

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 1 of 70

- [2- SD History Column: SD First Female Pilot](#)
- [4- Board of Regents Adjusts Policies for Medical Marijuana](#)
- [4- Truss Pros Ad](#)
- [5- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [6- Weather Pages](#)
- [9- Daily Devotional](#)
- [10- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [11- News from the Associated Press](#)



A sunset from the sky - photo taken by Jeslyn Kosel.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

South Dakota's First Female Pilot: Nellie Zabel Willhite

Nellie Zabel Willhite's dream took her to great heights.

SOUTH DAKOTA



HISTORY & HERITAGE

On Jan. 13, 1928, Willhite soared into history as South Dakota's first woman pilot.

"Up and up, to a height of about 6,000 feet, she went soaring around above the field, banking, turning, diving and climbing. After about 10 minutes, she brought the ship gently to earth in a perfect landing, according to Mr. Tennant (Harold Tennant, who operated Dakota Airlines flight school and was the chief pilot for Dakota Airlines at Renner Airport) without a bump or a swing," stated an article in the Jan. 22, 1928, Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader.

Willhite was born in the Black Hills on Nov. 22, 1892. Her father, Charles Zabel, was a freighter on the Fort Pierre to Deadwood Trail. A case of measles as a child severely impaired Nellie's hearing. Her widowed father enrolled her at the South Dakota School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls. While in Sioux Falls, she met Leonard and Dollie Mead of Yankton and became their foster daughter. Leonard Mead was the director of what was later called the South Dakota Human Services Center. Nellie was briefly married to Frank Willhite.

By 1927, she was living in Sioux Falls and spending her weekends at the Renner Airport north of Sioux Falls watching the airplanes fly. Tennant told Willhite that if she learned to fly an airplane, she would be the first South Dakota woman to learn to fly, according to Norma Kraemer of Deadwood. Kraemer, who is also a pilot, met Willhite in the 1980s. Flying lessons cost \$200, though. Willhite wrote her father, by then a postmaster in Sheboygan, Wis., about her desire to learn how to fly.

He replied, "Tomorrow is payday and I am sending \$100, and next payday I will send you another \$100 ... I am sending you this under one condition and that is, that I don't want you to pay it back."

He added a postscript asking Willhite to be satisfied in just plain flying, for most of the accidents



The photos are of Nellie and of Nellie standing beside her plane, an Alexander Eaglerock biplane. (Photo South Dakota State Historical Society – State Archives)



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 3 of 70

occurred when pilots were performing stunts. This letter is part of the Nellie Zabel Willhite Collection at the Center for Western Studies at Augustana University in Sioux Falls.

Willhite started her lessons in November 1927 at the Dakota Airlines flying school. After accumulating 13 hours of flying time, she soloed. In 1928, "solo" was considered "being a pilot," according to Kraemer.

Zabel purchased an open cockpit biplane for Willhite for \$2,750 after she convinced him to buy her a plane so she could make a living as a pilot. These open cockpit planes have none of the features or weather information of modern aircraft according to Kraemer. The compass was on the floor between the pilot's feet. The airspeed was sort of a reed that bent in the wind, strapped to one of the wing struts. The airplane's water-cooled engine was prone to lines breaking and forced landings.

In response to a letter from Willhite asking what to name the plane, Zabel suggested his nickname of "Pard." "In fact, it would be a 'Pard' to both you and me ... I suppose you will have the '13' also," Zabel wrote.

Willhite did have the word "Pard" and the number "13" painted on the plane. She considered 13 her lucky number as she was the 13th student to enroll in Dakota Airlines flight school and took her first solo flight after 13 hours of flying time on a 13th.

One of the first trips Willhite made once she had her own plane was to fly her father over the Fort Pierre to Deadwood Trail he had walked many times as a freighter.

"This was an ambitious trip for anyone in an airplane in 1928 with no aviation maps or radio navigation aids available," Kraemer wrote in "South Dakota's First Century of Flight."

Willhite performed as a stunt pilot and raced other airplanes at fairs, air shows and airport dedications. She sold rides, charging passengers between 50 cents and \$1.00 per ride and issuing them a souvenir ticket that bore her photograph and certifying that they flew with "Pard."

Willhite sold "Pard" in 1932 when it became too costly to maintain. By 1937, the reality of how difficult it was to make a living as a pilot made Willhite realize that she needed to find another way to support herself. She continued to fly as a hobby, keeping her pilot's license current into the 1950s, according to Kraemer.

Willhite overcame personal challenges throughout her life. She never viewed herself as handicapped, according to Kraemer.

The Ninety-Nines formed in November 1929 as a mutual support group for women pilots. The name came from the number of women pilots who were founding members. Willhite was one of the charter members. She organized the first South Dakota chapter in 1941.

Willhite received a variety of honors during her lifetime. She was inducted in the South Dakota Hall of Fame and honored on her 95th birthday when Gov. George S. Mickelson declared Nov. 22, 1987, as Nellie Zabel Willhite Day in South Dakota. She was also one of the first four people inducted into the South Dakota Aviation Hall of Fame.

Zabel's fears of his daughter being killed in a plane crash proved groundless. Willhite died at age 98 in Sioux Falls.

This moment in South Dakota history is provided by the South Dakota Historical Society Foundation, the nonprofit fundraising partner of the South Dakota State Historical Society at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. Find us on the web at www.sdhsf.org. Contact us at info@sdhsf.org to submit a story idea.

Board of Regents Adjusts Policies for Medical Marijuana

MADISON, S.D. – The South Dakota Board of Regents this week adjusted its policies to account for the soon-to-be legal presence of medical marijuana in South Dakota. This comes after voters approved Initiated Measure 26 in the last general election.

The policy revisions take into account an intersection between state and federal law on this topic, board officials said. The Board of Regents will continue to prohibit the use or possession of marijuana, including medical marijuana, on property owned or controlled by the board or at events hosted or sponsored by the board or any of its institutions.

“Marijuana remains a controlled substance at the federal level, so we can’t allow it on campus due to two federal drug-free acts, which still have federal funding implications for our institutions,” Brian L. Maher, the regents’ executive director and CEO, explained.

The regents’ revised policy does not prohibit a student, employee, or visitor, who has a valid written certification for medical marijuana, from ingesting medical marijuana on other property not controlled or owned by the board. However, the new policies do place some limitations on individuals while they are on campus or working on campus.

When reporting to work, employees must not be impaired or otherwise unable to perform their work duties. Likewise, students attending class or participating in activities may not be impaired or otherwise disrupt academic or campus activities as a result of their off-campus medical marijuana use. Employees and students who violate those restrictions are subject to disciplinary action, the policy states.

Regents took final action to approve these policy changes Wednesday.



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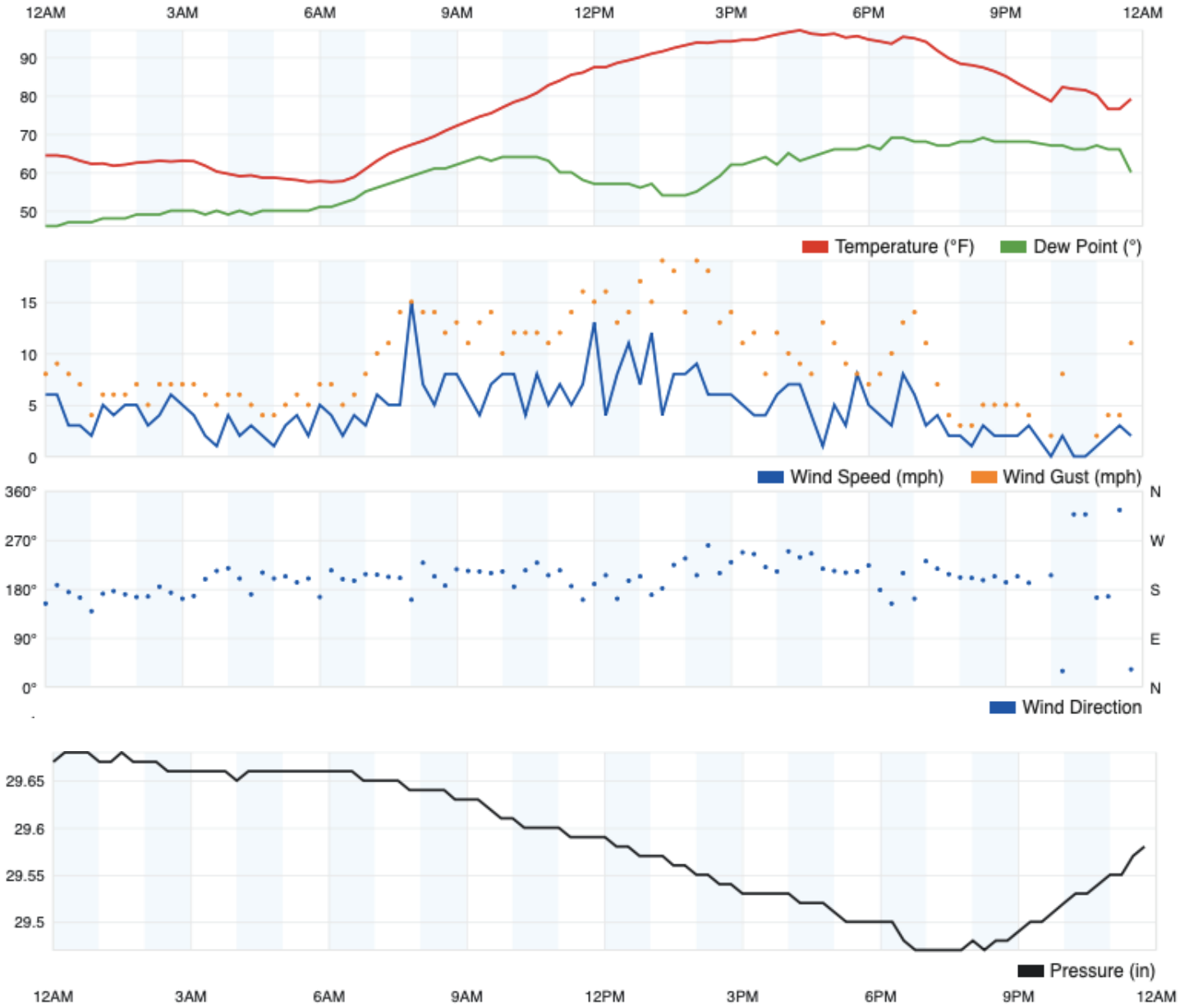
Day shift
and night
shift
assemblers!



Groton Daily Independent






Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 5 of 70

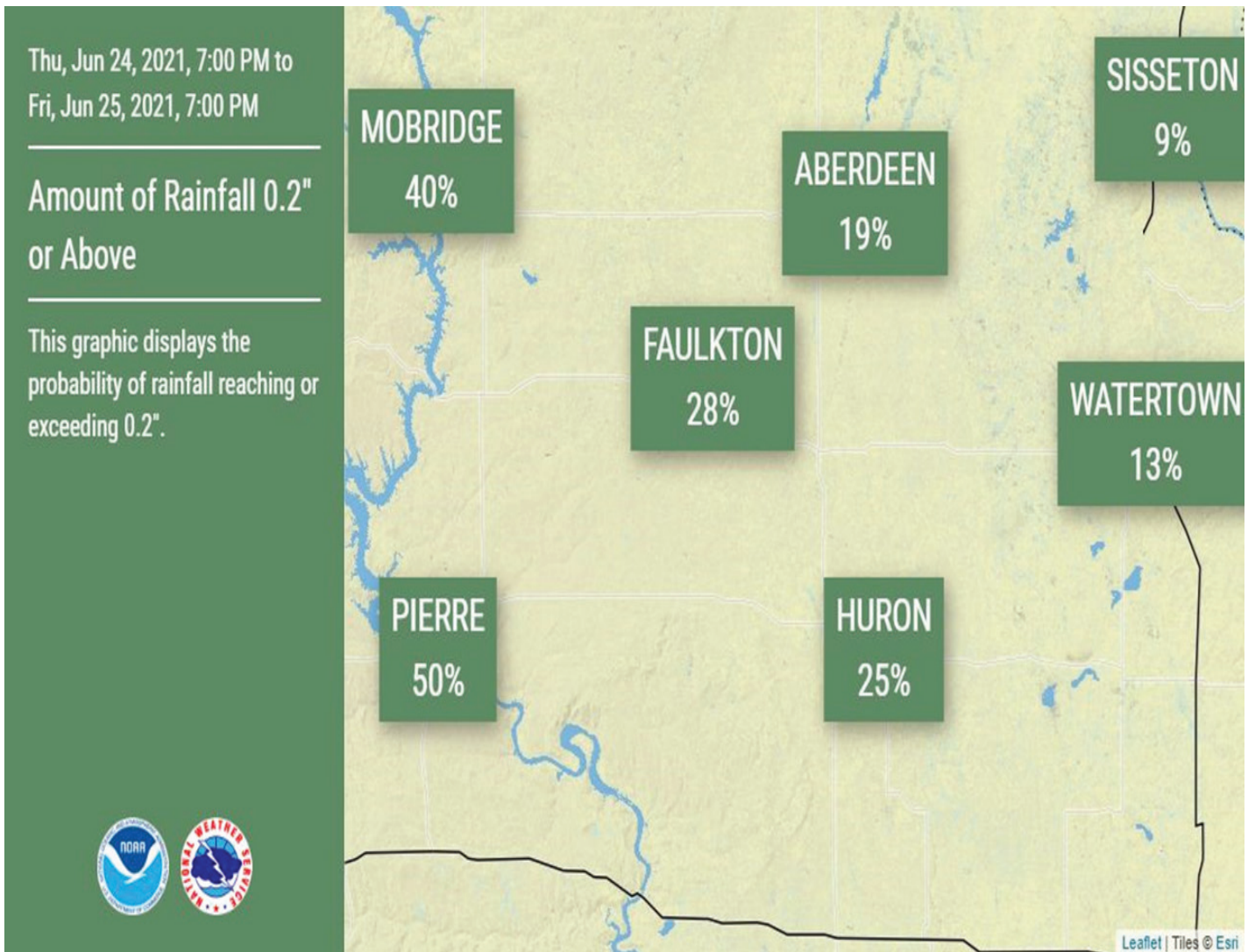
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 6 of 70

| Today | Tonight | Friday | Friday Night | Saturday |
|---|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Decreasing Clouds | Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance T-storms | Chance Showers | Slight Chance T-storms | Chance T-storms |
| High: 89 °F | Low: 60 °F | High: 83 °F | Low: 60 °F | High: 82 °F |



Shower and thunderstorm chances are possible late tonight through Friday. While any rain is welcome during a drought, rainfall amounts aren't looking overly significant. The maps shows the probability of each respective location getting 0.2 inches or more of rain between Thursday night and Friday night. Additional light rain chances do exist through the weekend however. Above normal temperatures will persist today, but cooler, more seasonable temperatures are also on the horizon for the weekend.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 7 of 70

Today in Weather History

June 24, 1902: Very strong winds occurred during the evening hours over portions of Hand and Stanley, to Turner and Lincoln Counties. Heavy losses occurred to barns and other farm outbuildings, trees, and windmills. One person was killed, and several were injured. A peak wind gust of 67 mph was recorded in Pierre.

June 24, 2003: An F4 tornado destroyed or heavily damaged all buildings, other structures, and vehicles in the small town of Manchester, in Kingsbury County. Propane and fuel oil tanks were destroyed. Many homes were stripped to the foundation. Of the six residents of the town, four were injured and were transported to hospitals. Three were deemed to be seriously injured, but none of the injuries were listed as life-threatening. One of the injured was in a basement, one was blown out of the home on the way to the same basement, and two were in a mobile home which was destroyed. The tornado damaged crops, trees, and power lines south of Manchester before reaching the town. The tornado also heavily damaged several farms north of Manchester, including two farms on which several buildings, including the houses, were destroyed. About 12 cattle were killed and others injured. The amount of crop damage was not known. Throughout the path, the tornado was observed to have multiple vortices. The tornado was seen and videotaped by numerous storm chasers and researchers. Researchers also deployed weather sensors around the town of Manchester. One of these sensors recorded a 100 millibar pressure drop as the tornado passed.

1929: In Durban, South Africa, a storm drops hailstones the size of baseballs. The rattle produced by the storm is described as sounding like "machine gun fire."

1975: An Eastern Airlines Boeing 727 crashed at JFK airport in New York City. 113 of the 124 people on board the aircraft died. Researcher Theodore Fujita studied the incident and discovered that a microburst caused the crash. His research led to improved air safety. The tower never experienced the microburst, which was held back by a sea-breeze front. The plane crashed 2,400 feet short of the runway.

1816 - The cold weather of early June finally gave way to several days of 90 degree heat in Massachusetts, including a reading of 99 degrees at Salem. (David Ludlum)

1924 - Six men at a rock quarry south of Winston-Salem, NC, sought shelter from a thunderstorm. The structure chosen contained a quantity of dynamite. Lightning struck a near-by tree causing the dynamite to explode. The men were killed instantly. (The Weather Channel)

1951 - Twelve inches of hail broke windows and roofs, and dented automobiles, causing more than fourteen million dollars damage. The storm plowed 200 miles from Kingman County KS into Missouri, with the Wichita area hardest hit. It was the most disastrous hailstorm of record for the state of Kansas. (David Ludlum)

1952 - Thunderstorms produced a swath of hail 60 miles long and 3.5 miles wide through parts of Hand, Beadle, Kingsbury, Miner and Jerauld counties in South Dakota. Poultry and livestock were killed, and many persons were injured. Hail ten inches in circumference was reported at Huron SD. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms spawned six tornadoes in eastern Colorado. Baseball size hail was reported near Yoder, CO, and thunderstorm winds gusting to 92 mph derailed a train near Pratt, KS. The town of Gould, OK, was soaked with nearly an inch and a half of rain in just ten minutes. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Forty-three cities reported record high temperatures for the date. Valentine NE reported an all-time record high of 110 degrees, and highs of 102 degrees at Casper, WY, 103 degrees at Reno, NV, and 106 degrees at Winnemucca, NV, were records for the month of June. Highs of 98 degrees at Logan, UT, and 109 degrees at Rapid City, SD, equalled June records. Lightning killed twenty-one cows near Conway, SC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along a warm front produced severe weather from Colorado and New Mexico to Kansas and Nebraska. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes, and produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Wood River, NE, and hail three inches in diameter at Wheeler, KS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

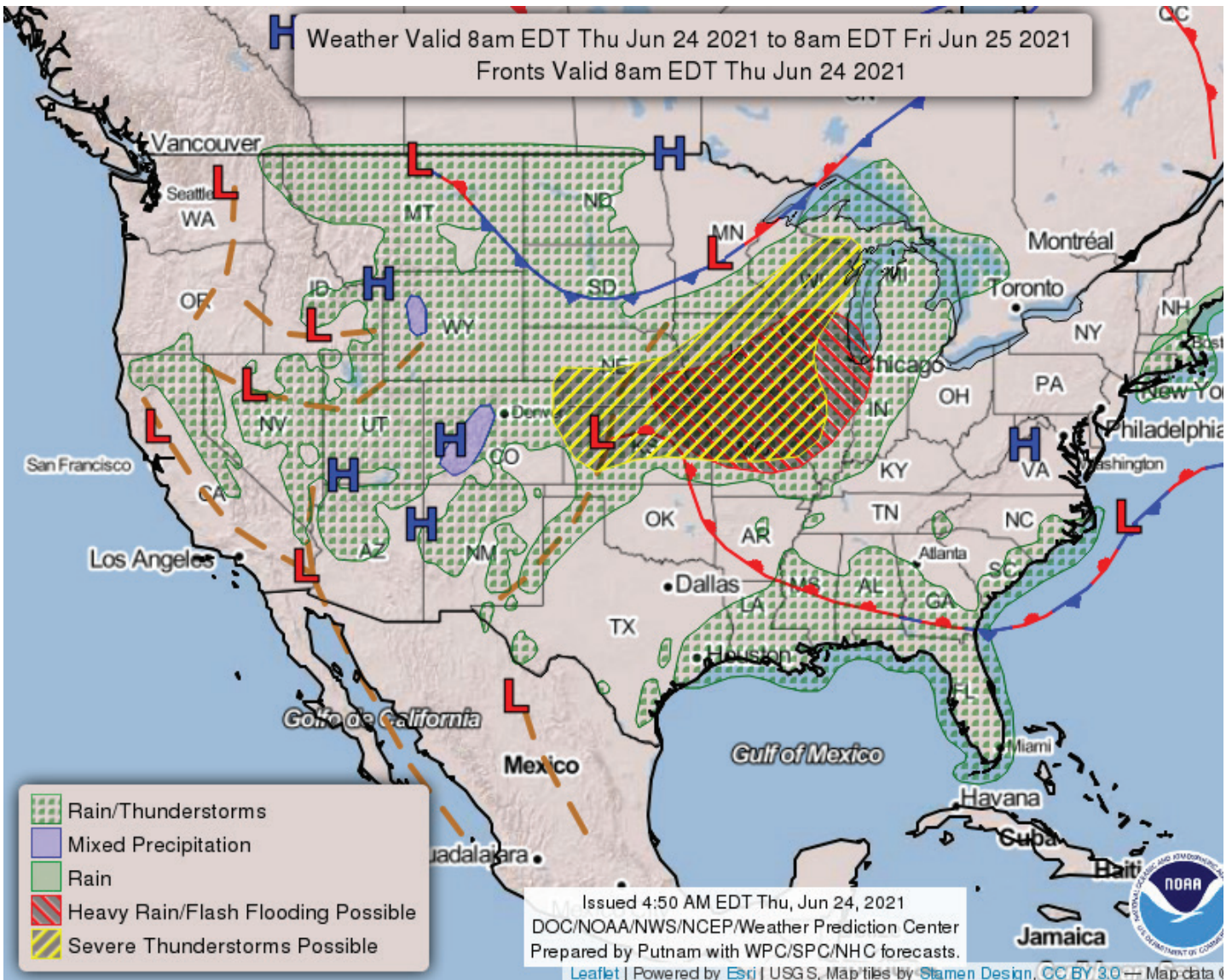
Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 8 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 97 °F at 4:29 PM
Low Temp: 57 °F at 6:19 AM
Wind: 19 mph at 1:22 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 108° in 1988
Record Low: 39° in 2017
Average High: 82°F
Average Low: 57°F
Average Precip in June.: 2.83
Precip to date in June.: 0.60
Average Precip to date: 10.08
Precip Year to Date: 4.54
Sunset Tonight: 9:26 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:46 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 9 of 70



ANNOUNCE THE WORD!

Years ago someone took a chisel and carved an image into a piece of wood. Then they took some dye, placed it on the raised image, and pressed it on a piece of parchment. Some believe that this was the day that printing was born.

In A.D. 779 the Chinese carved words and pictures by hand and invented "wood block printing." Years later however, Johannes Gutenberg, a man from Germany, invented a machine with movable type and called it a "printing press."

It is not possible to estimate the power of the printed page. It has brought knowledge and insight since the fifteenth century. It has also corrupted minds and been used to lead people into paths of destruction.

Napoleon once said, "There are only two powers in the world: the sword and the pen, and in the end, the former is always conquered by the latter."

Benjamin Franklin said, "Give me twenty-six lead soldiers and I will conquer the world."

G. Christian Weiss, a missionary-statesman wrote, "The battle for the men's minds will be won by the printer's ink. Make no mistake about it!"

Many years ago David wrote, "The Lord announced the Word."

Christians have no greater responsibility or obligation than to "announce" the Word of the Lord. Wherever we are and no matter what we are doing we must constantly and consciously "announce the Word" to the world.

Prayer: Help us to be faithful, Lord, to "announce" the Word in and through our lives whether by word or deed. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord announces the word. Psalm 68:11a

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 10 of 70

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

08-15-19-29-35

(eight, fifteen, nineteen, twenty-nine, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$64,000

Lotto America

03-09-16-19-38, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 3

(three, nine, sixteen, nineteen, thirty-eight; Star Ball: three; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$7.27 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$50 million

Powerball

13-20-40-51-63, Powerball: 1, Power Play: 3

(thirteen, twenty, forty, fifty-one, sixty-three; Powerball: one; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$63 million

South Dakota Board of Regents: no medical pot on campus

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Medical marijuana won't be allowed on the campuses of South Dakota's public universities, the Board of Regents announced Wednesday.

The board, which oversees the state's six public universities, changed its policy on medical marijuana as the state prepares for the drug to be legalized on July 1. It reasoned that it had to stay in compliance with federal law, which still outlaws the drug.

The new policy does not stop university students or employees from ingesting medical pot on property not controlled or owned by the board, but threatens to discipline students and employees who are "impaired" while in class or at their jobs.

"Marijuana remains a controlled substance at the federal level, so we can't allow it on campus due to two federal drug-free acts, which still have federal funding implications for our institutions," said Brian L. Maher, the regents' executive director, in a statement.

South Dakota AG objects to cameras in court at his trial

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's attorney general wants to keep cameras and audio recording devices out of the courtroom when he goes on trial in connection with the death of a man along a highway.

Jason Ravensborg faces three misdemeanor charges related to his driving the night he struck and killed Joe Boever.

A court document recently filed on behalf of Ravensborg objects to cameras or audio recordings during his trial, which is scheduled to start Aug. 26.

The attorney general is charged with careless driving, operating a vehicle while on an electronic device and driving outside of his lane.

Investigators say Ravensborg was distracted the night of Sept. 12, swerved out of his lane near Highmore and struck the 55-year-old Boever, who was walking on the shoulder with a flashlight.

Boever crashed headfirst through the windshield of Ravensborg's car with his glasses landing inside the vehicle, according to authorities. Ravensborg told officials he never saw Boever and thought he struck a deer.

Hyde County Sheriff Mike Volek responded to the scene and let Ravensborg drive his car home to Pierre.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 12 of 70

Ravnsborg said they didn't realize he hit and killed a person until he returned to the scene the next morning. Gov. Kristi Noem, three law enforcement organizations and some legislators have called on Ravnsborg to resign.

Each charge against the attorney general carries a maximum penalty of 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

This story has been corrected to show that Mike Volek is the sheriff in Hyde County, not Hughes County.

Longtime North Dakota veterinarian appointed to state post

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A longtime animal doctor from Hettinger has been named North Dakota's new state veterinarian and animal health division director, Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring announced Wednesday.

Dr. Ethan Andress will take over for Dr. Susan Keller, who is retiring after serving the state for 23 years. Andress will start on July 12.

