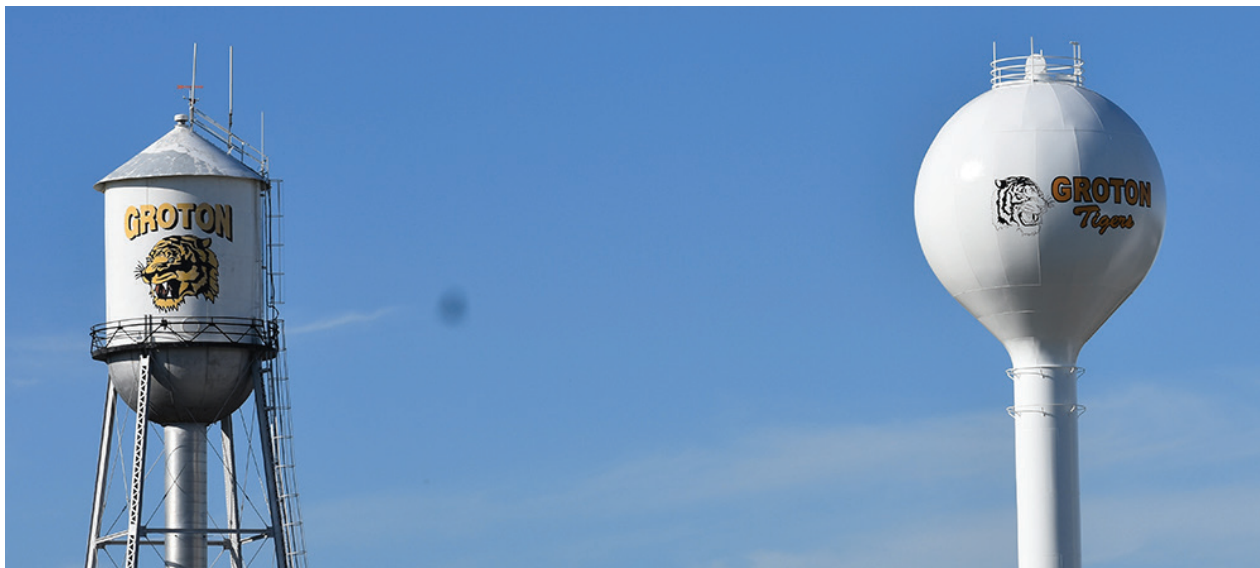
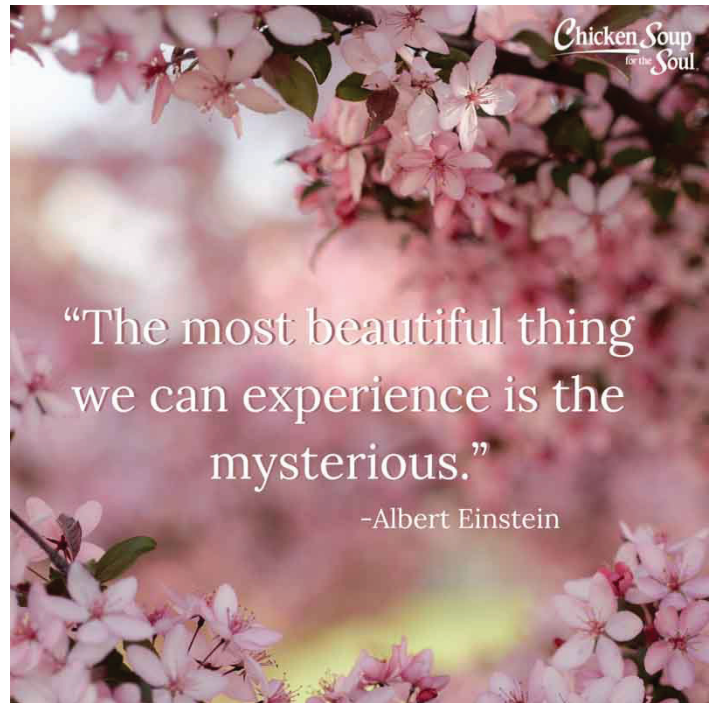


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View from the south as the image was painted yesterday



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Low income to be exempt from new water surcharge

Anita Lowary came before the city council Tuesday evening and expressed concern about the extra \$7.95 monthly surcharge for water improvement. She said there are many individuals who are struggling with finances. "Remember the elderly and the low income," she said. She added that the water rates have increased from \$27 to \$41 a month and for many people, it is becoming a hardship. City Finance Officer Hope Block suggested that those on LIEAP could be exempt from extra surcharge. The second reading of the water rates reflected just that, so those who are on LIEAP will be exempt from the surcharge. In addition, during the financial report, two loans will be paid off next year and Councilman David Blackmun said once the loans are paid off, the council should reconsider the surcharge and see if it can be reduced or eliminated.

Val Baker came before the council with a proposal to offer food for the kids five times a week during the summer month, starting next summer. She would like to have access to the community center for the disbursement of the food, Monday through Friday, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

A special event alcoholic beverage license for amateur baseball games on June 20 and July 18 was approved.



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Britton

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shift
assemblers!**



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Sam Pappas competes in National Speech and Debate Tourney by Kristen Gonsoir

I wanted to give a quick shoutout to Samantha Pappas has just finished up Round Zero at her SECOND National Speech and Debate Association tournament! With her practice round out of the way, she will prepare a minimum of 5 more extemporaneous speeches and present them to her judges.

For those not familiar with the speech world, this means Sam will be given at least 5 more completely random questions about the United States (politics, economy, health, international relations, business, or any other topic) and will have 30 minutes to write a 7 minute speech explaining her answer to those questions. It is a crazy challenge, but one that I know she will excel at!

Good luck to SD state champ and two time national qualifier, Sam Pappas! She should be starting her prep time for her next speech soon, but if you have a chance today or tomorrow please send her a word of congratulations! She certainly deserves it!!

Groton Jr. Teeners Takes Early Lead In Victory Over VFW 14U Clark

Groton Jr. Teeners grabbed an early lead on its way to a 4-1 victory over VFW 14U Clark Area on Tuesday. Groton Jr. Teeners took the lead on a in the first inning.

Kellen Antonsen was the winning pitcher for Groton Jr. Teeners. The bulldog lasted seven innings, allowing five hits and one run while striking out five and walking zero.

Cooper Pommer took the loss for VFW 14U Clark Area . The bulldog allowed one hit and two runs over one inning, striking out one.

Taylor Diegel went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Jr. Teeners in hits. Braxton Imrie led Groton Jr. Teeners with three stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with seven stolen bases.

Collin Gaikowski led VFW 14U Clark Area with two hits in three at bats.

VFW 14U Clark Area Runs Away With Early Lead In Victory

Groton Jr. Teeners watched the game slip away early and couldn't recover in a 7-2 loss to VFW 14U Clark Area on Tuesday.

VFW 14U Clark Area got on the board in the first inning when an error scored one run for VFW 14U Clark Area .

VFW 14U Clark Area scored three runs in the third inning. The offensive onslaught by VFW 14U Clark Area was led by Josh Kannegieter and Conner Mudgett, who each had RBIs in the inning.

Conner Mudgett was the winning pitcher for VFW 14U Clark Area . The ace surrendered two runs on four hits over five innings, striking out nine and walking one.

Braxton Imrie took the loss for Groton Jr. Teeners. The righty surrendered five runs on two hits over two innings, striking out five.

Taylor Diegel led Groton Jr. Teeners with two hits in three at bats.

Josh Kannegieter went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead VFW 14U Clark Area in hits.

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The Life of Doris Alberts



Mass of Christian Burial for Doris Alberts, 92, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Friday, June 18th at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church. Father Tom Hartman will officiate. Burial will follow in Sunset Memorial Gardens, Aberdeen under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Thursday from 6-7 p.m. with a wake service and rosary at 7:00 p.m.

Doris passed away May 4, 2021 at Prairie Heights Healthcare in Aberdeen.

Doris Norene Alberts was born May 29, 1928 to Michael Schliesman and Catherine (Giessinger) Schliesman at Milbank, S.D. She attended St Lawrence Catholic school through high school and graduated in 1946. After graduation she attended Presentation Heights Nursing school in Aberdeen and graduated in 1949. She was proud to wear her cap and pin. She was working at St Luke's Hospital where she met George Alberts, Jr. who was one of her patients. They were married June 5th, 1950 at St Lawrence Catholic Church in Milbank, S.D.

Doris and George moved to Putney where George was farming. In 1957, they bought the house and land that they called home and raised 3 children. Doris continued her nursing career, working for St Luke's Hospital, Brown County Public Health, various doctor offices and Gerber Professional Assn. She retired in 1990.

She belonged to St John the Baptist Church and SEAS Catholic Church in Groton, SD Nursing Association, Putney Ladies Aide and Putney bridge club. Doris and George enjoyed going dancing and entertaining family and friends. She enjoyed doing crocheting, knitting, hardanger and counted cross stitch. Many family and friends have things that she made.

Celebrating her life are 3 children, Marilyn (David) Anderson of Van Meter, IA, Michael Alberts of Groton and Brenda Henley of Littleton, CO, four grandchildren, two step-grandchildren, 3 great grandchildren, five step great grandchildren, one sister Nancy (Richard) Stump of Boise, ID, 3 sisters-in-law Kathy (Leon) Schleisman of Milbank Mavis Kirschenmann of Aberdeen and Arliss Alberts of Aberdeen.

She is preceded in death by her husband George, her parents, one sister and two brothers.

Groton Transit

FUNDRAISER

Thursday, June 17, 2021
4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

**Due to the heat, the event
has been moved to the
Groton Community Center**

*Please join us and help
support Groton Transit!*

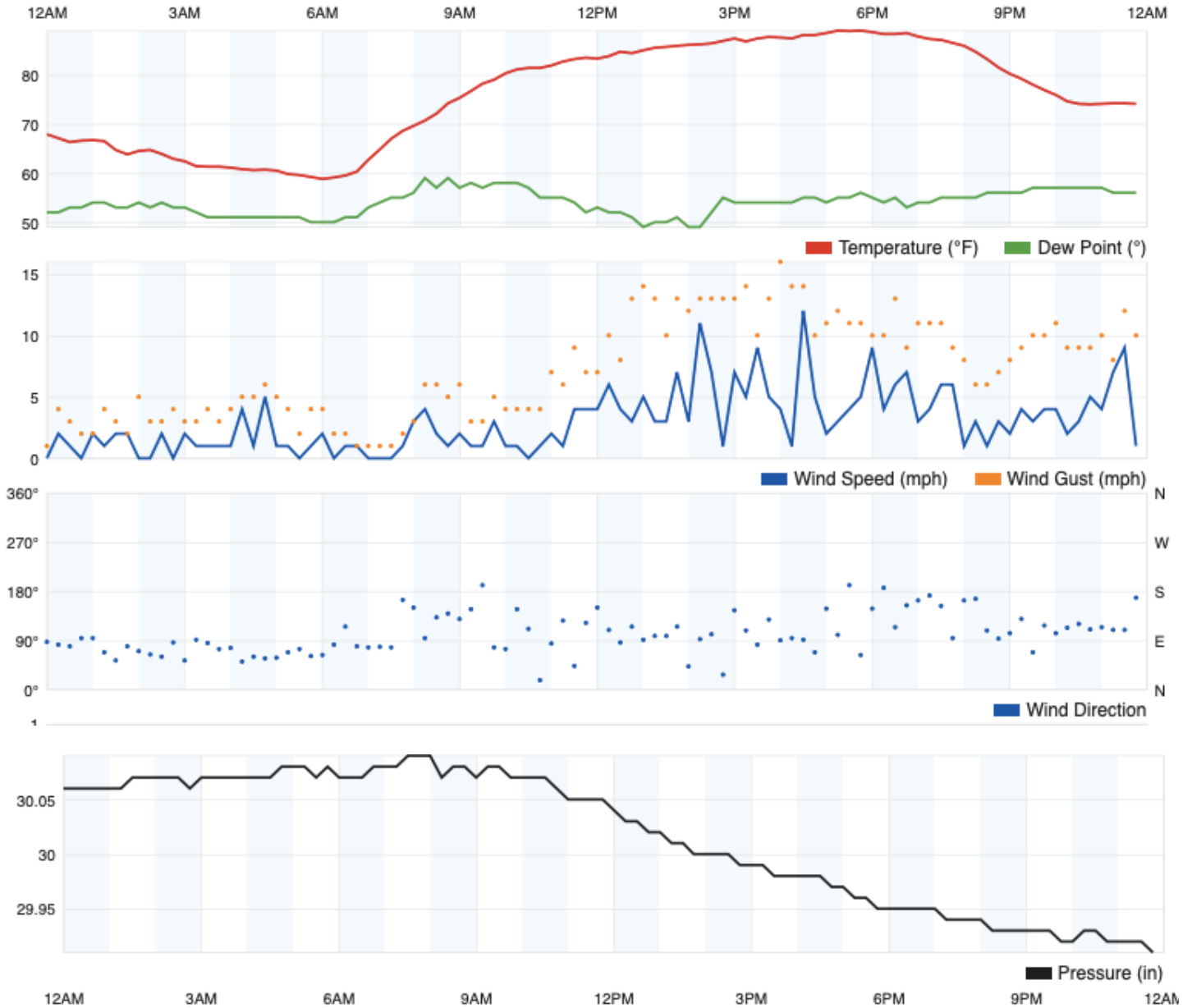
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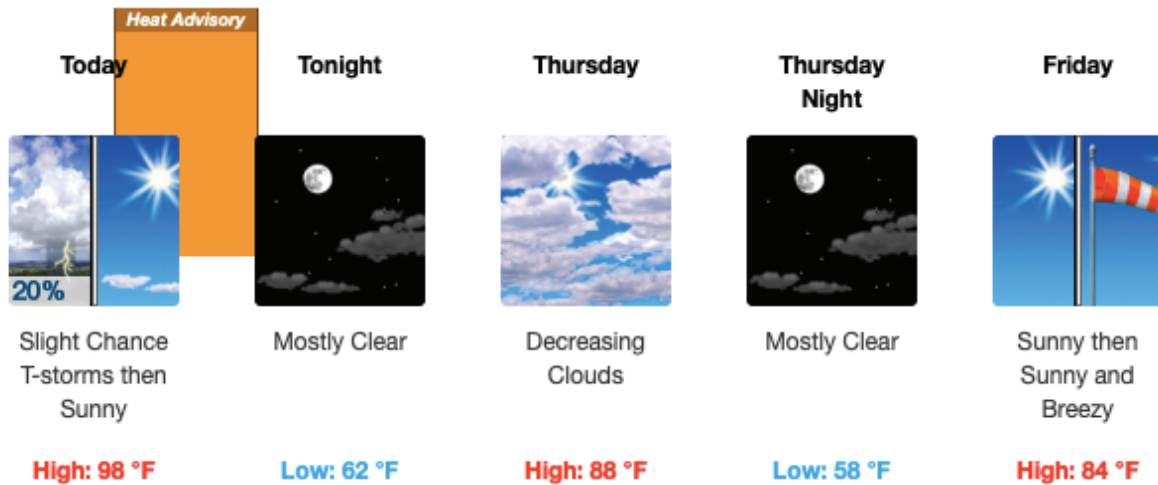
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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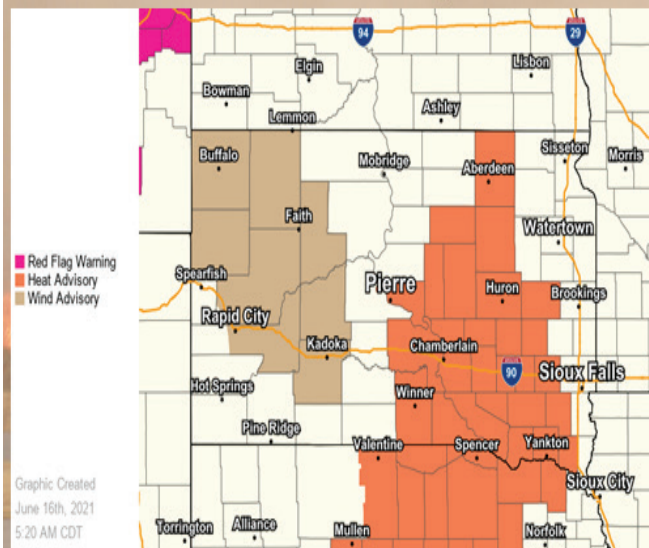
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Hot and Breezy

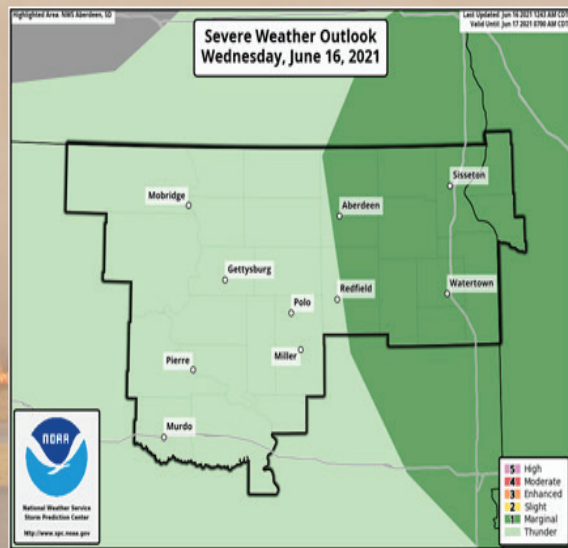
Late Day Strong to Severe Storms Possible east of the James Valley

Heat Advisory



NWS Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 6/16/2021 5:35 AM CST

Severe Threat



A front will move through the region today bringing breezy winds, highs in the 90s to near 100 degrees and the chance for some strong to severe storms by evening. Cooler and drier conditions are expected Thursday.

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Number of June days at or above **90 F**
through the 15th

	2021	Record	Record for all of June
Aberdeen	11	11 in 1933	23 in 1933 (2 nd place: 14 in 1988&1921)
Watertown	7	9 in 1933	22 in 1933 (2 nd place: 12 in 1987&1931)
Sisseton	9	9 in 1976&1959	15 in 1934&1933
Wheaton	8	10 in 1988	18 in 1988
Pierre	11	9 in 1976	22 in 1988 (2 nd place: 17 in 1956&1936)
Mobridge	11	8 in '88, '59 & '33	19 in 1933
Kennbec	12	12 in 1933	27 in 1933 (2 nd place: 21 in 1956)
Timber Lake	11	8 in 1914	19 in 1988&1936

...And the exceptional warmth will continue tomorrow before cooling off some for the rest of the week, and quite a bit thereafter



The first half of June has been one for the record books (or close) for many locations in terms of number of days at or above 90 F.

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Today in Weather History

June 16, 1915: A tornado swept over a narrow path in Hughes, Hyde, and Hand counties during the afternoon hours. This tornado caused several thousands of dollars in property damage and seriously injured many people. Luckily there were no fatalities reported.

June 16, 1992: An F3 tornado caused significant destruction as it moved northeast across the northwestern side of Ft. Thompson. The tornado virtually destroyed the Lake Sharpe Visitor Center. In Ft. Thompson, the tornado destroyed at least four homes and 15 mobile homes were damaged, leaving about 55 persons homeless. Eight people were injured, two of them seriously. The storm also destroyed other buildings, six 50,000 bushel grain bins, and four high voltage towers from Big Bend Dam. At the Shady Bend Campground, 19 campers and several boats were destroyed.

Also, heavy rains fell over a three-day period beginning on the 15th. The hardest hit area was in Clear Lake where the three-day total was 11.53 inches. As a result, a wall of water up to 15 feet high swept down creeks in the Clear Lake area. The resultant flash flooding went through first floors of many houses and even filled basements of houses on hills. The wave of water hit a car that was occupied by a woman and her son. The water spun them around as they floated about 200 yards. The car finally grounded without any reported injuries. All roads into Clear Lake were cut off as the town became surrounded by water. Officials in Deuel County estimated at least 37 bridges and culverts were destroyed. Other three-day rainfall totals include; 6.35 inches in Conde; 5.99 in Castlewood; 4.91 inches 2NW of Big Stone City; 4.90 in Redfield; and 4.65 inches at Artichoke Lake.

June 16, 2009: An upper low-pressure area brought several supercell thunderstorms which produced severe weather across parts of central and northeast South Dakota. Large hail up to 2 inches in diameter, several tornadoes, along with flash flooding occurred with these storms. Slow moving thunderstorms brought very heavy rains of 2 to 4 inches in and around Aberdeen causing extensive road flooding throughout the city. Dozens of basements were flooded and damaged along with some sewer backups. Many vehicles became stalled with the police sent out to direct traffic. There were also some power outages. A tornado touched down briefly northwest of Lebanon in Potter County with no damage occurring. A tornado touched down southeast of Polo in Hand County, in an open field. No damage occurred. Heavy rains of 3 to over 5 inches caused flash flooding of several roads and crops in north-central and northeast Spink County. Torrential rains from 3 to 6 inches fell across southeast Brown County bringing flash flooding. Many roads were flooded and damaged along with many acres of cropland. A tornado touched down in southeastern Hand County and remained on the ground for nearly 15 minutes before lifting. No damage occurred with this tornado as it stayed in the open country.

June 16, 2010: Very strong winds were observed during the evening hours in Dewey County, South Dakota. Three weather stations near Lantry observed winds from 101 to 142 mph. One station had recorded a 101 mph wind before it was destroyed. The other two stations recorded 131 mph and 142 mph winds. The winds destroyed an airplane hangar and severely damaged another one. Several semi-trailers were also tipped over and damaged by the very high winds.

1806: Great American total solar eclipse occurred from California to Massachusetts with nearly five-minute in duration.

1896: A tsunami ravages the coast of Japan killing between 22,000 and 27,000 people.

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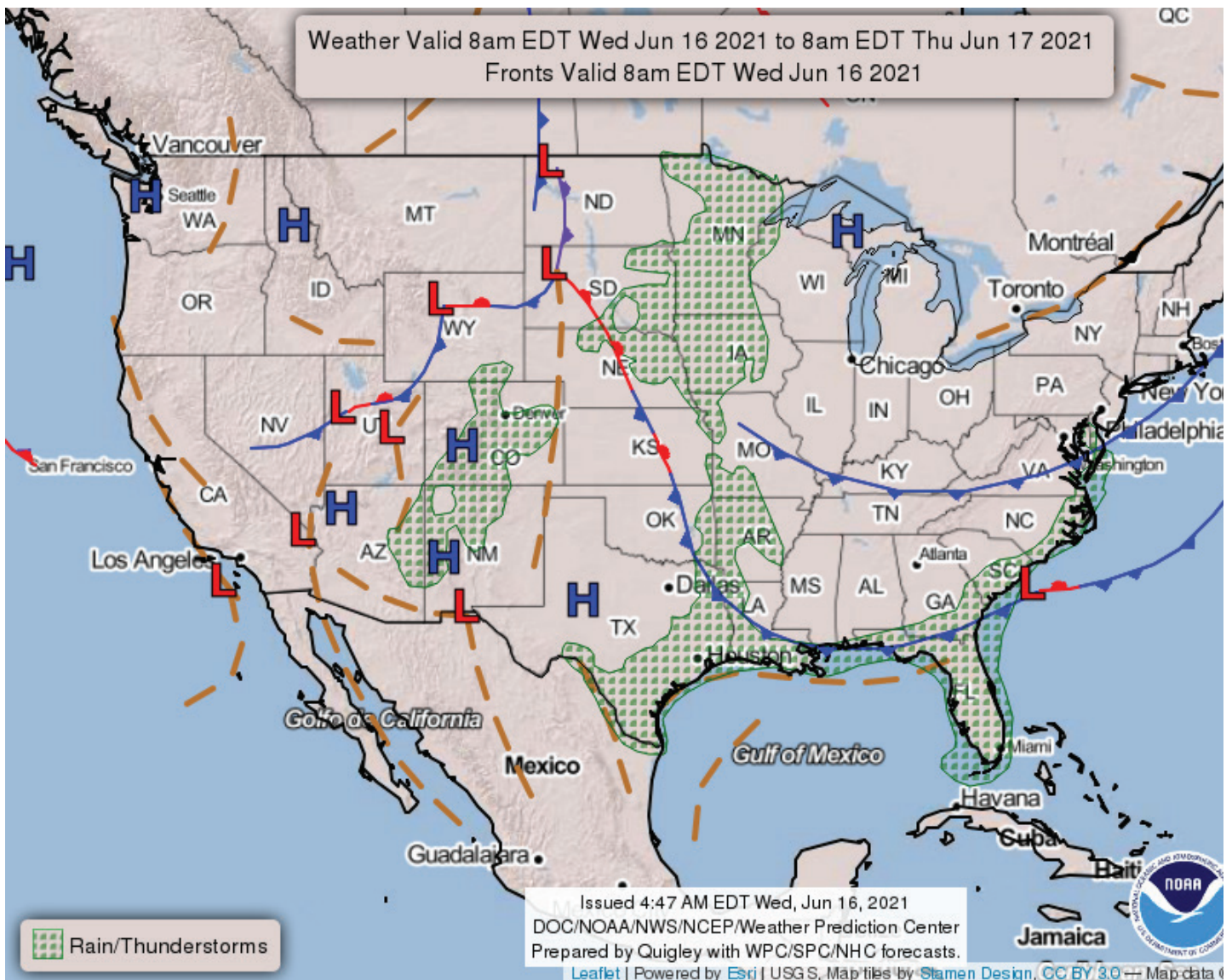
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 89.0 °F
Low Temp: 58.8 °F
Wind: 16 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 109° in 1933
Record Low: 34° in 1903
Average High: 81°F
Average Low: 56°F
Average Precip in June.: 1.77
Precip to date in June.: 0.53
Average Precip to date: 9.02
Precip Year to Date: 4.50
Sunset Tonight: 9:25 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:45 a.m.



