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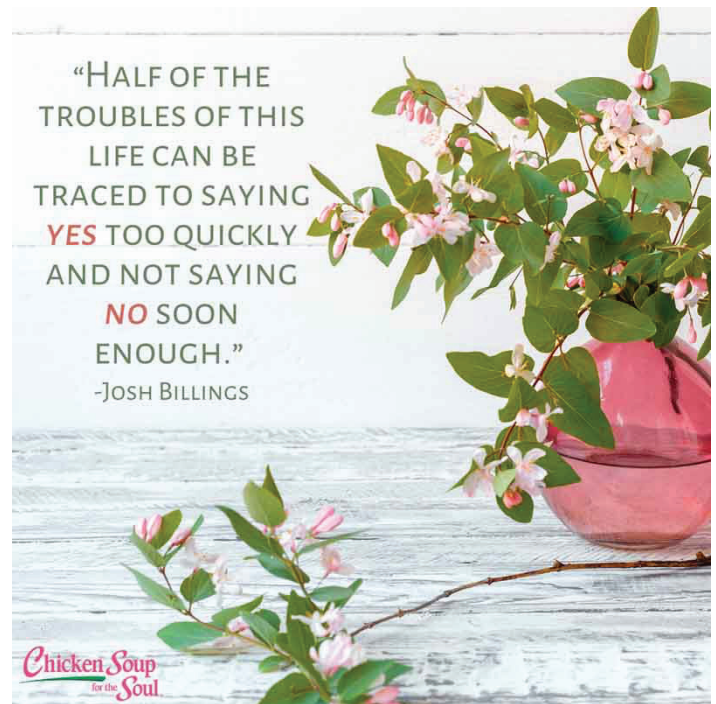
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Jeslyn and I will be going on a World Classroom Trip to Washington, D.C. We will be leaving this evening. Last time when I went with Julianna, we had a small layover in Minneapolis so I was able to get the GDI out at the airport. Not sure of layover time this time so there may or may not be a paper tomorrow.

Today is a holiday. However, it does appear that the mail service is running and that most banks are open. Guessing state and federal offices are closed today, so call ahead to make sure the office you are going to is open. The Juneteenth Holiday was just signed by the President yesterday and by Governor Noem yesterday as well.



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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Governor Noem Announces Holiday for State Workers on Friday to Honor Juneteenth

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem announced a holiday for state workers on Friday, June 18, 2021, in honor of Juneteenth. This is in response to the “Juneteenth National Independence Day Act”, which was signed today by President Joseph R. Biden.

“All men are created equal.’ That is America’s foundational ideal,” said Governor Kristi Noem. “Juneteenth celebrates an important day when we came closer to making that ideal a reality for all Americans, regardless of race. I hope state employees take the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful South Dakota weather on their day off.”

Juneteenth is celebrated every year on June 19. Juneteenth commemorates the anniversary of June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger announced freedom from slavery in Galveston, Texas following President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

Governor Noem had previously proclaimed Saturday, June 19, 2021, as “Juneteenth Day” in South Dakota.



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Britton



Bad habits for charging your phone

You may not realize it, but your smartphone battery has an expiration date. Most phones last two to three years, because their batteries naturally degrade the more you use them. There's no way to stop this process, but you can slow it down. Here are the don'ts (and the do's) of charging your phone.

Charging or draining completely

Two common habits that can speed up your battery's aging process are regularly charging to 100% and letting the battery dip to 0%. Instead, keep the charge between 30% and 80% by plugging your device in for smaller chunks of time.

Charging your phone overnight

Charging overnight won't overload your phone—its lithium-ion battery knows to stop once it hits 100%. But a full charge does count as one "cycle," and your battery is built to last 300 to 500 charge cycles, total. Instead of charging all night, try plugging in your phone periodically throughout the day so you can more easily unplug it before it reaches capacity.

Charging in extreme temperatures

Yes. The lithium-ion batteries in newer phones are extremely sensitive to heat or cold. Don't leave your phone charging under your pillow at night or on the dashboard on a sunny day. If you're out sledding, for instance, wait until your phone warms up before plugging in.

Using third-party chargers

Knockoff cables are inexpensive, but it's best to avoid any chargers that aren't approved by your phone's manufacturer. Cheap alternatives might lack safety mechanisms in the internal circuitry. In 2016, safety certification company UL® tested 400 counterfeit Apple chargers and found that all but three—a whopping 99%—failed an electric strength test, and 12 of the chargers "posed a risk of lethal electrocution."

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Next SDSU Extension Drought Hour Set for June 28

Brookings, S.D. - Nearly 90% of South Dakota is now in some level of drought. According to the latest U.S. Drought Monitor, 56% of the state is in the Severe Drought (D2) and Extreme Drought (D3) classifications. With daytime temperatures lingering around mid-to upper-90 degrees Fahrenheit for much of June and very few scattered rain showers, South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension State Climatologist Laura Edwards says the dominating high pressure over the area the last two weeks made rain hard to come by.

"While portions of northwest South Dakota were reassessed to take into account the recent heavy precipitation and improvements were made based upon the reanalysis of this data, the north-central, northeast and southeast had drought expand and intensify, with more moderate and severe drought being introduced," Edwards says.

On June 28, SDSU Extension will continue its virtual educational program series, Drought Hour. From 11 a.m. to noon CST, participants are invited to join the online conversation and stay ahead of drought impacts with climate updates, business insights and the latest research-tested management tips for farms, ranches and properties of all sizes.

The June 28 Drought Hour webinar will cover the following topics:

"Summer Drought and Climate Update," Laura Edwards, SDSU Extension

"Nitrate QuikTest for Standing Forages," Jaelyn Quintana, SDSU Extension Sheep Field Specialist

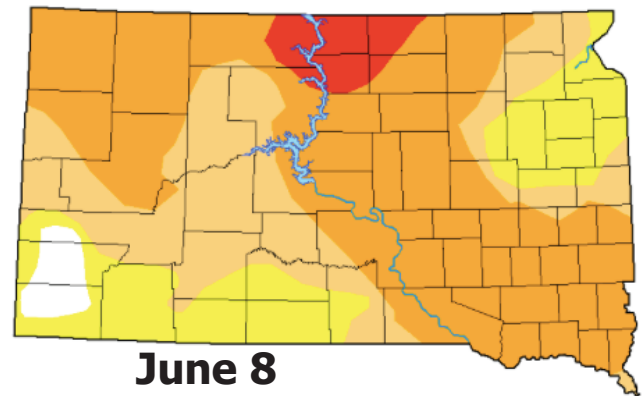
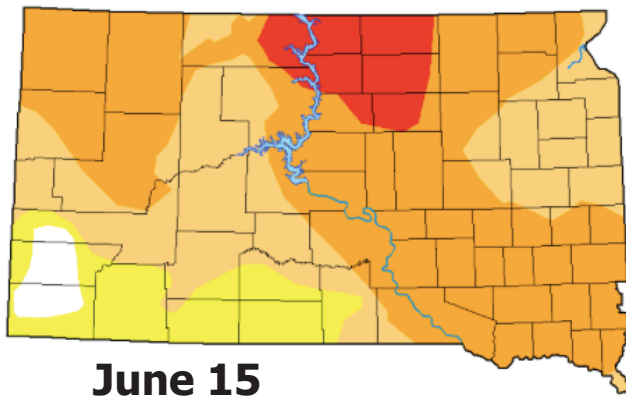
There is no fee to attend, but participants will need to register for the weekly webinars on the SDSU Extension Events page (extension.sdstate.edu/events). Confirmation Zoom links and reminders will be emailed to attendees.

In addition to the weekly webinar series, SDSU Extension has devoted an entire page on the Extension website to addressing drought concerns (extension.sdstate.edu/drought).

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Drought Monitor



High Plains

Precipitation across the High Plains region varied significantly this week, though very warm temperatures were consistent across the region. Notably, many places in the central and northern Great Plains have had warmer daytime high temperatures than much of the southern Great Plains, leading to potentially large losses of surface moisture to the atmosphere through evaporation and transpiration in the northern Great Plains. A few areas in the western half of North Dakota received enough rain from several thunderstorm events to improve their drought status, though this primarily occurred in areas with very heavy rain amounts (some locales received over 5 inches). For the most part, while welcome, the heavy rains have come after months of warm and dry conditions, and the widespread severe, extreme, and exceptional drought has been slow to improve as impacts to plants and livestock continue. In north-central and northeast South Dakota, and adjacent portions of North Dakota, moderate and severe drought expanded.

Johnson, O'Halleran Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Protect Rapid City Metropolitan Status

The OMB change would significantly impact federal programs in areas like Rapid City, South Dakota

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Representatives Dusty Johnson (R-SD) and Tom O'Halleran (D-AZ) today introduced the Metropolitan Statistical Area Preservation Act, a bill to preserve more than 140 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) from losing their classification as a MSA. In January, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a notice based on a recommendation from the Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Standards Review Committee to increase the MSA qualification from 50,000 to 100,000 people.

If implemented, this rule change would significantly impact federal programs in areas like Rapid City, South Dakota. In March, the South Dakota delegation urged OMB to reject this recommendation.

"Altering the standard MSA classification would impact more than 140 cities across the country, including Rapid City," said Johnson. "The federal programs and funding MSAs receive are vital to community's growth and development – this policy will do more harm than good across the larger cities in rural America."

"Far too many towns in rural Arizona had still not recovered from the Great Recession when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, shuttering more small businesses, and cutting local tax revenues down to near nothing," said O'Halleran. "Small towns and cities across our state need equitable access to federal funds that support the initiatives that keep families afloat and communities moving forward. I'm proud to join my colleagues in introducing this bipartisan, bicameral initiative that ensures hardworking Arizonans in rural areas throughout our state are not unfairly disadvantaged as we recover from this global health crisis."

U.S. Senators Thune (R-S.D.) and Mark Kelly (D-AZ) introduced companion legislation in the Senate on Tuesday.

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M. Strong At The Plate As Groton Jr Legion Defeats Smittys 14u

Andrew M didn't feel much like getting out on Thursday, tallying four hits and leading Groton Jr Legion to a 15-4 win over Smittys 14u. Andrew singled in the first, singled in the second, doubled in the third, and singled in the fifth.

Groton Jr Legion got things started in the first inning when Kaleb H's sac fly scored one run for Groton Jr Legion.

Groton Jr Legion put up six runs in the third inning. The rally was led by doubles by Dillon A and Andrew, a triple by Braden A, and by Tate L.

Ryan G was credited with the victory for Groton Jr Legion. The hurler went five innings, allowing four runs on seven hits.

#14 took the loss for Smittys 14u. The hurler surrendered six runs on seven hits over one and two-thirds innings, walking one.

Groton Jr Legion tallied 14 hits. Andrew, Colby D, Jordan B, and Tate each had multiple hits for Groton Jr Legion. Andrew led Groton Jr Legion with four hits in four at bats. Colby led Groton Jr Legion with four stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with 13 stolen bases.

#13 went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Smittys 14u in hits.

Two Pitchers Team Up As Groton Jr Legion Defeats Smittys 14u In Shut-Out

Groton Jr Legion defeated Smittys 14u 4-0 on Thursday as two pitchers combined to throw a shutout. Jordan B induced a groundout from #5 to finish off the game.

Groton Jr Legion scored three runs in the fifth inning. Groton Jr Legion's offense in the inning came from by Jacob L, a groundout by Caleb H, and a double by Cade L.

A double by #8 in the first inning was a positive for Smittys 14u.

Braden A got the win for Groton Jr Legion. The lefty lasted four and a third innings, allowing three hits and zero runs while striking out eight. Jordan threw two-thirds of an inning in relief out of the bullpen.

#5 took the loss for Smittys 14u. The pitcher lasted four and a third innings, allowing two hits and two runs while striking out two and walking zero.

Tate L, Cade, and Colby D each managed one hit to lead Groton Jr Legion.

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Groton Legion Post #39 Takes A Tough Blow From Milbank Post #9

Nothing came easy for Groton Legion Post #39 on Thursday, as they fell 9-0 to Post #9

A single by Peyton Johnson in the fifth inning was a positive for Groton Legion Post #39.

Kaden K earned the win for Post #9. Kaden surrendered zero runs on one hit over five innings, striking out ten and walking zero.

Alex Morris took the loss for Groton Legion Post #39. The pitcher went three and a third innings, allowing seven runs on eight hits, striking out six and walking one.

Johnson went 1-for-2 at the plate to lead Groton Legion Post #39 in hits.

Post #9 saw the ball well today, racking up ten hits in the game. Merik J and Cole S each managed multiple hits for Post #9. Merik led Post #9 with three hits in four at bats. Post #9 didn't commit a single error in the field. Justus O had the most chances in the field with ten.

Late Score Costs Groton Legion Post #39 Against Milbank Post #9

Groton Legion Post #39 lost the lead late in a 3-2 defeat to Post #9 on Thursday. The game was tied at two with Post #9 batting in the top of the sixth when Kellan H drew a walk, scoring one run.

The pitching was strong on both sides. Post #9 pitchers struck out eight, while Groton Legion Post #39 sat down seven.

In the first inning, Post #9 got their offense started. Kellan drove in one when Kellan doubled.

Groton Legion Post #39 knotted the game up at two in the bottom of the third inning. Jackson Cogley doubled on a 2-1 count, scoring one run.

Cole S earned the victory on the mound for Post #9. The righthander went two-thirds of an inning, allowing zero runs on zero hits, striking out one and walking zero.

Peyton Johnson took the loss for Groton Legion Post #39. The lefthander went five and two-thirds innings, allowing three runs on seven hits and striking out seven.

Micah D started the game for Post #9. Micah allowed six hits and two runs over five and a third innings, striking out seven and walking one

Alex Morris, Douglas Heminger, Cogley, Jayden Zak, Jonathan Doeden, and Pierce Kettering each managed one hit to lead Groton Legion Post #39.

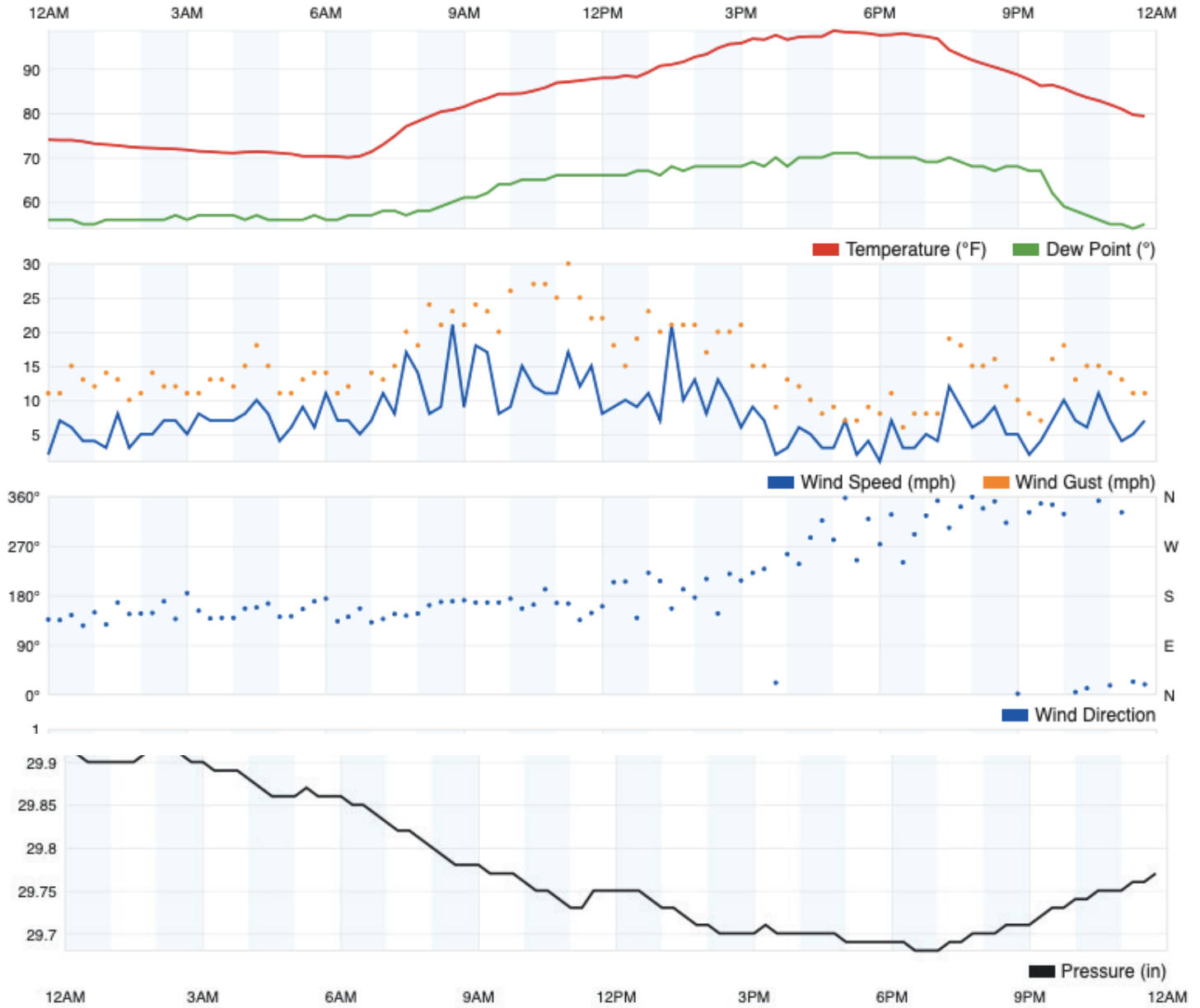
Post #9 tallied seven hits. Kellan and Steve A each managed multiple hits for Post #9. Kellan went 3-for-3 at the plate to lead Post #9 in hits. Post #9 didn't commit a single error in the field. Kaden K had eight chances in the field, the most on the team.

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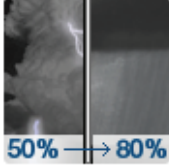
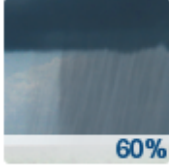
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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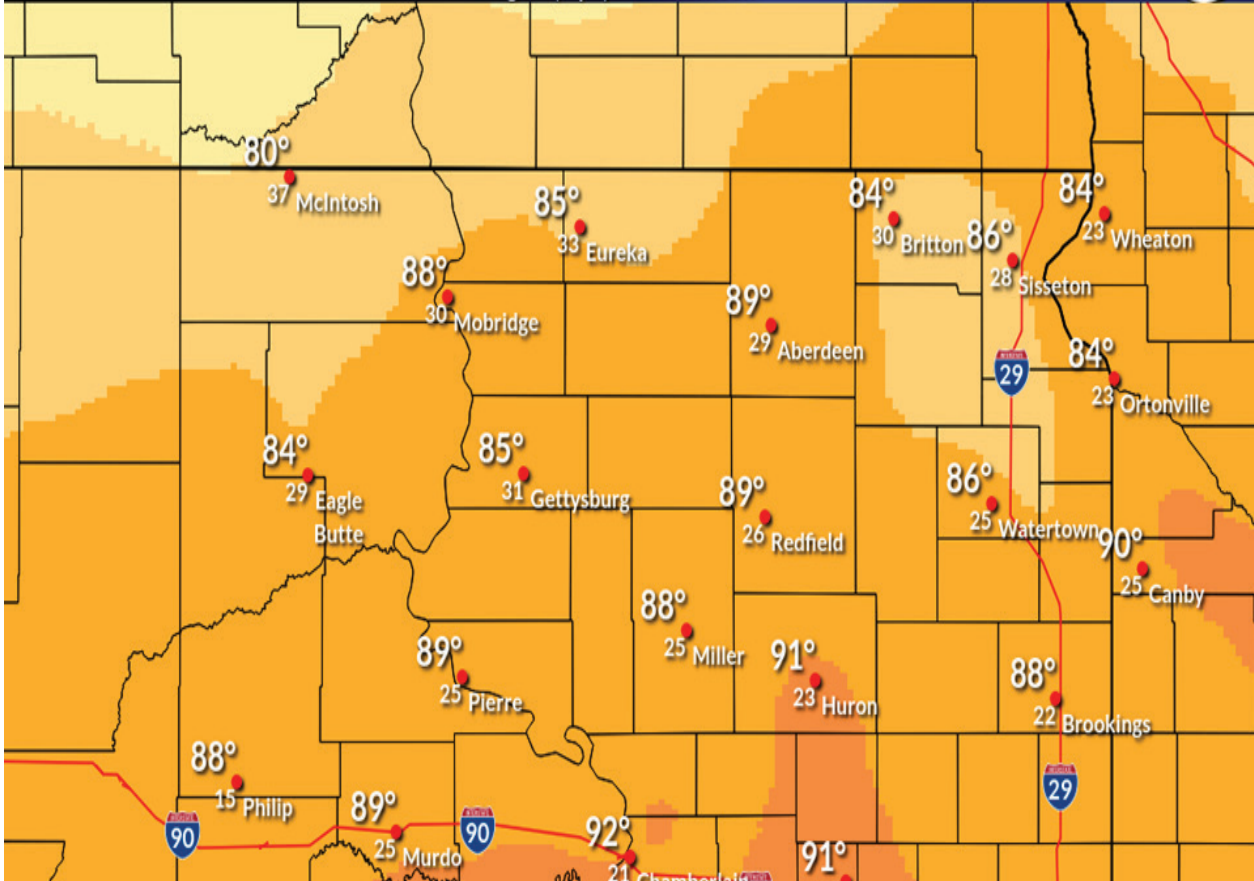
Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny	Mostly Clear and Breezy then Clear	Sunny	Chance T-storms then Showers	Showers Likely and Breezy
High: 89 °F	Low: 50 °F	High: 87 °F	Low: 59 °F	High: 77 °F

Warm, Dry, and Breezy Today

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD

The smaller number is the forecast maximum wind gust (mph) this afternoon

Issued Jun 18, 2021 4:08 AM CDT



Temperatures will top out in the 80s for most locations today with northwesterly winds gusting at around 25 to 35 mph. Precipitation chances return to the region starting Saturday afternoon, but more so Saturday night into Sunday.

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Today in Weather History

June 18, 1964: A tornado moved from SSW to NNE damaging three farmsteads between Hoven to 8 NNW of Bowdle. This tornado was estimated to have F2 strength. An estimated five inches of rain fell in three hours near Bowdle causing soil erosion just before the tornado hit.

Another storm moved from south to north and intensified as it moved northward. Winds between 50 and 100 mph were reported. The highest damage was in McPherson County where an estimated 2 million dollars in crop damage occurred. Heavy rain was also observed on this day. Some storm total rainfall includes; 6.73 inches in Eureka, 4.28 in Roscoe, 3.75 in Leola, 2.68 in Shelby, 2.45 in Britton, and 2.31 inches in Ipswich.

June 18, 1991: Large hail up to 2 inches in diameter broke windows and produced widespread tree damage in Watertown and vicinity. Extensive damage was caused to surrounding soybean and corn fields. Approximately 25,000 acres of crops were destroyed. Thunderstorm winds of 55 mph uprooted trees and downed power lines primarily on the Revillo area. Trees fell on cars, and an apartment complex was damaged.

1875 - A severe coastal storm (or possible hurricane) struck the Atlantic coast from Cape Cod to Nova Scotia. Eastport ME reported wind gusts to 57 mph. (David Ludlum)

1958: Hailstones up to four inches in diameter killed livestock as a storm passed from Joliet to Belfry in Carbon County, Montana.

1970 - Wind and rain, and hail up to seven inches deep, caused more than five million dollars damage at Oberlin KS. (The Weather Channel)

1972: Hurricane Agnes was one of the most massive June hurricanes on record. The system strengthened into a tropical storm during the night of the 15th and a hurricane on the 18th as it moved northward in the Gulf of Mexico.

1987 - It was a hot day in the Upper Great Lakes Region. Nine cities in Michigan and Wisconsin reported record high temperatures for the date. The high of 90 degrees at Marquette, MI, marked their third straight day of record heat. Severe thunderstorm in the Northern and Central High Plains Region spawned half a dozen tornadoes in Wyoming and Colorado. Wheatridge, CO, was deluged with 2.5 inches of rain in one hour. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms in eastern North Dakota and northern Minnesota produced hail three inches in diameter and spawned four tornadoes in Steele County. Thunderstorms also produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Clearbrook MN. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. In Arizona, afternoon highs of 103 degrees at Winslow, 113 degrees at Tucson, and 115 degrees at Phoenix were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

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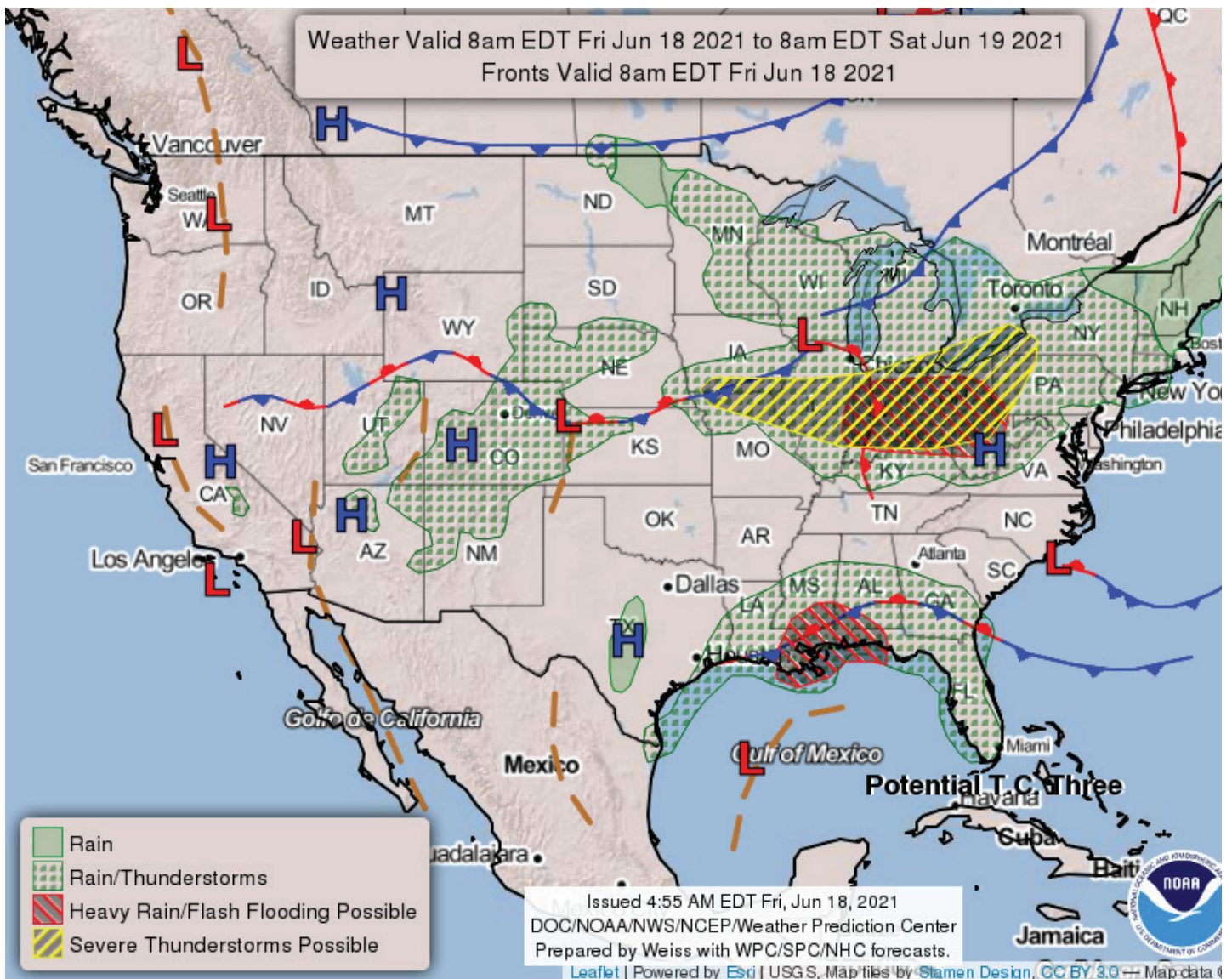
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 85.4 °F
Low Temp: 62.8 °F
Wind: 17 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 108° in 1933
Record Low: 38° in 1902
Average High: 81°F
Average Low: 56°F
Average Precip in June.: 2.03
Precip to date in June.: 0.53
Average Precip to date: 9.28
Precip Year to Date: 4.50
Sunset Tonight: 9:25 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:45 a.m.



