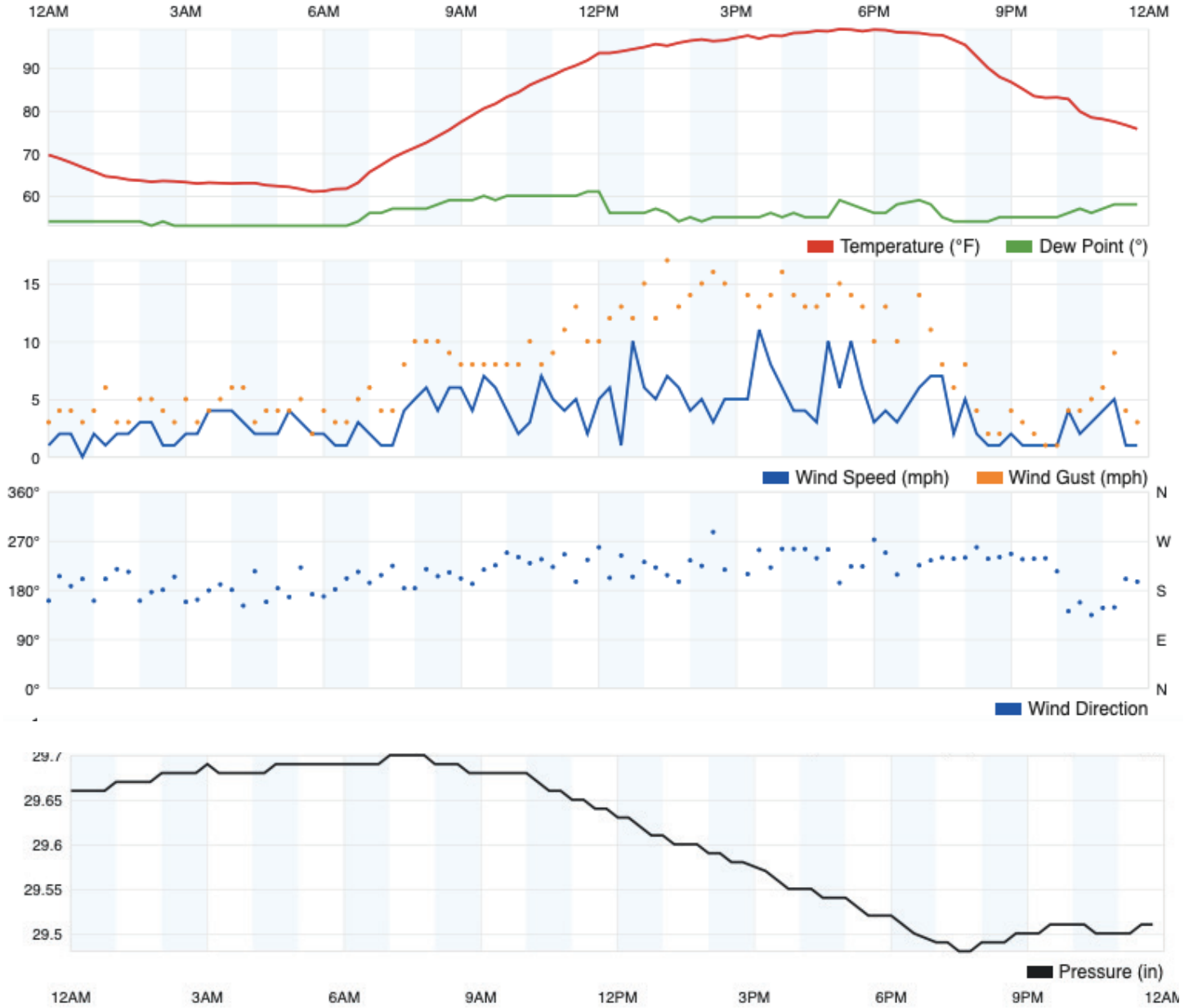
ABOUT DANIELLE FERGUSON

Danielle Ferguson, Sioux Falls, S.D., is an investigative reporter for South Dakota News Watch. She grew up in Salem, S.D. and previously worked as a watchdog reporter at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



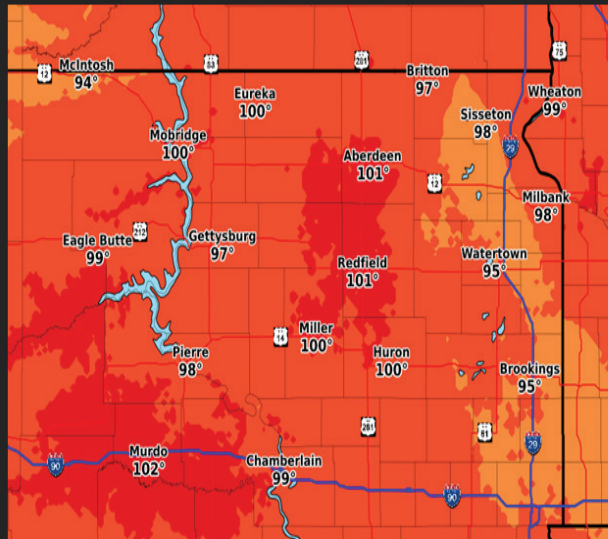
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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Sunny then Slight Chance T-storms	Mostly Clear	Hot	Mostly Clear	Hot
High: 100 °F	Low: 70 °F	High: 94 °F	Low: 58 °F	High: 96 °F

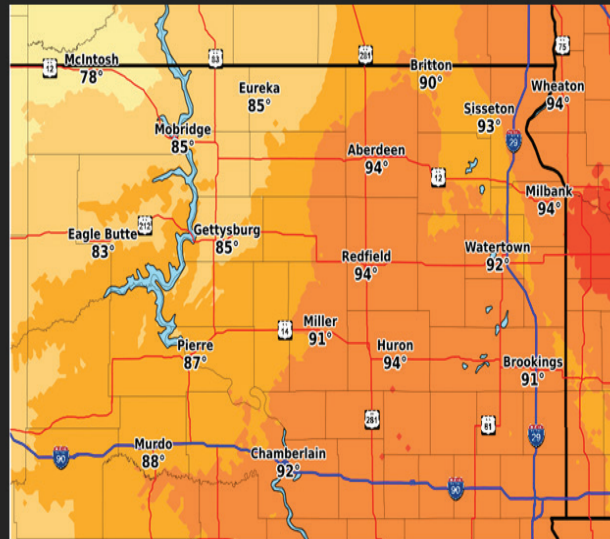
Hot Again Today – Some Relief on Sunday

Temperatures Today



A few storms along the ND/SD border this morning.

Temperatures on Sunday



A cold front crossing the region, bringing some relief.



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 6/5/2021 5:35 AM Central

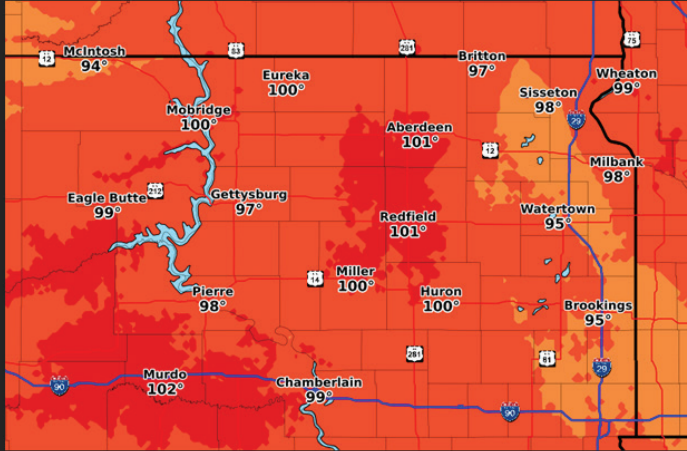
A few showers and storms will be possible along the North Dakota, South Dakota border this morning. Otherwise, hot conditions can be expected today, with highs reaching the 90s, to around 100 degrees. A cold front passing through the region will bring some storms to north-western South Dakota tonight and eastern South Dakota on Sunday afternoon.

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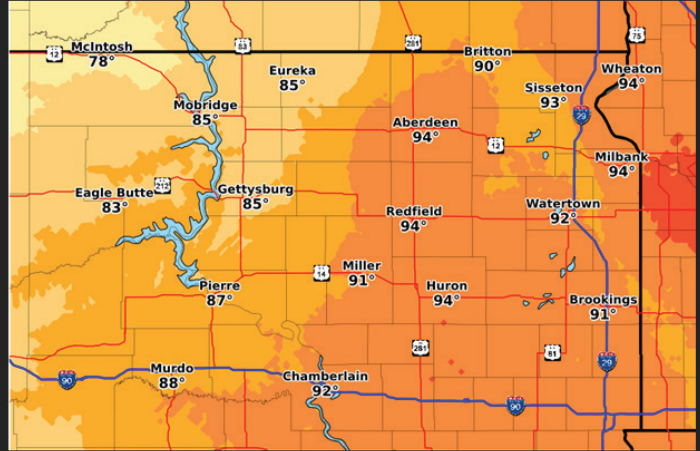
Hot Again Today – Some Relief on Sunday

Temperatures Today



A few storms along the ND/SD border this morning.

Temperatures on Sunday



A cold front crossing the region, bringing some relief.



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 6/5/2021 5:35 AM Central

Highs Saturday will be in the mid 90s to around 102 degrees, under a sunny sky and low relative humidity. Stay safe in the heat by drinking plenty of water, limiting time spent outdoors, wear sunscreen, and don't forget about vehicle safety.

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Today in Weather History

June 5, 1925: A severe thunderstorm that probably produced multiple numbers of small tornadoes moved northwest from Presho, in Jones County. There were large gaps of about 15 miles at times between tornadoes. One of these tornadoes passed 10 miles north of Ree Heights and ended north of Miller. Half dozen barns were destroyed west and north of Ree Heights. The strongest of the tornadoes was estimated as having F2 strength. Also on this date, a tornado moved from the southern edge of Fargo, North Dakota and on into Moorhead Minnesota. There were no injuries reported from this storm.

June 5, 1996: Hail, between a golf ball and tennis ball size, broke many windshields and dented vehicles in Watertown. Some houses in Watertown had their windows broken out because of the large hail. Golf ball sized hail also covered most of the ground at the Watertown Airport.

June 5, 1999: Winds gusting to 74 mph knocked down several trees throughout Groton. One tree took out a major transmission line and ripped the electrical service line off of a house. Power was out for parts of Groton for several hours. The high winds shattered the windows at a store on Main Street and tore a standing board on a sign loose which damaged five new vehicles at a dealership in Groton. The high winds also destroyed a small service building and the surrounding fence at the main juncture of natural gas pipelines at Groton. Winds to 70 mph brought several trees and many large tree branches down in Henry. Winds gusting to 80 mph snapped off several trees, blew a garage down, and brought power lines down in Hazel. In Watertown winds gusted to over 70 mph, blowing a portion of a roof off a house and destroyed the attached garage on another house. Near Watertown, a pole barn was destroyed, a hay bale was blown into a basement window of a house, and part of their deck was torn away. Near Florence, winds up to 80 mph tipped over and damaged a small shed, destroyed another storage shed, and also completely demolished a three stall garage.

June 5, 2008: Very heavy rains of 3 to 7 inches caused extensive flooding throughout Dewey County. Many roads, bridges, dams, culverts, along with some buildings were damaged or destroyed by the flooding. One man, west of Promise, used a boat to get back and forth from his ranch. A federal disaster declaration was issued for Dewey County and the Cheyenne River Reservation.

1976: When water began leaking from Idaho's new Teton Dam, there seemed to be no cause for alarm. On this date, warnings were frantic that the dam was about to break. As workers tried to shore up the crumbling dam, it crumbled shortly after 11 AM, sending 180 billion gallons of water pouring through Teton Canyon. 11 people lost their lives, but the toll would have been much higher if the dam had failed at night and residents had been asleep.

1859 - Frost was reported from Iowa to New England. The temperature dipped to 25 degrees in New York State, and up to two inches of snow blanketed Ohio. The cold and snow damaged the wheat crop. (David Ludlum)

1908 - Helena MT was deluged with 3.67 inches of rain to establish their all-time 24 hour rainfall record. (4th-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1916 - A tornado struck the town of Warren AR killing 83 persons. There were 125 deaths that day in a tornado outbreak across Missouri and Arkansas. (David Ludlum)

1917 - Residents near Topeka KS reported disk-shaped hailstones six to ten inches in diameter, and two to three inches thick. The hailstorm was accompanied by a tornado. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - International Falls, MN, dipped to a record low reading of 34 degrees during the morning. Williston, ND, and Glasgow, MT, reported record warm afternoon highs of 94 degrees. Major flooding was reported along the Guadalupe River in South Texas, with the water level at Cuero reaching 18 feet above flood stage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Twenty cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Asheville NC with a reading of 40 degrees. Fifteen cities in the north central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The high of 108 degrees at Glasgow MT was a record for June. (The National Weather Summary)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 99 °F at 5:12 PM

Low Temp: 61 °F at 5:49 AM

Wind: 17 mph at 1:23 PM

Precip: .00

Record High: 103° in 1933

Record Low: 37° in 1907

Average High: 77°F

Average Low: 52°F

Average Precip in June.: 0.44

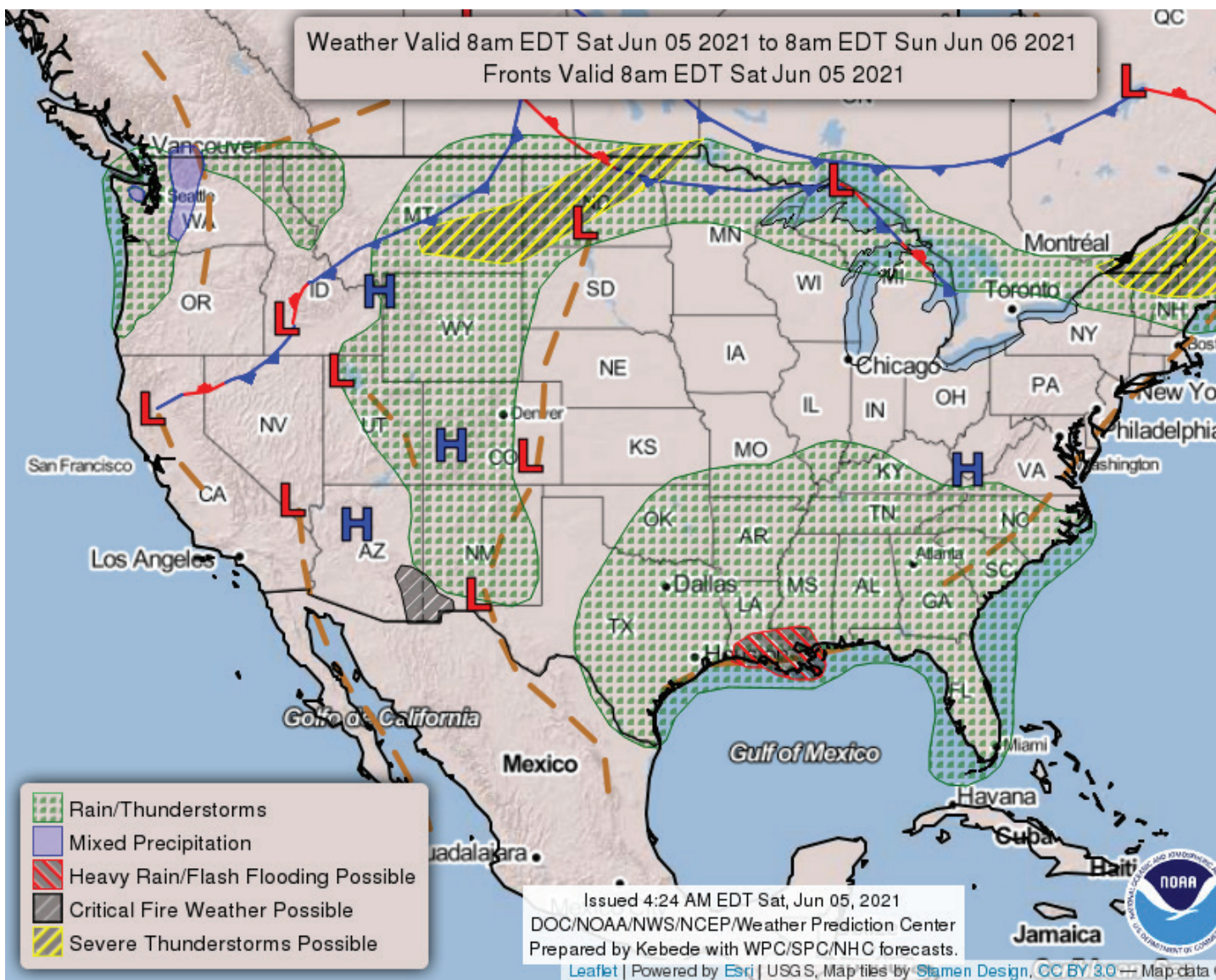
Precip to date in June.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 7.69

Precip Year to Date: 3.97

Sunset Tonight: 9:18 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:46 a.m.



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BASIC LEADERSHIP

"There's no shortage of writings on the subject of leadership," said the author of an article in a business magazine. Perhaps it is because we are facing so much political, economic, and financial insecurity. Everyone seems to be looking for a leader who will challenge their thinking with ideas on how we can recover what we have lost.

Another authority on leadership wrote, "The increasing rate of change is causing people a lot of fear. Facing the rapid rate of change in world markets is causing uncertainty and fear and people don't know what to believe."

"People need something that will give them safety and answer their questions about what is going to happen next," said a professor of economics.

"Leaders and managers are looking for the 'silver bullet' to solve their problems, but there is none available," said a consultant.

One renowned leader sounded foolish, even silly. He wrote, "Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I." But he, of all of the leaders who have taken their places on the stage of history, knew exactly what he was talking about.

From his experience as a shepherd and a king, a warrior and a parent, he had discovered that the Lord alone was able to lead him, to give him answers, provide solutions to his problems and enable him to make good decisions. He looked to his Leader, the Lord God of Israel, who had led His people into paths of prosperity and peace. He looked to the ultimate Leader who had proven Himself "right" since the beginning of time. Who is your leader?

Prayer: Lord, we look for a leader, may we look to You. Those who have followed Your guidance have never fooled, failed, or forsaken their followers. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I. Psalm 61:2c

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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

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News from the Associated Press

Trump speaking at NC GOP meeting; Dems plan "Day of Action"

GREENVILLE, N.C. (AP) — Donald Trump is coming to the Republican Party's annual convention in North Carolina, a state whose electoral votes he won in 2016 and 2020.

The former president was scheduled to address convention-goers Saturday in Greenville. The speech to more than 1,200 supporters signals a more public phase of his post-presidency, even as Trump considers whether to run again in 2024.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem also was slated to address the convention Saturday.

Trump's appearance comes as the North Carolina Democratic Party planned its own "Day of Action" on Saturday by focusing on contacting party registrants who didn't vote in 2020 and independent voters.

Democrats had door-knocking volunteers signed up in at least three dozen counties who will pitch to residents what they call President Joe Biden's successful early-term agenda.

Phone banks also will focus on counties with low COVID-19 vaccination rates and encouraging call recipients to get the vaccine, party spokesperson Kate Frauenfelder said.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

04-30-34-41-64, Mega Ball: 8, Megaplier: 3

(four, thirty, thirty-four, forty-one, sixty-four; Mega Ball: eight; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$45 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$286 million

For Native Americans, Harvard and other colleges fall short

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (AP) — When Samantha Maltais steps onto Harvard's campus this fall, she'll become the first member of the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe to attend its prestigious law school. It's a "full-circle moment" for the university and the Martha's Vineyard tribe, she says.

More than 350 years ago, Caleb Cheeshahteumuck, an Aquinnah Wampanoag man, became the first Native American to graduate from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, university — the product of its 1650 charter calling for the education of "English and Indian youth of this country."

"Coming from a tribal community in its backyard, I'm hyper aware of Harvard's impact," said Maltais, the 24-year-old daughter of her tribe's chairwoman. "It's a symbol of New England's colonial past, this tool of assimilation that pushed Native Americans into the background in their own homelands."

Maltais will arrive on campus at a time when Native American tribes, students and faculty are pushing the Ivy League institution and other colleges to do more for Indigenous communities to atone for past wrongs, much in the way states, municipalities and universities are weighing and, in some cases, already providing reparations for slavery and discrimination against Black people.

In Minnesota, 11 tribes have called on the state university system to return some of the lands taken from tribes, provide tuition waivers to Native American students and increase the number of Native American faculty, among other demands.

Tadd Johnson, the University of Minnesota's director of tribal relations and a member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, said the university will establish a "truth and reconciliation" process to document the historical wrongs and determine ways to make amends.

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"We're listening," he said. "We're acting on virtually everything that has been thrown at us."

Meanwhile in Colorado, state lawmakers are weighing legislation to grant in-state tuition to students from certain federally recognized tribes.

And in California, Native American students want tuition waivers and other tangible restitution, after most state schools have issued statements acknowledging their fraught history with tribal land, according to Tori McConnell, a 21-year-old member of the Yurok Tribe who graduates from the University of California, Davis in June.

"It's only right that they do these things," she said. "Actions speak louder than words."

Ryan King, a university spokesperson, said officials are "working diligently" to continue supporting Native students and tribal communities. He cited the creation of an advisory council to the university president that includes tribal leaders and scholars, among other recent efforts.

Many American universities are a product of the Morrill Act, a law signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 that funded the creation of public colleges through federal land sales. But an investigation by High Country News last year suggested nearly 11 million acres designated for so-called land grant colleges were actually taken from roughly 250 tribes.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology near Harvard, Native American students this past semester dug into the renowned school's Native American legacy, including how it continues to benefit from its status as one of the nation's original land grant colleges.

Luke Bastian, a 22-year-old Navajo student from Phoenix, says he and other students presented their class projects to MIT's president earlier this month as they urge the institution to create a Native American studies program.

University officials say conversations with Native students are ongoing and Bastian is optimistic they'll make progress. Students have already successfully lobbied for a designated campus space for Native students and convinced MIT to drop Columbus Day in favor of celebrating Indigenous People's Day, he said.

Some universities have taken laudable steps in recent years to prioritize the needs of Native students, say Indigenous community advocates.

Colorado State University offers the in-state tuition rate to students from any federally or state recognized tribe. And South Dakota State University uses private donations to provide scholarships to local tribal members and revenue from the college's land grant trust to enhance Native American programming, research and other efforts.

"We can't change the past, but we can change the future for these young people," says Barry Dunn, the university's president and a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe who launched the Wokini Initiative in 2017.

The call for colleges to do more comes at a critical time, as the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated higher education challenges for Native students, who already had the lowest college graduation rates in the country, said Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the American Indian College Fund, which awarded Maltais a full scholarship to Harvard Law.

During the pandemic, Native students experienced the sharpest college enrollment decline of any racial or ethnic group, as economic hardships, health disparities and the challenges of remote learning in isolated tribal communities forced many students to quit school, said Crazy Bull.

At Harvard, there's concern that Native students are being asked to take temporary leave from campus due to poor grades at rates higher than those of the overall student population, according to Emily Van Dyke, president of Harvard's Native American alumni group.

That suggests Native students are struggling to adjust and feel left out of broader campus conversations because of structural racism and other factors, said the 39-year-old Seattle resident, who is of Siksika descent. The number of Native students enrolled in the school of more than 6,700 undergraduates has dropped in recent years, from 45 in the 2009-2010 school year to 16 in 2019-2020, according to university data.

Students and alumni are also pushing Harvard to formally acknowledge that it stands on land once inhabited by Indigenous peoples, Van Dyke said. It's a basic, initial step many colleges have taken, including MIT and the University of California, Davis.

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"We're nowhere near where other colleges are at," Van Dyke said.

Harvard spokespeople declined to comment on the concerns, but Joseph Gone, an anthropology professor who heads the school's Native American program, said the university is in preliminary talks with local tribes to develop a land acknowledgement statement.

A member of the Gros Ventre Tribe in Montana, Gone also argues Harvard has made strides since his days as an undergraduate in the 1990s. He's one of three tenured Native American professors and roughly 10 Native American courses are now offered each semester.

The school's famous Peabody Museum, meanwhile, is also working to repatriate scores of artifacts to Native American tribes, Gone said, though some Native American groups have recently criticized the process.

For her part, Maltais says Harvard and other schools should ensure Native students coming from remote tribal communities acclimate to college life by investing more in student groups, mentorship programs, counseling and other support services.

The Dartmouth graduate, who recently served in the Peace Corps in Tonga, also supports the idea of free or discounted tuition for Native students, but stresses that shouldn't be the only solution.

"Not everyone needs a fancy degree," she said. "Sometimes the only reparation for land is land."

This story has been corrected to show that Emily Van Dyke is not a member of the Siksika Nation in Canada. She is of Siksika descent but not an officially enrolled tribe member. It has also been clarified to show she believes Native American students are not just struggling to adjust to campus life, but also feel left out of broader campus conversations at Harvard because of structural racism and other factors.

Labor negotiations escalate at South Dakota pork plant

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — In a sign of meatpacking workers becoming emboldened by the pandemic's health threats and economic repercussions, the union at a South Dakota pork processing plant that experienced a bad coronavirus outbreak last year has overwhelmingly rejected a contract offer from Smithfield Foods and will next move to bring the prospect of a strike to the negotiating table.

The Sioux Falls chapter of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union said 99% of union members who voted on the new contract offered from Virginia-based Smithfield Foods rejected it. The escalating labor negotiations are a sign of what might be a renewed boldness among workers in the physically demanding meatpacking industry. Through the pandemic, workers have organized around pushes for workplace safety and are now navigating an economy where some slaughterhouses, desperate for employees, have suddenly boosted wages.

Smithfield Foods downplayed the contract rejection, saying it was a "routine" part of negotiations. But the UFCW plans to vote Monday on whether to authorize a walkout. Union leaders said they view striking as a last resort, as they push for for a base wage of \$19 an hour to match the rate at a JBS pork plant 70 miles (113 kilometers) away in Worthington, Minnesota.

Slaughterhouse jobs usually offer elevated wages and benefits in exchange for the bloody, back-breaking work on butchering lines. But the wage gap is closing between meatpacking jobs and those at fast-food chains or retail stores, union leaders warned. They said that employees are exhausted after filling voids in the workforce during the pandemic while keeping up with robust demand for meat.

"We've got overworked employees," said B.J. Motley, the union president. "We've got people on the line with extended hours and now they're trying to take away their break."

He said the company plans to eliminate a 15-minute break period, but Smithfield pushed back on that assertion. Keira Lombardo, a spokeswoman for the company, said in a statement that its proposal would ensure there are two 15-minute breaks for employees who work 8-hour shifts. She added that the company's offer was "in full alignment" with agreements that the UFCW accepted at other locations.