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WHAT SIZE GOD DO YOU WORSHIP?

Some years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a compelling book entitled, *Your God Is Too Small*. Most of the world was startled by its title. What could he mean that the Creator of heaven and earth and everything in it and on it could possibly be too small?

His purpose was to expose those of us who did not believe that our God was big enough or wise enough or powerful enough or compassionate enough or even willing to solve the problems of the world. Surely, he reasoned if He was, and if we who called Him Lord, had enough confidence in Him and concern for the world's issues, we could expect Him to do something about them if we prevailed in prayer.

Sometimes we picture God as though He were Lincoln sitting in an armchair looking out into the distance from His perch in Washington. Other times we picture Him with a flowing white beard having no place to sit as He floats around the universe. Some picture Him peeking over a cloud looking at the "mess" He created and wondering what to do.

Psalm 65 sees God as the Creator of all things and the One to whom all things – great and small, big or little, important or insignificant – belong. Additionally, He sustains His creation by His constant involvement in everything: from falling rains to the harvesting of grain.

But it does not end there: He is not only the Creator-Sustainer, He is the Redeemer-Restorer. One day, He will reclaim His universe and make all things new!

Prayer: Lord, increase our faith to exceed the size of our problems. May we believe, as well as know, that You can do the impossible. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds, O God our savior. You are the hope of everyone on earth, even those who sail on distant seas. Psalm 65:5

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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 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** 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
08/28/2021 Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am 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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

18-22-27-38-52, Mega Ball: 11, Megaplier: 4

(eighteen, twenty-two, twenty-seven, thirty-eight, fifty-two; Mega Ball: eleven; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$40 million

Noem says she will try again for Mount Rushmore fireworks

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem indicated Tuesday she will try again to hold a fireworks display over Mount Rushmore to celebrate Independence Day on the heels of President Joe Biden's announcement that the White House will be hosting its own "independence from the virus" bash.

The National Parks Service in March denied the state's application to hold the pyrotechnic display, reasoning that fireworks caused safety concerns at the monument, local Native American tribes objected to the celebration being held on land they hold as sacred and a mass gathering could still defy coronavirus precautions. In an effort to overturn that decision, the Republican governor has written a letter to the president, bashed Biden in the media and sued the U.S. Department of the Interior. All of those efforts have failed.

But after Biden announced Tuesday that he would be encouraging nationwide celebrations to mark the country's effective return to normalcy, Noem said on Twitter that she would resubmit a request to hold fireworks at the monument on Saturday, July 3.

However, even if the federal government reversed its decision, the state would struggle to pull the event together with July Fourth weekend just weeks away. Noem's administration previously said in court that in order to have enough time to organize a fireworks event at the site, it would have to know by June 2 whether it would be allowed.

The governor's spokesman, Ian Fury, said Noem will reach out to the "Biden Administration to ask them to reconsider their unlawful decision." She has also said she will file an appeal of the judge's order in her lawsuit.

Noem has used the issue as a political cudgel to frame herself as an opponent of Biden. She took to Twitter to lash out at the president, writing, "Why are you being so hypocritical? You're having your own personal fireworks show in DC, but South Dakotans are told no?"

South Dakota has been dealing with drought and wildfires burned within the monument's boundaries earlier this year, forcing the park to close for several days. But Noem has said that if the fireworks were allowed, the fire conditions would be monitored and organizers could cancel the show if the fire risk were too great.

Noem successfully pushed last year for a return of the event after a decade-long hiatus. It gave former President Donald Trump an opportunity to feature in a patriotic display attended by thousands of people during the pandemic. Noem has said there were no COVID-19 outbreaks linked to last year's event.

Democratic Party has a new leader in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Democratic Party has a new leader.

Berk Ehrmantraut will begin his work as the party's executive director on June 28. Ehrmantraut was a

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campaign staffer for former gubernatorial candidate and South Dakota lawmaker Billie Sutton.

He succeeds Pam Cole, who resigned from the position earlier this year to work on expanding Medicaid in South Dakota.

Ehrmantraut is a Beresford native and has most recently been working as a senior digital communications manager at Friends of the Global Fight Against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

"It's always great to bring a young person back to South Dakota. It is even better to bring back someone who is committed to advancing policies that help working families and building the Democratic party across the state," said Randy Seiler, chairman of the state Democratic Party.

Federal judge charges US marshals in vaccination dispute

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — A federal judge in South Dakota on Monday criminally charged three members of the U.S. Marshals Service with contempt of court and obstructing justice after a dispute with a marshal who refused to disclose her COVID-19 vaccination status and removed prisoners from a courthouse.

Three supervisory marshals, including the agency's Chief of Staff John Kilgallon, were accused of allowing a deputy marshal to leave the courthouse in Aberdeen, South Dakota, with prisoners in tow on May 10, after the marshal refused to tell the judge whether she had been vaccinated against COVID-19, the Aberdeen American News reported.

U.S. District Judge Charles Kornmann gave the U.S. Attorney's Office until Friday to decide whether to charge the marshals, including Daniel Mosteller, the head of the agency in South Dakota, and Stephen Houghtaling, the state's chief deputy. Kornmann said he was determined to find another prosecutor if the U.S. Attorney declined to prosecute the case.

Kornmann moved in March to require vaccinations for courthouse employees, but Mosteller, told the judge the Marshals Service was not requiring employees to get vaccinated and would not provide their vaccination status to the court.

The U.S. marshal who brought the first defendant into the courtroom last month refused to disclose her vaccination status. As a result, Kornmann told her to leave and pulled in a different deputy marshal to sit in the courtroom. Later that day, Houghtaling told Kornmann by phone that the remaining defendants scheduled for hearings had been removed from the courthouse because the marshals service didn't think it could keep the courtroom secure without two marshals in the room.

Kornmann initially summoned the supervising officers to determine whether they would face civil contempt of court charges. But by the end of the hearing Monday, he had criminally charged the officers and accused them of kidnapping the prisoners. He also offered the officers an opportunity to admit wrongdoing and pay a \$5,000 fine, but they declined.

The three officers were represented by U.S. Department of Justice attorneys who usually handle civil matters. The attorneys indicated the officers were in the process of obtaining criminal defense attorneys and would not comment in court.

The Marshals Service declined to comment on the charges.

The Marshals Service operates under the DOJ, an executive branch agency, but it is tasked with the protection and enforcement of federal courts. Federal law grants the Marshal Service "final authority regarding security requirements for the judicial branch."

In a separate ruling last year, Kornmann, who was appointed under President Bill Clinton in 1995, slammed South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's response to the pandemic, writing that the state "has done little, if anything, to curtail the spread of the virus."

A trial date for the three marshals has been set for Sept. 13.

Face to face: Biden, Putin meet for long-anticipated summit

By AAMER MADHANI, JONATHAN LEMIRE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden and Russia's Vladimir Putin have arrived on Wednesday at the lush lakeside Swiss mansion for their highly anticipated summit, a moment of consequential diplomacy at

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a time when both leaders agree that relations between their countries are at an all-time low.

The two leaders shook hands while appearing briefly before cameras with Swiss President Guy Parmelin, who welcomed them to Switzerland, and then entered the mansion for what is expected to be four or five hours of talks.

For months, they have traded sharp rhetoric. Biden has repeatedly called out Putin for malicious cyberattacks by Russian-based hackers on U.S. interests, a disregard for democracy with the jailing of Russia's foremost opposition leader and interference in American elections.

Putin, for his part, has reacted with whatabout-isms and obfuscations — pointing to the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol to argue that the U.S. has no business lecturing on democratic norms and insisting that the Russian government hasn't been involved in any election interference or cyberattacks despite U.S. intelligence showing otherwise.

Now, the pair are meeting for the first time face-to-face as leaders. In advance, both sides set out to lower expectations.

Even so, Biden said it was an important step if the United States and Russia were able to ultimately find "stability and predictability" in their relationship, a seemingly modest goal from the president for dealing with the person he sees as one of America's fiercest adversaries.

"We should decide where it's in our mutual interest, in the interest of the world, to cooperate, and see if we can do that," Biden told reporters earlier this week. "And the areas where we don't agree, make it clear what the red lines are."

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told The Associated Press on Wednesday that no breakthroughs were expected and that "the situation is too difficult in Russian-American relations."

"However, the fact that the two presidents agreed to meet and finally start to speak openly about the problems is already an achievement," Peskov said several hours before the summit's start.

Arrangements for the meeting were carefully choreographed and vigorously negotiated by both sides.

Biden first floated the meeting in an April phone call in which he informed Putin that he would be expelling several Russian diplomats and imposing sanctions against dozens of people and companies, part of an effort to hold the Kremlin accountable for interference in last year's presidential election and the hacking of federal agencies.

Putin and his entourage arrived first at the summit site: Villa La Grange, a grand lakeside mansion set in Geneva's biggest park. Next came Biden and his team. Putin landed in Geneva on Wednesday shortly before the scheduled start of the meeting; Biden — who was in Europe for a week of meeting with allies — arrived the day before.

The three spent a moment together in front of the cameras, but only Parmelin made remarks.

Biden and Putin were expected to first hold a relatively intimate meeting joined by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Each side will have a translator.

The meeting will then expand to include five senior aides on each side.

After the meeting concludes, Putin is scheduled to hold a solo news conference, with Biden following suit. The White House opted against a joint news conference, deciding it did not want to appear to elevate Putin at a moment when the president is urging European allies to pressure Putin to cut out myriad provocations.

Biden sees himself with few peers on foreign policy. He traveled the globe as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and was given difficult foreign policy assignments by President Barack Obama when Biden was vice president. His portfolio included messy spots like Iraq and Ukraine and weighing the mettle of China's Xi Jinping during his rise to power.

He has repeatedly said that he believes executing effective foreign policy comes from forming strong personal relations, and he has managed to find rapport with both the likes of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whom Biden has labeled an "autocrat," and conventional politicians like Canada's Justin Trudeau.

But with Putin, whom the president has "no soul," Biden has long been wary. At the same time, he acknowledges that Putin, who remained the most powerful figure in Russian politics over the span of five U.S. presidents, is not without talent. Biden this week suggested that he is approaching his meeting with

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Putin carefully.

"He's bright. He's tough," Biden said. "And I have found that he is a — as they say...a worthy adversary."

The White House held on to hope of finding small areas of agreement.

No commitments have been made, but according to the senior administration official, there are hopes that both sides will return their ambassadors to their respective postings following the meeting. Russia's ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, was recalled from Washington about three months ago after Biden called Putin a killer; U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan left Moscow almost two months ago, after Russia suggested he return to Washington for consultations.

Both ambassadors will be in Geneva during Wednesday's meeting.

Biden administration officials say they think common ground can be found on arms control. International arms control groups are pressing the Russian and American leaders to start a push for new arms control by holding "strategic stability" talks — a series of government-to-government discussions meant to sort through the many areas of disagreement and tension on the national security front.

The Biden team will press its concerns on cybersecurity. In recent months, Russia-based hackers have launched alarming attacks on a major U.S. oil pipeline and a Brazil-headquartered meat supplier that operates in the U.S.

The Russian side has said that the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny is an internal political matter and one area where Putin won't engage Biden. But the senior Biden administration official said there "is no issue that is off the table for the president," suggesting Navalny will come up.

The meeting is sure to invite comparisons with President Donald Trump's 2018 meeting with Putin in Helsinki, where the two leaders held a joint news conference and Trump sided with Russian denials when asked whether Moscow had meddled in the 2016 presidential election.

Biden has prepared for his one-on-one by reviewing materials and consulting with officials across government and with outside advisers. Aides said the level of preparation wasn't unusual. Biden, in a brief exchange with reporters upon arriving in Geneva on Tuesday night, sought to offer the impression that he wasn't sweating his big meeting.

"I am always ready," Biden said.

The Latest: Biden and Putin open summit with a handshake

GENEVA (AP) — GENEVA — President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are starting their diplomatic talks in Geneva.

The two were first greeted by the Swiss president before sitting down for a small meeting that includes just Biden, Putin, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, with a translator for each side. They'll then move to larger talks, which will include more senior aides and are expected to last hours.

The two plan to discuss everything from cybercrime to Russia's alleged interference in America's elections, as well as arms control and Russia's intrusion in Ukraine.

Both sides have played down expectations for any major breakthroughs, but both Biden and Putin have stressed the need to restore more stable relations between the two nations.

GENEVA -- President Joe Biden has arrived at the 18th-century manor house in Geneva where he'll hold high-profile talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Biden is set to meet in-person with the Russian president for the first time in a decade. He last met Putin when the Russian leader was prime minister and Biden was serving as vice president, in March of 2011. He has since called Putin both a "killer" and a "worthy adversary."

The two are likely to discuss some issues that also were central to their 2011 meeting, like trade and arms control. But this meeting comes at a low point in diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Biden says he hopes to find areas of "cooperation" with Putin, but he's also expected to confront the

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Russian president on cybercrime, Russia's interference in U.S. elections and other issues that have contributed to frosty relations between the two countries.

GENEVA — Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is frequently late at high-level meetings, arrived on time at the 18th century Villa La Grange in Geneva for his high-stakes summit with President Joe Biden.

The Russian leader landed in Geneva and traveled to the summit venue, located in the Swiss city's largest park, in a Russian-made Aurus limousine that was airlifted from Moscow for the summit along with a fleet of other vehicles.

Putin, 68, who has received a Russian-made vaccine against the coronavirus, wasn't wearing a mask. However members of his delegation were wearing masks.

GENEVA -- Russian President Vladimir Putin has arrived at a lakeside villa in Geneva for his summit with U.S. President Joe Biden.

The two leaders are set to start their meeting accompanied by their top diplomats and a pair of translators. Other senior officials plan to join them for two successive rounds of talks that are expected to last for several hours Wednesday.

Topics on the summit agenda include strategic stability, cyber security, climate change, the coronavirus pandemic and the Arctic. Putin and Biden also are expected to cover regional crises in Ukraine, Syria and Libya, as well as the Iranian nuclear program and Afghanistan.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov, sought to moderate expectations for the summit but strongly emphasized the meeting's importance amid the strained ties between Moscow and Washington.

"It's the first such meeting that takes place at a time when the bilateral relations are extremely bad," Ushakov told reporters this week. "Both parties realize it's time to start dealing with the issues that have piled up."

GENEVA – Russian President Vladimir Putin has arrived in the Swiss city of Geneva for a summit with U.S. President Joe Biden.

Their meeting comes amid soaring Russia-U.S. tensions. The summit agenda covers a broad range of issues, from arms control and cybercrime to the pandemic and a diplomatic tug-of-war between Moscow and Washington.

The White House and the Kremlin have sought to downplay expectations for Wednesday's summit. But Biden and Putin have both emphasized the importance of a direct dialogue to try to negotiate a more stable and predictable relationship despite the sharp policy differences between the United States and Russia.

Ties between the two powers have remained at post-Cold War lows over Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, accusations of Russian interference in elections, hacking attacks and other irritants.

The two leaders are scheduled to meet for four or five hours at a lakeside mansion.

GENEVA — The acting chief of protocol for the Geneva region says staff members at the villa where U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are meeting will keep face masks on during the summit even if the two leaders don't.

Geneva authorities require the wearing of masks in public, though there are exceptions. The requirement holds particularly in places with a lot of pedestrian traffic, such as shopping areas.

Marion Bordier Bueschi, who is managing the grand lakeside mansion that will serve as the summit site, told The Associated Press that staffers inside Villa La Grange were already wearing masks.

She said Putin and Biden would likely not wear masks during their talks on Wednesday. She noted that both leaders have been vaccinated against the coronavirus.

Confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19 have dropped across Switzerland, and authorities are planning steps to ease the mask requirement later this month.

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U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are both coming to the summit table in Geneva with their own agendas and non-negotiable red lines. There will be no talk of a "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations.

Biden and his aides have made clear that he will not follow in the footsteps of his recent predecessors by aiming to radically alter the United States' ties to Russia. Instead, the White House is looking to move toward a more predictable relationship and attempt to rein in Russia's disruptive behavior.

Biden will push Putin on Wednesday to stop meddling in democratic elections, to ease tensions with Ukraine and to stop giving safe harbor to hackers carrying out cyber and ransomware attacks. Aides believe that lowering the temperature with Russia will also reinforce the United States' ties to democracies existing in Moscow's shadow.

Putin also won't be expecting a new *détente* to mend the rift caused by Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Nor does he count on a rollback of the crippling U.S. and EU sanctions that have restricted Moscow's access to global financial markets and top Western technologies.

Putin's task now is more modest — to spell out Russia's top security concerns and try to restore basic channels of communication that would prevent an even more dangerous destabilization. The main red line for Moscow is Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO.

GENEVA — A spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin cautioned that Putin's talks with U.S. President Joe Biden "will not be easy" or likely yield any breakthroughs.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told The Associated Press a few hours before the Russia-U.S. summit in Geneva on Wednesday that the topics on the broad agenda "are mostly problematic."

"We have many long-neglected questions that need to be trawled through. That's why President Putin is arriving with an attitude to frankly and constructively set questions and try to find solutions," Peskov said.

"No, this day cannot become historic, and we shouldn't expect any breakthroughs. The situation is too difficult in Russian-American relations," he continued. "However, the fact that the two presidents agreed to meet and finally start to speak openly about the problems is already an achievement. We can say that without having started yet, the summit already has a positive result, but we should not await breakthroughs."

Peskov said the bilateral issues Russia wants to discuss include strategic stability, arms control, cooperation in regional conflicts, cooperation on the pandemic, and climate change.

GENEVA — U.S. President Joe Biden and Russia's Vladimir Putin are set to meet for their highly anticipated summit in the Swiss city of Geneva. It's a moment of high-stakes diplomacy that comes as both leaders agree that U.S.-Russian relations are at an all-time low.

For four months, the two leaders have traded sharp rhetoric. Biden has repeatedly called out Putin for malicious cyberattacks by Russian-based hackers on U.S. interests, for disregard of democracy in the jailing of Russia's top opposition leader and for interfering in American elections.

Their talks on Wednesday are expected to last four to five hours. In advance, both sides set out to lower expectations. Arrangements for the meeting have been carefully choreographed and vigorously negotiated by both sides.

Putin and his entourage will arrive first at the summit site: Villa La Grange, a grand lakeside mansion set in Geneva's biggest park. Next come Biden and his team. Swiss President Guy Parmelin will greet the two leaders.

Biden and Putin first will hold a relatively intimate meeting joined by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The talks will then expand to include five senior aides on each side.

After the meeting concludes, Putin is scheduled to hold a solo news conference, with Biden following suit. The White House opted against a joint news conference, deciding it did not want to appear to elevate Putin at a time when the president is urging European allies to pressure Putin to cut out myriad provocations.

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China offers glimpse of Tibetan life without the Dalai Lama

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

LHASA, China (AP) — A brisk wind ruffles yellow prayer flags as dozens of Tibetans, some on crutches, circle a shrine in a time-honored Buddhist ritual. Across the street, a red banner spells out a new belief system, one being enforced with increasing fervor, of China's ruling Communist Party.

"Xi Jinping's new socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics is the guide for the whole party and all nationalities to fight for the great rejuvenation of China," the sign proclaims in Tibetan and Chinese script, referring to China's leader, who has sought to put his imprint on virtually every aspect of life across the vast country.

Lately, that has increasingly encompassed religion, both in central China and on its fringes, such as Tibet. The party is pressing a program to Sinicize Tibetan life through programs to separate Tibetans from their language, culture, and especially, their devotion to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's traditional spiritual leader who has lived in exile since 1959.

In the sun-drenched courtyard of the Jokhang Temple, one of the holiest sites in Tibetan Buddhism, the head monk, Lhakpa, said the Dalai Lama is not its spiritual leader. Asked who is, he said: "Xi Jinping."

The Associated Press joined a rare and strictly controlled media tour to Tibet highlighting what the government describes as the social stability and economic development of the region after 70 years of Communist Party rule. Stops included monasteries, temples, schools, poverty alleviation projects and tourist sites.

That appears to reflect the party's confidence that it is prevailing in the global battle of public opinion over Tibet. As a counterweight, Tibet rights groups continue to report frequent detentions, economic marginalization, a suffocating security presence and heavy pressure to assimilate with China's Han majority while pledging loyalty to the Communist Party.

Tibetans in exile say they were effectively independent for centuries and accuse China of trying to wipe out Tibet's Buddhist culture and language while exploiting its natural resources and encouraging Chinese to move there from other parts of the country. Beijing says Tibet has long been a part of China and that the Communists liberated hundreds of thousands of illiterate serfs when they overthrew the ruling theocracy in 1951.

Security has been tightened significantly since widespread anti-government protests in 2008, shortly before the Beijing Summer Olympics, accompanied by redoubled efforts at economic development and the declining influence of Buddhism. In the model village of Baji east of Lhasa, the capital, residents dressed in traditional garments told foreign journalists how poverty alleviation campaigns had changed their lives.

"Time has changed, so people's demands have changed. People needed religious beliefs as their spiritual sustenance in old times, but now we don't," said Tsering Yudron, 25, an accountant.

The government points to the billions of dollars it has invested in roads, airports, railways, schools and hospitals, saying development has doubled life expectancy, brought electrification, jobs, and opportunities to a region that long lagged behind.

"Tibet has eradicated extreme poverty," reads a 2019 government report on Tibet. "People now lead better lives and live in contentment. A brand new socialist Tibet has taken shape."

The impact on traditional culture has been stark. Like Christians and Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists have increasingly been pressured to "Sinicize" their religions under a program put forth by Xi, China's most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong. While repression has been less harsh than in nearby Xinjiang, which has seen mass incarcerations of Turkic Muslims, residents are under extreme pressure to monitor each other and infractions can bring long prison sentences, rights groups say.

The party has evolved a system to try to control Tibetans through their faith, said Robert Barnett, a Tibet scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Especially since the 2008 protests, the government has sought to "get the love of the Communist Party into those Tibetan minds when they're children," he said. From campuses to homes, portraits of Xi now hang from the walls of homes and temples as once did images of the Dalai Lama.

"Tibetan Buddhism should be guided in adapting to the socialist society and should be developed in the

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Chinese context," Xi said last year during a meeting focused on Tibet.

China has increasingly vilified the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet amid a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, and has in recent years relinquished his political role as head of the self-proclaimed Tibetan government-in-exile. Seeking to quell protests that pop up every decade or so, the party banned all images of the Dalai Lama in 1996, excised the exiled leader from books and broadcasts, and installed cadres in most villages, monasteries and nunneries.

While the Dalai Lama says he seeks only meaningful autonomy under Chinese rule, Beijing accuses him of supporting terrorism and seeking to split Tibet from China, and has cut off all contacts with his representatives.

With the Dalai Lama soon to turn 86, attention has increasingly turned to the question of his succession, or reincarnation as traditional belief holds. The successor is traditionally identified by senior monastic disciples, based on spiritual signs and visions. But China says that only Beijing can appoint the next Dalai Lama in a ceremony using a golden urn to pick from among candidates approved by the central government.

"Reincarnation of living Buddhas including the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions," said a foreign ministry spokesperson in 2019.

At the government-built Tibetan Buddhist College outside of Lhasa, more than 900 students study religion along with politics, law, computer science, Chinese and Tibetan. Among them are eight monks aged 7 to 11, recognized as reincarnations or "living Buddhas."

Chalk art celebrating 70 years of China's military takeover of Tibet adorns the wall next to a portrait of Xi in a class taught in Tibetan.

"We must adhere to the leadership of the party over the religious affairs and the Sinicization of religions. We must continue to accommodate the religions to the socialist system of China," said Zhang Liangtian, the college's top communist party official.

China has built a network of schools and institutions across Tibet to try and manufacture a "domesticated version" of Tibetan Buddhism to counter the leadership in exile, said Dibyesh Anand, the head of University of Westminster's international relations department in London.

The goal, Anand says, is to change the very core of Tibetan Buddhism by generating confusion about the Dalai Lama and his leadership, and eventually to dismantle his legacy as a "paramount national leader."

China has meanwhile sought to elevate other spiritual figures, particularly Tibetan Buddhism's second ranking figure, the Panchen Lama. A boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the new Panchen disappeared soon after and Beijing produced its own successor, whose legitimacy is highly contested.

Zhang, the Tibet Buddhism College's top party official, said that while the Dalai Lama had "betrayed his country," the Panchen Lamas "love the country and the religion."

Barnett said the close management of schools is a campaign to change the minds of future generations of Tibetans to "push for removing the possibility that people will listen to the Dalai Lama if they even get to hear what he says." Still, China believes it needs a religious leader to act as their proxy in order to control Tibet, Barnett said.

"It's all about a long-term historical project to control the next Dalai Lama," he said, "even if you can't control this one."

British lawyer Karim Khan sworn in as ICC's chief prosecutor

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — British lawyer Karim Khan was sworn in Wednesday as the new chief prosecutor for the International Criminal Court, pledging to reach out to nations that are not members of the court in his quest to end impunity for atrocities and to try to hold trials in countries where crimes are committed.

Khan, a 51-year-old English lawyer, has years of experience in international courts as a prosecutor, investigator and defense attorney. He takes over from Fatou Bensouda of Gambia, whose nine-year term ended Tuesday.