Andress is owner and partner of West River Veterinary Clinic in Hettinger, where he has worked as a mixed animal practitioner for 24 years. He graduated from South Dakota State University in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in biology. He earned his doctor of veterinary medicine degree from Iowa State University in 1997.

"Dr. Andress brings valuable experience in the field of veterinary medicine and extensive knowledge of bovine, equine and bison medicine," Goehring said. "His business background will also be an asset to our animal health programs and the state."

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. June 22, 2021.

Editorial: Local Revenues And Drought Concerns

Yankton is sailing into the summer season on a terrific financial wave after posting another big month of revenue in May. The latest report not only topped last May — which, of course, was early in the COVID-19 pandemic — but even surpassed the revenue collected in May 2019.

And once again, city officials are greeting this very good news with cautious optimism — or, is it optimistic caution? — citing the unknowns that are tied to the pandemic and new variants that could be headed our way.

"The cautionary thing is — are we through with COVID yet?" Yankton Finance Officer Al Viereck told the Press & Dakotan. "There's so much that's uncertain yet. We certainly are feeling the effects of opening up around here, but will we run into a re-occurrence and start to slow down again? That's our only concern."

Unfortunately, that may not be entirely accurate.

The area's agricultural economy has struggled in recent years as livestock and commodity prices have fallen. Now, producers are facing the expectations of a hot, dry summer — which has certainly started off that way — and the deepening of a drought that actually began about a year ago. That cycle is escalating: Yankton has officially received 1.18 inches of rain in June, a month when we typically average about 4 inches of precipitation. That does not bode well for farmers, and that may have serious implications down the line for city revenue.

Bear in mind, Yankton's revenue picture the past 15 months has been rather unusual, given the extraordinary circumstances. Despite the pandemic, the city saw some solid revenue months in 2020 — including its first-ever million-dollar month last July — before slowing down in the fall. That strong run through last spring and summer indicated some solid economic opportunity amid the pandemic.

This year, Yankton's revenue reports have been glowing, and not simply when compared to last year. Recovery funds and pent-up demand have the local economic engines revving, just as the summer season is kicking in. That's a promising combination.

But the impact of the weather on the ag economy remains a real wild card, and it is not trending well.

That's why an abundance of caution — which has always been a staple of city (and county) budgetary thinking — is essential right now. If the farm economy is hit hard by the drought, it will impact all of us.
END

South Dakota health groups push Medicaid expansion as 'deal'

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A campaign group backed by South Dakota's major health care systems announced Wednesday that it will begin gathering petition signatures for a ballot measure to expand Medicaid to provide health coverage for low-income people.

Medicaid expansion is shaping up to be a major question facing voters next year with much of the debate so far centering around the financial costs and benefits of the program. Two separate groups are launching ballot-measure campaigns for the November 2022 election, while top Republican lawmakers are pushing voters to install into the state constitution a higher vote threshold for Medicaid expansion.

South Dakota is one of 12 states that have not expanded health care coverage to more low-income adults under a key provision of the Affordable Care Act, the health care law championed by former President Barack Obama. But even as the federal government has tried to entice those states with financial incentives, key Republican lawmakers have indicated they have no plans to give up resisting Medicaid expansion. In South Dakota, proponents for expansion are trying to circumvent the Legislature by passing a law through the ballot.

South Dakotans Decide Healthcare, a group backed by the state's major health care organizations, said it has received a required fiscal analysis from the Legislative Research Council and will start collecting petition signatures. The group made it clear it will be making a financial argument to voters, touting in a statement that the state would receive \$1.3 billion in federal funding over five years for expansion. The state's share over that time would be \$166.2 million, but would also result in \$162.5 million in savings, according to the Legislature's researchers.

"This is a good deal, plain and simple, and I have a lot of faith that the voters in this state will agree," said Tim Rave, the head of the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations, in a statement.

The proposal would make Medicaid available to people who live below 133% of the federal poverty level, which is currently about \$17,000 annually for an individual or \$35,000 for a family of four. About 42,500 South Dakota residents would qualify for Medicaid under the proposal.

Dakotans for Health, which has touted itself as a "grassroots" effort, has also been gathering signatures for a separate ballot measure that aims to do the same thing. The group is led by Rick Weiland, a former Democratic Senate candidate.

Both campaigns need to gather and certify nearly 17,000 signatures to get their proposals on the November 2022 ballot.

However, before that election, the campaigns will face a challenge in the June primary next year. Republicans in the Legislature have proposed an amendment to the state constitution that would place a 60% vote threshold on ballot initiatives that raise taxes or spend more than \$10 million within five years of enactment, such as the Medicaid expansion proposals.

That constitutional amendment is subject to voter approval, but top Republican lawmakers, with an eye on Medicaid expansion, maneuvered to place it on the primary ballot, even though fewer voters will likely decide on it.

Two Republican legislative leaders — Sen. Lee Schoenbeck and Rep. Jon Hansen — are planning to financially back the push to pass the constitutional amendment. The two lawmakers last week filed paperwork to form a campaign committee called South Dakotans Against Higher Taxes, writing the purpose of the group is to "oppose higher taxes and big government spending and support measures that keep our taxes low."

Parents whose baby died settle with South Dakota hospital

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 14 of 70

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The parents of an infant who died at a Sioux Falls hospital have agreed to settle their malpractice lawsuit against the health care provider.

The terms of the mediated settlement between Avera McKennan Hospital and the baby's parents, Khayyam and Tejumade Gordon, were not disclosed, the Argus Leader reported.

The boy, identified in court records as K.G., was born on Jan. 1, 2018, at Avera Holy Family Hospital in Estherville, Iowa, and was released two days later. Tejumade Gordon brought the boy to the emergency room 11 days later because of swelling in his left groin area, according to the lawsuit.

An ultrasound showed a hernia, and Tejumade Gordon was instructed to call her baby's primary care physician the next day to discuss surgery. But his symptoms got worse, so Gordon returned to the ER with him later that night. He was again released.

The mother returned to the emergency room the next morning because her son had stopped eating, had been vomiting, was lethargic and had a temperature of 102 degrees, according to the complaint. An X-ray showed that he had multiple loops in his small intestine.

The infant was flown to Avera McKennan Hospital in Sioux Falls and placed in the pediatric intensive care unit. Another X-ray revealed a blockage in his bowel.

The baby had two surgeries in two days, but his condition continued to worsen and sepsis developed. Brain scans showed he was suffering seizures. The Gordons put him on a do-not-resuscitate order on the advice of his medical providers, and he died at less than 3 weeks old.

Hong Kong's last pro-democracy paper sells out final edition

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — The final edition of Hong Kong's last remaining pro-democracy paper sold out in hours Thursday, as readers scooped up all 1 million copies of the Apple Daily, whose closure was yet another sign of China's tightening grip on the semi-autonomous city.

Across the densely populated metropolis, people lined up early in the morning to buy the paper, which in recent years has become an increasingly outspoken critic of Chinese and Hong Kong authorities' efforts to limit the freedoms found here but not in mainland China. The paper was gone from newsstands by 8:30 a.m.

The newspaper said it was forced to cease operations after police froze \$2.3 million of its assets, searched its office and arrested five top editors and executives last week, accusing them of foreign collusion to endanger national security.

"This is our last day, and last edition, does this reflect the reality that Hong Kong has started to lose its press freedom and freedom of speech?" an Apple Daily graphic designer, Dickson Ng, asked in comments to The Associated Press. "Why does it have to end up like this?"

The paper printed 1 million copies for its last edition — up from the usual 80,000. On the front page was splashed an image of an employee in the office waving at supporters surrounding the building, with the headline "Hong Kongers bid a painful farewell in the rain, 'We support Apple Daily.'"

While pro-democracy media outlets still exist online, it was the only print newspaper of its kind left in the city.

The pressure on the paper reflects a broader crackdown on Hong Kong's civil liberties, ramped up after massive antigovernment protests in 2019 unsettled authorities. In response, they imposed a sweeping national security law — used in the arrests of the newspaper employees — and revamped Hong Kong's election laws to keep opposition voices out of the legislature.

The result is that dissenting voices have been almost completely silenced in the city long known as an oasis of freedoms on mainland China's doorstep. The increasing restrictions have come despite China's promise to protect Hong Kong's civil liberties for 50 years after the city's 1997 handover from Britain.

The closure of Apple Daily raises the specter that other media outlets — though none as outspoken — will become even more cautious, such as the more than 100-year-old English-language South China Morning Post. The paper, while identified with the political and business mainstream, has thus far contin-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 15 of 70

ued to report on controversial issues in Hong Kong and on mainland China, even after its owner, internet business titan Jack Ma, dropped from sight last year after publicly criticizing Chinese government policies.

Apple Daily's closure marks a "dark day for press freedom in Hong Kong," said Thomas Kellogg, executive director of the Georgetown Center for Asian Law.

"Without Apple Daily, Hong Kong is less free than it was a week ago. Apple Daily was an important voice, and it seems unlikely that any other media outlet will be able to fill its shoes, given growing restrictions on free speech and freedom of the press," he said.

Taiwan's Cabinet agency responsible for China issues also lamented the paper's closure as a heavy blow to media freedom in Hong Kong. The island is a self-governing democracy that split from mainland China in 1949 but that Beijing continues to claim as its territory.

"This shows the international community that the Chinese Communist Party, in its exercise of totalitarian political power, will stop at nothing to use extreme means to wipe out dissenting opinions," Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council said in an emailed statement. "Humankind's quest for freedom, democracy and other universal values will not be lost to history, but history will remember the ugly face of the power behind the suppression of freedom."

Beijing has dismissed such criticism as interference in its internal affairs, and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian on Thursday lashed out at foreign officials who have criticized the legal actions against Apple Daily.

"Press freedom is not an excuse of impunity and whoever disrupts Hong Kong has no extrajudicial privileges," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

On Wednesday night, over 100 people stood outside Apple Daily's office building in the rain to show their support, taking photographs and shouting words of encouragement.

Inside the building, associate publisher Chan Pui-man told staff who gathered around the newsroom to big applause: "You've done a great job, everyone!" Chan was one of the five arrested last week.

In the early hours of Thursday, residents in the city's Mong Kok neighborhood in the working-class Kowloon district began lining up hours before the paper hit the stands.

Apple Daily's Hong Kong website contained only a notice on Thursday that read: "We are sad to inform you that Apple Daily and Next Magazine's web and app content will no longer be accessible at 23:59, 23 June 2021, HKT."

"We would like to thank all of our readers, subscribers, advertisers, and Hongkonger(s) for your loyal support," the notice read.

A similar message was posted on its news app.

In the wake of the announcement of the paper's closure, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said authorities were using the national security law to curtail freedom and punish dissent, calling the paper's closure "a chilling demonstration of their campaign to silence all opposition voices."

German Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Adebahr said the closure was "another sign that pluralism, freedom of opinion and freedom of the press in Hong Kong are subject to erosion."

Last week's arrests of the Apple Daily employees represented the first time the national security law had been used against journalists for something they published.

Ethiopia confirms Tigray airstrike, says fighters targeted

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) — Ethiopia's military on Thursday confirmed it was responsible for a deadly airstrike on a busy marketplace in the country's Tigray region that locals say killed dozens of civilians, but the military insisted that only combatants were targeted.

A spokesman, Col. Getnet Adane, told journalists that fighters supporting the Tigray region's former leaders had assembled to celebrate Martyrs' Day on Tuesday when the airstrike occurred.

"The Ethiopian air force uses the latest technology, so it conducted a precision strike that was successful," he said. He didn't comment when reached for further details.

The airstrike in the village of Togoga killed at least 51 people and left 33 missing and more than 100

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 16 of 70

wounded, a regional health official told The Associated Press. Children were among the victims, other health workers said, adding that Ethiopian forces blocked some medical teams from responding and shot at a Red Cross ambulance trying to reach the scene. All spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

"There are a lot of people injured, but they didn't get medical service and help because of the blockage of the road by the military," said Dr. Kifle Redae.

The airstrike came amid some of the fiercest fighting in Tigray since the conflict began in November as Ethiopian forces, supported by forces from neighboring Eritrea, pursue Tigray's former leaders. The Ethiopian military spokesman denied Tigray fighters' claims of gains in recent days, saying Ethiopian forces had been deployed to other locations for Monday's national election.

The United States and the European Union have condemned the airstrike in Togoga that left children, including a 1-year-old baby, screaming in pain.

A "reprehensible act," the U.S. State Department said. "Denying victims urgently needed medical care is heinous and absolutely unacceptable. We urge the Ethiopian authorities to ensure full and unhindered medical access to the victims immediately. We also call for an urgent and independent investigation."

The U.S. also called for an immediate cease-fire in Tigray, where thousands of civilians have been killed and 350,000 people are now facing one of the world's worst famines in years.

Ethiopia says aid is being delivered to most of Tigray's 6 million people, but aid workers have said they have been repeatedly denied access to several parts of the region by soldiers.

Tigrayans were appalled by Ethiopia's assertion that the airstrike targeted only combatants.

"It's an insult to the people and adding salt to the wounds, you know?" said Hailu Kebede, a former Togoga resident and official with the Salsay Woyane Tigray opposition party. He described how his brother, who has a shop in the market, ran for his life while his nearby home was destroyed.

"We know the area. I grew up there. There were no combatants," Hailu said. "The destroyed homes are those of my friends and my family." One of his friends lost a child in the airstrike while another child had her hand amputated, he said.

The real death toll from the airstrike could be higher because some people likely took the dead home to their nearby villages and buried them without the knowledge of regional officials, Hailu said.

Miami-area condo collapses; massive rescue mission underway

By WILFREDO LEE Associated Press

SURFSIDE, Fla. (AP) — The sea-view side of a beachfront condo tower collapsed in the Miami-area town of Surfside early Thursday morning, trapping residents in rubble and twisted metal and sending a cloud of debris throughout the neighborhood.

Scores of rescue units rushed to the partially collapsed building and firefighters were seen pulling survivors from the concrete debris.

Santo Mejil, 50, told the Miami Herald his wife called him from the building, where she was working as an aide for an elderly woman.

"She said she heard a big explosion. It felt like an earthquake," Mejil told the newspaper. He said she later called him and said rescuers were bringing her down.

Authorities had no word yet on casualties or details of how many people lived in the building.

Miami Dade Fire Rescue was conducting search and rescue operations, and said in a tweet that more than 80 units were "on scene with assistance from municipal fire departments."

"We're on the scene so it's still very active," said Sgt. Marian Cruz of the Surfside Police Department. "What I can tell you is the building is twelve floors. The entire back side of the building has collapsed."

Victor Cohen, who lives nearby, told television station WPLG the building had been undergoing a major renovation when the ocean front wing "collapsed like a pancake."

Teams of fire fighters walked through the rubble, picking up survivors and carrying them from the wreckage.

The collapse left a number of units in the still-standing part of the building exposed. Television footage

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 17 of 70

showed bunk beds, tables and chairs still left inside the damaged apartments. Air conditioner units were hanging from some parts of the building, where wires now dangled.

Police blocked nearby roads, and scores of fire and rescue vehicles, ambulances and police cars swarmed the area.

The debris from the collapse coated cars up to two blocks away with a light layer of dust.

Photos and video from the scene show the collapse affected half the tower. Piles of rubble and debris surrounded the area just outside the building. The department has yet to say what may have caused the collapse.

The sea-view condo development was built in 1981 in the southeast corner of Surfside, on the beach. It had a few two-bedroom units currently on the market, with asking prices of \$600,000 to \$700,000.

The area is a mix of new and old apartments, houses, condominiums and hotels, with restaurants and stores serving an international combination of residents and tourists. The community provides a stark contrast from bustle and glitz of South Beach with a slower paced neighborhood feel.

Russia says it may fire to hit intruding warships

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia will be ready to fire to hit intruding warships, a senior diplomat said Thursday in a tough warning in the wake of a Black Sea incident in which a British destroyer sailed near Crimea in an area that Russia claims as its territorial waters.

Russia said one of its warships fired warning shots and a warplane dropped bombs in the path of British destroyer Defender on Wednesday to drive it away from the area near Sevastopol. But Britain denied that account and insisted its ship wasn't fired upon.

The incident marked the first time since the Cold War that Moscow acknowledged using live ammunition to deter a NATO warship, underlining the rising threat of military collisions amid Russia-West tensions.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Thursday that "the inviolability of the Russian borders is an absolute imperative," adding that it will be protected "by all means, diplomatic, political and military if needed."

He gibe that the British navy should rename its destroyer from Defender to Aggressor and warned that "those who try to test our strength are taking high risks."

Asked what Russia would do to prevent such intrusions in the future, Ryabkov told reporters it would stand ready to fire on targets if warnings don't work.

"We may appeal to reason and demand to respect international law," Ryabkov said, according to the Interfax news agency. "If it doesn't help, we may drop bombs and not just in the path but right on target if colleagues don't get it otherwise."

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman deplored what he described as a "deliberate and well-prepared provocation" by Britain and seconded the tough warning.

"If unacceptable provocative actions are repeated, if those actions go too far, no options to legitimately protect the borders of the Russian Federation could be excluded," the spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said in a call with reporters.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said a patrol ship fired warning shots after the HMS Defender had ignored a notice against intrusion and sailed 3 kilometers (1.6 nautical miles) into Russia's territorial waters near Sevastopol, the main Russian naval base in Crimea. It said a Russian Su-24 bomber also dropped four bombs ahead of the vessel to persuade the Defender to change course. Minutes later, the Defender left Russian waters, the ministry said.

Britain's Ministry of Defense denied the Defender had been fired on or was in Russian waters, but said it had been in Ukrainian waters.

"No warning shots have been fired at HMS Defender," it said in a statement. "The Royal Navy ship is conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law."

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, a move not recognized by most countries, gaining

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 18 of 70

access to its long Black Sea coast. Russia has chafed at NATO warships visiting near Crimea as destabilizing. In April, it declared a broader area off Crimea closed to foreign naval ships.

"It's incorrect to say either that it was fired on or this ship was in Russian waters," Max Blain, a spokesman for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, said Wednesday. "HMS Defender was taking the most direct and internationally recognized route between Ukraine and Georgia."

He emphasized that Britain, and much of the international community, does not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The Russian navy chief, Adm. Nikolai Yevmenov, said Thursday that the British destroyer's move was clearly provocative, noting that it ignored the warnings in a bid to test Russia's resolve.

"They came to see how we act," he told reporters in St. Petersburg. "And they only reacted to the power of weapons. Our navy acted in a competent and safe manner to stop the provocation."

Mikhail Khodaryonok, a retired Russian army colonel who works as a military analyst based in Moscow, said that the Russian warplane apparently dropped bombs miles away from the British ship to avoid any damage. He charged that the British denial that Russia had fired warning shots and dropped bombs to chase the Defender away reflected an attempt to save face.

"They couldn't admit that they were forced to change course, that they were aware of a threat that weapons would be used against them," Khodaryonok said in a telephone interview. "The former ruler of the seas couldn't allow for a loss of face by admitting that they submitted to the demands of the Russian side to change course."

Senators push \$953B infrastructure plan, raise hope for deal

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bipartisan group of senators is seeking President Joe Biden's support for a \$953 billion infrastructure plan, raising hopes for a breakthrough agreement after arduous negotiations on his top legislative priority.

Biden has invited members of the group of 21 senators, Republicans and Democrats, to the White House on Thursday. The pared-down plan, with \$559 billion in new spending, has rare bipartisan backing and could open the door to the president's more sweeping \$4 trillion proposals.

The senators have struggled over how to pay for the new spending. The tentative framework dipped by \$20 billion after a shift in funds for broadband internet, according to details from a person familiar with the proposal who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations.

The White House and Democratic leaders cast the bipartisan proposal as a positive development. Biden's top aides had met with senators for back-to-back meetings on Capitol Hill and later huddled with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

"We're very excited about the prospect of a bipartisan agreement," Pelosi said Wednesday night. The president's press secretary, Jen Psaki, said Biden had called for the meeting at the White House and that the group had made progress "towards an outline of a potential agreement."

One member of the group, Republican Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, said it was time for the group to reach out to other senators for support.

"In good faith, we tried to get there. We didn't agree on everything, but we were able to get there," Portman told reporters on Capitol Hill as he left a Wednesday evening meeting with the other senators and the White House team.

Biden has sought \$1.7 trillion in his American Jobs Plan, part of nearly \$4 trillion in broad infrastructure spending on roads, bridges and broadband internet but also the so-called care economy of child care centers, hospitals and elder care.

With Republicans opposed to Biden's proposed corporate tax rate increase, from 21% to 28%, the group has looked at other ways to raise revenue. Biden rejected their idea to allow gas taxes paid at the pump to rise with inflation, viewing it as a financial burden on American drivers.

Psaki said the senior staff to the president had two productive meetings with the bipartisan group at the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 19 of 70

Capitol. The White House team was huddled late into the evening with the Democratic leaders.

The White House said Pelosi and Schumer and the top administration aides agreed on Biden's goal of infrastructure investments without raising taxes on anyone who makes under \$400,000.

According to a White House readout of the meeting, the leaders talked with acting Budget Director Shalanda Young, National Economic Council Director Brian Deese and Domestic Policy Council Director Susan Rice, and they discussed the two-track approach ahead — a reference to the smaller bipartisan deal emerging from the group alongside a more sweeping plan of Democratic priorities that Congress is now drafting.

Schumer said the leaders "support the concepts" they have heard from the bipartisan negotiations.

The Democratic leaders also insisted on the two-part process ahead, starting with initial votes in July to consider the bipartisan deal and to launch the lengthy procedure for the Democrats' proposal, now drafted at nearly \$6 trillion.

The Democrats' bigger proposal would run through the budget reconciliation process, which would allow passage of Biden's priorities by majority vote, without the need for support from Republicans to overcome the Senate's 60-vote threshold. It would require multiple rounds of voting that are likely to extend into fall.

Schumer said, "One can't be done without the other."

That's a signal to both parties of the road ahead. Liberal Democrats have been wary of the bipartisan effort because they see it as insufficient and worry it will take the place of Biden's bigger plan. Republicans are also skeptical of passing a bipartisan bill only to be faced with an even bigger Democratic plan.

"We got our framework. We're going to the White House," Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., told reporters. "We wouldn't be going to the White House if we didn't think it has broad-based support."

Lawyer says death of McAfee surprised the US mogul's family

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Authorities in Spain say that a judge has ordered an autopsy on the remains of John McAfee, the gun-loving antivirus pioneer, cryptocurrency promoter and occasional politician who died in a cell pending extradition to the United States for allegedly evading millions in unpaid taxes.

A court spokeswoman for the Catalonia region said Thursday that a forensic team would need to perform toxicology tests on McAfee's body to determine the cause of death and that results could take "days or weeks."

Authorities have said that everything at the scene indicated that the 75-year-old tycoon killed himself.

The judicial investigation is being handled by a court in Martorell, a town northwest of Barcelona with jurisdiction over the prison where McAfee died. The spokeswoman wasn't authorized to be identified by name in media reports.

McAfee's Spanish lawyer, Javier Villalba, said the entrepreneur's death had come as a surprise to his wife and other relatives, adding he would seek to get "to the bottom" of his client's death.

"This has been like pouring cold water on the family and on his defense team," Villalba told The Associated Press on Thursday. "Nobody expected it, he had not said goodbye."

Although Villalba said that he had no evidence of any foul play, he blamed the death on "the cruelty of the system" for keeping a 75-year-old behind bars for economic and not blood-related crimes after judges refused to release him on bail.

"We had managed to nullify seven of the 10 counts he was accused of and even so he was still that dangerous person who could be fleeing Spain if he was released?" the lawyer said. "He was a world eminece, where could he hide?"

Spain's National Court on Monday ruled that McAfee should be extradited to the U.S. to face charges for evading more than \$4 million in the fiscal years 2016 to 2018. The judge dropped seven of the 10 counts in the initial indictment.

Villalba said that McAfee had learned about the ruling shortly after on Monday and that his death on

Wednesday didn't come in the heat of the moment. He also said that the legal team had been preparing with him an appeal to avoid being extradited.

A penitentiary source told AP that McAfee was sharing a cell in the Brians 2 jail where he had been put in preventive detention since he was arrested in October last year on a U.S. warrant, but that at the moment of his death he had been alone.

Prosecutors in Tennessee accused McAfee of failing to report income from promoting cryptocurrencies while he did consulting work, earnings made in speaking engagements and for selling the rights to his life story for a documentary. The criminal charges carried a prison sentence of up to 30 years.

The British-born entrepreneur led an eccentric life after selling his stake in the antivirus software company named after him in the early 1990s. He twice made long-shot runs for the U.S. presidency.

McAfee often professed his love for drugs and guns in public remarks. And some of his actions landed him in legal trouble beyond Tennessee, from Central America to the Caribbean. In 2012, he was sought for questioning in connection with the murder of his neighbor in Belize, but was never charged with a crime.

The Latest: Infections, deaths continue to soar in Russia

By The Associated Press undefined

MOSCOW — Coronavirus infections continue to soar in Russia, with the authorities reporting 20,182 new cases on Thursday and 568 further deaths. Both tallies are the highest since late January.

A surge in infections that hit Russia earlier this month comes as the authorities struggle to overcome widespread vaccine hesitancy and immunize its 146 million people. As of Wednesday, only 20.7 million — or just 14% of the the population — have received at least one shot of the vaccine, while 16.7 million — 11% — have been fully immunized.

In response to the soaring contagions, authorities in 14 Russian regions have made vaccinations mandatory for certain groups of people, such as state officials, those employed in retail, healthcare, education, restaurants and other service-providing businesses. In most of those regions, eligible companies are required to ensure vaccination of at least 60% of their staff in the coming months.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said Wednesday that over the past week, vaccinations rates have increased nearly two-fold.

Russia's state coronavirus task force has reported a total of over 5.3 million confirmed coronavirus cases in the pandemic and more than 131,000 deaths.

MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

- What should I know about the delta variant?
- "Scary" cluster blamed on the delta variant grows in Sydney.
- Italy is banking on a huge windfall of EU pandemic recovery funds to revamp its lagging economy. The future of the eurozone may depend on how well it does.
- Due to the pandemic, Tokyo is shaping up to be the 'no-fun' Olympics

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:

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Danish health officials are urging soccer fans who attended the Euro2020 game between Denmark and Belgium in Copenhagen on June 17 to be tested after they found at least three people who afterward tested positive with the delta variant.

On Twitter, Denmark's Health Minister said Wednesday that some 4,000 people sat in the same area as those who tested positive — six sections of the C stands at Copenhagen's Parken stadium.