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THE GOD WHO CAN

God often brings a difficult situation into our lives so He can turn it into a delightful memory so that we can remind ourselves of His love and mercy. Often when we face an impossible dilemma, He turns it into a blessing that will provide a story of His incredible power that we can share with our children. There are times when He turns overwhelming obstacles into great opportunities to demonstrate His power and terrible times and trials into triumphs and testimonies of His strength that we can share with others.

David wanted to remind the children of God about the greatness of God and wrote, "He turned the sea into dry land (and) they passed through the waters on foot – come let us rejoice in Him!"

The children of Israel were on their way to the Promised Land. When they came to the coast, they made their camp. Suddenly they turned around and saw their enemy coming to destroy them. Before them was the sea. Behind them was their enemy. When they looked at their options, they came to the conclusion that they would either drown or be destroyed. At that moment, they could not see God. But God was there as He always is.

And as He was with them, so is He with us! God is always between His children and the catastrophes of life. He never abandons us when we face the difficult decisions or demands of life.

If God could turn the sea into dry land and if the children of Israel were able to pass through the waters on foot, He can do the same for us today. With problems before us and troubles and trials behind us He can – and will - deliver us.

Prayer: Give us a faith, Father that will overcome every fear we face. May our trust in You grow as we see You at work in our world. In Jesus' Name, Amen!

Scripture For Today: He made a dry path through the Red Sea, and his people went across on foot. There we rejoiced in him. Psalm 66:6

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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

News from the Associated Press

Noem OKs holiday for state workers in honor of Juneteenth

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has declared Friday a holiday for state workers in honor of Juneteenth.

Noem said her decision is in response to legislation signed Thursday by President Joe Biden establishing a new federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery.

"All men are created equal.' That is America's foundational ideal," Noem said in a statement. "Juneteenth celebrates an important day when we came closer to making that ideal a reality for all Americans, regardless of race."

Juneteenth is meant to remember June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers brought the news of freedom to enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas. That was about 2 1/2 years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the Southern states.

"I hope state employees take the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful South Dakota weather on their day off," Noem said.

White-nose syndrome confirmed in Wyoming bats for 1st time

GILLETTE, Wyo. (AP) — Two bats from northeastern Wyoming's Devils Tower National Monument have been found with the state's first confirmed cases of a deadly fungal disease.

White-nose syndrome has killed millions of bats in North America since the fungus first appeared in New York in 2006.

Testing showed signs of the fungus in bats from southeastern Wyoming in 2018. The recent confirmation at Devils Tower, the first U.S. national monument, is "disheartening and frustrating," park resources management chief Russ Cash said.

"Bats are such an important piece of our ecosystem and our well-being as humans. Bats devour unbelievable amounts of insects and pests that are a nuisance," Cash said in a statement Tuesday.

The positive test results were no surprise. Biologists confirmed the disease in the Black Hills in South Dakota in 2018 and a dead bat in southeastern Montana's Fallon County in April, the Gillette News Record reports.

The disease has appeared in at least 37 states and seven Canadian provinces.

The fungus spreads mainly between bats but climbers and cavers can spread it too. They should clean and disinfect shoes, clothes and gear before and after visiting bat habitat and avoid reusing potentially exposed items in places free of the fungus, National Park Service officials said.

Avera Health building new medical center in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Avera Health has plans to build a \$34 million medical center in Sioux Falls, the health system announced Thursday.

The three-story center in southeastern Sioux Falls will provide family medicine, urgent care, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, internal medicine and dermatology, Avera said in a release.

Avera will occupy the first two floors when the building is done in January 2023. The third story is for future expansion.

"This center will serve a growing sector of our city with a wide range of medical services," said David Flicek, president and CEO of Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center and Chief Administrative Officer of Avera Medical Group.

Flicek said the facility will employ 60 to 70 people.

"The east side of Sioux Falls is growing, with a great deal of residential and commercial development planned for the future," Flicek said. "We're taking this proactive step to ensure this area of the city has

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ready access to health care through our family health center model.”

Avera Medical Group Family Health Center on the other side of Sioux Falls was built in 2016. A \$760,000 project is underway on the top floor to expand some current practices, including pediatrics and family medicine.

Survey: strong growth continues in rural parts of 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Strong growth continues across rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states and three states now have more jobs than they did before the coronavirus pandemic began, according to a monthly survey of bankers released Thursday.

The overall Rural Mainstreet economic index slipped in June to 70 from May’s record high of 78.8, but it remained in positive territory. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey, said the number of nonfarm jobs across the region remains 2% below where it was before the pandemic began, but three states — Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska — reported employment levels above where they were before the virus emerged last year.

The hiring index for the region remained high at 71.7 in June even though it was slightly lower than May’s 72.7 reading.

Goss said the region continues to benefit from growing exports, strong grain prices and continued low interest rates.

Bankers generally remain optimistic about the economy over the next six months. The confidence index also stayed strong at 71.7 in June although it was down from May’s 78.8.

More than three-quarters of the bankers said they think the Federal Reserve should start raising interest rates before the end of this year.

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

Second earthquake recorded in South Dakota this month

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Another earthquake has been recorded in South Dakota, the fifth since December.

According to the United States Geological Survey, a 2.6 magnitude quake was recorded about 6:30 a.m. Wednesday with the epicenter about 60 miles east of Rapid City.

It’s the second measurable earthquake this month. A 3.7 magnitude earthquake was recorded on June 4 on the border between South Dakota and Nebraska.

The largest earthquake recorded in South Dakota was a magnitude 4.5 quake south of Huron in 1911.

Damage does not usually occur until the earthquake magnitude reaches somewhere above 4 or 5, according to the USGS.

Senator: Military justice changes must go beyond sex cases

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand is on the brink of success in her yearslong campaign to get sexual assault cases removed from the military chain of command. But getting over the finish line may depend on whether she can overcome wariness about broader changes she’s seeking to the military justice system.

There is now widespread support for using independent military lawyers to handle sexual misconduct cases, but Gillibrand is promoting legislation that goes beyond that, extending that change to all major crimes. Top Pentagon officials and key lawmakers are open to the sexual assault shift, but they say applying it more broadly requires far more study and debate.

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In an interview with The Associated Press, Gillibrand said the wider change is necessary to combat racial injustice within the military, where studies have found that Black people are more likely to be investigated and arrested for misconduct. She intends to press that point in the coming days.

Asked if she might compromise on her bill, Gillibrand said that time has passed. "We've been doing that for eight years. We've been getting something through every year, and some things just don't work. You need this broad-based reform," the New York Democrat said. "This is a bill whose time has come."

For years, however, lawmakers have framed their push for change in the military justice system around problems with sexual misconduct cases. Victims — largely women — have long said they are reluctant to file sexual assault or harassment complaints because they fear they won't be believed or will face retaliation. They've complained that allegations are sometimes dismissed by a good ol' boys network among unit commanders or that attackers get away with minimal punishments.

Those complaints have resonated, and support has grown on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon, where senior defense leaders acknowledge that, despite years of effort, they've made little progress combating sexual misconduct in the ranks. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for the first time said they were open to taking sexual assault and harassment charges out of the chain of command.

But both also said that extending the change to all major crimes would require more time and review.

Similarly, Sen. Jack Reed, chair of the Armed Services Committee, supports the change for sexual misconduct and said this week that he believes it will get committee approval. But he said he wants more thorough discussion within the committee for changes that affect the entire Uniform Code of Military Justice.

"The worst thing we can do to victims of sexual assault is to move a bill through that can't be implemented effectively or on time, creates too large a workload for too few qualified military judge advocates, imperils prosecutions, leads to convictions being overturned on appeal, or results in neglected cases because the necessary attention cannot be devoted to them," he said.

Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, said Pentagon estimates indicate the broader bill would require more senior qualified lawyers than the department has, and will take 180 days to implement. He also has repeatedly objected to Gillibrand's efforts to get unanimous approval to move her bill separately to the full Senate for a vote, saying it should be included in the overall defense bill.

Asked about cost, Gillibrand said it will be "very little" because the prosecutors already are in place and they already take the cases to court.

The Pentagon, however, believes it won't be that simple, and that if lawyers are pulled out of the chain of command to handle major crimes, others will be needed to deal with other cases and duties, such as desertion, military discipline or legal policy reviews.

Jeh Johnson, former Pentagon general counsel, wrote in the Lawfare blog on Wednesday that Gillibrand's bill "appears to require a whole new bureaucracy. ... No one should be under the illusion that the broad mission contemplated by the bill can be carried by a small band of elite JAGs in a suite someplace in northern Virginia."

Johnson said a change for sexual assault crimes is long overdue, but added, "Congress should take care to fashion a solution commensurate with the problem at hand, and not go too far."

Gillibrand, who has 65 other Senate supporters for her bill, acknowledged that overcoming committee leaders' opposition will be a challenge.

"Having the chairman and ranking member opposed to this reform is highly problematic if this bill goes to the committee," said Gillibrand, adding, "It would be easier if the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the secretary of defense supported our proposal."

An independent review commission set up by Austin has recommended a similar change for sexual misconduct but did not consider other crimes in its study. Its plan would have judge advocates report to a civilian-led Office of the Chief Special Victim Prosecutor, and they would decide whether to charge someone and if the charge goes to court martial. The panel is expected to give Austin a report on prevention and victim support programs shortly, and he will then send his own recommendations to the president.

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The Pentagon, said Gillibrand, will use the panel's initial report "to confuse members of Congress, and they will try to muddy the waters and say, we've already looked at this and they only recommended that sexual assault come out of the chain of command."

She said she hopes lawmakers will be convinced by data that shows racial bias in prosecution decisions made by the military. And she argued that limiting the change to sexual assault would be discriminatory — setting up what some call a "pink" court to deal with crimes usually involving female victims.

"I'm deeply concerned that if they limit it to just sexual assault, it will really harm female service members. It will further marginalize them, further undermine them, and they'll be seen as getting special treatment," she said.

Eugene R. Fidell, a military law expert at New York University Law School, agreed, saying a separate system that largely benefits women will hurt unit cohesion. And he noted opponents' concerns that taking all major crimes out of the chain of command could result in fewer prosecutions. He said that's possible, but added that independent attorneys should make those decisions, and the result would be a higher conviction rate.

Gillibrand is pledging to keep going to the Senate floor, seeking to have her bill considered separately. "I will continue to do so until I convince Jack Reed that he should not stand in front of this bill," she said.

The Latest: France's Macron brings back customary kisses

By The Associated Press undefined

PARIS — French President Emmanuel Macron has kissed two World War II veterans on the cheeks, returning to a tradition that was abandoned at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

French authorities have recommended people to avoid "la bise," the custom of giving kisses of greeting, to avoid spreading the virus. Macron kissed the veterans on Friday while wearing a mask.

The president, who had COVID-19 in December and since been vaccinated against the disease, awarded the Legion of Honor to Leon Gautier, 98, a member of a French elite unite that took part in Normandy D-Day landings in 1944 and fellow World War II veteran Rene Crignola, 99, during a ceremony marking Gen. Charles De Gaulle's June 18, 1940 appeal for the people of France to resist the Nazis.

The French government this week announced a relaxation of virus restrictions, including allowing people to forego masks outdoors. A nighttime curfew is set to end on Sunday.

MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

- India switches policy to make shots free but still short of vaccines
- Some in Washington seeking 9/11-style commission on coronavirus
- Dr. Fauci: U.S. to spend \$3B for antiviral pills for COVID-19

Follow more of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

MADRID - Spain is planning to scrap its requirement to wear face masks outdoors.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced Friday that the government will pass a measure next week to life the requirement as of from June 26.

Sánchez called the move "a very important announcement for the 47 million people in our country." He added: "This will be our last weekend wearing masks outside."

Some regional authorities have in recent weeks urged the Spanish government to drop the outdoor mask requirement, which has become increasingly unpopular as temperatures rise with the approach of summer.

MOSCOW -- Confirmed COVID-19 cases in Moscow hit a daily record Friday and increased nearly 30% from the day before.

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Authorities reported 9,056 new cases in Russia's capital, the city's highest daily surge since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

In all of Russia, 17,262 new infections were registered Friday, the highest daily tally since early February. Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said this week that Moscow was seeing the effects of new virus variant that is "more aggressive, more difficult to tolerate, spreads faster."

In response to the soaring case numbers, Moscow authorities imposed an 11 p.m. curfew on bars and restaurants and made COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory for individuals working in retail, education, health care, public transportation and other trades that provide services to a large number of people.

On Friday, Sobyenin extended the bar and restaurant curfew until the end of the month and temporarily banned entertainment events with more than 1,000 spectators. The mayor also announced that a dozen restaurants in Moscow will become "coronavirus-free" by only allowing in vaccinated customers.

JERUSALEM — Israel says it will transfer around 1 million doses of soon-to-expire coronavirus vaccines to the Palestinian Authority in exchange for a similar number of doses the Palestinians expect to receive later this year.

Israel, which has reopened after vaccinating some 85% of its adult population, has faced criticism for not sharing its vaccines with the 4.5 million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The agreement was announced Friday by the new Israeli government that was sworn in on Sunday. It said it would transfer Pfizer vaccines that will expire soon, and that the PA would transfer a similar number of vaccines when it receives them from the pharmaceutical company in September or October.

Israel has carried out one of the most successful vaccination programs in the world, allowing it to fully reopen businesses and schools. This week, authorities lifted the requirement to wear masks in public, one of the last remaining restrictions.

BERLIN — Germany's health minister says the country has given a first coronavirus vaccine shot to more than half of the population. But authorities are urging people to remain cautious because of the prospect of the more contagious delta variant spreading.

Health Minister Jens Spahn said Friday that 41.5 million people -- or 50.1% of Germany's total population -- has received at least one vaccine dose. He said that 29.6% of the population is now fully vaccinated.

Germany has averaged more than 800,000 shots of vaccine per day over the past week. Spahn said it should be possible to offer everyone who wants to get vaccinated a shot "within a few weeks."

But officials pointed to Britain's experience with the delta variant, first discovered in India, as grounds for caution.

Spahn said: "The question won't be whether delta also becomes the dominant variant in Germany and continental Europe, but ... when and under what conditions."

LAHORE, Pakistan — People in Pakistan's most populated province are thronging COVID-19 vaccination centers days after Punjab authorities threatened to block cellphone service for those who refuse to get shots.

It was not immediately clear exactly when the provincial government will start cutting off phone service for people who won't get vaccinated.

The move in Punjab came after officials in Sindh province said they would withhold the July salaries of for government employees who do not receive COVID-19 jabs by June 30.

Officials said the positivity rate in Pakistan has dropped to less than 2%, indicated the country's third infection wave of the pandemic has peaked.

Pakistan has registered a total of 946,227 confirmed cases and 21,913 deaths in the pandemic since last year.

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California workers who've been vaccinated against COVID-19 can unmask as the

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state relaxed its COVID-19 safety rules and planned Friday to unveil an electronic verification system that Gov. Gavin Newsom denies is a "vaccine passport."

Regulators on Thursday approved revised rules allowing fully vaccinated employees the same freedoms on and off the job, including ending most mask and physical distancing requirements.

Newsom immediately issued an executive order waiving the usual 10-day legal review and allowing the changes to take effect as soon as they are filed with the secretary of state.

The rules apply in almost every workplace in the state, including offices, factories and retailers. They come after weeks of confusion as the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board flip-flopped over changes.

The measures now conform with general state guidelines that took effect Tuesday by ending most mask rules for vaccinated people. Employers can require workers to show proof of vaccination or allow them to self-report and keep a record.

Everybody still must wear masks on mass transit and in health facilities.

ATLANTA — Georgia officials say state health workers and others will participate in more than 370 community vaccination events between now and July 4th, trying to push up the state's lagging rate of COVID-19 vaccination.

Georgia ranks in the bottom 10, per capita, for vaccinations, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

The announcement came Thursday, the day before Vice President Kamala Harris will visit Atlanta Friday to promote vaccination.

Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock also released a public service announcement urging Georgians to get a shot.

Despite the low vaccination rates, Public Health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey says she remains hopeful that Georgia can reach 70% to 80% of the eligible population in coming months.

LANSING, Mich. — Michigan will lift all indoor capacity restrictions and mask requirements next week, 10 days sooner than planned amid vaccinations and plummeting COVID-19 infections, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced Thursday.

The state's main coronavirus order will expire at the end of Monday instead of July 1, bringing an end to mandatory 50% occupancy limits inside restaurants, gyms and entertainment venues and at indoor events like weddings and funerals.

"Today is a day that we have all been looking forward to, as we can safely get back to normal day-to-day activities and put this pandemic behind us," Whitmer, a Democrat, said in statement issued 15 months after she first signed emergency orders to control the coronavirus.

About 4.9 million residents, or 60%, of those ages 16 and older have gotten at least one vaccine dose.

State health officials said some virus orders will remain in place to protect vulnerable populations in prisons, long-term care facilities and the agriculture industry. Guidance for schools, where many students are not yet authorized to be vaccinated, will be issued next week.

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee on Thursday announced a new COVID-19 vaccine incentive lottery for the state's military, family members and veterans because the federal government wasn't sharing individual vaccine status of those groups with the state and there were concerns they would be left out of a previously announced lottery.

The announcement comes after last week's start of a lottery that has already had two drawings for \$250,000 prizes, and also includes giveaways for college tuition assistance, airline tickets and game systems, among other prizes.

A final drawing in that lottery will be for a \$1 million prize on July 13. Washington is among several states that created lotteries in hopes of increasing the pace of vaccination. The governor's office believes the state is the first with a separate lottery for those who have been vaccinated at military locations.

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The new separate lottery applies to military, military staff and family members who were vaccinated through the Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs, or the National Guard. A spokesman for Inslee said that the Department of Defense will be involved in circulating a form for military members to fill out.

WASHINGTON — There's a push on Capitol Hill and beyond for a full-blown investigation of the coronavirus outbreak by a national commission like the one that looked into 9/11.

The proposal comes amid lingering questions over the government's response to the crisis and the origin of the virus that has killed more than 600,000 Americans.

A bill introduced by Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine would establish such a commission.

The inquiry could include a look at the origins of the virus; early warnings and other communication with foreign governments; coordination among federal, state and local agencies; the availability of medical supplies; testing and public health surveillance; vaccination development and distribution; the uneven effect on minorities; and government relief policies.

Many are concerned politics will get in the way of any inquiry, as happened when Republicans came out against a commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan is locking down because of a massive spike in coronavirus cases among employees.

The embassy in Kabul already is on uncertain footing due to the imminent withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Now the embassy is ordering staffers into virtual isolation to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

It's already killed at least one person and sent 114 into quarantine. The embassy says in a notice to employees that most group activities, including work meetings and recreational gatherings, are banned.

The restrictions will remain in place until the chain of transmission is broken. Violators will be removed from the country on the next available flight.

NEW YORK — The U.S. Open tennis tournament will allow 100% spectator capacity throughout its entire two weeks in 2021.

This comes a year after spectators were banned from the Grand Slam event in New York because of the coronavirus pandemic. The U.S. Tennis Association made the announcement Thursday. The U.S. Open, held at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, is scheduled to start on Aug. 30.

The U.S. Open will be the first Grand Slam tournament to have full attendance since the Australian Open in January-February 2020, before the start of the pandemic. More than 700,000 people attended the two-week U.S. Open in 2019.

On Tuesday, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said many of the state's remaining social distancing rules would be eased because 70% of its adults have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine.

LONDON — The U.K. has recorded more than 10,000 daily coronavirus infections for the first time in nearly four months, likely the result of the spread of the more contagious delta variant.

Government figures Thursday reported 11,007 daily cases, the highest daily amount since Feb. 19.

The variant, which accounts for around 95% of all new cases in the U.K., is considered by government scientists to be between 40% to 80% more transmissible than the previous dominant strain.

The spread of the variant upended plans for the lifting of all restrictions on social contact next week. Instead, Prime Minister Boris Johnson delayed the easing by four weeks to July 19.

Most of the new infections are among younger age groups who have not received a vaccine. The U.K.'s vaccine rollout will be extended to all adults over age 18 on Friday.

WASHINGTON — The United States is devoting more than \$3 billion to advance development of antiviral

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pills for COVID-19 and other dangerous viruses that could turn into pandemics.

The pills would be used to minimize symptoms after infection. They are in development and could begin arriving by year's end, pending the completion of clinical trials.

Top U.S. infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci announced the plan Thursday at a White House briefing. Fauci says the new program would invest in "accelerating things that are already in progress" for COVID-19 but would also work to innovate new therapies for other dangerous viruses.

Several companies, including Pfizer, Roche and AstraZeneca, are testing antivirals in pill form.

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Rare poached cacti found in Italy sent home to native Chile

By TRISHA THOMAS Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Armed with a search warrant, Italy's police wildlife unit entered the house of a suspected cactus trafficker, finding over 1,000 rare cacti poached from Chile's Atacama Desert in a locked room.

This February 2020 discovery became one of the largest known cactus busts and the catalyst for an international effort among cacti experts, police, conservationists and governments to return the plants to their native countries.

What Lt. Col Simone Cecchini and his team found in Senigallia, a town on central Italy's Adriatic coast, were hundreds of *Copiapoa cinerea* and *Eriosyce* cacti that had been uprooted from the desert. They also found the suspected trafficker's passport, computer and other documents that helped them reconstruct his operation.

The suspect, an Italian in his 40s, had made seven trips to Chile, from where he sent boxes of cacti to Romania and Greece. They then were brought to Italy and sold to clients, mostly in Asia.

"I never imagined there could be a market like this. I never thought a cacti could be sent by post to Japan for 1,200 euros (\$1,430)," Cecchini said.

He reached out to Andrea Cattabriga, president of the Association for Biodiversity and Conservation, and asked him to examine the specimens to confirm they had plundered from the Chilean desert, which is considered the driest non-polar desert in the world. The region, west of the Andes Mountains, has been used by scientists as a site to simulate Mars expeditions.

In a small town on the outskirts of Bologna, Cattabriga has several greenhouses where he legally grows a wide variety of rare cacti from certified seeds. He then tries to recreate their natural habitat and uses cotton swabs for pollination. This has given him the ability to distinguish between those grown in greenhouses and others pulled out of the desert.

Cattabriga immediately contacted the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which keeps a red list of endangered species around the globe. According to the IUCN, about one-third of 1,478 cacti species are classified as threatened.

Yet while there's international concern about the risk of extinction for rhinos, tigers or pandas, few people are aware or concerned about the possibility of a cactus species becoming extinct.

"I think part of it is because plants are everywhere. So we take them for granted," said Barbara Goettsch, co-chair of the IUCN's cactus and succulent plants group. "In the specific case of cacti, these are more threatened with extinctions than birds or mammals."

Cacti have become increasingly popular both as collectors' items and as decorative house plants. In recent years, demand has been growing in China, Japan and Thailand.

Cattabriga and Cecchini decided the size of the seizure required an historic action: plants had to be returned to Chile.

"When a stolen work of art is recovered, it is returned," said Cattabriga. "It had to be the same for these cacti."

But sending them back was easier said than done. Shortly after the seizure, Italy went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The confiscated cacti were moved to a greenhouse at the Botanical Garden at the University of Milan. Then they launched a year-long effort to cut through red tape and find the

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funds for the transfer.

In Chile, Pablo Guerrero of the Botanical Department at the University of Concepcion began organizing with the Chile's National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) to receive the plants.

Finally, over a year after the cacti were discovered, the recovery plan fell into place. Cattabriga joined officers from Cecchini's wildlife team wrapping up 844 plants to be sent back to Chile. Of those confiscated from the suspected trafficker, 107 had died.

On April 18, 2021, the plants arrived at the airport in Santiago and were taken to a special quarantine center on the outskirts of the Chilean capital. They will remain there until August.

Their future is still uncertain. Politicians are pushing for them to be returned to the Atacama Desert. But Guerrero is concerned that the plants may not survive that direct planting. He is pushing for a special botanical garden in the Coquimbo region where their natural habitat can be reproduced.

Meanwhile, the suspected trafficker and an accomplice have been charged and will face trial in Ancona, Italy. He declined to speak to The Associated Press. Cecchini also said people who collaborated with the suspect have been put into a Europol database and will be monitored.

"Most people in Chile do not think we have species poaching. They think poaching is about rhinoceros or elephants very far away. They are not aware that it is right here with our cacti," said Guerrero.

EXPLAINER: India switches policy but still short of vaccines

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — Starting Monday, every adult in India will be eligible for a free vaccine paid for by the federal government.

The new policy, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week, ends a complex system introduced just last month of buying and distributing vaccines that overburdened states and led to inequities in how the shots were handed out.

India is a key supplier of vaccines around the world, and its missteps at home have led it to stop exports of shots, leaving millions of people around the world waiting unprotected. Only about 3.5% of Indians are fully vaccinated and while supporters hope the policy change will make vaccine distribution more equitable, poor planning means shortages will continue.

Here's a look at the changes to India's vaccine policy and what they mean.

THE EARLIER POLICY

India has vast experience in running large immunization programs, and each year it distributes 300 million shots to infants and mothers for free. For these programs, the federal government is in charge of buying the vaccines and then works with the states to figure out how best to distribute them.

But the scale of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign is unprecedented. And a massive surge in March pushed India's health system to the breaking point. As hundreds of thousands of people became infected each day and hospitals overflowed with patients gasping for air, the states complained they weren't getting enough shots from the federal government and clamored for more control over how the vaccines were distributed.

So, starting in May, the federal government agreed to buy just half of all vaccines produced for use in India and continued to give them out for free to health care and frontline workers and those over 45. The other half became available for states and private hospitals to buy directly. These vaccines were destined for people between 18 and 45; they were free if obtained from the the states, but cost money if obtained privately.