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"The priority for me, and I believe that's the principle of the Rome Statute, is not to focus so much on where trials take place, but to ensure that the quest for accountability and inroads on impunity are made," Khan said, referring to the treaty that founded the court, in his first speech after taking his oath of office.

"The Hague itself should be a city of last resort," he said. "Wherever possible, we should be trying to have trials in the country or in the region."

Khan said he wanted to work with countries that are not among the court's 123 member states to achieve justice. World powers the United States, Russia and China are not members and do not recognize the court's jurisdiction.

"My conviction is that we can find common ground in the quest and in the imperative to ensure we eradicate genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes," Khan said.

Most recently, Khan led a United Nations team investigating atrocities in Iraq, telling the Security Council last month that he uncovered "clear and compelling evidence" that Islamic State extremists committed genocide against the Yazidi minority in 2014.

In the past, he has defended clients at international courts including former Liberian President Charles Taylor and Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto. ICC prosecutors dropped charges against Ruto and President Uhuru Kenyatta of involvement in deadly post-election violence in their country.

Khan begins his nine-year term as the court's prosecution office is struggling to keep up with demands for investigations. The court prosecutes genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes in nations unable or unwilling to carry out their own prosecutions.

He said he wants to reform the office and immediately address what he called a "gender and geographical imbalance" among its staff. He also said prosecutors, who have lost several high profile cases in recent years, have to improve their performances in court.

"We have to perform in trial," Khan said. "We cannot invest so much. We cannot raise expectations so high and achieve so little so often in the courtroom."

His predecessor told The Associated Press in an interview Monday that there is "a serious mismatch" between what the prosecutor's office needs to do its work and what it is getting from the court's member nations.

"We have more or less had an explosion of cases that we are supposed to be handling, but we cannot do it without adequate resources," Bensouda told the AP.

She also had a warning for Khan that there are "attempts at every side, every corner, to politicize the actions of the prosecutor."

Among the most politically charged investigations Khan inherits are those in Afghanistan — where prosecutors are pursuing cases against all sides in the country's conflict, including allegations of crimes by American troops and foreign intelligence operatives — and in the Palestinian territories, where alleged abuses by Israeli forces and Palestinian militants are being probed.

Bensouda said every case the court opens "is politically charged one way or the other. So we are aware of that. But it should not be part of our decision-making."

Human Rights Watch had a similar message for Khan.

Bensouda's decisions to launch investigations in Afghanistan and the Palestinian territories "reinforced the office's independence," said Liz Evenson, associate international justice director at the rights group. "Karim Khan should build on his predecessor's efforts to ensure that those most responsible for grave crimes are held to account, regardless of their power or position."

Loan relief granted to defrauded for-profit college students

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

The U.S. Education Department said Wednesday it's erasing student debt for thousands of borrowers who attended a for-profit college chain that made exaggerated claims about its graduates' success in finding jobs.

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The Biden administration said it is approving 18,000 loan forgiveness claims from former students of ITT Technical Institute, a chain that closed in 2016 after being dealt a series of sanctions by the Obama administration. The new loan discharges will clear more than \$500 million in debt.

The move marks a step forward in the Biden administration's effort to clear a backlog of claims in the borrower defense program, which provides loan forgiveness to students who were defrauded by their colleges. Claims piled up during the Trump administration, which stalled the program and only started processing claims after a federal court demanded it. There are now more than 100,000 pending claims.

In announcing the new action, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona vowed to continue standing up for students who are deceived by their schools.

"Our action today will give thousands of borrowers a fresh start and the relief they deserve," Cardona said in a statement. "Many of these borrowers have waited a long time for relief, and we need to work swiftly to render decisions for those whose claims are still pending."

It follows another round of loan discharges in March, when the Education Department cleared \$1 billion in federal student debt for 72,000 borrowers. Those claims all came from former students of for-profit colleges.

Borrower defense is among several education programs targeted for an overhaul by the Biden administration as it works to reverse Trump-era policies. Cardona is hosting a series of hearings this month as his agency considers changes to that policy and others.

The program was rarely used until 2015, when the Education Department received thousands of claims from former students of Corinthian Colleges. The chain of for-profit colleges had recently shut down following findings that it lied to students about job placement rates.

Following the collapse of Corinthian and other beleaguered for-profit colleges, the Obama administration moved to make it easier for students to get loans erased. But the overhaul was reversed by the Trump administration, which later wrote its own rules making it tougher to get relief. In changing the rules, then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos said it had become too easy to get loans forgiven.

Cardona began chipping away at DeVos' rules in March when he rescinded a formula that allowed the Education Department to give only partial loan discharges to students whose claims were approved. All borrowers granted relief will now get their loans cleared in full.

Many of the 18,000 claims from ITT Tech were approved after the Education Department found that the company lied about graduates' job prospects. The agency said ITT made "repeated and significant misrepresentations" about its ability to help students get jobs. In reality, many students said it was harder to find employment when they listed ITT on their resumes, the department said.

Other claims were approved after the department found that ITT misled students about their ability to transfer course credits to other colleges. Credits were rarely accepted elsewhere, the department said, leaving students with "little to no progress" in their academic careers.

Borrowers will be notified about their claim approvals in the coming weeks, the agency said.

Greenpeace apologizes, local police slam Euro 2020 protester

By CIARÁN FAHEY AP Sports Writer

MUNICH (AP) — Greenpeace has apologized and Munich police are investigating after a protester parachuted into the stadium and injured two people before Germany's game against France at the European Championship.

The protester used a powered paraglider with a motor attached to his back but lost control and hit overhead camera wires attached to the stadium roof, careening over spectators' heads before he landed on the field ahead of Tuesday's game. Debris fell on the field and main grandstand, narrowly missing France coach Didier Deschamps.

Greenpeace spokesperson Benjamin Stephan apologized for the botched protest and the injuries caused.

"That was never our intention," Stephan said. "The paraglider was to fly over the stadium and drop a latex ball with a message of protest onto the field."

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Munich police said Wednesday they were investigating various potential violations of the criminal code and aviation act.

"The pilot injured two men during the landing approach. The injured were given medical care by the emergency services and taken to hospitals for further care," Munich police said in a statement.

The police said none of the injuries were serious and the pilot himself — a 38-year-old man with an address in the southwestern state of Baden Württemberg — was unharmed.

"There is no understanding whatsoever for such irresponsible actions in which a considerable risk to human life is accepted," the police said.

The protester's parachute had the slogan "KICK OUT OIL!" and "Greenpeace" written on it.

The parachutist managed to land on the field and Germany players Antonio Rüdiger and Robin Gosens were the first to approach him. He was then led away by security stewards.

"Technical difficulties meant the pilot was forced to land in the stadium," Stephan said. "We deeply regret that this put people in danger and apparently injured two persons."

UEFA called the action "reckless and dangerous" and said "law authorities will take the necessary action."

The German soccer federation also condemned the action.

"It could probably have turned out much worse," Germany team spokesman Jens Grittner said.

UEFA and one of its top-tier tournament sponsors, Russian state energy firm Gazprom, have previously been targeted by Greenpeace protests.

In 2013, a Champions League game in Basel was disrupted when Greenpeace activists abseiled from the roof of the stadium to unfurl a banner protesting Russian oil and Gazprom, which sponsored the visiting team, German club Schalke.

Greenpeace later donated money to a charity supported by Basel, which was fined by UEFA for the security lapse.

UEFA defended its environmental credentials in a statement on Tuesday after the incident.

"UEFA and its partners are fully committed to a sustainable Euro 2020 tournament," UEFA said, "and many initiatives have been implemented to offset carbon emissions."

Lebanon's crisis threatens one of its few unifiers, the army

By ZEINA KARAM and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Since the civil war, through wars with Israel, militant bombings and domestic turmoil, Lebanese have considered their military as an anchor for stability, one of the only institutions standing above the country's divisions.

But the military is now threatened by Lebanon's devastating financial collapse, which the World Bank has said is likely to rank as one of the worst the world has seen in the past 150 years.

The economic meltdown is putting unprecedented pressure on the U.S.-backed army's operational abilities, wiping out soldiers' salaries and wrecking morale. The deterioration puts at risk one of the few forces unifying Lebanon at a time when sectarian tensions and crime are on the rise amid the population's deepening poverty.

"Such a decline could be harbinger of the kinds of instability not seen since the last time Lebanon's political elites gutted or set adrift the Lebanese armed forces, namely in the five years leading up to the 1975-1990 civil war," said Aram Nerguizian, senior advisor of the Program on Civil-Military Affairs in Arab States at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The military itself has raised the alarm, unusual for a force that is perhaps unique in the Middle East in that it largely remains outside politics.

Army chief Gen. Joseph Aoun warned in a speech to officers in March that soldiers were "suffering and hungry like the rest of the people."

He also openly criticized the political leadership, which has been paralyzed by infighting and has done almost nothing to address the crisis. "What are you waiting for? What do you plan to do? We have warned more than once of the dangers of the situation," he said — a startling comment since army officers are

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not allowed to make political statements.

A senior army official confirmed to The Associated Press that the economic situation has greatly affected morale. "There is no doubt that there is great resentment among the ranks of the military," the official said.

The official noted that "many duties are demanded of the military," including maintaining internal stability. "The leadership is worried over developments in the security situation on the ground and the ability to deal with this issue," the officer said, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. Supporting the army is crucial to avoid Lebanon falling into chaos, he added.

France is convening a virtual fundraising conference Thursday seeking emergency aid, after army chief Aoun visited Paris last month pleading for assistance. France warned that Lebanon's military "may no longer be able to fully implement their missions which are essential to the country's stability." The U.S., the army's largest backer, has pledged to increase aid in 2021.

The military in part counterbalances Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite faction that boasts a powerful armed force as well as political dominance. Nerguizian warned that degradation of the military would allow Hezbollah to loom even larger -- an outcome few outside Lebanon, particularly in Washington, want to see materialize.

It could also open the door for countries like Russia, China, Iran or Syria to co-opt the force and find ways to influence it.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command said earlier this month that the U.S. is committed to supporting the Lebanese army.

"They're one of the elements of the Government of Lebanon that actually functions very well, and we believe they should continue to be the sole expression of military power of the state in Lebanon," he said.

After decades of corruption and mismanagement by the political elite, Lebanon's economy began to disintegrate in October 2019. The once-thriving banking sector has collapsed, and the currency has lost around 90 percent of its value to the dollar on the black market. More than half the nation has been plunged into poverty.

Equally hit are the 80,000 members of the military. Before the crisis, an enlisted soldier earned the equivalent of about \$800 a month, but that has now dropped to less than \$100 per month. Officers' salaries are higher but have also dropped in value, now about \$400 a month.

The army has tightened spending. A year ago, it announced it would stop offering meat in meals given to soldiers on duty. It still offers free medical treatment, but those in the force say the quality and effectiveness has sharply deteriorated.

"Morale is below the ground," said a 24-year-old soldier who quit the force in March after five years of service.

He said that by the time he left, the 1.2 million Lebanese pounds salary he received was barely enough for food, cigarettes and transportation. He spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing reprisals.

Mohammad Olayan, who retired two years ago after more than 27 years in the military, told The Associated Press that his end-of-service pay has been wiped out by the crash. Instead of a decent retirement, he now must take odd jobs to sustain his 12-year-old twin girls.

"What incentive is there for young soldiers?" he asked. "I sacrificed so much for my country and look how I ended up because of this mafia," he said, referring to politicians.

Nerguizian said that while overall cases of desertion remain relatively low, the force has seen increased instances of dereliction of duty, high AWOL rates and more moonlighting by personnel to augment salaries.

The last three years have also seen some of the largest attrition rates, with personnel choosing to leave the military, he said. "More worryingly, the force is losing quality officers and noncommissioned officers - the gray matter and capabilities the force has spent more than a decade and a half developing," Nerguizian added.

After Lebanon's 15-year civil war broke out in 1975, the army split along sectarian lines. It reunited in the early 1990s under the command of Gen. Emile Lahoud, who later became the president.

Since then, it has become one of the most professional militaries in the Middle East. The U.S. has given

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it more than \$2 billion since 2007, hoping to build a bulwark against Hezbollah's power — though the aid is far below the around \$3 billion a year it gives to Israel's military.

The military is also one of the few state institutions that enjoy respect among the Lebanese public, in contrast to their politicians, so mired in infighting they haven't been able to form a government since October.

During anti-government demonstrations that swept the country in late 2019, videos of soldiers overcome by emotion as they confronted protesters were widely shared on social media.

Elias Farhat, a retired Lebanese army general who is currently a researcher in military affairs, said he did not believe the collapse scenario is now possible.

"This is not an army's crisis but a country's crisis. In the past there were major security problems that affected the army and led to its disintegration," he said, referring to the civil war.

White House: Markets showing little worry about inflation

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

The White House believes it has an ally in the bond markets to make the case that inflation isn't an economic threat.

Republican lawmakers have interpreted the jump in consumer and producer prices as a sign that inflation is spiking at levels that will hurt growth, saying that President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package overcooked the economy. But the financial markets appear to be backing Biden's case that any price increases are the fleeting result of the United States restarting after the lockdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The White House points to charts that dig into two key market-based measures of inflation and show no cause for alarm in the medium to long term. The charts look at the interest rate on the five-year U.S. Treasury note and a measure of expected inflation known as 5y5y, which looks forward five years to investors' five-year inflation expectations.

As of Monday, the 5y5y was trading at 2.28%, an indication that annual inflation will be close to the Federal Reserve's 2% target. The charts suggest that inflation expectations — despite the recent bump in prices — are within the realm of expectations over the past 15 years. They also show that market expectations of coming inflation have essentially been flat in recent months.

While the markets offer evidence that the recent bout of price increases could fade in a few months, there are conflicting signals for economists. Demand for houses and other products has outpaced supply, a sign that inflation could be a problem. But there is also the possibility that the persistent demand could trigger more supplies to come onto the market. The uncertainty has been magnified for voters as Republican lawmakers say that inflation will devastate the economy and Democrats counter that rising prices are temporary.

Harvard University professor Jason Furman, who served as chief economist for the Obama White House, noted that there are arguments for and against rising inflation.

"The more I think about inflation the less sure I get of anything," Furman said Monday on Twitter. He added that there is a wide range of possible outcomes and "policy decisions should explicitly recognize our uncertainty."

Biden aides are optimistic that the market figures, along with household sentiment surveys, indicate that inflation will drift down. But they're also cautious in interpreting what's next because of the unprecedented nature of shuttering an economy due to COVID-19 and then reopening it with a total of roughly \$6 trillion worth of aid, a sum that includes money approved during Donald Trump's presidency.

The Labor Department said last week that consumer prices rose at an annual pace of 5% in May, as prices for used vehicles, airfare and gasoline surged. Producer prices — what businesses pay for goods and services — are up 6.6% from a year ago, the Labor Department said Tuesday. But market analysts anticipate that the forces driving inflation will lessen.

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"The underlying causes of inflation are supply chain disruptions, labor shortages and emergency stimulus which is boosting demand," said Bill Adams, an economist with PNC Financial Services. "All of these drivers of inflation will be less of an issue in the second half of the year."

It's unclear whether the financial markets' relative calm reflects confidence that the Fed will raise interest rates should inflation stay elevated. Fed officials will end their June meeting on Wednesday, giving forecasts of economic performance and inflation and potential guidance about when they could lift their benchmark rate from near-zero.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has put the blame squarely on Biden for rising prices, arguing that government intervention has caused prices and wages to increase to a degree that will ultimately imperil the economy. It's a message with a clear eye to the 2022 midterm elections, when Biden's performance will be at the forefront of voters' minds.

"The latest data reinforce what too many Americans have been experiencing firsthand: The Biden administration's partisan spending bill has blunted our nation's economic recovery," McConnell said last week on the Senate floor. "Higher prices at the gas pump and grocery store. A tougher time for small businesses trying to staff up."

N Korea's Kim looks much thinner, causing health speculation

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The health of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has long been a source of morbid fascination in rival South Korea, which sits in the shadow of Kim's 1.2-million-strong army and his growing arsenal of nuclear-armed missiles.

Has he gained even more weight? Is he struggling for breath after relatively short walks? What about that cane? Why did he miss that important state anniversary?

Now, the 37-year-old faces fresh speculation in the South about his health again. But this time, it's because he's noticeably slimmer.

Kim's health matters in Seoul, Washington, Tokyo and other world capitals because he hasn't publicly anointed a successor who would control an advancing nuclear program targeting the United States and its allies — if he is incapacitated. North Korea, never open about the internal workings of its leadership, has over the last year shut itself up even tighter to protect against the coronavirus pandemic.

In recent state media images, including those published on Wednesday, Kim appeared to have lost a large amount of weight. The strap on his fancy watch is tighter, and his face thinner. Some observers say Kim — who is about 170 centimeters (5 feet, 8 inches) tall and has previously weighed 140 kilograms (308 pounds) — may have lost about 10-20 kilograms (22-44 pounds).

Kim's apparent weight loss is more likely an attempt to improve his health, rather than a sign of illness, according to Hong Min, a senior analyst at Seoul's Korea Institute for National Unification.

"If he was experiencing health problems, he wouldn't have come out in public to convene the plenary meeting of the Workers' Party's Central Committee," a major political conference this week that is expected to last two to three days, Hong said.

Kim, known for heavy drinking and smoking, comes from a family with a history of heart problems. His father and grandfather, who ruled North Korea before him, both died of heart issues. Experts have said his weight could increase the possibility of cardiovascular diseases.

South Korea's Unification Ministry said it has no information to share about Kim's health. His slimmer look has been the focus of keen interest in South Korea, with media outlets publishing photos of his previous and current appearances.

Seo Yu-Seok at the Seoul-based Institute of North Korean Studies said the North's recent creation of a first secretary of the ruling Workers' Party, the country's No. 2 job, might have been related to Kim's possible health issues. He said Kim may have allowed the post's establishment at the urging of top officials but still hasn't named anyone to the job because it could loosen his grip on power.

"If Kim faces a real health problem and is in a condition in which he can't express his opinions, though

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he isn't dead, who will make a decision to name the first secretary?" Seo said.

When global speculation flared about Kim's health last year after he missed the commemoration of the birthday of his late grandfather, some analysts speculated Kim's younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, was next in line to inherit her brother's power. Others said a collective leadership was also possible.

China set to send first crew to new space station Thursday

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

JIUQUAN, China (AP) — The three members of the first crew to be sent to China's space station say they're eager to get to work making their home for the next three months habitable, setting up testing and experiments and preparing for a series of spacewalks.

The three met with reporters Wednesday from inside a germ-free glassed-in room, hours before they were to blast off on Thursday morning.

"First of all, we need to arrange our home in the core module, then get started on a whole range of diagnostic tests on crucial technology and experiments," said mission commander Nie Haisheng, 56, the most senior of the three who is making his third trip to space.

"The task is very arduous and there are many challenges. My colleagues and I will cooperate closely, operate carefully and overcome all difficulties," Nie said.

Unsurprisingly, all said they had complete confidence in the mission, which carries special political meaning for the ruling Communist Party as it prepares to celebrate its centenary next month.

Liu Boming, 54, whose one previous flight in 2008 included China's first spacewalk, said there would be multiple such activities during the mission as the astronauts carry out their science experiments, conduct maintenance and prepare the Tianhe, or Heavenly Harmony, core module to receive two other modules to be sent up next year.

Tang Hongbo, 45, who is making his first flight since being selected among the second batch of astronauts in 2010, said he had been training virtually nonstop for years. "There is pressure," Tang said. "But where there is pressure there is motivation and ... I have confidence in myself and have confidence in our team."

Thursday's launch begins the first crewed space mission in five years for an increasingly ambitious space program. China has sent 11 astronauts into space since becoming the third country to do so on its own in 2003, and has sent orbiters and rovers to the moon and Mars.

The astronauts will be traveling in the Shenzhou-12 spaceship launched by a Long March-2F Y12 rocket set to blast off at 9:22 a.m. (0122 GMT) from the Jiuquan launch center in northwestern China.

While the first Tianhe crew are all men, women will be part of future crews, officials have said.

Beijing doesn't participate in the International Space Station, largely due to U.S. concerns over the Chinese space program's secrecy and its military connections. Despite that, foreign science missions and possibly foreign astronauts are expected to visit the Chinese station in the future, China Manned Space Agency Assistant Director Ji Qiming told reporters at Jiuquan.

"Outer space is the common wealth of people all over the world, and exploring the universe is the shared cause of all mankind," Ji said.

"We are willing to carry out international cooperation and exchanges with all countries and regions worldwide that are committed to the peaceful use of outer space," Ji said, adding that existing cooperation is being expanded with countries including Russia, Italy and Germany along with the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs.

"I believe that in the near future, when the Chinese space station is complete, we will see Chinese and foreign astronauts taking on joint missions to the Chinese space station," Ji said.

Ji conceded the construction of the Chinese station had come "relatively late," but said that was also an advantage because it allowed China to use the latest technologies and concepts, particularly in the areas of reliability and safety.

"Exploring the vast universe, developing space activities, building a powerful space nation is our unremitting space dream," Ji said.

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"The construction and operation of China's space station will raise our technologies and accumulate experience for all the people. It is a positive contribution by China for human exploration of the universe, peaceful utilization of outer space and push forward the building of a community of shared future for mankind," he said.

The mission is the third of 11 planned through next year to add the additional sections to the station and send up crews and supplies. The main living section of the station was launched in April while the other two modules will be primarily for scientific work.

The mission builds on experience China gained from earlier operating two experimental space stations. It also landed a probe on Mars last month that carried a rover, the Zhurong, and earlier landed a probe and rover on the moon and brought back the first lunar samples by any country's space program since the 1970s.

Once completed, the station will allow for stays of up to six months, similar to the much larger International Space Station.

All astronauts will have their own living area, and a stationary bike and other exercise equipment will allow them to counter some of the effects of weightlessness. They'll also be able to bring personal items to remind them of home and stave off boredom while not working, Nie said.

The Chinese station reportedly is intended to be used for 15 years and may outlast ISS, which is nearing the end of its functional lifespan.

The launch of Tianhe was considered a success although China was criticized for allowing the uncontrolled reentry to Earth of part of the rocket that carried it into space. Usually, discarded rocket stages reenter the atmosphere soon after liftoff, normally over water, and don't go into orbit.

The rocket blasting off Thursday is of a different type, and Ji dismissed concerns about it or the models used for cargo missions posing a threat when they reenter. China published their trajectories and they are expected to burn up long before they could be a danger, he said.

What They Want: Divergent goals for Biden, Putin at summit

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — An American president won't side with Moscow over his own intelligence agencies. There will be no talk of a "reset" in Russian relations. And it is highly doubtful that anyone will gaze into Vladimir Putin's eyes and discuss his soul.

But beyond that, it's not clear what will happen Wednesday in Geneva when President Joe Biden meets Putin for the first time since taking office. Both sides acknowledge that the relationship between the two nations is dismal and neither holds out much hope for meaningful areas of agreement. Still, each man brings his own goals to the summit table.

A look at what each president is hoping to achieve in Switzerland:

WHAT BIDEN WANTS

Biden and his aides have made clear that he will not follow in the footsteps of his recent predecessors by aiming to radically alter the United States' ties to Russia. Instead, the White House is looking for a more modest though still vitally important goal: to move toward a more predictable relationship and attempt to rein in Russia's disruptive behavior.

Biden's first overseas trip was deliberately sequenced so that he will meet with Putin only after spending days meeting with European allies and powerful democracies, including a gathering at NATO, the decades-old alliance formed to serve as a bulwark to Russian aggression. He hoped to project a sense of unity and renewed cooperation after four years of tumult under former President Donald Trump, who often tried to cozy up to the Russian president.

Biden will push Putin to stop meddling in democratic elections, to ease tensions with Ukraine and to stop giving safe harbor to hackers carrying out cyber and ransomware attacks. Aides believe that lowering the temperature with Russia will also reinforce the United States' ties to democracies existing in Moscow's shadow.

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National security adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden will look for “areas where, in our common interest, we can work together to produce outcomes that are — that work for the United States and for the American people.”

Sullivan, who briefed reporters on Air Force One heading to Brussels for the NATO summit, said that Biden’s other message would be more stick than carrot: “How do we send a clear message about those harmful activities that we will not tolerate and to which we will respond?”

There have been brief moments of common ground. Moscow and Washington have shown a shared interest in restarting talks on strategic stability to work out a follow-up deal to the New START, the last remaining U.S.-Russian arms control pact that was extended for five years in January.

Biden will exhort Putin on human rights, including the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, not to support the regime in Belarus that carried out a recent skyjacking and to stop interfering with other nations’ elections. Cyber will also be a focal point, with the Geneva summit coming just days after NATO expanded its Article 5 mutual defense pact to include cyberattacks.

But the president acknowledged that there may be no way to keep Putin in check.

“There’s no guarantee you can change a person’s behavior or the behavior of his country. Autocrats have enormous power and they don’t have to answer to a public,” said Biden during a news conference Sunday after the Group of Seven summit in England. “And the fact is that it may very well be, if I respond in kind — which I will — that it doesn’t dissuade him and he wants to keep going.”

Biden had not minced words when it comes to assessing Putin. He said in an interview earlier this year that he agreed with an assessment that Putin was a “killer,” and he once declared that Putin didn’t have a soul.

That was far colder rhetoric than that of his immediate predecessors.

Trump spoke warmly of Putin and was deferential to him during their one summit, held in Helsinki in 2018, in which he turned his back on his own intelligence agencies. President Barack Obama’s administration, though wary of Putin, expressed hope in a “reset” and improvement of relations with Moscow. And George W. Bush said that he “looked the man in the eye” and “found him very straightforward and trustworthy.”