Since April 2 when the Delta variant — known for being more infectious — was first discovered in Denmark, 247 cases have been reported.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 21 of 70

SYDNEY, Australia — A state government minister has been infected with COVID-19 and another minister is in isolation as a cluster in the Australian city of Sydney worsens.

New South Wales Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall said he was told on Thursday that he had tested positive after dining with three government colleagues on Monday at a Sydney restaurant after an infected diner.

All four lawmakers had been attending Parliament as recently as Tuesday.

Health Minister Brad Hazard said he was self-isolating after being exposed to a potential case at Parliament House.

Hazard said while standing next to Premier Gladys Berejiklian at daily pandemic media briefings, that he thought she was "fairly safe."

Pandemic restrictions tightened in Sydney on Thursday as a cluster of the Delta variant increased and states banned travel from either parts of Sydney or from anywhere in New South Wales.

The cluster began last week when a Sydney airport limousine driver tested positive. He was not vaccinated and is suspected to have been infected while transporting a foreign air crew. The cluster had grown to 31 cases by Wednesday.

JERUSALEM — Israel's government has postponed the planned reopening of the country to vaccinated tourists over concerns about the spread of the infectious delta variant of the coronavirus.

Israel was set to reopen its borders to vaccinated visitors on July 1, after having largely closed the country during the pandemic. It had already started allowing groups of vaccinated tourists to enter in May. All visitors will need to be tested before boarding flights to Israel and show proof of vaccination.

But after a rise in infections in the past week, the government said Wednesday that it would be pushing that date until Aug. 1. Israel's Health Ministry recorded 110 new cases of coronavirus in the past day.

Israel has suffered a major economic blow due to the coronavirus pandemic, but even as the country has gradually recovered after a speedy vaccination campaign, the tourism industry has remained blighted.

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York will lift more COVID-19 restrictions when the state of emergency expires later this week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday.

New Yorkers will still have to wear masks on public transit, hospitals, nursing homes, correctional facilities and homeless shelters, in accordance with federal guidance.

But Cuomo's announcement Wednesday means public meetings, for example, no longer must occur virtually.

"Fighting COVID & vaccinating New Yorkers are still top priorities, but the emergency chapter of this fight is over," Cuomo tweeted.

It's the governor's latest announcement about lifting COVID-19 restrictions at a time when rates of new positives are dipping to record lows as more New Yorkers get vaccinated. And it follows months of push-back from Republicans and business groups who have called for Cuomo's executive power to be reined in.

BERLIN — Germany's disease control center says the delta variant accounted for more than 15% of coronavirus infections in the country by mid-June, with its share roughly doubling in a week.

The Robert Koch Institute said in a weekly report Wednesday that the more contagious delta variant's share in sequenced samples rose to 15.1% in the week ending June 13. That compares with 7.9% a week earlier.

The alpha variant, first detected in Britain, remained dominant in Germany, though its share declined to 74.1% from 83.5%.

Overall cases in Germany have declined to their lowest level in months. On Wednesday, the disease control center said that 1,016 new cases were reported over the previous day — a rate of 7.2 new cases per 100,000 residents over seven days.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 22 of 70

Authorities have relaxed many restrictions but are pointing to surges in Britain, Portugal and Russia driven by the delta variant, first detected in India, as illustrating the need to remain vigilant.

MADRID — Spain is scrapping its requirement to wear face masks outdoors, as long as people can remain at least 1.5 meters (5 feet) apart, from next Saturday.

Health Minister Carolina Darias said masks will still be needed at large gatherings, such as concerts, when people are on their feet instead of sitting on distanced chairs.

Masks remain mandatory indoors in public places and on public transport.

She said Wednesday that face coverings have been “tremendously efficient and useful” in helping curb the spread of COVID-19.

She noted that 32% of Spaniards have had two vaccine doses and 50% have had a single doses so far, allowing a relaxation of mask rules.

BERLIN — A spokesman for Angela Merkel says the German Chancellor received two different vaccines in a conscious effort to encourage people not to be afraid if they are advised to get a mix of shots.

Merkel’s office confirmed Tuesday that the 66-year-old received a first shot of the AstraZeneca vaccine on April 16. For the second shot, she received the Moderna vaccine.

Her spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said Merkel intentionally opted for the initial AstraZeneca shot at a time when there were concerns about possible serious side effects.

“And so she can now perhaps take away the fears of people...who were or are worried about this so-called cross-vaccination,” he said.

BOISE, Idaho — Just over half of Idaho adults have now received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine — about two months after the 50% mark was reached nationwide.

Idaho Public Health Administrator Elke Shaw-Tulloch said during a press conference Tuesday that the state is unlikely to meet the national goal of at least 70% of adults with at least one vaccine dose by July 4.

Still, she said the state continues to make slow gains in vaccination rates. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says Idaho has the eighth lowest adult partial COVID-19 vaccination rate in the U.S.

Falling short: Why the White House will miss its vax target

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Standing in the State Dining Room on May 4, President Joe Biden laid out a lofty goal to vaccinate 70% of American adults by Independence Day, saying the U.S. would need to overcome “doubters” and laziness to do it. “This is your choice,” he told Americans. “It’s life and death.”

As for the ambition of his 70% goal, Biden added: “I’d like to get it at 100%, but I think realistically we can get to that place between now and July Fourth.”

He won’t.

With the July Fourth holiday approaching, the White House acknowledged this week that Biden will fall shy of his 70% goal and an associated aim of fully vaccinating 165 million adults in the same time frame. The missed milestones are notable in a White House that from the outset has been organized around a strategy of underpromising and overdelivering for the American public.

White House officials, while acknowledging they are set to fall short, insist they’re unconcerned. “We don’t see it exactly like something went wrong,” press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier this week, stressing that Americans’ lives are still better off than they were when Biden announced the goal.

A half-dozen officials involved in the vaccination campaign, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the missed target candidly, pointed to a combination of factors, including: the lessened sense of urgency that followed early success in the vaccination campaign; a decision to reach higher than a play-it-safe lower goal; and unexpectedly strong recalcitrance among some Americans toward getting a shot.

Nonetheless, the White House says it’s not letting up on its vaccination efforts. Biden will be in North

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 23 of 70

Carolina on Thursday urging Americans to roll up their sleeves as part of a nationwide "month of action" to drive up the vaccination rate before the holiday. The White House is continuing to roll out increasingly localized programs to encourage specific communities to get vaccinated.

A drop-off in vaccination rates was always expected by the White House, but not as sharp as has proved to be the case. The scale of American reluctance to get vaccinated remains a source of global curiosity, particularly as many nations are still scrambling for doses to protect their most vulnerable populations.

When the 70% goal was first announced by Biden seven weeks ago, on average more than 800,000 Americans were getting their first vaccine dose each day — down from a high of nearly 2 million per day in early April. Now that figure is below 300,000.

Paradoxically, officials believe the strong response to the early vaccination campaign has served to reduce motivation to get a shot for some. One of the most potent motivators for people to get vaccinated was the high rate of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Now that those figures have dropped to levels not seen since the onset of the pandemic, officials say it's become harder to convince Americans of the urgency to get a shot — particularly for younger populations that already knew they were at low risk of serious complications from the virus.

Separately, two officials involved in the crafting of the 70% goal said officials knew 65% would have been a safer bet, but they said the White House wanted to reach for a figure closer to experts' projections of what would be needed for herd immunity to bring down cases and deaths. Aiming for the higher target, the officials said, was seen as adding to the urgency of the campaign and probably increased the vaccination rate above where it would have been with a more modest goal.

Other officials said the White House, which has always cast the vaccination campaign as "hard," nevertheless failed to grasp the resistance of some Americans to getting a shot when it set the 70% goal.

"The hesitation among younger Americans and among Trump voters has been too hard to overcome," said GOP pollster Frank Luntz, who has worked with the White House and outside groups to promote vaccinations. "They think they are making a statement by refusing to be vaccinated. For Trump voters, it's a political statement. For younger adults, it's about telling the world that they are immune."

Of the White House, Luntz said, "I think they did as good a job as they could have done."

The White House points to all that the nation has achieved to play down the significance of the goals it will miss.

Back in March, Biden projected a July Fourth holiday during which Americans would be able to safely gather in small groups for outdoor barbecues — a milestone reached by the U.S. months ago. Nearly all states have lifted their virus restrictions, businesses and schools are open and large gatherings are resuming nationwide.

"The most important metric at the end of the day is: What are we able to do in our lives? How much of 'normal' have we been able to recapture?" said Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. "And I think what we are seeing now is that we have exceeded our expectations."

The White House also has taken to crunching the vaccination numbers in new ways to put a positive spin on the situation. On Tuesday, the administration announced that 70% of adults 30 and over have been vaccinated — removing the most hesitant population from its denominator. But even that statistic glosses over lower vaccination rates among middle-aged adults (62.4% for those aged 40-49) and millennials (52.8% for those aged 25-39).

The administration's predicament is all the more notable given what had been an unbroken streak of fulfilled vaccination goals. Before taking office, Biden in December pledged to vaccinate 100 million Americans in the first 100 days of his presidency — a rate that the U.S. was exceeding by the time he was sworn in. Within days he suggested a goal of 150 million and ultimately easily met a revised goal of 200 million shots in the first 100 days.

Biden's 70% goal also was achievable, officials say — if in retrospect too ambitious — but critically relied less on the government's ability to procure shots and build capacity to inject them and more on individuals' willingness to get vaccinated.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 24 of 70

"We did that as a team, relying very heavily or exclusively on the docs and scientists," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said Tuesday on how the targets were selected.

More significant that the 70% statistic, officials said, is the vast regional disparities in vaccination, with a state like Vermont vaccinating more than 80% of its population while some in the South and West are below 50%. Within states, there's even greater variation. In Missouri, some southern and northern counties are well short of 40% and one county is at just 13%.

With the delta variant first identified in India taking hold in the U.S., officials say the next vaccination boost may not come from incentives like lotteries or giveaways, but out of renewed fears of preventable illness and death. Other officials project a significant increase in vaccine uptake once the shots, which have received emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration, receive final approval from the agency.

Heading into the end of the month another Biden goal also was in doubt.

The president last month set a target of shipping 80 million COVID-19 excess vaccine doses overseas by the end of June. U.S. officials say the doses are ready to go, but that regulatory and legal roadblocks in recipient countries are slowing deliveries beyond what was expected.

About 10 million have been shipped so far, including 3 million sent Wednesday to Brazil. Shipments are expected to pick up in the final days of the month, but meeting the goal by June 30 appears unlikely.

It takes time to share a lifesaving and delicate vaccine, one White House official said, but the administration expects to share "every single drop" of the promised doses.

What should I know about the delta variant?

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

What should I know about the delta variant?

It's a version of the coronavirus that has been found in more than 80 countries since it was first detected in India. It got its name from the World Health Organization, which names notable variants after letters of the Greek alphabet.

Viruses constantly mutate, and most changes aren't concerning. But there is a worry that some variants might evolve enough to be more contagious, cause more severe illness or evade the protection that vaccines provide.

Experts say the delta variant spreads more easily because of mutations that make it better at latching onto cells in our bodies. In the United Kingdom, the variant is now responsible for 90% of all new infections. In the U.S., it represents 20% of infections, and health officials say it could become the country's dominant type as well.

It's not clear yet whether the variant makes people sicker since more data needs to be collected, said Dr. Jacob John, who studies viruses at the Christian Medical College at Vellore in southern India.

Studies have shown that the available vaccines work against variants, including the delta variant.

Researchers in England studied how effective the two-dose AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines were against it, compared with the alpha variant that was first detected in the U.K.

The vaccines were protective for those who got both doses but were less so among those who got one dose.

It's why experts say it's important to be fully vaccinated. And it's why they say making vaccines accessible globally is so critical.

Eligibility rule keeps transgender runner out of trials

EUGENE, Ore. (AP) — Transgender runner CeCe Telfer will not be allowed to compete in the women's 400-meter hurdles at U.S. Olympic trials because Telfer has not met the conditions World Athletics established in its eligibility regulations for certain women's events.

Telfer competed for the men's team at Division II Franklin Pierce, but took time off, then came back to compete for the women's team. In 2019, Telfer won the NCAA title.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 25 of 70

Telfer was entered in this week's trials but was ultimately not allowed to compete because of guidelines World Athletics released in 2019 that closed off international women's events of between 400 meters and a mile to athletes who did not meet the eligibility requirements. Among those requirements was that their testosterone levels had to be below 5 nonomoles per liter (nmol/L) for a span of 12 months.

Telfer's manager, David McFarland, said Telfer would respect the decision.

"CeCe has turned her focus towards the future and is continuing to train. She will compete on the national — and world — stage again soon," McFarland said.

USATF said in a statement that in order for athletes to be eligible for the trials, they must meet the requirements to be a member of the U.S. Olympic team, and that eligibility for the Olympics is governed by World Athletics.

It further explained: "Following notification from World Athletics on June 17 that the conditions had not yet been met, USATF provided CeCe with the eligibility requirements and, along with World Athletics, the opportunity to demonstrate her eligibility so that she could compete at the U.S. Olympic Team Trials. According to subsequent notification to CeCe from World Athletics on June 22, she has not been able to demonstrate her eligibility."

In a blog last week in Women's Health, Telfer said: "I love what I'm doing and I'm getting to live my truth and live my authentic life. I believe that this is my way of being the change that I want to see in the world. And I live by that every single day."

In its statement, USATF said it "strongly supports inclusivity and providing a clear path to participation in the sport for all, while also maintaining competitive fairness."

"If CeCe meets the conditions for transgender athlete participation in the future, we wholeheartedly back her participation in international events as a member of Team USATF," the statement said.

Philippine democracy scion, ex-leader Benigno Aquino dies

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, the son of pro-democracy icons who helped topple dictator Ferdinand Marcos and a defender of good governance who took China's sweeping territorial claims to an international court, has died. He was 61.

Aquino's family told a news conference that he died in his sleep early Thursday due to "renal failure secondary to diabetes." A former Cabinet official, Rogelio Singson, said Aquino had been undergoing dialysis and was preparing for a kidney transplant.

"Mission accomplished Noy, be happy now with Dad and Mom," said Pinky Aquino-Abellada, a sister of the late president, using his nickname and struggling to hold back her tears.

Condolences poured in from politicians, the Catholic Church and others, including President Rodrigo Duterte's administration and Sen. Imee Marcos, a daughter of the late dictator. Philippine flags were lowered at half-staff on government buildings.

"We are saddened by President Aquino's passing and will always be thankful for our partnership," U.S. Embassy Charge d' Affaires John Law said in a statement.

"For beyond politics and much public acrimony, I knew Noy as a kind and simple soul. He will be deeply missed," Marcos said in a statement, using Aquino's nickname.

Aquino, who served as president from 2010 to 2016, was the heir of a family that has been regarded as a bulwark against authoritarianism in the Philippines.

His father, former Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr., was assassinated in 1983 while under military custody at the Manila international airport, which now bears his name. His mother, Corazon Aquino, led the 1986 "people power" revolt that ousted Marcos. The army-backed uprising became a harbinger of popular revolts against authoritarian regimes worldwide.

A scion of a wealthy land-owning political clan in the northern Philippines, Aquino, who was fondly called Noy or Pnoy by many Filipinos, built an image of an incorruptible politician who battled poverty and frowned over excesses by the country's elites, including powerful politicians. One of his first orders that

Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 26 of 70

lingered throughout his presidency was to ban the use of sirens in vehicles that carried VIPs through Manila's notorious traffic jams.

Aquino, whose family went into exile in the U.S. during Marcos's rule, had turbulent ties with China as president. After China seized a disputed shoal in 2012 following a tense standoff in the South China Sea, Aquino authorized the filing of a complaint before an international arbitration tribunal that questioned the validity of China's sweeping claims in the strategic waterway Beijing claims virtually the entire South China Sea on historical grounds.

"We will not be pushed around because we are a tiny state compared with theirs," Aquino told The Associated Press in June 2011. "We think we have very solid grounds to say 'do not intrude into our territory.'"

The Philippines largely won. But China refused to join in the arbitration and dismissed as a sham the tribunal's 2016 ruling, which invalidated Beijing's claims based on a 1982 U.N. maritime treaty. Aquino's legal challenge and the eventual ruling plunged the relations between Beijing and Manila to an all-time low.

Born in 1960 as the third of five children, Aquino never married and had no children. An economics graduate, he pursued business opportunities before entering politics.

During his mother's tumultuous presidency, after democracy was restored, Aquino was wounded by gunfire during a failed 1987 coup attempt by rebel soldiers who attempted to lay siege on the heavily guarded Malacanang presidential palace. Three of his security escorts were killed. A bullet had remained embedded in Aquino's neck.

He won a seat in the House of Representatives in 1998, where he served until 2007, then successfully ran for the Senate. Aquino announced his presidential campaign in September 2009, saying he was answering the call of the people to continue his mother's legacy. She had died just weeks earlier of colon cancer.

His won with a battle cry "without the corrupt, there won't be poor people." He called ordinary Filipinos his "boss" and offered himself as their servant. Friends said he often carried a copy of the Philippine Constitution in his pocket, a reflection of his steadfast belief that no one is above the law.

His victory was also seen as a protest vote due to exasperation with the corruption scandals of his predecessor, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. She was detained for nearly five years before the Supreme Court cleared her of the charges. Arroyo later served as House speaker under Duterte.

Public expectations of Aquino were high. While he moved against corruption — detaining Arroyo and three powerful senators — and initiated anti-poverty programs, the deep-seated inequalities and weak institutions in the Southeast Asian nation wracked by decades-old communist and Muslim insurgencies remained too daunting.

Under Aquino, the government expanded a program that provides cash dole-outs to the poorest in exchange for commitments by parents to send children to school. Big business, meanwhile, benefited from government partnership deals that allowed them to finance major infrastructure projects such as highways and airports for long-term gain.

One of Aquino's major successes was the signing of a 2014 peace deal with the largest Muslim separatist rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It eased decades of fighting in the country's south, homeland of minority Muslims in the largely Roman Catholic nation.

Opponents pounded on missteps, including a Manila bus hostage crisis that ended with the shooting deaths of eight Chinese tourists from Hong Kong by a disgruntled police officer, and delays in recovery efforts in the disastrous aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

Aquino came under heavy criticism in 2015 for his absence in a ceremony at a Manila air base for the arrival of the remains of police commandos who were killed by Muslim insurgents during a covert raid that killed one of Asia's most-wanted terror suspects. Aquino proceeded with a scheduled inauguration of a car manufacturing plant, triggering criticism that he lacked empathy.

Aquino retained high approval ratings when his single, six-year term ended in 2016. The rise of the populist Duterte, whose deadly crackdown on illegal drugs has killed thousands of mostly petty drug suspects, was a reality check on the extent of public dissatisfaction and perceived failures during Aquino's reformist rule.

Aquino campaigned against Duterte, warning he could be a looming dictator and could set back the

democracy and economic momentum achieved in his own term.

Time magazine named Aquino as one of 100 most influential people in the world in 2013, praising him for stabilizing a sputtering economy and for bravely confronting China over the South China Sea disputes.

After leaving office, Aquino stayed away from politics and the public eye.

He is survived by four sisters. Funeral arrangements were not immediately announced by the family.

Antivirus pioneer John McAfee found dead in Spanish prison

By ARITZ PARRA, RENATA BRITO and BARRY HATTON Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — John McAfee, the creator of McAfee antivirus software, was found dead in his jail cell near Barcelona in an apparent suicide Wednesday, hours after a Spanish court approved his extradition to the United States to face tax charges punishable by decades in prison, authorities said.

The eccentric cryptocurrency promoter and tax opponent whose history of legal troubles spanned from Tennessee to Central America to the Caribbean was discovered at the Brians 2 penitentiary in northeastern Spain. Security personnel tried to revive him, but the jail's medical team finally certified his death, a statement from the regional Catalan government said.

"A judicial delegation has arrived to investigate the causes of death," it said, adding that "everything points to death by suicide."

The statement didn't identify McAfee by name but said the dead man was a 75-year-old U.S. citizen awaiting extradition to his country. A Catalan government official familiar with the case who was not authorized to be named in media reports confirmed to The Associated Press that it was McAfee.

Spain's National Court on Monday ruled in favor of extraditing McAfee, 75, who had argued in a hearing earlier this month that the charges against him by prosecutors in Tennessee were politically motivated and that he would spend the rest of his life in prison if returned to the U.S.

The court's ruling was made public on Wednesday and was open for appeal, with any final extradition order also needing to get approval from the Spanish Cabinet.

McAfee was arrested last October at Barcelona's international airport and had been in jail since then awaiting the outcome of extradition proceedings. The arrest followed charges the same month in Tennessee for evading taxes after failing to report income from promoting cryptocurrencies while he did consulting work, made speaking engagements and sold the rights to his life story for a documentary. The criminal charges carried a prison sentence of up to 30 years.

Nishay Sanan, the Chicago-based attorney defending him on those cases, said by phone that McAfee "will always be remembered as a fighter."

"He tried to love this country but the U.S. government made his existence impossible," Sanan said. "They tried to erase him, but they failed."

The lawyer said Spanish authorities have not given his legal team a cause of death, and he wants to know if there were video cameras in McAfee's cell or in the prison.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Memphis declined to comment.

Tennessee prosecutors had argued that McAfee owed the U.S. government \$4,214,105 in taxes before fines or interests for undeclared income in the five fiscal years from 2014 to 2018, according to a Spanish court document seen by AP. But in this week's ruling, the National Court judge agreed to extradite him only to face charges from 2016 to 2018.

Born in England's Gloucestershire in 1945 as John David McAfee, he started McAfee Associates in 1987 and led an eccentric life after selling his stake in the antivirus software company named after him in the early 1990s.

McAfee twice made long-shot runs for the U.S. presidency and was a participant in Libertarian Party presidential debates in 2016. He dabbled in yoga, ultralight aircraft and producing herbal medications.

In 2012 he was wanted for questioning in connection with the death of Gregory Viant Faull, who was shot to death in early November 2012 on the Belize island where the men lived.

McAfee told AP at the time that he was being persecuted by the Belizean government. Belizean police

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 28 of 70

denied that, saying they were simply investigating a crime about which McAfee may have had information. Then-Prime Minister Dean Barrow expressed doubts about McAfee's mental state, saying, "I don't want to be unkind to the gentleman, but I believe he is extremely paranoid, even bonkers."

A Florida court ordered McAfee in 2019 to pay \$25 million to Faull's estate in a wrongful death claim.

In July of that year he was released from detention in the Dominican Republic after he and five others were suspected of traveling on a yacht carrying high-caliber weapons, ammunition and military-style gear.

McAfee told Wired Magazine in 2012 that his father, a heavy drinker and "very unhappy man," shot himself when McAfee was 15. "Every day I wake up with him," he told Wired.

He lived for a time in Lexington, Tennessee, a rural town of about 7,800 some 100 miles (160 kilometers) east of Memphis. In a 2015 interview with WBBJ-TV, McAfee said he only felt comfortable when armed. The TV station reported that he chose to be interviewed with a loaded gun in each hand.

"Very little gives me a feeling of being safe and more secure other than being armed in my bedroom with the door locked," McAfee told the station.

In one of his last known media interviews, with British newspaper The Independent last November, McAfee said his prison experience in Spain was a "fascinating adventure" and he planned never to return to the U.S.

"I am constantly amused and sometimes moved," he was quoted as saying. "The graffiti alone could fill a thousand-page thriller."

He also told The Independent that prisoners and guards had recognized him and some asked for his autograph.

McAfee said his main point of contact outside the prison was his wife, Janice McAfee. The last post from his Twitter account was a retweet of a Father's Day message from her.

"These eight months John has spent in prison in Spain have been especially hard on his overall health both mentally and physically, as well as financially, but he is undeterred from continuing to speak truth to power," it said.

California chipmaker Intel, which bought McAfee's company in 2011 for \$7.68 billion, for a time sought to dissociate the brand from its controversial founder by folding it into its larger cybersecurity division. But the rebranding was short-lived, and Intel in 2016 spun out the cybersecurity unit into a new company called McAfee.

Jaime Le, a McAfee company spokesperson, said in a statement: "Although John McAfee founded the company, he has not been associated with our company in any capacity for over 25 years. That said, our thoughts go to his family and those close to him."

A spokesperson with the U.S. Embassy in Madrid said it was aware of the reports about McAfee's death but would not comment for privacy reasons.

In pandemic, drug overdose deaths soar among Black Americans

CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

ST. LOUIS (AP) — She screamed and cried, banged on the dashboard, begging her husband to drive faster, faster, faster toward her brother lying face-down on his bedroom floor.

Craig Elazer had struggled all his life with anxiety so bad his whole body would shake. But because he was Black, he was seen as unruly, she said, not as a person who needed help. Elazer, 56, had started taking drugs to numb his nerves before he was old enough to drive a car.

Now his sister, Michelle Branch, was speeding toward his apartment in an impoverished, predominantly Black neighborhood in north St. Louis. His family had dreaded the day he would die of an overdose for so long that his mother had paid for his funeral in monthly installments.

It was September, and as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified America's opioid addiction crisis in nearly every corner of the country, many Black neighborhoods like this one suffered most acutely. The portrait of the opioid epidemic has long been painted as a rural white affliction, but the demographics have been shifting for years as deaths surged among Black Americans. The pandemic hastened the trend by further

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 29 of 70

flooding the streets with fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid, in communities with scant resources to deal with addiction.

In the city of St. Louis, deaths among Black people increased last year at three times the rate of white people, skyrocketing more than 33%. Black men in Missouri are now four times more likely than a white person to die of an overdose.

Dr. Kanika Turner, a local physician leading the charge to contain the crisis, describes the soaring death rate as a civil rights issue as pressing and profound as any other. The communities now being hit hardest are those already devastated by the war on drugs that demonized Black drug users, tore families apart and hollowed out neighborhoods by sending Black men to prison instead of treatment, she said. Even today, Black people in the United States are more likely to be in jail for drug crimes and less likely to access treatment.

Last year, George Floyd died in Minneapolis under a police officer's knee. He had fentanyl in his system and some of the officer's defenders tried to blame the drugs for his death. The world exploded in rage.

"That incident on top of the pandemic rocked the boat and shook all of us. It ripped the Band-Aid off a wound that has always been there," said Turner, who grew in the same neighborhoods where Elazer lived, beset by addiction, poverty and one of the highest murder rates in America. "We're undoing history of damage, history of trauma, history of racism."