WHY IT DIDN'T WORK

The states had never bought vaccines before and a limited supply meant they were competing with one another as well as with private hospitals. They were forced to pay higher prices than the federal government could have negotiated, said Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya, a health policy expert.

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"That essentially makes it inefficient," he said.

Private hospitals passed that cost on to people, and amid shortages at government centers, people had to either pay for a vaccine, or not get a shot.

The change in policy also expanded eligibility to all adults. Expanding the criteria despite shortages meant shots weren't always going to the groups the federal government initially said it would prioritize: those with essential jobs and the elderly. Since May, more people younger than 45 have received their first shot than those older than 60. More than 74 million people over 60 remain unvaccinated.

Modi said these decisions were taken to satisfy the states' demands, but the fractured response may have cost lives, said Dr. Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Pune city.

WHAT HAS CHANGED NOW?

The federal government has now decided to buy a larger portion of vaccines — but it's still not returning fully to its original policy. It will buy 75% of all vaccines made for use in India and likely renegotiate prices. These shots will be given to states and will continue to be distributed for free. Private hospitals can buy the remaining 25% at prices that have been capped and can charge for them.

States will receive vaccines based on their populations, disease burdens and how many people have been vaccinated. They will be penalized for wasting doses.

But supply remains a challenge. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said: "Where will the vaccines come from is a big question."

India has placed orders for vaccines still in development, but for the moment it will continue to rely on existing, overstretched suppliers like the Serum Institute of India.

Iran votes in presidential poll tipped in hard-liner's favor

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranians voted Friday in a presidential election that a hard-line protege of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei seemed likely to win, leading to low turnout fueled by apathy and calls for a boycott.

Opinion polling by state-linked organizations and analysts indicated that judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi — who is already under U.S. sanctions — was the dominant front-runner in a field of just four candidates. Former Central Bank chief, Abdolnasser Hemmati, is running as the race's moderate candidate but hasn't inspired the same support as outgoing President Hassan Rouhani, who is term limited from seeking the office again.

By mid-day, turnout appeared far lower than Iran's last presidential election in 2017. State television offered tight shots of polling places, several of which seemed to have only a handful of voters in the election's early hours.

Those passing by several polling places in Tehran said they similarly saw few voters. In some images on state TV, poll workers wore gloves and masks due to the coronavirus pandemic, with some wiping down ballot boxes with disinfectants.

If elected, Raisi would be the first serving Iranian president sanctioned by the U.S. government even before entering office over his involvement in the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988, as well as his time as the head of Iran's internationally criticized judiciary — one of the world's top executioners.

It also would put hard-liners firmly in control across the Iranian government as negotiations in Vienna continue to try to save a tattered deal meant to limit Iran's nuclear program at a time when it is enriching uranium to the closest point yet to weapons-grade levels. Tensions remain high with both the U.S. and Israel, which is believed to have carried out a series of attacks targeting Iranian nuclear sites as well as assassinating the scientist who created its military atomic program decades earlier.

Whoever wins will likely serve two four-year terms and thus may be at the helm at what could be one of the most-crucial moments for the country in decades — the death of the 82-year-old Khamenei. Already,

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speculation has mounted that Raisi may be a contender for the position, along with Khamenei's son, Mojtaba.

Polls opened at 7 a.m. local time for the vote, which has seen widespread public apathy after a panel overseen by Khamenei barred hundreds of candidates, including reformists and those aligned with Rouhani. Khamenei cast the first vote from Tehran, where he urged the public to take part.

"Through the participation of the people the country and the Islamic ruling system will win great points in the international arena, but the ones who benefit first are the people themselves," Khamenei said. "Go ahead, choose and vote."

Raisi, wearing a black turban that identifies him in Shiite tradition as a direct descendant of Islam's Prophet Muhammad, voted from a mosque in southern Tehran, waving to those gathered to cast ballots. The cleric acknowledged in comments afterward that some may be "so upset that they don't want to vote."

"I beg everyone, the lovely youths, and all Iranian men and women speaking in any accent or language from any region and with any political views, to go and vote and cast their ballots," Raisi said.

But few appeared to heed the call. There are more than 59 million eligible voters in Iran, a nation home to over 80 million people. However, the state-linked Iranian Student Polling Agency has estimated a turnout will be just 44%, which would be the lowest ever since the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Fears about a low turnout have some warning Iran may be turning away from being an Islamic Republic — a government with elected civilian leadership overseen by a supreme leader from its Shiite clergy — to a country more tightly governed by its supreme leader, who already has final say on all matters of state and oversees its defense and atomic program.

"This is not acceptable," said former President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who sought to change the theocracy from the inside during his eight years in office. "How would this conform to being a republic or Islamic?"

As Hemmati voted in Tehran, he was mobbed by journalists and told them that the Iranian people have the "right to have a peaceful and good life."

For his part, Khamenei warned of "foreign plots" seeking to depress turnout in a speech Wednesday. A flyer handed out Wednesday on the streets of Tehran by hard-liners echoed that and bore the image of Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2020. A polling station was set up by Soleimani's grave on Friday.

"If we do not vote: Sanctions will be heavier, the U.S. and Israel will be encouraged to attack Iran," the leaflet warned. "Iran will be under shadow of a Syrian-style civil war and the ground will be ready for assassination of scientists and important figures."

Some voters appeared to echo that call.

"We cannot leave our destiny in the hands of foreigners and let them decide for us and create conditions that will be absolutely harmful for us," Tehran voter Shahla Pazouki said. "We should change our country's situation by cooperation with each other."

Yet the disqualification of candidates seemed aimed at preventing anyone other than Raisi from winning the election. Also hurting a moderate like Hemmati is the public anger aimed at Rouhani, whose signature 2015 nuclear deal collapsed after then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018. Iran's already-ailing economy has suffered since, with double-digit inflation and mass unemployment.

The vote "is set to be the least competitive election in the Islamic Republic's history," wrote Torbjorn Soltvedt, an analyst at the risk consultancy firm Verisk Maplecroft. "There will be little need for the more overt forms of election fraud that characterized the turbulent reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009."

Rouhani, after casting his vote at the Interior Ministry, urged people to vote as it was important "for the county, the fate of people and the system."

Israel to send 1M coronavirus vaccine doses to Palestinians

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel said Friday it will transfer around 1 million doses of soon-to-expire coronavirus

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vaccines to the Palestinian Authority in exchange for a similar number of doses the Palestinians expect to receive later this year.

Israel, which has fully reopened after vaccinating some 85% of its adult population, has faced criticism for not sharing its vaccines with the 4.5 million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The disparity played out across the globe as the bulk of vaccines went to wealthy countries. As those countries have made progress containing their own outbreaks, they have recently begun pledging supplies for poorer countries that were left behind for months.

The new Israeli government, which was sworn in on Sunday, said it would transfer Pfizer vaccines that will expire soon, and that the PA would reimburse it with a similar number of vaccines when it receives them from the pharmaceutical company in September or October. Up to 1.4 million doses could be exchanged, the government said in a statement.

"We will continue to find effective ways to cooperate for the benefit of people in the region," Foreign Minister Yair Lapid tweeted after the deal was announced.

There was no immediate comment from the Palestinian Authority, and it was not immediately clear whether it has the capacity to distribute the vaccines before they expire.

Israel has carried out one of the most successful vaccination programs in the world, allowing it to fully reopen businesses and schools. This week, authorities lifted the requirement to wear masks in public, one of the last remaining restrictions.

Rights groups have said that Israel, as an occupying power, is obliged to provide vaccines to the Palestinians. Israel denies having such an obligation, pointing to interim peace agreements reached with the Palestinians in the 1990s.

Those agreements say the PA, which has limited autonomy in parts of the occupied West Bank, is responsible for health care but that the two sides should cooperate to combat pandemics. Israel has offered vaccines to the more than 100,000 Palestinians from the occupied West Bank who work inside Israel, as well as Palestinians in east Jerusalem.

Gaza is ruled by the Islamic militant group Hamas, which is considered a terrorist organization by Israel and Western countries. Israeli officials have suggested linking any supply of vaccines to Gaza to the return of two Israeli captives and the remains of two soldiers held by Hamas.

The PA has said it is acquiring its own supplies through agreements with private companies and a World Health Organization program designed to aid needy countries. It was not immediately clear whether the expected Pfizer doses are being supplied through that program, known as COVAX, or a private arrangement.

To date, around 380,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and around 50,000 in Gaza have been vaccinated. More than 300,000 infections have been recorded in the two territories, including 3,545 deaths.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want a state in all three territories. There have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade.

Germany hits vaccination milestone but wary of delta variant

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany has now given at least one coronavirus vaccine shot to more than half its population but officials urged people Friday to remain cautious and slow the spread of the more contagious delta variant.

COVID-19 infections have declined sharply in Germany over the past few weeks, on some days dropping below 1,000 per day for the first time since September. On Friday, the national disease control center said 1,076 new cases were reported in the past 24 hours, and there were only 10.3 cases per 100,000 residents over the past week.

After a slow start, vaccinations have accelerated in Germany and everyone 12 and over has been eligible to get a shot since last week. The country is administering more than 800,000 shots per day.

Nearly 41.7 million people — 50.1% of the total population — have now been given at least one shot, while nearly 24.7 million — or 29.6% of the population — are fully vaccinated.

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"These figures give us confidence," Health Minister Jens Spahn said. "Within a few weeks, it will be possible — as things stand, with the deliveries we can expect — to offer vaccinations to all adults who are willing."

But he and other officials urged Germans to keep up their guard, pointing to Britain's experience with the delta variant. That variant, first discovered in India, has powered another surge of infections in the U.K., forcing the government to delay plans to lift all remaining restrictions on social contact in England until July 19.

The delta variant accounts only for a bit over 6% of new cases in Germany, according to the latest figures, but that number has risen over the past two or three weeks. It accounts for over 90% of new infections in Britain, mainly among youths and young adults.

"The question won't be whether delta also becomes the dominant variant in Germany and continental Europe, but ... when and under what conditions — ideally under conditions with a high vaccination level and low infection figures," Spahn told reporters in Berlin.

Lothar Wieler, the head of the Robert Koch Institute, the national disease control center, appealed to Germans "not to carelessly squander our success" in bringing down infections. He said that when the delta variant becomes dominant depends very much on people's behavior, "but it will gain the upper hand in the fall, at the latest."

Germany has restricted travel from the U.K. since May 23, when Britain became the only European country classified as a "virus variant area," Germany's highest risk category. Airlines and others are restricted largely to transporting German citizens and residents from Britain, and those who arrive must spend 14 days in quarantine at home.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's chief of staff, Helge Braun, cautioned German fans against traveling to London for the later stages of soccer's European Championship. And he told the RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland newspaper group that "we must remain cautious until everyone has been offered vaccination."

Biden's silence on executions adds to death penalty disarray

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — Activists widely expected Joe Biden to take swift action against the death penalty as the first sitting president to oppose capital punishment, especially since an unprecedented spate of executions by his predecessor ended just days before Biden took office.

Instead, the White House has been mostly silent.

Biden hasn't said whether he'd back a bill introduced by fellow Democrats to strike the death penalty from U.S. statutes. He also hasn't rescinded Trump-era protocols enabling federal executions to resume and allowing prisons to use firing squads if necessary, something many thought he'd do on day one.

And this week, his administration asked the Supreme Court to reinstate the Boston Marathon bomber's original death sentence.

The hands-off approach in Washington is adding to disarray around the death penalty nationwide as pressure increases in some conservative states to find ways to continue executions amid shortages of the lethal-injection drugs. Worse, some longtime death penalty observers say, is that Biden's silence risks sending a message that he's OK with states adopting alternative execution methods.

"Biden's lack of action is unconscionable," said Ashley Kincaid Eve, a lawyer and activist who protested outside the Terre Haute, Indiana, prison where the federal inmates were executed. "This is the easiest campaign promise to keep, and the fact he refuses to keep it ... is political cowardice."

His cautious approach demonstrates the practical and political difficulties of ending or truncating capital punishment after it's been integral to the criminal justice system for centuries, even as popular support for the death penalty among both Democrats and Republicans wanes.

Support for the death penalty among Americans is at near-historic lows after peaking in the mid-1990s and steadily declining since, with most recent polls indicating support now hovers around 55%, according to the nonpartisan Death Penalty Information Center in Washington, D.C.

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Biden didn't make capital punishment a prominent feature of his presidential run, but he did say on his campaign website that he would work "to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example."

That simple-sounding promise was historic because it wasn't just about the federal death penalty, which, before former President Donald Trump, had been carried out just three times in the previous five decades. Then, 13 federal prisoners were executed during Trump's last six months in office during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Biden's promise also took direct aim at states, which, combined, have executed some 1,500 inmates since the 1970s; 27 states still have death penalty laws.

But the fact that the Biden administration chose to actively push for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's execution suggests the president's opposition to the death penalty isn't as all-inclusive as many activists believed.

Justice Department lawyers said in court filings Monday that a lower court was wrong to toss the 27-year-old's death sentence over concerns about the jury selection process, saying the Supreme Court should "put this case back on track toward a just conclusion."

White House spokesperson Andrew Bates said in an email regarding the Tsarnaev decision that the Justice Department "has independence regarding such decisions." Bates added that the president "believes the Department should return to its prior practice, and not carry out executions."

Meanwhile, states have resorted to other means as drugs used in lethal injections have become increasingly hard to procure. Pharmaceutical companies in the 2000s began banning the use of their products for executions, saying they were meant to save lives, not take them. The U.S. Bureau of Prisons has declined to explain how it obtained pentobarbital for the lethal injections under Trump.

Some states have refurbished electric chairs as standbys for when lethal drugs are unavailable. On Wednesday, South Carolina halted two executions until the state could pull together firing squads.

To the disbelief of many, Arizona went so far as to acquire materials to make cyanide hydrogen — the poisonous gas deployed by Nazis to kill 865,000 Jews at Auschwitz — for possible use in the state's death chamber.

"Execution processes are becoming more and more out of touch with core American values," Robert Dunham, director of the Death Penalty Information Center, said about Arizona's purchase. "It provides a very clear picture of what the death penalty has become in the United States."

Protocols put in place under Trump and not rescinded by Biden allow the U.S. government to employ execution methods sanctioned in states where a federal defendant was sentenced, Dunham said. That means, in theory, federal executioners could also use hydrogen cyanide.

Dunham said death by hydrogen cyanide stands out as uniquely brutal, invariably leading to an "extended, torturous death."

Even if there's virtually no chance the U.S. government would ever embrace an execution method favored by Nazis, Dunham said the very idea that it's theoretically possible should horrify Biden administration officials and spur them to act with an even greater sense of urgency.

"This creates another opportunity for the Biden administration to take action," he said. "Doing nothing puts the U.S. on the books as authorizing these cyanide executions in some instances."

A federal prosecutor, arguing in litigation over the government's execution protocols last month, insisted to a judge that the Justice Department would allow some death row inmates to choose their method of execution if they were sentenced in a state where the law would allow that.

Abe Bonowitz, director of the anti-capital punishment group Death Penalty Action, said he and other activists have spoken with administration officials and received some behind-the-scenes assurances that Biden will eventually support legislation to abolish the federal death penalty.

"We know this is not the biggest fish they have to fry right now. But we are hearing they will get to it," said Bonowitz, who has been critical of Biden's silence.

The president could take the path of least resistance, politically speaking, by telling his Justice Department not to schedule federal executions during his term. But that would fall far short of fulfilling his campaign promise, and it would leave the door open for future presidents to restart executions.

He could also use his executive powers to commute all federal death sentences to life in prison, but

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there's no sign of that happening. Granting full clemency to everyone on death row could be politically problematic for Biden and other Democrats, who have a slim majority in both the House and the Senate. Among those whose lives would be spared by such a Biden order would be Dylann Roof, who killed nine Black church members during a Bible study session in South Carolina and was the first person sentenced to death for a federal hate crime.

After Biden's inauguration, the question of whether the president would act fast to end capital punishment was a popular topic on federal death row in Terre Haute, where discussions were often conducted through interconnected air vents. It's not discussed much these days, death row inmate Rejon Taylor told The Associated Press recently through a prison email system.

"I won't say that skepticism has settled in, but I will say that most no longer feel that immediate action will happen," said Taylor, who was sentenced in 2008 for killing an Atlanta restaurant owner.

But most inmates, he said, don't believe they'll be executed while Biden is president.

Convention circuit of delusion gives forum for election lies

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW RICHMOND, Wisconsin (AP) — For a few hours last weekend, thousands of Donald Trump's supporters came together in a field under the blazing Wisconsin sun to live in an alternate reality where the former president was still in office — or would soon return.

Clad in red MAGA hats and holding "Trump 2021" signs, they cheered in approval as Mike Lindell, the My Pillow creator-turned-conspiracy peddler, introduced "our real president." Then Trump appeared via Jumbotron to repeat the lie that has become his central talking point since losing to Joe Biden by more than 7 million votes: "The election was rigged."

Lindell later promised the audience that Trump would soon be reinstated into the presidency, a prospect for which there is no legal or constitutional method.

In the nearly five months since Trump's presidency ended, similar scenes have unfolded in hotel ballrooms and other venues across the country. Attorney Lin Wood has told crowds that Trump is still president, while former national security adviser Michael Flynn went even further at a Dallas event by calling for a Myanmar-style military coup in the U.S. At the same conference, former Trump lawyer Sidney Powell suggested Trump could simply be reinstated and a new Inauguration Day set.

Taken together, the gatherings have gelled into a convention circuit of delusion centered on the false premise that the election was stolen. Lindell and others use the events to deepen their bond with legions of followers who eschew the mainstream press and live within a conservative echo chamber of talk radio and social media. In these forums, "evidence" of fraud is never fact-checked, leaving many followers genuinely convinced that Biden shouldn't be president.

"We know that Biden's a fraudulent president, and we want to be part of the movement to get him out," said Donna Plechacek, 61, who traveled from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, with her sister for the event. "I know that they cheated the election. I have no doubt about that. The proof is there."

State election officials, international observers, Trump's own attorney general and dozens of judges — including many Trump appointed — have found no verifiable evidence of mass election fraud. Indeed, Trump's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency called the election "the most secure in American history" and concluded there was "no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."

But Plechacek is not alone. A recent Quinnipiac University poll found that two-thirds of Republicans, 66%, think Biden's victory was not legitimate, while CNN found in April that 70% of Republicans do not think Biden won enough votes to be president. Half, 50%, said there is solid evidence to support that claim.

They are people like Deb Tulenchik and Galen Carlson from Pequot Lakes, Minnesota, who recalled the shock they felt after the election as Trump's early Election Night lead faded as additional ballots were counted.

Thanks to the country's polarization, many Trump supporters didn't know anyone who voted for Biden

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and only saw Trump-Pence signs lining the roadways as they drove around their neighborhoods. Carlson, 61, said he went to bed believing Trump won. He didn't heed warnings that mail-in votes take longer to count, so early returns would likely skew toward Trump, who urged his supporters to vote in person and not by mail.

"I was asleep early cause it looked like it was going to be a done deal. And then when we woke up I couldn't believe it," he said.

"Disbelief," echoed Tulenchik, 63.

Trump spent months girding himself against possible defeat, insisting he could only lose if there was massive fraud. It's a lie he's sure to repeat as he steps up his public schedule in the coming weeks.

But the narrative was already resonating under the beating sun at the Wisconsin MAGA rally, where attendees came decked out in Trump gear, including plenty of shirts declaring, "Trump Won!"

While Lindell repeatedly described the event as a free speech festival — paid for by him — it had all the trappings of a Trump rally, including several of his frequent warm-up acts and a large American flag hoisted up by cranes.

It was a carnival atmosphere: a face-painting tent for kids; stands selling corndogs, fresh-cut fries and ice cream; a flyover of old military planes. The 2020 campaign lived on, with vendors selling old campaign merchandise — along with Lindell's pillows. One older man with a cane walked around shirtless, wearing a sparkly cowboy hat and Crocs and using a Trump flag as a cape. One young woman carried a helmet with horns — reminiscent of the headgear worn by an Arizona man who calls himself the QAnon Shaman and who took part in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

Indeed, several people said they were at the U.S. Capitol that day, though they were vague on their roles.

While some were Trump rally devotees, traveling the country to see the former president in person, many said they were attending their first political event. Some said they paid little attention to politics until the election, or began to get involved because they opposed pandemic restrictions.

Again and again, attendees insisted Trump won the election. And several said they sincerely believed that he will somehow be reinstated in the coming months — a belief that has been pushed by Lindell and repeated privately by Trump, even though there is no legal framework under which that could be accomplished.

"Not all Democrats are evil. They will see the truth. Whether they like it or not, they will see the truth," said Beth Kroeger, 61, who lives in Sussex, Wisconsin, and said she expects Trump back in the Oval Office this time next year, "No doubt about it."

Some suggested the military would be involved; others are convinced he remains in control today.

Most assailed the mainstream media and said they instead got their news from people like Lindell and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, as well as the conservative channel Newsmax, talk radio and social media platforms.

Few have gone to greater lengths than Lindell to convince the American public the election was stolen. By his own account, he has spent millions of dollars staging election-related events, hiring private investigators and creating movies that purport to document the alleged fraud — not to mention the \$1.3 billion defamation lawsuit that has been filed against him by Dominion Voting Systems. (He has counter-sued.)

He now claims he has evidence that China and other countries hacked voting machines to switch votes from Trump, a Republican, to Biden, a Democrat, in "a cyber attack of historical proportions." But the evidence he cites in his most recent film, which features a blurred-out, anonymous cyber-expert, has been repeatedly debunked for not demonstrating what he claims.

Still, attendees repeatedly referenced his videos as clear proof of fraud.

"There's just so much evidence that Mike Lindell has," said Lynda Thibado, 65, who traveled with her husband, Don Briggs, from Menomonie, Wisconsin, by camper and stayed overnight at an adjacent campground.

"I mean, such proof positive," Briggs agreed.

The couple said they hoped the election would be overturned, but they were less confident that would

happen.

"I don't know if they can legally do anything now," said Briggs. Still, he said, "I don't think Biden will be the president come 2024, one way or the other."

North Korea's Kim vows to be ready for confrontation with US

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered his government to be prepared for both dialogue and confrontation with the Biden administration — but more for confrontation — state media reported Friday, days after the United States and others urged the North to abandon its nuclear program and return to talks.

Kim's statement indicates he'll likely push to strengthen his nuclear arsenal and increase pressure on Washington to give up what North Korea considers a hostile policy toward the North, though he'll also prepare for talks to resume, some experts say.

During an ongoing ruling party meeting Thursday, Kim analyzed in detail the policy tendencies of the U.S. under President Joe Biden and clarified steps to be taken in relations with Washington, the Korean Central News Agency said. It did not specify the steps.

Kim "stressed the need to get prepared for both dialogue and confrontation, especially to get fully prepared for confrontation in order to protect the dignity of our state" and ensure national security, it said.

In 2018-19, Kim held a series of summits with then-President Donald Trump to discuss North Korea's advancing nuclear arsenal. But the negotiations fell apart after Trump rejected Kim's calls for extensive sanctions relief in return for a partial surrender of his nuclear capability.

Biden's administration has worked to formulate a new approach on North Korea's nuclear program that it describes as "calibrated and practical." Details of his North Korea policy haven't been publicized, but U.S. officials have suggested Biden will seek a middle ground between Trump's direct meetings with Kim and former President Barack Obama's "strategic patience" to curb Kim's nuclear program.

Earlier this week, leaders of the Group of Seven wealthy nations issued a statement calling for the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and "the verifiable and irreversible abandonment" of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. They called on North Korea to engage and resume dialogue.

Sung Kim, the top U.S. official on North Korea, is to visit Seoul on Saturday for a trilateral meeting with South Korean and Japanese officials. His travel emphasizes the importance of three-way cooperation in working toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the State Department said.

Kim Jong Un has recently threatened to enlarge his nuclear arsenal and build high-tech weapons targeting the U.S. mainland if Washington refuses to abandon its hostile policy toward North Korea.

In March, Kim's military performed its first short-range ballistic missile tests in a year. But North Korea is still maintaining a moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests in an indication that Kim still wants to keep prospects for diplomacy alive.

Kwak Gil Sup, head of One Korea Center, a website specializing in North Korea affairs, wrote on Facebook that Kim's statement suggested he's taking a two-track approach of bolstering military capability and preparing for talks. But he said Kim will more likely focus on boosting military strength and repeating his demand for the U.S. to withdraw its hostile policy, rather than hastily returning to talks.

Kim said last week North Korea's military must stay on high alert to defend national security.

Analyst Cheong Seong-Chang at the private Sejong Institute in South Korea said North Korea will likely return to talks but won't accept a call for immediate, complete denuclearization. He said North Korea may accede to a proposal to freeze its atomic program and partially reduce its nuclear arsenal in phased steps if the Biden administration relaxes sanctions and suspends its regular military drills with South Korea.

Cha Duck Chul, a deputy spokesman at South Korea's Unification Ministry, said it's closely monitoring the North's ongoing political meeting and wants to reemphasize the best way to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula is through dialogue.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijiang called for renewed dialogue between

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North Korea and the U.S., saying that "We believe that the Korean Peninsula situation is facing a new round of tension."

Kim called the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee meeting taking place this week to review efforts to rebuild the economy, which has been severely crippled by pandemic border closings, mismanagement amid the U.S.-led sanctions, and storm damage to crops and infrastructure last year.

On Tuesday, Kim opened the meeting by warning of potential food shortages, urging officials to find ways to boost agricultural production because the country's food situation "is now getting tense." He also urged the country to brace for extended COVID-19 restrictions, suggesting North Korea would extend its border closure and other steps despite the stress on its economy.

Tropical system to bring heavy rain, flooding to Gulf Coast

MIAMI (AP) — Forecasters predict a tropical system will bring heavy rain, storm surge and coastal flooding to the northern Gulf Coast as early as Friday and throughout the weekend.

A tropical storm warning was in effect for parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida — extending from Intracoastal City, Louisiana, to the Okaloosa-Walton County line in the Florida Panhandle, according to the National Hurricane Center in Miami.

The poorly-organized disturbance was located Friday morning about 310 miles (500 kilometers) south of Morgan City, Louisiana, with maximum sustained winds of 35 mph (55 kph). It was moving north at 14 mph (22 kph).

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards late Thursday issued a state of emergency due to the potential weather threats. The move is an administrative step that authorizes the use of state resources to aid in storm response efforts, the governor's office said.

The system is expected to produce up to 8 inches (20 centimeters) of rain across the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, and up to 12 inches (30 centimeters) through the weekend along the central U.S. Gulf Coast.

The combination of storm surge and the tide will cause normally dry areas near the coast to be flooded by rising waters moving inland from the shoreline, the hurricane center said. The water could reach the heights of about 1-3 feet (30-91 centimeters).

There have already been two named storms during the 2021 Atlantic hurricane season. Meteorologists expect the season to be busy, but not as crazy as the record-breaking 2020 season.