“I was able to get a sense of his soul,” Bush said.

Biden won’t.

WHAT PUTIN WANTS

Putin also won’t be expecting to warm up ties. His main goal will be to draw his red lines for the new U.S. administration and negotiate a tense status quo that would protect Moscow’s vital interests.

The Russian leader doesn’t hope for a new détente to mend the rift caused by Russia’s 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula. Nor does he count on a rollback of the crippling U.S. and EU sanctions that have restricted Moscow’s access to global financial markets and top Western technologies.

Putin’s task now is more modest — to spell out Russia’s top security concerns and try to restore basic channels of communication that would prevent an even more dangerous destabilization.

The main red line for Moscow is Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO. Fearing its bid for the alliance membership, Putin responded to the 2014 ouster of Ukraine’s Russia-friendly president by annexing Crimea and throwing Moscow’s weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country’s eastern industrial heartland, where the seven-year conflict has killed more than 14,000.

When tensions along the line of contact in Ukraine’s east rose earlier this year, Russia quickly beefed up its troops near Ukraine and warned Kyiv’s leaders that it would intervene militarily if they tried to reclaim the rebel-controlled regions by force.

Moscow has since pulled back some of its forces from the border areas, but the Ukrainian leadership has said the bulk of them have remained close to the border.

In an interview with state TV last week, Putin described Ukraine’s bid to join NATO as an existential challenge to Russia that would allow the alliance’s missiles to hit Moscow and other targets in western Russia in just seven minutes. He compared it to Russia deploying its missiles in Canada or Mexico near the U.S. border. “Isn’t it a red line?” he said.

While taking a tough stance on Ukraine, the Russian leader could show a degree of flexibility on other

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global hotspots.

Even though Moscow has been critical of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan, it's interested in a settlement that would prevent the country from plunging into chaos following the U.S. troops' withdrawal later this year, fearing that instability could spill into ex-Soviet Central Asia.

Russia also has been involved in painstaking international talks to help repair a nuclear deal with Iran that was spiked by Trump, and it has expressed a willingness to cooperate with the U.S. in efforts to restart the stalled Mideast peace talks.

And the Kremlin would be interested in working out a deal on Syria, where Moscow's military campaign helped President Bashar Assad's government reclaim control over most of the country after a devastating civil war and the U.S. has maintained a limited military presence.

Russia has said it's ready to include its prospective doomsday weapons — such as the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed underwater drone and the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile — in the talks on condition the U.S. brings its missile defense and possible space-based weapons into the equation.

Putin also has emphasized Russia's readiness to make joint efforts to address climate change and cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

He called for establishing a dialogue on cybercrime, noting that Moscow could agree to extradite cyber-crime suspects to the U.S. if Washington assumes the same obligation.

The White House has strongly downplayed the idea of a cybercriminal prisoner exchange.

For years US Army hid, downplayed extent of firearms loss

By KRISTIN M. HALL, JAMES LAPORTA and JUSTIN PRITCHARD Associated Press

The U.S. Army has hidden or downplayed the extent to which its firearms disappear, significantly understating losses and thefts even as some weapons are used in street crimes.

The Army's pattern of secrecy and suppression dates back nearly a decade, when The Associated Press began investigating weapons accountability within the military. Officials fought the release of information for years, then offered misleading answers that contradict internal records.

Military guns aren't just disappearing. Stolen guns have been used in shootings, brandished to rob and threaten people and recovered in the hands of felons. Thieves sold assault rifles to a street gang.

Army officials cited information that suggests only a couple of hundred firearms vanished during the 2010s. Internal Army memos that AP obtained show losses many times higher.

Efforts to suppress information date to 2012, when AP filed a Freedom of Information Act request seeking records from a registry where all four armed services are supposed to report firearms loss or theft.

The former Army insider who oversaw this registry described how he pulled an accounting of the Army's lost or stolen weapons, but learned later that his superiors blocked its release.

As AP continued to press for information, including through legal challenges, the Army produced a list of missing weapons that was so clearly incomplete officials later disavowed it. They then produced a second set of records that also did not give a full count.

Secrecy surrounding a sensitive topic extends beyond the Army. The Air Force wouldn't provide data on missing weapons, saying answers would have to await a federal records request AP filed 1.5 years ago.

The broader Department of Defense also has not released reports of weapons losses that it receives from the armed services. It would only provide approximate totals for two years of AP's 2010 through 2019 study period.

The Pentagon stopped regularly sharing information about missing weapons with Congress years ago, apparently in the 1990s. Defense Department officials said they would still notify lawmakers if a theft or loss meets the definition of being "significant," but no such notification has been made since at least 2017.

On Tuesday, when AP first published its investigation, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., demanded during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that the Pentagon resurrect regular reporting. In a written statement to AP, the Pentagon said it "looks forward to continuing to work with Congress to ensure appropriate oversight."

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Blumenthal also challenged Army Secretary Christine Wormuth on her branch's release of information. "I'd be happy to look into how we've handled this issue," Wormuth replied. She described herself as "open to" a new reporting requirement and said the number of military firearms obtained by civilians is likely small.

Poor record-keeping in the military's vast inventory systems means lost or stolen guns can be listed on property records as safe. Security breakdowns were evident all the way down to individual units, which have destroyed records, falsified inventory checks and ignored procedures.

Brig. Gen. Duane Miller, the No. 2 law enforcement official in the Army, said that when a weapon does vanish the case is thoroughly investigated. He pointed out that weapons cases are a small fraction of the more than 10,000 felony cases Army investigators open each year.

"I absolutely believe that the procedures we had in place absolutely mitigated any weapon from getting lost or stolen," Miller said of his own experience as a commander. "But does it happen? It sure does."

The Associated Press began investigating the loss and theft of military firearms by asking a simple question in 2011: How many guns are unaccounted for across the Army, Marines Corps, Navy and Air Force?

AP was told the answer could be found in the Department of Defense Small Arms and Light Weapons Registry. That centralized database, which the Army oversees, tracks the life cycle of rifles, pistols, shotguns, machine guns and more -- from supply depots to unit armories, through deployments, until the weapon is destroyed or sold.

Getting data from the registry, however, would require a formal Freedom of Information Act request.

That request, filed in 2012, came to Charles Royal, then the longtime Army civilian employee who was in charge of the registry at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama.

Royal was accustomed to inquiries. Military and civilian law enforcement agencies would call him thousands of times each year, often because they were looking for a military weapon or had recovered one.

In response to AP's request, Royal pulled and double-checked data on missing weapons. Royal then showed the results to his boss, the deputy commander of his department.

"After he got it, he said, 'We can't be letting this out like this,'" said Royal, who retired in 2014, in an interview last year.

His boss didn't say exactly why, but Royal said the release he prepared on weapons loss was heavily scrutinized within the Army.

"The numbers that we were going to give was going to kind of freak everybody out to a certain extent," Royal said -- not just because they were firearms, but also because the military requires strict supervision of them.

AP was unable to reach Royal's supervisor and an Army spokesman had no comment on the handling of the FOIA request.

In 2013, the Army said it would not release any records. The AP appealed that decision and, nearly four years later, Army lawyers agreed that registry records should be public.

It wasn't until 2019 that the Army released a small batch of data. The records from the registry showed 288 firearms over six years.

Though years in the making, the response was clearly incomplete.

Standing in the stacks at the public library in Decatur, Alabama, last fall, Royal reviewed the seven printed pages of records that Army eventually provided AP.

"This is worthless," he said.

Told that in multiple years, the Army reported just a single missing weapon, Royal was skeptical. "Out of the millions that they handled, that's wrong," he said in a later interview. AP has appealed the FOIA release for a second time.

The data weren't even accurate when compared to Army criminal investigation records. Using the unique serial numbers assigned to every weapon, AP identified 19 missing firearms that were not in the registry data. This included a M240B machine gun that an Army National Guard unit reported missing in Wyoming

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in 2014.

The Army could not explain the discrepancy.

Reporters also filed another records act request for criminal cases opened by Army investigators.

In response, Army's Criminal Investigation Command produced summaries of closed investigations into missing or stolen weapons, weapons parts, explosives or ammunition.

Army spokesman Lt. Col. Brandon Kelley said that the records were "the Army's most accurate list of physical losses." Yet again, the total from the records provided -- 230 missing rifles or handguns during the 2010s -- was a clear undercount.

The records did not reflect several major closed cases and excluded open cases, which typically take years to finish. That meant any weapons investigators are actively trying to track down were not part of the total.

Army's first two answers -- 288 and 230 -- are contradicted by an internal analysis, one that officials initially denied they had done.

Asked in an interview whether the Army analyzes trends of missing weapons, Miller said no -- there were breakdowns of murders, rapes and property crimes, but not weapons loss or theft.

"I don't spend a lot of time tracking this data," Miller said.

In fact, in 2019 and 2020, the Army distributed memos describing military weapons loss as having "the highest importance." The numbers of missing "arms and arms components remain the same or increased" over the seven years covered by the memos, called ALARACTs.

A trend analysis in the document cited theft and "neglect" as the most common factors.

The memos counted 1,303 missing rifles and handguns from 2013-2019.

During the same seven years, the investigative records the Army said were authoritative showed 62 lost or stolen rifles or handguns.

Army officials said that some number they couldn't specify were recovered among the 1,303. The data, which could include some combat losses and may include some duplications, came from criminal investigations and incident reports. The internal memos are not "an authoritative document," and were not closely checked with public release in mind, Army spokesman Kelley said.

Members of Miller's physical security division were tracking the data, though Miller said he wasn't personally aware of the memos until AP brought them to his attention. He said that that if he were, he would have shared them.

"When one weapon is lost, I'm concerned. When 100 weapons are lost, I'm concerned. When 500 are lost, I'm concerned," Miller said in a second interview.

Each armed service is supposed to inform the Office of the Secretary of Defense of losses or thefts. That office also has not released data to AP, but spokesman John Kirby gave approximate numbers of missing weapons for the past few years. The numbers were lower than AP's totals.

"There is no effort to conceal," Kirby said. "There is no effort to obstruct."

Durant's sensational performance sends Nets to 3-2 lead

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Kevin Durant has always been one of the NBA's most unstoppable scorers.

The Brooklyn Nets needed much more than points Tuesday night, so Durant gave them one of the most spectacular performances in postseason history.

Durant had 49 points, 17 rebounds and 10 assists, sending the Nets back into the lead in the Eastern Conference semifinals with a 114-108 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks in Game 5.

"I know the perception of me is that I can score the basketball well, but any team that I've played on, I've been asked to do pretty much everything from rebounding to defending to initiating to scoring," Durant said. "I might not do it all the time but I do a little bit of everything."

In Game 5, it was a whole lot of everything.

The two-time NBA Finals MVP became the first player to have at least 45 points, 15 rebounds and 10

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assists in a playoff game.

"Historic, historic performance," Nets coach Steve Nash said.

With James Harden returning but delivering little offense and Kyrie Irving out, Durant played all 48 minutes and shot 16 for 23 from the field. The four-time scoring champion had 20 points in the fourth quarter, perhaps the biggest shot a 3-pointer with 50 seconds left and the Nets protecting a one-point lead.

"The injuries that he's been through, to come back even from the Achilles to the hamstring to get back in this position, the world is witnessing, once again, who is the best player in the world," Nets forward Jeff Green said.

No argument from the Bucks.

"He's the best player in the world right now and we've got to beat him as a team," Giannis Antetokounmpo said. "We've got to guard him as a team. We've got to make him make tough shots like tonight. We've just got to keep doing our job and hopefully he's going to miss."

Harden played for the first time since leaving 43 seconds into the series opener with right hamstring tightness. He shot just 1 for 10 and missed all eight 3-pointers, but had eight assists and six rebounds while playing 46 minutes.

"I woke up and was like, 'You know what? Let's go,'" Harden said. "I tried to go out there and do the best I can. Hopefully I gave my teammates some encouragement and some life."

Green made seven 3-pointers and scored 27 points for the Nets, who fell into a 17-point hole in this one after two losses in Milwaukee before Durant carried them back. Blake Griffin added 17 points.

Game 6 is Thursday in Milwaukee, where the Bucks are 4-0 against the Nets this season.

Antetokounmpo had 34 points and 12 rebounds, while Khris Middleton added 25 points.

The Bucks had all the momentum after winning the two games in Milwaukee, with Irving spraining his ankle in the second quarter of Game 4. It appeared Durant would be the only one of the three superstars to play Tuesday — which given the way he played, may have been enough anyway.

The Nets originally ruled Harden out on Monday, then upgraded him Tuesday first to doubtful and then questionable. He worked out before the game and seemed to be moving well, jogging off the court into the tunnel after his warmup before being cleared to play.

But he didn't appear to have full strength in his leg, leaving jumpers short and rarely beating anyone on the dribble.

Durant made sure it didn't matter.

"Special performance by him," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "Credit to him, some tough shots, so we've got to look at it, figure out getting better."

The Nets were 4 for 20 in the first quarter, 2 for 13 on 3-pointers, and Middleton's three-point play with 33 seconds left gave Milwaukee a 29-1 lead after one.

Durant's basket got it down to 42-33 before Antetokounmpo rattled in a 3-pointer and follow with two more baskets to push the lead to 16, which is where it still was when the Bucks took a 59-43 lead to the half.

The Bucks still led by 16 midway through the third quarter, answering every time the Nets seemed to have any momentum. But Durant then got hot and never really cooled off.

He made all four shots and scored 11 points in the final 6:18 of the third as the Nets pulled to 87-81 on his three-point play with 31 seconds left.

Durant kept right on going to open the fourth, with his 3-pointer with 8:36 to play making it 94-93, Brooklyn's first lead since it was 2-0.

TIP-INS

Bucks: Antetokounmpo had his third straight game with at least 30 points and 10 rebounds. He also was the only player to receive All-NBA first-team votes on all 100 ballots, earning his third consecutive first-team selection. ... Jrue Holiday had 19 points.

Nets: Irving was voted to the All-NBA third team, the first All-NBA selection for the Nets since Jason Kidd was voted to the first team in the 2003-04 season. ... The Nets paid tribute to announcer Marv Albert, who was calling the game courtside for TNT. Albert, who is from Brooklyn, is planning to retire after nearly

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60 years as a professional broadcaster after calling the Eastern Conference finals.

PLAYER'S CHOICE

Nash said before the game the decision to play would rest with Harden. Harden has never won an NBA title and pushed to get back for this game once it became clear the Nets wouldn't have Irving.

"So James is driving this," Nash said. "We have to try to support him the best way we can and be an aide for him to figure this out, but it's a tricky situation but it's one that we're willing to go down with James."

Making hot sauce and working to save wetlands

JANET McCONNAUGHEY Associated Press

EVERY ISLAND, La. (AP) — As storms grow more violent and Louisiana loses more of its coast, the family that makes Tabasco Sauce is fighting erosion in the marshland that buffers its factory from hurricanes and floods.

Overall, the effort is probably a standoff, says CEO and president Harold "Took" Osborn, great-great-grandson of the McIlhenny Co.'s founder. But in a state that has lost 2,000 square miles (5,200 square kilometers) of its coast since 1932, holding your ground is a victory.

The company has been brewing Tabasco Sauce since 1868 on Avery Island — the tip of a miles-deep column of salt — and now fills up to 700,000 bottles a day, selling them in 195 countries and territories.

While sinking land is a problem throughout southern Louisiana, Avery Island and four smaller salt domes along the Gulf Coast are still slowly rising.

But the danger from hurricanes remains. A 20-foot (6.1-meter) high, \$5 million earthen levee now encloses the 40 acres (16 hectares) or so around Tabasco's factory because Hurricane Rita's storm surge pushed floodwaters within inches (centimeters) of it in 2005.

Much of the wetlands work is low-tech, enlisting volunteers to plant marsh grass in the 30,000 acres (12,100 hectares) around the small island a bit north of Barataria Bay, one of the areas hit hardest by the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Osborn holds a master's degree in environmental science from Oxford University, but one might say conservation is in his DNA. The company's founder, Edmund McIlhenny, was a self-taught naturalist. Osborn's great-grandfather, E.A. McIlhenny, created an egret rookery at the island in 1895 because the birds were nearing extermination by hunters who sold their plumage to adorn women's hats.

In recent decades, McIlhenny Co. has armored shores against erosion with big rocks and has terraced wetlands to slow waves enough to let sediment drop out and form new land, Osborn said. "But the thing that works the best for the least amount of money is grass," he added.

As he steers a company boat, Osborn, 58, points to an expanse of grass stretching deep into the marsh. Ten years ago it was open water -- an oilfield canal that had widened over time.

Its mouth was plugged by planting clumps of smooth cordgrass a few feet apart wherever the bottom was a foot (30.5 centimeters) or less below the surface.

While the grass traps sediment, new shoots spring up from underground stems. "It catches good and it starts walking out," Osborn said.

Grass also gets planted along other parts of the shoreline. At one spot, a few lines of grass run alongside the bank for about 20 or 30 yards (18 to 27 meters). One of last year's hurricanes -- either Laura or Delta -- pulled out a wide swath of grass behind the scraggly row.

Osborn said the company also has plugged at least 15 of the many canals created by oil companies as shortcuts through the marsh. Oil companies that wanted to work in the area plugged some of them as part of their contracts, he said.

Marsh restoration around Avery Island has the added benefit of helping protect cities and towns to the north, said Mark Shirley of Louisiana Sea Grant. "Storm surge and hurricane protection is directly related to the marshland between you and the Gulf of Mexico," he said.

After a decade or more of leading a summer 4-H class called Marsh Maneuvers, Shirley is intimately familiar with the planting process. In one day, a crew of 16 high-school students pulls up enough clumps

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of grass from a healthy area to fill two flatboats, then plants the grass along a shoreline or canal mouth. "After a year or so, each small clump has multiplied 10 or 12 times and you have an acre or two of grass," he said.

Multiply that by four classes each summer, plus other groups, and it adds up.

It takes about a decade for a canal to fill in completely, said Heath Romero, McIlhenny Co.'s land manager.

The family also played a big part in creating the Rainey Conservation Alliance to foster larger wetland restoration and coastal protection projects across 187,000 acres (75,700 hectares) in St. Mary, Iberia and Vermilion parishes. Neighboring private landowners and the Audubon Society are the group's other members.

They have rounded up at least \$80 million in grants — from \$1.3 million in state surplus money for extending a shoreline protection project to \$24.9 million for replacing more than 400 acres (162 hectares) of marsh killed by saltwater intrusion and restoring freshwater flow.

A demonstration project designed to protect 4,000 acres (1,600 hectares) created skinny terraced ridges 5 to 6 feet (1.5 to 1.8 meters) high — up to double the standard height. Some were planted with trees, others prepared as rookeries for seabirds and wading birds.

When Hurricane Barry hit three months after the project's completion in 2019, the marsh behind the terraces was undamaged, according to a report commissioned by Audubon Louisiana, which owns some of the wetlands.

"Those (ridges) are expected to last between 50 and 100 years," rather than 20 or so, said Erik Johnson, the state organization's director of bird conservation.

The alliance is based on the idea that "what's good for our neighborhood is good for me," said John Foret, who worked with the group as a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration employee when it was formed in 2010 and became its executive director in October.

Osborn said there's more to wetlands restoration than protecting a five-generation family business. "My family understands that the land has been very good to us and it's our duty to honor, respect and preserve it," he said.

After enrollment dips, public schools hope for fall rebound

By KALYN BELSHA and GABRIELLE LaMARR LeMEE of Chalkbeat and ANNIE MA and LARRY FENN of The Associated Press Chalkbeat and Associated Press

Ashley Pearce's daughter was set to start kindergarten last year in Maryland's Montgomery County school system. But when it became clear that the year would begin online, Pearce found a nearby Catholic school offering in-person instruction and made the switch.

Now Pearce is grappling with a big question: Should her child return to the local public school? She's hesitant to uproot her daughter after she's made friends, and Pearce worries that the district might go fully virtual again if there's an uptick in coronavirus cases.

"It's going to be fine if we stay where we are, and that stability for my family is probably the way we're going to go."

As many parents across the U.S. weigh the same concerns, school districts that lost enrollment during the pandemic are looking anxiously to the fall to see how many families stick with the education choices they made over the last year. In hopes of attracting students, many districts have launched new efforts to connect with families with young children, including blanketing communities with yard signs and enlisting bus drivers to call parents.

There are early signs that enrollment may not fully rebound, and the stakes are high. If enrollment does not recover, public schools that lose students eventually could see funding cuts, though pandemic relief money is boosting budgets for now.

Sustained drops in enrollment could also shift the demographics of America's public schools. A first-of-its-kind analysis by Chalkbeat and The Associated Press found that enrollment declines varied by student race and ethnicity. Enrollment in preschool to 12th grade dropped by 2.6% across 41 states last fall, and

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the decline was steepest among white students, whose enrollment fell more than 4%.

White families' decisions seemed especially swayed by whether their child's public school offered in-person learning. States where more students were learning fully virtually tended to see larger declines among white students, the Chalkbeat/AP analysis found.

Meanwhile, the nation's Hispanic student population saw the biggest shift from pre-pandemic trends, with enrollment dipping 1.5% last fall — a significant change, given that Hispanic students had been the country's fastest-growing student group. That could be tied to some of the disruptions Hispanic families experienced during the pandemic, including higher rates of job losses and higher rates of death and hospitalization from COVID-19.

The data underscores the complicated task ahead for schools trying to reconnect with families who left public schools for different reasons and ended up at a wide range of alternatives.

"Districts might have this kind of 'different strokes for different folks' policy," said Richard Welsh, an associate professor at New York University who's studied student mobility. "We're open for business and we're committed to in-person learning' could be more targeted to white families."

On the flip side, Welsh said, "when you have districts that are giving tours about their safety protocols, those might be targeted more to their Black and Latinx families" whose communities were hit harder by the pandemic.

One such effort is underway in San Antonio, where the mostly Latino school district saw enrollment drop just over 5%. Officials there project that enrollment will rise this fall but not to pre-pandemic levels.

To build trust with families worried about in-person learning, district officials have been hosting town halls where families can ask experts questions about COVID-19 vaccines. The district will also continue to offer a fully virtual schooling option.

School officials are working to connect with every family who left or did not enroll their child in preschool or kindergarten, whether by phone or with a home visit, Superintendent Pedro Martinez said. The district has even tasked bus drivers with calling families between routes to encourage them to register their children.

And while Martinez is focused on the early grades, where enrollment dipped the most, he has his eye on older students too. Nearly every student in the district is from a low-income family, and many got jobs to help their families weather the pandemic. He's concerned that so many teens continued learning remotely all spring so they could continue to work, though he understands the financial pressure.

"It's so easy for a 16- or 17-year-old to prioritize work over school," he said.

Certain pandemic schooling options, like putting young children in child care instead of kindergarten, will likely fall by the wayside. But some families may stick with private schools, especially if, like Pearce, they see them as a way to avoid uncertainty.

It remains unclear exactly how many students those schools absorbed. In some states that track it, like Delaware and New Hampshire, private school enrollment grew 5% or more this year, according to data obtained by Chalkbeat and the AP. But in several others, including New York, Louisiana, Indiana and Colorado, private school enrollment fell by 3% or more, indicating families didn't switch en masse.

Notably, it wasn't just the wealthy who left public schools. There were significant enrollment declines among students from low-income families and more affluent ones in the 35 states that provided data.

Other families might continue to home-school their children — a practice that shot up in the few states that tracked it. In New York and Virginia, for example, home schooling grew by more than 50% this year, though it remained a relatively rare choice.

Regardless, districts are now ramping up their recruitment efforts, hoping to build on the small upticks they saw over the last few months as in-person learning became more widely available.

In Spokane, Washington, enrollment fell by nearly 7% last fall, with the steepest declines among Asian, Black and white students. District officials have been reaching out to families via text messages and mailers and through community groups.

They've been emphasizing the district's plan to shrink class sizes this fall, which they see as a selling point for families who want more individual attention for their children and for those with lingering fears about the coronavirus. The district assures families that it will offer both full-time in-person instruction

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and a virtual option.

"We want to create as much predictability, and try to mitigate a sense of unknown and fear, to the greatest extent possible," Superintendent Adam Swinyard said, "and just let our families know that we're ready and eager to be back."

Researchers who track student demographics are also watching closely to see who returns. By the fall, it will be clearer if the enrollment shifts carry longer-term implications.

Some districts already expect the pandemic to have a lasting effect.

In Denver, officials estimate that enrollment will drop by 6% in the coming years — a rate nearly double what was predicted before the pandemic. Declining birth rates and rising housing prices that drive families away are big factors, but officials believe the pandemic exacerbated those losses, especially in the youngest grades. Kindergarten applications are down considerably for the upcoming school year.

The district's planning director, Sara Walsh, said the total decline could be "pretty significant." But she hasn't given up on a turnaround: "I am hoping that maybe all of a sudden tons of kids show up."

Federal judge blocks Biden's pause on new oil, gas leases

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The Biden administration's suspension of new oil and gas leases on federal land and water was blocked Tuesday by a federal judge in Louisiana who ordered that plans continue for lease sales that were delayed for the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska waters "and all eligible onshore properties."

The decision is a blow to Democratic President Joe Biden's efforts to rapidly transition the nation away from fossil fuels and thereby stave off the worst effects of climate change, including catastrophic droughts, floods and wildfires.