Pastors are now marching into the city jail to train inmates how to survive once they get outside. They host mobile treatment centers in their parking lots. They make an appeal to their congregations: Do not numb the pain of violence and racism with drugs. Don't let the next funeral be for you.

Branch for decades begged God to deliver her brother from addiction. She would lie awake at night imagining him dead in a ditch or dark alley, with nothing in the world but the clothes on his back.

She was hysterical by the time she arrived at his apartment.

The cousin who found him said he was sorry; Elazer had been alone and dead for hours. They tried to convince her not to go inside, but she wanted to see him.

As Branch looked down at his body, she felt calm come over her.

"Society failed him," she said. "And I had a sense that he'd finally been set free."

When the Rev. Burton Barr drives to the city jail, he passes a corner store with a sign painted on its side: "Drugs ... the new slavery!"

"That's true," Barr said.

He calls himself "the hoodlum preacher" and he goes to the jail twice a week to try to save people from the addiction that consumed his life for 22 years.

He was swept up when heroin inundated Black communities in the 1960s and transitioned to cocaine in the 1980s. The face of addiction then was inner-city Black people like him, and they were criminalized. Barr once tried to tally the number of times he went to jail, and he stopped counting at 30.

"It was not a war on drugs. It was a war on us," said Barr, in recovery since 1991. "It devastated our communities."

Harsh sentencing laws passed in the 1980s were far more brutal on crack cocaine users, who were more likely to be Black, than they were for powder cocaine users, who were more likely to be white. A person convicted of possessing five grams of crack got the same sentence as someone with 100 times more powder. Black men went to prison by the tens of thousands.

Addiction was not widely accepted as a public health crisis — with a focus on treatment instead of incarceration — until recent years, only once it started killing white teens in the suburbs, Barr said.

The timeline of the current opioid epidemic begins in the late 1990s, and unfolds in three waves. The first arrived when pharmaceutical companies campaigned to expand prescribing painkillers and addiction spread through struggling, predominantly-white communities like Appalachia.

The second came when the government cracked down on prescriptions and many turned to heroin; then the third when fentanyl, 50 times more potent than heroin, was laced into opioids sold on the street.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 30 of 70

Some researchers believe the nation is entering a fourth wave. The drug supply is so messy and unpredictable that people overdosing have multiple drugs in their system: dangerous cocktails of fentanyl, a depressant, and stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamine.

A lot of illicit fentanyl is manufactured in Wuhan, China, where COVID-19 was first unleashed. Lockdowns initially disrupted the supply, said Vanda Felbab-Brown, a Brookings Institute fellow who studies trafficking.

In St. Louis, the drug trade became even more chaotic: People who used to know where their drugs were coming from no longer did. Fentanyl for a time was hard to find, and some turned to less-potent heroin.

But the Chinese laboratories rebounded and resumed shipping the chemicals to Mexico, where cartels process them, Felbab-Brown said. Pandemic border closures presented cartels with added incentive to traffic fentanyl: It is incredibly potent and profitable. The equivalent of a trunkful of heroin or cocaine can be carried across the border in a small suitcase.

Mexican soldiers are finding people at checkpoints ferrying tens of thousands of fentanyl pills. Navy personnel caught two men on a boat on the Sea of Cortez trying to smuggle 100,000. Mexican authorities raided a fentanyl factory in Chalco, a slum on the outskirts of Mexico City, where the drug was processed by the tons, so much they needed a forklift to move it.

In St. Louis, fentanyl flooded back to the streets. The death count exploded early last summer, said Rachel Winograd, a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis who tracks the state's overdose data. In the first six months of 2020, deaths increased 64% among Black people from the same period the year before, and 40% among white people.

Other cities saw a similar pattern. Doctors in Philadelphia found that in the first few months of the pandemic, overdoses increased more than 50% for Black people while decreasing for whites. In Massachusetts, health officials announced that overdose deaths among Black men soared in 2020 by nearly 70%.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 92,000 Americans died of overdose in the 12 months ending in November, the highest number ever recorded. That data is not broken down by race.

But researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, analyzed emergency medical calls nationwide and found an overall increase of 42% in overdose deaths in 2020. The largest increase was for Black people, with a spike of more than 50%.

One day last summer in St. Louis, Lynda Brooks went into a bathroom to smoke what she thought was crack. She felt strange, sat down and remembers only darkness. Once she was revived from a fentanyl overdose, she wondered if she'd been in hell.

She was so scared that for days she kept the lights on to try to resist going to sleep.

Brooks, a 55-year-old grandmother, had been addicted to crack for decades. She was often homeless and life out there was hard. She was assaulted, spit on, her husband died. So she took more drugs to escape feeling sad or scared or worthless.

Soon after she overdosed, she went to a community center. She told them if she didn't get help she knew she would die.

Brooks has been in recovery now for seven months, and she prays to remain scared of the drugs. She got a job and an apartment, and proudly keeps her new keys dangling from a shoelace around her neck. Her family told her they are proud of her. She said that feels like heaven.

Pastor Marsha Hawkins-Hourd smiled at Brooks from the sidewalk.

"You make me so happy," called Hawkins-Hourd, who runs the Child and Family Empowerment Center that helped Brooks find treatment and housing. "A lot of people fail. And it hurts when they fail. But you wipe all that away."

She is part of a network of faith leaders and grassroots activists trying to overcome the distrust people have for the systems that typically address addiction but are infested with systemic racism, she said.

She looks at block after block of falling-down buildings in the north side of the city. She sees them as a symbol of her neighbors who were deeply traumatized, then abandoned with limited access to treatment.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 31 of 70

At some point, these houses were filled with hope and life, she said. Then society left them to crumble as men were sent to prison and families buckled. Now the windows are broken out, their roofs caving in, weeds choking their insides.

"Mass incarceration and the war on drugs are the roots and all of this is the thorns," she said. "It is a set-up for failure, a set-up to continue in the same cycle of poverty and death."

Jerry Simmons sometimes imagines himself lying in one of those vacant houses where he sleeps, dead for days from an overdose before anyone discovers him.

He arrived in a church parking lot before dawn to be first in line for a mobile treatment van scheduled to arrive as part of a new state-funded effort to reach people like him.

"I just want to be a normal person back in society, working, living, loving, playing with my grandkids, making my kids be proud of me," said Simmons, 49, who's been addicted for 30 years, homeless and in and out of prisons.

When he climbed into the van, it had been about eight hours since he last snorted fentanyl, at 1:37 a.m. The crippling withdrawal symptoms would set in soon, he knew: aches down to the bone, diarrhea, shakes, insomnia.

To give himself strength, he wore a T-shirt printed with the face of his friend, killed in a hail of bullets 30 years ago. Simmons grew up near this church on the most murderous mile of road in one of America's most dangerous cities.

"There's death all around here," he said. Three friends have died in the last month, two to gun violence and one to overdose. The drugs, at first, helped him escape.

He sat down across from a recovery coach from Hawkins-Hourd's organization, which partnered with a treatment provider to usher people here.

"In the past 30 days, have you experienced serious depression?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"Have you neglected family because of your use of drugs?"

"Yes."

"Have you lost a job because of drug use?"

"Yes," he said again. Addiction has taken everything from him.

"I'm tired."

He was there to enroll in a treatment program that includes a prescription for the medication buprenorphine, which has been found to greatly reduce the likelihood of overdose death. But researchers have found that white patients are far more likely than Black patients to receive it. Black people instead tend to be steered toward methadone, which is distributed in highly regulated programs that often require standing in line daily before dawn.

"That is the worst form of segregation: one for the white, well-to-do people, one for the rest," said Dr. Percy Menzies, president of Assisted Recovery Centers of America, the company stationing mobile units on street corners and church parking lots. "The tsunami of fentanyl is absolutely frightening, and they have virtually no safety net."

Addiction is treatable with medication and therapy, he said. But he knows they can't expect to show up in white lab coats and ask people to trust them right away.

He started going to Black churches to bring pastors on board.

Minister Lacha Hughes heard him speak at her church on a Saturday, and the next day her niece, Natisha Stansberry, called her hysterical. Most of her life, Stansberry, 30, used drugs to self-medicate her mental distress. She was raped as a child and attempted suicide. In 2016, her 23-year-old brother was murdered. Stansberry wished it would have been her instead.

"I wanted to be the best I could be, but I went down the drain," she said. "I want to get myself together."

She was weeping into the phone that she was scared of dying; two of her friends had overdosed, one was dead and one in the hospital. Hughes ushered Stansberry into Menzies' clinic. Until now, all she ever knew to do for her was pray.

It had felt to her like they'd had no help. In a crisis, many here are even hesitant to call 911 because

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 32 of 70

they fear the police.

Now all over town, people walk around wearing little red backpacks, passed out by activists like Jerome Anderson, trying to saturate the streets with the overdose reversal medication Narcan so they can save each other.

He calls at passers-by: "Hey, take some Narcan. Save a life. I'm tired of going to family funerals."

Anderson, in recovery for 26 years, sang at three cousins' funerals in the last six months, all dead from overdose. He works for a grassroots public health group called Williams and Associates and his mission is to keep people alive so that one day they can find their way to recovery.

He carries around a cover letter that lets people know he's not a cop. Sometimes drug dealers let him stand next to them, to hand their customers his kits.

Jamilia Allen has used Narcan to revive her friends, more than once. She's terrified of fentanyl, but she's tried and tried to shake her heroin and crack addiction.

"It's designed to kill us, and that's what it's going to do. It takes your soul. If it don't kill you physically, it's going to kill you emotionally, kill all your dreams," she said. "I really want my life back, but I can't grasp it."

Allen, 31, was once an honor roll student and the captain of her high school cheerleading squad, and back then she judged people desperate for drugs.

She went to Walmart recently and was jealous of a woman buying a shower curtain. She wants a life that simple, and she fantasizes about someone sending her to a place like Malibu, where the rich white people go to kick addiction.

She was for a long time ashamed of her life: prostitution, being raped, beaten, thrown out naked in the snow. But now, she said, she wants people to know.

"I'm not going to let this kill me, and if I can help anyone else," she said, "then that's one less person like me."

All Michelle Branch has left of her brother fits into a little green shopping bag.

The Bible she bought him one time when he got sober and wrote "One Day at a Time" on the title page.

There's the baby book her mother put together, with so much hope when she taped a lock of his hair to the pages. There are report cards chronicling a bright child, loved by teachers but struggling to focus.

By third grade, he could read as well as a sixth-grader. He and his mother, a teacher, would read the newspaper cover to cover. He liked cowboy stories.

But he was anxious and jittery. Had he been diagnosed and treated, Branch believes he would be alive today.

"But they didn't catch hyperactivity or bipolar back then, especially not in little Black kids. We were just unruly, undisciplined, this much removed from being an animal," Branch said, pinching her fingers so there was little space between them.

Branch worked in the school system when the opioid epidemic began, white people were dying and pundits on TV said they needed to be saved from this public health tragedy. She wondered where they'd been when her brother was swirling into addiction.

Their mother raised them alone and they didn't have a lot of money. He told Branch he started drinking when he was 12, and soon progressed to drugs. He lived transiently, sleeping under overpasses, on dirty mattresses in dark alleys.

She can't count the number of times he tried to get sober.

Their mother always worried he would die. She wrote on little slips of paper and left them all over the house: pinned to her bedroom lampshade, taped to the kitchen wall. "God is working this problem out for me," they said.

She got sick with cancer, but lingered for years. Her family believed she was holding on out of fear of what would happen to her son.

She died worried about him.

He was in and out of jail, mostly for petty offenses. But several years ago, an acquaintance alleged he sexually assaulted her while using drugs. His lawyer told them the odds were against him as a Black man

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 33 of 70

accused of assaulting a white woman, Branch said. He pleaded guilty and spent three years in prison.

He was released in May 2020, as the pandemic bore down.

He couldn't find a job. There were no recovery meetings in-person and he'd been so transient all his life he didn't know how to use a smartphone. He was alone most of the time, with his 10-pound dog, Rico.

One night they couldn't reach him. His cousin, Carleton Smith, looked through the mail slot and saw him lying there.

The first responders gathered over his body pointed to a paper plate on his bed with a pile of white powder. "Fentanyl," they said.

When Branch sat down to write his obituary, she decided to tell his truth.

She wrote that he was a gentle soul but addiction destroyed him.

"It would devastate his family, make him homeless, cause him to beg for money on the street, take his freedom, his sparkle and smile," she wrote.

"It would take and take and take until it took his life."

'Scary' Sydney virus cluster blamed on delta variant grows

SYDNEY (AP) — Sydney was going through one the "scariest" times of the pandemic as a cluster of the highly contagious delta variant infects more people, an Australian state leader said on Thursday.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said she tested negative for the coronavirus after her Agriculture Minister Adam Marshall tested positive Thursday. Health Minister Brad Hazzard is self-isolating as a close contact of a suspected COVID-19 case in Parliament House.

Sydney tightened pandemic restrictions on Wednesday, but Berejiklian said Australia's largest city did not yet need to lock down further.

"Since the pandemic has started, this is perhaps the scariest period that New South Wales is going through," Berejiklian told reporters.

"It is a very contagious variant but at the same time we are at this stage comfortable that the settings that are in place are the appropriate settings," she added.

Authorities say the cluster spread from a Sydney airport limousine driver who tested positive last week. He was not vaccinated, reportedly did not wear a mask and is suspected to have been infected while transporting a foreign air crew. The cluster had grown to 36 cases by Thursday.

Police were considering charging the driver and his employer with a range of offenses, Police Force Deputy Commissioner Gary Worboys said.

Marshall tested positive after dining with three government colleagues on Monday at a Sydney restaurant after an infected diner.

All four lawmakers had been attending Parliament as recently as Tuesday.

Several government ministers, lawmakers and staff were told to get tested and isolate until July 6 after a positive case attended a political party dinner in Sydney on Tuesday. Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce also attended the dinner, but was allowed to attend Parliament in the national capital Canberra on Thursday after taking medical advice.

Australian states have closed their borders to travelers either from parts of Sydney or from anywhere in New South Wales. And New Zealand has stopped quarantine-free travel from New South Wales for at least three days.

Victoria state said it would continue to ease pandemic restrictions in its capital Melbourne following a fourth lockdown despite a Melbourne resident testing positive after returning from Sydney on Sunday.

Australia has been relatively successful in containing coronavirus clusters, although the delta variant first detected in India is proving more challenging.

The pandemic has claimed 910 deaths in Australia, which has a population of 26 million. The only COVID-19 death since October was an 80-year-old man who became infected overseas and was diagnosed in hotel quarantine.

John McAfee, software pioneer turned fugitive, dead at 75

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

John McAfee, the outlandish security software pioneer who tried to live life as a hedonistic outsider while running from a host of legal troubles, was found dead in his jail cell near Barcelona on Wednesday.

His death came just hours after a Spanish court announced that it had approved his extradition to the United States to face tax charges punishable by decades in prison, authorities said.

McAfee, who was among other things a cryptocurrency promoter, tax opponent, U.S. presidential candidate and fugitive, who publicly embraced drugs, guns and sex, had a history of legal woes spanning from Tennessee to Central America to the Caribbean. In 2012, he was sought for questioning in connection with the murder of his neighbor in Belize, but was never charged with a crime.

McAfee's body was discovered at the Brians 2 penitentiary in northeastern Spain. Security personnel tried to revive him, but the jail's medical team finally certified his death, a statement from the regional Catalan government said.

"A judicial delegation has arrived to investigate the causes of death," the statement read. "Everything points to death by suicide."

McAfee's death was confirmed after Spain's National Court ruled in favor of extraditing McAfee, 75, who had argued in a hearing earlier this month that the charges against him by prosecutors in Tennessee were politically motivated and that he would spend the rest of his life in prison if returned to the U.S.

The court's ruling was made public on Wednesday and was open for appeal, with any final extradition order also needing to get approval from the Spanish Cabinet.

McAfee was arrested last October at Barcelona's international airport and had been in jail since then awaiting the outcome of extradition proceedings. The arrest followed charges the same month in Tennessee for evading taxes after failing to report income from promoting cryptocurrencies while he did consulting work, made speaking engagements and sold the rights to his life story for a documentary. The criminal charges carried a prison sentence of up to 30 years.

Nishay Sanan, the Chicago-based attorney defending him on those cases, said by phone that McAfee "will always be remembered as a fighter."

"He tried to love this country but the U.S. government made his existence impossible," Sanan said. "They tried to erase him, but they failed."

Born in England's Gloucestershire in 1945 as John David McAfee, he moved to Virginia as a child and grew up troubled, with a father who "beat him mercilessly" and killed himself with McAfee's shotgun when the boy was 15, said Steve Morgan, who spent time with McAfee in Alabama in 2016 to talk about his life for a biography he'd been contracted to write. Morgan is also the founder of market research firm Cybersecurity Ventures.

"He told me his father never showed him an ounce of affection," Morgan said, adding that recounting his father's death was the only time during their long meeting that McAfee cried.

While McAfee's tech legacy may have been overshadowed in recent years by his tumultuous life, Morgan said he sees his most lasting impact as a software and security pioneer.

"I think that's how ultimately he really most like to be remembered. I think a lot of people will remember him as a very troubled soul. Some people will remember him as a criminal. It depends on your age and your exposure to him," Morgan said.

McAfee founded his eponymous company in 1987. At the time, Morgan said, he was operating a BBS, a bulletin board system that served as a precursor to the World Wide Web and working with his brother-in-law. When the first major computer virus, called "Brain," hit in 1986, "John instantly dialed up a programmer he knew and said, there's a big opportunity. We need to do something. You know, we want to write some code to combat this virus," Morgan said. He called the program VirusScan and the company McAfee Associates.

"He was a true pioneer, not just as a security technologist but as one of the first companies to distribute software over the internet," Morgan said.

California chipmaker Intel, which bought McAfee's company in 2011 for \$7.68 billion, for a time sought

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 35 of 70

to dissociate the brand from its controversial founder by folding it into its larger cybersecurity division. But the rebranding was short-lived, and Intel in 2016 spun out the cybersecurity unit into a new company called McAfee.

In the software industry, McAfee's claim to fame was that he offered the first all-in-one virus scanner, said Vesselin Bontchev, a Bulgarian computer scientist and an early antivirus researcher. Prior to that, said Bontchev, researchers would only scan for one virus at a time. But there were only about a dozen computer viruses back then.

"Technologically, as a scanner, it wasn't anything outstanding. It was just the general idea that was good. Not the implementation," said Bontchev, a senior researcher at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Bontchev said McAfee was "a peculiar guy," even back then. He said he wrote McAfee asking for a part-time job about the time the Soviet Union was breaking up so he could work on a post-doctoral dissertation in the U.S.

In response, McAfee told Bontchev in a letter that the Bulgarian was believed to be a Soviet agent so "they cannot work with me," he said. "This is a really bizarre way to say no to somebody who is asking for a job."

The two later met in the U.S. at the annual Virus Bulletin conference, said Bontchev. "I don't think he was a typical American. He was just weird."

McAfee twice made long-shot runs for the U.S. presidency and was a participant in Libertarian Party presidential debates in 2016. He dabbled in yoga, ultralight aircraft and the production of herbal medications.

In 2012 he was wanted for questioning in connection with the death of Gregory Viant Faull, who was shot to death in early November 2012 on the island in Belize where both men lived.

McAfee told AP at the time that he was being persecuted by the Belizean government. Belizean police denied that, saying they were simply investigating a crime about which McAfee may have had information. Then-Prime Minister Dean Barrow expressed doubts about McAfee's mental state, saying, "I don't want to be unkind to the gentleman, but I believe he is extremely paranoid, even bonkers."

A Florida court ordered McAfee in 2019 to pay \$25 million to Faull's estate in a wrongful death claim. He refused to pay it, writing in a statement posted on Twitter that he has "not responded to a single one of my 37 lawsuits for the past 11 years." He claimed to have no assets, writing that the order was a "mute point" — an apparent misspelling of "moot."

In July of that year he was released from detention in the Dominican Republic after he and five others were suspected of traveling on a yacht carrying high-caliber weapons, ammunition and military-style gear.

Wired Magazine reporter Joshua Davis spent six months investigating McAfee's tumultuous life in 2012, when he was living in Belize and being sought for questioning in connection with his neighbor's murder. He described watching as McAfee took out a pistol to illustrate a point.

"Let's do this one more time," he says, and puts it to his head," Davies wrote. "Another round of Russian roulette. Just as before, he pulls the trigger repeatedly, the cylinder rotates, the hammer comes down, and nothing happens. 'It is a real gun. It has a real bullet in one chamber,' he says. And yet, he points out, my assumptions have somehow proven faulty. I'm missing something."

Western drought brings another woe: voracious grasshoppers

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — A punishing drought in the U.S. West is drying up waterways, sparking wildfires and leaving farmers scrambling for water. Next up: a plague of voracious grasshoppers.

Federal agriculture officials are launching what could become their largest grasshopper-killing campaign since the 1980s amid an outbreak of the drought-loving insects that cattle ranchers fear will strip bare public and private rangelands.

In central Montana's Phillips County, more than 50 miles (80 kilometers) from the nearest town, Frank Wiederrick said large numbers of grasshoppers started showing up on prairie surrounding his ranch in recent days. Already they're beginning to denude trees around his house.

"They're everywhere," Wiederrick said. "Drought and grasshoppers go together and they are cleaning

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 36 of 70

us out.”

Grasshoppers thrive in warm, dry weather, and populations already were up last year, setting the stage for an even bigger outbreak in 2021. Such outbreaks could become more common as climate change shifts rainfall patterns, scientists said.

To blunt the grasshoppers’ economic damage, the U.S. Department of Agriculture this week began aerial spraying of the pesticide diflufenzuron to kill grasshopper nymphs before they develop into adults. Approximately 3,000 square miles (7,700 square kilometers) in Montana are expected to be sprayed, roughly twice the size of Rhode Island.

Agriculture officials had seen this year’s infestation coming, after a 2020 survey found dense concentrations of adult grasshoppers across about 55,000 square miles (141,000 square kilometers) in the West. A 2021 grasshopper “hazard map” shows densities of at least 15 insects per square yard (meter) in large areas of Montana, Wyoming and Oregon and portions of Idaho, Arizona, Colorado and Nebraska.

Left unaddressed, federal officials said the agricultural damage from grasshoppers could become so severe it could drive up beef and crop prices.

The program’s scale has alarmed environmentalists who say widespread spraying will kill numerous insects, including spiders and other grasshopper predators as well as struggling species such as monarch butterflies. They’re also concerned the pesticides could ruin organic farms adjacent to spray zones.

“We’re talking about natural areas being sprayed, this is not cropland,” said Sharon Selvaggio, a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist now with the Xerces Society, a conservation group focused on insects.

Government officials say they will spray pesticides in low concentrations and reduce the area treated by alternately spraying a strip of rangeland, then skipping the next strip. The intent is to kill grasshoppers passing between strips while sparing other insects that don’t move as far.

If spraying is delayed and grasshoppers grow larger and more resilient, federal officials could resort to two more toxic pesticides — carbaryl and malathion, according to government documents.

Selvaggio said pesticides could drift into areas not being targeted and kill beneficial insects such as bees that pollinate crops. “The toxicity is more than enough to kill bees,” she said. “This is not adequate protection.”

Organic farmers are divided on spraying. Some are concerned about losing their organic certification for years if they inadvertently get pesticides on their crops, while others are willing to tolerate spraying out of deference to their neighbors’ problems, said Jamie Ryan Lockman, director of Organic Montana.

The trade group isn’t going to challenge the spraying but wants organic farmers protected and for the government to research alternatives to chemicals for future outbreaks.

As this year’s crop of grasshoppers emerges, they’re starting to compete with cattle for food in arid eastern Montana, where single ranches can sprawl over thousands of acres (hectares) of private and public rangeland.

The grasshoppers start eating tender plants first, then move on to fully-grown plants and the seed heads of grain crops, killing them, said Marko Manoukian, a Montana State University agriculture extension agent in Phillips County. Farmers can collect insurance on damaged crops, whereas ranchers have no recourse when the grasshoppers remove vegetation from public lands.

“They are competing against our food supplies,” said Manoukian.

A typical infestation can remove 20% of forage from the range and have a \$900 million impact, according to a 2012 University of Wyoming study cited by federal officials.

At his ranch, not far from the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, Frank Wiederrick is preparing to sell up to 70% of his cows this summer because he fears they won’t have enough feed.

The federal government’s grasshopper program dates to the 1930s, when infestations covered millions of acres (hectares) in 17 western states. After locally-led efforts failed, Congress put the agriculture department in charge of controlling the insects on federal rangeland.

The last outbreak on a scale comparable to this year lasted from 1986 to 1988. Almost 20 million acres (8 million hectares) were treated with 1.3 million gallons (5 million liters) of malathion, according to researchers.

The grasshoppers targeted include roughly a dozen of the hundreds of native species in the West. Drought benefits them in part because it lessens exposure of grasshopper eggs to deadly parasites that need moisture, said Chelse Prather, a University of Dayton insect ecologist.

This year's outbreak will peak in roughly two months, when the insects reach 2 to 3 inches (5 to 7.6 centimeters) in length and become so prevalent they'll start to eat more plant matter than cattle can, Prather said.

The grasshoppers start to die down when there's nothing left to eat, Prather said, "but at that point they've probably already ... laid their eggs for next year."

Bipartisan senators reach tentative plan on infrastructure

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bipartisan group of senators reached a tentative framework on a \$953 billion infrastructure deal Wednesday ahead of a crucial meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House.

Biden's top aides met with senators for back-to-back meetings on Capitol Hill and later huddled with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer as the president reaches for a signature domestic achievement with his sweeping \$4 trillion infrastructure plans. While the plan from the group of 21 senators is far less, with \$559 billion in new spending, it would launch a broader process this summer that could open the door to Biden's big proposals.

"We're very excited about the prospect of a bipartisan agreement," Pelosi said.

The group of senators, Republicans and Democrats, had been narrowing on a smaller but still sizable \$1 trillion package of road, highway and other traditional infrastructure projects. The tentative framework is now \$20 billion less after a shift in funds for broadband internet, according to details from a person familiar with the proposal who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations. They have struggled over how to pay for the new spending.

Biden invited members from the group of senators to the White House on Thursday.

"The group made progress towards an outline of a potential agreement, and the President has invited the group to come to the White House tomorrow to discuss this in person," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said late Wednesday.

One member of the group, Republican Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, said it was time for the group to do outreach to get more senators on board with their plan.