"This is an expected and routine result at this stage of an ongoing negotiation," she said of the union's rejection of the company's offer. "Both parties have been proactively planning for and scheduling additional

meetings prior to this.”

A strike at the plant, which processes roughly 5% of pork products in the U.S., could ripple across the industry, from hog farmers to supermarket shelves. When the plant became an early coronavirus hot spot last year and shut down for several weeks along with others in the Midwest, the industry aggressively lobbied the public and former President Donald Trump for an order to stay open, arguing they provided an essential service to national security.

However, workers and unions also pushed for protections. At the plant in Sioux Falls, workers demonstrated in April 2020 for the plant to close down as infections spread.

“The pandemic dramatically raised the stakes,” said Colin Gordon, a University of Iowa history professor who has specialized in labor movements.

Smithfield Foods, like other larger meatpackers, poured millions of dollars into worker incentives and retrofitting plants with plexiglass barriers in an effort to stem infections. The precautions succeeded in preventing another large outbreak at the Sioux Falls plant and the company said there are currently no reported cases.

But the virus took its toll, as nearly 1,300 workers were infected, four died, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited the company for failing to protect employees during the early days of the April 2020 outbreak.

As the company tried to recover from the outbreak, it launched an ad campaign that praised its workers as “heroes.”

“We’re not heroes anymore, are we?” Anthony Yesker, a nine-year employee at the Sioux Falls plant, said after casting a vote against the company’s proposed contract. “They should at least look that we all put our lives on the line to keep the company going.”

He reasoned that if the union decided to go on strike, there were plenty of jobs in other warehouses available. The wages that Smithfield offered were once significantly higher than service industry jobs, but Yesker said the cost of living has gone up in Sioux Falls, making him rethink his job at the plant.

“This is a moment when workers have leverage right now,” said Laura Dresser, a labor economist at COWS, a liberal think tank at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Worker shortages at meatpacking plants aren’t new, but they have gotten worse during the pandemic, said Sarah Little, a spokeswoman for the North American Meat Institute, a trade association of meatpacking companies. She noted that companies are generally offering “very competitive wages and benefits” that start at \$22 an hour for entry-level positions in some areas.

For employees like Bullen Furula, who has worked at the Sioux Falls plant for 21 years and praised the opportunities that a job at the plant can bring, rising wages elsewhere mean a greater burden on those who have stuck with the company through one of its most trying years: “The more people quit, the more pressure is on us who are left behind.”

Special education graduation rates fall short of state goals

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Special education student graduation rates are falling short of state goals, according to new state data.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported Friday that the South Dakota Department of Education released annual information this week that shows the state graduation rate was 72.14%, well short of the 85% target.

The graduation rate for special education students in the Sioux Falls School District, the state’s largest district, was 75.56%. About three-quarters of special education students in that district are in regular classes 80% or more of the day.

The data considers students who have received a regular high school diploma in four years. It doesn’t reflect students with disabilities who graduate with a regular diploma but need additional time beyond four years to complete required coursework.

More than 22% of students who enrolled in special education are enrolled in higher education within a year of leaving high school, meeting the target of 15.5%.

Fire destroys tribal retreat center near Bear Butte

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Authorities are investigating the cause of a fire that destroyed the Rosebud Sioux Tribe's retreat center near Bear Butte.

The Rapid City Journal reported the fire was reported early Thursday morning. Firefighters arrived to find the building engulfed in flames. No one was inside.

The newspaper reported that the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is investigating the cause. The ATF has jurisdiction over fire and arson on federal and tribal land. The tribe said the South Dakota State Fire Marshal and local officials were investigating.

Bear Butte, or Mato Paha in Lakota, is a spiritual site for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and other tribes of the Oceti Sakowin. It's also sacred to the Cheyenne people. Indigenous people have visited Bear Butte for thousands of years. It's also been a site of pilgrimage for leaders including Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull and Frank Fools Crow.

The site is part of Bear Butte State Park, but Rosebud and other tribes own some of the land surrounding the formation.

New England's success against COVID-19 could be a model

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — For Dr. Jeremy Faust, the moment he realized the pandemic no longer dominated his workday came over Memorial Day weekend, when he didn't see a single coronavirus case over two shifts in the emergency room at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Kerry LaBarbera, an ER nurse a few miles away at Boston Medical Center, had a similar realization that same weekend, when just two patients with COVID-19 came through her unit, one of the busiest in New England.

"The past year and a half has been like going through a tornado or something terrible," she said. "You're holding on for dear life, and then you get past it and it's like, 'What just happened?'"

Massachusetts and the rest of New England — the most heavily vaccinated region in the U.S. — are giving the rest of the country a possible glimpse of the future if more Americans get their shots.

COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in the region have been steadily dropping as more than 60% of residents in all six states have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

The Deep South states of Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, in comparison, are the least vaccinated at around 35%, and new cases relative to the population are generally running higher there than in most of New England. Nationally, about 50% of Americans have received at least one shot.

In Massachusetts, health officials this past week determined that none of the state's cities and towns are at high risk for the spread of COVID-19 for the first time since they started issuing weekly assessments last August.

In Rhode Island, coronavirus hospitalizations have hit their lowest levels in about eight months. New Hampshire is averaging about a death a week after peaking at about 12 a day during the virus's winter surge. And Vermont, the most heavily vaccinated state in the U.S. at more than 70%, went more than two weeks without a single reported coronavirus death.

"It's an incredible change over such a short period of time," said Dr. Tim Lahey, an infectious disease physician at the University of Vermont Medical Center in Burlington.

Public health experts say the rest of the country could take some cues from New England as President Joe Biden pushes to get at least one vaccine dose into 70% of American adults by July 4, dangling the promise of free beer and other goodies.

One thing the region appears to have done right: It was generally slower than other parts of the country to expand vaccine eligibility and instead concentrated more on reaching vulnerable groups of people, said Dr. Thomas Frieden, a former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director under President

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Barack Obama.

New England leaders for the most part also embraced the recommendations of public health experts over economic priorities throughout the pandemic, said Dr. Albert Ko, who chairs the epidemiology department at the Yale School of Public Health in New Haven, Connecticut.

That parts of the region were among the hardest hit in the early days of the outbreak also played a significant role.

"We really went through it in those early moments," Ko said. "That's left a big imprint on the population generally."

To be sure, some of the improvements in COVID-19 numbers can be attributed to warmer weather that is allowing New Englanders to socially distance outdoors more, experts say.

States such as California and Nebraska are also doing as well as if not better than some New England states when it comes to new cases relative to population. And racial disparities in vaccinations persist in the region, as they do in many other corners of the country.

In a series of tweets last weekend, Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's School of Public Health in Providence, Rhode Island, contrasted the relatively low vaccination rates in Springfield, Massachusetts, one of the region's largest, poorest and most racially diverse cities, with the near-complete vaccination of his hometown of Newton, an affluent, largely white Boston suburb.

"So if you are in a high vaccination state, your job is not done," Jha wrote. "Because across America, there are too many people and communities for whom vaccines still remain out of reach."

Nationwide, new coronavirus cases are down to about 15,000 per day on average, while deaths have plummeted to around 430 a day — levels not seen since late March 2020, during the very early stages of the crisis. The overall U.S. death toll is just short of 600,000.

Even with cases down dramatically, New England hospitals are in many ways busier than ever, as patients return in droves after postponing medical care for more than a year.

Dr. Katherine Gergen Barnett, head of the family medicine department at Boston Medical Center, said it has been "energizing" to reconnect with regular patients but also taxing, as many have a year's worth of mental trauma to work through, on top of their neglected physical ailments.

"There's definitely a little bit of exhale happening," she said. "We ran that marathon, but now there's this other long race ahead of us in terms of getting people back to healthy."

Paul Murphy, an emergency department nurse at Brigham and Women's, said wait times for patients in his unit often exceed six hours these days, and the staff is feeling tired and burned out.

Still, the 54-year-old Warwick, Rhode Island, resident said it has been refreshing to step away from the work grind as the region comes back to life. Gone are the 50-hour-plus workweeks of the pandemic, with time now for his children's sports practices and other commitments, Murphy said.

Faust, the emergency physician at Brigham, said he clocked in nearly an entire day of guilt-free sleep recently, something he couldn't have dreamed of during the throes of the pandemic.

But like other health experts, he worries that the slowing pace of vaccinations could leave the nation vulnerable to newer, stronger virus mutations.

"We're playing roulette if we continue to let the virus infect so many people," Faust said. "That's what keeps me up at night now."

Protest erupts again over man killed by Minnesota deputies

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Protesters faced off with officers in Minneapolis early Saturday over the shooting death of a man by members of a U.S. Marshals task force.

Photos from the scene following a vigil for Winston Boogie Smith Jr., 32, showed dumpster fires in the street and a line of officers standing guard. It was the second night of protests in response to the fatal shooting Thursday in Minneapolis' Uptown neighborhood.

Authorities said Friday that Smith was wanted on a weapons violation and fired a gun before two deputies shot him while he was inside a parked vehicle. Members of the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force were

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trying to arrest him on a warrant for allegedly being a felon in possession of a gun.

Family and friends described Smith as a father of three who was often harassed by police. They are demanding transparency in the investigation and have asked that anyone who might have video footage to come forward.

Police said some people vandalized buildings and stole from businesses after the shooting Thursday. Nine people were arrested on possible charges including suspicion of riot, assault, arson and damage to property.

The fatal shooting comes as Minneapolis has been on edge since the death of George Floyd just over a year ago, and the fatal shooting of Daunte Wright by an officer in nearby Brooklyn Center in April.

G-7 nations sign key pact to make tech giants pay fair taxes

LONDON (AP) — The world's richest countries signed a landmark global agreement Saturday to confront tax avoidance and make sure that giant tech companies pay their fair share, Britain's treasury chief said.

Treasury chief Rishi Sunak said finance ministers from the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations signed the pact on the second and final day of meetings in London.

"I'm delighted to announce that G-7 finance ministers today, after years of discussions, have reached a historic agreement to reform the global tax system to make it fit for the global digital age and crucially to make sure that it's fair, so that the right companies pay the right tax in the right places," Sunak said in a video message posted on Twitter.

The meeting of finance ministers came ahead of an annual summit of G-7 leaders scheduled for June 11-13 in Carbis Bay, Cornwall. The U.K. is hosting both sets of meetings because it holds the group's rotating presidency.

The G-7 has also been facing pressure to provide vaccines for low-income countries facing new surges of COVID-19 infections and to finance projects to combat climate change.

Maine's blueberry crop faces climate change peril

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's beloved wild blueberry fields are home to one of the most important fruit crops in New England, and scientists have found they are warming at a faster rate than the rest of the state.

The warming of the blueberry fields could imperil the berries and the farmers who tend to them because the rising temperatures have brought loss of water, according to a group of scientists who are affiliated with the University of Maine.

The scientists analyzed 40 years of data and found that the state experienced a 1.1 degrees Celsius (1.98 degrees Fahrenheit) increase in average temperature, but the blueberry fields of Down East Maine experienced an increase of 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.34 degrees Fahrenheit).

That seemingly small difference is significant because rising temperatures could lead to water deficits that put the blueberries at risk, said Rafa Tasnim, a doctoral candidate in ecology and environmental science at UMaine and the study's lead author. Lack of water could result in smaller crop sizes and blueberries that are less likely to survive to be harvested.

"What we are expecting is the temperature is going to increase a lot and we will not get as much rainfall in the summertime especially," said Tasnim, who led a research team that published the study in the research journal *Water* earlier this year. "What that will mean for the wild blueberry plants is they will be water stressed."

Maine is home to the only commercial producers of wild blueberries in the U.S. The little berries are smaller and have a slightly different flavor than their cultivated cousins, and the vast majority of the crop is used to supply frozen fruit. Maine growers compete with those in Canada's eastern provinces, which also produce the fruit.

The wild blueberry industry in Maine has struggled somewhat in recent years due to factors such as last

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year's drought and volatile markets. Farmers produced 47.4 million pounds of Maine wild blueberries last year, and that was the lowest number since 2004.

The study authors found that wild blueberry growers might need to change the way they farm to prepare for future climate change. That could include changes to strategies such as irrigation and fertilizer use.

The industry is up to that challenge, said Eric Venturini, executive director of the Wild Blueberry Commission of Maine.

"We are actively engaged in finding out how climate change is impacting our industry and finding solutions to it," he said. "Climate change definitely poses challenge to wild blueberry farms in Maine."

The berries are widely used in processed food products. In recent years, Maine and its growers have worked to brand the berries as a health food product for the age of so-called superfoods. The blueberries are especially popular in smoothies.

The blueberries are also the subject of annual agricultural festivals, and they're the key ingredient of blueberry pie, the official state dessert. Maine's official berry is, somewhat unsurprisingly, the blueberry.

The scientists' findings dovetail with other research about the blueberry fields that has shown climate change to be a looming problem, said David Yarborough, emeritus professor of horticulture with the University of Maine, who was not involved in the study.

"And with increasing temperatures, that will probably be the trend into the future," Yarborough said. "What we're going to do about it is a good question."

'There is stuff': Enduring mysteries trail US report on UFOs

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The blob, captured on distant, fuzzy video by Navy pilots, seems to skitter just above the ocean waves at improbable speed, with no discernible means of propulsion or lift. "Oh my gosh, man," one aviator says to another as they laugh at the oddity. "What ... is it?"

Is it a bird? A plane? Super drone? An extraterrestrial something?

The U.S. government has been taking a hard look at unidentified flying objects like this one. A report summarizing what the U.S. knows about "unidentified aerial phenomena" — better known as UFOs — is expected to be made public this month.

There won't be an alien unmasking. Two officials briefed on the report say it found no extraterrestrial link to the sightings reported and captured on video. The report won't rule out a link to another country, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss it.

While the broad conclusions have now been reported, the full report may still present a broader picture of what the government knows. The anticipation surrounding the report shows how a topic normally confined to science fiction and a small, often dismissed group of researchers has hit the mainstream.

Worried about national security threats from adversaries, lawmakers ordered an investigation and public accounting of phenomena that the government has been loath to talk about for generations.

"There is stuff flying in our airspace," Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, one of the senators who pressed for the probe, recently told Fox News. "We don't know what it is. We need to find out."

Congress late last year instructed the director of national intelligence to provide "a detailed analysis of unidentified aerial phenomena data" from multiple agencies and report in 180 days. That time is about up. The intelligence office wouldn't say this past week when the full document will be out.

The bill passed by Congress asks the intelligence director for "any incidents or patterns that indicate a potential adversary may have achieved breakthrough aerospace capabilities that could put United States strategic or conventional forces at risk."

The chief concern is whether hostile countries are fielding aerial technology so advanced and weird that it befuddles and threatens the world's largest military power. But when lawmakers talk about it, they tend to leave themselves a little wiggle room in case it's something else — whether more prosaic than a military rival or, you know, more cosmic.

"Right now there are a lot of unanswered questions," Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff of California told NBC

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this week. "If other nations have capabilities that we don't know of, we want to find out. If there's some explanation other than that, we want to learn that, too."

Luis Elizondo, former head of the Pentagon's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, said he didn't believe that the sightings were of a foreign power's technology in part because it would have been nearly impossible to keep that secret. Elizondo has accused the Defense Department of trying to discredit him and says there's much more information that the U.S. has kept classified.

"We live in an incredible universe," Elizondo said. "There's all sorts of hypotheses that suggest that the three dimensional universe which we live in isn't quite so easy to explain."

But Michael Shermer, editor of Sceptic magazine, is skeptical.

The science historian, a longtime analyst of UFO theories and other phenomena, said he's seen too many blurry images of supposed alien encounters to be convinced by still more blurry footage of blobs from airplanes. This is a time, he notes, when several billion people worldwide have smartphones that take crisp images and satellites precisely render detail on the ground.

"Show me the body, show me the spacecraft, or show me the really high quality videos and photographs," he said in an interview. "And I'll believe."

Mick West, a prominent researcher of unexplained phenomena and debunker of conspiracy theories, said it was right for the government to investigate and report on the potential national security implications of sightings captured in now-declassified videos.

"Any time there is some kind of unidentified object coming through military airspace, that's a real issue that needs to be looked into," he told AP.

"But the videos, even though they're showing unidentified objects, they're not showing amazing unidentified objects."

Pilots and sky-watchers have long reported sporadic sightings of UFOs in U.S. airspace, seemingly at unusual speeds or trajectories. In most cases, those mysteries evaporate under examination.

In 1960, the CIA said 6,500 objects had been reported to the U.S. Air Force over the prior 13 years. The Air Force concluded there was no evidence those sightings were "inimical or hostile" or related to "interplanetary space ships," the CIA said.

Reports of UFOs have, of course, persisted since then. Some people who study the topic argue investigations have been limited by the stigma of being linked to conspiracy theories or talk of little green men storming Earth. They note that the government has a history of stonewalling and lying about the unexplained.

It took 50 years for the government to offer what it hoped was a full debunking of claims that alien bodies were recovered at a crash site in New Mexico in 1947. In 1997, the Air Force said the Roswell "bodies" were dummies used in parachute tests, recent ancestors of the car-crash dummies of today.

Retired Air Force Col. Richard Weaver, who wrote one of the official reports on the Roswell rumors, tried to assure the public that the government isn't competent enough to cover up a genuine alien sighting. "We have a hard time keeping a secret," he said, "let alone putting together a decent conspiracy."

A recent turning point came in December 2017, when The New York Times revealed a five-year Pentagon program to investigate UFOs. The Pentagon subsequently released videos, leaked earlier, of military pilots encountering shadowy objects they couldn't identify.

One was the video clip of the aviators tracking the blob above the ocean off the U.S. coast in 2015, dubbed Gofast. In another from that year, labeled Gimbal, an unexplained object is tracked as it soars high along the clouds, traveling against the wind. "There's a whole fleet of them," one naval aviator tells another, though only one indistinct object is shown. "It's rotating."

In 2019, the Navy announced it would create a formal process for its pilots to report unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAPs. Last August, the Defense Department created a task force dedicated to the matter. The mission was to "detect, analyze and catalog UAPs" that could endanger the U.S.

In an era of increasingly sophisticated drone aircraft, now seen as a risk to sensitive domestic military sites such as nuclear missile bases, the focus has been more on foreign rivals than on any supposed visi-

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tors from another planet. Yet the formation of the task force stood as a rare acknowledgment from the government that UFOs posed a potential national security concern.

More recently, a story on CBS' "60 Minutes" featured the declassified videos and raised questions about what intelligence the U.S. government has.

Rubio, top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee and its former chairman, said it is important for investigators to follow up on the reports of its pilots and make the findings public. "I am going off what our military men and their radars and their eyesight is telling them," Rubio said. "There are multiple highly trained, highly competent people."

Yet things in the sky are very often not what they seem. Shermer rattles off examples of how phenomena that appear otherworldly may be tediously of this Earth.

"Ninety to 95% of all UFO sightings," he said, "can be explained as weather balloons, flares, sky lanterns, planes flying in formation, secret military aircraft, birds reflecting the sun, planes reflecting the sun, blimps, helicopters, the planets Venus or Mars, meteors or meteorite space junk, satellites, swamp gas ... ball lightning, ice crystals reflecting light off clouds, lights on the ground or lights reflected on a cockpit window, temperature inversions, punch clouds."

"For any of these things to be real, we need something more than these grainy videos and blurry photographs," he said.

"We need really some hard evidence, extraordinary evidence, because this would be one of the most extraordinary claims ever if it was true."

Before final verdict, Mladic's bloody legacy divides Bosnia

By ELDAR EMRIC Associated Press

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — Fikret Grabovica wants to see at least some remorse from wartime Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladic when U.N. judges deliver their final verdict for genocide and other war crimes committed during Bosnia's 1990s ethnic carnage.

Grabovica's 11-year-old daughter, Irma, was among the 10,000 civilians killed in the relentless shelling and sniping that Serb troops under Mladic inflicted on the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo.

But an apology is unlikely from the general known as the "Butcher of Bosnia" for his ruthless campaigns of mass murder and expulsion.

Nearly three decades after Europe's worst conflict since World War II, a U.N. war crimes court in The Hague, Netherlands, is set on Tuesday to close the case against Mladic, the most notorious figure in the 1992-1995 war that killed more than 100,000 people and left millions homeless.

"If only he would admit that he made a mistake, that he was wrong," said Grabovica. "But that won't happen."

The tribunal sentenced Mladic in 2017 to life imprisonment, after convicting him of masterminding crimes throughout the 1992-95 Bosnian War, including genocide in the eastern enclave of Srebrenica in 1995, where his forces murdered more than 8,000 Muslim Bosnian men and boys.

Mladic appealed, but the case has been repeatedly delayed by his ill health and, more recently, by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many hope the final ruling will bring closure for the victims' families and drive home the message that there is no impunity for war crimes.

Sofia Stolk, a researcher at the T.M.C. Asser Institute in The Hague, said the final verdict is important because it closes the tribunal's last key case and because it concerns genocide, the deliberate killing of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of its destruction.

Stolk said the reaction in the Balkans to this and other war crimes trials is predictably mixed.

"It's both received as having an impact on transitional justice and to contribute to justice for the victims of the crimes committed there and ... it's also been regarded as a political trial ... mastered by the West," Stolk said.

Diametrically opposing views over Mladic's wartime legacy reflect deep ethnic divisions that still exist in

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Bosnia so many years after the war ended with a U.S.-brokered peace agreement. For Bosniaks, mostly Muslim, he is a villain and war criminal. Bosnian Serbs, however, still worship their wartime commander as a martyr and hero.

"I cannot accept any verdict," said Serb war veteran Milije Radovic from the eastern Bosnian town of Foca. "For me, he is an icon. And for the Serb people, he is an icon."

"Nobody can convict him of anything, especially not The Hague tribunal," Radovic said. "He is one of us. He is the victim of an international conspiracy by mafioso politicians. He is our man, a man from here, who respected the rules of war."

Posters, monuments and painted images of Mladic can be seen in the Serb-dominated half of Bosnia called Republika Srpska, where many believe Mladic's conviction is the result of fabrication and Western support for rival Bosniaks and Croats.

While charged with war crimes in 1995 by the Yugoslav war crimes court, Mladic went into hiding and evaded justice until 2011, when he was caught and handed over to The Hague from neighboring Serbia by its then-ruling pro-Western government.

Ahead of the final verdict, Mladic's lawyers have sought acquittal on charges that included orchestrating Europe's only post-WWII genocide in Srebrenica, and involvement in numerous other atrocities, including the siege of Sarajevo.

On the other hand, prosecutors weren't content that Mladic was convicted for genocide only in Srebrenica and not also in other areas where Bosnian Serb forces under his command tortured, imprisoned, killed and expelled non-Serbs.

One such location is Prijedor in northwest Bosnia, where residents last week commemorated over 100 children killed by Bosnian Serbs. At the time, Bosniaks and Croats were rounded up and forced to wear white ribbons before being sent to prison camps — scenes that reminded many of Nazi crimes.

Mladic's son, Darko Mladic, insisted in an interview with The Associated Press that his father is innocent and that his rights have been violated during the trial. The only legally appropriate decision would be to annul the initial conviction, he said.

"If the law is to be respected, he should be set free to return home," Darko Mladic said. "I never doubted him because I know him so well, I know his character."

Now 79 and in frail health, Mladic was known as a ruthless and fiery commander during the war, who personally led the Bosnian Serbs as they took control over large swaths of Bosnia to create a separate mini-state. Mladic remained defiant during the trial, lashing out at the tribunal as an anti-Serb instrument.

Standing by a monument for the 1601 children who died in the siege of Sarajevo, Grabovica said he could not understand such brutality.

"That he would act like that, issue orders to kill innocent children who had just come into this world, who just started to dream their dreams," he said. "My little girl was killed like that, who was only 11 and who could not have been guilty of anything,"

In Srebrenica, thousands of white tombstones in Islamic tradition mark the graves of the massacre victims, who were rounded up by Mladic's troops when they seized the enclave that was under U.N. protection at the time. Their remains are still being excavated from dozens of mass graves.

"If he could come here now to see these gravestones, everything would be clear to him," said Djulija Jusic, who lost her two sons and 33 other relatives in the massacre.

"He should spend the rest of his life in prison. I don't wish to do him any harm myself. All I wish is that God may let him see the grave of his son as I am watching the graves of my two sons," she said.

Illegal Serb church on Bosniak woman's land is demolished

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — Bosnian authorities on Saturday demolished a Serbian Orthodox church that was illegally built on land owned by a Bosniak woman, a move that comes after a 20-year legal battle that saw the case reach the European Court of Human Rights.

Workers and construction machinery arrived at Fata Orlovic's yard in the village of Konjevic Polje early

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Saturday. Using a crane, they brought down the white-colored church and its tower bell.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled in October 2019 that authorities must remove the church and pay damages to the Orlovic family totaling 31,000 euros (\$36,500).

The church was built shortly after Orlovic and her family were expelled from the village, 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Srebrenica during the 1992-95 Bosnian War. The family are Bosniaks, who are mostly Muslim, and the village was taken by Bosnian Serbs, who are mainly Orthodox Christians.

"Thank God we finally saw this happen," said Orlovic, who is in her late 70s. "I am exhausted after 20 years."

"Now, finally, I can sit down and have a cup of coffee in my yard without being chased out. I have never done anything wrong to them," she added.

Orlovic's husband was among some 8,000 Bosniak men and boys murdered by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica in 1995, the worst carnage of the ethnic conflict. The Srebrenica massacre has been acknowledged internationally as Europe's only genocide since World War II.

Upon returning to her village after the war, Orlovic's demands that the church be removed were ignored. In 2000, she launched legal proceedings to force the authorities of Republika Srpska, the name of the postwar Serb-run entity in Bosnia, to comply.

Orlovic's lawyer Rusmir Karkin told Bosnian media that he expected a quick removal of the debris from Orlovic's land.

"A lot of people are working and the weather is nice, so I expect everything to be over by tomorrow," he said.

Local authorities have said they will rebuild the Orthodox church at the entrance to the village.

Bosnia remains deeply ethnically divided long after the war ended in 1995 in a U.S. brokered peace agreement. More than 100,000 people were killed in the conflict and millions had to flee their homes.

Mine-sniffing rat Magawa ends years of hard work in Cambodia

By SOPHENG CHEANG Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — After five years of sniffing out land mines and unexploded ordnance in Cambodia, Magawa is retiring.

The African giant pouched rat has been the most successful rodent trained and overseen by a Belgian nonprofit, APOPO, to find land mines and alert its human handlers so the explosives can be safely removed.

Magawa has cleared more than 141,000 square meters (1.5 million square feet) of land, the equivalent of some 20 soccer fields, sniffing out 71 land mines and 38 items of unexploded ordnance, according to APOPO.

And for the first time, it won a British charity's top civilian award for animal bravery last year, an honor so far exclusively reserved for dogs.

"Although still in good health, he has reached a retirement age and is clearly starting to slow down," APOPO said. "It is time."