U.S. District Judge Terry Doughty's ruling came in a lawsuit filed in March by Louisiana Republican Attorney General Jeff Landry and officials in 12 other states. Doughty said his ruling applies nationwide. It grants a preliminary injunction — technically a halt to the suspension pending further arguments on the merits of the case.

"The omission of any rational explanation in cancelling the lease sales, and in enacting the Pause, results in this Court ruling that Plaintiff States also have a substantial likelihood of success on the merits of this claim," he wrote.

"We are reviewing the judge's opinion and will comply with the decision," an Interior Department statement emailed by communications director Melissa Schwartz said. "The Interior Department continues to work on an interim report that will include initial findings on the state of the federal conventional energy programs, as well as outline next steps and recommendations for the Department and Congress to improve stewardship of public lands and waters, create jobs, and build a just and equitable energy future."

The moratorium was imposed after Biden on Jan. 27 signed executive orders to fight climate change. The suit was filed in March. The Interior Department later canceled oil and gas lease sales from public lands through June — affecting Nevada, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming and the bureau's eastern region.

Biden's orders included a call for Interior officials to review if the leasing program unfairly benefits companies at the expense of taxpayers, as well as the program's impact on climate change.

The 13 states that sued said the administration bypassed comment periods and other bureaucratic steps required before such delays can be undertaken, and that the moratorium would cost the states money and jobs. Doughty heard arguments in the case last week in Lafayette.

Federal lawyers argued that the public notice and comment period doesn't apply to the suspension, that the lease sales aren't required by law and that the Secretary of the Interior has broad discretion in leasing decisions.

"No existing lease has been cancelled as a result of any of the actions challenged here, and development activity from exploration through drilling and production has continued at similar levels as the preceding four years," lawyers for the administration argued in briefs.

But Doughty sided with the plaintiff states attorneys, who argued that the delay of new leasing cost

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states revenue from rents and royalties.

"Millions and possibly billions of dollars are at stake," wrote Doughty, who was nominated to the federal bench by President Donald Trump in 2017.

"Local government funding, jobs for Plaintiff State workers, and funds for the restoration of Louisiana's Coastline are at stake," he added, alluding to a possible loss of oil and gas revenue that pays for Louisiana efforts to restore coastal wetlands.

"This is fantastic news for workers in Louisiana whose livelihoods are being threatened by the administration's thoughtless energy policy," U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) said in a statement.

But not everyone was supportive of the judge's decision.

"The judge's order turns a blind eye to runaway climate pollution that's devastating our planet," said Randi Spivak, public lands program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "We'll keep fighting against the fossil-fuel industry and the politicians that are bought by them."

Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and West Virginia are the other plaintiff states.

"This is a victory not only for the rule of law, but also for the thousands of workers who produce affordable energy for Americans," Landry said in a statement issued shortly after the ruling.

AP: Some stolen US military guns used in violent crimes

By KRISTIN M. HALL, JAMES LAPORTA, JUSTIN PRITCHARD and JUSTIN MYERS Associated Press

Pulling a pistol from his waistband, the young man spun his human shield toward police.

"Don't do it!" a pursuing officer pleaded. The young man complied, releasing the bystander and tossing the gun, which skittered across the city street and then into the hands of police.

They soon learned that the 9mm Beretta had a rap sheet. Bullet casings linked it to four shootings, all of them in Albany, New York.

And there was something else. The pistol was U.S. Army property, a weapon intended for use against America's enemies, not on its streets.

The Army couldn't say how its Beretta M9 got to New York's capital. Until the June 2018 police foot chase, the Army didn't even realize someone had stolen the gun. Inventory records checked by investigators said the M9 was 600 miles away -- safe inside Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

"It's incredibly alarming," said Albany County District Attorney David Soares. "It raises the other question as to what else is seeping into a community that could pose a clear and present danger."

The armed services and the Pentagon are not eager for the public to know the answer.

In the first public accounting of its kind in decades, an Associated Press investigation has found that at least 1,900 U.S. military firearms were lost or stolen during the 2010s, with some resurfacing in violent crimes. Because some armed services have suppressed the release of basic information, AP's total is a certain undercount.

Government records covering the Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force show pistols, machine guns, shotguns and automatic assault rifles have vanished from armories, supply warehouses, Navy warships, firing ranges and other places where they were used, stored or transported. These weapons of war disappeared because of unlocked doors, sleeping troops, a surveillance system that didn't record, break-ins and other security lapses that, until now, have not been publicly reported.

While AP's focus was firearms, military explosives also were lost or stolen, including armor-piercing grenades that ended up in an Atlanta backyard.

Weapon theft or loss spanned the military's global footprint, touching installations from coast to coast, as well as overseas. In Afghanistan, someone cut the padlock on an Army container and stole 65 Beretta M9s -- the same type of gun recovered in Albany. The theft went undetected for at least two weeks, when empty pistol boxes were discovered in the compound. The weapons were not recovered.

Even elite units are not immune. A former member of a Marines special operations unit was busted with two stolen guns. A Navy SEAL lost his pistol during a fight in a restaurant in Lebanon.

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On Tuesday, when AP published its investigation, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee that she would be "open to" new oversight on weapons accountability, and said the number of military firearms obtained by civilians is likely small. The Pentagon used to share annual updates about stolen weapons with Congress, but the requirement to do so ended years ago and public accountability has slipped.

"There must be full accountability in Congress with regular reporting of missing or stolen weapons," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said in an interview. In a written statement, Pentagon spokeswoman Commander Candice Tresch told AP that the Defense Department "looks forward to continuing to work with Congress to ensure appropriate oversight."

The Army and Air Force couldn't readily tell AP how many weapons were lost or stolen from 2010 through 2019. So the AP built its own database, using extensive federal Freedom of Information Act requests to review hundreds of military criminal case files or property loss reports, as well as internal military analysis and data from registries of small arms.

Sometimes, weapons disappear without a paper trail. Military investigators regularly close cases without finding the firearms or person responsible because shoddy records lead to dead ends.

The military's weapons are especially vulnerable to corrupt insiders responsible for securing them. They know how to exploit weak points within armories or the military's enormous supply chains. Often from lower ranks, they may see a chance to make a buck from a military that can afford it.

"It's about the money, right?" said Brig. Gen. Duane Miller, who as deputy provost marshal general is the Army's No. 2 law enforcement official.

Theft or loss happens more than the Army has publicly acknowledged. During an initial interview, Miller significantly understated the extent to which weapons disappear, citing records that report only a few hundred missing rifles and handguns. But an internal analysis AP obtained, done by the Army's Office of the Provost Marshal General, tallied 1,303 firearms.

In a second interview, Miller said he wasn't aware of the memos, which had been distributed throughout the Army, until AP pointed them out following the first interview. "If I had the information in front of me," Miller said, "I would share it with you." Other Army officials said the internal analysis might overstate some losses.

The AP's investigation began a decade ago. From the start, the Army has given conflicting information on a subject with the potential to embarrass -- and that's when it has provided information at all. A former insider described how Army officials resisted releasing details of missing guns when AP first inquired, and indeed that information was never provided.

Top officials within the Army, Marines and Secretary of Defense's office said that weapon accountability is a high priority, and when the military knows a weapon is missing it does trigger a concerted response to recover it. The officials also said missing weapons are not a widespread problem and noted that the number is a tiny fraction of the military's stockpile.

"We have a very large inventory of several million of these weapons," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in an interview. "We take this very seriously and we think we do a very good job. That doesn't mean that there aren't losses. It doesn't mean that there aren't mistakes made."

Kirby said those mistakes are few, though, and last year the military could account for 99.999% of its firearms. "Though the numbers are small, one is too many," he said.

In the absence of a regular reporting requirement, the Pentagon is responsible for informing Congress of any "significant" incidents of missing weapons. That hasn't happened since at least 2017. While a missing portable missile such as a Stinger would qualify for notifying lawmakers, a stolen machine gun would not, according to a senior Department of Defense official whom the Pentagon provided for an interview on condition the official not be named.

While AP's analysis covered the 2010s, incidents persist.

In May, an Army trainee who fled Fort Jackson in South Carolina with an M4 rifle hijacked a school bus full of children, pointing his unloaded assault weapon at the driver before eventually letting everyone go.

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Last October, police in San Diego were startled to find a military grenade launcher on the front seat of a car they pulled over for expired license plates. The driver and his passenger were middle-aged men with criminal records.

After publicizing the arrest, police got a call from a Marine Corps base up the Pacific coast. The Marines wanted to know if the grenade launcher was one they needed to find. They read off a serial number.

It wasn't a match.

CRIME GUNS

Stolen military guns have been sold to street gang members, recovered on felons and used in violent crimes.

The AP identified eight instances in which five different stolen military firearms were used in a civilian shooting or other violent crime, and others in which felons were caught possessing weapons. To find these cases, AP combed investigative and court records, as well as published reports. Federal restrictions on sharing firearms information publicly mean the case total is certainly an undercount.

The military requires itself to inform civilian law enforcement when a gun is lost or stolen, and the services help in subsequent investigations. The Pentagon does not track crime guns, and spokesman Kirby said his office was unaware of any stolen firearms used in civilian crimes.

The closest AP could find to an independent tally was done by the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services. It said 22 guns issued by the U.S. military were used in a felony during the 2010s. That total could include surplus weapons the military sells to the public or loans to civilian law enforcement.

Those FBI records also appear to be an undercount. They say that no military-issue gun was used in a felony in 2018, but at least one was.

Back in June 2018, Albany police were searching for 21-year-old Alvin Damon. They'd placed him at a shooting which involved the Beretta M9, a workhorse weapon for the military that is similar to a model Beretta produces for the civilian market.

Surveillance video obtained by AP shows another man firing the gun four times at a group of people off camera, taking cover behind a building between shots. Two men walking with him scattered, one dropping his hat in the street. No one was injured.

Two months later, Detective Daniel Seeber spotted Damon on a stoop near the Prince Deli corner store. Damon took off running and, not far into the chase, grabbed a bystander who had just emerged from the deli with juice and a bag of chips.

After Detective Seeber defused the standoff, officers collected the pistol. A check by New York State Police returned leads to four Albany shootings, including one just the day before in which a bullet lodged in a living room wall. In another, someone was shot in the ankle.

At the request of Albany police, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives traced the gun's story. The ATF contacted Army's Criminal Investigation Command, and a review of Army inventory systems showed the M9 had been listed as "in-transit" between two Fort Bragg units for two years before police recovered it.

And the Army still doesn't know who stole the gun, or when.

The case wasn't the first in which police recovered a stolen service pistol before troops at Fort Bragg realized it was missing. AP found a second instance, involving a pistol that was among 21 M9s stolen from an arms room.

Military police learned of the theft in 2010. By then, one of the M9s was sitting in an evidence room in the Hoke County Sheriff's Department, picked up in a North Carolina backyard not far from Bragg. Another M9 was later seized in Durham after it was used in a parking lot shooting.

Another steady North Carolina source of weapons has been Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, where authorities often have an open missing weapons investigation. Detectives in Baltimore found a Beretta M9 stolen from a Lejeune armory during a cocaine bust. The Naval Criminal Investigative Service found in the 2011 case that inventory and security procedures were rarely followed. Three guns were stolen;

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no one was charged.

Deputies in South Carolina were called in 2017 after a man started wildly shooting an M9 pistol into the air during an argument with his girlfriend. The boyfriend, a convicted felon, then started shooting toward a neighbor's house. The pistol came from a National Guard armory that a thief entered through an unlocked door, hauling off six automatic weapons, a grenade launcher and five M9s.

Meanwhile, authorities in central California are still finding AK-74 assault rifles that were among 26 stolen from Fort Irwin a decade ago. Military police officers stole the guns from the Army base, selling some to the Fresno Bulldogs street gang.

At least nine of the AKs have not been recovered.

INSIDER THREAT

The people with easiest access to military firearms are those who handle and secure them.

In the Army, they are often junior soldiers assigned to armories or arms rooms, according to Col. Kenneth Williams, director of supply under the Army's G-4 Logistics branch.

"This is a young guy or gal," Williams said. "This is a person normally on their first tour of duty. So you can see that we put great responsibility on our soldiers immediately when they come in."

Armorers have access both to firearms and the spare parts kept for repairs. These upper receivers, lower receivers and trigger assemblies can be used to make new guns or enhance existing ones.

"We've seen issues like that in the past where an armorer might build an M16" automatic assault rifle from military parts, said Mark Ridley, a former deputy director of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. "You have to be really concerned with certain armorers and how they build small arms and small weapons."

In 2014, NCIS began investigating the theft of weapons parts from Special Boat Team Twelve, a Navy unit based in Coronado, California. Four M4 trigger assemblies that could make a civilian AR-15 fully automatic were missing. Investigators found an armory inventory manager was manipulating electronic records by moving items or claiming they had been transferred. The parts were never recovered and the case was closed after federal prosecutors declined to file charges.

Weapons accountability is part of military routine. Armorers are supposed to check weapons when they open each day. Sight counts, a visual total of weapons on hand, are drilled into troops whether they are in the field, on patrol or in the arms room. But as long as there have been armories, people have been stealing from them.

Weapons enter the public three main ways: direct sales from thieves to buyers, through pawn shops and surplus stores, and online.

Investigators have found sensitive and restricted parts for military weapons on sites including eBay, which said in a statement it has "zero tolerance" for stolen military gear on its site.

At Fort Campbell, Kentucky, soldiers stole machine gun parts and other items that ended up with online buyers in Russia, China, Mexico and elsewhere. The civilian ringleader, who was found with a warehouse of items, was convicted. Authorities said he made hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Often though, recovering a weapon can prove hard.

When an M203 grenade launcher couldn't be found during a 2019 inventory at a Marine Corps supply base in Albany, Georgia, investigators sought surveillance camera footage. It didn't exist. The warehouse manager said the system couldn't be played back at the time.

An analysis of 45 firearms-only investigations in the Navy and Marines found that in 55% of cases, no suspect could be found and weapons remained missing. In those unresolved cases, investigators found records were destroyed or falsified, armories lacked basic security and inventories weren't completed for weeks or months.

"Gun-decking" is Navy slang for faking work. In the case of the USS Comstock, gun-decking led to the disappearance of three pistols.

Investigators found numerous security lapses in the 2012 case, including one sailor asleep in the armory. The missing pistols weren't properly logged in the ship's inventory when they were received several days

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before. Investigators couldn't pinpoint what day they disappeared because sailors gun-decked inventory reports by not doing actual counts.

ROOM FOR DISCREPANCY

Military officials shied from discussing how many guns they have, much less how many are missing.

AP learned that the Army, the largest of the armed services, is responsible for about 3.1 million small arms. Across all four branches, the U.S. military has an estimated 4.5 million firearms, according to the nonprofit organization Small Arms Survey.

In its accounting, whenever possible AP eliminated cases in which firearms were lost in combat, during accidents such as aircraft crashes and similar incidents where a weapon's fate was known.

Unlike the Army and Air Force, which could not answer basic questions about missing weapons, the Marines and Navy were able to produce data covering the 2010s.

The Navy data showed that 211 firearms were reported lost or stolen. In addition, 63 firearms previously considered missing were recovered.

According to AP's analysis of data from the Marines, 204 firearms were lost or stolen, with 14 later recovered.

To account for missing weapons, the Pentagon relies on incident reports from the services, which it keeps for only three years.

Pentagon officials said that approximately 100 firearms were unaccounted for in both 2019 and 2018. A majority of those were attributable to accidents or combat losses, they said. Even though AP's total excluded accidents and combat losses whenever known, it was higher than what the services reported to the Pentagon.

The officials said they could only discuss how many weapons were missing dating to 2018. The reason: They aren't required to keep earlier records. Without providing documentation, the Pentagon said the number of missing weapons was down significantly in 2020, when the pandemic curtailed many military operations.

The Air Force was the only service branch not to release data. It first responded to several Freedom of Information Act requests by saying no records existed. Air Force representatives then said they would not provide details until yet another FOIA request, filed 1.5 years ago, was fully processed.

The Army sought to suppress information on missing weapons and gave misleading numbers that contradict internal memos.

The AP began asking the Army for details on missing weapons in 2011 and filed a formal request a year later for records of guns listed as missing, lost, stolen or recovered in the Department of Defense Small Arms and Light Weapons Registry. Charles Royal, the former Army civilian employee who was in charge of the registry, said that he prepared records for release that higher ups eventually blocked in 2013.

"You're dealing with millions of weapons," Royal said in a recent interview. "But we're supposed to have 100% recon, right. OK, we're not allowed a discrepancy on that. But there's so much room for discrepancy."

Army spokesman Lt. Col. Brandon Kelley said the service's property inventory systems don't readily track how many weapons have been lost or stolen. Army officials said the most accurate count could be found in criminal investigative summaries released under yet another federal records request.

AP's reading of these investigative records showed 230 lost or stolen rifles or handguns between 2010 and 2019 -- a clear undercount. Internal documents show just how much Army officials were downplaying the problem.

The AP obtained two memos covering 2013 through 2019 in which the Army tallied 1,303 stolen or lost rifles and handguns, with theft the primary reason for losses. That number, which Army officials said is imperfect because it includes some combat losses and recoveries, and may include some duplications, was based on criminal investigations and incident reports.

The internal memos are not "an authoritative document," Kelley said, and were not closely checked with public release in mind. As such, he said, the 1,303 total could be inaccurate.

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The investigative records Kelley cited show 62 lost or stolen rifles or handguns from 2013 through 2019. Some of those, like the Beretta M9 used in four shootings in Albany, New York, were recovered.

"One gun creates a ton of devastation," Albany County District Attorney Soares said. "And then it puts it on local officials, local law enforcement, to have to work extra hard to try to remove those guns from the community."

Military defends Jan. 6 response as House steps up probes

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top Army leader defended the Pentagon's response to the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, telling a House panel Tuesday that the National Guard was delayed for hours because it had to properly prepare for the deployment and that senior military leaders had determined beforehand that the military had "no role" in determining the outcome of an election.

Lt. Gen. Walter Piatt, the director of the Army staff, echoed comments from other senior military leaders about the perception of soldiers being used to secure the election process. He said the Pentagon wanted to be careful about their response in part because of concerns about military helicopters that had flown low over Washington streets during protests over the killing of George Floyd by police in the summer of 2020.

It also took several hours for Guardsmen to be equipped and given a plan for how to secure the Capitol, Piatt said. The building was overrun by hundreds of supporters of former President Donald Trump who sought to stop the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

"When people's lives are on the line, two minutes is too long," he said. "But we were not positioned to respond to that urgent request. We had to re-prepare so we would send them in prepared for this new mission."

Piatt's testimony comes as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the House will step up its investigations into the deadly riots, in which a violent mob overran police, broke into the building and hunted for lawmakers. She said Tuesday that the House "can't wait any longer" to conduct a comprehensive investigation after Senate Republicans blocked legislation to create an independent commission.

"Whether we have a commission today, tomorrow or the next day over in the Senate, or not, the work of the committees will be very important in what we're seeking for the American people — the truth," Pelosi said.

One option under consideration is a select committee on the Jan. 6 attack, a setup that would put majority Democrats in charge. More than three dozen Republicans in the House and seven Senate Republicans wanted to avoid a partisan probe and supported the legislation to create an independent, bipartisan commission outside Congress.

But those numbers weren't strong enough to overcome GOP opposition in the Senate, where support from 10 Republicans is needed to pass most bills. Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer has said he may hold a second vote after the legislation failed to advance last month, but there's no indication that Democrats can win the necessary support from three additional Republicans.

"We can't wait any longer," Pelosi said. "We will proceed."

Meanwhile, most Republicans are making clear that they want to move on from the Jan. 6 attack, brushing aside the many unanswered questions about the insurrection, including how the government and law enforcement missed intelligence leading up to the rioting and the role of Trump before and during the attack.

The hazards of investigating the attack in the sharply divided Congress were on full display during the House Oversight and Reform Committee hearing, which was called to examine "unexplained delays and unanswered questions" about the siege.

Several Republicans tried to divert the subject, using their questioning to talk about coronavirus restrictions, the border and Biden's son Hunter, while others played down the severity of the violence.

Some of the Republicans appeared to defend the rioters, including Wisconsin Rep. Glenn Grothman, who grilled FBI Director Christopher Wray on whether some of those who broke into the Capitol were innocent.

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Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar repeated his arguments that a Trump supporter who was shot and killed while breaking into the House chamber, Ashli Babbitt, was "executed."

Democrats shot back that Republicans were trying to obscure the truth.

"This has got to do with the attempts by people to overthrow the government of the United States of America, something that hasn't happened in well over 100 years," said Maryland Rep. Kweisi Mfume. "And it's not something that we can slough off."

The three witnesses at the hearing — Wray, Piatt, and Gen. Charles E. Flynn, who was previously Army deputy chief of staff — were involved that day as the Capitol Police begged for backup. The National Guard did not arrive for several hours as police were overwhelmed and brutally beaten by the rioters.

Piatt insisted that he did not deny or have the authority to deny Guard help during a call with then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund, who has previously said he believed Piatt and other Army leaders were concerned about the optics of soldiers surrounding the building. According to the Defense Department, military leadership approved activation of the full D.C. National Guard at 3:04 p.m., about 40 minutes after the call with Sund.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, the New York Democrat who chairs the committee, criticized Wray for not providing documents her staff had requested and asked him if he believed the FBI should be blamed for the law enforcement failures on Jan. 6.

"Our goal is to bat 1,000, and any time there's an attack, much less an attack as horrific and spectacular as what happened on Jan. 6, we consider that to be unacceptable," Wray replied.

As the committee examined the insurrection, the House held a vote to give congressional medals of honor to Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police to thank them for their service that day. Dozens of those officers suffered injuries, including chemical burns, brain injuries and broken bones. Some may never return to work.

Twenty-one Republicans voted against giving the medals to the officers.

Seven people total died during and after the rioting, including Babbitt, three other Trump supporters who died of medical emergencies and two police officers who died by suicide in the days that followed. A third officer, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, collapsed and later died after engaging with the protesters, but a medical examiner determined he died of natural causes.

Israeli airstrikes target Gaza sites, first since cease-fire

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli aircraft carried out a series of airstrikes at militant sites in the Gaza Strip early Wednesday, the first such raids since a shaky cease-fire ended the war with Hamas last month.

The airstrikes targeted facilities used by Hamas militants for meetings to plan attacks, the Israeli military said, blaming the group for any act of violence emanating from Gaza. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

On Tuesday, hundreds of Israeli ultranationalists, some chanting "Death to Arabs," paraded in east Jerusalem in a show of force that threatened to spark renewed violence. Palestinians in Gaza responded by launching incendiary balloons that caused at least 10 fires in southern Israel.

The march posed a test for Israel's fragile new government as well as the tenuous truce that ended last month's 11-day war between Israel and Hamas.

Palestinians consider the march, meant to celebrate Israel's capture of east Jerusalem in 1967, to be a provocation. Hamas called on Palestinians to "resist" the parade, a version of which helped ignite last month's 11-day Gaza war.

With music blaring, hundreds of Jewish nationalists gathered and moved in front of Damascus Gate. Most appeared to be young men, and many held blue-and-white Israeli flags as they danced and sang religious songs.

At one point, several dozen youths, jumping and waving their hands in their air, chanted: "Death to Arabs!" In another anti-Arab chant, they yelled: "May your village burn."

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In a scathing condemnation on Twitter, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said those shouting racist slogans were "a disgrace to the Israeli people," adding: "The fact that there are radicals for whom the Israeli flag represents hatred and racism is abominable and unforgivable."

The crowd, while boisterous, appeared to be much smaller than during last month's parade. From the Damascus Gate, they proceeded around the Old City to the Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray.

Ahead of the march, Israeli police cleared the area in front of Damascus Gate, shut down roads to traffic, ordered shops to close and sent away young Palestinian protesters. Police said that officers arrested 17 people suspected of involvement in violence, some of whom threw rocks and attacked police, and that two police officers needed medical treatment. Palestinians said five people were hurt in clashes with police.

The parade provided an early challenge for Israel's new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, a hardline Israeli nationalist who has promised a pragmatic approach as he presides over a delicate, diverse coalition government.

Though there were concerns the march would raise tensions, canceling it would have opened Bennett and other right-wing members of the coalition to intense criticism from those who would view it as a capitulation to Hamas. The coalition was sworn in Sunday and includes parties from across the political spectrum, including a small Arab party.

Mansour Abbas, whose Raam party is the first Arab faction to join an Israeli coalition, said the march was "an attempt to set the region on fire for political aims," with the intention of undermining the new government.

Abbas said the police and public security minister should have canceled the event. "I call on all sides not to be dragged into an escalation and maintain maximum restraint," he said.

In past years, the march passed through Damascus Gate and into the heart of the Muslim Quarter, a crowded Palestinian neighborhood with narrow streets and alleys. But police changed the route Tuesday to avoid the Muslim Quarter.

Instead, the route went around the ancient walls of the Old City and through Jaffa Gate, a main thoroughfare for tourists, and toward the Jewish Quarter and Western Wall, the holiest site where Jews can pray.

Damascus Gate is a focal point of Palestinian life in east Jerusalem. Palestinian protesters repeatedly clashed with Israeli police over restrictions on public gatherings during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in April and May.

Those clashes spread to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a flashpoint site sacred to Jews and Muslims. Tensions at the time were further fueled by protests over the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers, also in Jerusalem.

At the height of the tensions, on May 10, Israeli ultranationalists held their annual flag parade. While it was diverted from the Damascus Gate at the last minute, it was seen by Palestinians as an unwelcome celebration of Israeli control over what they view as their capital.