"In good faith, we tried to get there. We didn't agree on everything, but we were able to get there," Portman told reporters on Capitol Hill as he left an evening meeting with the other senators and White House team.

Biden has sought \$1.7 trillion in his American Jobs Plan, part of nearly \$4 trillion in broad infrastructure spending on roads, bridges and broadband internet but also the so-called care economy of child care centers, hospitals and elder care.

With Republicans opposed to Biden's proposed corporate tax rate increase, from 21% to 28%, the group has looked at other ways to raise revenue. Biden rejected their idea to allow gas taxes paid at the pump to rise with inflation, viewing it as a financial burden on American drivers.

Psaki said the senior staff to the president had two productive meetings with the bipartisan group at the Capitol. The White House team was huddled late into the evening with the Democratic leaders.

The White House said Pelosi and Schumer and the top administration aides agreed on Biden's goal of infrastructure investments without raising taxes on anyone who makes under \$400,000.

According to a White House readout of the meeting, the leaders talked with Budget Acting Director Shalanda Young, National Economic Council Director Brian Deese and Domestic Policy Council Director Susan Rice, and they discussed the two-track approach ahead — a reference to the smaller bipartisan deal emerging from the group alongside a more sweeping plan of Democratic priorities that Congress is now drafting.

Schumer said the leaders "support the concepts" they have heard from the bipartisan negotiations.

The Democratic leaders also insisted on the two-part process ahead, starting with initial votes in July to consider the bipartisan deal and to launch the lengthy procedure for the Democrats' proposal, now drafted at nearly \$6 trillion.

The Democrats' bigger proposal would run through the budget reconciliation process, which would allow passage of Biden's priorities by majority vote, without the need for support from Republicans to overcome the Senate's 60-vote threshold. It would require multiple rounds of voting that are likely to extend into fall.

Schumer said, "One can't be done without the other."

That's a signal to both parties of the road ahead. Liberal Democrats have been wary of the bipartisan effort because they see it as insufficient and worry it will take the place of Biden's bigger plan. Republicans are also skeptical of passing a bipartisan bill only to be faced with an even bigger Democratic plan.

"We got our framework. We're going to the White House," Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., told reporters. "We wouldn't be going to the White House if we didn't think it has broad-based support."

Britney Spears tells judge: 'I want my life back'

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — After 13 years of near silence in the conservatorship that controls her life and money, Britney Spears passionately told a judge Wednesday that she wants to end the "abusive" case that has made her feel demoralized and enslaved.

Speaking in open court for the first time in the case, Spears condemned her father and others who control the conservatorship, which she said has compelled her to use birth control and take other medications against her will, and prevented her from getting married or having another child.

"This conservatorship is doing me way more harm than good," the 39-year-old Spears said. "I deserve to have a life."

She spoke fast and sprinkled profanity into the written speech that lasted more than 20 minutes as her parents, fans and journalists listened to an audio livestream. Many of the details Spears revealed have been carefully guarded by the court for years.

Spears told Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Brenda Penny that "I want to end this conservatorship without being evaluated."

Penny thanked the pop star for her "courageous" words but made no rulings. A long legal process is likely before any decision is made on terminating the conservatorship.

Spears said she wants to marry her boyfriend Sam Asghari and have a baby with him, but she is not allowed to even drive with him.

"All I want is to own my money and for this to end and for my boyfriend to be able to drive me in his (expletive) car," Spears said.

"I truly believe this conservatorship is abusive," Spears said, adding at another point, "I want my life back."

When an attorney representing her co-conservator said the hearing and transcript should be kept sealed if private medical information was to be revealed, Spears shouted her down, saying her words should be public.

"They've done a good job at exploiting my life," Spears said, "so I feel like it should be an open court hearing and they should listen and hear what I have to say."

She went on to say she was forced to take lithium — which made her feel "drunk" — after rehearsals broke down for a Vegas residency in 2019, which was subsequently canceled.

She said all she had done was disagree with one part of the show's choreography.

"I'm not here to be anyone's slave," Spears said. "I can say no to a dance move."

"Not only did my family not do a goddamn thing, my dad was all for it," Spears said.

She accused her father of relishing his power over her, as he showed when she failed a series of psychological tests in 2019 and forced her to go into a mental hospital.

"I cried on the phone for an hour, and he loved every minute of it," Spears said. "The control he had over someone as powerful as me, as he loved the control to hurt his own daughter 100,000%."

Spears said she felt forced to do the Las Vegas residency on the heels of a tour, and felt like a great weight was lifted when it was canceled. She has not performed or recorded since.

Spears also said several nurses often watch her every move, not even letting her change her clothes in private.

Vivian Thoreen, attorney for Spears' father, James Spears, gave a brief statement on his behalf after conferring with him during a recess.

"He is sorry to see his daughter suffering and in so much pain," Thoreen said. "Mr. Spears loves his daughter, and misses her very much."

James Spears serves as co-conservator of his daughter's finances, and also had control of her life decisions for most of the conservatorship. He currently serves as co-conservator of her finances.

Britney Spears said her years-long public silence has falsely created the impression that she approved of her circumstances.

"I've lied and told the whole world, 'I'm OK, I'm happy,'" she said. "I've been in denial, I've been in shock. I am traumatized."

More than 100 fans from the so called #FreeBritney movement gathered outside the courthouse before the hearing, holding signs that read "Free Britney now!" and "Get out of Britney's life!"

Fan Marissa Cooper was inside the courtroom, and cried and occasionally clapped during the remarks.

"It was insane," Cooper said outside court. "Everyone that's been following this has been called crazy since the beginning, and conspiracy theorists, so it just feels really really good to actually hear it from her."

Spears said she has not felt heard in any of her previous appearances before the court, all of which were sealed from the public.

Her court-appointed attorney, Samuel Ingham III, said he made no attempt to "control, or filter, or edit" his client's words. He said Spears has not officially asked him to file a petition to end the conservatorship.

Spears said she had done research that showed her conservatorship could be ended without further evaluation of her. But under California law, the burden would be on her to prove she is competent to manage her own affairs, and an intensive investigation and evaluation is probably inevitable before it can come to an end.

The conservatorship was put in place as she underwent a mental health crisis in 2008. She has credited its initial establishment with saving her from financial ruin and keeping her a top flight pop star.

Her father and his attorneys have emphasized that she and her fortune, which court records put at more than \$50 million, remain vulnerable to fraud and manipulation. Under the law, the burden would be on Spears to prove she is competent before the case could end.

Britney Spears' ex-boyfriend Justin Timberlake was among many who expressed outrage at her revelations.

"What's happening to her is just not right," Timberlake tweeted. "No woman should ever be restricted from making decisions about her own body."

Bodies of two young girls pulled from South Florida canal

LAUDERHILL, Fla. (AP) — Police are looking into reports that the mother of two young girls found dead in a South Florida canal was offering to baptize people in the canal a day earlier.

Lauderhill police Lt. Mike Bigwood identified the sisters during a Wednesday evening news conference as 7-year-old Daysha Hogan and 9-year-old Destiny Hogan. Investigators identified the girls' mother, Tinessa Hogan, as a possible person of interest. She has been taken into custody, but no criminal charges have been filed.

Destiny's body was spotted Tuesday afternoon outside a condominium complex in Lauderhill, which is near Fort Lauderdale. Daysha's body was found just before 9 p.m., not far from where the first body was located.

Bigwood confirmed that the family had lived in the area where the bodies were found. There were no records of child welfare workers responding to the home.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 40 of 70

At first, authorities did not suspect foul play because the first girl showed no signs of trauma. After the first body was found, detectives walked the length of the canal that runs behind the Habitat II Condominiums, but did not find anything else. Then, at 8:45 p.m., police received a 911 call from someone who spotted the second child's body.

The first girl was wearing short jean shorts and a grey T-shirt with the word, "Dance" in rainbow-colored lettering, police said. The second girl was wearing a tan top and flowered pajama-style bottoms, police said.

On Tuesday afternoon, detectives knocked on doors in the neighborhood, asking neighbors for help. Several residents told investigators about a woman, later identified as Tinessa Hogan, who was offering to baptize people in the canal on Monday. The girls were last seen near the canal with their mother Monday evening, Bigwood said.

Lawna Johnson, 51, told the SunSentinel she was sitting near the canal Tuesday when she spotted the body in the water.

"It's just upsetting," she said. "I see things on TV; I ain't never seen something real like that."

Amon Hilt, who is the father of three daughters, told WSVN the second girl's body was found after he arrived home Tuesday night.

"I had came from my friend's house, and my other friend had said, 'Hey man, there's a body in the lake. I was like, 'Yeah, I heard about it.' He was like, 'No, there's a body in the lake right now,'" Hilt told the television station.

He said one of his daughters has a shirt like the second child found was wearing.

"I have three little girls and it's tragic. I ran upstairs real quick and I hugged them," he said.

Witnesses: Airstrike in Ethiopia's Tigray kills more than 50

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — An airstrike hit a busy market in Ethiopia's northern Tigray village of Togoga on Tuesday and killed at least 51 people, according to health workers who said soldiers blocked medical teams from traveling to the scene.

An official with Tigray's health bureau told The Associated Press that more than 100 other people were wounded, more than 50 seriously, and at least 33 people were still missing. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of concerns about retaliation.

The alleged airstrike comes amid some of the fiercest fighting in the Tigray region since the conflict began in November as Ethiopian forces supported by those from neighboring Eritrea pursue Tigray's former leaders. A military spokesman and the spokeswoman for Ethiopia's prime minister, Billene Seyoum, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Wounded patients being treated at Ayder hospital in the regional capital, Mekele, told doctors and a nurse that a plane dropped a bomb on Togoga's marketplace. The patients included a 2-year-old child with "abdominal trauma" and a 6-year-old, the nurse said. An ambulance carrying a wounded baby to Mekele, almost 60 kilometers (37 miles) away by road, was blocked for two hours and the baby died on the way, the nurse added, speaking on condition of anonymity because of concerns about retaliation.

Hailu Kebede, foreign affairs head for the Salsay Woyane Tigray opposition party and who comes from Togoga, told the AP that one fleeing witness to the attack had counted more than 30 bodies in the remote village that's linked to Mekele in part by challenging stretches of dirt roads.

"It was horrific," said a staffer with an international aid group who told the AP he had spoken with a colleague and others at the scene. "We don't know if the jets were coming from Ethiopia or Eritrea. They are still looking for bodies by hand."

On Tuesday afternoon, a convoy of ambulances attempting to reach Togoga, about 25 kilometers (15 miles) west of Mekele, was turned back by soldiers near Tukul, the health workers said. Several more ambulances were turned back later in the day and on Wednesday morning, but one group of medical workers reached the site on Tuesday evening via a different route.

"We have been asking, but until now we didn't get permission to go, so we don't know how many people are dead," said one of the doctors in Mekele.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 41 of 70

Another doctor said the Red Cross ambulance he was traveling in on Tuesday while trying to reach the scene was shot at twice by Ethiopian soldiers, who held his team for 45 minutes before ordering them back to Mekele.

"We are not allowed to go," he said. "They told us whoever goes, they are helping the troops of the TPLF."

The TPLF refers to the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which governed Tigray until it was ousted by a federal government offensive in November. The subsequent fighting has killed thousands and forced more than 2 million people from their homes.

More than 25 of the wounded finally reached Ayder hospital later on Wednesday, a day after the airstrike, the regional health official said.

While the United Nations has said all sides have been accused of abuses in the Tigray conflict, Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers have been repeatedly accused by witnesses of looting and destroying health centers across the Tigray region and denying civilians access to care.

The European Union "strongly condemns the deliberate targeting of civilians" in Togoga, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Wednesday, calling it the latest in a "horrific series" of abuses committed in Tigray. He again called for an immediate cease-fire and urged the international community "to wake up and take action."

This month, humanitarian agencies warned that 350,000 people in Tigray are facing famine. Aid workers have said they have been repeatedly denied access to several parts of the region by soldiers.

The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed says it has nearly defeated the rebels. But forces loyal to the TPLF recently announced an offensive in parts of Tigray and have claimed a string of victories.

On Wednesday one of the former Tigray leaders, Getachew Reda, asserted that Tigray forces had shot down a C-130 transport plane carrying explosives, military officers and "Eritrean camouflage uniforms." The claim could not immediately be verified.

A resident in Adigrat, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of Mekele, said a group of Tigrayan fighters briefly entered the town on Tuesday, although he said it had since been retaken by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. He said federal police had since been seen beating people in the center of the town.

"Everybody is staying at home, there is no movement in the town," he said.

Renewed fighting was also reported in Edaga Hamus and Wukro, two towns that sit on the main road to Mekele.

The reports came as Ethiopia held federal and regional elections on Monday. The vote was peaceful in most parts of the country, although there was no voting in Tigray.

The vote was delayed last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, heightening tensions between the federal government and the TPLF, which went ahead with its own regional election in September.

Border Patrol chief who supported Trump's wall is forced out

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

CALEXICO, Calif. (AP) — The chief of the U.S. Border Patrol was forced out of his job Wednesday, after less than two years in a position that lies in the crosshairs of polarizing political debate.

Rodney Scott wrote to agents that he will be reassigned, saying he "will continue working hard to support you over the next several weeks to ensure a smooth transition."

Scott told top agency officials during a call to discuss budgets and other issues that he had 60 days to decide whether to be reassigned or retire, according to an official with direct knowledge of the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity because it was not intended for public release.

He said he was undecided. Raul Ortiz, Scott's deputy, will serve as interim chief, Scott told officials on the call.

Scott, a career official, was appointed head of the border agency in January 2020 and enthusiastically embraced then-President Donald Trump's policies, particularly on building a U.S.-Mexico border wall. President Joe Biden has canceled wall construction, one of his predecessor's top priorities.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Border Patrol, did not immediately respond

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 42 of 70

to a request for comment. Scott hasn't responded to a text or phone message.

It isn't the first time a Border Patrol chief has left with a change in presidential administration. Trump ousted Mark Morgan, a former FBI agent and the first outsider to lead the agency in its 97-year history, during his first week in office. It came less than a year after Morgan took the job during the Obama administration.

After his ouster, Morgan became a familiar face on cable television, fiercely defending Trump's border policies and getting back in the president's good graces before Trump brought him back to the administration. As acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Morgan appointed Scott to lead the Border Patrol.

The head of the Border Patrol leads an agency of nearly 20,000 agents, is appointed by the CBP commissioner and not subject to Senate confirmation. In April, Biden nominated Chris Magnus, the police chief of Tucson, Arizona, to lead the Border Patrol's parent agency.

Scott, who spent much of his career in San Diego, became an agent in 1992 when San Diego was by far the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. Traffic plummeted after the government dramatically increased enforcement there, but critics note the effort pushed people to remote parts of California and Arizona, where thousands have died in the heat.

San Diego was also where wall construction began in the 1990s, which shaped Scott's belief that barriers work.

"It wasn't, 'Do it in San Diego and stop,'" he told The Associated Press in a 2019 interview. "It was, 'Let's prove what works and then let's copy it on the southwest border so we can improve security for the whole United States.'"

When Scott was named San Diego sector chief in 2017, he devoted most of his remarks at a change-of-command ceremony to how the area evolved from the early 1990s. He shared the same story, in abbreviated form, with Trump on live television when the president toured border wall prototypes four months later. Trump often cited San Diego as a model of what he hoped to achieve along the border.

Scott refused to fall in line with a Biden administration directive to stop using terms like "illegal alien" in favor of descriptions like "migrant."

His relatively short tenure as chief was largely dominated by COVID-19 and a pandemic-related ban on seeking asylum that was introduced in March 2020 and remains in place.

U.S. authorities recorded more than 180,000 encounters on the Mexican border in May, the most since March 2000. But the numbers were boosted by the ban, which has encouraged repeat attempts to cross because getting caught carries no legal consequences.

Biden has exempted unaccompanied children, allowing them to pursue humanitarian protection in U.S. immigration courts. Nearly 19,000 unaccompanied children were picked up along the border in March, by far the highest month on record. April was second highest and May was third highest.

Teamsters aims to step up efforts to unionize Amazon workers

By JOSEPH PISANI AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a union that represents 1.4 million workers, is setting its sights on Amazon.

On Thursday, it will vote on whether to make organizing Amazon workers its main priority. The Teamsters accuse the nation's second-largest private employer of exploiting employees by paying them low wages, pushing them to work at fast speeds and offering no job security.

"There is no clearer example of how America is failing the working class than Amazon," says the resolution that will be voted on by representatives from 500 Teamsters local unions Thursday.

The resolution is expected to be approved and would allow the Teamsters to "fully fund and support" efforts to unionize Amazon workers and create a division to aid them and "protect the standards in our industries from the existential threat that is Amazon." It declined to say how much money it will spend on the efforts.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 43 of 70

Any attempt to unionize Amazon is likely to be an uphill battle. None has been successful in the company's 26-year history, including the most recent one at an Alabama warehouse where workers overwhelmingly voted against joining a union.

But the Teamsters said it will try a different strategy. Randy Korgan, the Teamsters' National Director for Amazon, wrote in Salon earlier this month that unionizing one facility at a time doesn't work because companies like Amazon have the money and legal resources to squash those efforts from the inside. Instead, Korgan wrote that organizing Amazon workers will take "shop-floor militancy," such as strikes in warehouses and in city streets.

Amazon didn't respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

The online shopping behemoth had pushed hard against unionizing efforts at the warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. Amazon argued that it paid workers at least \$15 an hour and already offered the benefits unions want. It hung anti-union signs throughout the warehouse, including inside bathroom stalls, and held mandatory meetings to convince workers why the union is a bad idea, according to one worker who testified at a Senate hearing.

When the votes were counted in April, nearly 71% of the more than 2,500 valid votes counted rejected a union.

The organizing in Bessemer was led by the New York-based Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which represents 100,000 workers at poultry plants; cereal and soda bottling facilities; and retailers such as Macy's and H&M.

The Teamsters is much larger. The union has been around since the early 1900s when goods were delivered by horse-drawn wagons. It now represents 1.4 million truckers, UPS employees and other types of workers, including nurses and warehouse mechanics.

"They're a strong, successful union," said Alex Colvin, the dean of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, who added the Amazon workers reflect the type of members it already represents. "They're a formidable adversary for Amazon to face."

The Teamsters is targeting workers in Amazon's fast-growing delivery network, such as drivers and warehouse workers who pack and ship orders. In the past couple of years, Seattle-based Amazon has been working to deliver most of its packages itself and rely less on UPS, the U.S. Postal Service and other carriers.

It has built several package-sorting hubs at airports, opened warehouses closer to where shoppers live and launched a program that lets contractors start businesses delivering packages in vans stamped with the Amazon logo. In January, it bought 11 jets that it plans to use to deliver orders to shoppers faster.

The Teamsters said in its resolution that Amazon's delivery network has become a dominate force in the logistics industry in a short amount of time and the way it treats workers could threaten the working standards it has set at UPS and at other parcel, freight and delivery companies.

Biden targets law-breaking gun dealers in anti-crime plan

By COLLEEN LONG and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced new efforts Wednesday to stem a rising national tide of violent crime, declaring the federal government is "taking on the bad actors doing bad things to our communities." But questions persist about how effective the efforts can be in what could be a turbulent summer.

Crime rates have risen after plummeting during the initial months of the coronavirus pandemic, creating economic hardship and anxiety. Biden's plan focuses on providing money to cities that need more police, offering community support and most of all cracking down on gun violence and those supplying illegal firearms.

"These merchants of death are breaking the law for profit," Biden said. "If you willfully sell a gun to someone who's prohibited, my message to you is this: We'll find you and we'll seek your license to sell guns. We'll make sure you can't sell death and mayhem on our streets."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 44 of 70

But there are also tricky politics at play, and Biden's plan shows how few options the Democratic president has on the issue.

The steps he outlined are aimed at going hard after gun dealers who break federal law and establishing strike forces in several cities to help stop weapons trafficking. He also said he would seek more money for the agency that tracks the nation's guns.

But the rest of his new strategy boils down mostly to suggestions for beleaguered localities. He's encouraging cities to invest some of their COVID-19 relief funds into policing and pushing alternative crime reduction steps such as increased community support and summer jobs for teenagers — often both targets and perpetrators of violence.

But it's voluntary.

The president has been clear that he is opposed to the "defund the police" movement, which has been effectively used against other Democrats to cast them as anti-law enforcement.

"This is not a time to turn our backs on law enforcement," said Biden, who noted that "crime historically rises during the summer, and as we emerge from this pandemic the traditional summer spike may be even more pronounced than it usually would be."

But he's also is trying to boost progressives' efforts to reform policing, following a year of demonstrations and public anguish sparked by the killing by police of George Floyd and other Black people across the country. While combating crime and overhauling the police don't have to be at odds, the two efforts are increasingly billed that way.

Biden will try to do both at once. But Republicans quickly tried to portray his measures as government overreach and linked them to efforts to rein in policing.

"I think a lot of it ties back to this whole 'defund the police' movement and some of the disruption we had in civil society last year," Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said on Fox News. "And I think that's part of, when you start undermining that basic foundation, you start breaking apart the bonds that hold us together and that's why you see an increase in crime."

Biden announced a "zero tolerance" policy that would give no leeway to gun dealers who fail to comply with federal law — their licenses to sell would be revoked on a first offense.

The president has already announced a half-dozen executive actions on gun control, including going after "ghost guns," homemade firearms that lack serial numbers for tracking and often are purchased without background checks.

A number of anti-crime and gun safety groups, including the Brady Campaign and Everytown for Gun Safety, applauded the administration's efforts.

"The president is helping start a much-needed conversation about reducing violent crime. A greater investment in community interventions will help take a bite out of violent crime," said Paul DePonte, head of the National Crime Prevention Council. "Strategies that increase public engagement in public safety are proven crime stoppers. Putting more police officers who are trained and certified in crime prevention on the streets of our communities makes sense."

Legislation to expand background checks has so far stalled in the Senate after the House passed it in March, even though Majority Leader Chuck Schumer vowed then that the Senate would hold a vote on the bill.

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy has been negotiating for weeks with individual Republicans to see if there is legislation that could win enough votes for passage. One option is to narrow the scope of the House bill and expand background checks only to commercial sales like gun shows. Most Republicans oppose regulating private sales between individuals, as the House bill would do, but some have said they would support tougher regulation of gun shows.

Biden will seek increased transparency on gun data and better coordination among states, and he will push Congress for more money for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the agency responsible for enforcing federal gun laws and regulating gun dealers. The Justice Department is also launching strike forces in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., to help take down illegal gun traffickers.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 45 of 70

Police officials have said they are struggling with increasing crime and continued tensions between police and communities; some say their calls for support aren't answered as they take the blame for the spike. Biden noted that \$350 billion of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package can be used by cities to hire law enforcement officers, pay overtime, prosecute gun traffickers and invest in technology to make law enforcement more efficient.

While crime is rising — homicides and shootings are up from the same period last year in Chicago; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Portland, Oregon; Baltimore; Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Houston — violent crime overall remains lower than it was a decade ago or even five years ago. Most violent crimes plummeted during the first six months of the coronavirus pandemic, as people stayed indoors and away from others, then started creeping up last summer.

It all comes against the backdrop of the national debate on policing and racism — and as a police reform bill is being crafted in Congress.

As a senator, Biden wrote several major anti-crime packages, including a 1994 bill that contained provisions now viewed by some as an overreaction to the crime spikes in the 1980s and 1990s. Critics say those bills helped lead to mass incarceration of Black Americans, and Biden's involvement became an issue in his 2020 campaign.

Biden has expressed second thoughts about some aspects of the legislation. But he and his allies still point to the law's provisions to address domestic violence, ban assault weapons and finance community policing.

Michigan Senate GOP probe: No systemic fraud in election

By DAVID EGGERT Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — State Senate Republicans who investigated Michigan's 2020 presidential election for months concluded there was no widespread or systemic fraud and urged the state attorney general to consider probing people who have made baseless allegations about the results in Antrim County to raise money or publicity "for their own ends."

The GOP-led state Senate Oversight Committee said in a 55-page report released Wednesday that citizens should be confident that the election's outcome represents the "true results." Democrat Joe Biden defeated then-President Donald Trump by about 155,000 votes, or 2.8 percentage points, in the battleground state.

Trump and his allies have pushed debunked conspiracy theories and unfounded information about voter fraud.

"The committee strongly recommends citizens use a critical eye and ear toward those who have pushed demonstrably false theories for their own personal gain," the panel wrote days after Republican activists requested an Arizona-style "forensic" audit of the election.

The committee's three Republicans did recommend legislation to close "real vulnerabilities" in future elections. Election-related bills are pending in the GOP-controlled Legislature, including proposed tougher photo ID rules that the Senate passed last week and the House amended and approved Wednesday. But Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer will veto them if they reach her desk.

Election night results in northern Michigan's rural Antrim County, which has roughly 23,000 residents, initially erroneously showed a local victory for Biden over Trump. But it was attributed to human error, not any problems with machines, and corrected. A hand recount turned up no signs of shenanigans.

"We will review the report in its entirety in order to determine if a criminal investigation is appropriate," Lynsey Mukomel, spokeswoman for Attorney General Dana Nessel, said of the call to probe individuals who have lied about what happened in Antrim.

People mentioned in the report include Mike Lindell, the MyPillow creator-turned-conspiracy peddler; lawyer Matthew DePerno, who unsuccessfully sued the county on behalf of a resident, and ex-state Sen. Patrick Colbeck. The report also criticized Texas-based Allied Security Operations Group, a company that worked with Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani to raise baseless allegations of fraud and counting errors.

The report dismissed various allegations — that many dead people voted, that hundreds of thousands of

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 46 of 70

unsolicited absentee ballots were mailed to Michigan voters, that absentee ballots were counted multiple times, that tens of thousands of fraudulent absentee ballots were “dumped” at Detroit’s counting center after the polls closed. Those ballots had been submitted throughout Election Day in drop boxes, in the mail and at clerk’s offices.

The panel’s Republicans recommended that drop boxes not be used or be closed sooner than 8 p.m. on election night so that processing and tabulating the ballots they contain do not extend long into the night. Democrats have said the move would disenfranchise some voters.

“The committee’s report goes into considerable detail ... and I hope the public is reassured by the security and protections already in place, motivated to support necessary reforms to make it better and grateful for our fellow citizens who do the hard work of conducting our elections,” said Sen. Ed McBroom, a Vulcan Republican who chairs the panel. Other recommendations include uniform signature-verification standards, the authorization of counting to begin before Election Day and the prohibition of unsolicited mailings of absentee ballot applications by the secretary of state.