While many rodents can be trained to detect scents and will work at repetitive tasks for food rewards, APOPO decided that African giant pouched rats were best suited to land mine clearance because their size allows them to walk across mine fields without triggering the explosives – and do it much more quickly than people. They also live up to eight years.

Magawa is part of a cohort of rats bred for this purpose. He was born in Tanzania in 2014, and in 2016, moved to Cambodia's northwestern city of Siem Reap, home of the famed Angkor temples, to begin his bomb-sniffing career.

APOPO also works with programs in Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique to clear millions of mines left behind from wars and conflicts.

More than 60 million people in 59 countries continue to be threatened by land mines and unexploded ordnance. In 2018, landmines and other remnants of war killed or injured 6,897 people, the group says.

D-Day spirit of remembrance lives on, despite the pandemic

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

CARENTAN, France (AP) — In a small Normandy town where paratroopers landed in the early hours of D-Day, applause broke the silence to honor Charles Shay. He was the only veteran attending a ceremony in Carentan commemorating the 77th anniversary of the assault that helped bring an end to World War II.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, this year's D-Day commemorations are taking place with travel restrictions that have prevented veterans or families of fallen soldiers from the U.S., Britain and other allied countries from making the trip to France. Only a few officials were allowed exceptions.

Shay, who now lives in Normandy, was a 19-year-old U.S. Army medic when he landed on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. Today, he recalls the "many good friends" he lost on the battlefield.

Under a bright sun, the 96-year-old Native American from Indian Island, Maine, stood steadily while the hymns of the Allied countries were being played Friday in front of the monument commemorating the assault in Carentan that allowed the Allies to establish a continuous front joining nearby Utah Beach to Omaha Beach.

Shay regretted that the pandemic "is interrupting everything." He is expected to be the only veteran at Sunday's anniversary day ceremony at the Normandy American Cemetery of Colleville-sur-Mer.

"We have no visitors coming to France this year for two years now. And I hope it will be over soon," he told The Associated Press in Carentan.

Shay's lone presence is all the more poignant as the number of survivors of the epochal battle dwindles. Only one veteran now remains from the French commando unit that joined U.S., British, Canadian and other allied troops in storming Normandy's code-named beaches.

While France is planning to open up to vaccinated visitors starting next week, that comes too late for the D-Day anniversary. So for the second year in a row, most public commemoration events have been cancelled. A few solemn ceremonies have been maintained, with dignitaries and a few guests only.

Local residents, however, are coming in greater numbers than last year, as France started lifting its internal virus restrictions last month.

Some French and a few other World War II history enthusiasts from neighboring European countries gathered in Normandy.

Driving restored jeeps, dressed in old uniforms or joyfully eating at the newly reopened terraces of restaurants, they're contributing to revive the commemorations' special atmosphere — and keeping alive the memory of June 6, 1944.

"In France, people who remember these men, they kept them close to their heart," Shay said. "And they remember what they did for them. And I don't think the French people will ever forget."

On Saturday morning, people in dozens of World War II vehicles, from motorcycles to jeeps and trucks, gathered in a field in Colleville-Montgomery to parade down the nearby roads along Sword Beach to the sounds of a pipe band. Residents, some waving French and American flags, came to watch.

Sitting in an old sidecar, Audrey Ergas, dressed in a vintage uniform including an aviator hat and glasses, said she used to come every year from the southern city of Marseille, except for last year due to virus travel restrictions.

"We absolutely wanted to come ... it's great pleasure, we needed it!" she said. "We were afraid that we might feel a bit alone, but in the end we were happy to do even small gatherings."

Pascal Leclerc, a member of the Remember Omaha Beach 44 group, shared the same joy.

"We missed it a lot. That's just fun, happiness, and also being able to pay tribute to all the veterans. That's the main goal," he said.

Henri-Jean Renaud, 86, remembers D-Day like it was yesterday. He was a young boy and was hidden in his family home in Sainte-Mere-Eglise when more than 800 planes bringing U.S. paratroopers flew over the town while German soldiers fired at them with machine guns.

Describing an "incredible noise" followed by silence, he remembers crossing the town's central square in the morning of June 6. He especially recalls seeing one dead U.S. paratrooper stuck in a big tree that

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is still standing by the town's church.

"I came here hundreds of times. The first thing I do is look at that tree," he said. "That's always to that young guy that I'm thinking of. He was told: 'You're going to jump in the middle of the night in a country you don't know'... He died and his feet never touched (French) soil, and that is very moving to me."

More than 12,000 soldiers were buried temporarily in Sainte-Mere-Eglise during and after the Battle of Normandy, before being moved to their final resting place.

In the years following the war, local people were allowed to go to the cemeteries. "Often, people had adopted a grave because they had seen a name they liked ... They were a bit like friends," Renaud said.

"Some, especially at the beginning when there were no coffins yet, had been buried in the ground. They had become the Normandy soil," he added, in a voice filled by emotion.

On D-Day itself, more than 150,000 Allied troops landed on beaches code-named Omaha, Utah, Juno, Sword and Gold, carried by 7,000 boats. The Battle of Normandy hastened Germany's defeat, which came less than a year later.

Still, that single day cost the lives of 4,414 Allied troops, 2,501 of them Americans. More than 5,000 were injured. On the German side, several thousand were killed or wounded.

This year, Col. Kevin Sharp came with a delegation of three other U.S. military officers from the 101st Airborne Division, based in Kentucky, to attend Friday's commemorations in Carentan — the same division that took part in the D-Day operations there. His delegation received special, last-minute permission to come to France despite virus restrictions.

The U.S. military "really values the legacy of the soldiers and the paratroopers who came before us," he told the AP. "It was important enough to send a small representation here to ensure that our appreciation for their sacrifices is made known."

UN: Famine is imminent in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Famine is imminent in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region and in the country's north, the U.N. humanitarian chief said, warning there's a risk that hundreds of thousands of people or more will die.

Mark Lowcock said the economy has been destroyed along with businesses, crops and farms and there are no banking or telecommunications services.

"We are hearing of starvation-related deaths already," he said in a statement Friday.

"People need to wake up," Lowcock said. "The international community needs to really step up, including through the provision of money."

No one knows how many thousands of civilians or combatants have been killed since months of political tensions between Ethiopian President Abiy Ahmed's government and the Tigray leaders who once dominated Ethiopia's government exploded into war last November.

Eritrea, a longtime Tigray enemy, teamed up with neighboring Ethiopia in the conflict.

In late May, Lowcock painted a grim picture of Tigray since the war began, with an estimated 2 million people displaced, civilians killed and injured, rapes and other forms of "abhorrent sexual violence" widespread and systematic, and public and private infrastructure essential for civilians destroyed, including hospitals and agricultural land.

"There are now hundreds of thousands of people in northern Ethiopia in famine conditions," Lowcock said. "That's the worse famine problem the world has seen for a decade, since a quarter of a million Somalis lost their lives in the famine there in 2011. This now has horrible echoes of the colossal tragedy in Ethiopia in 1984."

In the disastrous famine of 1984-85, about 2 million Africans died of starvation or famine-related ailments, about half of them in Ethiopia.

"There is now a risk of a loss of life running into the hundreds of thousands or worse," Lowcock said.

He said getting food and other humanitarian aid to all those in need is proving very difficult for aid

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agencies.

The United Nations and the Ethiopian government have helped about 2 million people in recent months in northern Ethiopia, mainly in government-controlled areas, he said.

But Lowcock said there are more than 1 million people in places controlled by Tigrayan opposition forces and "there have been deliberate, repeated, sustained attempts to prevent them getting food."

In addition, there are places controlled by the Eritreans and other places controlled by militia groups where it is extremely difficult to deliver aid, he said.

"The access for aid workers is not there because of what men with guns and bombs are doing and what their political masters are telling them to do," the undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs said.

Lowcock said all the blockages need to be rolled back and the Eritreans, "who are responsible for a lot of this need to withdraw," so aid can get through to those facing famine.

"Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed needs to do what he said he was going to do and force the Eritreans to leave Ethiopia," he said.

Lowcock said leaders of the seven major industrialized nations -- the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, Italy and Canada -- need to put the humanitarian crisis and threat of widespread famine in northern Ethiopia on the agenda of their summit from June 11-13 in Cornwall, England.

"Everyone needs to understand that were there to be a colossal tragedy of the sort that happened in 1984 the consequences would reach far and last long," he said.

Cruise ships restart in Venice; protesters decry their risks

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

VENICE, Italy (AP) — The first cruise ship leaving Venice since the pandemic is set to depart Saturday amid protests by activists demanding that the ship be rerouted out the fragile lagoon, especially Giudecca Canal through the city's historic center.

They say the enormous vessels — weighing over 90,000 tons and carrying thousands of passengers at a time — pose environmental and safety risks to the canal and the city. Another protest is also planned Saturday by pro-cruise activists whose jobs depend on having thousands of visitors flowing through one of Italy's top tourist destinations.

Italian Premier Mario Draghi's government pledged this winter to get cruise ships out of the Venice lagoon, but it will likely take years to reach that goal. The government says it is organizing bids for a viable alternative outside the lagoon, which should be posted any day now.

Still, even an interim alternative route to the Giudecca Canal won't be ready until next year, Italy's Ministry for Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility told The Associated Press in an email.

"Meanwhile, in 2022, as a temporary solution, a certain number of ships can dock in Marghera, relieving the traffic through Venice," the ministry said.

Marghera, an industrial port west of Venice that is still within the lagoon, will require lengthening existing piers to accommodate larger vessels as well as dredging a canal on the approach, cruise industry officials say. Because Marghera is an industrial site, that also means testing the sediment to be dredged for harmful pollutants.

Venice has become one of the world's most important cruise destinations over the last two decades, serving as a lucrative turnaround point for 667 cruise ships in 2019 carrying nearly 700,000 passengers, according to the cruise industry trade association, Cruise Lines International.

While some cruise companies have experimented with Trieste to the west or Ravenna to the south as drop-off points for those visiting Venice during the pandemic, industry officials say Venice remains a key port of call for cruises in the Adriatic Sea and eastern Mediterranean.

The passage Thursday of the MSC Orchestra — a cruise ship 300 meters (about 985 feet) long that towered over Venice with 16 decks— marked the first time a cruise ship had traveled up the Giudecca Canal since January 2020, before the pandemic shut down the industry.

When the ship sets sail later Saturday, passengers will enjoy a deck-side view of St. Mark's Square, the

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Doges Palace and the Bridge of Sighs as they exit the lagoon.

They also will pass protesters who have been campaigning since the 2012 Costa Concordia cruise ship disaster off Tuscany that killed 32 people to get the ships out of Venice's lagoon.

Concerns about cruise ships were heightened two years ago this week when the MSC Opera struck a dock and a tourist boat, injuring five people, while maneuvering through the Giudecca Canal.

Asia-Pacific trade ministers mull pandemic, recovery

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Trade ministers from the Pacific Rim were discussing ways to build back better from the pandemic in an online meeting Saturday hosted by New Zealand.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum has long focused on dismantling trade barriers. The meeting of its trade ministers was convened virtually, given the travel restrictions prevailing in the region as coronavirus outbreaks flare in many countries still struggling to obtain and deploy enough COVID-19 vaccines.

On the agenda was a statement on aiding the movement of essential goods needed to fight the pandemic, in line with global trade rules that have been strained in recent years, especially during the administration of President Donald Trump who favored striking trade deals with individual countries.

The trade ministers attending Saturday's meeting conferred with business leaders on Friday on ways to better manage the health and economic crisis brought on by the pandemic.

"We must ensure that trade plays a role in combatting the worst, continuing effects of COVID-19 through open and unrestricted trade in vaccines, essential medical supplies and associated products," said Rachel Taulelei, chair of the APEC Business Advisory Council.

In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the share of people vaccinated so far is in the low single digits. That includes places like Thailand and Taiwan that initially managed to avoid initial massive outbreaks but now are contending with their worst flare-ups.

APEC members Japan, South Korea and New Zealand are ranked among the worst among all developed nations in vaccinating their people for COVID-19, below many developing countries such as Brazil and India. Australia is also performing comparatively poorly.

This week, President Joe Biden announced the U.S. will swiftly donate an initial allotment of 25 million doses of surplus vaccine overseas through the United Nations-backed COVAX program, promising infusions for Asia, South and Central America, Africa and others.

That would be a substantial and immediate boost to the lagging COVAX effort, which to date has shared just 76 million doses with needy countries.

While some countries at times have limited exports of vaccines, chemicals needed to make them or of protective equipment such as surgical masks, it's unclear whether tariffs and other trade barriers have been the main problem since countries like Japan and New Zealand imposed onerous approval requirements that have slowed inoculations.

The average tariff on vaccines is a low 0.8%, according to the APEC Secretariat. But duties on some other products such as freezing equipment, vials and alcohol solutions can be as high as 30% for some countries.

While the average tariff on vaccines is very low within APEC (only 0.8%), tariffs are much higher for several goods that are very important in the vaccine supply chain.

Control of patents for the vaccines also has proven to be a contentious issue.

Much is at stake: beyond potential lives saved or lost, trade in vaccines and related supplies and equipment was estimated at \$418.5 billion in 2019, according to the latest available data, and likely surged in 2020.

Beyond contending with the current crisis, the APEC meeting was focusing on ways to hasten the recovery from the pandemic and "build back better," reallocating resources to improve health care, education and social safety nets, officials said.

Even though the region is still in the midst of its worst spate of coronavirus outbreaks so far, Pacific Rim economies are forecast to regain momentum this year, with growth rebounding to more than 6% from a

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1.9% contraction in 2020.

APEC gathers 21 economies along the Pacific Rim, from tiny Brunei to the United States to Chile and New Zealand. One of its long-term aims is to promote a free trade area of the Asia-Pacific region.

Pilgrims return to Spain's 'El Camino' paths after pandemic

By JOSEPH WILSON and IAIN SULLIVAN Associated Press

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, Spain (AP) — Committing to the pilgrim's path has for centuries been a source of renewal for those willing to put their lives on hold and spend days, weeks or even months crossing Spain along the Camino de Santiago, a journey that takes hikers to the reported burial place of the apostle St. James.

But after a year of being kept off the Way of St. James due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, soul-searchers hoping to heal wounds left by the coronavirus are once again strapping on backpacks and following trails marked with a seashell emblem to the shrine in the city of Santiago de Compostela.

Some travelers taking to the Camino are like Laura Ferrón, whose marriage ended during Spain's lockdown and who fears she might lose her job because the bank she works for plans massive layoffs. She and two lifelong friends flew from their homes in Spain's North Africa enclave of Ceuta to spend a week walking the final 100 kilometers (62 miles) of the pilgrimage route.

"This helps you let it all go. This pandemic has taught us to give more importance to what we have and to take a good long look at yourself," Ferrón, 33, said while resting on a climb near Arzúa. The village in the green hills of northwest Spain is about two days away from the medieval cathedral in Santiago that is the traditional ending point.

The Camino de Santiago is actually a series of paths that fan out beyond the Iberian Peninsula and spread across Europe. Whichever route one takes, they all end at the Santiago's baroque cathedral, where believers can visit what is said to be the tomb of James, the apostle who, according to Catholic tradition, brought Christianity to Spain and Portugal.

The pilgrimage has its roots in the alleged discovery of the tomb in the 9th century. Pilgrims have come to Santiago for a millenium, but the number of both believers and non-believers making the trip boomed in recent decades after regional authorities revived the route.

It is now supported by a wide network of religious and civic organizations and served by public and private hostels at prices for all pocketbooks.

Over 340,000 people from all over the world walked "El Camino" in 2019. Only 50,000 walked it last year, when Spain blocked both foreign and domestic travel except for during the summer months.

Before a state of emergency that limited travel between Spain's regions ended on May 9, only a handful of Spanish pilgrims were arriving in Santiago each day and registering with the Pilgrim's Reception Office to receive their official credential for having completed the pilgrimage.

Now that travel is again permitted, more people from Spain and elsewhere in Europe are walking the ancient path, although many of the hostels that cater to pilgrims them are still closed. A few hundred arrive in Santiago each day, compared to the several thousand exhausted pilgrims swinging their walking sticks along the city's cobblestone streets during a typical summer.

Spain's Health Ministry has reported the deaths of over 79,000 people from COVID-19. As it did around the world, the disease took its biggest toll on the country's oldest residents.

"For old people, one year of pandemic has felt like five," Naty Arias, 81, said while walking the Camino with her 84-year-old husband and two of their daughters. "And like my husband says, we don't have that much time left anyway, so we have to make the most of it."

The numbers of pilgrims arriving in Santiago over the next year-and-a-half will be boosted after Pope Francis extended the 2021 holy year dedicated to St. James through 2022. For Roman Catholics who take part in the pilgrimage, walking it during a Jubilee Year gives them the chance to receive the plenary indulgence, which grants them the full remission of the temporal punishment for their sins. The last Jubilee Year for the trail was in 2010.

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Santiago Archbishop Julián Barrio said he is cautiously optimistic that some 300,000 pilgrims could turn out this year, as long as the pace of Spain's vaccination program and the health situation worldwide continues to improve. He expects many to come seeking solace from the pain of the pandemic.

"The Way of St. James, in this sense, can help us. It is a space that helps us recover our inner peace, our stability, our spirit, which without doubt we all need, given the difficulties that we have in facing the pain and the ravages of the pandemic that sometimes leave us speechless," Barrio told The Associated Press.

Daniel Sarto, 67, joined three friends on the trail, looking to relax after months of stress from seeing his Barcelona-based trade show company bring in zero revenue.

"It has been a very, very, very hard year. Psychologically, it is very sad constantly thinking that this is going nowhere, about what will happen to our employees," Sarto said. "This is a relief being here, without a doubt. My wife told me that I had to get out of the house. I had to come."

Mental health experts agree that the pilgrimage can lead to emotional healing for both faithful Roman Catholics and the large number of non-Catholics who are drawn to make one. Dr. Albert Feliu, a health psychologist and lecturer at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, said preliminary results from a survey of 100 pilgrims point to a reduction of stress and depression that surpass those seen after regular vacations.

The survey was part of a multi-year study of the benefits of walking the Camino de Santiago being done by clinical researchers from universities in Spain and Brazil. Manu Mariño, the director of Quietud Mindfulness Center in Santiago, is also involved in the research. He has gone on the pilgrimage 24 times.

"The Way of St. James is a very good place to help us realize that suffering forms part of life, and that our suffering depends on how we relate to what we are experiencing," Mariño said. "You learn to live with just what is necessary, which means exactly what you can carry in a backpack."

Vladimir Vala, a 25-year-old university graduate in business, came to Spain to walk for three weeks before returning to the Czech Republic to get married. For Vala, the pandemic has one positive facet among all the misery, that he feels dovetails with the experience of walking, mostly by himself, day after day through the countryside.

"People were alone and they had to face themselves (during the pandemic)," Vala said after visiting the cathedral. "And I think the Camino is (about) facing yourself in its meaning. So it comes together really close. It's beautiful and hard."

The newly divorced Ferrón had a similar assessment.

"The trail is good for your mental health because all this can drive anyone crazy, being locked up, the fear, the psychosis," she said. "Some climbs are really hard, but at the end of the day you reach your goal and then you have the reward of a cold beer, which is divine."

Amid brutal case surge, Afghanistan hit by a vaccine delay

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan is battling a brutal surge in COVID-19 infections as health officials plead for vaccines, only to be told by the World Health Organization that the 3 million doses the country expected to receive by April won't be delivered until August.

"We are in the middle of a crisis," Health Ministry spokesman Ghulam Dastagir Nazari said this week, expressing deep frustration at the global vaccine distribution that has left poor countries scrambling to find supplies for their people.

Nazari has knocked on the door of several embassies, and so far, "I've gotten diplomatic answers" but no vaccine doses, he said.

Over the past month, the escalating pace of new cases has threatened to overwhelm Afghanistan's health system, already struggling under the weight of relentless conflict. In part, the increase has been blamed on uninterrupted travel with India, bringing the highly contagious Delta variant, first identified in India.

Also, most Afghans still question the reality of the virus or believe their faith will protect them and rarely wear masks or social distance, often mocking those who do. Until just a week ago, the government was allowing unrestricted mass gatherings.

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The Delta variant has helped send Afghanistan's infection rate soaring, hitting 16 provinces and the capital Kabul the hardest. This week, the rate of registered new cases reached as high as 1,500 a day, compared to 178 a day on May 1.

Hospital beds are full, and it is feared rapidly dwindling oxygen supplies will run out. Afghan ambassadors have been ordered to seek out emergency oxygen supplies in nearby countries, Foreign Minister Haneef Atmar said in a tweet Friday.

By official figures, Afghanistan has seen a total 78,000 cases and 3,007 deaths from the pandemic. But those figures are likely a massive undercount, registering only deaths in hospitals, not the far greater numbers who die at home.

Testing is woefully inadequate. In only the past month, the percentage of positive COVID tests has jumped from about 8% to 60% in some parts of the country. By WHO recommendations, anything higher than 5% shows officials aren't testing widely enough, allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

At most only 3,000 tests a day are carried out, as Afghans resist testing, even after the country dramatically ramped up its capabilities to 25,000 a day.

Only recently, the government tried to take steps to clamp down to contain the surge. It closed schools, universities and colleges for two weeks. It also shut down wedding halls, which had been operating unhindered throughout the pandemic.

But it is rare to see anyone wearing a mask in the streets, and even where masks are mandatory, like in government offices, it's rarely enforced. As many as 10 flights arrive daily from India, packed with Afghans, particularly students and people who had gone to India for medical treatment.

Nazari said banning flights was not an option since many Afghans cannot afford to be stranded in India and the government cannot prevent citizens from re-entering their own country.

For vaccines, Afghanistan so far has relied on a donation of AstraZeneca doses from India and then purchases of Sinopharm from China. About 600,000 people have had at least one dose, about 1.6% of the population of 36 million. But the number who have gotten a second dose is minute — "so few I couldn't even say any percentage," Nazari said.

Last month, the ministry received a letter from WHO saying the expected shipment of 3 million vaccine doses will not arrive until August due to supply problems, Nazari said. With just 35,000 vaccine doses remaining in the country, the authorities were forced to stop giving first jabs to use remaining supplies to give second jabs, he said.

Poor countries around the world have been pleading for vaccines even as developed nations have been able to inoculate significant portions of their populations. COVAX, set up with U.N. help to try to prevent vaccine inequities, has struggled to fill the gap. It faced a major setback when its biggest supplier, the Serum Institute of India, announced last month that it would not export any vaccines until the end of the year because of the surge in that country.

"Honestly speaking, I lost my faith in COVAX," Nazari said.

"Unfortunately, there are countries who vaccinated more than their 50% or 60% percent of the population ... and there are countries who did not receive vaccines to even vaccinate 1% of their population."

At the Afghan-Japan Communicable Disease Hospital, Kabul's only hospital dedicated solely to COVID treatment, all 174 beds are full. The Health Ministry opened roughly 350 more beds for coronavirus patients in another three hospitals, but they too quickly filled up. This week, people were being turned away.

Each day three or four people die of COVID at the Afghan-Japan Hospital, said hospital administrator Dr. Zalmi Rishteen.

Doctors struggle with the public's refusal to take precautions and follow safety protocols. "Our people believe it is fake, especially in the countryside," Rishteen said. "Or they are religious and believe God will save them."

In the hospital's intensive care unit, Dr. Rahman Mohtazir said that only makes it more dangerous for him as he does his job. "I am afraid I will catch it, but I am here to help," he said. "I listen to people and they say it's fake. Then they come here."

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The Health Ministry has recruited clerics, prominent religious figures and local elders to encourage vaccination and anti-coronavirus precautions.

The worsening COVID situation prompted the U.S. Embassy on Thursday to issue a health alert warning of shortages of supplies, oxygen and beds at hospitals and urging American citizens to "to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible."

GOP sees opening to revive attacks on Fauci in email trove

By JILL COLVIN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dr. Anthony Fauci has been a political lightning rod since the early days of the pandemic, lionized by the left as a beacon of truth in an administration that badly mismanaged the pandemic and villainized by the right as a misguided, spotlight-seeking bureaucrat seeking to undermine former President Donald Trump.

But with the release of a trove of Fauci's emails this week, Republicans' attacks on the nation's top government infectious-diseases expert have gone into overdrive. On conservative news channels, Fauci — who now serves as President Joe Biden's pandemic adviser — has been pilloried as a liar who misled the American people about the origins of COVID-19 to protect the Chinese government. In Congress, Republican calls for his resignation have grown louder, as have demands for new investigations into the origins of the virus.

"Given what we know now, I don't know how anyone can have confidence that he should remain in a position of public trust and authority," said Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, a potential presidential hopeful who is calling for Fauci's resignation and a full congressional inquiry.

The moves by Republicans represent a new effort to find a reliable foil in the first few months of the Biden administration, as they have struggled to turn public sentiment against the new president. So far, Biden has enjoyed widespread job approval, buoyed by the public's broad backing of his handling of the pandemic, which 71% of Americans support, according to a recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll.

Fauci, who has a security detail because of ongoing threats and who did not respond to a request for comment for this story, has repeatedly defended his work, saying he received thousands of emails and has never ruled out any theory.

"I still believe the most likely origin is from an animal species to a human, but I keep an absolutely open mind that if there may be other origins of that, there may be another reason, it could have been a lab leak," Fauci said Thursday on CNN.

The doctor's newly released emails, which span the early days of the pandemic and were obtained by BuzzFeed News and The Washington Post, show no evidence of any kind of coverup about the origin of the virus. Indeed, many of the discussions reflect the science at the time. But Republicans, including Trump, have seized on the emails as proof of a conspiracy to obscure the source of the virus.

In one email, from Feb. 1 of last year, Kristian Andersen, a researcher at the Scripps Research Institute, wrote to Fauci, the longtime director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, about ongoing efforts to decipher the origin of the novel coronavirus.

At the time, the lab leak hypothesis was largely dismissed by experts. It has recently gained traction, though the origins of the virus remain unknown.

"The unusual features of the virus make up a really small part of the genome (0.1%) so one has to look really closely at all the sequences to see that some of the features (potentially) look engineered," Andersen wrote. He said he and his colleagues "all find the genome inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory. But," he added, "we have to look at this much more closely and there are still further analyses to be done, so those opinions could still change."

By the next month, it turned out, they had. He and his colleagues published an article in Nature Medicine in which they concluded that it was "improbable that SARS-CoV-2 emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus."

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In another email, Fauci was thanked by the head of a nonprofit that helped fund research at China's Wuhan Institute of Virology, "for publicly standing up and stating that the scientific evidence supports a natural origin," which he said "will help dispel the myths being spun around the virus' origins."

Andersen, the scientist who wrote the "engineered" email, has tried to offer further explanation.

"As I have said many times, we seriously considered a lab leak a possibility. However, significant new data, extensive analyses, and many discussions led to the conclusions in our paper. What the email shows, is a clear example of the scientific process," he tweeted amid the backlash.