In the name of defending the holy city, Hamas fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem, disrupting the march and sparking the Gaza war, which claimed more than 250 Palestinian lives and killed 13 people in Israel.

After capturing east Jerusalem in 1967, Israel annexed the in a move not recognized by most of the international community. It considers the entire city its capital, while the Palestinians want east Jerusalem to be the capital of their future state. The competing claims over east Jerusalem, home to Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites, lie at the heart of the conflict and have sparked many rounds of violence.

Hamas had called on Palestinians to show "valiant resistance" to the march. It urged people to gather in the Old City and at the Al-Aqsa Mosque to "rise up in the face of the occupier and resist it by all means to stop its crimes and arrogance."

In the afternoon, Hamas-linked Palestinians launched some incendiary balloons from Gaza, setting off at least 10 blazes in southern Israel, according to Israel's national fire department.

Abu Malek, one of the young men launching the balloons, called the move "an initial response" to the march.

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Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, of the internationally backed Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, called the march an "aggression against our people." In neighboring Jordan, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the march as "unacceptable," saying it undermined efforts to reduce friction between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israeli media reported the military was on heightened alert in the occupied West Bank and along the Gaza frontier. Batteries of Israel's Iron Dome rocket-defense system were seen deployed near the southern town of Netivot, near the Gaza border, as a precaution.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz met with the military chief of staff, the police commissioner and other senior security officials. He "underscored the need to avoid friction and protect the personal safety of ... Jews and Arabs alike," his office said.

Southern Baptists pick president who worked for racial unity

By TRAVIS LOLLER and PETER SMITH Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The Southern Baptist Convention tamped down a push from the right at its largest meeting in decades on Tuesday, electing a new president who has worked to bridge racial divides in the church and defeating an effort to make an issue of critical race theory.

Ed Litton, a pastor from Alabama, won 52% of the vote in a runoff against Mike Stone, a Georgia pastor backed by a new group called the Conservative Baptist Network that has sought to move the already-conservative denomination further right.

Litton, who is white, was nominated by Fred Luter, the only Black pastor to serve as president of the United States' largest Protestant denomination. Luter praised Litton's commitment to racial reconciliation and said he has dealt compassionately with the issue of sexual abuse within SBC churches, another hot-button subject at the gathering of more than 15,000 church representatives.

Stone had campaigned aggressively, including speaking at churches across the country and even appearing on Fox & Friends on Tuesday before the vote. And the Conservative Baptist Network had encouraged supporters to come to the meeting as voting delegates.

But in the end, the message that seemed to resonate with voters was that Stone — who supported a motion to repudiate critical race theory, an academic construct for framing systemic racism that has been a target of religious and political conservatives — was a divisive choice.

"We're a family, and at times it seems like an incredibly dysfunctional family," Litton said after the results were announced. "But we love each other."

Delegates rejected a proposal that would have explicitly denounced critical race theory. Instead they approved a consensus measure that does not mention it by name but rejects any view that sees racism as rooted in "anything other than sin."

The measure also affirmed a 1995 resolution apologizing for the history of racism in a denomination that was founded in 1845 in support of slavery and for "condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime."

One white delegate urged the convention to denounce critical race theory by name, saying it held him "guilty because of the melanin content of my skin." But another argued that the convention shouldn't be swayed by a political movement that has already seen some state legislatures ban teaching of the theory.

"If some people in this room were as passionate about the gospel as they are about critical race theory, we would win this world to Christ," said James Merritt, chairman of the resolutions committee and a former convention president.

Several Black pastors have voiced frustration over critical race theory debates playing out in the SBC instead of the denomination confronting systemic racism itself.

The two-day meeting concludes Wednesday when delegates will consider proposals for a sweeping review of the SBC's response to abuse in its churches, an issue that recently erupted with secret recordings and leaked letters purportedly showing that some leaders tried to slow-walk efforts to hold churches accountable and to intimidate and retaliate against those who advocated on the issue. Stone was among

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those specifically called out.

On Tuesday, Tennessee pastor Grant Gaines, speaking with a survivor at his side, proposed a task force that would oversee a review of the denomination's actions — a broader investigation than the one announced last week by the SBC's Executive Committee.

"I stand with SBC church abuse survivors," Gaines said.

The convention overwhelmingly approved a resolution declaring that "any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor."

Opponents had argued that it precludes the possibility of an abuser repenting and transforming, but proponents from the resolution committee emphasized a scriptural injunction that pastors be "above reproach."

Voters gave final approvals to constitutional amendments excluding churches that affirm ethnic discrimination or act against the convention's "beliefs regarding sexual abuse." Still to be debated was how those standards on abuse apply in practice.

In an enthusiastically applauded address, outgoing president J.D. Greear, himself a target of criticism, lamented "the slander, the distortion, the character assassination and baseless accusations" some SBC leaders have endured. While denouncing liberalism, he also criticized what he saw as power-seeking and divisiveness over secondary issues.

The SBC cannot be a "cultural affinity group" or "voting bloc," Greear said, but must focus on its spiritual mission.

On critical race theory, he said it arises from "a worldview at odds with the gospel," but he heeded "leaders of color who tell us that our denunciations of justice movements fall on deaf ears when we remain silent on the suffering of our neighbors."

Pastor Bryan Kent of Compass Church in Mason, Mich., commended Greear's remarks, saying that if critical race theory "has an echo of truth among our brothers and sisters of color ... we should not be in such a rush to condemn."

Several Black pastors have already departed the SBC over what they said was racial insensitivity from overwhelmingly white leadership.

Dwight McKissic, a prominent Black pastor from Texas who had planned to join that exodus if Stone won, tweeted in response to Litton's election: "God has a plan for the SBC & I want to be a part of it. Truly, racism was rejected 2day!"

Jennifer Lyell, one of several survivors of sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches who has been advocating for convention reforms, also applauded the result: "I know that no SBC President alone can resolve the systemic problems with abuse of power & unrepentant sin in SBC leadership," she tweeted. "I am immensely thankful that a shepherd who listens was elected."

Some Stone supporters saw promise in his vote totals.

"Tough beat," SBC Executive Committee member Rod D. Martin tweeted. "But it's the work of a single year. We fought the entire denominational machine, plus all their MSM friends. We didn't win. But this result shows we can."

Stone received 36% of the votes in the first ballot, followed by Litton at 32%. That eliminated two other candidates including longtime Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler, who got 26%.

"My prayers and congratulations are with Pastor Ed Litton as Southern Baptists continue to serve our churches and communities," Stone said in a statement after the final result was announced.

Delegates also approved a strategic plan seeking to increase churches, missionaries, giving and teen ministry, the latest in a series of efforts to reverse steady declines in membership and baptisms over the past 15 years. Membership is now 14 million.

It was standing room only in the 18,000-seat hall where, with Nashville's COVID-19 precautions lifted, attendees were packed closely without facemasks. One small section was reserved for those wearing masks.

Last year's annual meeting was canceled due to the pandemic.

Senate approves bill to make Juneteenth a federal holiday

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By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate passed a bill Tuesday that would make Juneteenth, or June 19th, a federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

The bill would lead to Juneteenth becoming the 12th federal holiday. It is expected to easily pass the House, which would send it to President Joe Biden for his signature.

Juneteenth commemorates when the last enslaved African Americans learned they were free. Confederate soldiers surrendered in April 1865, but word didn't reach the last enslaved Black people until June 19, when Union soldiers brought the news of freedom to Galveston, Texas. That was also about two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in the Southern states.

"Making Juneteenth a federal holiday is a major step forward to recognize the wrongs of the past," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "But we must continue to work to ensure equal justice and fulfill the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation and our Constitution."

The Senate passed the bill under a unanimous consent agreement that expedites the process for considering legislation. It takes just one senator's objection to block such agreements.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., had objected in the previous Congress to a bill to celebrate Juneteenth as a federal holiday because of the cost and lack of debate, he said. Johnson noted that he has supported resolutions recognizing the significance of Juneteenth, but he was concerned the new holiday would give federal employees another day off at a cost of about \$600 million per year.

"While it still seems strange that having taxpayers provide federal employees paid time off is now required to celebrate the end of slavery, it is clear that there is no appetite in Congress to further discuss the matter. Therefore, I do not intend to object," Johnson said in a statement before Tuesday's vote.

The bill is sponsored by Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and had 60 co-sponsors. He tweeted Monday: "We have a long road towards racial justice in the United States and we cannot get there without acknowledging our nation's original sin of slavery. It is long past time to make Juneteenth a federal holiday."

The vast majority of states recognize Juneteenth as a holiday or have an official observance of the day, and most states hold celebrations. Juneteenth is a paid holiday for state employees in Texas, New York, Virginia and Washington.

Under the legislation, the federal holiday would be known as Juneteenth National Independence Day.

Biden elevates energetic critic of Big Tech as top regulator

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Tuesday installed an energetic critic of Big Tech as a top federal regulator at a time when the industry is under intense pressure from Congress, regulators and state attorneys general.

The selection of legal scholar Lina Khan to head the Federal Trade Commission is seen as signaling a tough stance toward tech giants Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple. Khan was sworn in as FTC chair just hours after the Senate confirmed her as one of five members of the commission on a 69-28 vote.

Khan has been a professor at Columbia University Law School and burst onto the antitrust scene with her massive scholarly work in 2017 as a Yale law student, "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox." She helped lay the foundation for a new way of looking at antitrust law beyond the impact of big-company market dominance on consumer prices. As counsel to a House Judiciary antitrust panel in 2019 and 2020, she played a key role in a sweeping bipartisan investigation of the market power of the tech giants.

At 32, she is believed to be the youngest chair in the history of the FTC, which polices competition and consumer protection in industry generally as well as digital privacy.

"Lina brings deep knowledge and expertise to this role and will be a fearless champion for consumers," Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., who has called for tech industry breakups, said in a statement. "Giant tech companies deserve the growing scrutiny they are facing, and consolidation is choking off competition across American industries. With Chair Khan at the helm, we have a huge opportunity to make big, structural change by reviving antitrust enforcement and fighting monopolies that threaten our economy,

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our society and our democracy.”

Khan also was a legal adviser to Rohit Chopra, an FTC commissioner, and was previously legal director of the Open Markets Institute, an organization that advocates against corporate concentration.

“It is a tremendous honor to have been selected by President Biden to lead the Federal Trade Commission,” Khan said in a statement. “I look forward to working with my colleagues to protect the public from corporate abuse.”

Biden said as a presidential candidate that dismantling the big tech companies should be considered. He also has said he wants to see quickly crimped the social media companies’ long-held legal protections for speech on their platforms.

Biden in March appointed Tim Wu, also an academic expert on antitrust and industry critic, as a special assistant to the president for technology and competition policy within the National Economic Council. Wu, like Khan a Columbia law professor, has been a senior adviser to the FTC and a senior enforcement attorney in the New York attorney general’s office.

The tech industry, once lionized by lawmakers and presidents as an engine of innovation and jobs, has seen its political fortunes eroded in recent years. Calls have been rising to break up the Silicon Valley giants.

Lawmakers of both parties champion stronger oversight of the tech industry, arguing that its massive market power is out of control, crushing smaller competitors and endangering consumers’ privacy. They say the companies hide behind a legal shield to allow false information to flourish on their social media networks or to entrench bias.

Last fall the Trump Justice Department, joined by states, filed a ground-breaking antitrust lawsuit against Google, accusing the search giant of abusing its market dominance to stifle competition. That was followed in December by another big antitrust suit, brought by the FTC and an array of states.

Amazon and Apple are under scrutiny by antitrust enforcers at the Justice Department, now in Biden’s purview, and the independent, bipartisan FTC. Twitter has joined Facebook and Google in facing frequent run-ins with lawmakers over its policies for moderating content on its platform.

A bipartisan group of House lawmakers, animated by the results of the Judiciary panel investigation of Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple, proposed sweeping legislation Friday to rein in Big Tech, possibly forcing the giants to break up their businesses while making it harder for them to acquire others. Those kinds of mandated breakups through a legislative overhaul would be a radical step for Congress to take and could be a bridge too far for some Republican lawmakers.

Some Republican lawmakers have denounced the new school of antitrust thought, championed by Khan and Wu and gaining currency among Democrats, that looks beyond the impact of big-company market dominance on consumer prices to its broader effects on industries, employees and communities.

The school is called “hipster antitrust” by its detractors. With this approach, Democrats are seeking to use antitrust law not to promote competition but to advance social or environmental goals, the Republicans contend.

US West swelters in record-busting heat, risking wildfires

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Dangerous, record-busting heat spread across the U.S. Southwest on Tuesday and into parts of Utah, Montana and Wyoming as a dome of high pressure hovered over a large swath of the region, pushing temperatures into the triple digits this week and intensifying the risk for wildfires amid a long-running drought.

Some of the highest temperatures were seen in bone-dry Arizona, where the National Weather Service forecast a record high of 117 degrees (47 degrees Celsius) in Phoenix. The previous high for the date was 115 degrees (46 Celsius), set in 1974.

“It is kind of early to see temperatures this high, that’s for sure,” said Marvin Percha, senior forecaster at the weather service’s Phoenix office.

Percha said the high pressure dome combined with the land’s lack of moisture caused by extreme drought has combined to create blistering heat expected throughout the entire week.

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"What is unusual is the strength and the duration" of the high pressure system, he said.

The temperatures in Phoenix also could break records the rest of the week, with highs expected to reach 116 Wednesday and 118 Thursday and Friday.

Stations where people can get water and cool off in the shade opened across the Phoenix metro area at Salvation Army posts, city swimming pools, libraries and community centers. They will operate during the day amid the excessive heat warning declared by the weather service.

People were warned to stay inside, drink plenty of water and not leave children or pets unattended in vehicles.

The excessive heat stretched from southeast California across Arizona and Nevada and into New Mexico, where a high of 103 degrees (39 Celsius) Monday at Albuquerque's airport set a record. It was expected to hit near that Tuesday.

Palmdale, in Southern California's Mojave Desert, hit 107 degrees (41.6 Celsius), breaking a record of 105 set in 1966.

"More records are at risk tomorrow," the National Weather Service for Los Angeles tweeted.

Salt Lake City set a heat record for the second day in a row, hitting 107 degrees Tuesday to tie its hottest temperature ever recorded, the weather service said. On Monday, Utah's capital reached 103 degrees to break a heat record for that date set nearly 50 years ago.

Some people cooled off at the Great Salt Lake outside Salt Lake City, floating in the water or playing along the shoreline.

Temperatures in the Las Vegas area also were rising toward possible records during what the weather service was calling the hottest spell in decades.

"It's just going up from here," said meteorologist Ashley Nickerson of the weather service's Las Vegas office.

The heat wave smashed daily temperature records in Montana and Wyoming and complicated the fight against several large wildfires. Strong winds with gusts up to 35 miles (56 kilometers) per hour were expected, threatening to stir up wildfires already burning and make it hard to stamp out new blazes.

A wildfire that broke out Monday near Yellowstone National Park in Montana grew quickly overnight and had burned more than 3 square miles (8 square kilometers) by Tuesday morning, according to the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Some people in the rural area were told to flee their homes, while other fires in the state also forced some evacuations.

Montana cities like Billings and Livingston and the Wyoming city of Sheridan at the base of the Bighorn Mountains set daily heat records, sometimes reaching as high as 108 degrees (42 Celsius).

"This is happening in the middle of June. This is unprecedented," said Bill Murrell, a weather service meteorologist in Riverton, Wyoming.

The heat wave hit at the start of the Southwest's annual monsoon season, which runs through Sept. 30 and is supposed to be the region's rainy period, often contributing as much as 60% of annual precipitation.

But last year's monsoon was the driest in recorded history, with an average of just 1.5 inches (4 centimeters) of rain in Arizona.

Percha, the forecaster in Phoenix, said June is Arizona's driest month and that the state doesn't usually start seeing some rain until early July.

Own-goal gives France 1-0 win over Germany at Euro 2020

By CIARÁN FAHEY AP Sports Writer

MUNICH (AP) — Mats Hummels' return to the national team went better for France than it did for Germany.

The experienced defender was recalled by Germany coach Joachim Löw for the European Championship for his leadership qualities, but he ended up scoring an own-goal Tuesday to give France a 1-0 victory.

"It was a struggle between titans," France coach Didier Deschamps said.

Hummels was attempting to stop Lucas Hernández's cross from reaching France forward Kylian Mbappé when he diverted the ball into his own net with his shin in the 20th minute.

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"I can't fault him," Löw said. "It's just bad luck. The ball in was fast. Maybe we should have attacked the throw in quicker. But it was hard for Mats to clear the ball."

There were chances at both ends, but France looked more likely to score while Germany squandered opportunities.

İlkay Gündoğan should have scored in the first half but couldn't direct his shot on target.

France had two goals called back for offside in the second half. Mbappé sent a curling shot inside the far post midway through the half and then set up Karim Benzema for another late in the match.

Benzema was playing in his first competitive game for France since a World Cup quarterfinal loss to Germany in 2014.

Mbappé also had a penalty appeal waved off in between the offside goals — Hummels had timed his tackle perfectly when the 22-year-old Frenchman would have been through on goal.

Germany had never previously lost an opening game in the group stage at the European Championship.

Löw started with the same lineup from the 7-1 rout of Latvia in Germany's final warm-up game, but his team had no answer to Paul Pogba, who disrupted the team's buildup play.

"It was important to start with a win. We were playing Germany, they really riled us. But we wanted this win above all," said Pogba, who also provided incisive passes for France's fearsome forward trio of Mbappé, Benzema and Antoine Griezmann.

Löw, who is stepping down after the tournament, sent on forwards Leroy Sané and Timo Werner late in the match, and then Kevin Volland as a last resort, but none could make a difference.

"We threw everything into it and fought to the end," Löw said. "We were just missing the ability to break through in the final third."

Germany's next coach, Hansi Flick, was among the 14,000 or so spectators in attendance amid strict measures against the coronavirus.

Before the match started, a Greenpeace protestor parachuted into the stadium. UEFA said there were some injuries.

Germany next faces Portugal, which defeated Hungary 3-0 with two record-setting goals from Cristiano Ronaldo. France will play the Hungarians in Budapest.

"We have to look forward," Germany midfielder Toni Kroos said. "When you lose the first game and you have three group games, there's a lot of pressure. We don't need to talk about it."

What They Want: Divergent goals for Biden, Putin at summit

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — An American president won't side with Moscow over his own intelligence agencies. There will be no talk of a "reset" in Russian relations. And it is highly doubtful that anyone will gaze into Vladimir Putin's eyes and discuss his soul.

But beyond that, it's not clear what will happen Wednesday in Geneva when President Joe Biden meets Putin for the first time since taking office. Both sides acknowledge that the relationship between the two nations is dismal and neither holds out much hope for meaningful areas of agreement. Still, each man brings his own goals to the summit table.

A look at what each president is hoping to achieve in Switzerland:

WHAT BIDEN WANTS

Biden and his aides have made clear that he will not follow in the footsteps of his recent predecessors by aiming to radically alter the United States' ties to Russia. Instead, the White House is looking for a more modest though still vitally important goal: to move toward a more predictable relationship and attempt to rein in Russia's disruptive behavior.

Biden's first overseas trip was deliberately sequenced so that he will meet with Putin only after spending days meeting with European allies and powerful democracies, including a gathering at NATO, the decades-old alliance formed to serve as a bulwark to Russian aggression. He hoped to project a sense of unity and renewed cooperation after four years of tumult under former President Donald Trump, who often tried to

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cozy up to the Russian president.

Biden will push Putin to stop meddling in democratic elections, to ease tensions with Ukraine and to stop giving safe harbor to hackers carrying out cyber and ransomware attacks. Aides believe that lowering the temperature with Russia will also reinforce the United States' ties to democracies existing in Moscow's shadow.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden will look for "areas where, in our common interest, we can work together to produce outcomes that are — that work for the United States and for the American people."

Sullivan, who briefed reporters on Air Force One heading to Brussels for the NATO summit, said that Biden's other message would be more stick than carrot: "How do we send a clear message about those harmful activities that we will not tolerate and to which we will respond?"

There have been brief moments of common ground. Moscow and Washington have shown a shared interest in restarting talks on strategic stability to work out a follow-up deal to the New START, the last remaining U.S.-Russian arms control pact that was extended for five years in January.

Biden will exhort Putin on human rights, including the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, not to support the regime in Belarus that carried out a recent skyjacking and to stop interfering with other nations' elections. Cyber will also be a focal point, with the Geneva summit coming just days after NATO expanded its Article 5 mutual defense pact to include cyberattacks.

But the president acknowledged that there may be no way to keep Putin in check.

"There's no guarantee you can change a person's behavior or the behavior of his country. Autocrats have enormous power and they don't have to answer to a public," said Biden during a news conference Sunday after the Group of Seven summit in England. "And the fact is that it may very well be, if I respond in kind — which I will — that it doesn't dissuade him and he wants to keep going."

Biden had not minced words when it comes to assessing Putin. He said in an interview earlier this year that he agreed with an assessment that Putin was a "killer," and he once declared that Putin didn't have a soul.

That was far colder rhetoric than that of his immediate predecessors.

Trump spoke warmly of Putin and was deferential to him during their one summit, held in Helsinki in 2018, in which he turned his back on his own intelligence agencies. President Barack Obama's administration, though wary of Putin, expressed hope in a "reset" and improvement of relations with Moscow. And George W. Bush said that he "looked the man in the eye" and "found him very straightforward and trustworthy."

"I was able to get a sense of his soul," Bush said.

Biden won't.

WHAT PUTIN WANTS

Putin also won't be expecting to warm up ties. His main goal will be to draw his red lines for the new U.S. administration and negotiate a tense status quo that would protect Moscow's vital interests.

The Russian leader doesn't hope for a new détente to mend the rift caused by Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Nor does he count on a rollback of the crippling U.S. and EU sanctions that have restricted Moscow's access to global financial markets and top Western technologies.

Putin's task now is more modest — to spell out Russia's top security concerns and try to restore basic channels of communication that would prevent an even more dangerous destabilization.

The main red line for Moscow is Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO. Fearing its bid for the alliance membership, Putin responded to the 2014 ouster of Ukraine's Russia-friendly president by annexing Crimea and throwing Moscow's weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland, where the seven-year conflict has killed more than 14,000.

When tensions along the line of contact in Ukraine's east rose earlier this year, Russia quickly beefed up its troops near Ukraine and warned Kyiv's leaders that it would intervene militarily if they tried to reclaim the rebel-controlled regions by force.

Moscow has since pulled back some of its forces from the border areas, but the Ukrainian leadership has said the bulk of them have remained close to the border.

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In an interview with state TV last week, Putin described Ukraine's bid to join NATO as an existential challenge to Russia that would allow the alliance's missiles to hit Moscow and other targets in western Russia in just seven minutes. He compared it to Russia deploying its missiles in Canada or Mexico near the U.S. border. "Isn't it a red line?" he said.

While taking a tough stance on Ukraine, the Russian leader could show a degree of flexibility on other global hotspots.

Even though Moscow has been critical of the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan, it's interested in a settlement that would prevent the country from plunging into chaos following the U.S. troops' withdrawal later this year, fearing that instability could spill into ex-Soviet Central Asia.

Russia also has been involved in painstaking international talks to help repair a nuclear deal with Iran that was spiked by Trump, and it has expressed a willingness to cooperate with the U.S. in efforts to restart the stalled Mideast peace talks.

And the Kremlin would be interested in working out a deal on Syria, where Moscow's military campaign helped President Bashar Assad's government reclaim control over most of the country after a devastating civil war and the U.S. has maintained a limited military presence.

Russia has said it's ready to include its prospective doomsday weapons — such as the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed underwater drone and the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile — in the talks on condition the U.S. brings its missile defense and possible space-based weapons into the equation.

Putin also has emphasized Russia's readiness to make joint efforts to address climate change and cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

He called for establishing a dialogue on cybercrime, noting that Moscow could agree to extradite cyber-crime suspects to the U.S. if Washington assumes the same obligation.

The White House has strongly downplayed the idea of a cybercriminal prisoner exchange.

AP says it will no longer name suspects in minor crimes

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Associated Press said Tuesday it will no longer run the names of people charged with minor crimes, out of concern that such stories can have a long, damaging afterlife on the internet that can make it hard for individuals to move on with their lives.

In so doing, one of the world's biggest newsgathering organizations has waded into a debate over an issue that wasn't of much concern before the rise of search engines, when finding information on people often required going through yellowed newspaper clippings.

Often, the AP will publish a minor story — say, about a person arrested for stripping naked and dancing drunkenly atop a bar — that will hold some brief interest regionally or even nationally and be forgotten the next day.

But the name of the person arrested will live on forever online, even if the charges are dropped or the person is acquitted, said John Daniszewski, AP's vice president for standards. And that can hurt someone's ability to get a job, join a club or run for office years later.

The AP, in a directive sent out to its journalists across the country, said it will no longer name suspects or transmit photographs of them in brief stories about minor crimes when there is little chance the organization will cover the case beyond the initial arrest.

The person's identity is generally not newsworthy beyond local communities, Daniszewski said.

The AP said it will also not link to local newspaper or broadcast stories about such incidents where the arrested person's name or mugshot might be used. The AP will also not do stories driven mainly by particularly embarrassing mugshots.

The policy will not apply to serious crimes, such as those involving violence or abuse of the public trust, or cases of a fugitive on the run.

"As a leader in the news industry, AP making this change is going to have a ripple effect and will prompt some organizations that don't have this on their radar right now to stop and take a look at these practices,"

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said Deborah Dwyer, a doctoral student who is studying the issue and runs the website unpublishingth-
enews.com

Several organizations already are doing so, driven in part by requests from people whose time in the news has lived on via the internet.