The lone Democrat on the committee, Sen. Jeff Irwin of Ann Arbor, noted that its two other members had been among 11 GOP senators who asked Congress to investigate “credible” allegations of election misconduct on Jan. 4, two days before it met to certify Biden’s win amid the deadly insurrection by Trump supporters at the Capitol.

“It is unfortunate that the Michigan Legislature participated in the circus, parading witnesses who were not credible or who pressed obvious falsehoods in order to promote the lie that Michigan’s results were tainted,” he said. “But it is my fervent hope that we, as a legislative body, can finally focus our energy on getting help out to our residents who need it most after such a tumultuous year for many due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Brazil’s environment minister resigns amid criticism, probes

By DAVID BILLER and MARCELO SILVA DE SOUSA Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazilian Environment Minister Ricardo Salles announced his resignation Wednesday, giving up his post amid sharp criticism of his tenure and two investigations into his actions involving allegedly illegal timber operations.

The move comes as talks with the U.S. government aimed at curbing Amazon deforestation have hit obstacles. Salles had insisted Brazil needs external financial support to take stronger action, while critics cautioned Washington to await concrete results before reaching any agreement with a Brazilian administration that has hobbled enforcement of environmental laws.

“I understand that Brazil this year and next, for its international and national agenda, needs a very strong union of interests and efforts and, so that can be done as smoothly as possible, I tendered my resignation to the president,” Salles told reporters at the presidential palace.

Salles and President Jair Bolsonaro have been outspoken supporters of development in the Amazon, which critics say has encouraged land grabbing and illegal mining in protected areas. As some foreign investors began expressing concern about surging deforestation, Bolsonaro’s administration received no rebuke from then U.S. President Donald Trump on his environmental policies.

On the campaign trail last year, U.S. President Joe Biden called on Brazil to curb Amazon deforestation in order to slow climate change, and this year his administration began talks with Salles’ ministry in an attempt to find solutions.

Preliminary data, based on satellite images, has shown year-on-year increases of Amazon deforestation for three straight months, most recently by 41% in May. The data is considered a reliable leading indicator for more complete calculations released at year end.

Brazilian activists said Salles’ departure was overdue.

Adriana Ramos, coordinator of the policy and legal program at the nonprofit Socioenvironmental Institute, said Salles’ tenure will be remembered by the loss of international confidence, an increase in emissions from deforestation and the dismantling of environmental controls.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 47 of 70

Márcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, a network of environmental groups, told The Associated Press that Salles' legacy is "the worst possible."

"There were two straight years of deforestation in the Amazon, fires in Brazil and invasions of public areas. He paralyzed the collection of environmental fines, persecuted inspectors and followed a path of environmental destruction in the country," Astrini said.

Talks between the Biden administration and Brazil's environment ministry are "paralyzed," Sen. Katia Abreu, who heads the Brazilian Senate's foreign relations committee, said in a statement Tuesday provided to AP. She said that reflects U.S. dissatisfaction and the need for changes by Brazil in order to reestablish dialogue.

The spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia, Tobias Bradford, said in a statement that the United States remains committed to partnering with Brazil to address climate change and that its stance regarding conversations with its government hasn't changed.

Neither Bradford, nor Brazil's environment and foreign ministries provided information regarding the date of the last meeting.

Environment ministry officials including Salles are under investigation for possibly facilitating the export of illegally cut timber. A separate probe is investigating whether Salles obstructed an operation to seize illegal timber. Salles has denied wrongdoing in both cases.

"It isn't possible for people to criminalize different opinions, points of views. Brazilian society needs that advance," Salles said Wednesday. "We experience a lot of objections over measures that were taken or planned, an attempt to characterize them as disrespecting laws or the constitution, which isn't true."

Speaking at an event Tuesday, Bolsonaro congratulated Salles and said his job was no easy task.

Astrini, of the Climate Observatory, and other environmental groups expressed skepticism that Salles' eventual replacement will usher in a change in policy.

"The true chief of environmental policy in Brazil is Bolsonaro. As we saw in other ministries, he is capable of changing a minister, but who orders policy is the president," Astrini said.

Calls for extension of eviction ban as new deadline looms

By ASHRAF KHALIL and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With one week to go before the nationwide ban on evictions expires, the White House is acknowledging that the emergency pandemic protection will have to end at some point. The trick is devising the right sort of "off-ramp" to make the transition without massive social upheaval.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that the separate bans on evictions for renters and mortgage holders were "always intended to be temporary."

Both will expire on June 30 unless extended. But Psaki would not say whether the administration was planning another extension. That decision, she said, lies with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which imposed the bans on the rationale that allowing people to lose their housing during a pandemic was an unacceptable public health risk.

Psaki said the decision on the moratorium "will be made by the CDC, based on public health conditions."

The White House, she said, "wouldn't get ahead of their assessment"

Psaki added that President Joe Biden "remains focused on ensuring that Americans who are struggling, through no fault of their own, have an off-ramp once it ends."

But even as the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic gradually recedes, there remains pressure on Biden to maintain the eviction moratorium for nonmedical reasons.

This week, dozens of members of Congress wrote to Biden and CDC Director Rochelle Walensky calling for the moratorium to be not only extended but also strengthened in some ways.

The letter, spearheaded by Democratic Reps. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Jimmy Gomez of California and Cori Bush of Missouri, called for an unspecified extension in order to allow the nearly \$47 billion in emergency rental assistance included in the American Rescue Plan to get into the hands of tenants.

Ending the assistance too abruptly, they said, would disproportionately hurt some of the same minority communities that were hit so hard by the virus itself. They also echoed many housing advocates by call-

ing for the moratorium's protections to be made automatic, requiring no special steps from the tenant in order to gain its protections.

"The impact of the federal moratorium cannot be understated, and the need to strengthen and extend it is an urgent matter of health, racial, and economic justice," the letter said.

Diane Yentel, president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, called an extension of the eviction ban "the right thing to do — morally, fiscally, politically, and as a continued public health measure."

But landlords, who have opposed the moratorium and challenged it in court, are against any extension. They have argued the focus should be on speeding up the distribution of rental assistance.

"With each passing month, we are at risk of losing an ever-increasing amount of rental housing — jeopardizing the availability of safe, sustainable and affordable housing for all Americans," Bob Pinnegar, the president and CEO of the National Apartment Association, said in an email interview. "The mounting housing affordability crisis is quickly becoming a housing affordability disaster fueled by flawed eviction moratoriums, which leave renters with insurmountable debt and housing providers holding the bag."

Calls grow to evacuate Afghans to Guam as US troops leave

By JULIE WATSON and BEN FOX Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — In the chaotic, final hours of the Vietnam War, the U.S. evacuated thousands of South Vietnamese who supported the American mission and were at risk under the communist government.

With U.S. and NATO forces facing a Sept. 11 deadline to leave Afghanistan, many are recalling that desperate, hasty exodus as they urge the Biden administration to evacuate thousands of Afghans who worked as interpreters or otherwise helped U.S. military operations there in the past two decades.

Despite unusual bipartisan support in Congress, the administration hasn't agreed to such a move, declining to publicly support something that could undermine security in the country as it unwinds a war that started after the 9/11 attacks.

"We have a moral obligation to protect our brave allies who put their lives on the line for us, and we've been working for months to engage the administration and make sure there's a plan, with few concrete results," Republican Rep. Peter Meijer of Michigan said during a House hearing last week.

Lawmakers have urged the administration to consider temporarily relocating Afghans who worked for American or NATO forces to a safe overseas location while their U.S. visas are processed. Some have suggested Guam, a U.S. territory that served a similar purpose after the Vietnam War. Kurdish refugees also were flown to the Pacific island in 1996 after the Gulf War.

Guam's governor recently wrote to President Joe Biden to say the territory was ready to help if needed.

The Biden administration for now is focusing on accelerating a special visa program for Afghans who helped U.S. operations and pouring resources into relieving the backlog.

"We are processing and getting people out at a record pace," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday. "We are working with Congress right now to streamline some of the requirements that slow this process down and we're doing the kind of extensive planning for potential evacuation, should that become necessary."

Members of Congress were expected to raise the issue Friday, when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani comes to Washington to meet with Biden and lawmakers.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the State Department's special representative for Afghanistan reconstruction, warned lawmakers in May that "the departure of all educated Afghans" would "signal panic" and hurt the morale of the country's security forces.

"This is a delicate, complicated balance that we have to keep," Khalilzad said.

Democratic Rep. Jason Crow of Colorado recently introduced legislation that would nearly double the number of visas available this year, to 8,000, and ease eligibility requirements.

But he said congressional action will not be quick enough or sufficient.

Even if the legislation passed immediately, the number of visas would fall far short of the estimated 18,000 Afghans waiting to be processed. That figure does not include their spouses and children, who

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 49 of 70

would bring the total to about 70,000 people.

And the average wait is more than three years. The process also has been hampered by the coronavirus pandemic, which led the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan to suspend visa interviews.

Crow, a former Army ranger who served in Afghanistan, said he prefers the government "evacuate our Afghan partners to a temporary evacuation site where we can safely conduct robust visa processing without threat to applicants' safety by the Taliban."

In a statement this month, the Taliban vowed not to attack those who worked for Western interests, urging Afghans to remain at home and warning their ranks against revenge killings.

Still, many Afghans are desperate for a visa, fearing violence not only from the Taliban but heavily armed warlords allied with the U.S. and seeing now as their last chance to leave Afghanistan.

The American withdrawal began May 1, when the number of U.S. troops was between 2,500 and 3,500, and could be completed by July 4. Some 7,000 NATO forces are set to leave by Sept. 11.

Independent Sen. Angus King of Maine said the government needs to find a "creative" approach to helping Afghans who worked with the U.S. military. That could include sending more people from the State Department or the military to process visas in Afghanistan or evacuating people to a safe place to be vetted.

"It's not only a moral issue, it's a national security issue," said King, who sits on both the Intelligence and Armed Services committees, adding that "we also have a practical responsibility, in terms of do we want people to help us in the future?"

More than 300 interpreters have been killed in Afghanistan since 2016, according to No One Left Behind, an organization that advocates on their behalf.

Former Army Maj. Matt Zeller said a military evacuation is the only viable option for thousands of Afghans facing threats who have been protected by the presence of U.S. troops.

"I'm only alive because my Afghan, Muslim translator saved my life by killing two Taliban fighters who were about to kill me in a battle," said Zeller, whose interpreter waited three years for a visa.

The U.S. government should have learned from what happened in Vietnam, said Jim Jones, a Vietnam veteran and former Idaho Supreme Court chief justice.

Initially fearing a mass evacuation would undermine the South Vietnamese military, the U.S. watched for weeks as the North Vietnamese Army overtook South Vietnam before starting to fly out Americans and allies. The effort ended with the largest helicopter evacuation in history in the final hours of the war.

In less than 24 hours, Marine helicopters airlifted about 7,000 U.S. military personnel, South Vietnamese who supported the American mission and their dependents.

Many South Vietnamese soldiers and government officials left behind were killed or held in "reeducation" camps. They included troops who had helped Jones stay alive as an Army artillery officer.

"We had a moral obligation to extract as many as possible but, instead, we abandoned them to a horrific fate," Jones wrote in the Military Times. "We simply cannot allow that kind of tragedy to happen again with the Afghans. I pray that this great nation does not again turn its back on beleaguered people who placed their trust in us."

Pentagon leaders told lawmakers Wednesday that they are prepared to carry out an evacuation if ordered, though they also have sought to downplay concerns that history will repeat itself.

"I don't see Saigon 1975 in Afghanistan," Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently told lawmakers.

No jail time in 1st riot sentence; Oath Keeper pleads guilty

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

An Indiana woman on Wednesday became the first defendant to be sentenced in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and avoided time behind bars, while a member of the Oath Keepers extremist group pleaded guilty in a conspiracy case and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors in a major step forward for the massive investigation.

The two developments signal that the cases against those charged in the deadly siege are slowly advanc-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 50 of 70

ing, even as the U.S. Department of Justice and the courthouse in Washington, D.C., struggle under the weight of roughly 500 federal arrests across the U.S. And it comes as Republicans in Washington attempt to downplay the violence committed by members of the mob supporting former President Donald Trump.

Graydon Young, who was accused alongside 15 other members and associates of the Oath Keepers of conspiring to block the congressional certification of Joe Biden's presidential victory, pleaded guilty to two counts: conspiracy and obstruction of an official proceeding. It was the first guilty plea in the major conspiracy case brought against members of the group.

The second charge calls for up to 20 years in prison, but U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta said federal sentencing guidelines call for Young to serve between 5 1/4 years and 6 1/2 years behind bars. Prosecutors may seek even less time in exchange for his cooperation against other defendants.

Young, 55, of Englewood, Florida, was arrested in February and charged in the sweeping conspiracy case accusing members of the Oath Keepers of coming to Washington prepared to use violence and intent on stopping the certification of the vote. Authorities said in court documents that Young joined the Florida chapter of the Oath Keepers in December, writing that he was "looking to get involved in helping ..."

Later that month, Young reached out to a company that does firearms and combat training about a rifle class for four people, according to the indictment. Authorities say Young, wearing a helmet and tactical vest, was part of the military-style "stack" seen on camera marching through the crowd before entering the Capitol building.

Young's attorneys didn't immediately respond to emails sent Wednesday seeking comment.

Another Oath Keepers member, Jon Ryan Schaffer, has also pleaded guilty in the riot, but was not charged in the conspiracy case. Schaffer has agreed to cooperate with investigators and potentially testify against other defendants.

Anna Morgan Lloyd, 49, of Indiana, was ordered by a federal judge to serve three years of probation, perform 120 hours of community service and pay \$500 in restitution after admitting to unlawfully entering the Capitol. She pleaded guilty to a single misdemeanor charge under a deal with prosecutors.

After the riot, Lloyd described Jan. 6 on Facebook as the "best day ever."

On Wednesday, she apologized to the court, her family and "the American people," saying she went to Washington that day to peacefully show her support for Trump.

"I'm ashamed that it became a savage display of violence that day. And I would have never been there if I had a clue it was going to turn out that way," Lloyd told the judge. "It was never my intent to be a part of anything that's so disgraceful to our American people."

In seeking probation for Lloyd, prosecutors noted that she was not involved in any violence and destruction or preplanning and coordination of the Capitol breach. Lloyd was invited by her hairdresser to drive to Washington to hear Trump speak, her attorney wrote in court documents.

U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth said he was giving her a "break," but didn't want others to think that probation — and not a stiffer sentence — would be the norm.

"Legally, I could give you the six months, but is that really what we want our judiciary to do?" the judge asked.

Lamberth said he struggled with what would be an appropriate sentence for Lloyd because he views the riot as a serious crime. "This wasn't a peaceful demonstration the way it turned out. It was not an accident," he said. "It was intended to and brought a halt to the very functioning of our government."

He said he was "especially troubled" by some lawmakers who are seeking to rewrite the history of the Capitol riot.

"I don't know what planet they were on, but there were millions of people in this country that saw what happened on Jan. 6 and that saw what you saw and what you just described: a disgrace to our country," the judge said.

In a letter to the judge asking for leniency, Lloyd wrote that she was a registered Democrat but that she and her husband began supporting Trump in 2016 because "he was standing up for what we believe in."

After her arrest, Lloyd's lawyer gave her a list of books and movies to help her "see what life is like for others in our country," Lloyd wrote. Lloyd said she has sought to educate herself by watching movies such

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 51 of 70

as "Schindler's List" and the History Channel's "Burning Tulsa" and reading Bryan Stevenson's "Just Mercy."

"I've lived a sheltered life and truly haven't experienced life the way many have," Lloyd wrote. "I've learned that even though we live in a wonderful country things still need to improve. People of all colors should feel as safe as I do to walk down the street."

Four other people — a Tennessee man, a Maryland man and a Virginia couple — have pleaded guilty to the same misdemeanor charge in the last two weeks.

Earlier Wednesday, another man, Robert Maurice Reeder of Maryland, admitted to entering the Capitol, but his lawyer said he didn't force his way inside and didn't damage any property or hurt anyone.

Before his arrest, an attorney for Reeder provided federal authorities with a compilation of photos and videos that he took with his cellphone at the Capitol. A video seemed to show Reeder chanting, "Fight for Trump!" and he recorded an assault on a Capitol police officer, according to the FBI.

"You need to retreat!" Reeder apparently told the officer, an FBI agent wrote in a court filing.

A prosecutor said Tennessee resident Brian Wayne Ivey, who pleaded guilty on Tuesday, entered the Capitol through a window that somebody else broke with a riot shield and spent roughly 30 minutes inside the building.

Joshua Bustle of Virginia, who pleaded guilty alongside his wife, will also be seeking probation, his lawyer said. Jessica Bustle's attorney described them as "good, decent, hardworking people," who were urged to come to Washington by "very powerful people and groups."

"They are not criminals or insurrectionists or rioters. They were not looking to break laws when they came to DC on the 6th. They violated minor laws on the 6th and they have accepted responsibility and accountability for doing so," Jessica Bustle's attorney, Nabeel Kibria, wrote in an email.

'No zero risk': UK move to increase Wembley fans questioned

By PAN PYLAS and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The British government faced accusations of mixed messaging Wednesday that could threaten its plan to fully lift lockdown restrictions in England next month after it decided to allow more than 60,000 people inside Wembley Stadium for the latter stages of soccer's European Championship.

Following discussions with UEFA, European soccer's governing body, the government increased the number of fans allowed inside the London stadium for the semifinals on July 6 and 7 and the final on July 11.

Wembley, which can take 90,000, will now be allowed to be at about 75% capacity for the three matches, making them the largest sporting gatherings since the coronavirus pandemic took root in the country in March 2020. In contrast, only around 20,000 people were inside the stadium on Tuesday night when England beat the Czech Republic 1-0.

The decision to increase Wembley's capacity has stoked worries that it will fuel the current wave of infections in the U.K., which has already endured Europe's second-worst pandemic death toll of 128,000.

Professor Lawrence Young, a virologist at the University of Warwick, warned that allowing 60,000 fans to crowd into Wembley is a "recipe for disaster" given the prevalence of the delta variant first identified in India, which scientists say is 40% to 80% more contagious.

"We are so close to getting on top of this virus with the success of the vaccination program — why put the end of lockdown on July 19 at risk?" he said.

Although infections are less likely in an outdoor environment, public health experts warned that the virus could still find a way to spread, notably as tens of thousands of fans travel to and from the stadium.

"Yes, being outside will offset the risk — but there is no zero risk," Dr. Catherine Smallwood, senior emergency officer at the World Health Organization's Europe office in Copenhagen, told The Associated Press. "It's not limited to the stadia themselves. It's also around the stadia, the gatherings that happen outside of it, in bars and clubs, in households."

Smallwood said scenes like those in a rocking Budapest stadium last Saturday when Hungary drew 1-1 with world champion France were "something that we should be worried about." She urged tournament organizers to put in "every effort" to reduce the level of risk.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 52 of 70

The U.K. government already knows the potential negative impact of large-scale events. After all, there is evidence that a European Champions League soccer match between Liverpool and Atletico Madrid and the Cheltenham horse racing festival helped seed the virus in 2020.

Unlike most other countries in Europe, the U.K. has seen a spike in infections over the past few weeks despite a widely lauded rollout of vaccines. The virus has been largely spreading among younger age groups, most of whom have yet to receive a dose of vaccine. On Wednesday, government figures showed another 16,135 new cases, the highest daily rate since Feb. 6.

The Conservative government hopes its rapid rollout of vaccines will keep the current outbreak in check and limit the number of COVID-19 patients requiring hospital treatment, thereby paving the way for it to lift remaining restrictions on social contact on July 19. Wednesday's figures showed that around 65% of Britain's population has received one dose of vaccine, while 47% have had two.

It says the increased capacity for the Wembley matches — and the finals at the Wimbledon tennis tournament on the weekend of July 10 and 11 — will be part of its Event Research Programme on holding mass events safely that it has been running. It also said all ticket-holders for the matches must show evidence of a negative COVID-19 test or proof of two vaccine doses — something that's not required when fans go to a watch a match in a pub.

Media Minister John Whittingdale said the test events so far, including music's Brit Awards, "have shown very successful results" and analysis will be published soon.

Whittingdale also indicated the government will grant UEFA's request for around 2,500 VIPs — such as officials, politicians and sponsors — to be allowed to enter the country for the latter stages of the tournament without having to quarantine. He said, however, their movements will be severely constrained.

Right now most travelers returning to the U.K. face 10 days of quarantine at home and those from high-risk countries must quarantine at special hotels.

"Those who are allowed to come into the country in order to attend the match come in for precisely that," he told broadcaster ITV. "They're not allowed to just go on a tour of Britain whilst they're here. They come in, they stay in a designated place, they attend the match, and then they leave."

Stephen Reicher, a professor of social psychology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, warned that people could easily get confused about the messaging at a critical time in the pandemic.

"If we live in a society which tells us 'Well, it's fine for 60,000 people to meet at Wembley,' it's very hard at the same time to say to people, 'Look, there's still a pandemic out there, and we've still got to be careful,'" he told BBC radio.

If England's national team makes the latter stages of the tournament, then concerns over the capacity issues at Wembley may be overridden by other ways of spreading of the virus as fans celebrate or commiserate together.

After all, England has not won a major tournament title, let alone made a final, since it hosted the 1966 World Cup.

Russia says warning shots deter UK warship; London denies it

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia said one of its warships in the Black Sea fired warning shots and a warplane dropped bombs Wednesday to force a British destroyer out of an area near Crimea that Moscow claims as its territorial waters, but Britain denied that account and insisted its ship wasn't fired upon.

It was the first time since the Cold War that Moscow acknowledged using live ammunition to deter a NATO warship, reflecting the growing risk of military incidents amid soaring tensions between Russia and the West.

The Russian Defense Ministry said a patrol ship fired warning shots after the HMS Defender had ignored a notice against intrusion and sailed 3 kilometers (1.6 nautical miles) into Russia's territorial waters near Sevastopol, the main Russian naval base in Crimea. It said a Russian Su-24 bomber also dropped four bombs ahead of the vessel to persuade the Defender to change course. Minutes later, the Defender left

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 53 of 70

Russian waters, the ministry said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova denounced the "rude British provocation that defies international law," and said London's ambassador was being summoned. The Defense Ministry said it also called in the U.K. military attache in Moscow to protest the destroyer's "dangerous move" and urged British authorities to investigate the crew's actions.

Britain's Ministry of Defense denied the Defender had been fired on or was in Russian waters, but had been in Ukrainian waters.

"No warning shots have been fired at HMS Defender," it said in a statement. "The Royal Navy ship is conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law."

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, a move not recognized by most countries, gaining access to its long Black Sea coast. Russia has chafed at NATO warships visiting near Crimea as destabilizing. In April, it declared a broader area off Crimea closed to foreign naval ships.

"We believe the Russians were undertaking a gunnery exercise in the Black Sea and provided the maritime community with prior warning of their activity," the British Ministry of Defense said. "No shots were directed at HMS Defender and we do not recognize the claim that bombs were dropped in her path."

British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said the Defender "carried out a routine transit from Odessa towards Georgia across the Black Sea."

"As is normal for this route, she entered an internationally recognized traffic separation corridor," he tweeted, adding that HMS Defender exited the corridor safely at 9:45 a.m. BST (0845 GMT; 4:45 a.m. EDT).

"As is routine, Russian vessels shadowed her passage and she was made aware of training exercises in her wider vicinity," he added.

Speaking to Parliament's defense committee, Wallace again denied Russia's version of events.

"These are the things that come and go with Russia," he said. "Disinformation, misinformation is something that we have seen regularly. We're not surprised by it; we plan for it."

Asked if Defender's crew had seen or heard anything, he said "initial reports say they did hear or observe training noises somewhere to the rear of her but beyond visual range."

"We saw the reports this morning," said Max Blain, a spokesman for Prime Minister Boris Johnson. "It's incorrect to say either that it was fired on or this ship was in Russian waters. HMS Defender was taking the most direct and internationally recognized route between Ukraine and Georgia."

He emphasized that Britain, and much of the international community, does not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said it was "clear proof of Ukraine's position: Russia's aggressive and provocative actions in the Black and Azov seas, its occupation and militarization of Crimea pose a lasting threat to Ukraine and allies."

"We need a new quality of cooperation between Ukraine & NATO allies in the Black Sea," Kuleba tweeted.

In November 2018, Russian coast guard ships fired on three Ukrainian gunboats trying to pass from the Black Sea into the Azov Sea and captured them along with 24 crewmembers. It returned the crew and the boats the following year.

HMS Defender, a Type 45 destroyer, is part of the U.K. Carrier Strike Group heading to the Indo-Pacific region. It was announced earlier this month that it would be temporarily breaking away from the group to carry out its "own set of missions" in the Black Sea.

Just before Wednesday's incident, Defender stopped in the Ukrainian port of Odessa, where Ukrainian and British officials and industry representatives signed an agreement to collaborate on boosting Ukraine's naval capabilities.

NATO members Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria border the Black Sea. Warships from the U.S., U.K. and other NATO allies also have made increasingly frequent visits in support of Ukraine.

Speaking before the incident, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces, sharply criticized the deployment of NATO warships near Russian waters.

"The moves by warships of the U.S. and its allies have been clearly provocative," Gerasimov said at an

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 54 of 70

international security conference in Moscow organized by the Defense Ministry. "It creates preconditions for incidents and doesn't help ease tensions in the military sphere."

He charged that the British destroyer HMS Dragon intruded into Russian waters near Crimea in October, and the U.S. destroyer USS John S. McCain violated the Russian border in the Sea of Japan in November.

In April, Russia imposed restrictions on foreign naval movements near Crimea until November in a move that drew strong complaints from Ukraine and the West. Russia rejected the criticism and noted the restrictions wouldn't interfere with commercial shipping.

Earlier this year, Russia also bolstered its troops near the border with Ukraine and warned Kyiv against using force to reclaim control of the country's eastern industrial heartland, where a conflict with Russia-backed separatists has killed more than 14,000 people in seven years. Moscow withdrew some of its forces after maneuvers, but Ukrainian officials say many of them remain.

Speaking earlier Wednesday via video to participants of the security conference, President Vladimir Putin expressed concern about NATO forces near Russia.

"We aren't striving for a decisive, unilateral military advantage to tip the balance of forces in our favor," Putin said. "But we will never allow anyone else to tip that balance."