"It's just science," he later added. "Boring, I know, but it's quite a helpful thing to have in times of uncertainty."

The former president disagrees. While in office, Trump, who disdained the scientist's popularity, frequently flouted Fauci's recommendations on battling COVID-19 by playing down the severity of the pandemic and often touting unproven scientific remedies, including a malaria drug and even injecting disinfectant. And he frequently tried to undermine Fauci's credibility by refusing to acknowledge the evolution in scientists' understanding of the virus and how it spread, which informed guidance about policies like masking.

Trump is expected to yet again go after Fauci when he returns to the public stage in a speech in North Carolina on Saturday night. He sees the emails as further vindication that he was right about the doctor, according to an adviser who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe private conversations.

"There are a lot of questions that must be answered by Dr. Fauci," Trump said in a statement this week. "What did Dr. Fauci know about 'gain of function' research, and when did he know it?"

"Gain of function" refers to enhancing the severity or transmissibility of a virus.

House Republican Whip Rep. Steve Scalise said on Fox Business Network on Thursday that Fauci "needs to be brought in under oath to answer questions" about the emails, while Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., now the No. 3 Republican in the House, blasted out a fundraising email with the subject line "FIRE FAUCI."

"Anthony Fauci's recently released emails and investigative reporting about #COVID19 origins are shocking. The time has come for Fauci to resign and for a full congressional investigation into the origins of #COVID19 — and into any and all efforts to prevent a full accounting," Hawley tweeted after recently voting along with Scalise and Stefanik to block a full congressional investigation into the origins of the Jan. 6 insurrection.

But the White House has made clear that it is standing with Fauci, despite the onslaught of criticism.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki this week praised Fauci as "an undeniable asset in our country's pandemic response," and Biden felt compelled to poke his head back into a room full of reporters he'd departed Friday to say that he was, indeed, "very confident in Dr. Fauci." In a sign of support, Fauci will join first lady Jill Biden for a visit Sunday to a vaccination clinic in New York.

Biden administration officials and allies point to polling showing that Fauci is still one of the country's most trusted public health communicators. Privately, they see the GOP's focus on Fauci as a ploy to energize their base that likely will not resonate with moderate voters. And they are happy to compare Fauci's record on public health with Trump's.

"A note to Fauci critics," tweeted Andy Slavitt, Biden's outgoing senior COVID-19 adviser. "For years, he has been working tirelessly on the development of the mRNA vaccine in anticipation of a potential major viral outbreak. And on Jan 11, 2020, his team downloaded the gene sequence & on the 13th began work on the vaccine."

"So keep it down," he wrote.

Clippers beat Mavs 104-97, force Game 7 in another road win

By SCHUYLER DIXON AP Sports Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Kawhi Leonard and the Los Angeles Clippers made it an NBA-record six straight victories for the road team in a playoff series.

Now they have to figure out how to beat Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks at home in a Game 7 to avoid another bitter postseason disappointment.

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Leonard tied his playoff career high with 45 points and the Clippers beat the Mavericks 104-97 on Friday night, winning for the third time in front of a raucous Dallas crowd more than three times bigger than any during the regular season.

This time it was a tense finish keyed by the two-time NBA Finals MVP after double-digit LA victories in the first two games in Dallas, and coming off the Clippers' third straight loss at home.

"Great players perform in big moments," Clippers coach Tyrone Lue said. "It just shows you who Kawhi Leonard is."

Only one other seven-game series had started with five straight victories by the road team. Now Leonard and Paul George get their first chance to eliminate the team they beat in six games in the first round in the Florida playoff bubble last August. Game 7 is Sunday in Los Angeles.

"Just another basketball game," Leonard said. "Like we say, if we don't want to go home, pay attention to details, have faith, shooting the ball with confidence. If you do that, you can live with the results."

Luka Doncic scored 29 points but was just 2 of 9 from 3-point range as the LA defense turned up the pressure in key moments and held Dallas to 29% shooting in the fourth quarter.

Tim Hardaway Jr. had 23 points but missed a 3-pointer and a layup in the closing minutes.

After coming home with a 2-0 series lead and losing twice, the Mavericks lost a close-out game for just the second time in seven games under coach Rick Carlisle.

Now Dallas has to bounce back from the disappointment of another missed opportunity on the home court, still looking for the first playoff series victory since the franchise's only championship 10 years ago.

"We've done it before already in this series," said Kristaps Porzingis, the European sidekick to Doncic who was relegated to a secondary role on offense and finished with just seven points on seven shots in 31 minutes. "We feel like we can beat them, and we'll see who's right and who's wrong."

The Mavericks were down 90-88 when Maxi Kleber missed an open corner 3. Leonard scored the next eight LA points, including back-to-back 3-pointers for a 98-90 lead with 1:41 remaining.

A night after the other Los Angeles team was eliminated when LeBron James and the Lakers lost to Phoenix, the Clippers trailed for long stretches before going in front for good with six minutes left on a jumper by George, who had 20 points and 13 rebounds.

Reggie Jackson scored 14 of his 25 points in the first quarter to help keep LA close early. Leonard took over from there.

The five-time All-Star made all five of his shots in the fourth quarter, including the consecutive 3s, as LA shot 63% in the final quarter. Leonard was 18 of 25 overall and 5 of 9 from deep.

"He destroyed us," Doncic said. "He had a hell of a game. That's what he does."

Leonard's strong finish came after guarding Doncic at the start and plenty of time thereafter with Lue saying the Clippers needed to slow the Dallas sensation in the first quarter after Doncic scored 19 in the first on the way to 42 in Game 5.

"He's been a big factor defensively throughout the series," Carlisle said. "The fact that he had the energy offensively to hit those shots down the stretch, the majority of which were very difficult, is something to behold."

The biggest lead for either team from the middle of the second quarter to the end of the third was a seven-point Dallas edge in the third.

The Clippers erased that deficit quickly with their best defensive intensity of the game to that point, sparking an 11-0 run capped by a 3-pointer from Leonard.

LA left Dorian Finney-Smith open for a 3-pointer that helped Dallas go back in front, and the Mavericks later scored the final five points of the third for a 77-73 lead.

TIP-INS

Clippers: Serge Ibaka missed his fourth consecutive game with back spasms. The issue kept him out of 30 straight games in the regular season before he played the final two games leading into the playoffs and the first two in this series. Ibaka made the trip for Game 5 after staying in LA for the first two games in Dallas. ... After Leonard, Jackson and George, the next-highest LA scorer was Nicolas Batum with six.

Mavericks: Carlisle's only other close-out loss as coach of the Mavericks was in Game 7 at San Antonio

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in the first round in 2014, when the Mavericks weren't expected to last that long. ... Boban Marjanovich scored 12 points as Dallas went with a big lineup again.

Biden aims to restore species protections weakened by Trump

By MATTHEW DALY and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration says it is canceling or reviewing a host of actions by the Trump administration to roll back protections for endangered or threatened species, with a goal of strengthening a landmark law while addressing climate change.

The reviews by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service are aimed at five Endangered Species Act regulations finalized by the Trump administration, including critical habitat designations and rules defining the scope of federal actions on endangered species. The Fish and Wildlife Service also said Friday it will reinstate the so-called "blanket rule," which mandates additional protections for species that are newly classified as threatened. Under former President Donald Trump, those protections were removed.

Habitat designations for threatened or endangered species can result in limitations on energy development such as mining or oil drilling that could disturb a vulnerable species, while the scoping rule helps determine how far the government may go to protect imperiled species.

Under Trump, officials rolled back protections for the northern spotted owl, gray wolves and other species, actions that President Joe Biden has vowed to review. His administration already has moved to reverse Trump's decision to weaken enforcement of the century-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which made it harder to prosecute bird deaths caused by the energy industry.

The decision on the bird law was among more than 100 business-friendly actions on the environment that Trump took and Biden wants reconsidered and possibly revised or scrapped. The reviews announced Friday follow through on that executive order.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to working with diverse federal, tribal, state and industry partners to not only protect and recover America's imperiled wildlife but to ensure cornerstone laws like the Endangered Species Act are helping us meet 21st century challenges," said Martha Williams, principal deputy director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency looks forward to "continuing these conservation collaborations and to ensuring our efforts are fully transparent and inclusive," Williams added.

The reviews announced Friday will take months or years to complete. Many rules targeted by Trump originated with former President Barack Obama and took him years to undo, continuing a decades-old, back-and-forth between Democratic and Republican administrations with starkly differing approaches to environmental regulation.

Industry groups and Republicans in Congress have long viewed the Endangered Species Act as an impediment to economic development and under Trump they successfully lobbied to weaken the law's regulations. Environmental groups and Democratic-controlled states battled the moves in court, but those cases remained unresolved when Trump left office in January.

Noah Greenwald with the Center for Biological Diversity said the environmental group was grateful to see the Trump rules being canceled or changed, particularly a rule that would have denied blanket protections for threatened species.

"We hope they move quickly so more species aren't harmed," Greenwald said.

Earthjustice attorney Kristen Boyles, who was involved in legal challenges to the Trump rules, said Friday's announcement covered major changes under the previous administration that needed to be addressed. But Boyles said questions remain about what will happen while the new proposals go through a lengthy rule-making process.

"These will take time, and in the interim we don't want the harm to continue," she said.

Jonathan Wood, a lawyer for the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative law firm that advocates for property rights, said the Biden proposals could backfire by removing incentives for landowners to cooper-

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ate in helping imperiled wildlife.

"There were some things in the Trump rules that were right," Wood said, citing regulations that he said offered needed flexibility and better incentives to recover endangered species.

"This looks basically like a 180-degree reversal," he said. "Once again we're going to yo-yo back and forth on what the rules are."

The Biden administration said in January it was reconsidering a Trump rule that removed federal protections for wolves across most of the Lower 48 states, but officials so far have not backed away from the Trump rule and continue to defend it in court. Wildlife advocates have pressed to revive the federal protections for gray wolves across the Northern Rockies and Upper Midwest after Republicans in Idaho, Montana and other states made it much easier to kill the predators.

In the final days of the Trump administration, the Fish and Wildlife Service cut by one-third the amount of protected federal old-growth forest used by the spotted owl, a move that was cheered by the timber industry and slammed by Democrats and environmental groups.

The Biden administration has temporarily delayed putting the Trump-era rules into effect in order to review the decision.

Last week, the Biden administration proposed federal protections for the lesser prairie chicken, saying its habitat across five states is in danger of becoming more fragmented, with a further toll expected from the effects of climate change and drought. The chicken's habitat spans parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas -- including a portion of the oil-rich Permian Basin.

The administration said this week that an extremely rare wildflower that grows only in Nevada's high desert should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Tiehm's buckwheat flower grows where an Australian mining company wants to dig for lithium.

Biden says jobs report bolsters case for government spending

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

President Joe Biden portrayed the May jobs report as a jumping off point for more spending on infrastructure and education to keep growth going — essentially an argument for his agenda. But the employment numbers issued Friday also hinted at the possible limits of how much government aid can be pumped into the world's largest economy.

"We're on the right track," Biden said. "Our plan is working. And we're not going to let up now. We're going to continue to move on. I'm extremely optimistic."

The May jobs report showed the complexity of restarting the economy after a pandemic shutdown and the mixed signals that can result when an unprecedented surge of government spending flows through the economy. Biden can congratulate his administration on 559,000 jobs being added and a 5.8% unemployment rate, yet the hiring was lower than what many economists expected after his \$1.9 trillion relief package.

Biden's challenge is to convince Americans that his administration's relief efforts to date have done well enough to sustain faster growth, instead of creating inflation and imbalances that could jeopardize public support for his plans to invest at least another \$3 trillion in roads, clean energy, children and schools.

The report suggested that not enough people are seeking work, a possible problem for a president who is hoping that his rescue package will put the country back at full employment by 2022. While Biden viewed the jobs figures as a full-speed-ahead argument for his agenda, several economists were urging a degree of caution to see whether more Americans will start looking for jobs after the steep losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Republicans, for their part, found ways to turn the jobs report into an argument against Biden's plans to finance more government programs through tax increases on the wealthy and corporations. Their concern is that generous unemployment benefits have prevented people from accepting jobs and that the government aid — much of it still forthcoming — will fuel inflation.

Texas Rep. Kevin Brady, the top Republican on the House Ways & Means Committee, said Biden should divert more of the COVID-19 relief money to infrastructure.

"If we want to help families build their lives and rebuild the U.S. economy for the long term, it's time for

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the emergency spending and the endless government checks to end," Brady told Fox Business.

The big red flag in the jobs report was that the labor force participation rate ticked down to 61.6%. Despite the government spending, it's essentially unchanged from where it was last summer and down from 63.3% before the coronavirus struck 14 months ago. The lower participation rate means that a healing economy is not encouraging enough people to find work.

For some economists, it's evidence that Biden's \$1.9 trillion relief package was likely excessive. The government spending has so far generated more demand for workers and goods than the economy could produce, possibly vindicating some Republican criticisms.

"We have a general sense of what's going on at this point: We are not able to create the jobs fast enough relative to the demand we're infusing into the economy," said Marc Goldwein, senior vice president for the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

Goldwein and other economists said they believe that Biden's aid package helped the economy, though the same results might have been achieved for less money. There is also the possibility that the relief package's expanded unemployment benefits propped up consumer spending and that forthcoming state and local government aid kept workers on payrolls — all of which could have helped boost the jobs totals.

Harvard University professor Jason Furman, a former chief economist in the Obama White House, said it was surprising that the participation rate fell in a month when vaccinations were advancing, COVID-19 infections were declining, job openings were up and wages were rising.

Because demand for workers is greater than their current supply, the silver lining for Biden is a sharp jump in average hourly earnings. That's a clear benefit to working Americans that can be sold on the campaign trail, but the risk of wages rising too quickly is levels of inflation that could choke off growth.

Furman urged patience in a recent paper, arguing that the demand for workers will most plausibly lead to an increased supply of people seeking jobs.

"In the interim there would be more price inflation, but over time it would be offset by an economy that returns to something that could even be better than its pre-pandemic path," he wrote in a paper with Wilson Powell III for the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Biden acknowledged the difficulty of reviving the economy after the shutdowns tied to the pandemic, noting that it was not as simple as flicking a light switch. One of the major problems is supply bottlenecks for computer chips, used cars and an array of raw materials that can cause higher prices. Those supply bottlenecks in the short term are raising prices and could make it costlier to fund infrastructure projects.

Brian Deese, director of the White House National Economic Council, said the administration plans to release next week a review of how to make supply chains more resilient. But some of the current mismatches are short term and will need to be resolved through market forces.

"On a lot of these issues," Deese said, "there is no immediate short-term, magic bullet fix."

Biden rebuffs GOP infrastructure offer, citing broader goals

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has dismissed a fresh Republican infrastructure proposal that offered modestly more spending but fell short of "his objectives to grow the economy," the White House said.

His reaction Friday cast further doubt on the two parties' prospects for striking compromise on one of the administration's chief legislative priorities as deadlines slip and time runs out to make progress toward a deal.

The White House released the statement after Biden spoke by phone with West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, the chief GOP negotiator. Both sides said the two would speak again on Monday, but Biden's team made clear the president will be casting about for talks with other senators.

"The President expressed his gratitude for her effort and goodwill, but also indicated that the current offer did not meet his objectives to grow the economy, tackle the climate crisis, and create new jobs," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

A Capito statement provided no detail about their discussion or the new offer.

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Making the pitch for Republicans, Capito had suggested around a \$50 billion boost above the previous Republican offer of \$928 billion, the White House said, still leaving the GOP well short of the \$1.7 trillion that Biden is seeking.

In a further sign that a deal with Capito was seeming increasingly less likely, the White House said Biden told Capito that he would "continue to engage a number of Senators in both parties in the hopes of achieving a more substantial package."

For weeks, the president has been engaged in talks with GOP senators trying to strike a compromise on Biden's top legislative a priority, the big infrastructure investment package. While the two sides appear to have narrowed the price gap between his initial \$2.3 trillion proposal and the GOP's \$568 billion opening bid, they remain far apart on the scope of the deal and how to pay for it.

Biden wants to raise corporate taxes to generate revenues for the infrastructure investments, a non-starter for Republicans. The GOP senators propose tapping unspent COVID-19 relief aid to pay for the roads, bridges and other projects, an idea rejected by Democrats.

Earlier in the day, after the release of a modest May jobs report, Biden made the case for his robust investment package to push the economy past the COVID-19 crisis and downturn, and into a new era.

"Now is the time to build on the progress we've made," Biden told reporters in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. "We need to make those investments today to continue to succeed tomorrow."

After returning to the White House, Biden spoke with Capito by telephone. The White House had been eyeing a deadline early next week as Congress returns from its Memorial Day break to see progress toward a deal. Meanwhile, Democrats are setting the ground work for a go-it-alone approach. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has indicated that Biden will look to act without Republican support if there is no consensus.

Psaki downplayed any hard-set deadline Friday and said the administration continues to talk to lawmakers from both parties.

"There's runway left," Psaki told reporters at the White House. "We're going to keep a range of pathways open."

Republicans are showing no interest in Biden's latest proposal for a 15% corporate minimum tax rate that would ensure all companies pay something in taxes, rather than allowing so many write-offs or deductions that they contribute zero to the Treasury.

A Republican familiar with the talks and granted anonymity to discuss the private assessment said the GOP senators view that idea as an unnecessary tax hike. They had already rejected his initial proposal to hike the corporate tax rate, from 21% to 28%,

Instead, Republicans are insisting on using untapped COVID-19 relief funds to pay for the infrastructure investments. Biden's team has rejected that approach.

Still, neither Biden nor the GOP senators appear ready to call off talks, even as Democrats prepare to use budget rules to pass any big package on their own, without Republican votes.

On Friday, House Democrats released a plan for spending \$547 billion over the next five years on road, mass transit and rail projects, a blueprint of their priorities and a potential building block for Biden's broader package.

The proposal from Oregon Rep. Peter DeFazio, the Democratic chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, continues existing programs set to expire and adds key pieces of the larger measure Biden is negotiating with Republicans.

DeFazio's legislation doesn't address how to pay for the projects. He called the effort a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to move our transportation planning out of the 1950s and toward our clean energy future."

His bill would authorize up to \$343 billion for roads, bridges and safety improvements. Another \$109 billion would go to public transit programs and \$95 billion would go to freight and passenger rail system, including a tripling of funding for Amtrak.

DeFazio's bill is not expected to attract much GOP support, as Republicans unveiled their own legisla-

tion recently that would authorize about \$400 billion over five years for road, bridge and transit programs.

Republicans on the House panel criticized the Democratic legislation in a statement. "Instead of working with Republicans to find common ground on a bill that could earn strong bipartisan support – something our Senate counterparts did successfully last month – this bill moves even further to the left to appease the most progressive members in the Majority's party."

Biden also called DeFazio on Friday to thank him for his work "on key elements of the American Jobs Plan," Psaki said, adding that they agreed on the benefits of continuing to engage Democratic and Republican senators.

Business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable have called on lawmakers to continue negotiations and work toward a bipartisan compromise.

But some Democrats have questioned the merits of that approach and are already unhappy with some of the compromises that Biden has offered. They support using a process that would allow Democrats to pass an infrastructure boost with a simple majority, which they did through a COVID-19 relief measure that delivered \$1,400 payments to most Americans.

"Getting Republicans on board is not necessary. Getting the American people back on their feet is," Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y., said.

U.S. judge overturns California's ban on assault weapons

By DON THOMPSON Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — A federal judge Friday overturned California's three-decade-old ban on assault weapons, ruling that it violates the constitutional right to bear arms.

U.S. District Judge Roger Benitez of San Diego ruled that the state's definition of illegal military-style rifles unlawfully deprives law-abiding Californians of weapons commonly allowed in most other states and by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Under no level of heightened scrutiny can the law survive," Benitez said. He issued a permanent injunction against enforcement of the law but stayed it for 30 days to give state Attorney General Rob Bonta time to appeal.

Gov. Gavin Newsom condemned the decision, calling it "a direct threat to public safety and the lives of innocent Californians, period."

In his 94-page ruling, the judge spoke favorably of modern weapons, said they were overwhelmingly used for legal reasons.

"Like the Swiss Army knife, the popular AR-15 rifle is a perfect combination of home defense weapon and homeland defense equipment. Good for both home and battle," the judge said in his ruling's introduction.

That comparison "completely undermines the credibility of this decision and is a slap in the face to the families who've lost loved ones to this weapon," Newsom said in a statement. "We're not backing down from this fight, and we'll continue pushing for common sense gun laws that will save lives."

Bonta called the ruling flawed and said it will be appealed.

California first restricted assault weapons in 1989, with multiple updates to the law since then.

Assault weapons as defined by the law are more dangerous than other firearms and are disproportionately used in crimes, mass shootings and against law enforcement, with more resulting casualties, the state attorney general's office argued, and barring them "furthers the state's important public safety interests."

Further, a surge in sales of more than 1.16 million other types of pistols, rifles and shotguns in the last year — more than a third of them to likely first-time buyers — show that the assault weapons ban "has not prevented law-abiding citizens in the state from acquiring a range of firearms for lawful purposes, including self-defense," the state contended in a court filing in March.

Similar assault weapon restrictions have previously been upheld by six other federal district and appeals courts, the state argued. Overturning the ban would allow not only assault rifles, but things like assault shotguns and assault pistols, state officials said.

But Benitez disagreed.

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"This case is not about extraordinary weapons lying at the outer limits of Second Amendment protection. The banned 'assault weapons' are not bazookas, howitzers, or machine guns. Those arms are dangerous and solely useful for military purposes," his ruling said.

Despite California's ban, there currently are an estimated 185,569 assault weapons registered with the state, the judge said.

"This is an average case about average guns used in average ways for average purposes," the ruling said. "One is to be forgiven if one is persuaded by news media and others that the nation is awash with murderous AR-15 assault rifles. The facts, however, do not support this hyperbole, and facts matter."

"In California, murder by knife occurs seven times more often than murder by rifle," he added.

In a preliminary ruling in September, Benitez said California's complicated legal definition of assault weapons can ensnare otherwise law-abiding gun owners with criminal penalties that among other things can strip them of their Second Amendment right to own firearms.

"The burden on the core Second Amendment right, if any, is minimal," the state argued, because the weapons can still be used — just not with the modifications that turn them into assault weapons. Modifications like a shorter barrel or collapsible stock make them more concealable, state officials said, while things like a pistol grip or thumbhole grip make them more lethal by improving their accuracy as they are fired rapidly.

The lawsuit filed by the San Diego County Gun Owners Political Action Committee, California Gun Rights Foundation, Second Amendment Foundation and Firearms Policy Coalition is among several by gun advocacy groups challenging California's firearms laws, which are among the strictest in the nation.

The lawsuit filed in August 2019 followed a series of deadly mass shootings nationwide involving military-style rifles.

It was filed on behalf of gun owners who want to use high-capacity magazines in their legal rifles or pistols, but said they can't because doing so would turn them into illegal assault weapons under California law. Unlike military weapons, the semi-automatic rifles fire one bullet each time the trigger is pulled, and the plaintiffs say they are legal in 41 states.

The lawsuit said California is "one of only a small handful states to ban many of the most popular semi-automatic firearms in the nation because they possess one or more common characteristics, such as pistol grips and threaded barrels," frequently but not exclusively along with detachable ammunition magazines.

The state is appealing Benitez's 2017 ruling against the state's nearly two-decade-old ban on the sales and purchases of magazines holding more than 10 bullets. That decision triggered a weeklong buying spree before the judge halted sales during the appeal. It was upheld in August by a three-judge appellate panel, but the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said in March that an 11-member panel will rehear the case.

The state also is appealing Benitez's decision in April 2020 blocking a 2019 California law requiring background checks for anyone buying ammunition.

Both of those measures were championed by Newsom when he was lieutenant governor, and they were backed by voters in a 2016 ballot measure.

Hawaii sets vaccine thresholds for lifting travel quarantine

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Hawaii Gov. David Ige said Friday that the state will drop its quarantine and COVID-19 testing requirements for travelers once 70% of the state's population has been vaccinated against the disease. Hawaii will also lift its requirement that people wear masks indoors once that level has been reached, he said.

The state Department of Health website said 59% of Hawaii's population has had at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 52% finished their dosing regimen.

The state is using its figures, and not those provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to calculate thresholds for lifting restrictions. Health Department Director Dr. Libby Char said that's because Hawaii's numbers are more accurate. She said it appears the CDC has been counting some of

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Hawaii's doses twice.

Right now, travelers arriving from out of state must spend 10 days in quarantine or, to bypass that quarantine, they must show proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken before departure for the islands.

Once 60% of Hawaii's population is vaccinated, Ige said, the state will allow travelers to bypass a quarantine requirement as long as they can prove they were vaccinated in the U.S.

Restrictions on travel between the islands will open up before that.

Ige said that as of June 15, people will be able to fly interisland without taking a COVID-19 test or showing proof of vaccination. Also on that date, those who have been vaccinated in Hawaii may bypass quarantine when returning from a trip out of state.

To encourage more people to get vaccinated, the state announced it launched a website HIGotVaccinated.com where vaccinated people can enter to win prizes and learn about discounts at local retailers and restaurants.

Among the deals: A \$3 bag of Zippy's chili for those who show their vaccination card. Among the prizes are 100,000 frequent flyer miles from Hawaiian Airlines.

So many people went to the website after the state announced its existence that the site crashed. Health Department spokesman Brooks Baehr said 500 people signed up for prizes in the first hour.

ASEAN envoys meet Myanmar junta leader to press for dialogue

By JERRY HARMER Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations met with Myanmar's junta leader on Friday, six weeks after an emergency regional summit on the coup in the country drew promises of progress toward a solution but produced no tangible results.

State broadcaster MRTV showed Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing meeting with Brunei Second Foreign Minister Erywan Yusof and ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi, but provided only a broad outline of their discussions.

Earlier this week, an Indonesian diplomat said the delegation's purpose was to seek Myanmar's approval of an ASEAN special envoy for the crisis, who is yet to be named. He said the choice of the envoy involved both sides, making progress slow.

Friday's meeting received a cool response from members of Myanmar's opposition shadow government. The National Unity Government said at a rare online news conference that ASEAN should meet with them as well, not just the military.

"Any discussions, any meeting about the future of the people of Myanmar must include the people of Myanmar, (their) voices must be heard," said spokesperson Sa Sa.

The appointment of an ASEAN envoy was one of five points agreed at the regional summit in Jakarta in April, which Min Aung Hlaing attended over the objection of opponents who said the invitation legitimized his power grab. Shortly afterward, a spokesperson for the military government said it would only allow the envoy to visit after it had achieved security and stability in the country.

The military ousted the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on Feb. 1, saying her party's landslide victory in elections last November resulted from massive voter fraud. It has not produced credible evidence to back its claim.