The Boston Globe, for example, announced earlier this year an appeals process where it would consider, on a case-by-case basis, removing old stories from its archives. It tied its announcement to a review of policies prompted by a racial reckoning.

"We are not in the business of rewriting the past, but we don't want to stand in the way of a regular person's ability to craft their future," the Globe said in announcing the effort.

In response, columnist Nicholas Goldberg of the Los Angeles Times wrote in February that news organizations "shouldn't muck around with history."

"Trying to rewrite the past, or even trying to hide from view what has already been reported, is almost always a mistake," he wrote.

The AP's policy change likewise triggered a vigorous debate on social media.

In a 2018 survey conducted by Dwyer, some 80 percent of news organizations had some policy about removing stories from archives, up from less than half a decade earlier. But in some cases, the policies aren't written down, aren't talked about in public or aren't even publicized in their own newsrooms, Dwyer said.

The AP has resisted efforts to get stories removed altogether. It has long had a policy of clarifying or updating even very old stories with news of an acquittal, for example, "but a story that is truthful and accurate on the day we wrote it, we'd consider that sacrosanct," Daniszewski said. "We're not going to rewrite history."

Dwyer said her research has found a majority of Americans believe they have the right to ask news organizations to remove stories from archives, and would expect articles to be updated if charges were dropped. Yet at the same time, many people believe that an organization's archive would be less trustworthy if it allowed stories to be scrubbed from it.

Q&A: Rita Moreno on finding self-worth and never giving up

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Rita Moreno emigrated with her mother from Puerto Rico at age five. By six, she was dancing at Greenwich Village nightclubs. By 16, she was working full time. By 20, she was in "Singin' in the Rain."

In the documentary "Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It," Norman Lear says: "I can't think of anyone I've ever met in the business who lived the American dream more than Rita Moreno."

In the decades that followed, Moreno won a Tony, a Grammy, an Emmy and an Oscar, for "West Side Story." (Her entire acceptance speech: "I can't believe it.") With seemingly infinite spiritedness, she has epitomized the best of show business while also being a victim to its cruelties. That has made Moreno, who co-stars in Steven Spielberg's upcoming "West Side Story" remake, a heroic figure to Latinos, and to others. "I have never given up," she said in a recent interview by Zoom from her home in Berkeley, California.

The reason for the conversation was Mariem Pérez Riera's intimate and invigorating documentary, which opens in theaters Friday after playing virtually at the Sundance Film Festival and in an outdoor premiere at the Tribeca Festival. The film opens with Moreno preparing a Cuban themed party for her 87th birthday. "And I demand costumes," the screen legend says with a smile.

But as upbeat as Moreno remains, "Just a Girl Who Decided to Go for It" also deals frankly with the many turbulences of Moreno's life: being positioned as the "Spanish Elizabeth Taylor" and the stereotyped casting that followed; a long and painful relationship with Marlon Brando; the abuse of her agent; a confining marriage.

Moreno was likewise forthright in an interview with The Associated Press while occasionally reaching for a tissue for springtime allergies. "All that cocaine," the 89-year-old joked. Remarks have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

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AP: What struck me most watching the film is that despite going through what would defeat or embitter most, you seem to have emerged with such joy and appreciation for life.

MORENO: I have a very strong constitution. Maybe you inherit it. Maybe it's due to learning how to cope with my tumultuous life through psychotherapy. I really credit that for helping me through some really, really bad times. My mom was like that, too. And you know what? I have a feeling that a lot of people who are outliers have strong constitutions because it's either sink or swim, right? And I think you learn early on in life that swimming is preferable to sinking.

AP: How early did you learn that?

MORENO: The first test, I think, was learning English in kindergarten when I didn't know a word, not a word. That's the first thing that happened to me literally when I came to this country. Children are impressively resilient. And then, in a way, they're also extremely tender and fragile. I think the reason I ending up having such a hard time in life is that I ran into a racial bias very early on. When you're young — I mean 5, 6, 7 — and people call you bad names like "spic" or "garlic mouth" or "gold tooth," like in "West Side Story," you're tender, you're a child. You believe these things. You believe that you're not worthy. You don't know why, but you know that there's something wrong with you.

AP: Do you remember the first time you performed?

MORENO: Oh, yeah. It was for my grandpa in Puerto Rico to a rhumba record. Shaking my little booty. And he loved it. He was clapping in time to the music. And I was thinking: Wow, this is fun. And he's loving this. I like this a lot. I mean, I was born to be a performer. I think some people are just wired that way. I was just born to perform and please people — and that got out of hand, too.

AP: You said you wanted to be completely honest in the film but were there some things that were difficult to be candid about? You speak about being raped by your agent.

MORENO: Oh, yeah. That was difficult. And talking about my husband (cardiologist Lenny Gordon, who died in 2010) was difficult in a different way. In so many ways he was a remarkable man. He was loving. I've never seen a more devoted grandfather and father and husband. But what happened with us is that he was a controlling person. I have a theory that when some people have relationships, they make a contract with each other that is never spoken or verbalized. In our case, it was I'll be the little girl and I'll be charming and I will please you. But you have to be my daddy and take care of me and protect me. That was our agreement. It was never spoken. But that's what it was. I didn't realize it until one day I wanted to start growing up and the marriage was not working. It's so much not a part of who I am. Plus, I was brought up that way. You have to please the man. But I suffered a lot. I remember times when I'd say I was going to go to the grocery store and I'd go somewhere to park the car and cry.

AP: Your life seems to be this long process of unlearning the wrong things you were told about yourself.

MORENO: What a wonderful way to put it. You're absolutely on the money. I had to learn that I was a person of value like all other people. But it's very difficult when you learn something from childhood. It's not as though I came to this country when I was 20 and learned something different. I was a little girl and you're very impressionable. You believe that you don't have value. You don't know why you don't have it, but you believe it. And, man, that is so hard to get rid of. You know, there's still a little girl with me, but the difference is that I can now send her to her room. There's still a nasty little girl in me who says, "I told you that couldn't happen." And I'm now able to say: "Go to your room!"

AP: Your central therapy session followed years with Marlon Brando. In your memoir, you spoke about him as your greatest lover but your time with him was torturous.

MORENO: Here's what's hilarious to me. It was he who said to me: "You need help. You need therapy." So the lunatic is telling the crazy woman that she needs help! (Laughs). But he was right! He was right. I remember the day he said that to me, I thought: "Yeah, but he's crazy as a loon!"

AP: It's not everyone that dates Elvis just to make Brando jealous, as you did. Are you sometimes amazed by the life you've led?

MORENO: Yes. But I have to say that after I saw the documentary for the very first time — my daughter and I saw it together — I left the screening room saying, "Wow, that's quite a life I've led!" (Laughs) But

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you don't think that way about yourself. Very likely, if you had something like this done about you, you would also say the same thing about yourself.

AP: In watching what has and hasn't changed in that time, what stands out to you? You were there when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech.

MORENO: I feel extremely fortunate that I'm still around to see the sea changes that are taking place. I'll be 90 in December and I don't think I'm going to see the women's movement really progress more because I won't be around. But I've seen it change. I've seen a change in such meaningful ways and I'm grateful for that. What still concerns me mightily and profoundly is that Hispanics haven't gotten their hold on our profession, I don't know what the hell is wrong. I don't know what is not working right. The Black community has done incredibly and I have nothing but the deepest admiration for the Black professional community. They've done it and I think we can take some lessons from them. But where is our "Moonlight"? Why are we not advancing?

AP: Do you have any answers?

MORENO: We tend in this country to silo ourselves. We are Puerto Rican and then we are also Mexican. We are also Argentinian. We are Spanish Spain. And somehow those twains haven't really met and coalesced the way we need to. That may be the answer. But it's very complicated. People forget that we're not just Hispanic. We are from other countries. Maybe the answer, or the beginning of the answer, lies in a summit, some kind of summit. I'm not going to see that. My age forbids it. But I sure as hell hope something happens. I can't believe we're still struggling the way we are. And when we do something that's Latino, it doesn't do as well. "One Day at a Time" (a Netflix sitcom begun in 2017) was hilarious. It was marvelous. It was no accident because it had Norman Lear who chose the writers. And we lasted three and a half seasons. You wonder: Why didn't that happen?

AP: Many would attribute it to the entrenched biases in Hollywood.

MORENO: It's one of the very few things about my career that really makes me sad. A lot of the reviews for this documentary were fabulous. A number of the critics said something to the effect of: It's sad to think that this woman might have had a real career in films had she not had this career when she had it. And I think that's true. I think it's very, very true. I want to say I've been robbed. But you know, what good does that do?

AP: After "West Side Story," you've said you were offered only similar, stereotypical roles for years.

MORENO: Those were brutal. Brutal! When I got the Oscar and the Golden Globe, I thought: "OK, finally." And that's not what happened at all. In fact, it was the opposite. I was offered more Anita-type roles when I was offered something, which was not that frequent. I made a decision not to accept any more of those kinds of roles. It was a lot of coffee pourers, housewives and stuff. I said I'm not going to do them anymore. Ha-ha, I showed them. I didn't make a movie for seven years. I mean, how stubborn can you get?

AP: You recently revisited "West Side Story" with Spielberg. How was that?

MORENO: It was just grand. I've been a fan of Steven's work for years. When he called, he offered me a part in "West Side Story." I nearly peed my pants because this is Steven Spielberg, one of my idols. I said to him that I would love to do a cameo, but I said, "You don't really want me to do that, do you?" And he said, "Oh, no, no. It's a part. It's a real part. Tony Kushner wrote it for you." First of all, Tony Kushner's writing the script? What! I was thrilled. I was excited the way a child would be excited. Tony kept adding to the part. It's a wonderful part. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

AP: I don't imagine you do, but do you have any regrets?

MORENO: If I can't have all the movies I always wanted to be in — which are all the Meryl Streep movies, I wanted to be her — but if I can't do that, I've done pretty well, considering. And I think I've left an important legacy in a very, very meaningful sense and that is: That I have never gave up. I have never given up. I just cling and hang on to what is important to me. A great deal of that has to do with self-respect and earning respect.

AP: I know it's early, but have you picked out a theme for your 90th birthday in December?

MORENO: I think it's going to be Puerto Rico. (Laughs.) It means the food. It means people have to

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dress a certain way. I'm probably going to say Puerto Rico in the '30s. I'll make them wear Panama hats.

People hurt by parachuting protestor at Euro 2020 game

By CIARÁN FAHEY AP Sports Writer

MUNICH (AP) — Several spectators were treated in the hospital for injuries caused by a protestor who parachuted into the stadium before France played Germany at the European Championship, UEFA said Tuesday.

Debris fell on the field and main grandstand, narrowly missing France coach Didier Deschamps, when the parachutist struck wires for an overhead camera attached to the stadium roof.

The governing body of European soccer called it a "reckless and dangerous" act and said "law authorities will take the necessary action."

"This inconsiderate act ... caused injuries to several people attending the game who are now in hospital," UEFA said.

The incident happened just before the start of the Euro 2020 match between the last two World Cup champions. Deschamps was shown ducking into the team dugout to avoid falling debris.

France won the match 1-0.

"We as the German soccer federation condemn it of course, because it wasn't just him, but others that he endangered and injured. It's unacceptable from our point of view," German team spokesman Jens Grittner said. "And the incident is being checked by the police, the authorities here in Munich and at UEFA. But of course we also condemn what happened there. It could probably have turned out much worse."

The protestor's parachute had the slogan "KICK OUT OIL!" and "Greenpeace" written on it.

He glided into the stadium and seemed to lose control after connecting with the wires. He veered away from the playing area toward the main grandstand and barely cleared the heads of spectators.

The parachutist managed to land on the field and Germany players Antonio Rüdiger and Robin Gosens were the first to approach him. He was led away by security stewards and given medical attention on the side of the field.

UEFA and one of its top-tier tournament sponsors, Russian state energy firm Gazprom, have previously been targeted by Greenpeace protests.

In 2013, a Champions League game in Basel was disrupted when Greenpeace activists abseiled from the roof of the stadium to unfurl a banner protesting Russian oil and Gazprom, which sponsored the visiting team, German club Schalke.

Greenpeace later donated money to a charity supported by Basel, which was fined by UEFA for the security lapse.

UEFA defended its environmental credentials in Tuesday's statement.

"UEFA and its partners are fully committed to a sustainable Euro 2020 tournament," UEFA said, "and many initiatives have been implemented to offset carbon emissions."

Buoyed by allied summits, Biden ready to take on Putin

By AAMER MADHANI, JONATHAN LEMIRE and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Fresh from supportive summits with allies, Joe Biden declared himself ready Tuesday to take on Russia's Vladimir Putin in far more confrontational talks — a climactic finish to the most important week of meetings in his young presidency.

Biden meets for his first talks as president with the Russian leader on Wednesday, in what's expected to be roughly a half-day of discussions between the two leaders and aides behind closed doors. That's after spending much of a weeklong European trip — the foreign policy highlight of his presidency so far — working to strengthen ties with like-minded partner nations in order to better deal with rivals Russia and China.

A reporter soon after Biden's arrival in Geneva on Tuesday shouted out a question on whether he was ready for Wednesday's talks. "I am always ready," Biden answered.

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The American leader reached Geneva following rounds of cordial elbow bumping, grinning photo sessions and close consultations with global leaders at the Group of Seven, NATO and U.S.-European Union summits. He secured a series of joint communiques expressing concern over Russia and China, and was at the EU on Tuesday to preside over the announcement of a breakthrough easing a long-running U.S. aircraft trade dispute with that bloc.

As for Russia, the U.S. and the EU declared they "stand united in our principled approach" to the longtime rival, "ready to respond decisively to its repeating pattern of negative behavior and harmful activities."

Biden's European tour has aimed to restore U.S. partnerships that were damaged under former President Donald Trump, who openly invited what American intelligence services said was Russian interference in U.S. political campaigns, and who sought out Putin and other autocrats he saw as strong.

In line with the chilly-so-far Biden-Putin relationship — Putin's government responded with indignation earlier this year after Biden said he considered the Russian a "killer" — the two men plan neither lunch nor dinner together, and no joint press conference after, in what's expected to be their four to five hours together.

That's in contrast to this week's G-7 session hosted by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, where the allies and their spouses held a beach barbecue and round after round of "family photos."

According to a senior administration official granted anonymity to disclose internal discussions, Biden is hoping to find small areas of agreement with the Russian president, including potentially returning ambassadors to Washington and Moscow.

That and other diplomatic issues, including the tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats and closure of consulates, will be high on the agenda for both sides.

The U.S. ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan, a rare holdover from the Trump administration, and Anatoly Antonov, the Russian ambassador to Washington, will both be in Geneva for the summit.

The two men departed their posts earlier this year as part of what both Russia and the United States describe as an all-time low in the two countries' relationship.

In addition, Russia has complained for years about its eviction and loss of consulates in San Francisco and Seattle and other facilities in Maryland and New York. The U.S., meanwhile, has been forced to close its consulate in St. Petersburg and is now facing the loss of Russian citizens employed by its embassy in Moscow, which will significantly reduce the consular services it is able to provide.

Biden also is looking to make progress on a new arms control agreement between the two nations, which agreed to a five-year extension of the remaining current pact in January.

Putin foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov sought to moderate expectations for the summit, but he strongly emphasized its importance given the current tensions.

"It's the first such meeting that takes place at a time when the bilateral relations are extremely bad," he said. "Both parties realize it's time to start dealing with the issues that have piled up."

Biden plans to raise issues ranging from cyberattacks to Putin's treatment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was poisoned and later jailed in what was seen as political retribution for exposing alleged Kremlin corruption and leading an anti-Putin protest movement.

In Geneva, a couple dozen Navalny supporters turned out in a sun-drenched square on Tuesday, and murals of a smiling Navalny holding his fingers in a heart shape, with the words "Hero of our time" in French, have popped up around the Swiss city in recent days. Those reference a similar mural in St. Petersburg, Russia, that authorities quickly covered over.

Syria, where Russia is threatening to close the last humanitarian crossing into that country, also is on the leaders' agenda.

Biden this week called Putin a "worthy adversary" and has said he is hoping to find areas of cooperation with the Russian president. But he also warned that if Russia continues cyberattacks and other aggressive acts toward the U.S. "we will respond in kind."

Biden goes into Wednesday's talks bolstered not only by the supportive words of European allies but by the tangible news of a major breakthrough in a 17-year trade dispute centered on rival subsidies for aircraft manufacturers.

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At almost every stop this week, the president repeated his message that "America is back," in hopes of convincing both allies and rivals that the U.S. is engaged and strong internationally after Trump's isolationist presidency and the political upheaval that peaked last January in violence at the U.S. Capitol.

Political sniping continued. House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy accused the Democratic president of deferring to Putin on his trip abroad and making America weaker.

"I don't care about charming Europe and thinking you're one of them," McCarthy said, a day after Biden referred to Republicans as "fractured."

The EU and U.S. agreed Tuesday to set up what their statement called a "high-level dialogue" on Russia to counter what they said was Moscow's drift into deeper authoritarianism and anti-Western sentiment.

At the same time, the 27-nation EU is divided in its approach to Moscow. Russia is the EU's biggest natural gas supplier, and plays a key role in international conflicts and key issues, including the Iran nuclear deal and conflicts in Syria and Libya.

But the hope is that Biden's meeting with Putin might pay dividends, and no one in Brussels wanted to undermine the show of international unity that has been on display at the G-7 and NATO summits, according to EU officials.

Impatient Democrats prepare to go-it-alone on infrastructure

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Patience running thin, Democratic leaders are laying the groundwork for a go-it-alone approach on President Joe Biden's big jobs and families infrastructure plans even as the White House continues negotiating with Republicans on a much more scaled-back \$1 trillion proposal.

A top White House adviser assured House Democrats during a closed-door session Tuesday that there would be a fresh assessment by next week on where talks stand with the Republicans. But Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced he is moving ahead, huddling privately Wednesday with the Senate Budget Committee to prepare for July votes on a majority-rules approach as wary Democrats prepare to lift Biden's \$1.7 billion American Jobs Plan and \$1.8 billion American Families Plan to passage.

Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are trying to calm worries from anxious rank-and-file Democrats that Biden is leaving too much on the table in talks with Republicans. Restless lawmakers want assurances that if they concede to a scaled-back bill with Republicans, it won't be the last word and the president's push for investments in climate change strategies, child care centers and other Democratic priorities will proceed — with or without GOP votes.

"We'll see where we're going to go after a week or 10 days (of) more dialogue and negotiation," White House counselor Steve Ricchetti said Tuesday, according to a partial transcript of the private caucus meeting obtained by The Associated Press.

The updated timeline comes as Biden's top legislative priority is teetering in Congress while he is overseas. The president and the Democratic leaders of the House and Senate have been engaged in a two-track strategy — reaching for a bipartisan deal with Republicans but also setting the stage for a potential majority-rules strategy in case talks fail.

Over the past week, a bipartisan group of 10 senators has narrowed in on a nearly \$1 trillion deal of mainly road, highway and other traditional infrastructure projects, but without the family-related investments in child care centers and other facilities that Ricchetti insisted Tuesday remains a top priority for the administration. Republicans reject those investments as costly and unnecessary.

"Just ask a working mom if child care is part of her family's infrastructure," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich. "Ask a family with an aging parent who needs help to live at home safely if home care is infrastructure. We understand that it is."

On Tuesday, the members of the bipartisan group of senators presented the emerging proposal to their colleagues at closed-door Senate lunches and were met with mixed reviews.

The effort by the bipartisan group, five Democrats and five Republicans, has come far in meeting Biden's initial ideas, but the senators and the president remain wide apart over how to pay for the plan.

Republicans have rejected the president's proposal to raise the corporate tax rate, from 21% to 28%,

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to pay for infrastructure investments, or to increase taxes on wealthy Americans..

Instead, under the bipartisan proposal, the projects would be funded by increasing the gas tax paid at the pump by linking it to inflation, tapping unspent COVID-19 relief funds and trying to recoup unpaid income taxes.

"People were optimistic we could actually get something done," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., emerging from the lunch meeting.

But the prospect of raising the gas tax is highly unpopular with some Democratic lawmakers, echoing Biden's refusal to raise taxes on people earning less than \$400,000 a year.

Sen. Ron Wyden, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, described it as "another hit on working people."

"To me, their idea that they're going to raise taxes on working people while letting multinational companies and the most wealthy Americans off the hook is a nonstarter," Wyden said. "I mean, where is the fairness in that?"

Biden is also facing skepticism from Democrats who want to see robust investments in strategies to fight climate change — for electric vehicle charging stations, money to bolster communities' response to harsh weather conditions and funds for public transit that many rural state Republicans oppose and that have been dramatically reduced in the bipartisan plan.

"There has to be a guarantee, an absolute unbreakable guarantee, that climate is going to be at the center of any infrastructure deal that we cut," said Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass.

"We cannot let our planet down," said Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore. "This has to be part of the deal."

The White House plans to give the bipartisan infrastructure negotiations another week to 10 days before assessing the next steps, but insisted there was no deadline to this latest round of talks.

Deputy press secretary Andrew Bates said that Ricchetti conveyed to the lawmakers that "we are certainly going to know where things stand on infrastructure talks generally in the next week to 10 days, and that we can then take stock overall. But he did not set a deadline or cutoff."

Rep. John Yarmuth, D-Ky., the House Budget Committee chair, said the plan is, if bipartisan talks falter, to move "full steam ahead" on considering a package as soon as July under special reconciliation rules that would enable majority passage without the need for Republican votes.

With the Senate narrowly split, 50-50, Democrats are skeptical at least 10 Republicans will join to reach the 60-vote threshold needed to advance most legislation over a filibuster. Democrats are pushing to use budget reconciliation rules that would allow passage on a simple majority vote of 51 votes in the Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris able to serve as a tiebreaker.

The package being prepared by the House Budget Committee would include both the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan. These are Biden's ambitious proposals to build not just roads and highways, but also the so-called human infrastructure of child care, veterans care and education facilities.

Schumer will convene a meeting Wednesday of the Democratic senators on the Budget Committee, urging them to rally around a "Unity Budget," according to a senior Democratic aide who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private session.

Schumer will instruct the 11 Democratic senators on the panel to ensure that key climate and care-giving components are included in the framework — including a plan to reduce U.S. electricity emissions by 80% by 2030.

"The White House made it clear to us that we should be prepared to proceed on two tracks," said Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, the chair of the House Democratic Caucus. "We're prepared to do what is necessary to get the American Jobs Plan over the finish line."

'A summer of freedom': Vaccine gives new meaning to July 4th

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden wants to imbue Independence Day with new meaning this year by encouraging nationwide celebrations to mark the country's effective return to normalcy after 16 months of coronavirus pandemic disruption and more than 600,000 lives lost.

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The White House is expressing growing certainty that July Fourth will serve as a breakthrough moment in the nation's recovery, even though the U.S. is expected to fall short of its goal of having 70% of adults vaccinated by the holiday. Still, the pace of the nation's healing will be a stark contrast with the rest of the world struggling to vanquish the virus.

The planned celebration will be the largest event of Biden's presidency and is designed to demonstrate the nation's victory over the virus as COVID-19 cases and deaths drop to levels not seen since the first days of the outbreak. The U.S. is seeing its highest rate of air travel since the pandemic began, and schools, businesses and restaurants are rapidly reopening.

To celebrate the resumption of pre-pandemic life, Biden is looking to celebrate the July Fourth holiday as "a summer of freedom."

He plans to host first responders, essential workers and military service members and their families on the South Lawn of the White House for a cookout and to watch the fireworks over the National Mall. More than 1,000 guests are expected, officials said.

The plan shows the dramatic shift in thinking since Biden cautiously held out hope just three months ago that people might be able to hold small cookouts by the Fourth.

For most Americans, that reopening target was hit last month, by Memorial Day weekend, after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention relaxed mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people and state and local virus restrictions also eased.

Now, officials say July Fourth will serve as an unofficial kickoff to a new phase in the U.S. pandemic response. The federal government is looking to turn the page on the domestic public health crisis and focus on an economic and civic revival at home and marshaling support for vaccinations around the globe.

The White House is hoping to see similar Independence Day activities across the country, a year after the virus forced a mass cancellation of festivities.

"We welcome you to join us by hosting your own events to honor our freedom, salute those who have been serving on the frontlines, and celebrate our progress in fighting this pandemic," the White House wrote in an email to state and local officials Tuesday. It asked them to share their own plans, which the administration would later highlight.

"America is headed into a summer dramatically different from last year," the administration wrote to officials. "A summer of freedom. A summer of joy. A summer of reunions and celebrations."

The upbeat announcement contrasts with the drearier reality in Europe, where Biden is on an eight-day tour, and in the rest of the world as vaccines remain scarce.

"The administration needs to walk a line, using events like this to increase vaccine interest and confidence here in the U.S. while also being sensitive to the fact that this crisis is still out of control in many parts of the world," said Dr. Jeremy Faust, an emergency physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in the Division of Health Policy and Public Health.

For instance, in the United Kingdom, one of the few countries that has a vaccination rate similar to that of the U.S., the government announced Monday that it plans to further delay reopening for at least another month to try to get more people vaccinated and to slow the spread of the highly transmissible and more dangerous delta variant first identified in India.

In large swaths of the world, the virus is raging unchecked, and health experts warn that without vaccinations, variants can emerge that will break through the protection the vaccines are providing in the U.S.