Russia's relations with the West have sunk to the lowest levels since the Cold War, following Moscow's annexation of Crimea, accusations of Russian interference with elections, hacking attacks and other tensions.

In a speech at the same conference before Wednesday's incident, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said "the situation in Europe is explosive," and accused NATO of stonewalling Russian proposals to enhance security by refraining from military exercises near the borders of Russia and alliance members.

He said "the world is rapidly sinking in a new confrontation, which is much more dangerous than during the Cold War times."

Hong Kong's last pro-democracy paper publishes final edition

By ZEN SOO and MATTHEW CHENG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong's sole remaining pro-democracy newspaper published its last edition Thursday after five editors and executives were arrested and millions of dollars in its assets were frozen as part of China's increasing crackdown on dissent in the semi-autonomous city.

The board of directors of Apple Daily parent company Next Media said in a statement Wednesday that the print and online editions would cease due to "the current circumstances prevailing in Hong Kong."

The silencing of a prominent pro-democracy voice was the latest sign of China's determination to exert greater control over the city long known for its freedoms after huge anti-government protests there in 2019 shook the government. Since then, Beijing has imposed a strict national security law — used in the arrests of the newspaper employees — and revamped Hong Kong's election laws to keep opposition voices out of the legislature.

Apple Daily was founded by tycoon Jimmy Lai in 1995 — just two years before Britain handed Hong Kong back to China — and initially was a tabloid known for celebrity gossip. But Lai also portrayed the paper as an advocate of democratic values and said it should "shine a light on snakes, insects, mice and ants in the dark," according to the paper.

It grew into an outspoken voice for defending Hong Kong's freedoms not found in mainland China, and in recent years it often criticized the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for limiting those freedoms and reneging on a promise to protect them for 50 years after the handover. While pro-democracy media outlets still exist online, it was the only print newspaper of its kind left in the city.

In a post on Instagram, the paper thanked its readers.

"Even if the ending is not what we want, even if it's difficult to let go, we need to continue living and keep the determination we have shared with Hong Kong people that has remained unchanged over 26 years," Apple Daily wrote.

The newspaper said it planned to print 1 million copies for the final edition, up from the usual 80,000, and people lined up to buy them.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 55 of 70

The paper's announcement coincided with the start of the city's first trial under the year-old national security law that is being closely watched as a barometer of how strictly the courts will interpret the legislation.

The widely expected move to close Apple Daily followed last week's arrests and crucially the freezing of \$2.3 million of the paper's assets. Its board of directors wrote a few days ago to ask Hong Kong's security bureau to release some of the money so the company could pay wages, but it's not clear if it got a response. The paper also said it made the decision to close out of concern for employees' safety.

The editors and executives were detained on suspicion of colluding with foreigners to endanger national security. Police cited more than 30 articles published by the paper as evidence of a conspiracy to encourage foreign nations to impose sanctions on Hong Kong and China. It was the first time the national security law had been used against journalists for something they published.

On Wednesday, police also arrested a 55-year-old man on suspicion of foreign collusion to endanger national security, according to Apple Daily, which cited unidentified sources. The paper said the man wrote editorials for it under the pseudonym Li Ping.

Lai, the newspaper's founder, faces charges under the national security law for foreign collusion and is currently serving a prison sentence for his involvement in the 2019 protests.

The move against Apple Daily drew criticism from the U.S., the EU and Britain.

The forced closure by Hong Kong authorities "is a chilling demonstration of their campaign to silence all opposition voices," British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said in a Twitter post. "It is clearer than ever that the (national security law) is being used to curtail freedom and punish dissent."

German Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Adebahr called the closure a "hard blow against press freedom in Hong Kong."

Amnesty International Asia-Pacific Regional Director Yamini Mishra said the police action against Apple Daily will "send a shiver down the spine of all media outlets operating in Hong Kong."

"The forced closure of Apple Daily is the blackest day for media freedom in Hong Kong's recent history," Mishra said. "The paper has been effectively banned by the government for publishing articles that criticized it, and for reporting on international discussions about Hong Kong."

The law, imposed last year, criminalizes subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion. Chinese and Hong Kong officials have said the media must abide by the law, and that press freedom cannot be used as a "shield" for illegal activities.

The first person to stand trial under the law, Tong Ying-kit, pleaded not guilty Wednesday to charges of terrorism and inciting secession by driving a motorcycle into police officers during a 2019 rally while carrying a flag with the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times." Several officers were knocked over and three were injured.

That slogan was often chanted during the 2019 demonstrations, which began as protests against a bill allowing Hong Kong residents to be extradited to China for trial but burgeoned into broader calls for greater democratic freedoms. China was shaken by the breadth of the protests and responded with tough measures, including the national security law, which makes calls for Hong Kong's independence illegal.

Tong's trial will set the tone for how Hong Kong handles national security offenses. So far, more than 100 people have been arrested under the law, with many others fleeing abroad. The result is that it has virtually silenced opposition voices in the city.

A court ruled last month that Tong will stand trial without a jury, a departure from Hong Kong's common law traditions. Under the national security law, a panel of three judges can replace jurors, and the city's leader has the power to designate judges to hear such cases.

The law carries a maximum penalty of life in prison for serious offenses. Tong is on trial at the High Court, where sentences are not capped.

Justices rule for student in 'cursing cheerleader' case

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the case of the cursing cheerleader, the Supreme Court notched a victory for the free speech rights of students Wednesday, siding with a high school student whose vulgar social media

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 56 of 70

post got her kicked off the junior varsity squad.

The court voted 8-1 in favor of Brandi Levy, who was a 14-year-old freshman when she expressed her disappointment over not making the varsity cheerleading team with a string of curse words and a raised middle finger on Snapchat.

Levy, of Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, was not at school when she made her post, but she was suspended from cheerleading activities for a year anyway. In an opinion by Justice Stephen Breyer, the high court ruled that the suspension violated Levy's First Amendment freedom of speech rights. Justice Clarence Thomas dissented, noting he would have upheld the suspension.

The justices did not foreclose schools from disciplining students for what they say off campus, though they did not spell out when schools could act. An earlier federal appeals court ruling in this case would have barred public schools from punishing off-campus speech.

Despite ruling in Levy's favor, Breyer wrote that "we do not believe the special characteristics that give schools additional license to regulate student speech always disappear when a school regulates speech that takes place off campus. The school's regulatory interests remain significant in some off-campus circumstances."

The case drew extra interest at a time of remote learning — because of the coronavirus pandemic — and a rising awareness of the harmful effects of online bullying.

The decision was a strong endorsement of students' right to speak freely, which the court first expressed more than a half century ago in defending armbands worn by high school students in protest of the Vietnam War, said Abner Greene, a constitutional law professor at the Fordham University School of Law in Manhattan.

"Students can engage in all kinds of critical or dissenting commentary, whether about the Vietnam War or the student cheerleading team, without losing their free speech rights. And it doesn't matter where they say it," Greene said.

The case arose from Levy's posts, one of which pictured her and a friend with raised middle fingers and included the repeated use of a vulgarity to complain that she had been left off the varsity cheerleading squad.

"F—— school f—— softball f—— cheer f—— everything," she wrote near the end of her freshman year, from a local convenience store, on a Saturday. Now 18, Levy recently finished her first year of college.

Levy's parents filed a federal lawsuit after the cheerleading coach learned of the posts and suspended her from the junior varsity team for a year. Lower courts ruled in Levy's favor, and she was reinstated.

The school district appealed to the Supreme Court after the broad appellate ruling that said off-campus student speech was beyond schools' authority to punish.

The dispute is the latest in a line of cases that began with *Tinker v. Des Moines*, the Vietnam-era case of a high school in Des Moines, Iowa, that suspended armband-wearing students. In a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court sided with the students, declaring they don't "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."

The court also held then that schools retained the authority to restrict speech that would disrupt the school environment.

Wednesday's ruling basically adopted the reasoning of Judge Thomas Ambro of the 3rd U.S. Circuit of Appeals in Philadelphia. Ambro agreed with the other two judges who decided Levy's case that the suspension was unwarranted, but only because what she did was not disruptive either to the cheerleading team or school.

Breyer wrote that Levy's case seemed less serious than its Vietnam-era predecessor.

"It might be tempting to dismiss B. L.'s words as unworthy of the robust First Amendment protections discussed herein. But sometimes it is necessary to protect the superfluous in order to preserve the necessary," he wrote, using Levy's initials because that was how she was identified in the original lawsuit. Levy has granted numerous interviews allowing her name to be used.

Justice Samuel Alito wrote in a concurring opinion that school officials in Mahanoy got "carried away" in

seeking to discipline Levy. "If today's decision teaches any lesson, it must be that the regulation of many types of off-premises student speech raises serious First Amendment concerns, and school officials should proceed cautiously before venturing into this territory," Alito wrote.

The case was one of four the justices decided Wednesday as they approach their summer break. In the other cases, the court:

- Put limits on when police can enter a home when chasing someone suspected of a misdemeanor.
- Sided with agriculture businesses challenging a California labor regulation that allowed union organizers on their property.

- Ruled that the structure of the government agency that oversees mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac is unconstitutional, sending that case back for further review.

Eight cases remain to be decided, including a voting rights dispute which could affect legal challenges to voting measures put in place by Republican lawmakers in several states following last year's elections. More decisions are expected Friday.

AP sources: Officials mulling ousting US prisons director

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senior Biden administration officials have discussed whether to remove the hold-over director of the beleaguered federal Bureau of Prisons who has been at the center of the agency's myriad crises.

The discussions about whether to fire Michael Carvajal are in the preliminary stages and a final decision hasn't yet been made, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. They were not authorized to publicly discuss the internal talks and spoke on condition of anonymity.

But there's an indication that the bureau is shaking up its senior ranks following growing criticism of chronic mismanagement, blistering reports from the Justice Department's inspector general and a bleak financial outlook.

Since the death of Jeffrey Epstein at a federal lockup in New York in August 2019, The Associated Press has exposed one crisis after another, including rampant spread of coronavirus inside prisons and a failed response to the pandemic, escapes, deaths and critically low staffing levels that have hampered responses to emergencies.

At least two regional directors, the officials in charge of federal lockups in the South Central and the Southeast regions — including a Texas prison where inmates routinely walked off the grounds to retrieve drugs and other contraband delivered to them in the woods — are also being replaced.

The Bureau of Prisons said the two regional directors — Juan Baltazar, Jr. and J.A. Keller — are retiring and had been planning to do so. But two other people familiar with the matter said that neither had planned to leave for months and were told other officials were being appointed to their jobs.

On Wednesday, the agency said it was appointing wardens William Lothrop and Heriberto Tellez to the regional posts. Tellez is currently in charge of the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, where a 34-year-old inmate was found dead in his cell early Wednesday.

British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell is also being held at the jail. Last year, her lawyers sought to question Tellez about the constant surveillance she has been subjected to since her arrest on sex trafficking charges, but a judge refused.

The Justice Department, which runs the bureau, did not directly address whether officials were considering removing Carvajal, one of the few remaining holdovers from the Trump administration. Instead it said it was working to put in place recommendations made by both the department's inspector general and the Government Accountability Office and is undertaking other changes.

"Director Carvajal has formed a task force to help address the fundamental challenges facing BOP," the Justice Department said in a statement to the AP. "That work is an important priority."

Implementing the changes "will be critical to advancing BOP's mission — ensuring that inmates are housed safely and securely, and also providing critical programming and rehabilitation to help those inmates successfully reenter society after they have served their time," the statement said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 58 of 70

Carvajal took over as director in February 2020, just before the pandemic began raging in the bureau's facilities nationwide, leaving tens of thousands of inmates infected with the virus and resulting in 240 deaths. He also oversaw an unprecedented run of federal executions in the waning months of the Trump presidency that were so poorly managed they became virus superspreader events.

Nearly one-third of federal correctional officer jobs in the United States are vacant, forcing prisons to use cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard inmates. The expanded use of that practice, known as augmentation, has been raising questions about whether the agency can carry out its required duties to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff members while also putting in place programs and classes required under the law.

Over the past 18 months, 30 prisoners have escaped from federal lockups across the U.S. — and nearly half still have not been caught. At some of the institutions, doors are left unlocked, security cameras are broken, and officials sometimes don't notice an inmate is missing for hours. Prisoners have broken out at lockups in nearly every region of the country.

The agency's staffing levels have reached a critical point under Carvajal's tenure and officers at several facilities have held protests calling for him to be fired. The agency claims its hiring programs have been successful, though it has significantly slowed its hiring process, pausing most new hires until at least October.

The bureau said it expects to bring on 1,800 new employees, that the initiative has been "a huge success" and continues to focus on hiring and training staff.

The agency has also been plagued by such serious misconduct that then-Attorney General Bill Barr launched a special task force to address criminal wrongdoing by officers at several prisons after a loaded gun was found smuggled in the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York City, the federal jail where Epstein killed himself in August 2019.

Biden faces growing pressure from the left over voting bill

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When New York Democratic Rep. Mondaire Jones was at the White House for the signing of the proclamation making Juneteenth a national holiday last week, he told President Joe Biden their party needed him more involved in passing voting legislation on the Hill.

In response? Biden "just sort of stared at me," Jones said, describing an "awkward silence" that passed between the two.

For Jones, the moment was emblematic of what he and a growing number of Democratic activists describe as a lackluster engagement from Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris on an issue they consider urgent and necessary for the health of U.S. democracy.

Although the White House has characterized the issue as "the fight of his presidency," Biden has prioritized his economic initiatives, measures more likely to win Republican support in the Senate. And he's shown little interest thus far in diving into a messy debate over changing Senate rules to pass the legislation on Democratic votes alone.

But as Democrats' massive election legislation was blocked by Republicans on Tuesday, progressives argued Biden could not avoid that fight much longer and must use all his leverage to find a path forward. The criticism suggested the voting debate may prove to be among Biden's first major, public rifts with the left of his presidency.

"President Obama, for his part, has been doing more to salvage our ailing democracy than the current president of the United States of America," Mondaire said, referring to a recent interview in which the former president pushed for the legislation.

The White House argues that both Biden and Harris have been in frequent touch with Democratic leadership and key advocacy groups as the legislation — dubbed the For the People Act — moved through Congress. Biden has spoken out forcefully at times, declaring a new Georgia law backed by Republicans an "atrocious."

On Wednesday, Harris met virtually with leaders of several voting and civil rights groups, describing the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 59 of 70

moment as an "inflection point" and reiterating a commitment to federal legislation protecting voting rights.

In advance of the vote, Biden met with Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., at the White House to discuss both voting rights and infrastructure. But Biden didn't use his clout to work Republicans, who have expressed staunch and unified opposition to any voting legislation, arguing Democrats are pushing an unnecessary federal takeover of elections now run by state and county officials.

Biden spent much of the month focused on foreign policy during a trip to Europe, encouraging Americans to get vaccinated and selling his infrastructure plan to the American public. He tasked Harris with taking the lead on the issue, and she spent last week largely engaged in private meetings with voting rights advocates as she traveled for a vaccination tour around the nation.

Those efforts haven't appeased some activists, who argue that state laws tightening election laws are designed to make it harder for Black, young and infrequent voters to cast ballots. The best way to counter the state laws is with federal legislation, they say, and Biden ought to come out for a change in the Senate filibuster rules that require 60 votes to advance most legislation.

"Progressives are losing patience, and I think particularly African American Democrats are losing patience," said Democratic strategist Joel Payne, a longtime aide to former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. "They feel like they have done the kind of good Democrat thing over the last year-plus, going back to when Biden got the nomination, unifying support around Biden, turning out, showing up on Election Day."

"Progressives feel like, 'Hey, we did our part.' And now when it's time for the bill to be paid, so to speak, I think some progressives feel like, 'OK, well, how long do we have to wait?'"

Still, there could be a silver lining for Democrats in the ongoing battle over voting rights: The issue is a major motivator for progressives and may serve to drive enthusiasm among Black voters as well, potentially driving engagement in a midterm year where Democrats are certain to face a tough political climate.

Harris watched the legislation fail to advance to debate on Tuesday, in her role as president of the Senate, and coming off the floor told reporters that she and Biden still support voting legislation and "the fight is not over."

Ezra Levin, co-executive director of Indivisible, a progressive grassroots group, said it's been nowhere near the level of advocacy the public has seen on the infrastructure bill.

"The president has been on the sidelines. He has issued statements of support, he's maybe included a line or two in a speech here or there, but there has been nothing on the scale of his public advocacy for recovery for COVID relief, for roads and bridges," Levin said.

"We think this is a crisis at the same level as crumbling roads and bridges, and if we agree on that, the question is, why is the president on the sidelines?"

White House aides push back against any suggestion the president and vice president haven't been engaged on the issue.

But in private, White House advisers see infrastructure as the bigger political winner for Biden because it's widely popular among voters of both parties, a White House official said. Passing a major infrastructure bill is seen within the White House as going further towards helping Democrats win in the 2022 midterms and beyond than taking on massive voting overhaul that had a slim chance of passage without a debate over filibuster rules, said the official, who requested anonymity to discuss internal talks.

In the weeks ahead, Biden will use the "bully pulpit" of the presidency to elevate voting rights, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

"What you should expect to hear from him is that there are many ways to work across the country — with activists, with states, with legislators — using every lever at our disposal to expand access, improve access to voting across the country," Psaki said.

Embracing filibuster changes, in particular, risks undermining Biden's profile as a bipartisan dealmaker and could poison the delicate negotiations around infrastructure, where the White House insists it still sees opportunity for bipartisan compromise.

Still, Democrats say it's time for Biden to get out front on the issue. Rep. Colin Allred, D-Texas, said the proposals Republicans are looking to pass in his home state are "more explicit and more dangerous than anything I've ever come across."

Allred said that the voting fight increases pressure on Biden to take the leadership on the filibuster fight. "We do need President Biden to make that a priority, because if you're going to talk about supporting the underlying legislation, it really doesn't matter if we don't have way to get past the filibuster," he said.

High court limits when police can enter home without warrant

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Adding to the country's ongoing discussion of the extent of police powers, the Supreme Court on Wednesday put limits on when police officers pursuing a fleeing suspect can enter a home without a warrant.

The high court ruled that when officers are pursuing someone suspected of a misdemeanor, a less serious crime, they cannot always enter a home without a warrant if a suspect enters.

The court had previously given police greater freedom to enter homes in cases involving more serious crimes. In a 1976 case, the justices said that police in "hot pursuit" of a suspect believed to have committed a felony can enter a home without a warrant.

The case the justices decided Wednesday is important both to law enforcement and to groups concerned about privacy. But it doesn't give police a bright line for when they can and cannot enter a home to pursue someone suspected of committing a misdemeanor.

"The flight of a suspected misdemeanant does not always justify a warrantless entry into a home. An officer must consider all the circumstances in a pursuit case to determine whether there is a law enforcement emergency. On many occasions, the officer will have good reason to enter — to prevent imminent harms of violence, destruction of evidence, or escape from the home. But when the officer has time to get a warrant, he must do so — even though the misdemeanant fled," Justice Elena Kagan wrote in a majority opinion for seven members of the court that included both liberals and conservatives.

Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito said that, in their view, a suspect's choice to flee alone should give police the ability to pursue that person into a home. They suggested the majority's opinion leaves too much for officers in the field to consider in the midst of a chase, providing "no guidance at all."

"The Constitution does not demand this absurd and dangerous result," Roberts wrote.

Elizabeth Wydra, president of the liberal Constitutional Accountability Center, said it remains to be seen how the decision will play out in the real world. The decision does not bar police from homes when they are chasing a misdemeanor suspect, but it does not give them free reign to enter either.

"As our country continues to grapple with the limits and problems associated with law enforcement's powers, the Court's refusal to allow police unfettered entry into the home is welcome," she wrote in a statement.

Larry H. James, general counsel for the National Fraternal Order of Police, which filed a brief in the case, said he does not see much changing for police as a result of the ruling. The decision tells police to do what they always do, he said, which is "use your common sense, use your training." He said the guidance for police from the ruling is: "When the situation warrants immediate action, take it. When it doesn't, get a warrant."

The case before the justices involved California resident Arthur Lange. One evening in 2016, an officer saw Lange driving his station wagon in Sonoma County, playing music loudly and honking his horn several times. The officer believed those were noise violations punishable by small fines and followed Lange. The officer later turned on his car's lights to get Lange to stop. But Lange continued driving for about four seconds, turned into his driveway and entered his garage without stopping.

The officer got out of his car and, as Lange's garage door was closing, stuck his foot under the door so it would re-open. Lange was ultimately arrested after the officer smelled alcohol on his breath, and he was charged with driving under the influence as well as an excessive noise offense.

Lange argued that the officer's entry into the garage without a warrant violated his Fourth Amendment right to be free of "unreasonable searches and seizures." The justices sent his case back to lower courts to be reevaluated in light of their decision.

The case is *Lange v. California*, 20-18.

Poll: Many Democrats want more US support for Palestinians

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new poll on American attitudes toward a core conflict in the Middle East finds about half of Democrats want the U.S. to do more to support the Palestinians, showing that a growing rift among Democratic lawmakers is also reflected in the party's base.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds differences within both the Democratic and the Republican parties on the U.S. approach toward Israel and the Palestinians, with liberal Democrats wanting more support for the Palestinians and conservative Republicans seeking even greater support for the Israelis.

The survey also examined Americans' opinions on the Biden administration's handling of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The survey was conducted about three weeks into a cease-fire following a devastating 11-day war last month between Israel and the Gaza Strip's Hamas militant rulers. The fighting killed at least 254 Palestinians and 13 people in Israel.

The poll shows Americans overall are divided over U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians. It also shows more Americans disapprove of President Joe Biden's approach to the conflict than approve of it.

Among Democrats, 51% say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Palestinians. The sentiment jumps to 62% among Democrats who describe themselves as liberal. On the other hand, 49% of Republicans say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Israelis, a number that rises to 61% among those who say they're conservative.

Paul Spelce, a 26-year-old Democratic-leaning independent voter and supporter of Palestinian statehood, is a member of a heavily religious Texas Republican family whose support for Israel is ingrained with their Christian faith. Spelce, of Austin, says he followed news of last month's Gaza war and the U.S. response closely on the radio as he helped deliver mail.

"I started paying a lot more attention," said Spelce, who said he disapproved of Biden's handling of the conflict and thinks the United States is too supportive of Israelis and not supportive enough of the Palestinians.

"I don't think Biden's word was that strong," Spelce said. "And I don't think, you know, this administration ... can actually do anything" regarding the conflict.

Overall, the poll shows that 29% of Americans say the U.S. is too supportive of the Israelis, 30% say it's not supportive enough and 36% say it's about right. In its approach toward the Palestinians, 25% say the U.S. is too supportive, 32% say it's not supportive enough and 37% say it's about right.

Broad but not unvarying support for Israel has been a tenet of U.S. domestic politics, as well as its foreign policy, for decades. Biden refrained from publicly criticizing Israel over civilian deaths and waited until the last days of fighting last month to openly press Israel to wind down its airstrikes on heavily populated Gaza.

The war highlighted differences among Democratic lawmakers and between some Democratic lawmakers and Biden on Israel policy. Dozens of Democrats in Congress called for Israel and Hamas to cease fire immediately, days before Biden openly did. Sen. Bernie Sanders, a progressive Vermont independent, urged the U.S. to be more even-handed in its approach to the conflict.

The poll found 56% of Americans disapprove of the way Biden is handling the conflict, compared with 40% who approve. While 75% of Republicans disapprove of how Biden is handling the conflict, so do 35% of Democrats.

"The new administration's policies, its posture toward Israel, it's totally different" to President Donald Trump's, said Christina Elliott, a 57-year-old Republican in the northeast Texas town of Atlanta. She said she disapproves of Biden's approach to the conflict and thinks the U.S. should be more supportive of Israelis and less of Palestinians.

"The Palestinians need to put just as much effort as Israel is" into peaceful relations, Elliott said, and added of Israel, "My God, they're surrounded by enemies."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 62 of 70

Forty-two percent of liberal Democrats say they disapprove of how Biden is handling the conflict, compared with 31% of moderate and conservative ones.

That's compared with just 9% of Democrats who disapproved of how Biden is handling his job in general. Overall, Biden's job approval rating stands at 55%.

Since the cease-fire, Israel has transitioned to a new government that says it wants to repair relations with Democrats and restore bipartisan support in the U.S. for Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu, the former longtime prime minister, had openly challenged both Biden and President Barack Obama on U.S. policy in the Middle East and was seen as allying himself to Trump.

Some of the respondents in the survey, both Democratic and Republican, cited the comparatively limited timespan of the war — in comparison, 50 days of fighting in 2014 killed more than 2,200 Palestinians and 73 people on the Israeli side — in saying they approved of Biden's handling of the conflict.

The poll also shows just 19% of Americans think the U.S. should play a major role in finding a solution to the conflict, while 50% say it should play a minor role and 28% say it should play no role. Democrats and Republicans are largely in agreement on the size of the U.S. role in the conflict.

A majority of Americans, 57%, say they think there is a way for Israel and an independent Palestinian state to coexist peacefully, compared with 39% who say there is not a way. About 2 out of 3 Democrats think there is a way. Republicans are closely divided, with 50% saying there is and 45% saying there is not.

Patrick Diehl, another Democratic-leaning independent, cited U.S. offers to help rebuild Gaza buildings leveled by Israeli airstrikes, "so, I guess, they can be destroyed again. This seems to me kind of hapless."

"You know, we need a stronger position taken by the administration — pushing for actual change rather than continuation of this wretched situation," said Diehl, 74, of Tucson, Arizona.

Big US banks to employees: Return to the office vaccinated

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Wall Street's big investment banks are sending a message to their employees this summer: Get back into the office and bring your vaccination card.

New York-based Morgan Stanley said this week that all employees will be required to attest to their vaccination status. Those who are not vaccinated will be required to work remotely, which could potentially put their jobs at risk, since the bank's top executives have said they want everyone back in the office by September.

"If you can go into a restaurant in New York City, you can come into the office," said Morgan Stanley CEO James Gorman at a industry conference earlier this month.

Morgan Stanley is one of several big banks requiring employees to return to the office and also provide documentation of having received a coronavirus vaccine or making a formal declaration confirming vaccination.

Goldman Sachs required most of its employees to return to the office on June 14, with some exceptions extending that deadline to Sept. 30. It requires every employee to state their vaccine status, but does not require proof. JPMorgan is asking employees to submit their vaccination records as well, in the form of an internal portal.