Security forces have brutally suppressed widespread popular protests against the military takeover, firing live ammunition into crowds and carrying out waves of arrests. As of Friday, 845 people have been killed in the crackdown, according to the independent Assistance Association of Political Prisoners.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric in New York highlighted the impact of violence on public health workers. He said there have been at least 212 reported attacks on patients, health workers, ambulances and health care facilities, resulting in at least 14 deaths and 51 injuries since the coup.

"Our colleagues on the ground stress that hospitals are, and must remain, a place of sanctuary and unequivocal neutrality so that patients can seek care and health professionals can provide care safely and without fear," he said.

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The Jakarta summit also reached an agreement to immediately end the violence and start a dialogue between the contending parties with the help of the special envoy.

Brunei is taking the lead in negotiating with the Myanmar junta because it currently holds ASEAN's rotating chairmanship. ASEAN comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

In the online news conference, Sa Sa also said the number of people's militias taking up arms against the military government is set to rise rapidly in response to what he called a "reign of terror."

"There will be so many more forces will appear in the coming months," he said. "It will be out of control. That's why we say to the international community to help us to stop this coup. We need stability in Myanmar."

In recent weeks, civilian armed groups have appeared in several regions of the country, often using homemade weapons or old hunting rifles to engage the army and police, with some success.

Some groups of pro-democracy activists have fled to the jungles to receive combat training from battle-hardened ethnic armed groups who have been fighting for greater autonomy for decades.

US intel report on UFOs: No evidence of aliens, but ...

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Whatever or whoever they are, they're still out there. U.S. intelligence is after them, but its upcoming report won't deliver any full or final truth about UFOs.

The tantalizing prospect of top government intel finally weighing in — after decades of conspiracy theories, TV shows, movies and winking jokes by presidents — will instead yield a more mundane reality that's not likely to change many minds on any side of the issue.

Investigators have found no evidence the sightings are linked to aliens — but can't deny a link either. Two officials briefed on the report due to Congress later this month say the U.S. government cannot give a definitive explanation of aerial phenomena spotted by military pilots.

The report also doesn't rule out that what pilots have seen may be new technologies developed by other countries. One of the officials said there is no indication the unexplained phenomena are from secret U.S. programs.

The officials were not authorized to discuss the information publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. Findings of the report were first published by The New York Times.

The report examines multiple unexplained sightings from recent years that in some cases have been captured on video of pilots exclaiming about objects flying in front of them.

Congress in December required the Director of National Intelligence to summarize and report on the U.S. government's knowledge of unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAPs — better known to the public as unidentified flying objects or UFOs. The effort has included a Defense Department UAP task force established last year. The expected public release of an unclassified version of the report this month will amount to a status report, not the final word, according to one official.

A Pentagon spokeswoman, Sue Gough, declined Friday to comment on news stories about the intelligence report. She said the Pentagon's UAP task force is "actively working with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on the report, and DNI will provide the findings to Congress."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, when asked about the report, said of the question at first, "It's always a little wacky on Fridays." But she added, "I will say that we take reports of incursions into our airspace by any aircraft — identified or unidentified — very seriously and investigate each one."

The Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency have for decades looked into reports of aircraft or other objects in the sky flying at inexplicable speeds or trajectories.

The U.S. government takes unidentified aerial phenomena seriously given the potential national security risk of an adversary flying novel technology over a military base or another sensitive site, or the prospect of a Russian or Chinese development exceeding current U.S. capabilities. This also is seen by the U.S. military as a security and safety issue, given that in many cases the pilots who reported seeing unexplained

aerial phenomena were conducting combat training flights.

The report's lack of firm conclusions will likely disappoint people anticipating the report, given many Americans' long-standing fascination with UFOs and the prospect of aliens having reached humankind. A recent story on CBS' "60 Minutes" further bolstered interest in the government report.

Luis Elizondo, former head of the Pentagon's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, said the one official's claim that there was no indicated link to secret U.S. programs would be significant. But he called on the government to be fully transparent.

"I think that our tax dollars paid for information and data involving UFOs," Elizondo said. "And I think it is the U.S. government's obligation to provide those results to the American people."

But skeptics caution that the videos and reported sightings have plausible Earth-bound explanations. Mick West, an author, investigator and longtime skeptic of UFO sightings, said he supported the military looking into any possible incursion of U.S. airspace, especially by an adversary.

"People are conflating this issue with the idea that these UFOs demonstrate amazing physics and possibly even aliens," West said. "The idea that this is some kind of secret warp drive or it's defying physics as we know it, there really isn't any good evidence for that."

The Pentagon last year announced a task force to investigate the issue, and the Navy in recent years created a protocol for its pilots to report any possible sightings. And lawmakers in recent years have pushed for more public disclosure.

"There's a stigma on Capitol Hill," Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., told "60 Minutes" in May. "I mean, some of my colleagues are very interested in this topic and some kind of, you know, giggle when you bring it up. But I don't think we can allow the stigma to keep us from having an answer to a very fundamental question."

Biden rebuffs GOP infrastructure offer, citing broader goals

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday dismissed a fresh Republican infrastructure proposal that offered modestly more spending but fell short of "his objectives to grow the economy," the White House said.

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"The President expressed his gratitude for her effort and goodwill, but also indicated that the current offer did not meet his objectives to grow the economy, tackle the climate crisis, and create new jobs," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

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Biden wants to raise corporate taxes to generate revenues for the infrastructure investments, a non-starter for Republicans. The GOP senators propose tapping unspent COVID-19 relief aid to pay for the roads, bridges and other projects, an idea rejected by Democrats.

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Earlier in the day, after the release of a modest May jobs report, Biden made the case for his robust investment package to push the economy past the COVID-19 crisis and downturn, and into a new era.

"Now is the time to build on the progress we've made," Biden told reporters in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. "We need to make those investments today to continue to succeed tomorrow."

After returning to the White House, Biden spoke with Capito by telephone. The White House had been eyeing a deadline early next week as Congress returns from its Memorial Day break to see progress toward a deal. Meanwhile, Democrats are setting the ground work for a go-it-alone approach. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has indicated that Biden will look to act without Republican support if there is no consensus.

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"Getting Republicans on board is not necessary. Getting the American people back on their feet is," Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y., said.

US calls on Nicaragua to free opposition figure Chamorro

MANAGUA, Nicaragua (AP) — The U.S. State Department on Friday called on Nicaragua to free opposition figure Cristiana Chamorro, who is being held incommunicado at her home after her laptops and cellphones were taken away.

Chamorro is a potential presidential candidate in the Nov. 7 elections and the daughter of former President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Her detention is the latest in a series of moves by President Daniel Ortega that his critics say are to prevent candidates from running against him in his re-election bid.

On Tuesday, the government charged Chamorro with money laundering involving alleged financial irregularities related to the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation for Reconciliation and Democracy, which she headed. The nongovernmental group is named after her mother. The State Department called for the release not just of Chamorro, but of two foundation employees as well.

"Their detention on trumped up charges is an abuse of their rights, and it represents an assault on democratic values as well as a clear attempt to thwart free and fair elections," according to the U.S. statement.

"Ms. Chamorro's arrest comes amid unrelenting attacks on pro-democracy presidential candidates and independent media. The Ortega regime has pledged to bar Ms. Chamorro from participating in November elections and, in May, baselessly canceled the legal status of two opposition political parties."

On Wednesday, police raided the home and placed Chamorro under a form of house arrest, and a court granted a request from prosecutors to bar Chamorro from running in the Nov. 7 elections or holding public office, citing the charges against her.

She was expected to challenge Ortega for the presidency.

Chamorro has said the allegations were trumped up to keep her out of the race.

In January, she stepped down from her role at the foundation. A month later, it closed its operations in Nicaragua after passage of a "foreign agents" law designed to track foreign funding of organizations operating in the country.

Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council and congress have been narrowing the maneuvering space of the country's opposition. In May, the council cancelled the legal status of the Democratic Restoration Party, which was expected to potentially be a vehicle for an opposition coalition bid against Ortega.

Cristiana Chamorro's mother beat Ortega to win the presidency in 1990 and served until 1997.

Her husband, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, had run his family newspaper La Prensa and was jailed and forced into exile multiple times by the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. He was eventually assassinated in 1978. Cristiana Chamorro is the vice president of La Prensa.

Falwell: Liberty University lawsuit is excuse to shame him

LYNCHBURG, Va. (AP) — Jerry Falwell Jr. is asking a court in Virginia to dismiss a lawsuit Liberty University filed over his headline-grabbing departure last year as leader of the evangelical school his father founded.

Falwell claims in a court filing that much of Liberty's suit serves only to keep shaming him after a provocative photo of him came to light and revelations surfaced of his wife's extramarital affair, The News & Advance in Lynchburg reported Thursday.

Falwell claims the suit focuses on his wife's personal life while not addressing his "actions as the leader of Liberty."

"The rehashing of these events and protected defamation of Falwell through litigation serves one mission — ruining Falwell's reputation through mischaracterization of events and public shaming through out-of-context pictures filed in a public complaint," according to Tuesday's filing in Lynchburg Circuit Court.

Falwell's departure in August came after a news outlet published an interview with a man who said he had a years-long sexual relationship with Becki Falwell and that Jerry Falwell participated in some of the

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liaisons as a voyeur. Falwell denied the report.

The school filed its suit in April, seeking tens of millions in damages. Liberty claims Falwell crafted a "well-resourced exit strategy" from his role as president and chancellor in the form of a lucrative 2019 employment agreement while withholding damaging information about the personal scandal that exploded into public view the following year.

The agreement included a raise, which Falwell told The Associated Press Friday amounted to \$250,000, and a \$2.5 million severance package.

"Despite his clear duties as an executive and officer at Liberty, Falwell Jr. chose personal protection," the lawsuit says.

The suit also alleges that Falwell failed to disclose and address "the issue of his personal impairment by alcohol" and has refused to fully return confidential information and other personal property belonging to Liberty.

Falwell said in Tuesday's filing that he had no duty to tell the university about private matters.

Authorities: Man killed by Minnesota deputies had fired gun

By AMY FORLITI and MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Authorities said Friday that a man wanted on a weapons violation fired a gun before deputies fatally shot him in Minneapolis, a city on edge since George Floyd's death more than a year ago under an officer's knee and the more recent fatal police shooting of Daunte Wright in a nearby suburb.

Family and friends identified the man killed Thursday as Winston Boogie Smith Jr., a 32-year-old father of three. Shelly Hopkins, who was in a longtime relationship with Smith, told The Associated Press that despite any mistakes Smith has made, he didn't deserve to be killed.

"I wasn't there," she said of Thursday's shooting. "I don't know exactly what happened. But I know him. And he didn't deserve that... He had the best heart out of anybody I've ever met in my life."

Members of the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force were trying to arrest Smith on a warrant for allegedly being a felon in possession of a gun, authorities said. The Marshals Service said in a statement Thursday that Smith, who was in a parked vehicle, didn't comply with law enforcement and "produced a handgun resulting in task force members firing upon the subject."

The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension said Friday that two sheriff's deputies — one from Hennepin County and one from Ramsey County — fired their weapons, striking Smith. The state investigators also said evidence indicates Smith fired his gun, saying a handgun and spent cartridge were found inside the car.

Smith died at the scene. State investigators said Smith's passenger, a 27-year-old woman, was treated for injuries from glass debris.

The Bureau of Criminal Apprehension said the U.S. Marshals Service does not allow officers on its North Star Fugitive Task Force to use body cameras and there is no squad camera footage of the shooting. But the U.S. Marshals Service said that while deputy marshals do not wear body cameras, the Department of Justice permits state, local and tribal task force officers to do so.

Waylon Hughes, a close friend of Smith, told reporters that Smith loved music, writing comedy skits and posting them on social media. Hughes said he didn't know Smith to carry a gun, and Hopkins also said she didn't know that he had one.

Family and friends demanded transparency and called for the release of all footage from security and surveillance cameras in the area along with information about the officers involved. At an evening news conference outside the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, family members and activists said they don't believe there is no video.

Department of Public Safety spokesman Bruce Gordon said no surveillance video has been identified, but authorities are still investigating.

"This man had a family, and he's just like anybody else," said Kidale Smith, Winston Smith's brother. "(People) always try to pin something on a man and try to identify him as a criminal, especially if he's Black."

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Smith also questioned the police account of what happened.

"You've got seven unmarked cars and you shoot a man in his car. You don't even give him a chance to get out... You're the U.S. Marshals," he said. "You're supposed to be highly trained men, and you can't handle a simple situation?"

According to online court records, Smith was wanted for allegedly being a felon in possession of a firearm in 2019.

The felony stems from a 2017 assault and robbery of Smith's ex-girlfriend. Smith pleaded guilty to one count of aiding and abetting first-degree aggravated robbery for attacking his ex-girlfriend while another woman took her purse. Smith was sentenced to two years in prison, but the prison sentence was stayed for three years, provided he didn't break the law.

With the felony conviction, Smith was barred from possessing a firearm. In December 2019, he was charged in Ramsey County with two counts of illegally possessing a firearm. According to the complaint, officers arrested Smith on a probation violation and found a handgun under the driver's seat of the car he had been in earlier.

Smith was also charged with fleeing police in Hennepin County last year. According to the complaint in that case, officers in Bloomington began chasing Smith at a high speed, but stopped when he started driving the wrong way on a highway.

Hopkins said Smith was a spiritual man who prayed before every meal. "The two biggest things he cared about in this world was making people happy and being there for his kids," she said.

Hopkins said she knew Smith had some court issues, but said police "tried to make a case against him that didn't exist." She said Smith had been harassed by police for years and had numerous cars impounded. She said he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from his interactions with police.

After Thursday's shooting, some people vandalized buildings and stole from area businesses, police said. Nine people were arrested on possible charges including suspicion of riot, assault, arson and damage to property. Graffiti reading "Mpls still hates cops" and "No trial for them" marked the building next to the parking ramp where Smith was shot.

There has been tension between police and residents since the deaths of Floyd, a Black man who died last year after he was pinned to the ground by Minneapolis officers, and Wright, a Black motorist who was fatally shot in April by an officer in the nearby suburb of Brooklyn Center.

Tensions in Minneapolis already had risen Thursday after crews removed concrete barriers that blocked traffic at a Minneapolis intersection that has become a memorial to Floyd. Crews cleared artwork, flowers and other items from 38th Street and Chicago Avenue where Floyd was killed, informally known as George Floyd Square, but community activists quickly put up makeshift barriers.

2nd woman says NYC mayoral candidate sexually harassed her

NEW YORK (AP) — A second woman has come forward with sexual misconduct accusations against mayoral candidate and City Comptroller Scott Stringer, saying he groped her and made unwanted advances when she worked as a waitress in 1992 at a bar he ran.

Teresa Logan said she was 18 when Stringer groped her at the Uptown Local bar, and kissed and groped her outside of work, The New York Times reported Friday.

Logan, now 47, said she decided to come forward after hearing the account of Jean Kim, who said in late April that the Democrat groped her without consent in 2001 when she was part of one of his campaigns.

"It was like this trigger," Logan told the Times. "There's like a visceral feeling hearing her on the news, and him, and hearing her and knowing she was right. I was like, I know I have to do this."

She was initially connected with the paper through Patricia Pastor, the attorney representing Kim.

Pastor told The Associated Press that Logan called her after hearing a media account of Kim's accusations. Stringer, 61, has denied Kim's accusations. In response to Logan's claims, he said in a statement: "While I do not remember Ms. Logan, if I ever did anything to make her uncomfortable, I am sorry."

"Uptown Local was a long-ago chapter in my life from the early 1990s and it was all a bit of a mess,"

he told the Times,

In one incident, Logan said Stringer put his hand on her inner thigh and kissed her while they were in a cab together. Her sister told the Times that Logan had told her about the encounter that night.

"I do remember her coming home and being like, more scared than I've ever seen her, and just telling me, like, she was really, really shaken up," Yohanna Logan told the newspaper. "I remember her saying that she was in a cab with him and that he, like, touched her, tried to, like, kiss her and she was trying to get out of it."

The Associated Press does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted unless they come forward publicly.

Stringer is among the large field of candidates vying to become the city's next mayor; the Democratic primary is June 22, with early voting starting June 12.

Putin chafes at US, criticizes response to Capitol attack

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday set a tough tone for his upcoming summit with U.S. President Joe Biden, accusing Washington of trying to contain Russia and citing its response to the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol as a manifestation of the West's double standards.

Speaking at an economic forum in St. Petersburg, Putin said that arms control, global conflicts, the coronavirus pandemic and climate change are among the issues he and Biden would discuss at their June 16 summit in Geneva.

"We need to find ways of looking for a settlement in our relations, which are at an extremely low level now," Putin said.

"We don't have any issues with the U.S.," he continued. "But it has an issue with us. It wants to contain our development and publicly talks about it. Economic restrictions and attempts to influence our country's domestic politics, relying on forces they consider their allies inside Russia, stem from that."

He voiced hope that the meeting will help ease tensions with Washington. Russia-U.S. ties have sunk to post-Cold War lows over Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, accusations of Russian interference in elections in the U.S. and other Western nations, and cyberattacks that U.S. officials allege had Russian origins.

Putin reiterated that Russia rejects accusations of interfering in U.S. presidential elections, and he spoke critically of the U.S. response to the Capitol attack, which took place as Congress prepared to certify that Biden had defeated then-President Donald Trump in November.

"They weren't just a crowd of robbers and rioters. Those people had come with political demands," he said.

Putin pointed out that the heavy charges against hundreds of participants in the attack were filed even as the U.S. and its allies strongly criticized Belarus' crackdown on anti-government protests. And he charged that even as the West has criticized Russian authorities for a harsh response to anti-Kremlin demonstrations, protesters in Europe have faced an even tougher police response, with some shot in the eye by what he mockingly called "democratic rubber bullets."

At a later videoconference with the heads of major international news agencies, Putin said "I don't expect any breakthrough results" from the summit with Biden. The United States and Russia have some corresponding interests, he said, "despite certain disagreements. These disagreements are not the result of Russian actions."

In response to a question from Associated Press President and Chief Executive Gary Pruitt, Putin returned to the theme of blaming the United States for poor relations.

"We are not taking steps first — I'm talking about the steps that deteriorated our relations. It was not us who introduced sanctions against us, it was the United States who did that on every occasion and even without grounds, just because our country exists," he said through a translator.

He also criticized the United States as being overconfident and drew a parallel with the Soviet Union.

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"You know what the problem is? I will tell you as a former citizen of the former Soviet Union. What is the problem of empires — they think that they are so powerful that they can afford small errors and mistakes," he said. "But the number of problems is growing. There comes a time when they can no longer be dealt with. And the United States, with a confident gait, a firm step, is going straight along the path of the Soviet Union."

At the earlier session, Putin praised Biden as a "very experienced statesman who has been involved in politics for his entire life ... and a very prudent and careful person. I do hope that our meeting will be positive."

He also took time to deride the allegations that Russian hackers targeted a U.S. pipeline and a meat plant — accusations that have clouded the atmosphere before the summit.

"I do hope that people would realize that there hasn't been any malicious Russian activity whatsoever," he said. "I heard something about the meat plant. It's sheer nonsense. We all understand it's just ridiculous. A pipeline? It's equally absurd."

Putin said "the U.S. special services should track down those ransom seekers. It's certainly not Russia that would extort money from some company. We don't deal with chicken or beef. It's plain ridiculous."

He alleged the hacking accusations were aired by those who try to "provoke new conflicts before our meeting with Biden," and added that some in the U.S. doubted Russian involvement in the hacks.

"It means that inside the American society, media and political class, there are people who want to find ways to repair U.S.-Russian relations," he said.

On other issues, Putin praised his country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and called for a stronger worldwide response to global warming as he sought to bolster Russia's international standing.

Addressing the forum, Putin lauded the efficiency of Russian-designed vaccines and bemoaned what he described as "politically motivated bans" on their purchase in some countries.

Last year, Russia boasted of being the first in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine, but it has since moved slowly in giving shots to its population. The slack pace of vaccination has been partly attributed to public skepticism about the vaccines amid controversial signals from the authorities.

Experts have questioned whether Russia will be able to meet the government target of vaccinating more than 30 million of the country's 146 million people by mid-June, and nearly 69 million by August.

Putin again urged the Russians to move quickly to get the shots, and he invited foreigners to Russia to get vaccinated, saying he would instruct the government to facilitate that.

He also emphasized the need to strengthen the international response to climate change, noting that melting permafrost has posed a major challenge to Russia's Arctic regions.

"We have entire cities built on permafrost," he said. "What will happen if it all starts melting?"

Putin said pipes have been laid for the first of two lines of the prospective Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany, leaving only welding to finalize its construction. He said the second line will follow soon.

The U.S. has strongly opposed construction of the Russian pipeline, but the Biden administration opted last month not to punish the German company overseeing the project while announcing new sanctions against Russian companies and ships. The Kremlin has hailed it as a "positive signal" before the Putin-Biden summit.

The Russian leader hailed the project as more economically feasible than an existing pipeline via Ukraine, rejecting Ukrainian and Western criticism that it's designed to rob Kyiv of transit fees.

Putin said Russia will continue pumping via Ukraine 40 billion cubic meters of gas a year in line with an existing five-year contract, and could continue doing so after it expires if Ukraine shows "goodwill."

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a tense tug-of-war following Moscow's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its support for separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine.

Putin deplored what he described as the U.S. use of the dollar as a political weapon, saying that "its use as an instrument of competition and political struggle has hurt its role as the world reserve currency."

Russia said Thursday it will completely remove the U.S. dollar from its National Wealth Fund and turn the dollar-denominated assets into euros, yuan and gold. Russia long has moved to reduce the dollar's share in its hard currency reserves as it has faced U.S. sanctions amid tensions with Washington and its allies.

Judge grants delay in civil rights case over Floyd's death

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A magistrate judge has delayed until September the arraignment of four former Minneapolis police officers charged with federal civil rights violations in George Floyd's death, ruling Friday that the case is complex and not subject to time restraints under the Speedy Trial Act.

Prosecutors had asked for more time to prepare for the case, due in part to the sheer volume of evidence. Defense attorneys did not oppose the delay.

A federal grand jury indicted Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, J. Kueng and Tou Thao last month, alleging they violated Floyd's rights while acting under government authority as Floyd was restrained face-down, handcuffed and not resisting. Chauvin is also charged in a separate indictment alleging he violated the rights of a 14-year-old boy in 2017.

Magistrate Judge Tony Leung said the four men would be arraigned Sept. 14, subject to any further orders from the court. A date for trial has not been set.

Chauvin has been convicted of murder and manslaughter in state court and is awaiting sentencing in that case. The other former officers also face state trial next March on aiding and abetting counts.

Floyd, 46, repeatedly said he couldn't breathe as Chauvin pinned him to the ground on May 25, 2020. Kueng and Lane helped restrain Floyd — Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held Floyd's legs. Thao held back bystanders and kept them from intervening during the 9 1/2-minute restraint that was captured on bystander video and led to worldwide protests and calls for change in policing.

The federal indictment alleges Chauvin violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure and from unreasonable force by a police officer. Thao and Kueng are charged with violating Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not intervening to stop Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. All four officers are charged for their failure to provide Floyd with medical care.

Chauvin is also scheduled to be arraigned on civil rights charges stemming from the 2017 case. That arraignment is set for Sept. 16, and a trial date has not been scheduled.

FBI subpoenas info on readers of news story on slain agents

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI issued a subpoena demanding U.S. newspaper giant Gannett provide agents with information to track down readers of a USA Today story about a suspect in a child pornography case who fatally shot two FBI agents in February.

The subpoena, served on the company in April, came to light this week after the media company filed documents in federal court asking a judge to quash the subpoena. The Justice Department's actions were immediately condemned by press freedom advocates.

The news comes as the Justice Department has disclosed in recent weeks that it seized the email and phone records of reporters in at least three separate instances during the Trump administration. It raises questions about what liberties federal authorities are taking in using news organizations, journalists and their work as investigative tools.

The subpoena asks for information about anyone who clicked on the article for a period of about 35 minutes on the day after the shooting. It seeks the IP addresses — which can sometimes be used to identify the location of a computer, the company or organization it belongs to, and where it was registered — along with mobile phone identification information of the readers.

While the subpoena doesn't ask specifically for the names of those who read the story, such identification information could easily lead federal agents to the readers.

It is unclear why the FBI was seeking information about the USA Today story in particular, even though numerous other news organizations, including The Associated Press, had reported extensively on the Florida shooting, one of the bloodiest days in the FBI's history.

The suspect opened fire on the agents when they arrived to serve a federal search warrant in a child

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exploitation case. The two agents, Daniel Alfin and Laura Schwartzenberger, were killed and three others were wounded.

Maribel Perez Wadsworth, the publisher of USA Today and president of the USA Today Network, said the government wants the news organization to hand over "private information" about its readers and said it was fighting the subpoena to protect the relationship between its readers and journalists. The company also contacted the FBI before asking a judge to quash the subpoena but did not receive "any substantive reply nor any meaningful explanation of the asserted basis for the subpoena," she said.

"We intend to fight the subpoena's demand for identifying information about individuals who viewed the USA Today news report," Wadsworth said in a statement. "Being forced to tell the government who reads what on our websites is a clear violation of the First Amendment."

The FBI agent who signed the subpoena to Gannett has worked for years on child exploitation cases and has testified in several criminal cases related to child pornography offenses, newspaper accounts and other public records show.

The subpoena — first reported by Politico — says the information is needed as part of an ongoing criminal investigation. Federal officials would not provide additional details about the investigation.

"This is an extraordinary demand that goes to the very heart of the First Amendment. For good reason, the courts have generally refused to give the government access to this kind of sensitive information except in the most unusual circumstances," said Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University.

The Justice Department in recent weeks disclosed that investigators secretly obtained call records of journalists at The Washington Post, The New York Times and CNN in an effort to identify sources who provided national security information that was published in the early months of the Trump administration. President Joe Biden has said the Justice Department would not seize reporters' phone records, though it remains unclear if that promise can be kept.

"This subpoena, especially when viewed alongside the subpoenas that the Justice Department served under the Trump administration in an effort to obtain journalists' records, strongly suggests we need more robust protection for records that implicate the freedoms of speech and the press," Jaffer said.

The Justice Department — in both Republican and Democratic administrations — has struggled to balance the media's constitutionally protected rights against the government's interests in safeguarding classified information and collecting information for criminal cases.

During a 2007 investigation, an FBI agent impersonated an Associated Press journalist while investigating bomb threats at a high school in Washington state. The agent portrayed himself as an AP journalist when he communicated with the suspect online and then sent a link to a fabricated AP news article that, when clicked, allowed the FBI to pinpoint the suspect's location.

The ruse was made public in 2014 and two years later the FBI imposed restrictions on the ability of agents to masquerade as reporters — but it stopped short of ruling out the practice.

In 2013, federal investigators secretly seized two months of phone records for Associated Press reporters and editors that included 20 telephone lines of both AP offices and the journalists, including their home phones and cellphones.