Ethiopia finally set to vote as PM vows 1st fair election

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Ethiopians will vote Monday in a landmark election overshadowed by reports of famine in the country's war-hit Tigray region and beset by logistical problems that mean some people won't be able to vote until September.

The election is the centerpiece of a reform drive by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, whose rise to power in 2018 seemed to signal a break with decades of authoritarian rule and led to his Nobel Peace Prize the following year. He has described the poll as "the nation's first attempt at free and fair elections."

Abiy's ruling Prosperity Party, formed in 2019 by merging groups who made up the previous ruling coalition, is widely expected to cement its hold on power. The party that wins a majority of seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives will form the next government.

"We will secure Ethiopia's unity," Abiy said ahead of his final campaign rally on Wednesday, repeating his vow of a free and fair election after past votes were marred by allegations of fraud.

But opposition groups have accused Ethiopia's ruling party of harassment, manipulation and threats of violence that echo abuses of the past.

And Abiy is facing growing international criticism over the war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. Thousands of civilians have been killed and more than 2 million people have been displaced since fighting broke out in November between Ethiopian forces, backed by ones from neighboring Eritrea, and those supporting the now-fugitive Tigray leaders.

Last week, humanitarian agencies warned that 350,000 people in Tigray are on the brink of famine, a

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crisis that several diplomats have described as "manmade" amid allegations of forced starvation. Ethiopia's government has rejected the figure and says food aid has reached 5.2 million in the region of 6 million.

No date has been set for voting in Tigray's 38 constituencies, where military personnel who usually play a key role in transporting election materials across Africa's second-most populous country are busy with the conflict.

Meanwhile, voting has been postponed until September in 64 out of 547 constituencies throughout Ethiopia because of insecurity, defective ballot papers and opposition allegations of irregularities. Outbreaks of ethnic violence have also killed hundreds of people in the Amhara, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions in recent months.

Some prominent opposition parties are boycotting the election. Others say they have been prevented from campaigning in several parts of the country.

"There have been gross violations," Yusef Ibrahim, vice president of the National Movement of Amhara, said earlier this month. He said his party had been "effectively banned" from campaigning in several regions, with some party members arrested and banners destroyed.

Neither officials with the Prosperity Party nor Abiy's office responded to requests for comment on such allegations.

Ethiopia last year postponed the election, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the tensions with Tigray's former leaders. Recently the vote was delayed again by several weeks amid technical problems involving ballot papers and a lack of polling station officials.

Abiy's Prosperity Party has registered 2,432 candidates in the election, which will see Ethiopians voting for both national and regional representatives. The next largest party, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice, is fielding 1,385 candidates. A total of 47 parties are contesting the election.

But on Sunday, five opposition parties released a joint statement saying that campaigning outside the capital, Addis Ababa, "has been marred by serious problems, including killings, attempted killings and beatings of candidates."

Two prominent opposition parties, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Oromo Federalist Congress, are boycotting the vote. "It's going to be a sham election," OFC chairman Merera Gudina said earlier this month.

That means the Prosperity Party will face little competition in Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous state.

Several prominent OFC members remain behind bars after a wave of unrest last year sparked by the killing of a popular Oromo musician, and the OLF's leader is under house arrest. The leader of the Balderas Party for True Democracy, Eskinder Nega, was also detained and is contesting the election from prison.

Getnet Worku, secretary general of the newly established ENAT party, said earlier this month it is not standing candidates in several constituencies because the threat of violence is too high, asserting that armed militias organized by local officials frequently broke up rallies.

There are growing international concerns over whether the elections will be fair. The European Union has said it will not observe the vote after its requests to import communications equipment were denied.

In response, Ethiopia said external observers "are neither essential nor necessary to certify the credibility of an election," although it has since welcomed observers deployed by the African Union.

Last week the U.S. State Department said it is "gravely concerned about the environment under which these upcoming elections are to be held," citing "detention of opposition politicians, harassment of independent media, partisan activities by local and regional governments, and the many interethnic and inter-communal conflicts across Ethiopia."

Abiy's appointment as prime minister in 2018 was initially greeted by an outburst of optimism both at home and abroad. Shortly after taking office, he freed tens of thousands of political prisoners, allowed the return of exiled opposition groups and rolled back punitive laws that targeted civil society.

In 2019 he won the Nobel Peace Prize in part for those reforms and for making peace with Eritrea by ending a long-running border standoff.

But critics say Ethiopia's political space has started to shrink again. The government denies the accusation. Several prominent opposition figures accused of inciting unrest are behind bars. While opening a sugar

factory earlier this month, Abiy accused "traitors" and "outsiders" of working to undermine Ethiopia.

This week his spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, described the election as a chance for citizens to "exercise their democratic rights" and accused international media of mounting a "character assassination of the prime minister."

Migrant family's presence on Greek island hints at pushbacks

By MICHAEL SVARNIAS and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press Writers

VATHY, Greece (AP) — Around dawn one recent spring day, an inflatable dinghy carrying nearly three dozen people reached the Greek island of Samos from the nearby Turkish coast. Within 24 hours, refugee rights groups say, the same group was seen drifting in a life raft back to Turkey.

But of the 32 people determined to have initially made it to Samos, only 28 were in the raft the Turkish coast guard reported retrieving at sea.

Four days later, the missing four — a Palestinian woman and her three children — appeared in Samos' main town of Vathy, apparently having eluded Greek authorities. She applied for asylum and last week was informed their application had been accepted.

"I consider that the arrival of this woman, if we're not speaking of a miracle, of a virgin birth, of her falling from the sky, we're speaking of clear proof of a pushback," said Dimitris Choulis, the lawyer who helped 31-year-old Huda Zaga apply for asylum, along with her 12-year-old daughter and sons, aged 11 and 5.

Accusations from rights groups and migrants that Greece has been carrying out pushbacks — the illegal summary deportation of migrants without allowing them to apply for asylum — are nothing new, on land or at sea. But it is rare for such cases to involve anyone managing to stay behind.

Greece vehemently denies the claims, but says it has an obligation to protect its borders, which are also the European Union's external borders. It points to March 2020, when Turkey opened its borders into the EU and actively encouraged migrants to cross into Greece.

Zaga says she arrived on Samos on April 21 in a dinghy crammed with people. After making landfall, the group scrambled up a wooded hill, splitting up to avoid detection by authorities.

"We were terrified of being caught and being sent back to Turkey, especially after we crossed into the territorial waters of Greece," Zaga told The Associated Press.

Before long, social media posts appeared. A local journalist posted about the migrants' arrival. Other residents said they had seen them, or given them food or water.

But as the day progressed, the story changed. The journalist contacted authorities, and posted she was told the migrants were not new arrivals but residents of a refugee camp on the outskirts of Vathy making a day trip — a roughly 50-kilometer (31-mile) hike over mountains.

Several residents told the AP they were told by authorities and others not to speak of what they had seen. They spoke on condition of anonymity, saying they didn't want problems.

The next day, a piece of the dinghy the migrants arrived in still lay on the beach of Marathokampos Bay. The rights group Aegean Boat Report, which monitors arrivals on Greek islands, posted photos of the new arrivals. Some showed Zaga and her children with others on a wooded hillside, the Marathokampos coastline in the background.

Asked about the case, Greece's Shipping Ministry, under whose jurisdiction the coast guard falls, said it had no record of an April 21 arrival on Samos. Authorities did not provide any explanation for the appearance of the woman and her children.

Zaga said she was aware of the pushback risk, having experienced it before. She tried to enter Greece three times earlier from the land border but was caught twice inside Turkey and once after entering Greece. This time, she was determined to succeed.

"We managed the impossible, to make sure that what happened to them won't happen to us," she said of those returned to Turkey.

Zaga said she broke away from the others, staying behind with her children, and got in touch with people who had helped arrange her journey to Samos. She would not provide specifics about how she managed

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to evade detection, or who helped her contact the lawyer. But on April 26, she arrived at Choulis' office asking for assistance.

Choulis said he immediately realized they were the people missing from the reported Marathokampos landing. He informed Greek judicial authorities, police and the coast guard that he was accompanying the family to the refugee camp for registration.

As he waited outside during Zaga's registration interview he was told repeatedly to leave, Choulis said. "There was a strange climate of suspicion," he said, and an intense fear that Zaga and her children might still be sent back to Turkey. But at this point, representatives of the U.N. refugee agency had been informed and were present.

UNHCR Representative in Greece Mireille Girard said the organization received a telephone message on April 21 about migrants arriving on Samos and sought confirmation from authorities, but got no response. A few days later, the agency was informed a family believed to have been with the group had remained on Samos and was applying for asylum.

"These elements are concerning. They are indications of a pushback from Samos island on 21 April and need to be formally investigated," Girard said.

In the meantime, Zaga's family has received asylum. She says she fled her home in the Nablus region of the West Bank for several reasons, but mainly to escape an abusive husband who assaulted her eldest son. She hopes to eventually reach Belgium, where her sister lives.

"I want to see my children happy, to see them going to school, eating healthy food, sleeping well and to live normally just like other children. To have safety and security, to have a school and home," she said.

For Choulis, Zaga's successful asylum application underscores the perils of pushbacks, which have, at times, allegedly been carried out by masked men without visible badges on their uniforms, to hide their identities.

"The fact that her asylum application was accepted shows just how dangerous it is for masked men of the coast guard or the police to judge who has the right to asylum and who doesn't," the lawyer said.

"We cannot leave the fate of something as important as the right to asylum to be determined in the middle of the sea or on the shores."

GOP needs new health care target; 'Obamacare' survives again

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court's latest rejection of a Republican effort to dismantle "Obamacare" signals anew that the GOP must look beyond repealing the law if it wants to hone the nation's health care problems into a winning political issue.

Thursday's 7-2 ruling was the third time the court has rebuffed major GOP challenges to former President Barack Obama's prized health care overhaul. Stingingly for Republicans, the decision emerged from a bench dominated 6-3 by conservative-leaning justices, including three appointed by President Donald Trump.

Those high court setbacks have been atop dozens of failed Republican repeal attempts in Congress. Most spectacularly, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., flashed a thumbs-down that doomed Trump's drive to erase the law in 2017.

Along with the public's gradual but decisive acceptance of the statute, the court rulings and legislative defeats underscore that the law, passed in 2010 despite overwhelming GOP opposition, is probably safe. And it spotlights a remarkable progression of the measure from a political liability that cost Democrats House control just months after enactment to a widely accepted bedrock of the medical system, delivering care to what the government says is more than 30 million people.

"The Affordable Care Act remains the law of the land," President Joe Biden said, using the statute's more formal name, after the court ruled that Texas and other GOP-led states had no right to bring their lawsuit to federal court.

"It's not as sacred or popular as Medicare or Medicaid, but it's here to stay," said Drew Altman, president of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "And it's moved from an ideological whipping boy to a set

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of popular benefits that the public values.”

Highlighting the GOP’s shifting health care focus, in interviews and written statements Thursday, more than a dozen Republican lawmakers called for controlling medical costs and other changes, but none suggested another run at repeal. Congressional Republicans hadn’t even filed a legal brief supporting the latest Supreme Court challenge.

“Just practically speaking, you need 60 votes in a Republican Senate, a Republican president, right? And we’ve tried that and were unable to accomplish it,” said Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., a leading voice on health care in the GOP.

Polling shows the risks in trying to demolish Obama’s law. A Kaiser poll showed Americans about evenly divided on the law in December 2016, just after Trump was elected on a pledge to kill it. By February 2020, 54% had a favorable view while 39% disapproved.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., and other top Republicans issued a statement illustrating one line of attack the party is preparing — trying to handcuff all Democrats to “Medicare for All,” a costly plan for government-provided health care backed by progressives that goes beyond what Biden and many in the party have proposed.

Congress should “not double down on a failed health care law or, worse, move towards a one-size-fits-all, socialist system that takes away choice entirely,” the Republicans said.

The GOP should focus on health issues people care about, like personalized care and promoting medical innovation, not repealing the health care law, said David Winston, a pollster and political adviser to congressional GOP leaders.

“Republicans need to lay out a clear direction of where the health care system should go,” Winston said. “Don’t look backward, look forward.”

Most people have gained coverage from either Obama’s expansion of the government-funded Medicaid program for lower-income people or from private health plans, for which federal subsidies help offset costs for many.

The law’s most popular provisions also include its protections for people with preexisting medical conditions from higher insurance rates, allowing people up to age 26 to remain covered under their parents’ plans and requiring insurers to cover services like pregnancy and mental health.

Key requirements like that are “locked in concrete,” said Joseph Antos, a health policy analyst at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. The political opening for Republicans would be if Democrats push hard for things like lowering the eligibility age for Medicare to 60 because for many conservative-leaning voters, he said, “that’s a sign of government pushing too far” into private marketplace decisions.

Yet serious problems remain.

Nearly 29 million Americans remained uninsured in 2019, and millions more likely lost coverage at least temporarily when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, according to Kaiser. In addition, medical costs continue rising and even many covered by the law find their premiums and deductibles difficult to afford.

In response, Biden’s \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package enacted in March expanded federal subsidies for health insurance premiums for those buying coverage. His infrastructure and jobs proposal being negotiated in Congress includes \$200 billion toward making that permanent, instead of expiring in two years.

But his plan includes none of his more controversial campaign trail proposals to expand health care access, like creating a federally funded public health care option or letting Medicare directly negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies. While those proposals are popular with Democratic voters, they face tough odds in a closely divided Congress.

Still, Republicans gearing up for 2022 elections that will decide congressional control must decide where their next focus will be.

One GOP strategist involved in House races, speaking on condition of anonymity to describe internal thinking, said the party should focus on issues like the economy and border security that register as higher voter concerns. A Gallup poll showed that in May, 21% of the public ranked the economy as the country’s top problem, with health care registering at just 3%.

Other Republicans say the Supreme Court’s rejection of the latest repeal attempt will clear the political

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field for them to refocus their health care attacks on Democrats.

"Now it's Medicare for All that will be a top health care issue playing a role in campaigns," said Chris Hartline, spokesperson for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the Senate GOP's campaign arm.

Black Americans laud Juneteenth holiday, say more work ahead

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black Americans rejoiced Thursday after President Joe Biden made Juneteenth a federal holiday, but some said that, while they appreciated the recognition at a time of racial reckoning in America, more is needed to change policies that disadvantage too many of their brethren.

"It's great, but it's not enough," said Gwen Grant, president and CEO of the Urban League of Kansas City. Grant said she was delighted by the quick vote this week by Congress to make Juneteenth a national holiday because "it's been a long time coming."

But she added that "we need Congress to protect voting rights, and that needs to happen right now so we don't regress any further. That is the most important thing Congress can be addressing at this time."

At a jubilant White House bill-signing ceremony, Biden agreed that more than a commemoration of the events of June 19, 1865, is needed. That's when Union soldiers brought the news of freedom to enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas — some 2 1/2 years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed slaves in Southern states.

"This day doesn't just celebrate the past. It calls for action today," Biden said before he established Juneteenth National Independence Day. His audience included scores of members of Congress and Opal Lee, a 94-year-old Texas woman who campaigned for the holiday.

Biden singled out voting rights as an area for action.

Republican-led states have enacted or are considering legislation that activists argue would curtail the right to vote, particularly for people of color. Legislation to address voting rights issues, and institute policing reforms demanded after the killing of George Floyd and other unarmed Black men, remains stalled in the Congress that acted swiftly on the Juneteenth bill.

Other people want the federal government to make reparations or financial payments to the descendants of slaves in an attempt to compensate for those wrongs. Meanwhile, efforts are afoot across the country to limit what school districts teach about the history of slavery in America.

Community organizer Kimberly Holmes-Ross, who helped make her hometown of Evanston, Illinois, the first U.S. city to pay reparations, said she was happy about the new federal holiday because it will lead more people to learn about Juneteenth.

But she would have liked Congress to act on anti-lynching legislation or voter protections first.

"I am not super stoked only because all of the other things that are still going on," said Holmes-Ross, 57. "You haven't addressed what we really need to talk about."

Peniel Joseph, an expert on race at the University of Texas at Austin, said the U.S. has never had a holiday or a national commemoration of the end of slavery. Many Black Americans had long celebrated Juneteenth.

"Juneteenth is important symbolically, and we need the substance to follow, but Black people historically have always tried to do multiple things at the same time," Joseph said.

Most federal workers will observe the holiday Friday. Several states and the District of Columbia announced that government offices would be closed Friday.

Juneteenth is the 12th federal holiday, including Inauguration Day once every four years. It's also the first federal holiday since the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday was added in 1983.

Before June 19 became a federal holiday, it was observed in the vast majority of states and the District of Columbia. Texas was first to make Juneteenth a holiday in 1980.

Most white Americans had not heard of Juneteenth before the summer of 2020 and the protests that stirred the nation's conscience over race after Floyd's killing by a Minneapolis police officer, said Matthew Delmont, who teaches history at Dartmouth College.

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He said the new federal holiday “hopefully provides a moment on the calendar every year when all Americans can spend time thinking seriously about the history of our country.”

The Senate passed the bill earlier this week by unanimous agreement. But in the House, 14 Republicans voted against it, including Rep. Chip Roy of Texas. Roy said Juneteenth deserves to be commemorated, but he objected to the use of “independence” in the holiday’s name.

“This name needlessly divides our nation on a matter that should instead bring us together by creating a separate Independence Day based on the color of one’s skin,” he said in a statement.

Added Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., who also voted against the bill: “We have one Independence Day, and it applies equally to all people of all races.”

The sentiment was different in Texas, the first state to make Juneteenth a holiday.

“I’m happy as pink,” said Doug Matthews, 70, and a former city manager of Galveston who has helped coordinate the community’s Juneteenth celebrations since Texas made it a holiday.

He credited the work of state and local leaders with paving the way for this week’s step by Congress.

“I’m also proud that everything started in Galveston,” Matthews said.

Pete Henley, 71, was setting up tables Thursday for a Juneteenth celebration at the Old Central Cultural Center, a Galveston building that once was a segregated Black school. He said the Juneteenth holiday will help promote understanding and unity.

“All holidays have significance, no matter what the occasion or what it’s about, but by it being a federal holiday, it speaks volumes to what the country thinks about that specific day,” said Henley, who studied at the school before it was integrated and is president of the cultural center.

He said his family traces its roots back to enslaved men and women in the Texas city who were among the last to receive word of the Emancipation Proclamation.

“As a country, we really need to be striving toward togetherness more than anything,” Henley said. “If we just learn to love each other, it would be so great.”

Holmes-Ross recalled first learning about Juneteenth in church in Evanston, a Lake Michigan suburb just outside Chicago. Over the years, she said she made sure her three children commemorated the day with community events including food, dancing and spoken word performances.

She said it was about more than a day off for her family and expressed hope that it would be for others, too.

“We were intentional about seeking out Black leaders and things we could celebrate as African Americans,” Holmes-Ross said. “Hopefully, people do something productive with it. It is a day of service.”

Frank Bonner, Herb on ‘WKRP in Cincinnati,’ dies at 79

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Frank Bonner, who played a brash salesman with an affection for polyester plaid suits on the TV comedy “WKRP in Cincinnati,” has died. He was 79.

Bonner died Wednesday from complications of Lewy body dementia, said his daughter, Desiree Boers-Kort. The actor died at his home in Laguna Niguel, south of Los Angeles.

He had been diagnosed about three years ago with the disease that leads to worsening mental and physical complications.

“WKRP in Cincinnati” aired from 1978-1982 and was set in a lagging Ohio radio station trying to reinvent itself with rock. The cast included Gary Sandy, Tim Reid, Howard Hesseman and Jan Smithers, alongside Bonner as subpar ad salesman Herb Tarlek.

Loni Anderson, who played the station’s empowered receptionist Jennifer, said she was “heartbroken” over his death.

“Frank Bonner was like family,” Anderson said in a statement. “He was one of the funniest men I had the pleasure of working with and he was the nicest man I have ever known.”

Boers-Kort said her father valued his time on the sitcom in part because it led him toward the career he favored over acting — directing. After taking on that job for six episodes of “WKRP,” he went on to direct for more than a dozen other 1980s and 1990s shows including “Simon & Simon,” “Who’s the Boss” and

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"Saved by the Bell: The New Class."

Bonner continued to act, including in the early 1990s sequel "The New WKRP in Cincinnati," "Scarecrow and Mrs. King" and "Night Court."

"He did prefer the behind-the-camera (work), and he thoroughly enjoyed helping people get to where he needed them to be for the scenes," Boers-Kort said Thursday. "He was very humble and down-to-earth, and just a nice, kind human."

He got a kick out of Herb's ill-advised wardrobe and kept some of the belts when the show ended, his daughter said. He was fond of them because he knew the character's style was "one of the things that people loved about him."

A native of Arkansas whose birth name was Frank Boers Jr., he was raised in the city of Malvern. His Hollywood career began in the 1970s with the film "Equinox" and on TV dramas, including "The Young Lawyers" and "Mannix."

Bonner is survived by his wife, Gayle Hardage Bonner, who was his high school sweetheart in Malvern. The pair reunited and eventually wed four decades later and after previous marriages for both, his daughter said.

Other survivors include sons Matthew and Justine Bonner; stepdaughter DeAndra Freed; seven grandchildren and a great-grandchild. Bonner was preceded in death by his son, Michael.

Catholic foster care agency wins Supreme Court verdict

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In another victory for religious groups at the Supreme Court, the justices on Thursday unanimously sided with a Catholic foster care agency that says its religious views prevent it from working with same-sex couples. The court said the city of Philadelphia wrongly limited its relationship with the group as a result of the agency's policy.

The ruling was specific to the facts of the case, sidestepping bigger questions about how to balance religious freedom and anti-discrimination laws. Instead, the outcome turned on the language in the city's foster care contract. Three conservative justices would have gone much further, and LGBTQ groups said they were relieved that the decision was limited.

Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for a majority of the court that Catholic Social Services "seeks only an accommodation that will allow it to continue serving the children of Philadelphia in a manner consistent with its religious beliefs; it does not seek to impose those beliefs on anyone else."

Roberts concluded that Philadelphia's refusal to "contract with CSS for the provision of foster care services unless it agrees to certify same-sex couples as foster parents ... violates the First Amendment."

Roberts noted that no same-sex couple has ever asked to work with Catholic Social Services, which is affiliated with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. If that were to happen, that couple would be referred to one of the more than 20 other agencies that works with same-sex couples, Catholic Social Services has said.

"For over 50 years, CSS successfully contracted with the City to provide foster care services while holding to these beliefs," said Roberts, one of seven members of the court who is Catholic or attended Catholic schools.

Because of its beliefs, the Catholic agency also does not certify unmarried couples.

In recent years, religious groups have been delighted by victories at the court, often by wide margins. That includes cases in which the court lifted a ban on state aid to religious schooling, gave religious schools greater leeway to hire and fire teachers and allowed a cross to remain on public land. More recently, the court repeatedly sided with religious groups in fights over coronavirus restrictions.

Philadelphia learned in 2018 from a newspaper reporter that Catholic Social Services would not certify same-sex couples to become foster parents. The city has said it requires the foster care agencies it works with not to discriminate as part of their contracts. The city asked Catholic Social Services to change its policy, but the group declined.

As a result, Philadelphia stopped referring additional children to the agency. Catholic Social Services sued, but lower courts sided with Philadelphia.

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In coming to the conclusion that Philadelphia had acted improperly, Roberts said the city gave Catholic Social Services a choice between "curtailing its mission or approving relationships inconsistent with its beliefs."

He also pointed to language in the city's standard foster care contract. The contract says that agencies cannot reject prospective foster or adoptive parents based on their sexual orientation "unless an exception is granted." Because the city created a process for granting exemptions, it cannot then deny Catholic Social Services an exemption, Roberts concluded.

The case's outcome was similar to a 2018 decision in which the court sided with a Colorado baker who would not make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. That decision, too, was limited to the specific facts of the case and dodged bigger issues of how to balance religious freedom and anti-discrimination laws. But the court has grown more conservative since that ruling.

In "both cases the court reached narrow, very fact-specific decisions that leave non-discrimination laws and policies standing and fully enforceable by governments," said Leslie Cooper, deputy director of the American Civil Liberties Union LGBTQ & HIV Project, which was involved in the case on Philadelphia's side.

Three conservative justices who joined Roberts' opinion said they would have gone further. Justices Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch said they would have overruled a 1990 Supreme Court decision that they said improperly allows limits on religious freedom.

Alito called the court's ruling Thursday a "wisp of a decision." Gorsuch said it was an "(ir)resolution," predicting that the litigation would continue, with the city perhaps rewriting its contract.

Philadelphia City Solicitor Diana Cortes said the ruling was a "difficult and disappointing setback."

In a statement, she said the court had "usurped the City's judgment that a nondiscrimination policy is in the best interests of the children in its care." But she said the city was also "gratified" that the justices did not "radically change existing constitutional law to adopt a standard that would force court-ordered religious exemptions from civic obligations in every arena."

A lawyer with The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty who argued the case on behalf of Catholic Social Services called it a "common-sense ruling in favor of religious social services."

"The Supreme Court recognized that CSS has been doing amazing work for many years and can continue that work in the city of Philadelphia," Lori Windham said.

Black Americans laud Juneteenth holiday, say more work ahead

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black Americans rejoiced Thursday after President Joe Biden made Juneteenth a federal holiday, but some said that, while they appreciated the recognition at a time of racial reckoning in America, more is needed to change policies that disadvantage too many of their brethren.

"It's great, but it's not enough," said Gwen Grant, president and CEO of the Urban League of Kansas City. Grant said she was delighted by the quick vote this week by Congress to make Juneteenth a national holiday because "it's been a long time coming."

But she added that "we need Congress to protect voting rights, and that needs to happen right now so we don't regress any further. That is the most important thing Congress can be addressing at this time."

At a jubilant White House bill-signing ceremony, Biden agreed that more than a commemoration of the events of June 19, 1865, is needed. That's when Union soldiers brought the news of freedom to enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas — some 2 1/2 years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed slaves in Southern states.

"This day doesn't just celebrate the past. It calls for action today," Biden said before he established Juneteenth National Independence Day. His audience included scores of members of Congress and Opal Lee, a 94-year-old Texas woman who campaigned for the holiday.

Biden singled out voting rights as an area for action.

Republican-led states have enacted or are considering legislation that activists argue would curtail the right to vote, particularly for people of color. Legislation to address voting rights issues, and institute po-

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licensing reforms demanded after the killing of George Floyd and other unarmed Black men, remains stalled in the Congress that acted swiftly on the Juneteenth bill.

Other people want the federal government to make reparations or financial payments to the descendants of slaves in an attempt to compensate for those wrongs. Meanwhile, efforts are afoot across the country to limit what school districts teach about the history of slavery in America.

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"We were intentional about seeking out Black leaders and things we could celebrate as African Americans," Holmes-Ross said. "Hopefully, people do something productive with it. It is a day of service."

EXPLAINER: What's behind the heat wave in the American West?

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Much of the American West has been blasted with sweltering heat this week as a high pressure dome combines with the worst drought in modern history to launch temperatures into the triple digits, toppling records even before the official start of summer.