The return-to-office push has its roots in banking-industry culture. Despite years of observing modernization and digital banking, the industry's top executives still operate under a culture that prizes in-person meetings to carve out deals. This has made banks among the leading industries pushing for employees to return to the office as soon as possible as the pandemic wanes.

"We know from experience that our culture of collaboration, innovation and apprenticeship thrives when our people come together, and we look forward to having more of our colleagues back in the office so that they can experience that once again on a regular basis," Goldman Sachs executives wrote in a memo to employees earlier this month.

This isn't the first time banks have tried to return their employees to the office in the pandemic. JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon tried to mandate a return to offices for traders back in September 2020, long

before the availability of a vaccine. The experiment lasted less than a week, resulting in several traders becoming infected with COVID.

'It's a family': Wreck shatters life's work at girls home

By JAY REEVES and KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

CAMP HILL, Ala. (AP) — Caring for abused and neglected girls is Candice Gulley's life work, and that's what she was doing when she helped load vans from an Alabama children's home for a trip to the beach. The kids walked on the sand, ate seafood and threw an early, dinosaur-themed fourth birthday party for her son, Ben, during a week on the coast.

With Gulley behind the wheel of a van headed back to the home as Tropical Storm Claudette blew through the South, the trip ended in a cataclysmic crash. The van was caught in a chain-reaction wreck on a rain-slick interstate that involved 17 vehicles, seven of which caught fire — some reduced to twisted, burned-out hulks. Two of Gulley's own children and two nephews were among the 10 dead.

The lone survivor in her van, Gulley was recovering from her physical injuries Tuesday, which would have been Ben's birthday. One relative made an appeal on social media for people to pray for Gulley; another posted a video of the little boy as a tribute.

Gulley said last month that she had a tough childhood which left her "clinging to God" after her father's suicide when she was just 8, but the added emotional trauma of the crash is hard to fathom.

Social work is a notoriously tough job, but Gulley relished the challenge at the Tallapoosa County Girls Ranch, a Christian-based group home where she and her husband, Tommy, began working and living a decade ago after years in youth ministry in Mobile, their hometown.

"They are like my second parents," former ranch resident Therese Meshall Crawford said Wednesday of the couple, who were her house parents a decade ago. "The best way to explain Candice and Tommy is they are the most open-hearted people ever. Candice, she will do anything for you."

Crawford, 26, said she knew the Gulley's two children who were killed in the crash for much of their lives.

"It broke my heart. I cried for hours. I still cry," Crawford, now a mother herself and an aspiring nurse.

Gulley has a "God-given ability to relate to children in a positive way," said Jerry Ferguson, a pastor who worked with the ranches for 30 years and hired the Gulleys as house parents.

"She was genuine. She had the ability to relate to children at their level, that was very important," Ferguson said

Often known as "mom and pop" to the girls, the couple would play games with their charges, take them on trips and horse rides, all while pushing them to excel in school and showing unconditional love and support, he recalled. For some of the girls, he said, it was the first taste of a supportive family life.

"Lots of our kids were in situations where the people who were supposed to love them the most did the most harm to them," Ferguson said.

In a Facebook live interview in May, Gulley described both her own life and the ranch, which she said is different from other foster care operations.

"Really, I think what sets us apart is it's a family. Kids come and they go, but once they set roots down at the ranch, we're your family," Gulley said. In a way, the beach trip was like a family vacation: girls from troubled homes who often come to consider one another sisters traveling with stand-in parents.

The wreck killed Gulley's 16-year-old daughter, Isabella, and 3-year-old Ben. Her two nephews, 12-year-old Josiah Dunnavant and 8-year-old Nicholas Dunnavant, who lived near Mobile, also were killed.

"They were just all sweet loving children," Candice Gulley's aunt, Desiree Bishop, told FOX10.

"It's a high price to pay. It just comes in waves of grief, just waves of grief," she said.

Authorities haven't said what caused the wreck, which also killed four ranch residents who've not been publicly identified, as well as Cody Fox of Tennessee and his 9-month-old daughter, Ariana. But witnesses said the road was wet because of Claudette, and authorities said vehicles may have hydroplaned.

Someone pulled Gulley out of the wreckage on Interstate 65, but no one else in the van could be saved. She was hospitalized afterward.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 64 of 70

Gulley, who has five children including a daughter adopted from the ranch, took over as director in 2019 after her predecessor departed for another position. She'd previously worked as a house parent, serving as a fill-in mom and mentor to girls who arrived at the home because of abandonment, abuse or neglect.

Sometimes families are too broke to care for a child; other times a girl must be removed from her home because of drug abuse by parents, said Michael Smith, chief executive of Alabama Youth Homes. But Gulley is there for them all, helping teach the importance of well-done chores and finished schoolwork while sharing her own steady faith in God.

As director, she oversees ranch management, staff and helps with fundraising.

"We create an environment that has structure, that has stability," she said in the Facebook interview.

After missing out on events including annual beach trips because of the pandemic, the girls and ranch workers looked forward to the break at the coast, Smith said. They all packed into two vans and loaded a trailer with suitcases for the trip to Gulf Shores, where Smith said he met the group for lunch four days before the crash.

"They get to pick the place they want to go out eat," he said. "We had a really good time. The girls had a ball."

The crash sent shockwaves through Camp Hill and Reeltown, the rural communities closest to the home located on a two-lane road about 60 miles (97 kilometers) northeast of Montgomery.

Terrie Webster, who works at a store near the ranch, said a woman she knows who works as a house parent at the home would have been on the van if not for a late change of plans. Webster said she can't begin to understand the pain caused by the wreck.

"It's awful. I can't even imagine," Webster said.

Tallapoosa County Sheriff Jimmy Abbett, who worked with Gulley over her nearly 11 years at the ranch, said Gulley always worries about her girls and their accomplishments are her proudest moments.

"Words can't express what she is going through," he said. "Knowing Candice like I do, she is worried about the girls and the ranch, too."

Can ET see us? Study finds many stars with prime Earth view

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Feeling like you are being watched? It could be from a lot farther away than you think.

Astronomers took a technique used to look for life on other planets and flipped it around — so instead of looking to see what's out there, they tried to see what places could see us.

There's a lot.

Astronomers calculated that 1,715 stars in our galactic neighborhood — and hundreds of probable Earth-like planets circling those stars — have had an unobstructed view of Earth during human civilization, according to a study Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

"When I look up at the sky, it looks a little bit friendlier because it's like, maybe somebody is waving," said study lead author Lisa Kaltenegger, director of the Carl Sagan Institute at Cornell University.

Even though some experts, including the late Stephen Hawking, warn against reaching out to aliens because they could harm us, Kaltenegger said it doesn't matter. If those planets have advanced life, someone out there could conclude that there is life back here based on oxygen in our atmosphere, or by the radio waves from human sources that have swept over 75 of the closest stars on her list.

"Hiding is not really an option," she said.

One way humans look for potentially habitable planets is by watching them as they cross in front of the star they are orbiting, which dims the stars' light slightly. Kaltenegger and astrophysicist Jacqueline Faherty of the American Museum of Natural History used the European Space Agency's Gaia space telescope to turn that around, looking to see what star systems could watch Earth as it passes in front of the sun.

They looked at the 331,312 stars within 326 light-years of Earth. One light-year is 5.9 trillion miles. The angle to see Earth pass in front of the sun is so small that only the 1,715 could see Earth at some point in the last 5,000 years, including 313 that no longer can see us because we've moved out of view.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 65 of 70

Another 319 stars will be able to see Earth in the next 5,000 years, including a few star systems where scientists have already spotted Earth-like planets, prime candidates for contact. That brings the total to more than 2,000 star systems with an Earth view.

The closest star on Kaltenegger's list is the red dwarf star Wolf 359, which is 7.9 light-years away. It's been able to see us since the disco era of the mid 1970s.

Carnegie Institution for Science planetary scientist Alan Boss, who wasn't part of the study, called it "provocative." He said in addition to viewing Earth moving in front of the star, space telescopes nearby could spot us even if the cosmic geometry is wrong: "So intelligent civilizations who build space telescopes could be studying us right now."

So why haven't we heard from them?

It takes a long time for messages and life to travel between stars and civilizations might not last long. So between those two it's enough to limit the chances for civilizations to exchange "emails and TikTok videos," Boss said in his own email. "So we should not expect aliens to show up anytime soon."

Or, Kaltenegger said, life in the cosmos, could just be rare.

What's exciting about the study is that it tells scientists "where to point our instruments," said outside astronomer Seth Shostak of the SETI Institute that searches for extraterrestrial intelligence. "You might know where to look for the aliens!"

Unvaccinated Missourians fuel COVID: 'We will be the canary'

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — As the U.S. emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, Missouri is becoming a cautionary tale for the rest of the country: It is seeing an alarming rise in cases because of a combination of the fast-spreading delta variant and stubborn resistance among many people to getting vaccinated.

Intensive care beds are filling up with surprisingly young, unvaccinated patients, and staff members are getting burned out fighting a battle that was supposed to be in its final throes.

The hope among some health leaders is that the rest of the U.S. might at least learn something from Missouri's plight.

"If people elsewhere in the country are looking to us and saying, 'No thanks' and they are getting vaccinated, that is good," said Erik Frederick, chief administrative officer at Mercy Hospital Springfield, which has been inundated with COVID-19 patients as the variant first identified in India rips through the largely non-immunized community. "We will be the canary."

The state now leads the nation with the highest rate of new COVID-19 infections, and the surge is happening largely in a politically conservative farming region in the northern part of the state and in the southwestern corner, which includes Springfield and Branson, the country music mecca in the Ozark Mountains where big crowds are gathering again at the city's theaters and other attractions.

While over 53% of all Americans have received at least one shot, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most southern and northern Missouri counties are well short of 40%. One county is at just 13%.

Cases remain below their winter highs in southwestern Missouri, but the trajectory is steeper than in previous surges, Frederick said. As of Tuesday, 153 COVID-19 patients were hospitalized at Mercy and another Springfield hospital, Cox Health, up from 31 just over a month ago, county figures show.

These patients are also younger than earlier in the pandemic — 60% to 65% of those in the ICU over the weekend at Mercy were under 40, according to Frederick, who noted that younger adults are much less likely to be vaccinated — and some are pregnant.

He is hiring traveling nurses and respiratory therapists to help out his fatigued staff as the rest of the country tries to leave the pandemic behind.

"I feel like last year at this time it was health care heroes and everybody was celebrating and bringing food to the hospital and doing prayer vigils and stuff, and now everyone is like, 'The lake is open. Let's go.' We are still here doing this," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 66 of 70

There are also warning signs across the state line: Arkansas on Tuesday reported its biggest one-day jump in cases in more than three months. The state also has low vaccination rates.

Lagging rates — especially among young adults — are becoming an increasing source of concern elsewhere around the country, as is the delta variant.

The mutant version now accounts more than 20% of new COVID-19 infections in the U.S., doubling in just two weeks, the CDC said Tuesday. It is responsible for half of new cases across a swath that includes Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

“The delta variant is currently the greatest threat in the U.S. to our attempt to eliminate COVID-19,” said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert. He said there is a “real danger” of local surges like the one in Missouri in places with deep vaccine resistance.

To help counter the threat, administration officials are stepping up efforts to vaccinate Americans ages 18 to 26, who have proved least likely to get the shot when it’s available to them.

Elsewhere around the world, Britain, with an even higher vaccination rate than the U.S., has postponed the lifting of remaining restrictions on socializing in England because of the rapid spread of the variant. Israel, another vaccination success story, is reacting by tightening rules on travelers.

In Missouri, Republican Gov. Mike Parson has taken the position that it is better to ask people to take “personal responsibility” than to enact restrictions.

Missouri never had a mask mandate, and Parson signed a law last week placing limits on public health restrictions and barring governments from requiring proof of vaccination to use public facilities and transportation.

Missouri Health Department spokeswoman Lisa Cox said the agency is encouraging people to get vaccinated, but confessed: “This is the Show-Me State and Missourians are skeptical.”

Frederick said some people in the heavily Republican state are resistant because they feel as if Democrats are pushing the vaccine.

“I keep telling people, while we are busy fighting with each other, this thing is picking us off one by one,” he said. “It takes no sides. It has no political affiliation. It is not red. It is not blue. It is a virus. And if we don’t protect ourselves, we are going to do a lot of damage to our community.”

Steve Edwards, CEO of Cox Health, lamented in a tweet that while a number of major news organizations have contacted the hospital about the rise in cases, Fox News was not among them.

“Fox,” he tweeted, “is the most popular cable news in our area — you can help educate on Delta, vaccines and can save lives.”

Lisa Meeks, 49, of Springfield, is among those who haven’t been vaccinated. She said that she is a Christian and that God gave her a strong immune system.

“As of right now, nobody knows anything long term or short term about these vaccines because they are brand new,” she said, despite months of real-world evidence that the vaccines are highly safe and effective. “And so people are now basically the lab rats.”

An offer of free beer from Mother’s Brewing Co. in Springfield for those who get vaccinated drew a disappointing 20 to 50 people to each of the first three clinics.

“We keep trying,” said Jeff Schrag, owner and founder of Mother’s Brewing. “It is a game of inches.”

As immunizations slow, the delta variant has become the predominant form of the virus in the region. Aaron Schekorra, a spokesman for the Springfield-Greene County Health Department, said it makes up 93% of the random sample of cases that the county is sending for analysis, up from 70% three weeks ago.

He said that unvaccinated people gathering for graduation celebrations and Memorial Day festivities also fueled the spread of the virus. The events came just as the community lifted its mask mandate.

“My concern,” he said, “would be that this is a preview of what is to come in other parts of the country that don’t have higher vaccination rates.”

Russian gas pipeline vexes U.S. charm offensive in Germany

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 67 of 70

BERLIN (AP) — The United States and Germany struggled Wednesday to resolve a major dispute over a Russian gas pipeline, even as the Biden administration seeks to improve relations with Western Europe that had been strained during Donald Trump's presidency.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his German counterpart Heiko Maas met in Berlin and extolled the depth and strength of U.S.-German relations, but there was no sign of progress in talks to overcome the impasse over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. And neither Blinken nor Maas could offer a timetable for a possible resolution.

"We don't always agree and one of those areas of disagreement is the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which we continue to believe is a threat to European energy security," Blinken said. "Germany has a different perspective and that happens from time to time. We'll handle our disagreements while pressing ahead on the many areas where we are working very closely together."

In addition to increasing the continent's reliance on Russian gas, the U.S. believes the pipeline will become a tool for Russia to exert political pressure on vulnerable Eastern and Central European nations. As such, the project continues to be a significant irritant in U.S.-German ties despite steps by the Biden administration to cool the dispute.

Speaking alongside Blinken at a joint news conference, Maas said Germany was well aware of the U.S. concerns and trying to address them.

"We are engaging in these talks," he said. "We are aware of the expectations from Washington and it is of the utmost importance."

Maas said that Germany is also speaking with Ukraine and other countries bypassed by the pipeline with an eye toward guaranteeing them an alternative energy supply.

"There is a whole host of ways and means and approaches that we are discussing but we are not discussing them in public," Maas said.

Ideally, he added, a resolution could be reached by the time outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel visits Biden in Washington next month. But, Maas stressed that timing was aspirational only.

Blinken met later with Merkel and neither mentioned the pipeline in brief welcoming remarks.

Despite U.S. opposition and strident objections from Poland and Ukraine, Merkel strongly favors the project, which has been one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's key initiatives to increase Russia's energy revenue.

The pipeline also faces strong bipartisan opposition in the U.S. Congress, where both Republican and Democratic lawmakers harshly criticized the administration for waiving sanctions against the German firm constructing it, the company's German CEO and several other executives in May. Critics saw those sanctions as a last-ditch effort to prevent completion of the pipeline that is now more than 95% constructed.

In waiving the sanctions against Nord Stream 2 AG and the executives, the White House rejected recommendations from the State Department and other agencies in favor of imposing the penalties, according to officials and congressional aides. Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan argued that the sanctions would do more harm than good in terms of repairing ties with Germany, they said.

Blinken is in Germany on his second visit to Europe in seven days, having just accompanied President Joe Biden to leaders' summits in Britain and Belgium. In his meeting with Maas, Blinken emphasized the "America is back" message that Biden also delivered last week.

Maas welcomed the commitment that Blinken is also expected to pass on to Merkel in a later meeting. He said Biden's visit, coupled by Blinken's return to Europe so quickly, "underlined impressively that America is back: Back on the multilateral and international stage and we're very pleased by this."

Merkel echoed that sentiment in her comments before meeting Blinken, saying Germany was "delighted" with Biden's pronouncement. "Given all the controversies in the world I think it's fair to say we need to keep channels of dialogue open," she said.

Biden administration officials insist that there are still ways to mitigate the pipeline's impact. They say even after the project is physically completed there are still permits, insurance and testing hurdles it must clear before becoming operational. Some officials believe that could delay its opening by nine to 12 months..

After Germany, Blinken will visit France and Italy as part of his weeklong tour, his first trips to all three nations as secretary of state.

Hungary's PM uses soccer to push vision of right-wing Europe

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Populist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has long used soccer to advance his right-wing politics, and now widespread international criticism of a new law seen as targeting the LGBT community has turned this month's European Championship into a major stage for his challenge to Europe's liberal values.

Last week, as more than 60,000 soccer fans poured into Budapest's Puskas Arena, an emblem of Orban's famous devotion to soccer, the Hungarian Parliament approved a controversial bill that bans sharing with minors any content portraying homosexuality or sex reassignment.

Human rights groups and liberal politicians in Hungary and from around Europe denounced the law as conflating homosexuality with pedophilia and as a draconian effort to push any representation of LGBT people into the shadows. Nearly half of the European Union's 27 member countries issued a statement calling it a "clear breach of (LGBT people's) fundamental right to dignity," and officials are examining whether the legislation contravenes EU law.

In a direct rebuke to the law, Munich's mayor and city council called for its stadium to be lit up with rainbow colors in a show of support for tolerance and gay rights when Germany plays Hungary on Wednesday at Euro 2020.

The controversy has turned the game into a symbolic showdown between competing visions for the future of Europe, pitting Orban's promotion of what he calls "illiberal democracy" against Western Europe's "liberal consensus."

UEFA, European soccer's governing body, said that while it understood the city's intention to send a message to promote inclusion, it denied the request because it considered it a political move. Other stadiums in Germany unaffiliated with the tournament will be allowed such displays and the team captain will wear a rainbow armband.

European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas slammed the UEFA decision, saying Wednesday he can't find "any reasonable excuse" for UEFA to reject Munich's plans.

Orban has been challenging the European consensus ever since he returned to power in 2010: frequently criticizing multiculturalism, curtailing media freedoms, and relentlessly campaigning against the EU itself, portraying Brussels as a modern heir to Soviet Moscow, which dominated Hungary for decades.

His message resonates with many Hungarians who resent interference and perceived condescension from the EU — and he has frequently shown himself adept at maneuvering around its policies, such as when he went out on his own to make Hungary the first EU country to procure Russian and Chinese COVID-19 vaccines not approved by European regulators.

The move — which has led Hungary to have the second-highest rate of vaccination in the EU — offered validation for his strategy of bucking the bloc's dictates, both increasing his power at home and challenging the EU's credibility and liberal values.

Fiercely opposed to immigration, he has blasted European leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for plans in 2015 to distribute the burden of that year's wave of refugees from the Middle East and Africa and refused to accept asylum seekers. His crackdowns on the media have led to "a degree of (state) media control unprecedented in an EU member state," according to Reporters Without Borders.

More recently, after his ruling Fidesz party broke with its center-right political group in the European Parliament, Orban has embarked on a mission to unite Europe's right-wing forces into a new political formation.

By all accounts a soccer fanatic and a former player himself, Orban has often used the sport as his preferred venue for pushing his political vision and amplifying his image as a man of the people.

Since the days of Hungary great Ferenc Puskas — widely regarded as one of the best players of all time who led "the Mighty Magyars" to the 1954 World Cup final and an Olympic gold medal at the 1952 Helsinki

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 69 of 70

Games — the country has never again achieved world-class status in soccer. But Orban has attempted to rekindle some of the old magic.

In 2007, he founded the Puskas Soccer Academy in his home village of Felcsut, where he had played semi-professionally in the 1990s. His government also introduced a scheme where companies may donate money to sports clubs in lieu of paying corporate tax, an arrangement that since 2010 has netted clubs as much as \$2.7 billion — money that critics say would have been better spent on Hungary's ailing health care sector.

The government also directly funds the sport, paying for several of the 32 stadiums that have been built or renovated in Hungary since Orban assumed power, making the structures something of a symbol of state largesse.

This major injection of capital into soccer has made games a popular meeting place for politicians and the politically connected. Orban is often photographed at games with some of Hungary's most successful businessmen, including billionaire Sandor Csanyi, Hungary's second wealthiest person who is also the president of the Hungarian soccer federation and a UEFA vice president.

The games themselves have also become battlegrounds for displays of Hungary's values. After a recent game in Budapest between Hungary's national team and Portugal, UEFA received complaints that Hungarian fans were carrying homophobic banners.

Video from the game also showed Hungarian fans chanting "Cristiano homosexual!" at Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo during the match. In 2017, FIFA, soccer's international governing body, fined the Hungarian soccer federation \$22,000 after Hungarian fans directed the same chant at Ronaldo at a World Cup qualifier in Budapest.

Earlier in the tournament, during a friendly match in Budapest between Ireland and Hungary, Hungarian fans booed Irish players as they knelt on the field as a sign of solidarity against racism.

Orban seized the opportunity to denounce the gesture that has swept Europe and the United States amid calls for action against racial injustice. He defended the fans, asserting that "politics has no place in sports," and chided the Irish national team, telling them not to "provoke the host if you come as a guest."

Hungarians only kneel before God, their country, and their lovers, he said.

Levente Toth, 45, a Hungarian fan who traveled to Munich to view Wednesday's game, said that he thought the push to illuminate Germany's stadium in rainbow colors "has no place in sports," adding that he thought opposition to the new law was "overblown" and echoing the typical message that the legislation protects children.

"No one wants to harm gays or people who think differently or people of different sexual orientations," he said.

But Toth said those displaying homophobic banners or engaging in hateful chants at games "should be lifted out of the crowd."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, June 24, the 175th day of 2021. There are 190 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 24, 1948, Communist forces cut off all land and water routes between West Germany and West Berlin, prompting the western allies to organize the Berlin Airlift.

On this date:

In 1497, the first recorded sighting of North America by a European took place as explorer John Cabot spotted land, probably in present-day Canada.

In 1807, a grand jury in Richmond, Virginia, indicted former Vice President Aaron Burr on charges of treason and high misdemeanor (he was later acquitted).

In 1880, "O Canada," the future Canadian national anthem, was first performed in Quebec City.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, June 24, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 352 ~ 70 of 70

In 1940, France signed an armistice with Italy during World War II.

In 1947, what's regarded as the first modern UFO sighting took place as private pilot Kenneth Arnold, an Idaho businessman, reported seeing nine silvery objects flying in a "weaving formation" near Mount Rainier in Washington.

In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Roth v. United States*, ruled 6-3 that obscene materials were not protected by the First Amendment.

In 1964, AT&T inaugurated commercial "Picturephone" service between New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C. (the service, however, never caught on).

In 1973, President Richard Nixon concluded his summit with the visiting leader of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, who hailed the talks in an address on American television.

In 1983, the space shuttle Challenger — carrying America's first woman in space, Sally K. Ride — coasted to a safe landing at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1992, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, strengthened its 30-year ban on officially sponsored worship in public schools, prohibiting prayer as a part of graduation ceremonies.

In 2015, a federal judge in Boston formally sentenced Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (joh-HAHR' tsahr-NEYE'-ehv) to death for the 2013 terror attacks. (A federal appeals court later threw out the sentence; the Supreme Court this fall will consider reinstating it.) Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley became the first southern governor to use his executive power to remove Confederate banners, as four flags with secessionist symbols were taken down from a large monument to rebel soldiers outside the state capitol in Montgomery.

In 2018, women in Saudi Arabia were able to drive for the first time, as the world's last remaining ban on female drivers was lifted.

Ten years ago: A defiant U.S. House voted overwhelmingly to deny President Barack Obama the authority to wage war against Libya, but Republicans fell short in an effort to actually cut off funds for the operation. New York State legalized same-sex marriage.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama created the first national monument to gay rights, designating the site of the 1969 Stonewall riots in Manhattan. Republican Donald Trump, visiting Scotland, hailed Britain's vote to leave the European Union, drawing parallels to the anger driving his own presidential campaign.

One year ago: Three white men were indicted on murder charges in the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was shot while running in a neighborhood near Georgia's coast. Wisconsin's governor activated the National Guard to protect state properties after a night of violent protests that included the toppling of two statues outside the state Capitol. The city of Charleston, South Carolina, removed a statue honoring John C. Calhoun, an early U.S. vice president and defender of slavery. The U.S. recorded a one-day total of 34,700 new confirmed COVID-19 cases, the highest level since late April, according to a count kept by Johns Hopkins University. Party officials confirmed that Democrats would hold an almost entirely virtual presidential nominating convention in Milwaukee in August. A divided federal appeals court ordered the dismissal of the criminal case against President Donald Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn, finding that the Justice Department's move to abandon the case settled the matter. (Flynn had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about conversations with the Russian ambassador.)

Today's Birthdays: Rock singer Arthur Brown is 79. Actor Michele Lee is 79. Actor-director Georg Stanford Brown is 78. Rock musician Jeff Beck is 77. Rock singer Colin Blunstone (The Zombies) is 76. Musician Mick Fleetwood is 74. Actor Peter Weller is 74. Rock musician John Illsley (Dire Straits) is 72. Actor Nancy Allen is 71. Reggae singer Derrick Simpson (Black Uhuru) is 71. Actor Joe Penny is 65. Singer-musician Andy McCluskey (Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark) is 62. R&B/pop singer-songwriter Siedah (sy-EE'-dah) Garrett is 61. Actor Iain Glen is 60. Rock singer Curt Smith is 60. Actor Danielle Spencer is 56. Actor Sherry Stringfield is 54. Singer Glenn Medeiros is 51. Actor Carla Gallo is 46. Actor Amir Talai (TV: "LA to Vegas") is 44. Actor-producer Mindy Kaling is 42. Actor Minka Kelly is 41. Actor Vanessa Ray is 40. Actor Justin Hires is 36. Actor Candice Patton is 36. Singer Solange Knowles is 35. Actor Max Ehrich is 30. Actor Beanie Feldstein is 28.