After that, the Justice Department, under then-Attorney General Eric Holder, announced revised guidelines for leak investigations, which require additional levels of review before a journalist could be subpoenaed.

Judge says he'll appoint ex-judge in review of Giuliani raid

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge said Friday he was appointing a former federal judge to oversee a review of materials seized in raids on the home and office of Rudy Giuliani, who served as former president Donald Trump's personal lawyer.

U.S. District Judge J. Paul Oetken announced in a brief written order that he was appointing Barbara Jones as "special master" in the review once she confirmed that she has no disqualifying conflict of inter-

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est. Shortly afterward, she submitted a declaration saying she had no conflicts.

In July 2016, Jones — who served as a Manhattan federal judge from 1995 to 2013 — joined the law firm Bracewell and Giuliani, which Giuliani himself had left six months earlier.

In a letter submitted to Oetken by prosecutors late Thursday on behalf of all parties, prosecutors wrote that Giuliani and Washington attorney Victoria Toensing, whose cell phone was taken by investigators, both agreed to the appointment of Jones through their lawyers and did not believe she had a conflict of interest.

Oetken said he agreed that appointing Jones would be “in the interests of justice.”

Jones served the same role after 2018 raids on the home and office of Michael Cohen, Trump’s former personal attorney. Cohen pleaded guilty to campaign finance and other charges and was sentenced to three years in prison, though he was released to home confinement last year after one year as the coronavirus spread through prisons.

Prosecutors are examining Giuliani’s interactions with Ukrainian figures and whether he violated a law governing lobbying on behalf of foreign countries or entities. A law firm representing Toensing, a former federal prosecutor and close ally of Giuliani and Trump, has said Toensing was told she was not a target of the investigation.

In their letter recommending Jones, prosecutors wrote that she had “efficiently and meticulously reviewed” tens of thousands of items over a period of four months and made privilege designations that were not objected to by the parties” in the Cohen case.

So far, prosecutors have said they have successfully downloaded 11 electronic devices belonging to Giuliani and returned them to him. They say seven more devices belonging to Giuliani and others at his firm, Giuliani Partners LLC, will require more time to unlock because they lack a passcode.

Giuliani, a Republican and former mayor of New York City, has not been charged with a crime. He has said all of his activities in Ukraine were conducted on behalf of Trump. At the time, Giuliani was leading a campaign to press Ukraine for an investigation into Joe Biden and his son, Hunter, before Biden was elected president.

Mississippi group honors fictional man in ‘Ode to Billy Joe’

GREENWOOD, Miss. (AP) — A group of Mississippi residents gathered on a sleepy, dusty Delta day to remember the fictional Billy Joe McAllister where — as the 1967 hit song had it — he ended his life when he jumped off the Tallahatchie bridge.

The Greenwood Commonwealth reported that members of the society calling themselves the June Bugs held a ceremony Thursday and talked about Billy Joe as if they knew him. The group included Republican U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker and Bill Lockett, an attorney and blues club owner who once ran for Mississippi governor as a Democrat.

They unveiled a tombstone at a spot called the Tallahatchie Flats.

“Ode to Billy Joe” was written and recorded by Bobbie Gentry, who lived part of her life in Greenwood.

Wicker quoted from the lyrics Thursday, speaking of the fictional character as if he had been real.

“People said, ‘Billy Joe never had a lick of sense,’ but I never believed that,” the senator said.

Lockett dressed as a pope and spoke about the possibility that Billy Joe committed some sins, including taking his own life by leaping into the Tallahatchie. Lockett announced that he “grants, conveys and bestows and publicly pronounces a special dispensation” for Billy Joe.

People sang “Wade in the Water,” and a tombstone for McAllister was unveiled with the phrase: “He loved the river even unto death.”

An Episcopal priest read a list of Mississippi authors and musicians who were also being memorialized, including William Faulkner and Muddy Waters.

Biden aims to restore species protections weakened by Trump

By MATTHEW DALY and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Friday it is canceling or reviewing a host of actions

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by the Trump administration to roll back protections for endangered or threatened species, with a goal of strengthening a landmark law while addressing climate change.

The reviews by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service are aimed at five Endangered Species Act regulations finalized by the Trump administration, including critical habitat designations and rules defining the scope of federal actions on endangered species. The Fish and Wildlife Service also said it will reinstate the so-called "blanket rule," which mandates additional protections for species that are newly classified as threatened. Under former President Donald Trump, those protections were removed.

Habitat designations for threatened or endangered species can result in limitations on energy development such as mining or oil drilling that could disturb a vulnerable species, while the scoping rule helps determine how far the government may go to protect imperiled species.

Under Trump, officials rolled back protections for the northern spotted owl, gray wolves and other species, actions that President Joe Biden has vowed to review. His administration already has moved to reverse Trump's decision to weaken enforcement of the century-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which made it harder to prosecute bird deaths caused by the energy industry.

The decision on the bird law was among more than 100 business-friendly actions on the environment that Trump took and Biden wants reconsidered and possibly revised or scrapped. The reviews announced Friday follow through on that executive order.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to working with diverse federal, tribal, state and industry partners to not only protect and recover America's imperiled wildlife but to ensure cornerstone laws like the Endangered Species Act are helping us meet 21st century challenges," said Martha Williams, principal deputy director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency looks forward to "continuing these conservation collaborations and to ensuring our efforts are fully transparent and inclusive," Williams added.

The reviews announced Friday will take months or years to complete. Many rules targeted by Trump originated with former President Barack Obama and took him years to undo, continuing a decades-old, back-and-forth between Democratic and Republican administrations with starkly differing approaches to environmental regulation.

Industry groups and Republicans in Congress have long viewed the Endangered Species Act as an impediment to economic development and under Trump they successfully lobbied to weaken the law's regulations. Environmental groups and Democratic-controlled states battled the moves in court, but those cases remained unresolved when Trump left office in January.

Noah Greenwald with the Center for Biological Diversity said the environmental group was grateful to see the Trump rules being canceled or changed, particularly a rule that would have denied blanket protections for threatened species.

"We hope they move quickly so more species aren't harmed," Greenwald said.

Earthjustice attorney Kristen Boyles, who was involved in legal challenges to the Trump rules, said Friday's announcement covered major changes under the previous administration that needed to be addressed. But Boyles said questions remain about what will happen while the new proposals go through a lengthy rule-making process.

"These will take time, and in the interim we don't want the harm to continue," she said.

Jonathan Wood, a lawyer for the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative law firm that advocates for property rights, said the Biden proposals could backfire by removing incentives for landowners to cooperate in helping imperiled wildlife.

"There were some things in the Trump rules that were right," Wood said, citing regulations that he said offered needed flexibility and better incentives to recover endangered species.

"This looks basically like a 180-degree reversal," he said. "Once again we're going to yo-yo back and forth on what the rules are."

The Biden administration said in January it was reconsidering a Trump rule that removed federal pro-

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tections for wolves across most of the Lower 48 states, but officials so far have not backed away from the Trump rule and continue to defend it in court. Wildlife advocates have pressed to revive the federal protections for gray wolves across the Northern Rockies and Upper Midwest after Republicans in Idaho, Montana and other states made it much easier to kill the predators.

In the final days of the Trump administration, the Fish and Wildlife Service cut by one-third the amount of protected federal old-growth forest used by the spotted owl, a move that was cheered by the timber industry and slammed by Democrats and environmental groups.

The Biden administration has temporarily delayed putting the Trump-era rules into effect in order to review the decision.

Last week, the Biden administration proposed federal protections for the lesser prairie chicken, saying its habitat across five states is in danger of becoming more fragmented, with a further toll expected from the effects of climate change and drought. The chicken's habitat spans parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas -- including a portion of the oil-rich Permian Basin.

The administration said this week that an extremely rare wildflower that grows only in Nevada's high desert should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Tiehm's buckwheat flower grows where an Australian mining company wants to dig for lithium.

Facebook suspends Trump for 2 years, then will reassess

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Facebook announced Friday that former President Donald Trump's accounts will be suspended for two years, freezing his presence on the social network until early 2023, following a finding that Trump stoked violence ahead of the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

At the end of the suspension, the company will assess whether Trump's "risk to public safety" has subsided, Nick Clegg, Facebook's vice president of global affairs, wrote in a blog post. He said Facebook will take into account "external factors" such as instances of violence, restrictions on peaceful assembly and other markers of civil unrest.

Facebook also announced that it would end a contentious policy that automatically exempted politicians from rules banning hate speech and abuse, and that it would stiffen penalties for public figures during times of civil unrest and violence.

The former president called Facebook's decision on the suspension "an insult." The two-year ban replaced a previous ruling that ordered Trump to be suspended indefinitely.

"They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this censoring and silencing, and ultimately, we will win. Our Country can't take this abuse anymore!" Trump said in a news release.

Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become indispensable tools for politicians to get their messages out and to raise small-dollar donations. Without the megaphone of Twitter and the targeted fundraising appeals his campaign mastered on Facebook, Trump could be at a serious disadvantage relative to other politicians.

Trump has teased running for president again in 2024. His aides say that he has been working on launching his own social media platform to compete with those that have booted him, but one has yet to materialize. A blog he launched on his existing website earlier this year was shut down after less than a month. It attracted dismal traffic.

On Facebook, Trump's suspension means that his account is essentially frozen. Others can read and comment on past posts, but Trump and other account handlers are unable to post new material. Twitter, by contrast, has permanently banned Trump from its service, and no trace of his account remains.

"What they've done here is shield themselves from potential presidential rage" with a reassessment of Trump's account in two years, said Jennifer Grygiel, a Syracuse University communications professor.

In a color-coded chart on its blog post, the company said public figures who violate its policies during times of crisis can be restricted from posting for a month (yellow) or as long as two years (red). Future violations, it said, will be met with "heightened penalties, up to and including permanent removal."

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The policy that exempted politicians from rules on hate speech and abuse was once championed by CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The company said it never applied the policy to Trump, but on Friday backtracked to say it did use it once, in 2019 for a video of a rally on his Facebook page.

The social media giant said it will still apply the "newsworthiness" exemption to certain posts it deems to be in the public interest, even if they violate Facebook rules. But it will no longer treat material posted by politicians any differently than other posts. In addition, Facebook said it will make public whenever it does apply the exemption to a post.

The announcements are in response to recommendations from the company's quasi-independent oversight board. Last month, that panel upheld a decision by Facebook to keep Trump suspended, but the board said the company could not merely suspend him indefinitely. It gave the company six months to decide what to do with his accounts.

In its decision last month, the board agreed with Facebook that two of Trump's Jan. 6 posts "severely violated" the content standards of both Facebook and Instagram.

"We love you. You're very special," Trump said to the rioters in the first post. In the second, he called them "great patriots" and told them to "remember this day forever."

Those comments violated Facebook's rules against praising or supporting people engaged in violence, the board said. Specifically, the board cited rules against "dangerous individuals and organizations" that prohibit anyone who proclaims a violent mission and ban posts that express support for those people or groups.

The two-year suspension is effective from Jan. 7, so Trump has 19 months to go.

A group calling itself the Real Facebook Oversight Board, which is critical of Facebook and its oversight panel, said in a statement Friday that the ban brings Trump back just in time for the 2024 presidential election and shows "no real strategy to address authoritarian leaders and extremist content, and no intention of taking serious action against disinformation and hate speech."

Due to its sheer size and power, Facebook's decision has broad implications for politicians and their constituencies around the globe. Chinmayi Arun, a fellow at Yale Law School's Information Society Project, said it's good that the company laid out a standard for when it will suspend political leaders and for how long.

"What's tremendous is that Facebook took the oversight board's recommendation to reevaluate the real-world context and the offline tensions, while deciding what to do with a politician's online speech," she said. But she remains concerned that suspensions cannot be reviewed unless Facebook asks.

For years, Facebook gave the former president special treatment and free reign to spread misinformation and threats on the platform. Outside critics and even Facebook's own employees called for the company to remove Trump long before the Jan. 6 comments.

Last summer, for instance, Zuckerberg decided to leave up posts by Trump that suggested protesters in Minneapolis could be shot, using the words "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." Trump's comment evoked the civil-rights era by borrowing a phrase used in 1967 by Miami's police chief to warn of an aggressive police response to unrest in Black neighborhoods.

While Facebook put labels on many of Trump's election posts, he did not face penalties such as suspension for repeatedly and falsely claiming victory in 2020.

In Friday's post, Clegg anticipated criticism from both sides of the political aisle.

"We know that any penalty we apply — or choose not to apply — will be controversial. There are many people who believe it was not appropriate for a private company like Facebook to suspend an outgoing President from its platform, and many others who believe Mr. Trump should have immediately been banned for life," he wrote.

Facebook's job, he said, is "to make a decision in as proportionate, fair and transparent a way as possible, in keeping with the instruction given to us by the Oversight Board."

But by staying in the middle, some experts said Facebook had once again punted the decision instead of taking a firm stance.

"It's the wait-and-see approach," said Sarah Kreps, a Cornell professor and director of the Cornell Tech

Policy Lab. "I think they're hoping this can just resolve itself with him not being kind of an influential voice in politics anymore."

Cuomo daughter shares queer identity: 'You are not alone'

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Michaela Kennedy-Cuomo, the daughter of New York's governor, used a social media post Thursday to share her queer identity and call for allies to speak up against homophobia.

"To those who are contending with the compulsive heterosexuality our society force feeds us and innate attraction beyond cis het folks, please know that you are not alone," the 23-year-old wrote on Instagram. "Today, I stand in my queer identity with pride, and in memory of those who came before me. I stand indebted to the activists who fought for my right to love and happiness."

Kennedy-Cuomo has often used her social media accounts to advocate for the LGBTQ community, including those affected by sexual assault.

She has also shared pictures of herself at Pride marches with family members including Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat who pushed for the successful passage of same-sex marriage legislation in the state 2011.

"I love, support and couldn't have more pride in Michaela," Cuomo said in a statement.

June is Pride Month in New York and elsewhere, with events scheduled throughout the month to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall rebellion.

Kennedy-Cuomo is the governor's youngest of three daughters that he has with ex-wife Kerry Kennedy.

In her Instagram post Thursday, Kennedy-Cuomo said filtering programs on social media platforms have at times made it harder to find content with key words such as "lesbian and bi."

Without such "censorship," she wrote: "maybe I could have accessed the information and tools that as a bisexual person I would need to protect myself from increased rates of sexual victimization, homelessness, hunger, unemployment, hate crimes, and mental health challenges."

A spokesperson for Instagram said the platform is promoting LGBT hashtags with a colored font in honor of Pride Month.

Kennedy-Cuomo urged people who need help with issues around their sexuality to reach out to the Trevor Project, a national group providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ youth.

FDA approves obesity drug that helped people cut weight 15%

By LINDA A. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Regulators on Friday said a new version of a popular diabetes medicine could be sold as a weight-loss drug in the U.S.

The Food and Drug Administration approved Wegovy, a higher-dose version of Novo Nordisk's diabetes drug semaglutide, for long-term weight management.

In company-funded studies, participants taking Wegovy had average weight loss of 15%, about 34 pounds (15.3 kilograms). Participants lost weight steadily for 14 months before plateauing. In a comparison group getting dummy shots, the average weight loss was about 2.5%, or just under 6 pounds.

"With existing drugs, you're going to get maybe 5% to 10% weight reduction, sometimes not even that," said Dr. Harold Bays, medical director of the Louisville Metabolic and Atherosclerosis Research Center. Bays, who is also the Obesity Medicine Association's chief science officer, helped run studies of the drug.

In the U.S., more than 100 million adults — about 1 in 3 — are obese.

Dropping even 5% of one's weight can bring health benefits, such as improved energy, blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels, but that amount often doesn't satisfy patients who are focused on weight loss, Bays said.

Bays said Wegovy appears far safer than earlier obesity drugs that "have gone down in flames" over safety problems. Wegovy's most common side effects were gastrointestinal problems, including nausea, diarrhea and vomiting. Those usually subsided, but led about 5% of study participants to stop taking it.

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The drug carries a potential risk for a type of thyroid tumor, so it shouldn't be taken by people with a personal or family history of certain thyroid and endocrine tumors. Wegovy also has a risk of depression and pancreas inflammation.

Wegovy (pronounced wee-GOH'-vee) is a synthesized version of a gut hormone that curbs appetite. Patients inject it weekly under their skin. Like other weight-loss drugs, it's to be used along with exercise, a healthy diet and other steps like keeping a food diary.

The Danish company hasn't disclosed Wegovy's price but said it will be similar to the price of its Saxenda, a weight loss drug injected daily that now typically costs more than \$1,300 per month without insurance.

Dr. Archana Sadhu, head of the diabetes program at Houston Methodist Hospital, said Wegovy's usefulness "all depends on what the price will be." She noted patients' health insurance plans sometime don't cover weight-loss treatments, putting expensive drugs out of reach.

Sadhu, who has no connection to Novo Nordisk, plans to switch patients who are obese and have Type 2 diabetes to Wegovy. It makes patients feel full sooner and increases release of insulin from the pancreas to control blood sugar, she said. Patients would then be more likely to get motivated to exercise and eat healthier, she added.

Wegovy builds on a trend in which makers of relatively new diabetes drugs test them to treat other conditions common in diabetics. For example, popular diabetes drugs Jardiance and Novo Nordisk's Victoza now have approvals for reducing risk of heart attack, stroke and death in heart patients.

Phylander Pannell, 49, of Largo, Maryland, joined a patient study after cycles of losing and then regaining weight. She said she received Wegovy, worked out several times a week and lost 65 pounds over 16 months.

"It helped curb my appetite and it helped me feel full faster," said Pannell. "It got me on the right path."

Shortly after she finished the study and stopped receiving Wegovy, she regained about half the weight. She's since lost much of that, started exercise classes and bought home exercise equipment. She's considering going back on Wegovy after it's approved.

Novo Nordisk also is developing a pill version.

Bargain hunters pounce as Trump condo prices hit decade lows

By BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The building has stunning Manhattan skyline views, its spa offers deep-tissue massages, and the fancy restaurant off the lobby serves up prime steaks. Best of all, many apartments at the Trump World Tower are selling at a deep discount — assuming the buyer doesn't mind the name over the door.

"Fifty percent of the people wouldn't want to live in a Trump building for any reason ... but then there are guys like me," says Lou Sollecito, a car dealer who recently bought a two-bedroom unit with views of the Empire State Building. "It's a super buy."

The purchase price was \$3 million, nearly a million less than the seller paid in 2008.

Bargain hunters are swooping in to take advantage of prices in Trump buildings that have dropped to levels not seen in over a decade, a crash brokers attribute to a combination of the former president's polarizing image and the coronavirus pandemic. It's a stunning reversal for a brand that once lured the rich and famous willing to pay a premium to live in a building with Trump's gilded name on it.

An Associated Press review of more than 4,000 transactions over the past 15 years in 11 Trump-branded buildings in Chicago, Honolulu, Las Vegas and New York found prices for some condos and hotel rooms available for purchase have dropped by one-third or more.

That's a plunge that outpaces drops in many similar buildings, leaving units for sale in Trump buildings to be had for hundreds of thousands to up to a million dollars less than they would have gone for years ago.

"They're giving them away," says Lane Blue who paid \$160,500 in March for a studio in Trump's Las Vegas tower, \$350,000 less than the seller paid in 2008. It was his second purchase in the building this year and may not be his last.

Just how much the Trump name is to blame is impossible to say. Many units for sale are in cities that

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were hit hard by the pandemic or in hotels that had to shut down or in condo buildings much older than their competitors, making comparisons difficult.

Still, Trump's red-meat rhetoric and policies haven't helped. Within a year into his presidency, hotels and condo buildings in Panama, Toronto and Manhattan that paid millions to use his name started stripping it off their facades.

After Trump was accused of whipping up the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, things got really bad. Banks vowed not to lend to him, the PGA canceled a tournament at his New Jersey golf course, and New York City fired him as manager of a public course in the Bronx. Several brokers say many potential buyers won't even look at Trump buildings now.

"I'd be happy if his name was taken off," says Gary Gabriel, who owns an apartment in Trump Palace on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "It's embarrassing."

It's also an opportunity.

"We can see the river. We can see the lake. It has a downtown view," says Nilufar Kabir, who bought a one-bedroom unit in Trump's Chicago condo-hotel in February for \$680,000, nearly one-fifth less than what the seller paid. "It's a bargain."

Other condos in Chicago's Trump International Hotel and Tower have dropped even more, down 34% during the four years of his presidency, according to Gail Lissner, a managing director at the consulting firm Integra Realty Resources. That compares with a 6% drop over the same period at 18 nearby luxury condo buildings of similar age.

Says Lissner, "You can live in a luxury building for a non-luxury price tag."

Prices fell even more for units in the 96-story Chicago building that are set aside for hotel guests, a category hit hard by pandemic travel restrictions. But Lissner leaves them out of her analysis because there are no similar hotel units in nearby buildings to compare them against.

In Las Vegas, prices at Trump's hotel have fallen 4% since he took office four years ago, while average prices for three dozen other hotels in the city that also sell condominiums and rooms rose 14%, according to data collected by Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices broker Forrest Barbee. Since the Trump building opened a dozen years ago, prices per square foot have fallen 66%.

And in Manhattan, Trump-branded buildings have fallen so far, down to 15-year lows, that they have lost their premium for the first time, selling at lower prices per square foot than the average for all condo buildings, according to research firm CityRealty.

"I have never seen buildings plummet so dramatically," says Ondel Hylton, senior content director at CityRealty, which has a webpage tracking the eight Manhattan buildings still bearing the Trump name. "It seems like this is a bottom."

Some buyers are thinking the same.

"Ten years from now people will forget about him," says a New York banker who asked for anonymity to talk about a second Trump World apartment he bought last month for \$2.1 million, a two-bedroom overlooking the United Nations. "The name will mean less."

Or disappear completely.

"Does it get bad enough that they rebrand?" asks the new owner of a Trump hotel room steps from Hawaii's Waikiki Beach, though he figures it won't matter given the bargain price — \$505,000, which is over \$300,000 less than the seller paid. "It's got an ocean view!"

It had the same view when Trump took office, and prices at the Trump International Hotel in Waikiki plunged 23% over the next four years, according to broker Rachel Bradley of Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices. The nearby Ritz-Carlton also got hit hard, down 20%, but Trump fared far worse when compared with a broad sample of three dozen Honolulu hotels that also sell rooms: Their prices over four years fell only 3%.

Trump Organization Executive Vice President Eric Trump declined to comment.

The exact hit to Trump's company is hard to know. It sold most of the units it owned in his branded buildings years ago, though it still has dozens in Chicago and Las Vegas worth much less now.

The bigger damage is likely to be to the former president's image and future branding. Developers who

used to pay him millions to use his name won't strike deals with him if they think it could sink prices.

Those golden five letters over the door once attracted buyers like Derek Jeter, Johnny Carson and Lib-erace but now are so controversial that many people who bought recently refused to allow their names to be used in this story, worried that the boycotts against Trump could hurt them.

Vegas buyer Blue, who runs an air freight company in California, doesn't care. He calls Trump "one of the greatest presidents ever" and thinks anger directed at him will blow over.

"Stuff washes out. People forget. People move on," he says.

Legion official resigns over censored Memorial Day speech

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

The head of an American Legion post in Ohio stepped down Friday amid criticism following the decision of Memorial Day ceremony organizers to turn off a retired U.S. Army officer's microphone while he was speaking about how freed Black slaves honored fallen soldiers just after the Civil War.

American Legion leaders in Ohio also suspended the post's charter and are taking steps to close it.

The moves come in the wake of intense backlash to the decision to censor retired Army Lt. Col. Barnard Kemter, who said he included the story in his speech because he wanted to share the history of how Memorial Day originated.

But organizers of the ceremony in Hudson, Ohio, said that section of the speech was not relevant to the program's theme of honoring the city's veterans.

Cindy Suchan, chair of the Memorial Day parade committee and president of the Hudson American Legion Auxiliary, said this week that either she or Jim Garrison, adjutant of the American Legion Post 464, turned down the audio, the Akron Beacon Journal reported.

Garrison resigned his leadership position a day after the state organization demanded he step down, said Roger Friend, department commander for the Ohio American Legion. Garrison has since been asked to drop his membership altogether, Friend said.

"The American Legion Department of Ohio does not hold space for members, veterans, or families of veterans who believe that censoring black history is acceptable behavior," Friend said in a statement.

He said the censoring was premeditated and planned by Garrison and Suchan.

"They knew exactly when to turn the volume down and when to turn it back up," Friend said.

In the days before the ceremony, Suchan said she reviewed the speech and asked Kemter to remove certain portions. Kemter said he didn't see the suggested changes in time to rewrite the speech.

Kemter, who spent 30 years in the Army and served in the Persian Gulf War, told The Beacon Journal he was disappointed that the organizers silenced two minutes of his 11-minute speech.

His microphone cut out just as began talking about how former slaves and freed Black men exhumed the remains of more than 200 Union soldiers from a mass grave in Charleston, South Carolina, and gave them a proper burial.

Kemter at first thought there was a problem with audio, tapping on the microphone.

The decision to silence him disrespected Kemter and all veterans, Hudson's mayor and City Council said in a statement Thursday.

"Veterans have done everything we have asked of them during their service to this country, and this tarnished what should have been a celebration of their service," the statement said.

US businesses struggle to fill jobs even as hiring picks up

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hiring in the United States picked up in May yet was slowed again by the struggles of many companies to find enough workers to keep up with the economy's swift recovery from the pandemic recession.

U.S. employers added 559,000 jobs last month, the Labor Department said Friday, an improvement from April's sluggish increase of 278,000. Yet the gain fell well short of employers' need for labor. The unem-

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ployment rate fell to 5.8% from 6.1%.

The speed of the rebound, fueled by substantial federal aid and rising vaccinations, has created a disconnect between businesses and the unemployed: While companies are rushing to add workers immediately, many of the unemployed are still holding back. Some of the jobless are likely seeking better positions than they had before the pandemic triggered widespread layoffs. Or they still lack affordable child care.

Others still worry about contracting COVID-19 or have decided to retire early. And a temporary \$300-a-week federal unemployment benefit, on top of regular state jobless aid, has likely led many unemployed Americans to take time to consider their options.

That mismatch between employers and job seekers resulted in the sharp slowdown in hiring in April, when businesses added far fewer jobs than economists had forecast and many fewer than had been hired in March. The disconnect eased somewhat in May. But economists say it will likely persist until early fall, when schools reopen, COVID-19 fades further and federal unemployment benefits end.

"There is a gap between the economy and labor market," said Nela Richardson, chief economist at the payroll processing firm ADP. May's job gains, she said, are "more lackluster than one would expect given the strong state of economic growth."

The May jobs report offered a number of signs that companies are trying harder to find workers. They're offering more money, for one thing. Average hourly pay jumped for a second straight month, especially in the leisure and hospitality industry, which includes restaurants, bars, hotels and amusement parks. Hourly wages for all workers in that industry, except managers, were 6.4% higher in May compared with pre-pandemic levels — a substantial gain.