Record daily highs were seen this week in parts of Arizona, California, New Mexico, Montana, Wyoming and Utah. Phoenix, which is baking in some of the U.S. West's hottest weather, hit a record-breaking 118 degrees (48 Celsius) Thursday and was expected to reach 116 degrees (46 Celsius) Friday and Saturday.

"Very dangerous record breaking heat should continue today across the deserts with well above normal highs," the National Weather Service's Phoenix staff wrote on Facebook. "A very good day to stay indoors."

WHY IS THE AMERICAN WEST SO HOT THIS WEEK?

The heat comes from a high pressure system over the West, a buckle in the jet stream winds that move across the U.S. and vast swaths of soil sucked dry by a historic drought, said Marvin Percha, a senior meteorologist for the agency in Phoenix.

He and other scientists say the heat wave is unusual because it arrived earlier and is staying longer than in most years.

"June last year, things seemed pretty normal," noted Park Williams, a University of California, Los Angeles, climate and fire scientist. "The record-breaking heat waves came in August and September."

But with such an early heat wave this year, "this could be the tip of the iceberg," Williams said.

WHAT ROLES DO DROUGHT AND CLIMATE CHANGE PLAY?

A two-decade-long dry spell that some scientists refer to as a "megadrought" has sucked the moisture out of the soil through much of the Western United States. Researchers said in a study published last year in the journal Science that man-made climate change tied to the emission of greenhouse gases can be blamed for about half of the historic drought.

Scientists studying the dry period that began in 2000 looked at a nine-state area from Oregon and Wyoming down through California and New Mexico and found only one other that was slightly larger. That drought started in 1575, a decade after St. Augustine, Florida, was founded and before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock in 1620.

The hot weather can be tied to the drought drying out the landscape. Normally, some of the sun's heat evaporates moisture in the soil, but scientists say the Western soil is so dry that instead that energy makes the air even warmer.

"When the soil is wet, heat waves aren't so bad," said Williams, who has calculated that soil in the western half of the nation is the driest it has been since 1895. "But if it's dry, we are under extreme risk."

HOW DO RECENT WILDFIRES FIGURE INTO THIS?

Scientists say the wildfires that have erupted in recent days have been fed by the excessive heat across the region. Climate change contributes to the drought conditions and makes trees and shrubs more likely to catch fire.

At least 14 new wildfires broke out this week in Montana and Wyoming as the record heat sparked an early start to the fire season. Firefighters also battled blazes in Arizona and New Mexico.

"From a fire potential standpoint, what is capable this year, it is certainly much more severe than we've seen in the past," U.S. Department of Agriculture fire meteorologist Gina Palma said in a climate briefing

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Thursday.

Palma said the drought-related fire risks were especially pronounced in higher elevations across much of the U.S. West, from the Rocky Mountains down into the Southwest and parts of California.

"You will be seeing very extreme fire behavior, certainly conditions that we would not normally see in June," she said.

IS THIS THE NEW NORMAL?

A growing number of scientific studies are concluding that heat waves in some cases can be directly attributed to climate change, said Kristie L. Ebi, a professor at the Center for Health and the Global Environment at the University of Washington.

That means the U.S. West and the rest of the world can expect more extreme heat waves in the future unless officials move to cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, Ebi and other scientists say.

A study last month estimated the percent and number of heat deaths each year that can be attributed to human-caused climate change. It included about 200 U.S. cities and found more than 1,100 deaths a year from climate change-caused heat, representing about 35% of all heat deaths in the country.

On average each year, Phoenix has 23 climate-triggered heat deaths, Los Angeles has 21 and Tucson has 13, the study said.

"Climate change is harming us now," Ebi said. "It's a future problem, but it's also a current problem."

Heated debate before US Catholic bishops vote on Communion

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

In impassioned debate Thursday, U.S. Catholic bishops clashed over how to address concerns about Catholic politicians, including President Joe Biden, who continue to receive Communion despite supporting abortion rights.

Some bishops said a strong rebuke of Biden is needed because of his recent actions protecting and expanding abortion access. Others warned that such action would portray the bishops as a partisan force during a time of bitter political divisions across the country.

The issue is by far the most contentious agenda item at the national meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which is being held virtually. It will conclude Friday soon after an announcement of how the bishops cast their secret ballots on the Communion dispute.

If a majority of bishops approve, the USCCB's doctrine committee will draft a statement on the meaning of Communion in the life of the church that would be submitted for a vote at a future meeting, probably an in-person gathering in November. One section of the document is expected to include a specific admonition to Catholic politicians and other public figures who disobey church teaching on abortion and other core doctrinal issues.

Bishop Donald Hying of Madison, Wisconsin, said he speaks with many people who are confused by a Catholic president who advances "the most radical pro-abortion agenda in history," and action from the bishops' conference is needed.

"They're looking for direction," Hying said.

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego countered that the USCCB would suffer "destructive consequences" from a document targeting Catholic politicians.

"It would be impossible to prevent the weaponization of the Eucharist," McElroy said. "We will invite all of the political animosities that divide our nation into the heart of the Eucharistic sacrament."

Biden, who attends Mass regularly, says he personally opposes abortion but doesn't think he should impose that position on Americans who feel otherwise. He's taken several executive actions during his presidency that were hailed by abortion-rights advocates.

The chairman of the USCCB doctrine committee, Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, said no decisions have been made on the final contents of the proposed document. He said bishops who are not on the committee would have chances to offer input, and the final draft would be subject to amendments before it is put up to a vote.

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Rhoades also said the document would not mention Biden or other individuals by name, and would offer guidelines rather than imposing a mandatory national policy.

This would leave decisions about Communion for specific churchgoers up to individual bishops and archbishops. Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the archbishop of Washington, has made clear that Biden is welcome to receive Communion at churches in the archdiocese.

Gregory was among the dozens of bishops joining in Thursday's debate, urging colleagues to defeat the measure and allow more time for candid, in-person dialogue before moving ahead.

"The choice before us at this moment is either we pursue a path of strengthening unity among ourselves or settle for creating a document that will not bring unity but may very well further damage it," Gregory said.

The chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Pro-Life Activities, Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, disagreed that the bishops were being too hasty and said Biden had forced their hand.

"It's not the bishops who have brought us to this point — it's some of our public officials," he said. "This is a Catholic president doing the most aggressive things we've ever seen on life at its most innocent.

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, one of the most outspoken advocates of a USCCB rebuke to Biden, said the bishops' credibility is already questioned by many Catholics and would erode further if they did not move forward with the document.

"The eyes of the whole country are on us right now," he said. "If we do not act courageously in presenting this teaching document clearly and convincingly on this core Catholic value, how can we expect to be taken seriously on any other topic?"

Top general 'shocked' by AP report on AWOL guns, mulls fix

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

Shocked by an Associated Press investigation into the loss and theft of military guns, the Pentagon's top general signaled Thursday that he will consider a "systematic fix" to how the armed services keep account of their firearms.

The AP's investigation reported how some of the missing guns have been stolen and later used in violent street crimes, while many others have vanished without a clue from the military's enormous supply chains.

In all, AP identified at least 1,900 guns that the four armed services recorded as lost or stolen during the 2010s. Most came from the Army. Because some of the service branches provided incomplete data -- or none at all -- that total is a certain undercount.

"I was frankly shocked by the numbers that were in there," Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Appropriations Committee at a hearing Thursday.

In a statement, Milley's spokesman said the chairman would explore overhauling how the services track and secure weapons. Milley "would like to consider a systematic fix in the future where the accountability of weapons and the ability to track and query these numbers is simplified and accurate," said Col. Dave Butler.

Later Thursday, an Army spokesman said the military branch with the most guns would also fill gaps in how it accounts for lost and stolen weapons.

"The Army staff met today to develop a way forward to fix this problem and we will provide more information as this effort evolves," said Col. Cathy Wilkinson.

Four senators have publicly expressed concerns since AP published Tuesday.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., was the latest to question military officials during a Capitol Hill appearance. Citing a case in which automatic assault rifles were stolen from an Army base and sold to a California street gang, Feinstein asked Milley at Thursday's hearing what the military is doing to ensure "there are no problems like this and that weapons are well secured."

Milley responded that he had asked the leaders of each armed service to do a deep dive on their numbers. He said the initial information they have given him suggests the number of missing weapons is "significantly less" than what AP reported. The AP derived its figures from records provided by the service

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branches, including criminal investigations, lost property forms and data from small arms registries, as well as internal memos AP obtained.

"I need to square the balance here. I owe you a firm answer," Milley told Feinstein.

His spokesman, Butler, elaborated: "Although we can't yet verify the numbers reported by AP, the chairman believes this is another example of the free press shining a light on the important subjects we need to get right."

Top officials with the Army, Marines and Secretary of Defense's office have said missing weapons are not a widespread problem and noted that the number is a tiny fraction of the military's stockpile.

Before publication of the AP's investigation, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in an interview that the armed services can account for 99.999% of their several million firearms. "Though the numbers are small, one is too many," Kirby said.

Lawmakers' focus so far had been a new reporting requirement, not systematic reform.

The Pentagon used to share annual updates about stolen weapons with Congress, but the requirement to do so ended years ago, apparently in fiscal year 1994. In more recent years, the Office of the Secretary of Defense has decided when to advise lawmakers of "significant" losses or thefts.

No such notifications have been made since at least 2017, the Pentagon said. Among the several hundred missing firearms that AP identified during subsequent years was a stolen Army pistol that authorities linked to shootings in New York. Other cases included weapons parts that an Army insider brought to the Texas-Mexico border to sell.

On Thursday, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said he planned to write a "mandatory reporting requirement" into the National Defense Authorization Act that Congress is drawing up this summer. In a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Blumenthal also asked that the Department of Defense's Office of the Inspector General conduct "a thorough review" of policies and security procedures.

Describing themselves as very concerned by AP's findings, Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Thom Tillis, R-N.C., have said they would be looking into questions raised by the reporting.

The AP's investigation, which began in 2011, is the first public accounting of its kind in decades, in part because neither the Department of Defense nor the armed services are required to tell the public about AWOL weapons.

The Army, the largest of the military services and one with more than 3 million firearms, and Air Force could not readily provide data to the AP on how many weapons were lost or stolen from 2010 through 2019.

Court: If bias rules have exceptions, faith groups qualify

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

Justice Samuel Alito called it a "wisp" of a decision — a Supreme Court ruling Thursday that favored Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia but was far from the constitutional gale wind that would have reshaped how courts interpret religious liberty under the First Amendment.

Still, there was a shift.

Governmental entities are now on notice that if they want to ban discrimination against LGBTQ persons or anyone else, they must not allow for any exceptions, or else religious groups will have the right to ask for them and they'll have a strong case for getting them.

The high court's ruling involved Philadelphia's decision to stop referring children for foster placement to Catholic Social Services after learning in 2018 that the local agency wouldn't certify same-sex couples as foster parents.

The city said the agency violated its requirement that contractors not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. Catholic Social Services had unsuccessfully argued in lower courts that it should be exempted under its religious belief that marriage is solely between a man and a woman. Also, it noted there were more than 20 other agencies that would work with same-sex couples.

A decades-old Supreme Court precedent says that if a government policy applies to everybody, religious groups can't claim an exemption even if it conflicts with their beliefs.

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But in Thursday's majority opinion, the court noted that Philadelphia's contract with foster agencies allowed the human services commissioner to make exceptions to its non-discrimination law.

"Where such a system of individual exemptions exists, the government may not refuse to extend that system to cases of religious hardship without a compelling reason," the court said, adding that the city doesn't have a compelling reason to deny the Catholic agency an exception.

University of Louisville law professor Samuel Marcossou, who focuses on constitutional law and LGBTQ rights, said the ruling will put governments in "what may sometimes be a difficult decision whether to make their policies absolute."

Their dilemma will be whether to "sacrifice the flexibility to make exceptions that make sense to achieve important policy goals, or allow those exceptions to become much broader in practice than the government would like since religious groups would be able to take advantage of them," Marcossou said.

While all nine justices agreed with the decision, Alito and two others wanted to go further. They urged the court to reconsider the 1990 precedent it's based on: *Employment Division v. Smith*, which held that Oregon's drug prohibitions applied to everybody, even those using them for religious ceremonies.

Alito was not alone in predicting that if Philadelphia removes its no-exceptions stance, that won't resolve things. The case, or a similar one, could come before the court again soon.

"It's not going to work if Philadelphia tries to come within the ruling by taking away all their discretion granting exemptions," said Bruce Ledewitz, a law professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and specialist in constitutional law.

He said that under Chief Justice John Roberts, the court's direction is so predictable that if it takes such a case, the religious party will win. If a religious party would likely lose, the court wouldn't take the case in the first place, he said.

"What you have is a historical moment in the court's history," he said. "The majority feels for whatever reason that religious liberty is threatened, and they're going to uphold religious liberty."

Indeed, a recent study tracking cases before the Supreme Court found that it has overwhelmingly sided with religious petitions, and that whereas past cases often focused on the rights of religious minorities, recent decisions have favored mainstream Christian groups.

Thursday's decision shows the "court's extraordinary support for religion," said Lee Epstein, a law professor at Washington University in St. Louis and co-author of the study.

Mary Catherine Roper, deputy legal director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, which represented two organizations that intervened in the case to seek equitable treatment for LGBTQ families in Philadelphia's foster system, said the ruling has a silver lining: The majority opinion does not question Philadelphia's right to ban discrimination in its foster care system.

"We're disappointed for the families and children of Philadelphia," Roper said, but glad that the court didn't allow Catholic Social Services "to remake the foster care system under their own beliefs."

Roman Catholic Archbishop Nelson Perez of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, which is affiliated with Catholic Social Services, applauded the ruling, saying it "makes it abundantly clear that religious ministries cannot be forced to abandon their beliefs as the price for ministering to those in need," he said.

But not all religious voices were supportive.

"The Catholic hierarchy may think that they have achieved a stunning victory," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, which advocates for LGBTQ Catholics. "In fact it is a crushing defeat for the Catholic values of equality, respect and human dignity of all people."

M. Currey Cook of Lambda Legal, which advocates for LGBTQ rights, said the case would look different if there were evidence of the Catholic agency's policies' impact on LGBTQ couples or children.

"When confronted with such facts in a future case," Cook said, "the court will have to grapple for the first time with the ways such discrimination harms the foster children whose needs and best interests must always be paramount in child welfare cases."

Voting bill showdown looms as GOP rejects Manchin plan

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By BRIAN SLODYSKO and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate is set for a key vote Tuesday on a sweeping rewrite of voting and election law, setting up a dramatic test of Democratic unity on a top priority that Republicans are vowing to block.

Democrats appeared to be coalescing Thursday around changes to the bill that could win the support of moderate West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, the lone Democratic holdout on the legislation. Yet they still faced lockstep Republican opposition that will likely leave Democrats back where they started: lacking the votes to overcome a Republican filibuster. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called Manchin's proposal "equally unacceptable."

"Republicans are digging in their heels," said Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut. "They've made it pretty clear this week that there's nothing they're willing to support."

The bill, known as the For the People Act, has been touted as Democrats' answer to a state level-GOP push to enact voting restrictions following the 2020 election. It passed the House in March, but has bogged down in the Senate as Democrats have debated among themselves — with Manchin ultimately declaring he couldn't vote for it because it lacked bipartisan support.

Yet Manchin's position has evolved and compromise appeared to be nearing after he proposed a series of changes this week to narrow its scope. His proposal received a boost Thursday when Stacey Abrams, a former Georgia gubernatorial candidate who is a leading Democratic voice on voting rights, said she "absolutely" supported it.

"What Sen. Manchin is putting forward are some basic building blocks that we need to ensure that democracy is accessible," Abrams told CNN.

Still, in a narrowly divided Senate where Democrats must count on Vice President Kamala Harris to cast tie-breaking votes, any compromise will likely be for naught unless changes are made to Senate filibuster rules, which Manchin and others oppose. For now, it takes 60 votes to overcome a filibuster and advance legislation.

Over a dozen Senate Republicans took turns at the microphone during a Thursday news conference to denounce the bill, which they view as a federal overreach into state and local elections.

McConnell predicted all Republicans would remain in lockstep opposition regardless of what changes are made. Sen. Roy Blunt, the No. 4 ranking Senate Republican, noted the endorsement by Abrams, who is a lightning rod for GOP criticism.

"I actually think when Stacey Abrams immediately endorsed Sen. Manchin's proposal it became the Stacey Abrams (bill), not the Joe Manchin (bill)," he told reporters Thursday.

As written, the Democrats' bill would bring about the largest overhaul of U.S. voting in a generation, touching nearly every aspect of the electoral process. It would blunt laws erected in the name of election security, like voter ID requirements, while curtailing the influence of big money in politics. It would create a nonpartisan process for redrawing congressional districts, expand mail voting and early voting, restore the rights of felons to cast a ballot, and scores of other provisions.

Manchin's counter-offer, which is intended to entice GOP support, would leave significant portions of the sprawling bill intact, while curtailing, rewriting or eliminating other key parts.

"Color me a little a little skeptical," Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine, of Virginia, said of the possibility of bipartisanship.

What will ultimately come to the floor for a vote Tuesday remains unclear. Also not certain: whether Manchin will vote for it.

"We'll see what bill we have," he told reporters Thursday. "We don't know what bill we're going to have."

A national voter ID requirement favored by Manchin has emerged as one sticking point with some Democrats.

Manchin's proposal is far softer than the strict photo ID requirements adopted by some states. It would require all states to check ID, but various documents including a utility bill could be used instead of a photo ID, a requirement already adopted by 15 states including Manchin's West Virginia.

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"That is what we're negotiating," said Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who is playing a lead role in guiding the legislation.

Polls have shown notable bipartisan support for voter ID requirements, and Democrats in their elections overhaul focused on the strictest ID laws. In the current Senate bill, Democrats would require states with an ID law to allow voters who show up without identification to cast a regular ballot as long as they sign an affidavit under penalty of perjury.

"We might squabble about one or two things," said Sen. Raphael Warnock, of Georgia. "But I am not about to sacrifice the good in the pursuit of the perfect."

Klobuchar said she would continue to work on the bill over the weekend and was optimistic all 50 Senate Democrats would support it.

"If we reach unity on a voting bill in the Democratic Party, with all of the debates we've been having over the last few months, I don't think anything's over yet," she said.

Israel strikes Gaza after Hamas fires incendiary balloons

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel launched airstrikes on the Gaza Strip late Thursday for a second time since a shaky cease-fire ended last month's 11-day war. The strikes came after activists mobilized by Gaza's militant Hamas rulers launched incendiary balloons into Israel for a third straight day.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the strikes, which could be heard from Gaza City. Israel also carried out airstrikes early Wednesday, targeting what it is said were Hamas facilities, without killing or wounding anyone.

The military said fighter jets struck Hamas "military compounds and a rocket launch site" late Thursday in response to the balloons. It said its forces were preparing for a "variety of scenarios including a resumption of hostilities."

Rocket sirens went off in Israeli communities near Gaza shortly after the airstrikes. The military later said they were triggered by "incoming fire, not rockets."

Surveillance camera footage obtained by The Associated Press showed what appeared to be heavy machine-gun fire into the air from Gaza, a possible attempt by Palestinian militants to shoot down aircraft. Other footage showed projectiles being fired from Gaza, but it was unclear what kind or where they landed.

Tensions have remained high since a cease-fire halted the war on May 21, even as Egyptian mediators have met with Israeli and Hamas officials to try and shore up the informal truce.

Israel and Hamas have fought four wars and countless smaller skirmishes since the Islamic militant group seized power from rival Palestinians forces in 2007. Israel and Egypt have imposed a crippling blockade on Gaza, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians, since Hamas took over.

Earlier, Israeli police used stun grenades and a water cannon spraying skunk water to disperse Palestinian protesters from Damascus Gate in east Jerusalem, the epicenter of weeks of protests and clashes in the run-up to the Gaza war.

After the crowds were dispersed, Palestinians could be seen throwing rocks and water bottles at ultra-Orthodox Jews walking in the area.

Calls had circulated for protesters to gather at Damascus Gate in response to a rally held there by Jewish ultranationalists on Tuesday in which dozens of Israelis had chanted "Death to Arabs" and "May your village burn." The police had forcibly cleared the square and provided security for that rally, part of a parade to celebrate Israel's conquest of east Jerusalem.

In a separate incident, a Palestinian teenager died Thursday after being shot by Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank during a protest against a settlement outpost, the fourth demonstrator to be killed since the outpost was established last month.

The Israeli military said Wednesday that a soldier stationed near the wildcat outpost in the West Bank saw a group of Palestinians approaching, and that one "hurled a suspicious object at him, which exploded adjacent to the soldier." The army said that the soldier fired in the air, then shot the Palestinian who threw

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the object.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said Thursday that Ahmad Shamsa, 15, died of a gunshot wound sustained a day earlier.

Settlers established the outpost, which they refer to as Eviatar, near the northern West Bank town of Nablus last month and say it is now home to dozens of families. Palestinians say it is built on private land and fear it will grow and merge with other large settlements nearby.

Nearly 500,000 Jewish settlers live in some 130 settlements across the occupied West Bank. The Palestinians and much of the international community view the settlements as a violation of international law and a major obstacle to peace.

Israeli authorities have evacuated the outpost on several occasions. They appear reluctant to do so this time because it would embarrass Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and other right-wing members of the fragile government sworn in over the weekend.

Palestinians from the nearby village of Beita have held several protests in which demonstrators have hurled stones and Israeli troops have fired tear gas and live ammunition. Four Palestinians have been killed since mid-May, including Shamsa and another teenager.

The Israeli military also shot and killed a Palestinian woman on Wednesday, saying she had tried to ram her car into a group of soldiers guarding a West Bank construction site.

In a statement, the army said soldiers fired at the woman in Hizmeh, just north of Jerusalem, after she exited the car and pulled out a knife. The statement did not say how close the woman was to the soldiers, and the army did not release any photos or video of the incident.

The family of Mai Afaneh insisted she had no reason or ability to carry out an attack.

In recent years, Israel has seen a series of shootings, stabbings and car ramming attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians in the occupied West Bank. Most have been carried out by Palestinians with no apparent links to organized militant groups.

Palestinians and Israeli human rights groups say the soldiers often use excessive force and could have stopped some assailants without killing them. In some cases, they say that innocent people have been identified as attackers and shot.

The Palestinians seek the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority exerts limited self-rule in population centers, as part of a future state along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem. Israel captured all three territories in the 1967 war and says Jerusalem is indivisible. There have been no substantive peace talks in more than a decade.

St. Louis gun-waving couple pleads guilty to misdemeanors

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — A St. Louis couple who gained notoriety for pointing guns at social justice demonstrators pleaded guilty Thursday to misdemeanor charges, but the man left the courthouse defiantly pledging to “do it again” if faced with the same circumstances.

Patricia McCloskey pleaded guilty to misdemeanor harassment and was fined \$2,000. Her husband, Mark McCloskey, pleaded guilty to misdemeanor fourth-degree assault and was fined \$750. They also agreed to give up the weapons they used during the confrontation.

When several hundred demonstrators marched past their home in June of 2020, the couple waved weapons at them. They claimed the protesters were trespassing and that they feared for their safety.

The McCloskeys, both of them lawyers in their 60s, wore blue blazers and spoke calmly in answering questions from Judge David Mason during Thursday’s hearing. Mason asked Mark McCloskey if he acknowledged that his actions put people at risk of personal injury. He replied, “I sure did your honor.”

Mark McCloskey, who announced in May that he was running for a U.S. Senate seat in Missouri, was unapologetic after the hearing.

“I’d do it again,” he said from the courthouse steps in downtown St. Louis. “Any time the mob approaches me, I’ll do what I can to put them in imminent threat of physical injury because that’s what kept them

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from destroying my house and my family.”

The McCloskeys’ defense lawyer, Joel Schwartz, said after the hearing the couple had hoped to raise money by donating Mark’s rifle to charity, but acknowledged that it was an unusual request.

Because the charges are misdemeanors, the McCloskeys do not face the possibility of losing their law licenses and can continue to own firearms.

On the courthouse steps after the hearing, special prosecutor Richard Callahan said the misdemeanor plea was reasonable noting the McCloskeys called the police, no shots were fired and no one was hurt.

“But I think that their conduct was a little unreasonable in the end,” he said. “I don’t think people should view this case as some type of betrayal or assault on the Second Amendment. We still have the Second Amendment rights. It’s just that the Second Amendment does not permit unreasonable conduct.”

The June 28, 2020, protests came weeks after George Floyd’s death under a Minneapolis police officer’s knee. Mark McCloskey emerged with an AR-15-style rifle, and Patricia McCloskey waved a semiautomatic pistol, according to the indictment. Cellphone video captured the confrontation. No shots were fired and no one was hurt.

The McCloskeys were indicted by a grand jury in October on felony charges of unlawful use of a weapon and evidence tampering. Callahan later amended the charges to give jurors the alternative of convictions of misdemeanor harassment instead of the weapons charge. Under that alternative, the evidence tampering count would be dropped.

An investigation by St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner’s office led to the initial indictments — and harsh backlash from several Republican leaders. Then-President Donald Trump spoke out in defense of the couple, whose newfound celebrity earned them an appearance via video at the Republican National Convention.

Republican Missouri Gov. Mike Parson has said that if the McCloskeys are convicted, he’d pardon them. A spokeswoman for Parson didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment after the hearing.

Callahan, a longtime judge and former U.S. attorney, was appointed special prosecutor after a judge in December ruled that Gardner created an appearance of impropriety by mentioning the McCloskey case in fundraising emails before the August Democratic primary. Gardner went on to win reelection.

‘Obamacare’ survives: Supreme Court dismisses big challenge

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court, though increasingly conservative in makeup, rejected the latest major Republican-led effort to kill the national health care law known as “Obamacare” on Thursday, preserving insurance coverage for millions of Americans.

The justices, by a 7-2 vote, left the entire Affordable Care Act intact in ruling that Texas, other GOP-led states and two individuals had no right to bring their lawsuit in federal court. The Biden administration says 31 million people have health insurance because of the law, which also survived two earlier challenges in the Supreme Court.

The law’s major provisions include protections for people with existing health conditions, a range of no-cost preventive services, expansion of the Medicaid program that insures lower-income people and access to health insurance markets offering subsidized plans.

“The Affordable Care Act remains the law of the land,” President Joe Biden, said, celebrating the ruling. He called for building further on the law that was enacted in 2010 when he was vice president.

Also left in place is the law’s now-toothless requirement that people have health insurance or pay a penalty. Congress rendered that provision irrelevant in 2017 when it reduced the penalty to zero.

The elimination of the penalty had become the hook that Texas and other GOP-led states, as well as the Trump administration, used to attack the entire law. They argued that without the mandate, a pillar of the law when it was passed, the rest of the law should fall, too.

And with a Supreme Court that includes three appointees of former President Donald Trump, opponents of “Obamacare” hoped a majority of the justices would finally kill the law they have been fighting for more

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than a decade.

But the third major attack on the law at the Supreme Court ended the way the first two did, with a majority of the court rebuffing efforts to gut the law or get rid of it altogether.