While in Europe, Biden and other Group of Seven leaders announced plans to provide 1 billion shots for poorer nations, half of them from the U.S., but aid groups said a far greater commitment is needed to defeat the virus around the globe.

Even in the U.S., as infection rates continue to slip, the vaccination campaign is far from over. Fewer than 370,000 Americans are now getting their first dose on average each day, down from a high of nearly 2 million per day two months ago.

White House officials acknowledge the deep geographic disparities in vaccination rates and said the administration will continue to issue reminders that unvaccinated Americans remain at risk of serious illness and death from the virus.

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Yet cases are trending downward even in the Southern and Midwestern states that remain markedly behind the rest of the country in vaccinations.

Elsewhere, California began its grand reopening Tuesday, lifting nearly all its remaining virus restrictions. In New York, which Gov. Andrew Cuomo said had hit a benchmark of 70% of adults receiving at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, rules were being lifted that had limited the size of gatherings and required some types of businesses to follow social distancing or cleaning protocols.

"It means that we can now return to life as we know it," Cuomo said, announcing that the state would also launch fireworks Tuesday to mark the occasion, in addition to New York City's already announced plans to resume its July Fourth fireworks display on the East River.

All American adults have been eligible for vaccine shots for two months, and the administration has mounted an aggressive "month of action" to try to drive up demand for doses, though that has done little to change the trend lines: Fewer Americans are interested in getting vaccinated.

Officials say the effects of the July Fourth vaccination goal of 70% of Americans on driving down COVID-19 cases are already being felt even if the benchmark won't be attained. Some 166.5 million adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to CDC data. To reach his goal, Biden would need to vaccinate about 14 million more people in less than three weeks.

"Regardless of where we are on July Fourth, we're not shutting down shop," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said last week. "On July 5th, we're going to continue to press to vaccinate more people across the country."

Biden intends to use his remarks on July Fourth to highlight the administration's "wartime response," with a vaccination campaign that helped bring cases and deaths down by about 90% from where they were before he took office on Jan. 20.

Judge OKs Weinstein's extradition for California rape case

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

A New York judge on Tuesday approved disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's extradition to California, where he faces additional sexual assault charges, ending a legal fight prolonged by the COVID-19 pandemic, the defense's concerns about Weinstein's failing health and a squabble over paperwork.

Judge Kenneth Case said there was no reason to delay Weinstein's transfer any longer, denying his lawyer's request to keep him at a state prison near Buffalo — where he is serving a 23-year sentence for a rape conviction last year — until the start of jury selection in the Los Angeles case.

Los Angeles authorities plan to collect Weinstein, 69, from the Wende Correctional Facility in Alden, New York, at the end of June or in early July, prosecutors said at Tuesday's extradition hearing in Buffalo, giving Weinstein's lawyer time to appeal Judge Case's decision.

Weinstein's lawyer, Norman Effman, argued he should remain in Wende's hospital-like maximum-security setting while receiving treatment for maladies including a loss of eyesight, rather than being shipped cross-country to a Los Angeles jail cell. His suggestion that Weinstein instead be arraigned by video was also rejected.

"What we were trying to do is not avoid the trial, but avoid an unnecessary stay in a jail rather than a prison," Effman said, claiming pre-trial detention in California would rob Weinstein of needed medical care.

Erie County Assistant District Attorney Colleen Curtin Gable, arguing in favor of Weinstein's extradition, retorted: "It's Los Angeles. It's not some remote outpost that doesn't have any sort of medical care."

Weinstein faces 11 sexual assault counts in California involving five women, stemming from alleged assaults in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills from 2004 to 2013. The charges include rape, forcible oral copulation, sexual battery by restraint and sexual penetration by use of force.

Los Angeles prosecutors first charged Weinstein in January 2020, just as jury selection was getting underway in the New York City case that ended in his conviction and imprisonment.

Weinstein is appealing the verdict that he raped an aspiring actress in 2013 in a Manhattan hotel room and forcibly performed oral sex on TV and film production assistant in 2006 at his Manhattan apartment.

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Because Weinstein is incarcerated in New York, Case's authorization was needed in order to transfer him to the custody of Los Angeles authorities under the terms of an interstate extradition agreement.

One other way Weinstein's move could have been blocked was by an objection from New York's governor, but Gable said there was no such action by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Weinstein, appearing via video from the Wende prison, placed his hands on his mask-covered face after Case announced his decision. Earlier in the hearing, Weinstein had the mask drooping from his right ear as he sat in what appeared to be a prison meeting room.

In addition to concerns about Weinstein's health, Effman questioned the legitimacy of extradition paperwork filed by Los Angeles authorities, which he said was defective because it listed only some of the charges.

"We are challenging the paperwork because it's not right. It's wrong... They just copied the form and changed the date," Effman told Case.

Gable said the paperwork "absolutely met the requirements" of the extradition agreement.

Gable also challenged Effman's claims about Weinstein's health, telling the judge Weinstein last week rejected a prescribed treatment for his eye condition because he said he "wasn't psychologically ready for it" and that prison officials cycled through ophthalmologists trying to find one "acceptable to the defendant."

Weinstein has myriad health problems and his condition has worsened since he's been in prisons, according to his lawyers, including a bout with COVID-19 two weeks after his sentencing in March 2020.

Weinstein has diabetes, extensive coronary artery disease, anemia, hypertension, obstructive sleep apnea, chronic lower back pain, sciatica, chronic leg pain and arthritis that severely limits his ability to walk, and eye ailments that have severely degraded his vision, his lawyers said.

"Every inmate has an absolute right to appropriate treatment when he or she is in custody," Gable said. "But they don't have a say in when and where they get their treatment, and there's absolutely nothing in either doctor's report that says this treatment can't be done in Los Angeles."

US COVID-19 deaths hit 600,000, equal to yearly cancer toll

By JANIE HAR and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 topped 600,000 on Tuesday, even as the vaccination drive has drastically brought down daily cases and fatalities and allowed the country to emerge from the gloom and look forward to summer.

The number of lives lost, as recorded by Johns Hopkins University, is greater than the population of Baltimore or Milwaukee. It is about equal to the number of Americans who died of cancer in 2019. Worldwide, the COVID-19 death toll stands at about 3.8 million.

The milestone came the same day that California and New York lifted most of their remaining restrictions, joining other states in opening the way, step by step, for what could be a fun and close to normal summer for many Americans.

"Deep down I want to rejoice," said Rita Torres, a retired university administrator in Oakland, California. But she plans to take it slow: "Because it's kind of like, is it too soon? Will we be sorry?"

With the arrival of the vaccine in mid-December, COVID-19 deaths per day in the U.S. have plummeted to an average of around 340, from a high of over 3,400 in mid-January. Cases are running at about 14,000 a day on average, down from a quarter-million per day over the winter.

The real death tolls in the U.S. and around the globe are thought to be significantly higher, with many cases overlooked or possibly concealed by some countries.

President Joe Biden acknowledged the approaching milestone Monday during his visit to Europe, saying that while new cases and deaths are dropping dramatically in the U.S., "there's still too many lives being lost," and "now is not the time to let our guard down."

The most recent deaths are seen in some ways as especially tragic now that the vaccine has become available practically for the asking.

More than 50% of Americans have had at least one dose of vaccine, while over 40% are fully vaccinated,

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according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But demand for shots in the U.S. has dropped off dramatically, leaving many places with a surplus of doses and casting doubt on whether the country will meet Biden's target of having 70% of American adults at least partially vaccinated by July 4. The figure stands at just under 65%.

As of a week ago, the U.S. was averaging about 1 million injections per day, down from a high of about 3.3 million a day on average in mid-April, according to the CDC.

At nearly every turn in the outbreak, the virus has exploited and worsened inequalities in the United States. CDC figures, when adjusted for age and population, show that Black, Latino and Native American people are two to three times more likely than whites to die of COVID-19.

Also, an Associated Press analysis found that Latinos are dying at much younger ages than other groups. Hispanic people between 30 and 39 have died at five times the rate of white people in the same age group.

Overall, Black and Hispanic Americans have less access to medical care and are in poorer health, with higher rates of conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. They are also more likely to have jobs deemed essential, less able to work from home and more likely to live in crowded, multigenerational households.

With the overall picture improving rapidly, California, the most populous state and the first to impose a coronavirus lockdown, dropped state rules on social distancing and limits on capacity at restaurants, bars, supermarkets, gyms, stadiums and other places, ushering in what has been billed as its "Grand Reopening" just in time for summer.

Disneyland is throwing open its gates to all tourists after allowing just California residents. Fans will be able to sit elbow-to-elbow and cheer without masks at Dodgers and Giants games.

Gov. Gavin Newsom celebrated by hosting a drawing in which 10 people won \$1.5 million each simply for being vaccinated.

In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Tuesday that 70% of adults in the state have received at least one dose of the vaccine, and he announced that the immediate easing of many of the restrictions will be celebrated with fireworks.

"What does 70% mean? It means that we can now return to life as we know it," he said.

He said the state is lifting rules that had limited the size of gatherings and required some types of businesses to follow cleaning protocols, take people's temperature or screen them for COVID-19 symptoms. Businesses will no longer have to restrict how many people they can allow inside based on the 6-foot rule.

For the time being, though, New Yorkers will have to keep wearing masks in schools, subways and certain other places.

Massachusetts on Tuesday officially lifted a state of emergency that had been in effect for 462 days, though many restrictions had already been eased, including mask requirements and limits on gatherings. Republican lawmakers in Kansas decided to let a state of emergency expire Tuesday. And Maryland's governor announced that the emergency there will end on July 1, with the state no longer requiring any masks.

The first known deaths from the virus in the U.S. were in early February 2020. It took four months to reach the first 100,000 dead. During the most lethal phase of the disaster, in the winter of 2020-21, it took just over a month to go from 300,000 to 400,000 deaths.

With the crisis now easing, it took close to four months for the U.S. death toll to go from a half-million to 600,000.

Hungary: Lawmakers pass law barring LGBT content for minors

By BALAZS PIVARNYIK and BELA SZANDELSZKY Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Lawmakers in Hungary approved legislation Tuesday that prohibits sharing with minors any content portraying homosexuality or sex reassignment, something supporters said would help fight pedophilia but which human rights groups denounced as anti-LGBT discrimination.

Fidesz, the conservative ruling party of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, introduced the legislation, which is the latest effort to curtail the rights of gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people

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in the European Union nation located in central Europe.

Hungary's National Assembly approved the bill in a 157-1 vote. Fidesz has a parliamentary majority, and lawmakers from the right-wing Jobbik party also endorsed the measure. One independent lawmaker voted against it.

Csaba Domotor, the Fidesz state secretary, described the goal as "the protection of children," noting that the changes include the introduction of a searchable registry of convicted pedophiles.

"Pedophiles won't be able to hide any more – there are similar solutions in other countries, too. The criminal code will be even more strict. Punishments will be more severe. No one can get away with atrocities with light punishments and parole," he said.

All other opposition parties boycotted the voting session in protest. Human rights groups had denounced the measure strongly, saying it was wrong to conflate LGBT people with pedophilia. They argued that the law could be used to stigmatize and harass residents because of their sexual orientations and gender identities.

"On this shameful day, the opposition's place is not in the parliament but on the streets," Budapest Mayor Karacsony wrote on Facebook.

Orban's government in the past has depicted migrants as a grave threat to Hungary and the nation's Christian identity, a theme the prime minister has successfully used to win past elections. With the next elections scheduled for 2022, and fewer migrants entering Europe, the ruling party has increasingly depicted the LGBT rights movement as a threat, in an attempt to shore up its conservative base.

Yet more than a dozen local organizations, including Amnesty International Hungary and LGBT rights organizations, argued in a statement after the vote that the legislation is not in line with Hungarian society, which is largely accepting of LGBT people.

"(It) also clearly infringes the right to freedom of expression, human dignity and equal treatment, the statement said.

Lawmaker Gergely Arato, of the Democratic Coalition parliamentary grouping, said the changes violate the standards of parliamentary democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The legislation, presented last week by Fidesz, was on its face primarily aimed at fighting pedophilia. It included amendments that ban the representation of any sexual orientation besides heterosexual as well as sex reassignment information in school sex education programs, or in films and advertisements aimed at anyone under 18.

Thousands of LGBT activists and others held a protest in Budapest on Monday in an unsuccessful effort to stop the legislation from passing.

Dunja Mijatovic, the commissioner for human rights at the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights body, also had asked Hungarian lawmakers to reject the legislation, saying it reinforced prejudice against LGBT people.

The Fidesz party also successfully championed a law last year making it impossible for transgender people to legally change the gender markers on their identity documents. Human rights officials say that puts them at risk of humiliation when they need to present identity documents.

"Today's decision in #Hungary's parliament represents another severe state discrimination against #LGBTIQ people," Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Roth of Germany tweeted Tuesday after the new legislation passed. "This law goes against everything we regard as our common European values. Full solidarity and support for LGBTIQ people in Hungary."

Record rise in US wholesale prices over the past year

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wholesale prices, driven by rising food costs, increased 0.8% in May and by a unprecedented amount over the past year as the U.S. economy emerges from pandemic lockdowns and pushes inflation higher.

The monthly gain in the producer price index, which measures inflation pressure before it reaches consum-

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ers, followed a 0.6% increase in April and a 1% jump in March, the Labor Department reported Tuesday. Food prices jumped a sizable 2.6% with the cost of beef and veal rising, though the cost of fresh fruits declined. Energy costs rose 2.2%, reversing a 2.4% drop in April.

Over the past 12 months, wholesale prices are up 6.6%, the largest 12-month increase on records going back to 2010.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile categories such as food and energy, rose 0.7% in May, the same as April, while core inflation rose 5.3% over the past 12 months, the largest gain on records going back to 2014.

Nearly 60% of the wholesale price increase from May reflected a 1.5% jump in prices for goods. Prices for services rose by 0.6%.

Last week, the U.S. reported that consumer prices rose 0.6% in May with prices over the past year surging by 5%, the biggest 12-month gain in more than a decade.

Analysts said that the big jump in wholesale prices following the sizable gain in consumer prices underscores the current upward movement in inflation.

Shortages of raw materials and intermediate goods are driving a good portion of the rise in wholesale inflation, according to Michael Pearce, the senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics.

More evidence suggests COVID-19 was in US by Christmas 2019

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new analysis of blood samples from 24,000 Americans taken early last year is the latest and largest study to suggest that the new coronavirus popped up in the U.S. in December 2019 — weeks before cases were first recognized by health officials.

The analysis is not definitive, and some experts remain skeptical, but federal health officials are increasingly accepting a timeline in which small numbers of COVID-19 infections may have occurred in the U.S. before the world ever became aware of a dangerous new virus erupting in China.

"The studies are pretty consistent," said Natalie Thornburg of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There was probably very rare and sporadic cases here earlier than we were aware of. But it was not widespread and didn't become widespread until late February," said Thornburg, principal investigator of the CDC's respiratory virus immunology team.

Such results underscore the need for countries to work together and identify newly emerging viruses as quickly and collaboratively as possible, she added.

The pandemic coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China in late 2019. Officially, the first U.S. infection to be identified was a traveler — a Washington state man who returned from Wuhan on Jan. 15 and sought help at a clinic on Jan. 19.

CDC officials initially said the spark that started the U.S. outbreak arrived during a three-week window from mid-January to early February. But research since then — including some done by the CDC — has suggested a small number of infections occurred earlier.

A CDC-led study published in December 2020 that analyzed 7,000 samples from American Red Cross blood donations suggested the virus infected some Americans as early as the middle of December 2019.

The latest study, published Tuesday online by the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, is by a team including researchers at the National Institutes of Health. They analyzed blood samples from more than 24,000 people across the country, collected in the first three months of 2020 as part of a long-term study called "All Of Us" that seeks to track 1 million Americans over years to study health.

Like the CDC study, these researchers looked for antibodies in the blood that are taken as evidence of coronavirus infection, and can be detected as early as two weeks after a person is first infected.

The researchers say seven study participants — three from Illinois, and one each from Massachusetts, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin — were infected earlier than any COVID-19 case was originally reported in those states.

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One of the Illinois cases was infected as early as Christmas Eve, said Keri Althoff, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the study's lead author.

It can be difficult to distinguish antibodies that neutralize SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, from antibodies that fight other coronaviruses, including some that cause the common cold. Researchers in both the NIH and CDC studies used multiple types of tests to minimize false positive results, but some experts say it still is possible their 2019 positives were infections by other coronaviruses and not the pandemic strain.

"While it is entirely plausible that the virus was introduced into the United States much earlier than is usually appreciated, it does not mean that this is necessarily strong enough evidence to change how we're thinking about this," said William Hanage, a Harvard University expert on disease dynamics.

The NIH researchers have not followed up with study participants yet to see if any had traveled out of the U.S. prior to their infection. But they found it noteworthy that the seven did not live in or near New York City or Seattle, where the first wave of U.S. cases were concentrated.

"The question is how did, and where did, the virus take seed," Althoff said. The new study indicates "it probably seeded in multiple places in our country," she added.

Emails show Trump pressured Justice Dept. over 2020 election

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — During the last weeks of his presidency, Donald Trump and his allies pressured the Justice Department to investigate unsubstantiated claims of widespread 2020 election fraud that even his former attorney general declared without evidence, newly released emails show.

The emails, released Tuesday by the House Oversight Committee, reveal in new detail how Trump, his White House chief of staff and other allies pressured members of the U.S. government to challenge the 2020 election over false claims.

Officials at Homeland Security and the Justice Department, as well as Republican election leaders across the country, repeatedly said there was no pervasive fraud. Former Attorney General William Barr, a longtime Trump loyalist, was among those who said there was no evidence of such fraud.

The emails also show the extent to which Trump worked to enlist then-acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen in his campaign's failing legal efforts to challenge the election result, including suggesting filing a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court.

Those sent to Rosen include debunked conspiracy theories and false information about voter fraud. Trump's lies about the election helped spur on the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 in a failed effort to stop the certification of Joe Biden's victory.

Several times, for example, Trump allies wrote about Dominion Voting Systems' potential voter fraud, a conspiracy theory now the subject of a billion-dollar defamation lawsuit by the voting company. Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, asked about investigating allegations of voter fraud caused by satellites from Italy.

Meadows tried to have Rosen investigate the conspiracy theories and pushed the acting attorney general to meet with an ally of Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani who was pitching unfounded election conspiracies that Italy was using satellites and military technology to change votes.

After Rosen forwarded Meadows' email, Rich Donoghue, the acting deputy attorney general, sent a note to Rosen that said, "pure insanity." Rosen wrote back that he was asked to have the FBI meet with Giuliani's associate and he said no, insisting the man could follow the FBI's normal protocol for tips and just call the public tip line or take his information to an FBI field office. But Rosen said Giuliani was "insulted" by the answer.

"Asked if I would reconsider, I flatly refused, said I would not be giving any special treatment to Giuliani or any of his 'witnesses,' and re-affirmed yet again that I will not talk to Giuliani about any of this," Rosen wrote.

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On Dec. 14, the day that Electoral College votes were certified and that Barr said he would be resigning later that month, a Trump White House assistant sent a note to Rosen with the subject "From POTUS," an acronym for president of the United States. The email to Rosen, a deputy attorney general who became acting attorney general after Barr left, included talking points on alleged voter fraud in Antrim County, in a key battleground state, Michigan. Those included claims like "a Cover-up is Happening regarding voting machines in Michigan" and "Michigan cannot certify for Biden."

Just moments after the Trump assistant sent the documents, Donoghue sent the same documents to the U.S. attorneys in the Eastern and Western districts of Michigan.

On Dec. 29, the Trump assistant emailed Rosen, Donoghue and Acting Solicitor General Jeffrey Wall and included a draft legal brief for the Supreme Court, with a phone number where they could contact the president directly. The proposed complaint asked the court to "declare that the Electoral College votes cast" in the six battleground states that Trump lost "cannot be counted." It asked for the court to order a special election in those states.

One of Trump's private attorneys then emailed senior Justice officials urging them to file the complaint. The emails show he repeatedly called Rosen's senior advisers and others in the Justice Department demanding meetings, saying he was driving from Maryland to Justice Department headquarters in Washington to meet with Rosen because he couldn't reach him.

"As I said on our call, the President of the United States has seen this complaint, and he directed me last night to brief AG Rosen in person today and discuss bringing this action," he wrote in one email. "I have been instructed to report back to the President this afternoon after this meeting."

The Associated Press reported late last year on the effort within the Trump administration to pressure government employees to adopt the false narrative of 2020 election fraud. Trump asked the Justice Department to investigate instances of voter fraud, and Justice leaders sent a memo to the states prioritizing the effort. Trump also asked that a special prosecutor be named to investigate the false voter fraud claims.

And the official serving as Trump's eyes and ears at the Justice Department tried to pressure staffers to give up sensitive information about election fraud and other matters she could relay to the White House. She was banned from the building.

Trump considered replacing Rosen with a more loyal ally, Jeffrey Clark, and even looked into whether the White House could appoint a special counsel without the Justice Department's approval. On Jan. 1, for example, Meadows asked Rosen to have Clark investigate "signature match anomalies in Fulton county, GA."

It didn't happen, and on Jan. 3 another Justice official wrote that the "cause of justice won."

Three days later, hundreds of pro-Trump rioters broke into the Capitol, attacking police and causing dozens of injuries, causing \$1.5 million in damage and sending lawmakers fleeing for their lives. Five people died, including a police officer who collapsed that day. At least 400 people have been arrested in connection with the riot, the largest Justice Department prosecution in history.

In Argentina, pandemic exacts a heavy toll on tango culture

By DÉBORA REY Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — In a huge ballroom in a Buenos Aires basement, the tables are stacked. On the orchestra stage, the piano lid is closed near unplugged speakers and billboard images of tango celebrities.

The empty, dark dance floor at the Viruta Tango Club is a symbol of the pandemic-induced crisis facing dancers and musicians of an art form known for close physical contact and exchanging partners.

Like other venues of its kind, the Viruta club has been closed since March 8, 2020, around the time that Argentine authorities decreed a strict quarantine in hopes of reducing the spread of COVID-19. The club used to host hundreds of tango dancers between Wednesday and Sunday.

"For those of us who make a living from tango, our self-esteem is on the floor," said Horacio Godoy, a dancer, historian and club organizer who walked across the Viruta dance hall, which, when in full swing, recreated the atmosphere of the 1940s era when tango became a wildly popular entertainment.

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"We are more emotionally than financially bankrupt," Godoy said.

Equally damaging has been the closing of borders, preventing the arrival of tourists, the main source of financing for the local tango industry. Tango tours abroad have also been canceled as Argentina continues to suffer high coronavirus caseloads more than a year after the pandemic began. There have been more than 80,000 confirmed deaths from COVID-19 in the country.

Godoy, who earns some money by teaching virtual tango classes to foreigners, said that funds for dancers and musicians from the mayor's office are not enough to pay for expenses at the Viruta club. Of 18 employees, only three have kept their jobs.

"The city of Buenos Aires can't offer history like Rome and Paris. It doesn't have a beach to offer like in the Caribbean. It doesn't have gastronomy on offer like Italy. It doesn't have waterfalls or glaciers. The city of Buenos Aires has tango," he said.

According to the Federal Assembly of Tango Workers, the cultural mainstay had employed some 7,000 people throughout Argentina. But between 2020 and this year, some 40 tango clubs out of a total of 200 in Buenos Aires have closed permanently.

Before the pandemic, there were about 40 tango footwear and apparel companies and now a dozen survive, the group said.

Although it's a symbol of Argentine culture, tango does not get any specific subsidies.

"Tango workers suffered from permanent job insecurity long before the pandemic," said Diego Benbassat, a musician with the "Misteriosa Buenos Aires" orchestra and spokesman for the tango workers assembly. "There were never public policies designed for tango, so that is why we are so vulnerable."

Mora Godoy, who once taught tango steps to Barack Obama and received standing ovations for her international performances, has had to close her dance school.

"I did 419 shows with my tango company in 2019. We had done more than 100 in 2020 by the time everything was closed and this madness, this sadness, this world tragedy began," she said.

A corner of her apartment is decorated with images of the dances that marked her life before the pandemic. One of her favorites: then-President Obama resting his hand on her bare back, taking steps to the beat of "Por una cabeza" by Carlos Gardel, during an official visit to Argentina in 2016.

"It is very painful not to be able to dance," said Godoy, adding that some tango professionals had turned to taxi-driving and selling groceries to make a living. She said entrepreneurs who previously made a lot of money from running tango clubs had done little during the pandemic to help the professional dancers who had been so important to their profits.

"Everything froze," said musician and dancer Nicolás Ponce, who started a business selling indoor and outdoor plants during the pandemic.

The essence of tango, he said, is what makes it so difficult to perform in the current health emergency.

"A bit of the success of tango is its corporality, the act of embracing each other," he said. "In life one does not hug everyone. That feeling of embrace is what makes tango stand out from other dances."

Nostalgia for that hug makes many tango dancers, or tangueros, defy restrictions to dance in outdoor spaces.

On a recent Saturday, a dozen couples got together to dance at the Obelisco, an emblematic monument in the center of Buenos Aires, some even without a mask.

"Tango in the open air is health. What is dangerous is stillness," read a sign posted on the sidewalk by dance teacher Luciana Fuentes.

"We not only have COVID. I am afraid that one day my muscles will forget to dance. I do it alone with a broom every day in my house," Fuentes said.

"I am not anti-quarantine. I do not think that COVID does not exist. I take my precautionary measures, but ... I will not stop dancing tango in public spaces."

Eriksen sends public thank you message from hospital

By MATTIAS KARÉN Associated Press