And the number of unemployed who say their jobs are permanently lost declined in May by the most in five months. That's an encouraging sign that companies are going beyond just recalling workers they had laid off in the pandemic.

Yet many of those jobs are still low-paying and not appealing to many Americans — people like Marcellus Rowe, who has been unemployed since he lost his \$16-an-hour job at the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Agency in November 2019.

Rowe, 29, says the only jobs he sees being advertised for someone like him pay scarcely more than \$9 or \$10 for work in restaurants and small shops. That isn't enough to cover his \$1,000 monthly rent.

"I'm going to continue to look for suitable work," Rowe said. "I know it's going to come eventually. What I cannot do is settle for an unsuitable job that pays low wages."

He's been getting by on unemployment benefits, boosted by the \$300-a-week federal supplement. But Georgia is eliminating the federal benefit on June 26. Nearly half the states — all led by Republican governors — will cut off the extra aid starting this month. Many businesses have blamed the federal benefit for discouraging some of the jobless from taking work.

"It's really going to be a hardship," Rowe said, noting that he's already dropped cable television service to save money.

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh said Friday that the complaints from businesses about the federal jobless aid is "a distraction" and noted that the number of people applying for unemployment aid is falling steadily.

Eric Winograd, an economist at AllianceBernstein, an investment management firm, said there are still about 7 million people not searching for work — and so aren't counted as unemployed — but who say in government surveys that they want a job. That's about 50% higher than before the pandemic.

"That is compelling evidence that there is a large pool of workers who will return to work when they feel that it is safe or when they are able to sort out child care," Winograd said.

For now, many large chains, including Amazon, Walmart, Costco, and Chipotle, have raised starting pay to try to attract more applicants. And the average work week remained elevated last week, which suggests that businesses, struggling to hire, are working their current staffs for longer hours.

Some smaller companies have also boosted pay and taken other steps to fill jobs, but are still looking for more workers. National Church Residences, a provider of senior living centers based in Columbus, Ohio, with 340 locations around the country, steadily raised its minimum wage to \$14.50 an hour over several years before the pandemic.

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Danielle Willis, senior vice president of human resources at the company, said those increases have helped attract staff. The company also provides health care and a 5% matching payment into a retirement plan for its full-time employees, including nurse aides, property managers and maintenance workers. Yet the 2,700-person company still has 300 positions open nationwide.

Nationally last month, the bulk of the job growth was at hotels, restaurant and bars, which gained 220,000 positions. Retailers lost jobs for a second straight month. And despite a hot housing market, the construction industry shed 20,000 jobs, its second straight month of cuts, likely reflecting supply shortages and soaring costs for building materials.

The economy expanded last quarter at a robust 6.4% annual rate, and economists envision growth in the current quarter reaching a sizzling pace of 9% or more. All that growth, driven by higher spending, has raised inflation fears. But for now, it has mainly propelled demand for labor.

Though the economy still has 7.6 million fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic struck, job postings in late May were nearly 26% above pre-pandemic levels, according to the employment website Indeed. Government data shows that posted jobs have reached their highest level on record dating back to 2000.

Consumers are opening their wallets. In April, they increased their spending after a huge gain in March that was fueled by the distribution of \$1,400 stimulus checks. With more Americans feeling comfortable about staying in hotels and visiting entertainment venues, spending on services jumped.

Becky Frankiewicz, president of the temporary staffing firm Manpower Group's North American division, said many of the firm's clients are raising pay and benefits to try to attract more applicants. Some of these companies, particularly in manufacturing and warehousing, are also trying other tactics, like paying their workers weekly or even daily, rather than every two weeks. Manpower is also encouraging its clients to make job offers the same day as an interview rather than waiting.

About 60% of Manpower's temporary placements are leaving their jobs before a temporary assignment ends, Frankiewicz said, mostly because they are receiving better offers.

"People have options," she said. "Companies have to offer speed in cash, speed to hire and a lot of flexibility in how they work."

For now, though, there are signs that many of the unemployed remain cautious about seeking jobs.

On Thursday, Tony Sarsam, CEO of SpartanNash, a grocery distributor and retailer, said on a conference call with investors that the company took part last month in a job fair with 60 companies that had 500 jobs to fill.

"Only four candidates showed up," Sarsam said.

EXPLAINER: 5 key takeaways from the May jobs report

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American job market is in an odd place.

Consider that in May, employers added 559,000 jobs. In ordinary times, that would amount to a blockbuster burst of hiring for one month, and the response would be an outpouring of cheers.

These are not ordinary times. In the wake of a violent recession that paralyzed the economy and triggered tens of millions of layoffs, the nation still remains 7.6 million jobs short of the number it had in February 2020, just before viral pandemic erupted. So the government's May jobs report Friday registered as a mild disappointment, coming after an even weaker month in April.

In one sense, the modest pace of hiring is surprising: The economic rebound is accelerating, and the need for workers is surging. COVID-19 is quickly receding in the United States — new cases are way down to an average of just over 16,000 a day, from 250,000 in early January — as more Americans are vaccinated.

Yet economists note that the economy is in an awkward place: It's recovering from a devastating crisis almost as fast as it had succumbed to it. In fact, the very speed of the rebound helps explain why job growth remains modest. Businesses are reopening as fast as they can to meet the pent-up demand by consumers to shop, travel, dine out and attend sporting and other entertainment events. As they encounter that surging customer demand, they are struggling to find enough workers and supplies as fast

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as they need them.

Over the next few months, economists expect the labor shortage — and the bottlenecks in supply chains that have contributed to it — to lift and eventually clear the way for more robust job growth.

“The details of the report again showed a clear impact from labor supply constraints, and we continue to expect stronger job gains later this year,” Jan Hatzius, chief economist at Goldman Sachs, said in a research note.

Here are five takeaways from the May jobs report:

UPS AND DOWNS

The monthly job numbers have been bouncing around as the economy navigates a bumpy transition from COVID-19 lockdown to boom times. During this transitional period, economists caution against trying to predict hiring patterns from month to month.

“All these employers put up help-wanted signs at the same time,” noted Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody’s Analytics. “It’s taking a few weeks for workers to take the jobs.”

Over the past few months, job growth has gone from 233,000 in January to 536,000 in February to 785,000 in March, to 278,000 in April, to 559,000 in May. As recently as December, the economy had lost 306,000 jobs.

Step back, though, and the job market looks far less volatile: The three-month hiring average was 518,000 in March, 533,000 in April and 541,000 in May.

BACK TO THE OFFICE

As the coronavirus has receded and the economy has reopened, work-from-home Americans have been trickling back to their traditional workplaces. The proportion of job holders who said they teleworked from home declined in May to 16.6% last month from 18.3% in April, extending a sharp drop from 35.4% a year earlier. (The figures include people who worked at home some time during the previous four weeks because of the pandemic.)

Leslie Preston, a senior economist at TD Economics, called the decline in teleworking “another sign that work life is gradually returning to normal.”

In another signal of encroaching normality, the number of people who said they had decided not to seek work because of the pandemic dropped to 2.5 million last month from 2.8 million in April.

RISING WAGES

Pay is up.

Average hourly earnings rose by a healthy 0.5% in May, on top of a 0.7% increase in April. Last month’s wage growth was especially impressive considering that 52% of the added jobs came from the traditionally low-wage leisure and hospitality sector. What that means is that many of these workers are earning higher wages from employers desperate to attract or keep them. Many large chains, including Amazon, Walmart, Costco and Chipotle have begun raising pay.

For nonsupervisory workers in leisure and hospitality — including restaurants and hotel employees — hourly wages rose 1.2% last month from April and 8.8% from a year ago.

Likewise, rank-and-file construction workers, benefiting from a housing boom, enjoyed a 4.4% wage increase in May compared with a year earlier. And amid a surge in online shopping and deliveries, transportation and warehouse workers received an average 3.5% hourly wage increase over the previous 12 months.

PROGRESS FOR THE JOBLESS

For months, employers have been recalling workers they had temporarily laid off after the pandemic hit and forced them to close or scale back their operations. In May, the number of Americans on temporary layoff dropped by an additional 291,000 to 1.8 million — down 90% from a staggering 18 million in April 2020.

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Even people who lost their old jobs permanently made progress last month: The number of such people dropped by 295,000 in May to 3.2 million. But that is still up 59% from 2 million in April 2020. Nearly 3.8 million Americans — about 41% of the jobless — have been out of work for six months or more.

FALLING UNEMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

The jobless rates for Black and Hispanic Americans fell sharply last month: 9.1% of Black workers were unemployed in May, down from 9.7% in April. And 7.3% of Hispanics reported being out of work, compared with 7.9% in April. Like the overall U.S. unemployment rate, those figures represented the lowest such jobless figures since March 2020.

Still, Black and Hispanic unemployment remains well above the rate of joblessness for white Americans, which was 5.1% in May, down from 5.3% in April.

Biden says jobs report bolsters case for government spending

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

President Joe Biden portrayed the May jobs report as a jumping off point for more spending on infrastructure and education to keep growth going — essentially an argument for his agenda. But the employment numbers issued Friday also hinted at the possible limits of how much government aid can be pumped into the world's largest economy.

"We're on the right track," Biden said. "Our plan is working. And we're not going to let up now. We're going to continue to move on. I'm extremely optimistic."

The May jobs report showed the complexity of restarting the economy after a pandemic shutdown and the mixed signals that can result when an unprecedented surge of government spending flows through the economy. Biden can congratulate his administration on 559,000 jobs being added and a 5.8% unemployment rate, yet the hiring was lower than what many economists expected after his \$1.9 trillion relief package.

Biden's challenge is to convince Americans that his administration's relief efforts to date have done well enough to sustain faster growth, instead of creating inflation and imbalances that could jeopardize public support for his plans to invest at least another \$3 trillion in roads, clean energy, children and schools.

The report suggested that not enough people are seeking work, a possible problem for a president who is hoping that his rescue package will put the country back at full employment by 2022. While Biden viewed the jobs figures as a full-speed-ahead argument for his agenda, several economists were urging a degree of caution to see whether more Americans will start looking for jobs after the steep losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Republicans, for their part, found ways to turn the jobs report into an argument against Biden's plans to finance more government programs through tax increases on the wealthy and corporations. Their concern is that generous unemployment benefits have prevented people from accepting jobs and that the government aid — much of it still forthcoming — will fuel inflation.

Texas Rep. Kevin Brady, the top Republican on the House Ways & Means Committee, said Biden should divert more of the COVID-19 relief money to infrastructure.

"If we want to help families build their lives and rebuild the U.S. economy for the long term, it's time for the emergency spending and the endless government checks to end," Brady told Fox Business.

The big red flag in the jobs report was that the labor force participation rate ticked down to 61.6%. Despite the government spending, it's essentially unchanged from where it was last summer and down from 63.3% before the coronavirus struck 14 months ago. The lower participation rate means that a healing economy is not encouraging enough people to find work.

For some economists, it's evidence that Biden's \$1.9 trillion relief package was likely excessive. The government spending has so far generated more demand for workers and goods than the economy could produce, possibly vindicating some Republican criticisms.

"We have a general sense of what's going on at this point: We are not able to create the jobs fast enough relative to the demand we're infusing into the economy," said Marc Goldwein, senior vice president for the

Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

Goldwein and other economists said they believe that Biden's aid package helped the economy, though the same results might have been achieved for less money. There is also the possibility that the relief package's expanded unemployment benefits propped up consumer spending and that forthcoming state and local government aid kept workers on payrolls — all of which could have helped boost the jobs totals.

Harvard University professor Jason Furman, a former chief economist in the Obama White House, said it was surprising that the participation rate fell in a month when vaccinations were advancing, COVID-19 infections were declining, job openings were up and wages were rising.

Because demand for workers is greater than their current supply, the silver lining for Biden is a sharp jump in average hourly earnings. That's a clear benefit to working Americans that can be sold on the campaign trail, but the risk of wages rising too quickly is levels of inflation that could choke off growth.

Furman urged patience in a recent paper, arguing that the demand for workers will most plausibly lead to an increased supply of people seeking jobs.

"In the interim there would be more price inflation, but over time it would be offset by an economy that returns to something that could even be better than its pre-pandemic path," he wrote in a paper with Wilson Powell III for the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Biden acknowledged the difficulty of reviving the economy after the shutdowns tied to the pandemic, noting that it was not as simple as flicking a light switch. One of the major problems is supply bottlenecks for computer chips, used cars and an array of raw materials that can cause higher prices. Those supply bottlenecks in the short term are raising prices and could make it costlier to fund infrastructure projects.

Brian Deese, director of the White House National Economic Council, said the administration plans to release next week a review of how to make supply chains more resilient. But some of the current mismatches are short term and will need to be resolved through market forces.

"On a lot of these issues," Deese said, "there is no immediate short-term, magic bullet fix."

Fisher-Price recalls baby soothers after 4 infant deaths

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. (AP) — Fisher-Price says it is recalling a model of its baby soothers after the deaths of four infants who were placed on their backs unrestrained in the devices and later found on their stomachs.

In a joint statement with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, Fisher-Price said Friday it is recalling its 4-in-1 Rock 'n Glide Soothers, which are designed to mimic the motion of a baby being rocked in someone's arms.

The fatalities between April 2019 and February 2020 were a 4-month old from Missouri, a 2-month old from Nevada, a 2-month old from Michigan and an 11-week old from Colorado, according to the statement.

Fisher-Price, a division of El Segundo, California-based Mattel Inc., is also recalling a similar product, the 2-in-1 Soothe 'n Play Glider, although there were no reported deaths connected to it.

"Inclined products, such as gliders, soothers, rockers and swings are not safe for infant sleep, due to the risk of suffocation," CPSC Acting Chairman Robert Adler said.

Fisher-Price General Manager Chuck Scothon, said the company is committed to educating parents and caregivers on the safe use of its products, "including the importance of following all warnings and instructions."

About 120,000 4-in-1 Rock 'n Glide Soothers and 55,000 2-in-1 Soothe 'n Play Gliders were sold from January 2014 through December 2020 for about \$108. The 2-in-1 Soothe 'n Play Gliders were sold from November 2018 through May 2021 for about \$125.

There were also 25,000 4-in-1 Rock 'n Glide Soothers and 27,000 2-in-1 Soothe 'n Play Gliders distributed in Canada.

Tennis player released from custody in match-fixing case

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN AP Sports Writer

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PARIS (AP) — The Russian tennis player arrested on suspicion of match-fixing at last year's French Open was released from police custody on Friday, judicial officials told The Associated Press.

Yana Sizikova, who was arrested Thursday in Paris after competing in a French Open doubles match, was not formally charged after questioning but remains under investigation, the Paris prosecutor's office said.

The 26-year-old Sizikova denies the allegations, according to her lawyer, Frederic Belot. He told the AP that Sizikova wants to file a complaint for defamation.

The prosecutor's office said Sizikova was arrested for "sports bribery and organized fraud for acts likely to have been committed in September 2020."

The case was opened last October by a French police unit specializing in betting fraud and match-fixing. It has previously worked with Belgian authorities investigating suspect matches at the lower levels of professional tennis.

The French tennis federation said it could not provide further information because the investigation is ongoing.

The International Tennis Integrity Agency, which investigates match-fixing in the sport, declined to comment on the details of the case but said in a message to the AP that "there has been ongoing liaison between the ITIA and law enforcement in France."

Speaking to the AP in a phone interview, her lawyer said Sizikova was "extremely shocked."

"She was placed in custody like a criminal. She says she is innocent and did not want me to assist her during her questioning because she considers herself like a victim," Belot said.

Belot said he only started representing Sizikova on Friday after he was approached by the player's parents. He said Sizikova had contacted the ITIA when the case was opened last year to deny any wrongdoing.

The prosecutor's office said the probe centered on suspicions about one match at Roland Garros last year. It did not specify the match. German newspaper Die Welt and French sports daily L'Equipe said at the time there were suspicious betting patterns in the first round of a women's doubles match on Sept. 30.

On that day, Sizikova and partner Madison Brengle of the United States played on Court No. 10 against Romanian players Andreea Mitu and Patricia Maria Tig. Sizikova was broken to love serving in the fifth game of the second set, during which she double-faulted twice.

Le Parisien reported Friday that tens of thousands of euros (dollars) were bet with several operators in different countries on the Romanian players winning that game.

The newspaper said Sizikova, who is ranked 101st in doubles and 765th in singles, was arrested Thursday after losing in the first round of the doubles tournament at Roland Garros. The newspaper said authorities searched Sizikova's hotel room.

Last year's French Open, delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic, was played in late September and early October.

Hundreds gather near Hong Kong park despite vigil ban

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hundreds of people gathered near a Hong Kong park Friday despite a ban on an annual candlelight vigil to remember China's deadly crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, and the arrest earlier in the day of an organizer of previous vigils.

Hong Kong police banned the vigil for a second straight year, citing coronavirus social distancing restrictions, although there have been no local cases in the semi-autonomous Chinese city for about six weeks.

Police closed off parts of Victoria Park — the venue of past vigils — in the city's Causeway Bay shopping district and warned people not to participate in unauthorized assemblies, which is illegal with punishment of up to five years imprisonment.

Despite the ban and a heavy police presence, hundreds of people still showed up Friday night to walk along the park's perimeter.

Many illuminated the flashlights on their smartphones while others lit candles in remembrance of the hundreds, if not thousands of people who lost their lives when China's military put down student-led pro-

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democracy protests in Beijing at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

In past years, tens of thousands of people have gathered in Victoria Park to honor the dead. Thousands attended last year despite the ban, lighting candles and singing songs. Police later charged more than 20 activists with participating in the event.

Edward Yeung, one of those participating in Friday night's event, flicked on a lighter instead of a candle and said authorities are "scared of the people."

"They're scared that people will remember all this. They want to wash it all away," he said.

China's ruling Communist Party has never allowed public events on the mainland to mark the anniversary and security was increased at the Beijing square, with police checking pedestrians' IDs as tour buses shuttled Chinese tourists in and out.

Chinese officials have said that the country's rapid economic development since what they call the "political turmoil" of 1989 proves that decisions made at the time were correct.

Efforts to suppress public memory of the Tiananmen events have lately turned to Hong Kong. Apart from the vigil ban, a temporary June 4 museum closed after a visit from authorities earlier this week.

The efforts came amid sweeping moves to quell dissent in the city — including a new national security law, election system changes and the arrest of many activists who participated in pro-democracy protests that swept Hong Kong in 2019.

Earlier Friday, police arrested Chow Hang Tung, a vice chair of the Hong Kong Alliance which organized Hong Kong's annual candlelight vigil, the group said.

Although police did not identify Chow, they said they arrested a 36-year-old woman from the Hong Kong Alliance as she was publicizing an unauthorized assembly via social media despite the police ban on the vigil.

After the ban was issued, Chow urged people to commemorate the event privately by lighting candles wherever they are.

Chow, a lawyer, said in an earlier interview with The Associated Press that she expected to be jailed.

"I'm already being persecuted for participating and inciting last year's candlelight vigil," she said. "If I continue my activism in pushing for democracy in Hong Kong and China, surely they will come after me at some point, so it's sort of expected."

Two other key members of the Hong Kong Alliance — Lee Cheuk-yan and Albert Ho — are behind bars for joining unauthorized assemblies during the 2019 protests.

At the University of Hong Kong on Friday afternoon, students took part in an annual washing of the "Pillar of Shame" sculpture, which was erected to remember the victims of the Tiananmen crackdown.

"In cleaning the Pillar of Shame, we shall learn how our predecessors defended the freedom of expression before, and we shall not easily give up," said Charles Kwok, the president of the students' union.

Some gathered in churches Friday night to mark June 4 and pray for the victims.

Clare Ho, a postgraduate student, said she participated in previous vigils but decided to attend Mass this year to pray for the victims because the vigil was banned.

"I feel like the least I can do as a Hong Konger, and as a Catholic, I just feel like coming here to pray for them is something I should do," she said.

As Chinese authorities seek to curb remembrances, they seem confident that the passage of time will erase memories of Tiananmen.

The government made no response to an appeal from Tiananmen Mothers, published on the Human Rights in China website, urging the party to release official records about the crackdown, provide compensation for those killed and injured and hold those responsible to account.

Tiananmen Mothers said many young Chinese 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."

The suppression of the Tiananmen commemorations has been accompanied in recent years by harsh repression of religious and ethnic minorities in Tibet, the northwestern region of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, along with the sharp curtailing of political rights in Hong Kong.

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"China's authoritarian regime has used another kind of force — enforced amnesia — in its attempts to bury the truth of the brutal crimes it committed against its people," Human Rights in China said in a statement.

In self-governing Taiwan, activists who host an annual Tiananmen memorial moved mostly online as the island faces its worst outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. A temporary memorial pavilion was set up in Taipei for people to leave flowers and other mementoes.

The U.S. State Department issued a statement of support for those advocating for victims and pursuing the truth.

"We must never stop seeking transparency on the events of that day, including a full accounting of all those killed, detained, or missing," the statement said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin denounced the statement as interference in China's internal affairs and said the U.S. should "first look at itself in a mirror and reflect on its own poor record in human rights."

"In what position can the U.S. lecture others on human rights?" he said, citing the 1921 massacre of Black residents in Tulsa, Oklahoma, discrimination against minorities and U.S. actions in the Middle East.

Experts see strides on AIDS, but COVID-19 halted progress

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some researchers believe COVID-19 has derailed the fight against HIV, siphoning away health workers and other resources and setting back a U.S. campaign to decimate the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

Saturday marks the 40th anniversary of the first report that brought AIDS to the attention of the public. For a time, the battle against HIV — the virus that causes AIDS — was going well. But experts believe the U.S. could soon see its first increase in infections in years. Internationally, recent strides could also be undone because of COVID-19's interruption of HIV testing and care.

"COVID was a huge setback," said Jeffrey Crowley, a former director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy who is now at Georgetown University.

COVID-19 has killed nearly 600,000 Americans in 16 months, approaching the 700,000 Americans that AIDS killed over 40 years.

Before COVID-19, health officials were celebrating how new medicines and other developments had gradually tamed HIV, prompting then-President Donald Trump to announce in 2019 a campaign to "eliminate" the U.S. epidemic by 2030.

But now, U.S. health officials are gathering data on exactly how much COVID-19 affected HIV infections and deaths, including how well testing, prevention and treatment kept up in the pandemic.

There are signs of a backslide.

Samuel Jenness, an Emory University researcher, used Atlanta-area data and statistical modeling to project major increases in some sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

At the least, COVID-19 halted recent declines in new HIV infections, Jenness said. "At the worst, it potentially brought us an increase of cases for at least the next couple of years," he added.

Limited data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests there were large drop-offs in HIV testing and other services.

The CDC looked at data from a lab that handles about a quarter of the nation's HIV tests, comparing the numbers from March 13 through September 30 last year with the same period the year before. The agency found there were 670,000 fewer HIV screening tests, and about 4,900 fewer HIV diagnoses than normal.

There also was a 21% national decline in prescriptions for pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, a kind of medicine people at risk for HIV take to prevent them from getting the virus through sex or injection drug use.

Why the declines?

Most U.S. health departments and community organizations had to scale back HIV testing, the first step in putting people with the virus on medicine that can keep them from spreading it. Also, health department

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workers who did the contact tracing to stop HIV outbreaks were shifted to COVID-19.

Even where HIV clinics were open, some people did not want to come in because of fear of catching the coronavirus.

There may be another reason: less sex.

Surveys suggest that at least during the initial months of the pandemic, many adults at higher risk for HIV infection had sex on fewer occasions and with fewer sexual partners.

But there also are signs that many people resumed their normal levels of sexual activity by summer, said Jenness, whose research focused on gay and bisexual men — a group that for years has had the highest HIV infection rates.

"People's sexual behavior changed for only three months," but prevention, testing and care disruptions are still going on, he said.

What does that mean for the national goals?

Data released this week showed the number of new infections declining for years, dropping to about 35,000 in 2019.

After Trump made his announcement in 2019, federal health officials clarified that the actual goal was a huge reduction in new infections over the next 10 years — down to fewer than 3,000 a year.

But Jenness and his fellow researchers predicted that the Atlanta area alone will see about 900 more HIV cases than normal over the next five years among gay and bisexual men.

Another bad omen: Drug overdoses are still rising, and shared needles are one way people spread HIV, noted Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC's director.

Recent surges in HIV infections in West Virginia have been tied to intravenous drug use, part of an on-going shift in how the virus is spreading there. In 2014, 1 in 8 West Virginia HIV cases was attributed to injected drugs. By 2019, nearly 2 out of 3 were, according to state health department data.

All of this suggests that the 90% reduction goal will not be met, several experts said, though health officials have not yet abandoned that objective.

"We're still working towards that goal," said Kevin Delaney, a CDC HIV/AIDS researcher. "If we are missing millions of HIV screening tests from 2020, there will need to be an investment made to make those up. But the targets have not been changed."

Walensky, a noted HIV researcher before she became CDC director, said it will be difficult.

"Do I think it's doable? Absolutely," she said. "Do I think we have the resources now to do it? I don't think so yet."

Worldwide, officials say there were about 38 million people with HIV/AIDS in 2019. An estimated 1.7 million people contracted HIV in 2019, a 23% decline in new HIV infections since 2010.

But COVID-19 interfered with testing and other health services globally, too. In Africa, one of the continents hardest hit by AIDS, experts noted interruptions in programs that check pregnant women for HIV and that provide male circumcision to reduce their risk of infection.

UNAIDS, the United Nations effort to stem HIV and AIDS, previously set goals to get certain proportions of infected people diagnosed and treated by 2020. This week, the organization said dozens of countries have hit the goals — "evidence that the targets were not just aspirational but achievable." The agency has set even more ambitious goals for 2025.

But it will be difficult for the whole world to hit such targets, said Dr. Kevin De Cock, a Kenya-based global health expert.

"I'm not persuaded it's judicious to talk about the end of AIDS," De Cock said. "Internationally, I think we've made tremendous progress. (But) we are not on track to meet the goals that organizations like UNAIDS have declared."

Belarus opposition slams dissident TV confessions as coerced

By YURAS KARMANAU and VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — The Belarusian opposition said Friday a dissident journalist was coerced to

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appear in a video on state TV in which he wept and praised the country's authoritarian ruler, a broadcast sharply criticized by Western officials.

In the 90-minute video broadcast Thursday night, Raman Pratasevich repented for his opposition activities and said he respects Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko as "a man with balls of steel."

He said he was tired of political activism and only wants to have a family and live a normal life. Then he broke into tears, covering his face with his hands. As he did so, marks left by handcuffs were clearly visible on his wrists.

Associates of the 26-year-old reacted with outrage, accusing authorities of forcing Pratasevich to confess and disavow the opposition.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the main opposition candidate in Belarus' presidential election in August 2020, said she would urge the U.S. and the EU to pressure Belarus to release him.