Trump's appointees — Justices Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh — split their votes. Kavanaugh and Barrett joined the majority. Gorsuch was in dissent, signing on to an opinion from Justice Samuel Alito.

Justice Stephen Breyer wrote for the court that the states and people who filed a federal lawsuit "have failed to show that they have standing to attack as unconstitutional the Act's minimum essential coverage provision."

In dissent, Alito wrote, "Today's decision is the third installment in our epic Affordable Care Act trilogy, and it follows the same pattern as installments one and two. In all three episodes, with the Affordable Care Act facing a serious threat, the Court has pulled off an improbable rescue." Alito was a dissenter in the two earlier cases in 2012 and 2015, as well.

Like Alito, Justice Clarence Thomas was in dissent in the two earlier cases, but he joined Thursday's majority, writing, "Although this Court has erred twice before in cases involving the Affordable Care Act, it does not err today."

Because it dismissed the case for the plaintiff's lack of legal standing — the ability to sue — the court didn't actually rule on whether the individual mandate is unconstitutional now that there is no penalty for forgoing insurance. Lower courts had struck down the mandate, in rulings that were wiped away by the Supreme Court decision.

With the latest ruling, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that "the Affordable Care Act is here to stay," former President Barack Obama said, adding his support to Biden's call to expand the law.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton pledged to continue the fight against "Obamacare," which he called a "massive government takeover of health care."

But it's not clear what Republicans can do, said Larry Levitt, an executive vice president for the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation, which studies health care.

"Democrats are in charge and they have made reinvigorating and building on the ACA a key priority," Levitt said. "Republicans don't seem to have much enthusiasm for continuing to try to overturn the law."

Republicans have pressed their argument to invalidate the whole law even though congressional efforts to rip out the entire law "root and branch," in Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell's words, have failed. The closest they came was in July 2017 when Arizona Sen. John McCain, who died the following year, delivered a dramatic thumbs-down vote to a repeal effort by fellow Republicans.

Chief Justice John Roberts said during arguments in November that it seemed the law's foes were asking the court to do work best left to the political branches of government.

The court's decision preserves benefits that have become part of the fabric of the nation's health care system.

Polls show that the law has grown in popularity as it has endured the heaviest assault. In December 2016, just before Obama left office and Trump swept in calling the ACA a "disaster," 46% of Americans had an unfavorable view of the law, while 43% approved, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation tracking poll. Those ratings flipped, and by February of this year 54% had a favorable view, while disapproval had fallen to 39% in the same ongoing poll.

The health law is now undergoing an expansion under Biden, who sees it as the foundation for moving the U.S. to coverage for all. His giant COVID-19 relief bill significantly increased subsidies for private health plans offered through the ACA's insurance markets, while also dangling higher federal payments before the dozen states that have declined the law's Medicaid expansion. About 1.2 million people have signed up with HealthCare.gov since Biden reopened enrollment amid high levels of COVID cases earlier this year.

Most of the people with insurance because of the law have it through Medicaid expansion or the health insurance markets that offer subsidized private plans. But its most popular benefit is protection for people with preexisting medical conditions. They cannot be turned down for coverage on account of health problems, or charged a higher premium. While those covered under employer plans already had such protections, "Obamacare" guaranteed them for people buying individual policies.

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Another hugely popular benefit allows young adults to remain on their parents' health insurance until they turn 26. Before the law, going without medical coverage was akin to a rite of passage for people in their 20s getting a start in the world.

Because of the ACA, most privately insured women receive birth control free of charge. It's considered a preventive benefit covered at no additional cost to the patient. So are routine screenings for cancer and other conditions.

For Medicare recipients, "Obamacare" also improved preventive care, and more importantly, closed a prescription drug coverage gap of several thousand dollars that was known as the "doughnut hole."

Biden signs bill making Juneteenth a federal holiday

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden signed legislation Thursday establishing a new federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery, saying he believes it will go down as one of the greatest honors he has as president.

Biden signed into law a bill to make Juneteenth, or June 19, the 12th federal holiday. The House voted 415-14 on Wednesday to send the bill to Biden, while the Senate passed the bill unanimously the day before.

"This is a day of profound weight and profound power, a day in which we remember the moral stain, the terrible toll that slavery took on the country and continues to take," Biden said.

Juneteenth commemorates June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers brought the news of freedom to enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas — two months after the Confederacy had surrendered. That was also about 2 1/2 years after the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the Southern states.

It's the first new federal holiday since Martin Luther King Jr. Day was created in 1983. One of the federal holidays, Inauguration Day, happens every four years.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management, which is the human resources office for the federal government, tweeted Thursday that most federal employees will observe the new holiday — Juneteenth National Independence Day — on Friday since June 19 falls on a Saturday this year.

Biden noted the overwhelming support for the bill from lawmakers in both parties. He had run for president promising to unite the country and work with Republicans, but his first major legislation to provide more COVID relief to American consumers and businesses was passed along party lines and he has struggled to unite lawmakers to support a major public works bill.

"I hope this is the beginning of a change in the way we deal with one another," Biden said.

Biden signed the legislation surrounded by members of the Congressional Black Caucus as well as the lead sponsors of the legislation in the Senate, Sens. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and John Cornyn, R-Texas. He was introduced by Vice President Kamala Harris, the nation's first African-American vice president.

"We have come far and we have far to go, but today is a day of celebration," Harris said.

The White House moved quickly to hold the signing ceremony after the House debated the bill and then voted for it Wednesday.

"Our federal holidays are purposely few in number and recognize the most important milestones," said Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y. "I cannot think of a more important milestone to commemorate than the end of slavery in the United States."

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, speaking next to a large poster of a Black man whose back bore massive scarring from being whipped, said she would be in Galveston on Saturday to celebrate along with Cornyn.

"Can you imagine?" said Jackson Lee. "I will be standing maybe taller than Sen. Cornyn, forgive me for that, because it will be such an elevation of joy."

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

The vote comes as lawmakers struggle to overcome divisions on police reform legislation following the killing of George Floyd by police and as Republican state legislators push what experts say is an unprecedented number of bills aimed at restricting access to the ballot box. While Republicans say the goal is to

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prevent voter fraud, Democrats contend that the measures are aimed at undermining minority voting rights. Several members of the Congressional Black Caucus went to the floor Wednesday to speak in favor of the bill. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, D-N.J., said she viewed Juneteenth as a commemoration rather than a celebration because it represented something that was delayed in happening.

"It also reminds me of what we don't have today," she said. "And that is full access to justice, freedom and equality. All these are often in short supply as it relates to the Black community."

Some Republican lawmakers opposed the effort. Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont., said creating the federal holiday was an effort to celebrate "identity politics."

"Since I believe in treating everyone equally, regardless of race, and that we should be focused on what unites us rather than our differences, I will vote no," he said in a press release.

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.

Rep. Clay Higgins, R-La., said he would vote for the bill and that he supported the establishment of a federal holiday, but he was upset that the name of the holiday included the word "independence" rather than "emancipation."

"Why would the Democrats want to politicize this by coopting the name of our sacred holiday of Independence Day?" Higgins asked.

Rep. Brenda Lawrence, D-Mich., replied, "I want to say to my white colleagues on the other side: Getting your independence from being enslaved in a country is different from a country getting independence to rule themselves."

She added, "We have a responsibility to teach every generation of Black and white Americans the pride of a people who have survived, endured and succeeded in these United States of America despite slavery."

The 14 House Republicans who voted against the bill are Andy Biggs of Arizona, Mo Brooks of Alabama, Andrew Clyde of Georgia, Scott DesJarlais of Tennessee, Paul Gosar of Arizona, Ronny Jackson of Texas, Doug LaMalfa of California, Thomas Massie of Kentucky, Tom McClintock of California, Ralph Norman of South Carolina, Mike Rogers of Alabama, Matt Rosendale of Montana, Chip Roy of Texas and Tom Tiffany of Wisconsin.

Can you mix and match COVID-19 vaccines?

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

Can you mix and match two-dose COVID-19 vaccines?

It's likely safe and effective, but researchers are still gathering data to be sure.

The authorized COVID-19 shots around the world are all designed to stimulate your immune system to produce virus-fighting antibodies, though the way they do so varies, noted Dr. Kate O'Brien, director of the World Health Organization's vaccine unit.

"Based on the basic principles of how vaccines work, we do think that the mix-and-match regimens are going to work," she said.

Scientists at Oxford University in the United Kingdom are testing combinations of the two-dose COVID-19 vaccines made by AstraZeneca, Moderna, Novavax and Pfizer-BioNTech. Smaller trials are also ongoing in Spain and Germany.

"We really just need to get the evidence in each of these (vaccine) combinations," O'Brien said.

So far, limited data suggests an AstraZeneca shot followed by the Pfizer shot is safe and effective. The combination also appears to come with a slightly higher likelihood of temporary side effects like aches and chills.

That might be because mixing and matching different types of vaccines can often produce a stronger immune response, said Lawrence Young, a virologist at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom.

In some places, health officials already suggest mixing in select circumstances.

After the AstraZeneca vaccine was linked to extremely rare blood clots, several European countries

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including Germany and France recommended people who got it as a first dose get a Pfizer or Moderna shot as a second dose instead. On Thursday, Canada made the same recommendation.

Some places like Britain say people should aim to get the same vaccine for their second dose if possible. If they got AstraZeneca as their first shot, they're advised to get another vaccine only if they have a history of blood clots or other conditions that might put them at higher risk of clots.

Nadal, Osaka both out for Wimbledon; she'll go to Olympics

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Rafael Nadal and Naomi Osaka are sitting out Wimbledon, leaving the oldest Grand Slam tennis tournament without two of the sport's biggest stars as it returns after being canceled last year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Nadal, a two-time champion at the All England Club, announced via a series of social media posts Thursday that he would also miss the Tokyo Olympics to rest and recover "after listening to my body."

"The goal," the 35-year-old Spaniard said, "is to prolong my career and continue to do what makes me happy."

Osaka's agent, Stuart Duguid, said Thursday in an email that the four-time Grand Slam champion does plan to head to the Summer Games after skipping Wimbledon.

"She is taking some personal time with friends and family," Duguid wrote. "She will be ready for the Olympics and is excited to play in front of her home fans."

Osaka is a 23-year-old who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father; the family moved to the United States when she was 3 and she is still based there.

Osaka has been ranked No. 1 and is currently No. 2; she is the highest-earning female athlete and was the 2020 AP Female Athlete of the Year. She is 14-3 this season, including a title at the Australian Open in February.

Last month, Osaka was fined \$15,000 when she didn't speak to reporters after her first-round victory at the French Open. The next day, Osaka pulled out of the tournament entirely, saying she experiences "huge waves of anxiety" before meeting with the media and revealing she has "suffered long bouts of depression."

In a statement posted on Twitter at the time, she said she would "take some time away from the court now, but when the time is right I really want to work with the Tour to discuss ways we can make things better for the players, press and fans."

Osaka has played at Wimbledon three times, twice exiting in the third round and losing in the first round in 2019.

Another Grand Slam title winner, 2020 U.S. Open champion Dominic Thiem, tweeted Thursday that he will not go to the Olympics, saying: "I don't feel ready to play my best in Tokyo."

Wimbledon, which was called off in 2020 for the first time since World War II because of COVID-19 concerns, begins main-draw play on June 28. The Olympic tennis competition opens on July 24.

Nadal lost to Novak Djokovic in four grueling sets that lasted more than four hours in the semifinals of the French Open last week — just the third loss for Nadal in 108 career matches at Roland Garros, where he has won a record 13 championships.

That defeat ended Nadal's 35-match winning streak at the clay-court major tournament and his bid for a fifth consecutive title there.

Nadal is tied with Roger Federer for the most Grand Slam titles won by a man with 20; Djokovic went on to win the French Open on Sunday for his 19th major.

Nadal's Slam total includes trophies at Wimbledon in 2008 and 2010. He also owns two Olympic gold medals, in singles at the 2008 Beijing Games and in doubles with Marc Lopez at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games, where Nadal was Spain's flag bearer at the opening ceremony.

In 2012, Nadal pulled out of the London Olympics and the U.S. Open because of knee tendinitis.

Nadal said having only two weeks between the end of the French Open and the start of Wimbledon this

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year — normally there are three, but play in Paris was delayed a week because of COVID-19 concerns — “didn’t make it easier” for him to recover from “the always demanding” clay-court season.

After the loss to Djokovic at Roland Garros, Nadal pointed to fatigue as an issue for him in the later stages of that match.

On Thursday, he explained in one his tweets that avoiding “any kind of excess” wear and tear on his body “is a very important factor at this stage of my career in order to try to keep fighting for the highest level of competition and titles.”

A former No. 1-ranked player who currently is No. 3, Nadal is 23-4 with two titles this season in Barcelona and Rome, both on clay courts.

Scotch whisky makers welcome suspension of costly US tariffs

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Scotch single malt whisky makers breathed a sigh of relief Thursday after the United States agreed to suspend tariffs on one of Scotland’s main exports in the wake of the resolution of a long-standing transatlantic trade row over subsidies to aircraft companies Boeing and Airbus.

President Donald Trump imposed the 25% tariffs on select products of the European Union, including Scotch single malt whiskies, in October 2019 as part of the trade dispute. While the U.K. is no longer an EU member, it belonged to the bloc when the tariffs were introduced.

Earlier this week, the U.S. and the EU reached an agreement to end the aerospace dispute, paving the way for a 5-year suspension of tariffs. Parallel talks were held between the U.S. and the U.K. over the tariffs.

The tariffs on Scotch single malts were the most high-profile to affect Britain. The Scotch Whisky Association estimated that they contributed to a 30% fall in total whisky exports to the U.S., equivalent to around 600 million pounds (\$850 million) in the 18 months to March 2021.

“This deal removes the threat of tariffs being re-imposed on Scotch whisky next month and enables distillers to focus on recovering exports to our largest and most valuable export market,” Karen Betts, the association’s chief executive, said.

A thaw in U.S.-EU relations had been widely expected following the election of President Joe Biden. Tariffs linked to the Airbus-Boeing dispute were temporarily halted in a bid to negotiate a solution.

Following the U.S.-EU aerospace agreement, British International Trade Secretary Liz Truss and the U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai agreed to halt retaliatory tariffs for five years.

“Today’s deal draws a line under an incredibly damaging issue and means we can focus on taking our trading relationship with the U.S. to the next level, including working more closely to challenge unfair practices by nations like China and using the power of free trade to build back better from the pandemic,” Truss said.

Tai said the agreement, in which both sides also agreed to form a working group on the civil aviation industry, can be built upon to “ensure fair competition and address common challenges from China and other non-market economies.”

Following the U.K.’s departure from the EU’s economic orbit at the start of this year, it is free to negotiate trade deals independently. Earlier this week, the British government negotiated the broad outlines of a trade deal with Australia that will see tariffs on a range of goods eliminated over coming years.

Ivan Menezes, the chief executive of drinks giant Diageo, said the elimination of tariffs on Scotch whisky and other recent developments illustrate the benefits that can accrue from Brexit.

“With the end of this dispute, a new free trade agreement with Australia that removes remaining tariffs on U.K. spirits and the opening of trade talks with India, the largest whisky market in the world, the U.K.’s newly independent trade policy is now bringing major benefits for Scotch and Scotland,” said Menezes, whose company’s stable of single malt whiskies includes Talisker and Lagavulin.

The Scottish National Party, which runs the devolved administration in Scotland, urged more support from the British government to help businesses that suffered.

“Whilst this announcement is very welcome after months of cross-party campaigning, the losses to

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Scotch whisky exports have been eye-watering, and it will take time for the industry to get back on its feet," lawmaker David Linden said.

Under Thursday's agreement, the U.K. will suspend for five years the 25% tariffs on U.S. rum, brandy and vodka. American whiskeys though will continue to face a 25% tariff in the U.K. that were imposed in connection with a separate steel and aluminum dispute between the EU and the U.S.

The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States welcomed Thursday's deal and hoped that a resolution can soon be found to lift the tariffs on American whiskeys, which it said have contributed to a 53% decline in exports to the U.K.

"We hope this positive momentum will also lead to the prompt and permanent removal of the EU and UK's tariffs on American Whiskeys," the group's CEO Chris Swonger said.

House votes to repeal 2002 Iraq War authorization

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Democratic-led House, with President Joe Biden's backing, passed legislation Thursday to repeal the 2002 authorization for use of military force in Iraq, a step that supporters said was necessary for Congress to reassert its constitutional duty to weigh in on matters of war. Detractors worried it would embolden militias or terrorist groups.

The repeal was passed overwhelmingly, 268-161. Forty-nine Republicans voted for the bill. Only one Democrat, Rep. Elaine Luria of Virginia, voted against it. In the Senate, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., intends to bring the measure to the floor this year.

Supporters said repeal would not affect U.S. military operations around the world, but could prevent a president from relying on the 2002 authorization to conduct unrelated military actions. The White House says there are no ongoing military activities reliant solely upon that authorization.

The authorization was directed against the government of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, authorizing the "necessary and appropriate" use of force to "defend U.S. national security against the continuing threat posed by Iraq" and to "enforce all relevant" U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq.

"Repeal is crucial because the executive branch has a history of stretching" the authorization's legal authority, said Democratic Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "It has already been used as justification for military actions against entities that had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist dictatorship simply because such entities were operating in Iraq."

Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, said he agreed the authorization was outdated, but he argued that Congress should not repeal it without also approving a replacement.

"We should not encourage any president to go it alone without Article I congressional authorization," McCaul said.

The action follows years of debate over whether Congress has ceded too much of its war-making authority to the White House. Many lawmakers, particularly Democrats, say passage of the 2002 authorization was a mistake, and some Republicans agree the authority should be taken off the books. Some lawmakers say the 2001 resolution to fight terrorism, passed after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, should be reexamined as well.

As a senator in 2002, Biden voted for the resolution that President George W. Bush used to invade Iraq the following year. Biden was not considered a leading critic of that 2003 military operation at the time, despite his claims as a presidential candidate in 2020.

Biden faced considerable criticism for the vote during the Democratic primary campaign. He and his aides, including now-Secretary of State Tony Blinken, initially defended the vote by saying the Bush administration wanted more leverage against Hussein and that Biden hadn't intended his vote as a blank check. Biden eventually called the resolution a mistake.

Democratic Rep. Barbara Lee of California, the bill's sponsor, said that 87% of the current members of the House were not in Congress in 2002 and that the authorization for military force passed at that time bears no correlation to the threats the nation faces today. She also was the lone vote against the 2001

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authorization following Sept. 11.

"To this day, our endless war continues costing trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in a war that goes way beyond any scope that Congress conceived or intended," Lee said.

Schumer had said on Wednesday that "the Iraq War has been over for nearly a decade" and that "the authorization passed in 2002 is no longer necessary in 2021."

The White House said Biden is committed to working with Congress to update the authorization with a "narrow and specific framework appropriate to ensure that we can continue to protect Americans from terrorist threats."

Schumer said he wanted to be clear that legislation terminating the use of force in Iraq does not mean the U.S. is abandoning the country and the shared fight against the Islamic State group. He said the measure would eliminate the possibility of a future administration "reaching back into the legal dustbin to use it as a justification for military adventurism."

He cited the Washington-directed drone strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassim Soleimani in January 2020 as an example.

The Trump administration said Soleimani was plotting a series of attacks that endangered many American troops and officials across the Middle East. The national security adviser at the time, Robert O'Brien, told reporters that President Donald Trump exercised America's right to self-defense and that the strike was a fully authorized action under the 2002 authorization to use military force.

"There is no good reason to allow this legal authority to persist in case another reckless commander in chief tries the same trick in the future," Schumer said.

In the Senate, key lawmakers are working on a bill that would repeal not only the 2002 authorization, but also the 1991 authorization for use of force in Iraq, which remains on the books. The 1991 authorization gave President George H.W. Bush the authority to use force against Iraq to enforce a series of Security Council resolutions passed in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The Senate and House would have to work out any differences in their bills and vote on a final product before it can go to Biden's desk to be signed into law.

In the end, legislation terminating the 2002 authorization will need 60 votes in an evenly divided Senate to overcome procedural hurdles. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he opposes the effort to terminate the authorization.

"We used it to get Soleimani and there might be another Soleimani out there," Inhofe said.

Students pulled from car by Atlanta police sue city

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Atlanta police had no justification for pulling two students from their car and hitting them with stun guns while they were stuck in traffic caused by protests over George Floyd's death, a lawsuit filed Thursday says.

The federal lawsuit by Taniyah Pilgrim and Messiah Young — students at historically Black colleges in Atlanta — accuses police of assault and false arrest and says one officer dangerously escalated the confrontation by falsely claiming the pair had a gun.

"Accountability is what relieves pain and brings peace, and unfortunately there has been no accountability," Mawuli Mel Davis, an attorney for Young, said.

The suit names the city, nine officers and Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms as defendants. The mayor's office said it had not been served with the lawsuit and could not comment.

Video of the May 2020 confrontation — shared widely online — shows officers shouting at Pilgrim and Young, firing Tasers at them and dragging them from the car. The pair can be heard screaming and asking what they did wrong.

They were heading home on May 30 during a curfew declared hours earlier by Bottoms when an officer instructed Young, 23, to leave the area, according to the suit. Young — unaware of the curfew — moved forward a few yards to comply with the officer but was again stuck in traffic, the suit says.

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He had been filming police confronting someone else on the side of the street, and the suit claims the officer retaliated by going after him and Pilgrim, 21.

Police swarmed the vehicle, and one officer repeatedly shouted that they had a gun, though he had no reason to believe that, according to the suit. The suit claims another officer responded by pulling out and aiming his gun at Young and dragging him violently out of the vehicle and slamming him to the ground.

Young was punched repeatedly and suffered a deep laceration to his arm that required 13 stitches, according to his attorneys.

Another officer said concern about a gun led him to hit Pilgrim with a stun gun, according to the suit.

"There was no gun. There was no weapon," attorney L. Chris Stewart, who represents Pilgrim, said. "Yet he screamed multiple times from a distance, 'He's got a gun,' which could have gotten these kids killed."

Attorneys played video of the encounter at a news conference announcing the suit. Young turned his head away from the screen, and Pilgrim dabbed tears from her eyes.

Bottoms and then-Police Chief Erika Shields decided two officers had used excessive force and should be fired immediately, though those decisions were overturned earlier this year. At least two other officers named in the suit are no longer with Atlanta police.

Prosecutors have filed criminal charges against six officers in the incident.

Young and Pilgrim said they have had trouble moving on with their lives.

"Everyday, I'm reminded of something from that night," Young said.

Pilgrim said she experiences anxiety and nightmares.

"It's like life took a total turn for something that we didn't ask to be involved with," she said.

UEFA asks Euro 2020 teams to stop removing sponsor bottles

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — Reacting to a bottle-snatching trend at the European Championship started by Cristiano Ronaldo, players on the 24 teams have been asked to stop removing strategically placed sponsor drinks from the news conference platforms, UEFA said Thursday.

Ronaldo, Paul Pogba and Manuel Locatelli all removed sponsor bottles away from the view of cameras when taking their seats at official media sessions this week.

Euro 2020 tournament director Martin Kallen said UEFA has "communicated with the teams regarding this matter."

"It is important because the revenues of the sponsors are important for the tournament and for European football," Kallen said in a briefing.

Pogba, who is Muslim and does not drink alcohol, objected to the distinctive green bottle of official Euro 2020 beer sponsor Heineken. The beer is marketed as 0.0% alcohol.

Kallen said tournament rules require compliance with UEFA's promises to sponsors, though players with religious objections "don't need to have a bottle there." Media managers at each of the 11 stadiums across Europe should also help with removing beer bottles ahead of the arrival of a player of Muslim faith.

Pogba had to take questions in the interview room after being named best player in France's 1-0 win over Germany on Tuesday. The player awards are sponsored by the brewer.

Ronaldo started the trend on Monday at a mandatory pre-game news conference by hiding two Coca-Cola bottles and replacing them with a water bottle, which was also one of the drink maker's brands.

A drop in Coca-Cola's share price this week was attributed by some to Ronaldo's snub, but without any evidence that the two things were connected.

Locatelli copied the Portugal great on Wednesday after helping Italy beat Switzerland.

It prompted UEFA to remind officials with the teams that players should respect the sponsors and the contributions they make to European soccer.

While UEFA will not impose fines on individual players, Kallen said it was "always a possibility" that national federations get a financial penalty for further incidents.

The issue is a source of comedy for other teams.

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Scotland midfielder John McGinn quipped "No Coke?" because there were no bottles in the squad's training base interview room, and Belgium coach Roberto Martinez said after a 2-1 victory over Denmark on Thursday that his team loves the drink.

Coca-Cola is an official sponsor of the Belgian soccer federation.

All 24 teams will get some of the money paid by Coca-Cola, Heineken and 10 other top-tier sponsors that contribute to UEFA's total tournament revenue of almost 2 billion euros (\$2.4 billion).

The values of individual sponsor deals are not published, but UEFA got 483 million euros (\$576 million) in sponsor deals from 10 partners at Euro 2016 in France.

Players also indirectly get money from Euro 2020 commercial income via their national federations and clubs.

The 24 national federations will share 371 million euros (\$442 million) in UEFA prize money, which typically helps pay player bonuses. The champions can get a maximum of 34 million euros (\$40.6 million) from UEFA by also winning all three of their group games.

Hundreds of clubs worldwide also get shares from at least 200 million euros (\$239 million) allocated by UEFA from Euro 2020 revenue as a reward for releasing their players to European national teams. Of that money, 130 million euros (\$155 million) is allocated on a daily rate for about 630 players taking part in the final tournament.

Euro 2020 revenue will also fund 775 million euros (\$925 million) UEFA has promised to its 55 member federations in annual grants and development project funds for the period of 2020-24.

Q&A: Abdul-Jabbar talks new documentary, MLK, social justice

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is an NBA legend, but the man known for his trademark skyhook shot has also devoted his life advocating for equality and social justice.

Abdul-Jabbar will take another step in his activism walk as an executive producer and narrator of the documentary "Fight the Power: The Movements That Changed America," which premieres Saturday on the History Channel. The one-hour documentary explores the history of protests that shaped the course for justice in America.

"Fight the Power" examines the labor movement of the 1880s, women's suffrage and civil rights along with the LGBTQ+ and Black Lives Matter initiatives. It also features footage from Abdul-Jabbar's personal experiences when he covered one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s news conferences at age 17 and attended the famous 1967 Cleveland Summit, where prominent Black athletes such as Bill Russell and Jim Brown discussed Muhammad Ali's refusal to serve in the Vietnam War.

Abdul-Jabbar said co-executive producer Deborah Morales was adamant about the documentary needing to include all groups impacted by "bigotry and discrimination." His pursuit toward social justice for marginalized people prompted the NBA to create an award bearing his name last month.

In a recent interview, Abdul-Jabbar spoke with The Associated Press about the importance of project, his unforgettable conversation with King, and how Emmett Till and James Baldwin were catalysts to his social justice journey.

Remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: Why does the documentary focus on several different movements?

ABDUL-JABBAR: For me, it is trying to show that what Black Americans must deal with has been experienced by other marginalized groups. All of us at one time or another have been targeted by the dominant group. So, we must understand that all of us are in the same boat and we have to stick up for the rights of every marginalized group, not just the ones that we're in that causes controversy, but to look at other issues."

AP: When did you first realize people of color were treated unfairly in this country?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It started when I was 8 years old. That's how old I was when Emmett Till was murdered. And I didn't understand it. I asked my parents to explain it. They didn't have the words. I was like "Where do I live? Why am I a target here?"

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AP: How did you find some clarity?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I was in the eighth grade. I was about 13 years old, and I read James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time." That explained it all to me. It gave me an idea of what I had to do and what Black Americans had to do in order to get out from underneath all of this oppression.

AP: You are a champion on the basketball court and voice of inclusivity. Did you envision this path for yourself, even after your Hall of Fame hoops career?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I never really saw myself as a leader in all of it. I was someone who spoke out. I had enough nerve (and was) crazy enough to speak out about things. If we don't talk about the issues, they don't get dealt with. So, somebody has to go out there and speak. You remember all the controversy behind LeBron (James) saying, "Shut up and dribble is a lot of B.S." You have to just get to that point where you can say that and have people understand what it means.

AP: Which personal experience highlighted in the doc stands out to you the most?

ABDUL-JABBAR: When I was 17 and I got to interview Dr. King. That was incredible. Just to exchange some words with him. But to understand what his message actually meant, I never really compared it side by side with what Malcolm X was talking about. When you do that, you find out actually that they had the two different approaches to the same end: freedom, justice and equality for all Americans. Equality, that's what it should be about.

AP: What's your biggest takeaway from the documentary?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It's a series of steps forward, but there's also some backsliding and a lot of attempts to move everything backwards. We had to deal with what people were really talking about, making America great again. It wasn't about being great. It was about being ruled by a certain group of people. They thought that was great. But our country should be ruled by the American people. And all of us have a vote in. All of us have a voice. And we have to use our voices and our votes in a righteous way.

AP: Are there other topics you would like to explore in the future?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I'm hoping I can do a more documentary style piece on the Underground Railroad. There's a dramatic piece on right now that's very well done. But we should get into the details and let America understand what it was all about, because it's an interesting story.

AP: What would be your angle?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Some of the people involved that you would never, ever be considered to be heroes of the Underground Railroad. For example, what do you know about Wild Bill Hickok? When he was a teenager, he and his father and uncle help escaping slaves get to Canada. He lived in central Illinois and the escaping slaves would go from the Mississippi River up to Chicago and southern Wisconsin, get on a boat, go across Lake Michigan. When they got to Canada, they were free. There's a whole lot of stories like that.

Drought saps California reservoirs as hot, dry summer looms

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

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

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

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

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

At nearby Folsom Lake, normally bustling boat docks rested on dry land, their buoys warning phantom

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boats to slow down. Campers occupied dusty riverbanks farther north at Shasta Lake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Storm brewing on Katie Ledecky's Tokyo Olympic horizon

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Katie Ledecky is used to slaying her competition, winning not by hundredths but by full seconds. Usually lots of 'em.

So when the world's dominant female distance swimmer goes slower than expected, it's a shock. Especially to her.

That's what happened in the 400-meter freestyle at the U.S. Olympic trials this week. Taking notice was Ariarne Titmus. Ledecky faces potentially tough challenges — and possible defeats — by the Australian at next month's Tokyo Olympics.

Titmus fired the first shot, clocking a winning time of 3 minutes, 56.90 seconds at the Australian trials. It was the second fastest in history and just off Ledecky's world record of 3:56.46 set five years ago in Rio de Janeiro.

Ledecky's response was, well, less than intimidating. She surprised even herself by going 4:01.27.

"I felt like I would be faster than that," she said. "I was a lot more nervous than I expected to be. I just wanted to get the race over with and get to that wall and punch my ticket."

Later that night, Ledecky returned to her Omaha hotel room to reunite with her immediate family for the first time since Christmas 2019, months before the coronavirus pandemic shut down the world.

"I started crying, they started crying," she said. "Just so nice to be back with them. We've all been through so much over the past year, and I think you kind of take things for granted."

Ledecky's greatness has been assumed since the 2012 London Games, where she won a surprise gold in the 800 free at age 15. Four years later, she left Rio de Janeiro as the most decorated female athlete of the games with four golds, one silver and two world records.

"It's pretty remarkable for her to continue doing what she's doing knowing that she was an Olympic champion at 15, and she's still arguably the best swimmer in the world," said her coach, Greg Meehan.

But there's a storm cloud on Ledecky's Olympic horizon in the form of Titmus. The 20-year-old Aussie swam the second-fastest 200 free ever at her country's trials. Her time of 1:53.09 was just 0.11 seconds shy of Federica Pellegrini's world record set in 2009 in a since-banned rubber suit.

Ledecky won the 200 free at Omaha in 1:55.11.

"The medals aren't given this week," the 24-year-old American said, "so I don't think we have to get too caught up in what times people are going here versus anywhere else in the world right now."

Tell that to Meehan, who will serve as the U.S. women's head coach in Tokyo.

"There's other people in the mix and there's challenges," he said, without naming names. "She's going to be met with challenges through each and every one of her events, so I think that's a great motivator."

Ledecky has learned to compartmentalize, whether it's swimming multiple events in the same session or moving past a disappointing time.

"If I had gotten a 1:57 in prelims in the 200 free a couple years ago, I think I would have been a wreck — not a wreck, but I would have let it bother me," she said. "But I was just able to roll it off and say, 'OK, I got the job done.'"

She also locked down a spot for Tokyo in the 1,500 free — the first time women will compete in the metric mile at the Olympics.

Still to come is the 800 free on Friday.

Ledecky's ability to swim — and win — at distances ranging from 200 to 1,500 meters hinges on more than mere talent. It requires strict time management, which involves warming down after racing, mas-

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sages, eating right, napping.

"We're trying to find the little things that she can constantly get better at and use that as a good motivating tool," Meehan said. "It's not necessarily about dominance. It's just about being the best that she can be in that realm and that environment, and hoping that's going to be enough to do the things that she wants to do."

With just more than a month to go until the games, including the post-trials training camp in Hawaii, Ledecky is searching for any kind of edge that will lower her times when gold is on the line.

"It's not like you can accomplish a whole lot," she said, "but I know that the past two Olympic cycles I have gotten a lot out of those training camps and have used them to my benefit."

Watching Ledecky this week in Omaha, Michael Phelps has been silently predicting her times. Clearly, his guess in the 400 free was well off. Still, he credits her for pushing time barriers much the way he did over five Olympics.

"She's recreating what's possible," Phelps said. "She's challenging her imagination and that's awesome to watch."

By the end of trials this weekend, Ledecky should be set to swim four individual events in Tokyo and possibly two relays. She's already tuning out the noise, especially from Down Under.

"The most important expectations are the ones that I have for myself," she said. "I do a pretty good job of sticking to those and not seeing what kinds of medal counts or times that people are throwing out about what I could accomplish if everything goes perfectly."

Brief, global internet outages blamed on software bug

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — A software bug at a major network provider briefly knocked dozens of financial institutions, airlines and other companies across the globe offline during peak business hours in Asia.

Akamai, which runs one of the internet's main content-delivery systems, said the outage Thursday was not caused by a cyberattack, but rather a software bug on a service that protects customers against denial-of-service attacks.

Many of the 500 affected Akamai customers had their traffic rerouted in minutes but it took more than four hours to fully restore the system, the Massachusetts company said. Akamai operates mirrors of customer websites in 135 countries — known as edge servers — designed to speed access to them.

The Hong Kong Stock Exchange and the four largest U.S. airlines were among those impacted. Akamai does not name its customers but says they include more than 300 of the world's banks, more than 30 airlines, more than 200 national government agencies and 825 retailers.

Many of the outages were reported by people in Australia trying to do banking, book flights and access postal services at mid-afternoon. Many services were back up and running after an hour or so.

Banking services were severely disrupted, with Westpac, the Commonwealth, ANZ and St George all down, along with the website of the Reserve Bank of Australia, the country's central bank. The Reserve Bank cancelled a bond-buying operation due to technical difficulties facing several banks that were to participate.

The airline Virgin Australia was also affected and cited the Akamai content delivery system. It said flights largely operated as scheduled after it restored access to its website and guest contact center.

Outages briefly spiked on American, Delta, United and Southwest airlines. Because the disruptions happened late at night in the U.S. when few planes were taking off, airline representatives said there was little to no effect on flights.

Southwest, which has suffered two other, unrelated technology issues this week, said its website and other internet-based tools were briefly disconnected but flights were not affected. United said there were no lingering issues early Thursday.

The disruptions occurred only days after many of the world's top websites went offline briefly due to a software disruption at Fastly, another major web services company. The company blamed the problem

on a software bug triggered when a single customer changed a setting.

Brief internet service outages are not uncommon and are only rarely the result of hacking or other mischief. However, the recent outages have underscored how vital a small number of behind-the-scenes companies have become to running the internet.

Editors of Hong Kong newspaper arrested under security law

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong police used a sweeping national security law Thursday to arrest five editors and executives of a pro-democracy newspaper on charges of colluding with foreign powers — the first time the legislation has been used against the press in yet another sign of an intensifying crackdown by Chinese authorities in the city long known for its freedoms.

Police said they had evidence that more than 30 articles published by Apple Daily played a “crucial part” in what they called a conspiracy with foreign countries to impose sanctions against China and Hong Kong.

The newspaper said in a statement that the move left it “speechless” but vowed to continue its reporting and even invited other media outlets to watch the Friday editions roll off the presses, a show of its commitment to continue its work.

Apple Daily has long been one of the most outspoken defenders of Hong Kong’s freedoms and in recent years has often criticized the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for walking back promises that the territory could retain those freedoms for 50 years after the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997.

The newspaper has thus found itself a frequent target. Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai is currently serving a 20-month prison sentence after being convicted of playing a role in unauthorized protests in 2019, when Hongkongers took the streets in massive antigovernment demonstrations in response to a proposed extradition law that would have allowed suspects to stand trial in China. Protests grew to include calls for broader democratic freedoms, but the movement only appeared to harden Beijing’s resolve to limit civil liberties in the territory, including by imposing the national security law used in Thursday’s arrests.

The legislation outlaws secession, subversion, terrorism and foreign collusion and has been used to arrest over 100 pro-democracy figures since it was first implemented a year ago, with many others fleeing abroad. The result is that it has virtually silenced opposition voices in the city — and drawn sanctions from the U.S. against Hong Kong and Chinese government officials.

Those arrested Thursday included Apple Daily’s chief editor Ryan Law; the CEO of its publisher Next Digital, Cheung Kim-hung; the publisher’s chief operating officer; and two other top editors, according to the newspaper.

Police also froze 18 million Hong Kong dollars (\$2.3 million) in assets belonging to three companies linked to Apple Daily, said Li Kwai-wah, a senior superintendent at Hong Kong’s National Security Department.

Trading in shares of Next Digital was halted Thursday morning at the request of the company, according to filings with the Hong Kong stock exchange.

In an apparent show of force, more than 200 police officers were involved in the search of Apple Daily’s offices, and the government said a warrant was obtained to look for evidence of a suspected violation of the national security law.

Apple Daily published a letter to its readers, saying that police had confiscated many items during the search, including 38 computers that contained “considerable” journalistic material.

“Today’s Hong Kong feels unfamiliar and leaves us speechless. It feels as though we are powerless to stop the regime from exercising its power as it pleases,” the letter read. “Nevertheless, the staff of Apple Daily is standing firm. We will continue to persist as Hongkongers and live up to the expectations so that we have no regrets to our readers and the times we are in.”

Hong Kong Security Minister John Lee told a news conference that police will investigate those arrested and others to establish if they have assisted in instigating or funding the offenses.

He alleged that the police action against the Apple Daily editors and executives is not related to “normal

journalistic work.”

“The action targeted the use of journalistic work as a tool to endanger national security,” he said.

In a chilling warning, he said that anyone working with the “perpetrators” would “pay a hefty price.” He added: “Distance yourself from them, otherwise all you will be left with are regrets.”

The Chinese government’s liaison office in Hong Kong said in a statement Thursday that it supported police action, noting that while the city’s mini-constitution, the Basic Law, guarantees the freedoms of speech and press, those rights cannot undermine the “bottom line of national security.”

“Freedom of the press is not a ‘shield’ for illegal activities,” the liaison office said.

Experts said that, with the arrests, the government has sent a message that certain topics are off limits.

“This is a direct attack on Apple Daily, and on press freedom in Hong Kong,” said Thomas Kellogg, executive director of the Georgetown Center for Asian Law. “I fear that the arrests will send a message to media outlets across Hong Kong, that certain red lines will be enforced ... and that those who cross them risk the possibility of arrest and of jail time under the national security law.”

Hong Kong Journalists Association Chairman Chris Yeung echoed those concerns, saying the national security law was being used as a “weapon to prosecute media executives and journalists.”

He said that the court warrant that allowed police to search the offices of Apple Daily had undermined journalists’ ability to protect their materials, a vital part of upholding press freedom.

“Self censorship will get worse if journalists are not sure whether they are able to protect their sources of information,” said Yeung.

Weird ‘living fossil’ fish lives 100 years, pregnant for 5

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The coelacanth — a giant weird fish still around from dinosaur times — can live for 100 years, a new study found.

These slow-moving, people-sized fish of the deep, nicknamed a “living fossil,” are the opposite of the live fast, die young mantra. These nocturnal fish grow at an achingly slow pace.

Females don’t hit sexual maturity until their late 50s, the study said, while male coelacanths are sexually mature at 40 to 69 years. And maybe strangest of all, researchers figure pregnancy in the fish lasts about five years.

Coelacanths, which have been around for 400 million years, were thought extinct until they were found alive in 1938 off South Africa. Scientists long believed coelacanths live about 20 years. But by applying a standard technique for dating commercial fish, French scientists calculated they actually live close to a century, according to a study in Thursday’s Current Biology.

Coelacanths are so endangered that scientists can only study specimens already caught and dead.

In the past, scientists calculated fish ages by counting big lines on a specific coelacanth scale. But the French scientists found they were missing smaller lines that could only be seen using polarized light — the technique used to figure out the age of commercial fish.

Study co-author Bruno Ernande, a marine evolutionary ecologist at France’s marine research institute, said polarized light revealed five smaller lines for every big one. The researchers concluded the smaller lines better correlated to a year of coelacanth age — and that indicated their oldest specimen was 84 years old.

Using the technique, the scientists studied two embryos and calculated the largest was five years old and the youngest was nine years old. So, Ernande said, they figured pregnancy lasts at least five years in coelacanths, which have live births.

That five-year gestation is “very strange” for fish or any animal, said Scripps Institution of Oceanography’s Harold Walker, who wasn’t part of the research.

Even though coelacanths are unrelated genetically and show wide evolutionary differences, they age slowly like other dwellers of the deep, sharks and rays, Ernande said. “They might have evolved similar life histories because they are sharing similar type habitats,” he said.

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As COVID-19 crisis ebbs, some seeking 9/11-style commission

By JAY REEVES and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

With more than 600,000 Americans dead of COVID-19 and questions still raging about the origin of the virus and the government's response, a push is underway on Capitol Hill and beyond for a full-blown investigation of the crisis by a national commission like the one that looked into 9/11.

It is unclear whether such a probe will ever happen, though a privately sponsored team of public health experts is already laying the groundwork for one.

Given that most of the disaster unfolded on President Donald Trump's watch, many worry that politics will get in the way of any inquiry, as happened when Republicans came out against a commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters. Others fear that a desire by many to simply move on will thwart a review.

"I think we need to get into the weeds, to look at the details to see what happened," said Sabila Khan of Jersey City, New Jersey, whose father, Shafqat Rasul Khan, died of COVID-19. "If this happens again, our loved ones died in vain."

A bill introduced by Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine would establish such a commission.

Its inquiry could include a look at the origins of the virus; early warnings and other communication with foreign governments; coordination among federal, state and local agencies; the availability of medical supplies; testing and public health surveillance; vaccination development and distribution; the uneven effect on minorities; and government relief policies.

"The death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic is more than 200 times that of the 9/11 attacks — but Congress has yet to establish a similar blue ribbon commission to investigate the vulnerabilities of our public health system and issue guidance for how we as a nation can better protect the American people from future pandemics," Menendez and Collins wrote in an essay this week in *The New York Times*.

While the government crash program to develop a vaccine proved a success, the crisis in the U.S. was marked by shortages of protective gear and other medical equipment, insufficient testing, defective test kits, false or misleading information about treatments, and mixed messages on the need for masks and lockdowns.

Last month, President Joe Biden ordered U.S. intelligence to step up its efforts to investigate the virus's origins, including the possibility it escaped from a Chinese laboratory, a once-fringe theory that has gained currency in recent weeks. Many scientists have said they instead believe the virus occurred in nature and jumped from animals to humans.

Dr. Naeha Quasba of Baltimore, who lost her father, Ramash Quasba, to the outbreak, said she favors an investigation that could hold others accountable for their failures, which she said include the lack of a national response plan, inadequate health funding and lackadaisical enforcement of public health orders.

"But at this point, my dad is gone and now a vaccine is available," Quasba said. "So people are moving on to a different phase."

While no vote on the legislation is scheduled and the prospects of passage are uncertain, work already is going on that could help shape an investigation: Members of what is called the COVID Commission Planning Group have been at work for five months, trying to come up with the key questions for a commission and the best ways to get answers.

University of Virginia history professor Philip Zelikow, who is leading the planning group and was executive director of the 9/11 Commission, said dozens of experts have been enlisted with the support of charitable foundations and have identified more than 40 lines of inquiry.

"All that preparatory work is being done to be put at the disposal of whatever commission gets created, if it's created by the Congress, created by the president or created independently and privately sponsored," he said.

Established by Congress in late 2002, the 9/11 Commission produced a 567-page report in July 2004 that began with a detailed narrative of the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings. It went into the causes of terrorists'

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hatred of the U.S., lapses that helped allow the attacks to occur and suggestions for preventing another one. Many of its suggestions were implemented, including greater intelligence-sharing between agencies.

Planning group member Marc Lipsitch, an epidemiology professor and director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics at Harvard's School of Public Health, said one possible alternative to a government-appointed COVID-19 commission would be one that is privately funded.

"The upside is that it could be done in a less politically charged way," Lipsitch said.

Another planning group member, Anita Cicero, deputy director at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said the debate over whether to investigate the Capitol attack demonstrated that the partisan divide is the first obstacle to overcome in this case.

"The idea that this should be a commission set up by one party or the other, I think that is sort of dead upon arrival. So you have to find a way that this is a truly more bipartisan and welcome effort," she said.

In poorest countries, surges worsen shortages of vaccines

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA and FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Hati Maronjei once swore he would never get a COVID-19 shot, after a pastor warned that vaccines aren't safe.

Now, four months after the first batch of vaccines arrived in Zimbabwe, the 44-year-old street hawker of electronic items is desperate for the shot he can't get. Whenever he visits a clinic in the capital, Harare, he is told to try again the next day.

"I am getting frustrated and afraid," he said. "I am always in crowded places, talking, selling to different people. I can't lock myself in the house."

A sense of dread is growing in some of the very poorest countries in the world as virus cases surge and more contagious variants take hold amid a crippling shortage of vaccine.

The crisis has alarmed public health officials along with the millions of unvaccinated, especially those who toil in the informal, off-the-books economy, live hand-to-mouth and pay cash in health emergencies. With intensive care units filling up in cities overwhelmed by the pandemic, severe disease can be a death sentence.

Africa is especially vulnerable. Its 1.3 billion people account for 18% of the world's population, but the continent has received only 2% of all vaccine doses administered globally. And some African countries have yet to dispense a single shot.

Health experts and world leaders have repeatedly warned that even if rich nations immunize all their people, the pandemic will not be defeated if the virus is allowed to spread in countries starved of vaccine.

"We've said all through this pandemic that we are not safe unless we are all safe," said John Nkengasong, a Cameroonian virologist who heads the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "We are only as strong as the weakest link."

Zimbabwe, which has imposed new lockdown measures because of a sharp rise in deaths and cases in the country of over 15 million people, has used just over a million of 1.7 million doses, blaming shortages in urban areas on logistical challenges.

Long lines form at centers such as Parirenyatwa Hospital, unlike months ago, when authorities were begging people to get vaccinated. Many are alarmed as winter sets in and the variant first identified in South Africa spreads in Harare, where young people crowd into betting houses, some with masks dangling from their chins and others without.

"Most people are not wearing masks. There is no social distancing. The only answer is a vaccine, but I can't get it," Maronjei said.

At the start of the pandemic, many deeply impoverished countries with weak health care systems appeared to have avoided the worst. That is changing.

"The sobering trajectory of surging cases should rouse everyone to urgent action," said Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, Africa director of the World Health Organization. "Public health measures must be scaled up fast to find, test, isolate and care for patients, and to quickly trace and isolate their contacts."

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New cases on the continent rose by nearly 30% in the past week, she said Thursday.

In Zambia, where a vaccination campaign has stalled, authorities reported that the country is running out of bottled oxygen. Sick people whose symptoms are not severe are being turned away by hospitals in Lusaka, the capital.

"When we reached the hospital, we were told there was no bed space for her," Jane Bwalya said of her 70-year-old grandmother. "They told us to manage the disease from home. So we just went back home, and we are trying to give her whatever medicine can reduce the symptoms."

Uganda is likewise fighting a sharp rise in cases and is seeing an array of variants. Authorities report that the surge is infecting more people in their 20s and 30s.

Intensive care units in and around the capital, Kampala, are almost full, and Misaki Wayengera, a doctor who heads a committee advising Uganda's government, said some patients are "praying for someone to pass on" so that they can get an ICU bed.

Many Ugandans feel hopeless when they see the astronomical medical bills of patients emerging from intensive care. Some have turned to concoctions of boiled herbs for protection. On social media, suggestions include lemongrass and small flowering plants. That has raised fears of poisoning.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni imposed new restrictions this month that included closing all schools. But he avoided the extreme lockdown measures of last year, saying he didn't want to hurt people's livelihoods in a country with a vast informal sector.

For beauticians, restaurant workers and vendors in crowded open-air markets struggling to put food on the table, the threat from COVID-19 may be high, but taking even a day off when sick is a hardship. Testing costs \$22 to \$65, prohibitive for the working class.

"Unless I am feeling very sick, I wouldn't waste all my money to go and test for COVID," said Aisha Mbabazi, a waiter in a restaurant just outside Kampala.

The 28-year-old had a scare weeks ago, she said, noting that a COVID-19 infection could cost her the job if her employer found out. But she has been unable to get a shot.

"I really wanted the vaccine because for us, any time you can get COVID," she said. "Even just touching the menu."

Dr. Ian Clarke, who founded a hospital in Uganda, said that while vaccine demand is growing among the previously hesitant, "the downside is that we do not know when, or from where, we will get the next batch" of shots.

Africa has recorded more than 5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 135,000 deaths. That is a small fraction of the world's caseload, but many fear the crisis could get much worse.

Nearly 90% of African countries are set to miss the global target of vaccinating 10% of their people by September, according to the World Health Organization.

One major problem is that COVAX, the U.N.-backed project to supply vaccine to poor corners of the world, is itself facing a serious shortage of vaccine.

Amid a global outcry over the gap between the haves and the have-nots, the U.S., Britain and the other Group of Seven wealthy nations agreed last week to share at least 1 billion doses with struggling countries over the next year, with deliveries starting in August.

In the meantime, many of the world's poor wait and worry.

In Afghanistan, where a surge threatens to overwhelm a war-battered health system, 700,000 doses donated by China arrived over the weekend, and within hours, "people were fighting with each other to get to the front of the line," said Health Ministry spokesman Dr. Ghulam Dastagir Nazari.

The vaccine rush is notable in a country where many question the reality of the virus and rarely wear masks or social distance, often mocking those who do.

At the end of May, approximately 600,000 Afghans had received at least one dose, or less than 2% of the population of 36 million. But the number of those fully vaccinated is minute — "so few I couldn't even say any percentage," according to Nazari.

In Haiti, hospitals are turning away patients as the country awaits its first shipment of vaccines. A major

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delivery via COVAX was delayed amid government concern over side effects and a lack of infrastructure to keep the doses properly refrigerated.

"I'm at risk every single day," said Nacheline Nazon, a 22-year-old salesperson who takes a colorful, crowded bus known as a tap-tap to work at a clothing store in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, because that is all she can afford.

She said she wears a mask and washes her hands. If the vaccine becomes available, she said, "I'll probably be the first one in line to get it."

Putin praises summit result, calls Biden a tough negotiator

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday praised the outcome of his summit with U.S. President Joe Biden and called him an astute and shrewd negotiator.

The two leaders concluded three hours of talks Wednesday at an opulent villa facing Lake Geneva by exchanging expressions of mutual respect but firmly restating their starkly different views on cyberattacks, the conflict in Ukraine, political dissent and other issues. At the same time, they announced an agreement to return each other's ambassadors and mapped more talks on arms control and cybersecurity.

Putin, who hailed Biden as a highly experienced and constructive interlocutor at a news conference in Geneva, offered more praise of the U.S. leader on Thursday in a video call with graduates of a government management school.

Biden kept him on his guard with his savvy negotiating skills, Putin said.

"He perfectly knows the matter," Putin said. "He is fully concentrated and knows what he wants to achieve. And he does it very shrewdly."

He dismissed what he described as media attempts to cast Biden as physically frail, noting that the 78-year-old U.S. president was in great shape even though the meeting wrapped up a European tour for him that included the G-7 and NATO summits.

"He was on a long trip, he flew in from across the ocean, involving jetlag," the 68-year-old Putin said, adding that he knows how tiring travel can be.

"The atmosphere was quite friendly," he added. "I think we managed to understand each other, we managed to understand each other's positions on key issue, they differ on many things and we noted the differences. At the same time, we established areas and points where we can possibly bring our positions closer in the future."

Putin particularly emphasized the importance of an agreement to conduct dialogue on cybersecurity between experts, saying it would help reduce tensions.

Biden said he and Putin agreed to have their experts work out an understanding about what types of critical infrastructure would be off-limits to cyberattacks. The agreement follows a flood of ransomware attacks against U.S. businesses and government agencies that U.S. officials said originated from Russia.

Putin, who has strongly denied any Russian state role in the cyberattacks, argued Thursday that "instead of finger-pointing and bickering, we should better combine efforts to fight cybercrime."

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the summit as positive and productive, saying it allowed the leaders "to directly put forward their positions and try to understand where interaction is possible and where there can be no interaction due to categorical disagreements."

Peskov particularly noted the joint statement from the presidents that said the two countries will conduct a dialogue on strategic stability issues and reaffirmed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" — a principle declared by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at their Geneva summit in 1985.

Restating the principle was a "significant achievement" amid current tensions between Moscow and Washington, said Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who attended the talks.