"Raman is a hostage," she told The Associated Press. "Lukashenko hijacked a passenger plane in order to capture him and subject him to that moral and physical humiliation."

Tsikhanouskaya said earlier during a visit to Poland that Pratasevich and others speaking in videos from prison "are for sure being tortured and violated."

Her spokeswoman, Anna Krasulina, said Pratasevich "made his statements under tough physical and psychological pressure and, possibly, under drugs."

"We demand the immediate release of Raman, who is used by Lukashenko's regime as a toy and instrument to blackmail Belarus' democratic forces," Krasulina told the AP. "Lukashenko is an international terrorist who must be stopped."

Pratasevich was traveling from Greece to Lithuania aboard a Ryanair flight on May 23 when Belarusian flight controllers ordered the pilots to divert to Minsk, citing a bomb threat. No bomb was found, but Pratasevich and his Russian girlfriend were arrested.

Speaking in a trembling voice and looking nervous in the program on the state-controlled ONT channel, Pratasevich said opposition leaders were pondering plans for a forceful government overthrow and was feuding over how to divide funds given to them by Poland and Lithuania.

Pratasevich, who ran a popular channel on the Telegram messaging app that helped organize months of demonstrations against Lukashenko, also offered repentance for his action and said he pleaded guilty to organizing mass disturbances. The charges carry a 15-year prison sentence.

Pratasevich said he fears he could face a death sentence on charges linked to his being part of a volunteer battalion that fought Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. He pleaded with Lukashenko not to hand him over to separatists who have launched a criminal investigation against him. His colleagues say he was not involved in fighting and was covering the conflict as a journalist.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba warned that Lukashenko will "feel pain" if Belarus allows the separatists to interrogate Pratasevich, adding that Kyiv will interpret that as a sign of disrespect of its territorial integrity.

Stsiapan Putsila, who co-founded the Nexta channel with Pratasevich, told the AP that Pratasevich likely had been subjected to both "psychological pressure and specially designed drugs."

"His statements had nothing to do with reality, they are the result of unbearable torture and exploitation of his emotions," Putsila said.

Tsikhanouskaya's adviser, Franak Viachorka, described Pratasevich's TV appearance as a "public humiliation."

"He was forced to publicly betray his views and his colleagues," Viachorka told AP. "He was forced to plead respect for Lukashenko on camera. Their goal was to humiliate, break and trample him. He's a hostage taken in a terrorist operation of Lukashenko's regime that hijacked the plane."

Belarus was rocked by months of protests triggered by Lukashenko's reelection to a sixth term in an August vote that was widely seen as fraudulent. He responded to opposition demands to step down with fierce repression. More than 35,000 people have been arrested and thousands beaten, and opposition leaders have been either jailed or forced to leave the country.

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The program aired Thursday night marked Pratasevich's third appearance on state TV since the May 23 flight diversion and arrest. In a brief video a day later, he confessed to staging mass disturbances. In other remarks shown Wednesday, he said demonstrations against Lukashenko had fizzled and the opposition should wait for a better moment to revive them. He also said he had been set up by an unidentified associate.

Outraged European Union leaders responded May 24 to the flight's diversion by barring Belarusian flag carrier from EU airspace and airports and directing European carriers to avoid Belarus' airspace. The 27-nation bloc formalized the ban Friday, saying member countries will "be required to deny permission to land in, take off from or overfly their territories to any aircraft operated by Belarusian air carriers, including as a marketing carrier."

EU leaders also denounced the Pratasevich video. In Berlin, Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said the German government "condemns in the strongest terms" his TV appearance and dismissed his confessions as "completely unworthy and implausible."

"This is a disgrace for the broadcaster that screened it and for the Belarusian leadership," Seibert said in Berlin.

Speaking after a meeting of top diplomats of Denmark and the Baltic nations in Copenhagen, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis called the broadcast a manifestation of "state terrorism."

U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab tweeted that Pratasevich "was clearly under duress," adding that "the persecution of those defending human rights and media freedom in Belarus must stop."

"Those involved in the filming, coercion and direction of the interview must be held accountable," he said.

In stark contrast, Russian President Vladimir Putin offered strong support Friday for Belarus, casting the angry Western response to the flight's diversion as a manifestation of double standards. He pointed to a 2013 incident in which a private plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales landed in Vienna after several European nations had refused to let it cross their airspace, purportedly over speculation that Edward Snowden, who leaked classified U.S. government information, was aboard.

Putin said the Western reaction has been driven by a desire to influence developments there, adding that "they shouldn't meddle in domestic affairs" of Belarus.

He also derided allegations by some in the West that Russia could have been involved in the flight's diversion.

"NATO is in danger if NATO's leadership makes such statements," Putin snapped. "It reveals a complete lack of understanding of the procedures."

Asked by a moderator if Russia would act like Belarus and divert an international flight if it knew that a person on its wanted list was on board, Putin smirked and said: "I won't tell you."

Heart reaction probed as possible rare vaccine link in teens

By LINDSEY TANNER and LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writers

Health authorities are trying to determine whether heart inflammation that can occur along with many types of infections could also be a rare side effect in teens and young adults after the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

An article on seven U.S. teen boys in several states, published online Friday in Pediatrics, is among the latest reports of heart inflammation discovered after COVID-19 vaccination, though a link to the vaccine has not been proven.

The boys, aged 14 to 19, received Pfizer shots in April or May and developed chest pain within a few days. Heart imaging tests showed a type of heart muscle inflammation called myocarditis.

None were critically ill. All were healthy enough to be sent home after two to six days in the hospital and are doing "doing pretty well," said Dr. Preeti Jaggi, an Emory University infectious disease specialist who co-authored the report.

She said more follow-up is needed to determine how the seven fare but that it's likely the heart changes were temporary.

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Only one of the seven boys in the Pediatrics report had evidence of a possible previous COVID-19 infection and doctors determined none of them had a rare inflammatory condition linked with the coronavirus. The cases echo reports from Israel in young men diagnosed after receiving Pfizer shots.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention alerted doctors last month that it was monitoring a small number of reports of heart inflammation in teens and young adults after the mRNA vaccines, the kind made by Pfizer and Moderna.

The CDC hasn't determined if there's really a link to the shots, and continues to urge that everyone 12 and older get vaccinated against COVID-19, which is far riskier than the vaccine. The Pfizer vaccine is available to those as young as 12; the Moderna shot remains cleared only for adult use.

This kind of heart inflammation can be caused by a variety of infections, including a bout of COVID-19, as well as certain medications — and there have been rare reports following other types of vaccinations.

Authorities will have to tease out whether cases following COVID-19 vaccination are occurring more often than that expected "background rate."

For now, the CDC says most patients were male, reported symptoms after the second dose, and their symptoms rapidly improved.

"I think we're in the waiting period where we need to see whether this is cause-and-effect or not," said John Grabenstein of the Immunization Action Coalition, a former director of the Defense Department's immunization program.

A Pediatrics editorial noted that among U.S. children under age 18, there have been over 4 million COVID-19 cases, more than 15,000 hospitalizations and at least 300 deaths.

The CDC on Friday reported that COVID-19-related hospitalizations of kids aged 12 to 17 fell early this year but rose again in March and April. Possible reasons include the spread of new virus variants, more kids going back to school, or the relaxing of mask and social distancing rules, agency researchers said.

While infected kids are less likely to become critically ill than adults, the CDC data on about 200 hospitalizations from 14 states show that one-third were treated in intensive care units. The report had no mention of any heart involvement.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the hospitalizations raise concerns and urged parents to get their kids vaccinated.

"Vaccination is our way out of this pandemic," she said in a statement.

The Pediatrics editorial said the heart inflammation cases warrant more investigation but added that "the benefits of vaccination against this deadly and highly transmissible disease clearly far outweigh any potential risks."

Editorial co-author Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, head of an American Academy of Pediatrics infectious diseases committee, is involved in Pfizer vaccine studies, including a COVID-19 vaccine study in children.

Biden tells graduates it's 'up to you' to shape the future

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden says members of the graduating class of 2021 are leaving school at an "inflection point" that gives them influence to shape the nation and the world around them like few others.

Biden's brief video message to graduates was released Friday by the White House as the coronavirus pandemic has put a dent in commencement ceremonies. Comparing today's students to those who graduated during the era of the civil rights and anti-war protest movements, Biden encouraged them to seize the moment to tackle climate change and systemic racism.

Biden told the graduates that only once in every few generations does a class enter history at point "where it actually has a chance to change the trajectory of the country," as he said theirs will.

"You're going to see more change in the next 10 years than you saw and we saw in the last 50 years," Biden said. "It's going to be up to you to translate that unprecedented change into a greater measure of happiness and prosperity for not only you and our nation, but for the world around you."

Biden delivered remarks last month at the Coast Guard Academy's graduation, but has no other com-

mencement remarks scheduled this year.

Ghosn's lawyers say client happy after days of French probe

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Ex-Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn has answered hundreds of questions by French investigators over the past week in Beirut and was "happy and satisfied" to have had the opportunity to explain himself over accusations of financial misconduct, his lawyers said Friday.

The four and a half days of questioning marked the first opportunity for Ghosn, a French national, to defend himself against the French allegations — including spending on lavish parties and private planes — since his 2018 bombshell arrest in Japan and escape to Lebanon a year later.

However, as Ghosn was being interrogated outside of French soil, it was unclear how he could, if at all, be handed down preliminary charges. His lawyers said they will now seek the right to ask for witnesses and expert testimony in the French investigation.

Earlier, the auto magnate-turned-fugitive told The Associated Press that he has done nothing wrong and hopes the investigations are eventually dropped. He didn't speak to reporters throughout the Beirut interrogation, which began on Monday.

It is an unusual move for French magistrates to question a suspect abroad. Ghosn, who was given sanctuary by Lebanese authorities, grew up in Lebanon and also has Lebanese citizenship. Lebanon will not extradite him. He is Brazilian-born.

Ghosn was questioned about the financing of parties he threw at the Versailles Palace as the head of the Renault-Nissan car alliance. The French investigators, in cooperation with Lebanese judicial authorities, were also examining 11 million euros in spending on private planes and events arranged by a Dutch holding company, and subsidies to a car dealership in Oman.

"It was his opportunity to explain his positions," said Jean Yves Le Borgne, a member of Ghosn's defense team. "It has now happened and he is satisfied and happy."

"Still unresolved, of course, is the problem of the next step in this procedure," Le Borgne added.

Ghosn has not so far been charged with anything in France, but could be, given preliminary accusations of fraud, corruption, money laundering, misuse of company assets, or aggravated breach of trust.

Whether Ghosn could be charged or not by the French, Carlos Abou Jaoude, his Beirut-based lawyer, said Lebanese and French authorities have to determine what Ghosn's "status" will be.

Ghosn is campaigning to clear his name against multiple legal challenges in France after Japanese accusations triggered scrutiny of his activities there. He told the AP he had much more confidence in the French legal system than the Japanese system he had fled.

He was arrested in Japan in November 2018 on accusations of financial misconduct and was kept in solitary confinement for months without being allowed to speak with his wife. He fled to Lebanon a year later in a dramatic escape that stunned the world. Meanwhile, several associates are in jail or on trial in Japan and Turkey, in cases related to his financial activities or escape.

'Dead end': German cardinal offers to quit over church abuse

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER and NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A leading German cardinal and confidant of Pope Francis, Cardinal Reinhard Marx, offered to resign Friday over the Catholic Church's "catastrophic" mishandling of clergy sexual abuse cases, declaring in an extraordinary gesture that the scandals had brought the church to "a dead end."

The archdiocese of Munich and Freising, where Marx has served as archbishop since 2007, published his resignation letter to the pope online, in multiple languages, and the cardinal said Francis had given him permission to make it public.

"It is important to me to share the responsibility for the catastrophe of the sexual abuse by Church officials over the past decades," the 67-year-old Marx wrote in the letter. But he also issued a challenge of

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sorts for his fellow bishops to use the opportunity of the scandal to save the church and reform it.

There was no immediate comment from the Vatican, where Marx sits on powerful financial and political committees. A Vatican spokesman said information about resignations is announced in a daily bulletin, and Friday's edition did not mention Marx. The German cardinal noted that Francis had told him to "keep performing my service as bishop until his decision is made."

However, Marx told reporters in Munich later on Friday that he had personally read his letter to the pope last month on the phone and that after thinking about it and praying, the pope told him last week to publish it.

Marx, who led the German Bishops' Conference from 2014 until 2020, wrote that investigations during the last decade showed there had been "a lot of personal failures and administrative mistakes but also institutional or 'systemic' failure."

In 2018, a church-commissioned report concluded that at least 3,677 people were abused by clergy in Germany between 1946 and 2014. More than half of the victims were 13 or younger when the abuse took place, and nearly a third of them were altar boys, according to the report.

Earlier this year, another report came out about the church officials' handling of alleged sexual abuse in the country's western Cologne diocese. The archbishop of Hamburg, a former Cologne church official who was faulted in that report, offered his resignation to the pope and was granted a "time out" of unspecified length.

Marx himself has not been implicated in any of the investigative reports to date, but he said all members of the hierarchy shared blame for the failures. A report is expected this summer about the handling of sexual abuse cases in Marx's archdiocese, German news agency dpa reported.

"My impression is that we are at a 'dead end' which, and this is my paschal hope, also has the potential of becoming a 'turning point,'" Marx wrote the pope, saying he hoped his offer to resign would be seen as a signal for a new beginning, "for a new awakening of the Church, not only in Germany."

Marx later told reporters that he wasn't tired of being a bishop, but believed someone had to personally take responsibility for the abuse scandal so that the church can be reformed.

"I am convinced that there will be a new epoch of Christianity, there's no question about it," he said. "But this can only happen ... if the church renews itself and learns from this crisis."

Marx said he sees a danger that the abuse issue will only be dealt with in a purely administrative way, which is not enough.

"It's about the overall renewal and reform of the church. This belongs together," he said.

Marx's offer to resign was an extraordinary gesture and laid bare the credibility crisis that the scandal created in Germany, as it has in other countries. To try to recover that credibility, Marx has spearheaded a process of reform and debate with the powerful German laity to address some of the structural problems that contributed to the crisis.

But the so-called "Synodal Path" has sparked fierce resistance inside Germany and out, primarily from conservative bishops and priests opposed to opening any debate on issues such as priestly celibacy, women's role in the church and homosexuality.

Resistance has also come from the Vatican and bishops outside Germany, including culture warriors in the United States who have broken with church protocol to pen essays critical of the German reform process.

In his resignation letter, Marx made no mention of his status as a member of Francis' kitchen cabinet, a group of cardinals who advise the pope, or his role as head of the Vatican's Council of the Economy, a group of experts who oversee the Vatican's finances.

The head of a powerful laypersons' organization, the Central Committee of German Catholics, or ZdK, said he was "deeply shocked" by the cardinal's offer to resign.

"The wrong person is leaving," ZdK President Thomas Sternberg told Germany's Rheinische Post newspaper. "What Marx did for ecumenical Christianity, for the Synodal Path and also when it comes to the processing of sexual abuse (revelations) is very important."

The ZdK has participated in the Synodal Path meetings for more than a year with the German Bishops'

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Conference. The meetings, which are set to conclude in the fall, feature discussions about allowing priests to get married, the ordination of women and a different understanding of sexuality, among other reforms. The process was launched as part of the response to revelations of clergy sexual abuse.

The head of the German Bishops' Conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Baetzing, expressed respect for Marx's decision.

"His resignation offer makes clear that the church in Germany needs to continue the Synodal Path," Baetzing said in a written statement. "The Synodal Path was created to look for systemic answers to the crisis. The basic, theological discussions which determine the Synodal Path are therefore a significant and important part of this process."

Some conservative commentators, however, cheered Marx's resignation offer as evidence that his ideas for the German Church via the Synodal Path were "dead," not the church itself. Some on the right have warned that the German process of reform could lead to a schism, or formal break from Rome.

"No kidding, the Catholic Church in Germany really had reached a dead end, if by 'dead end' one means the liberal, modernist way forward led by Cdl Marx," said Rod Dreher, an Orthodox convert from Catholicism and columnist for The American Conservative. "He is right to resign. Let someone rise who can offer leadership based in truth."

Other top cardinals and bishops previously offered to resign for alleged involvement in abuse-related failings, only to see Francis sit on the decision for some time.

French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin offered to resign in 2019 after a French court convicted him of failing to report a pedophile priest. Francis refused to accept the resignation pending the outcome of Barbarin's appeal, though he accepted it the following year, by which time Barbarin had been acquitted.

Francis allowed Australian Cardinal George Pell, his economics minister, to take an extended leave of absence in 2017 to return home to face trial for old sexual abuse charges. Pell's conviction was overturned by Australia's High Court last year, but by that time, Pell was just a year shy of retirement age and Francis had already named a successor.

In Belarus, yellow tags single out political prisoners

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — While visiting her son in a Belarusian prison, Natallia Makavetskaya saw deep scars on his wrists left by tight handcuffs. She also noticed the yellow tag sewn onto his clothes.

The tags mark those jailed for joining demonstrations against authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko and single them out for "particularly harsh prison conditions," Makavetskaya told The Associated Press.

"They have decided that my son is prone to extremism and treated him accordingly," she said in a telephone interview.

Her son, Uladzislau Makavetsky, was convicted in December of threatening a police officer with a truncheon during a clash between protesters and police in his hometown of Vitebsk, and was sentenced to two years in prison. He denied the charges, saying he was only trying to protect an elderly man who had been beaten by police, and he just tossed away a truncheon dropped by one of the officers.

Makavetsky told his mother that authorities at prison colony No. 22, located near Brest on the border with Poland, denied him any personal items or visitors for a time. During daily lineups, he was ordered to stand apart from other prisoners and say: "I'm prone to extremism." Prisoners with yellow tags also get extensive regular searches.

The 28-year-old woodcarver was one of more than 35,000 people arrested in Belarus in a harsh crackdown on protests that followed Lukashenko's reelection to a sixth term in an August 2020 vote that was widely seen as rigged. Thousands were severely beaten by police.

The wide-ranging repression was spotlighted again on May 23, when a Ryanair flight traveling from Greece to Lithuania was diverted to Minsk where authorities arrested Raman Pratasevich, a dissident journalist who was aboard. He has been shown in several videos on state TV since his arrest, most recently Thursday night, tearfully repenting for his activities and praising Lukashenko in remarks that the opposition said

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were clearly made under duress.

Outraged European Union authorities denounced the flight's diversion as air piracy and imposed more sanctions on the country.

Belarus human rights activists say authorities have toughened prison conditions in recent months for those who took part in protests. Many of them have been marked with the yellow tags, a practice denounced by human rights activists.

"The tags' yellow color draws direct associations with yellow Stars of David for Jews in Nazi Germany, and it's hard to understand why the Belarusian authorities did it," said Valiantsin Stefanovich of the Viasna human rights center. "In any case, these dangerous experiments lead to stigmatization of political prisoners by prison authorities and other inmates."

Viasna says that at least 460 political prisoners are being held in Belarusian penitentiaries on criminal charges related to protests that carry terms from six months to several years.

The Belarusian authorities have ignored criticism of harsh conditions for jailed protesters. Lukashenko has repeatedly cast protesters as pawns in what he described as efforts by Western spy agencies to destabilize Belarus and forcefully change the government.

Besides Makavetskaya, three other women told the AP that their sons had yellow tags sewn on their clothes when they visited them in April and May.

One of them, who asked to be identified only by her first name, Valiantsina, fearing reprisals from authorities, said her son told her he is kept in handcuffs around the clock. The IT specialist from Minsk is serving his four-year sentence in prison colony No. 1 in the city of Novopolotsk.

"My son whispered to me that he was being held for days in a stretched position in a punishment cell, his legs stretched far apart to cause intense pain without any trace left," she told AP.

Another prisoner who was given a yellow tag was Katsiaryna Barysevich, a journalist of the Tut.by independent news portal who was released last month after serving six months on charges of revealing personal data in her report about a protester's death.

"I wouldn't say that I have been broken," Barysevich told reporters after her release. "I have learned to look calmly at mad things."

Lioubou Kaspiarovich, another Tut.by journalist who spent 15 days in jail last month for covering a trial related to protests, said she and 14 others in her two-bed cell had to sleep on the concrete floor that was still wet with chlorine bleach.

"They were waking us up several times during the night, ordering us to report the criminal law articles we were charged with, and each morning they poured a bucketful of chlorine on the floor," Kaspiarovich told the AP. "And they put a homeless woman who had lice in our cell."

Vitold Ashurok, who was among the first to draw attention to harsh conditions and yellow tags for political prisoners, died inside a prison in Shklov, where he was serving a five-year sentence for participating in protests. The authorities said Ashurok, 50, died of a heart attack May 21, although his death certificate didn't list a cause of death.

When relatives were given his body, which bore bruises and a bandage on his head, authorities also released a video in which a man purported to be Ashurok was seen grasping his head and collapsing before officers enter. The opposition said the video was doctored.

Viasna's Stefanovich questioned the official version of Ashurok's death.

"An absolutely healthy person suddenly dies in custody ... and they don't name the cause of death, and (then) hand over his body with bandages," he said. "What are people supposed to think?"

His death brought an outpouring of anger.

"He died in the struggle for freedom and a brighter future for Belarus," U.S. Ambassador Julie Fisher said on Twitter, adding that Ashurok's "wrongful imprisonment and senseless death demand accountability."

Another prisoner tried to slit his throat with a pen in court Tuesday after authorities threatened his family with criminal charges. Stsiapan Latypau, 41, was hospitalized and put in a medically induced coma afterward.

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German Foreign Ministry expressed shock and anger over the incident. Ministry spokeswoman Maria Adebahr said it "symbolizes the hopelessness that Lukashenko brings upon his citizens with his repression and also the brutal violence that is obviously being used there."

Human rights activists and relatives of those being held have urged the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Belarusian prisons to inspect conditions for political prisoners.

"They are cranking up repressions and there is no way to find out the truth about what's going on behind the walls of the Belarusian prisons that have inherited the worst Soviet traditions," said Viasna's Stefanovich.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, June 5, the 156th day of 2021. There are 209 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 5, 1967, war erupted in the Middle East as Israel, anticipating a possible attack by its Arab neighbors, launched a series of pre-emptive airfield strikes that destroyed nearly the entire Egyptian air force; Syria, Jordan and Iraq immediately entered the conflict.

On this date:

In 1794, Congress passed the Neutrality Act, which prohibited Americans from taking part in any military action against a country that was at peace with the United States.

In 1912, U.S. Marines landed in Cuba at the order of President William Howard Taft to ensure order and protect U.S. interests.

In 1917, about 10 million American men between the ages of 21 and 31 began registering for the draft in World War I.

In 1950, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Henderson v. United States*, struck down racially segregated railroad dining cars.

In 1964, The Rolling Stones performed the first concert of their first U.S. tour at Swing Auditorium in San Bernardino, California.

In 1968, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was shot and mortally wounded after claiming victory in California's Democratic presidential primary at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles; assassin Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was arrested at the scene.

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control reported that five homosexuals in Los Angeles had come down with a rare kind of pneumonia; they were the first recognized cases of what later became known as AIDS.

In 1999, jazz and pop singer Mel Tormé died in Los Angeles at age 73.

In 2002, 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her Salt Lake City home. (Smart was found alive by police in a Salt Lake suburb in March 2003. One kidnapper, Brian David Mitchell, is serving a prison sentence; the other, Wanda Barzee, was released in September, 2018.)

In 2004, Ronald Wilson Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, died in Los Angeles at age 93 after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease.

In 2006, more than 50 National Guardsmen from Utah became the first unit to work along the U.S.-Mexico border as part of President George W. Bush's crackdown on illegal immigration.

In 2013, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, accused of killing 16 Afghan civilians, many of them sleeping women and children, pleaded guilty to murder at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, to avoid the death penalty; he was sentenced to life in prison.

Ten years ago: Israeli troops battled hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters who tried to burst across Syria's frontier with the Golan Heights, killing a reported 20 people. Rafael Nadal won his record-equaling sixth French Open title, beating Roger Federer 7-5, 7-6 (3), 5-7, 6-1.

Five years ago: Hillary Clinton overwhelmed Bernie Sanders in Puerto Rico's Democratic presidential primary, putting her within striking distance of capturing her party's nomination. David Gilkey, a veteran news photographer and video editor for National Public Radio, and an Afghan journalist, Zabihullah Tamanna,

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were killed in an insurgent ambush while on assignment. Novak Djokovic (NOH'-vak JOH'-kuh-vich) became the first man in nearly a half-century to win four consecutive major championships and finally earned an elusive French Open title to complete a career Grand Slam, beating Andy Murray 3-6, 6-1, 6-2, 6-4.

One year ago: Minneapolis banned chokeholds by police, the first of many changes in police practices to be announced in the aftermath of George Floyd's death; officers would also now be required to intervene any time they saw unauthorized force by another officer. An op-ed in The Washington Post, signed by 89 former defense officials, accused President Donald Trump of using the U.S. military to undermine the rights of Americans protesting police brutality. City workers and volunteers painted "Black Lives Matter" in enormous yellow letters for two blocks on the street leading to the White House in a sign of local leaders' embrace of the protest movement. The World Health Organization broadened its recommendations for the use of masks during the pandemic. With results tabulated from several primaries earlier in the week, Joe Biden formally clinched the Democratic presidential nomination. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said the league had been wrong for not listening to players fighting for racial equality.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-singer Bill Hayes is 96. Broadcast journalist Bill Moyers is 87. Former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark is 82. Author Dame Margaret Drabble is 82. Country singer Don Reid (The Statler Brothers) is 76. Rock musician Freddie Stone (AKA Freddie Stewart) (Sly and the Family Stone) is 74. Rock singer Laurie Anderson is 74. Country singer Gail Davies is 73. Author Ken Follett is 72. Financial guru Suze Orman is 70. Rock musician Nicko McBrain (Iron Maiden) is 69. Jazz musician Peter Erskine is 67. Jazz musician Kenny G is 65. Rock singer Richard Butler (Psychedelic Furs) is 65. Actor Beth Hall is 63. Actor Jeff Garlin is 59. Actor Karen Sillas is 58. Actor Ron Livingston is 54. Singer Brian McKnight is 52. Rock musician Claus Norreen (Aqua) is 51. Actor Mark Wahlberg is 50. Actor Chad Allen is 47. Rock musician P-Nut (311) is 47. Actor Navi Rawat (ROH'-waht) is 44. Actor Liza Weil is 44. Rock musician Pete Wentz (Fall Out Boy) is 42. Rock musician Seb Lefebvre (Simple Plan) is 40. Actor Chelsey Crisp is 38. Actor Amanda Crew is 35. Electronic musician Harrison Mills (Odesza) is 32. Musician/songwriter/producer DJ Mustard is 31. Actor Sophie Lowe is 31. Actor Hank Greenspan is 11.