The strategic stability dialogue would cover a wide range of issues related to nuclear and other weapons and is key to reducing the risk of conflict between the two superpowers.

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The talks follow a decision this year to extend the New START, the last remaining U.S.-Russian arms control pact and would be aimed at working out a follow-up agreement after it expires in 2026.

The negotiations will be complex and strenuous. The U.S. is worried about new destabilizing weapons developed by Russia, such as the atomic-powered, nuclear-armed Poseidon underwater drone, while Russia wants to include U.S. missile defense and potential space-based weapons in an agreement.

"It's a difficult task to conjugate the approaches and formulas," Ryabkov said. "But we are ready to try to solve it."

Konstantin Kosachev, a deputy speaker of Russia's upper house of parliament, hoped that talks between experts would help reduce the bad blood.

"The more often experts will meet, the less room the politicians will have for speculation and manipulation," he told The Associated Press.

The decision to return the ambassadors, who left their posts amid the tensions, was also widely billed by Russian officials and experts as an important move to stabilize ties.

Russia recalled its ambassador, Anatoly Antonov, for consultations in March after Biden described Putin as a killer in an interview. John Sullivan, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, flew home in April after public suggestions from Russian officials that he should leave to mirror Antonov's departure.

U.S.-Russian ties have plummeted to all-time lows after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, accusations of Russian interference in elections and cyberattacks, and Western criticism of the Kremlin's crackdown on the opposition.

Biden criticized the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and other moves by the Kremlin to stifle dissent and independent media. Putin shot back, keeping to his practice of never mentioning his chief political foe by name, saying Navalny knew he was breaking the law and was duly punished. He added that government critics designated as "foreign agents" were pursuing malign Western interests.

In comments posted to his Instagram account, Navalny denounced Putin's comments as lies.

"He just doesn't say a word of truth," Navalny said. "Clearly, he just physically can't stop lying."

Navalny was arrested in January upon returning from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin — an accusation that Russian officials reject. In February, Navalny was given a 2 1/2-year prison term for violating the terms of a suspended sentence from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that he dismissed as politically motivated.

Navalny's supporters held a protest in Geneva ahead of Putin's visit and dotted the city with billboards blasting the Kremlin for refusing to investigate his poisoning.

On Ukraine, Russia reaffirmed its view that the country's bid for NATO membership represents a red line, while the U.S. has restated that the alliance's doors remain open for its membership.

Some in Ukraine voiced hope the summit could help ease tensions that spiked this year when Russia bolstered its forces near Ukraine.

"Reducing the conflict potential in U.S.-Russian relations could help lower tensions on our border with Russia," said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Penta Center think tank.

But independent Kyiv-based political expert Vadim Karasev warned of a danger that the lack of resolution of the conflict with Russia-backed separatists in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland known as the Donbas would make it frozen, and the country would steadily drift to the fringes of international politics.

"The results of the Putin-Biden meeting will cool Kyiv's aspirations," Karasev said. "Ukraine won't be able to quickly join NATO, and the conflict in Donbas will become a chronic one. The Ukrainian issue will lose its acuteness, leaving Kyiv on the periphery of the global agenda."

Experts say that sharp differences rule out any quick progress on the divisive issues.

"Confrontation will continue, but there is a hope now that instead of being uncontrollable it could become more orderly," said Valery Garbuzov, the head of the U.S. and Canada Institute, the government-funded think-tank.

'Fire and Fury' author writes new Trump book 'Landslide'

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By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The author of “Fire and Fury,” the million-seller from 2018 that helped launch the wave of inside accounts of the Trump White House, will have a last take coming out next month.

Michael Wolff’s “Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump Presidency” is scheduled for July 27, publisher Henry Holt told The Associated Press on Thursday. Trump, who condemned “Fire and Fury” and attempted to have its publication halted, is among those who spoke to Wolff for his new book, according to Holt.

“In ‘Landslide,’ Wolff closes the story of Trump’s four years in office and his tumultuous last months at the helm of the country,” the publisher announced, “based on Wolff’s extraordinary access to White House aides and to the former President himself, yielding a wealth of new information and insights about what really happened inside the highest office in the land, and the world.”

Wolff’s first book on Trump, published in January 2018, was an immediate sensation and went on to sell more than 2 million copies. Critics questioned details of Wolff’s reporting, but his underlying narrative of a chaotic White House and a volatile, easily distracted chief executive has held through numerous bestsellers which followed, from Bob Woodward’s “Fear” to John Bolton’s “The Room Where It Happened.”

Trump would deny Wolff’s claims that he permitted him access to the White House and tweeted in 2018 that “Fire and Fury” was “full of lies, misrepresentations and sources that don’t exist.” A Trump lawyer sent the publisher a cease and desist letter and threatened to sue for libel, a response which helped raise interest in “Fire and Fury.” (Wolff had far fewer sales, and less access, with the 2019 book “Siege: Trump Under Fire”).

Other books on the Trump administration’s final days are in the works, including one by Woodward and Washington Post colleague Robert Costa. Politico and Vanity Fair have been among those reporting that Trump agreed to meet with Wolff and others writing about him, including Maggie Haberman of The New York Times and Jon Karl of ABC News.

A memoir by Trump remains uncertain. He issued a statement last week saying he was “writing like crazy” and claimed, to much skepticism among publishers, that he had turned down two offers.

Publishing executives had expressed hesitancy about Trump even before the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters and became even warier after. Simon & Schuster CEO Jonathan Karp told employees at a company town hall last month that he wasn’t interested in a Trump book because he doubted the former president, who has continued to falsely claim he won, would offer an honest account.

Reports detail tense moments with Georgia election monitors

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — As a pair of election workers sat at a table counting ballots during an audit of Georgia’s presidential election in November, no fewer than eight Republican monitors swarmed around them, hurling accusations of voter fraud and taking photos in violation of the rules.

This was one of several tense situations involving party monitors that independent election monitor Carter Jones documented in reports produced during the several months he spent observing election operations in Fulton County to ensure that officials in the state’s most populous county were complying with a consent agreement.

“The party audit monitors seemed to feel as though they were detectives or sheriffs and that they were going to personally ‘crack the case’ and uncover a stolen election,” Jones wrote in a report submitted to the State Election Board on Nov. 20. “This is a gross misunderstanding of their role as monitors and certainly made the audit process more contentious — not to mention more difficult for the auditors attempting to count amidst the commotion of a full-scale argument.”

While transparency is imperative throughout the election process and monitors are necessary, political parties must do a better job of vetting and training their monitors and explaining exactly what their role is, Jones wrote. He also suggested that repeat offenders be prohibited from serving as monitors in the future.

No one from the Fulton County Republican and Democratic parties immediately responded Thursday to emails seeking comment.

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Fulton County, which includes most of Atlanta, experienced many problems during its primary last June, including hourslong lines and absentee ballots that were requested but never received. The State Election Board entered into a consent order with the county to make changes for the general election. That included the appointment of Jones, who has previous experience working on elections in other parts of the world, as an independent monitor from October through January.

An executive summary of his findings was released earlier this year and Jones briefed the State Election Board in February. But detailed notes and reports produced by Jones during the process and obtained this week by The Associated Press provide more details about what he saw.

Then-President Donald Trump focused his attention on Georgia after losing the traditional Republican stronghold to Democrat Joe Biden by about 12,000 votes in November. Trump and his allies focused particular attention on Fulton County, making repeated unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud. Election workers in the county were subjected to intense harassment, sometimes stemming from misunderstandings by observers about what they were seeing as ballots were counted, recounted by hand for an audit and recounted again by machine at Trump's request.

On Nov. 14, when Jones walked over to the table where the group of GOP monitors was hovering over workers processing a batch of early voting ballots from the city of College Park, one monitor told him she'd taken a photo of the stack of ballots — all for Democrat Joe Biden, none for Trump — as evidence of voter fraud.

"You took photos?" Jones asked.

"Yes, for evidence. I'm concerned with the truth. As a journalist you should be too," the woman replied, misunderstanding his role. When he told her photos weren't allowed, she seemed to get angry and accused him of being complicit in a cover-up of voter fraud, Jones wrote.

About an hour and a half later, Jones observed the same party monitor yelling at a Fulton County attorney who had been called over to allow an elderly pair of audit workers to take a break. They had been working for hours to process a batch of 3,500 ballots and had skipped lunch so as not to violate the rules against taking breaks in the middle of a batch. But one of them was diabetic and was starting to shake from low blood sugar.

The party monitor was demanding strict adherence to the "no breaks" policy. After arguing with county elections director Rick Barron and another county official, the monitor pulled Jones into the conversation. Jones said he tried to stay neutral, but asked her to be reasonable with the application of the policy. He also let her know she could file a formal complaint with the secretary of state.

"The monitor then again accused me of colluding to cover up voter fraud and made a vague personal threat to both me and Barron," Jones wrote in his report, adding that he included the anecdote "in an attempt to encapsulate the tense mood in the room."

Complaints about overzealous party monitors were common during the audit, Jones wrote. Among the other issues he documented were monitors trying to speak with auditors, wandering among ballot bags and taking photos of the labels on them, trying to instruct auditors how to do their jobs, and gathering around tables when there was only supposed to be one monitor from each party for every 10 tables. The party monitors "were also performing their duties very eagerly and were frequently informing staff if they saw an issue," Jones noted, adding that often their complaints were valid.

Earlier in the month, as the ballots were initially being counted during the week of the election, party monitors sometimes misunderstood what was happening, complained about their level of access, went around barriers to talk to election workers, shot photos and video, and exhibited "astoundingly poor mask hygiene," Jones wrote, referring to the county's policy that election workers wear face coverings to prevent transmission of the coronavirus.

At one point on Election Day, Jones noticed the party monitors watching him closely. He introduced himself and asked one if he'd seen anything out of the ordinary.

"We weren't informed of your role here so it's not our place to tell you anything," the monitor responded and then called Jones a traitor.

During a runoff election in January, a monitor secretly recorded a 45-minute conversation with a county

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election official and quoted their conversation extensively in a complaint filed with the secretary of state's office.

Multiple party monitors in January told Jones they had been recording the license plates of staffers' cars as "evidence," which Jones said seemed like "a massive invasion of the privacy of the election workers."

Japan announces easing of virus emergency ahead of Olympics

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan on Thursday announced the easing of a coronavirus state of emergency in Tokyo and six other areas from next week, with new daily cases falling just as the country begins final preparations for the Olympics starting in just over a month.

Japan has been struggling since late March to slow a wave of infections propelled by more contagious variants, with new daily cases soaring above 7,000 at one point and seriously ill patients straining hospitals in Tokyo, Osaka and other metropolitan areas.

New cases have since subsided significantly, paving the way for Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to downgrade the state of emergency when it expires on Sunday to less stringent measures. The new measures will last until July 11 — just 12 days before the Olympics.

Suga said the relaxed measures will focus on early closures of bars and restaurants.

If another surge occurs and strains hospitals, "we will quickly take action, including strengthening the measures," Suga said, addressing concerns by medical experts. "We should be most cautious about causing another major upsurge."

Limits for the number of fans at sporting events will remain in place, and "the upper limits for the Tokyo Olympics will be decided in line with these rules," Suga said, suggesting that some fans will be allowed in Olympic venues.

Holding the Olympics before elections expected in the fall is also a political gamble for Suga, whose support ratings have tumbled over dissatisfaction with his handling of the pandemic, a slow vaccination drive and a lack of explanation about how he intends to ensure the virus doesn't spread during the Olympics.

Experts at a virus panel meeting Thursday gave their approval for government plans to downgrade the emergency in Tokyo, Aichi, Hokkaido, Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo and Fukuoka.

"We must do everything we can, and provide firm financial support as well," to minimize risks of a resurgence of infections, said Dr. Shigeru Omi, head of a government COVID-19 panel.

Japan does not enforce hard lockdowns and the state of emergency allows prefectural leaders to order closures or shorter hours for non-essential businesses. Those that comply are compensated and violators fined. Stay-at-home and other measures for the general population are only requests and are increasingly ignored.

At a parliamentary Health and Labor Committee last week, Omi cautioned that holding the Olympics in the middle of the pandemic is "abnormal" and warned that it would increase the risk of infections.

Omi, who accompanied Suga at the news conference Thursday, noted that more people are moving around in Tokyo, summer vacations are approaching, and new virus variants are spreading ahead of the Olympics. "There are many risks that can trigger an upsurge," he said.

A team of experts on Wednesday released a simulation showing a possible jump in cases during the Olympics if the spread of the new variants and people's movements increase after emergency measures are eased.

Health Minister Norihisa Tamura told reporters the government would not hesitate to issue another emergency declaration even in the middle of the Olympics to protect people's lives.

The state of emergency will remain in Okinawa, where hospitals are still overwhelmed, while Hiroshima and Okayama will be taken off the list.

Ryuji Wakita, the director-general of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases who heads a government COVID-19 advisory board, on Wednesday said that even as more people are getting the jabs and most of the country's 36 million senior citizens are expected to be fully inoculated by the end of July, younger

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people are largely unvaccinated and infections among them could quickly burden hospitals.

"In order to prevent another upsurge, it is crucial to prevent the people from roaming around during the Olympics and summer vacation," Wakita said.

Suga has opened up mass inoculation centers and started vaccinations at major companies, part of an ambitious target of as many as 1 million doses per day. As of Wednesday, only 6% of Japanese were fully vaccinated.

In hard-hit Osaka in western Japan, hospital capacity has improved and new infections dropped to 108 on Wednesday, down from more than 1,200 a day in late April.

In Tokyo, new cases are down to around 500 per day from above 1,100 in mid-May. Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike has said effective virus measures need to be kept in place.

AP Interview: Official says Nepal desperately needs vaccines

By BINAJ GURUBACHARYA Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — Nepal has significantly reduced coronavirus infections after its worst outbreak, which overwhelmed the country's medical system, but is in desperate need of vaccines, its health minister said Thursday.

"We have gone down from the red stage to the yellow stage, but are not yet able to reach the green zone," Health Minister Sher Bahadur Tamang said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We are working very hard to get us there."

Nepal has been under lockdown since April after new cases and deaths spiked following a massive outbreak in neighboring India.

Close to 10,000 new cases and hundreds of deaths were reported daily in mid-May, when the surge was at its worst. There was an acute shortage of hospital beds, medicines and oxygen for patients.

In the capital, Kathmandu, doctors treated patients in hospital corridors, verandahs and parking lots, and ambulances were turned back due to a lack of space. There were long lines at oxygen plants to fill cylinders.

After weeks of lockdown, the situation has improved. The number of new cases on Thursday was 2,607 along with 39 deaths, according to the Health Ministry.

Nepal launched a vaccination campaign in January but was forced to suspend it after India halted exports of domestically produced AstraZeneca vaccines because of its own outbreak. China then donated 800,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine in March and another 1 million earlier this month.

Still, only about 8.5% of the population has received one shot and about 2.5% have been fully immunized.

"The main issue for us is vaccines, and unless we get vaccines we cannot say everyone is safe," Tamang said. "We have been appealing to all countries manufacturing vaccines to please provide us with some."

About 1.4 million elderly Nepalese received an initial dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine in March but now are unsure when they can get a second dose as the government struggles to acquire the vaccine.

Tamang said the government has set aside funds to purchase vaccines, and both the World Bank and Asian Development Bank are providing money as well, so funds are not currently a problem.

COVAX, the U.N.-backed project to supply vaccines to poor regions of the world, pledged Nepal 2 million doses by March but has only provided 248,000 because it also is facing a serious shortage.

"We were supposed to get vaccines from the COVAX facility, but we feel like we have fallen to the lowest priority position on their list," Tamang said.

He said new regulations have been adopted to allow any vaccine producer to come to Nepal to run vaccine trials, and if possible produce them, with all fees waived.

With the emergency phase now over, the country needs to focus on improving its medical facilities and equipment to prepare for future disease outbreaks, Tamang said.

He noted that Nepal has received planeloads of emergency supplies such as oxygen cylinders, oxygen concentrators, face masks, gloves and other medical goods from the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Switzerland and Australia.

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"We are very thankful to all the donors who came to help us in our time of need but now we are urging the donors to please give us ICU beds, ventilators, X-ray machines and equipment to test for other diseases too," Tamang said.

Black community has new option for health care: The church

By CARRIE ANTLFINGER Associated Press

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Every Sunday at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, the Rev. Joseph Jackson Jr. praises the Lord before his congregation. But since last fall he's been praising something else his Black community needs: the COVID-19 vaccine.

"We want to continue to encourage our people to get out, get your shots. I got both of mine," Jackson said to applause at the church in Milwaukee on a recent Sunday.

Members of Black communities across the U.S. have disproportionately fallen sick or died from the virus, so some church leaders are using their influence and trusted reputations to fight back by preaching from the pulpit, phoning people to encourage vaccinations, and hosting testing clinics and vaccination events in church buildings.

Some want to extend their efforts beyond the fight against COVID-19 and give their flocks a place to seek health care for other ailments at a place they trust — the church.

"We can't go back to normal because we died in our normal," Debra Fraser-Howze, the founder of Choose Healthy Life, told The Associated Press. "We have health disparities that were so serious that one pandemic virtually wiped us out more than anybody else. We can't allow for that to happen again."

Choose Healthy Life, a national initiative involving Black clergy, United Way of New York City and others, has been awarded a \$9.9 million U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant to expand vaccinations and make permanent the "health navigators" who are already doing coronavirus testing and vaccinations in churches.

The navigators will eventually bring in experts for vaccinations, such as the flu, and to screen for ailments that are common in Black communities, including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, AIDS and asthma. The effort aims to reduce discomfort within Black communities about seeking health care, either due to concerns about racism or a historical distrust of science and government.

The initiative has so far been responsible for over 30,000 vaccinations in the first three months in 50 churches in New York; Newark, New Jersey; Detroit; Washington, D.C.; and Atlanta.

The federal funding will expand the group's effort to 100 churches, including in rural areas, in 13 states and the District of Columbia, and will help establish an infrastructure for the health navigators to start screenings. Quest Diagnostics and its foundation has already provided funding and testing help.

Choose Healthy Life expects to be involved for at least five years, after which organizers hope control and funding will be handled locally, possibly by health departments or in alignment with federally supported health centers, Fraser-Howze said.

The initiative is also planning to host seminars in churches on common health issues. Some churches already have health clinics and they hope that encourages other churches to follow suit, said Fraser-Howze, who led the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS for 21 years.

"The Black church is going to have to be that link between faith and science," she said.

In Milwaukee, nearly 43% of all coronavirus-related deaths have been in the Black community, according to the Milwaukee Health Department. Census data indicates Blacks make up about 39% of the city's population. An initiative involving Pastors United, Milwaukee Inner City Congregations Allied for Hope and Souls to the Polls has provided vaccinations in at least 80 churches there already.

Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country, according to the studies by the Brookings Institution. Ericka Sinclair, CEO of Health Connections, Inc., which administers vaccinations, says that's why putting vaccination centers in churches and other trusted locations is so important.

"Access to services is not the same for everyone. It's just not. And it is just another reason why when we talk about health equity, we have ... to do a course correction," she said.

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She's also working to get more community health workers funded through insurance companies, including Medicaid.

The church vaccination effort involved Milwaukee Inner City Congregations Allied for Hope, which is faith organization working on social issues. Executive Director and Lead Organizer Lisa Jones says the effect of COVID-19 on the Black community has reinforced the need to address race-related disparities in health care. The group has hired another organizer to address disparities in hospital services in the inner city and housing, and lead contamination.

At a recent vaccination clinic in Milwaukee at St. Matthew, a Christian Methodist Episcopal church, Melanie Paige overcame her fears to get vaccinated. Paige, who has lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, said the church clinic helped motivate her, along with encouragement from her son.

"I was more comfortable because I belong to the church and I know I've been here all my life. So that made it easier."

US jobless claims tick up to 412,000 from a pandemic low

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week for the first time since April despite widespread evidence that the economy and the job market are rebounding steadily from the pandemic recession.

The Labor Department said Thursday that jobless claims rose 37,000 from the week before to 412,000. As the job market has strengthened, the number of weekly applications for unemployment aid has fallen for most of the year. The number of jobless claims generally reflects the pace of layoffs.

Weekly applications for unemployment aid had dropped for six straight weeks, and economists had expected another dip last week. Still, the report showed the the four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week ups and downs, fell by 8,000 last week to 395,000 — the lowest four-week average since the pandemic slammed the economy in March 2020.

For jobless claims to rise slightly "should not be cause for concern yet," said AnnElizabeth Konkel, economist at the Indeed Hiring Lab.

"The big picture is that while we are not back to a 'normal' level yet of initial claims, they are no longer astronomically high."

A year ago, nearly 1.5 million people had applied for unemployment benefits in one week.

With vaccinations up and more consumers venturing out to spend — on restaurant meals, airline fares, movie tickets and store purchases — the economy is rapidly recovering from the recession. All that renewed spending has fueled customer demand and led many companies to seek new workers, often at higher wages, and avoid layoffs.

In fact, the speed of the rebound from the recession has caught many businesses off guard and touched off a scramble to hire. In May, employers added a less-than-expected 559,000 jobs, evidence that many companies are struggling to find enough workers as the economy recovers faster than expected.

But many economists expect hiring to catch up with demand in the coming months, especially as federal unemployment aid programs end and more people pursue jobs. They note that the economy still has 7.6 million fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic struck.

And employers are posting job openings faster than applicants can fill them. In April, they advertised a record 9.3 million job openings, up a sharp 12% from the number in March.

The rapid rollout of vaccines has brought the number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases down to an average of just over 12,000, from around 250,000 a day in early January.

Though jobless claims have tumbled since the start of 2021, when they exceeded 900,000, they remain high by historical standards. Before the pandemic paralyzed the economy in March 2020, unemployment applications were running at about 220,000 a week.

In Thursday's report, the government said a total of 3.5 million Americans were continuing to collect traditional state unemployment benefits in the week ending June 5, up by just 1,000 from the week before.

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Many Americans are contending with health and child care issues related to COVID-19 and with career uncertainty after the recession wiped out many jobs for good. Some who have lost work during the pandemic have decided to retire. Others are taking their time looking for work because, in some cases, supplemental federal jobless benefits, on top of regular state unemployment aid, pay them more than their old jobs did.

Many states, though, are set to begin dropping the supplemental federal jobless aid this month.

Including the federal benefits, 14.8 million people were receiving some type of jobless aid during the week of May 29, down nearly 560,000 from the week before and from 30.2 million a year earlier.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, June 18, the 169th day of 2021. There are 196 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 18, 1812, the War of 1812 began as the United States Congress approved, and President James Madison signed, a declaration of war against Britain.

On this date:

In 1778, American forces entered Philadelphia as the British withdrew during the Revolutionary War.

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte met defeat at Waterloo as British and Prussian troops defeated the French in Belgium.

In 1873, suffragist Susan B. Anthony was found guilty by a judge in Canandaigua, New York, of breaking the law by casting a vote in the 1872 presidential election. (The judge fined Anthony \$100, but she never paid the penalty.)

In 1940, during World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill urged his countrymen to conduct themselves in a manner that would prompt future generations to say, "This was their finest hour." Charles de Gaulle delivered a speech on the BBC in which he rallied his countrymen after the fall of France to Nazi Germany.

In 1953, a U.S. Air Force Douglas C-124 Globemaster II crashed near Tokyo, killing all 129 people on board. Egypt's 148-year-old Muhammad Ali Dynasty came to an end with the overthrow of the monarchy and the proclamation of a republic.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Japanese Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda spoke to each other by telephone as they inaugurated the first trans-Pacific cable completed by AT&T between Japan and Hawaii.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter and Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev signed the SALT II strategic arms limitation treaty in Vienna.

In 1983, astronaut Sally K. Ride became America's first woman in space as she and four colleagues blasted off aboard the space shuttle Challenger on a six-day mission.

In 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Georgia v. McCollum*, ruled that criminal defendants could not use race as a basis for excluding potential jurors from their trials.

In 2003, baseball Hall-of-Famer Larry Doby, who broke the American League's color barrier in 1947, died in Montclair, N.J., at age 79.

In 2010, death row inmate Ronnie Lee Gardner died in a barrage of bullets as Utah carried out its first firing squad execution in 14 years. (Gardner had been sentenced to death for fatally shooting attorney Michael Burdell during a failed escape attempt from a Salt Lake City courthouse.)

In 2018, President Donald Trump announced that he was directing the Pentagon to create the "Space Force" as an independent service branch. Troubled rapper-singer XXXTentacion (ex ex ex ten-ta-see-YAWN') was shot and killed in Florida in what police called an apparent robbery attempt.

Ten years ago: President Hamid Karzai acknowledged that the U.S. and Afghan governments had held talks with Taliban emissaries in a bid to end the nation's nearly 10-year war. Yelena Bonner, 88, a Russian rights activist and widow of Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, died in Boston. Clarence Clemons,

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the saxophone player for the E Street Band who was one of the key influences in Bruce Springsteen's life and music, died in Florida at age 69.

Five years ago: With California's Yosemite Falls as a backdrop, President Barack Obama said climate change was already damaging America's national parks, with rising temperatures causing Yosemite's meadows to dry out and raising the prospect of a glacier preserve without its glaciers someday. During an appearance in Las Vegas, Donald Trump railed against efforts by some frustrated Republicans planning a last-ditch effort to try to thwart him from becoming the party's nominee, and threatened to stop fundraising if Republicans didn't rally around him.

One year ago: The Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, rejected President Donald Trump's effort to end legal protections for 650,000 young immigrants. Atlanta police officers called out sick to protest the filing of murder charges against Garrett Rolfe, a white officer, in the shooting of a Black man, Rayshard Brooks. The mayor of Columbus, Ohio, said a statue of Christopher Columbus would be removed from the city that was named after him. Portraits honoring four former House speakers who served in the Confederacy were removed from the U.S. Capitol. The abandoned bus that was central to the book and movie "Into the Wild" was removed by helicopter from the Alaska wilderness; it had become a lure for dangerous pilgrimages. Dame Vera Lynn, who serenaded British troops during World War II with sentimental favorites "We'll Meet Again" and "The White Cliffs of Dover," died at the age of 103.

Today's Birthdays: Former Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., is 84. Sir Paul McCartney is 79. Actor Constance McCashin is 74. Actor Linda Thorson is 74. Former Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., is 71. Actor Isabella Rossellini is 69. Actor Carol Kane is 69. Actor Brian Benben is 65. Actor Andrea Evans is 64. Rock singer Alison Moyet is 60. Rock musician Dizzy Reed (Guns N' Roses) is 58. Figure skater Kurt Browning is 55. Country singer-musician Tim Hunt is 54. R&B singer Nathan Morris (Boyz II Men) is 50. Actor Mara Hobel is 50. Singer-songwriter Ray LaMontagne is 48. Rapper Silkk the Shocker is 46. Actor Alana de la Garza is 45. Country singer Blake Shelton is 45. Rock musician Steven Chen (Airborne Toxic Event) is 43. Actor David Giuntoli is 41. Drummer Josh Dun (Twenty One Pilots) is 33. Actor Renee Olstead is 32. Actor Jacob Anderson is 31. Actor Willa Holland is 30.