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

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"Tea - A Taste of Happiness"

Ladies' Luncheon & Program
Wednesday, July 21st at Noon
Bethesda Lutheran Church, Bristol
Silent Auction at 10:30

Door Prizes

Skit by the WELCA members

Advance tickets required: \$10

Call Kay Espeland 605-492-3507
Alice Jean Peterson 605-216-2835

Full or Part time help
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hours Monday-Friday
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SD.

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HELP

WANTED!

(0711.0808)

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Region VFW Baseball Tournament

Groton Sets The Stage For Victory With Early Lead Over Webster

SDVFW 14U Groton jumped out to an early lead over SDVFW 14U Webster and took home an 11-3 victory on Wednesday. SDVFW 14U Groton scored on a fielder's choice by Braxton Imrie in the first inning, a single by Korbin Kucker in the first inning, a single by Nicholas Morris in the first inning, a error in the second inning, a walk by Kucker in the second inning, and a stolen base by Imrie in the second inning.

SDVFW 14U Groton tallied four runs in the fifth inning. SDVFW 14U Groton big bats were led by Gavin Englund, Brevin Flihs, Teylor Diegel, and Imrie, all driving in runs in the inning.

Flihs got the win for SDVFW 14U Groton. The hurler allowed four hits and three runs over five innings, striking out seven. Kellen Antonsen threw two innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Ian Lesnar took the loss for SDVFW 14U Webster. The pitcher went one inning, allowing three runs on four hits and walking one.

SDVFW 14U Groton racked up 13 hits in the game. Diegel, Karsten Flihs, and Englund each had multiple hits for SDVFW 14U Groton. Diegel led SDVFW 14U Groton with three hits in four at bats.

SDVFW 14U Webster racked up five hits on the day. Matthew Mount and Trey Dunse all managed multiple hits for SDVFW 14U Webster.

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**School Board
Meeting
Thursday,
July 15, 2021
7 p.m. - GHS
Multipurpose Room**

Groton Legion Post #39 Can't Catch Up To Redfield

Groton Legion Post #39 fell behind early and couldn't come back in an 11-0 loss to Redfield on Wednesday. Redfield scored on a single by Camden Osborn and a stolen base by Keaton Rohlf in the first inning.

The Groton Legion Post #39 struggled to contain the high-powered offense of Redfield, giving up 11 runs. Redfield got things moving in the first inning, when Osborn singled on a 2-2 count, scoring one run.

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

Christian DeYoung was the winning pitcher for Redfield. The bulldog went five innings, allowing zero runs on three hits, striking out five and walking one.

Jackson Cogley took the loss for Groton Legion Post #39. The righty lasted three and two-thirds innings, allowing 12 hits and 11 runs.

Brodyn DeHoet, Cogley, and Larson each collected one hit to lead Groton Legion Post #39.

Redfield racked up 13 hits in the game. Osborn, Peyton Osborn, Owen Osborn, Rohlf, and Seth Siebrecht each collected multiple hits for Redfield. Redfield was sure-handed and didn't commit a single error. Rohlf made the most plays with six. Redfield stole nine bases during the game as three players stole more than one. Osborn led the way with four.

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South Dakota State University announces dean's list

BROOKINGS, S.D. - The following students have been named to the dean's list for academic excellence after the spring 2021 semester at South Dakota State University. To earn dean's list distinctions in SDSU's colleges, students must have completed a minimum of 12 credits and must have earned at least a 3.5 GPA on a 4.0 scale. Students with an asterisk received a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Cassandra Ann Townsend, Andover *

Matthew Robert Sperry, Bath *

Allison Lynn Duerre, Bristol

Kaitlyn Ann Anderson, Claremont

Dylan Michael Frey, Claremont *

Seth Allen Howell, Columbia

Cory Wren Murphy, Frederick *

Faith Emily Crissman, Groton

Patrick Collin Gengerke, Groton

Kelby Nathan Hawkins, Groton

Marshall McGregor Lane, Groton

Nicole Mabel Marzahn, Groton

Keri Jo Pappas, Groton

AnneMarie Lyn Smith, Groton *

Emily Anne Thompson, Groton *

Turner Thomas Webb, Groton

Chesney Jesine Olson, Langford *

Antique military vehicle parade coming to Groton

On July 28th there will be an antique military vehicle parade in Groton. It will consist of 45 antique vehicles and will start at the north end of Main street and go to the Legion on the south end. They will set up the vehicles for display and there will be coffee and doughnuts provided by the Legion. The parade will start at 9am. These individuals will only be in town until 9:45. They are traveling the Yellowstone Trail and have other stops to make. They have been doing this for a number of years on historic highways across the US.

From the MVPA Convoy

We are pleased to be in Groton for a quick breakfast stop. We will be following the Historic Yellowstone Trail Highway route from Aberdeen to Milbank on the first day of a 24 day convoy across the Midwest to eastern Ohio.

Our core purpose is to honor Veterans of All Wars with our vehicles and to show the American Public the vehicles used by our Veterans keep America free. These old war horses have been restored to original condition and are all privately owned. Our convoy averages about 30 mph across the historic highways of America. About half of the owners are Veterans, including Australian and New Zealanders.

We have completed two transcontinental convoys on the old Lincoln Highway (2009 & 2019), the Alaska Highway, Route 66, the Bankhead transcontinental Highway from Virginia to San Diego, and now a large part of the Yellowstone Trail.

This year we have about 40 historic military vehicles ranging from a 1918 Dodge Bros Staff car to a 1941 Packard Navy Staff Car, to many WWII Jeeps and Dodges, to the M-series trucks that fought in Vietnam. We have "heavies" such as deuces, 5 tons and 10 tons as well as newer Desert Storm era vehicles.

We are a non-profit and do not solicit any funds nor do we sell anything.

We plan on "racking and stacking" the convoy on Main Street in front of the Legion Post. We hope that the local residents will come out and see our vehicles and talk about their experiences in the Military. We also introduce these trucks to thousands of people who have never seen them before.

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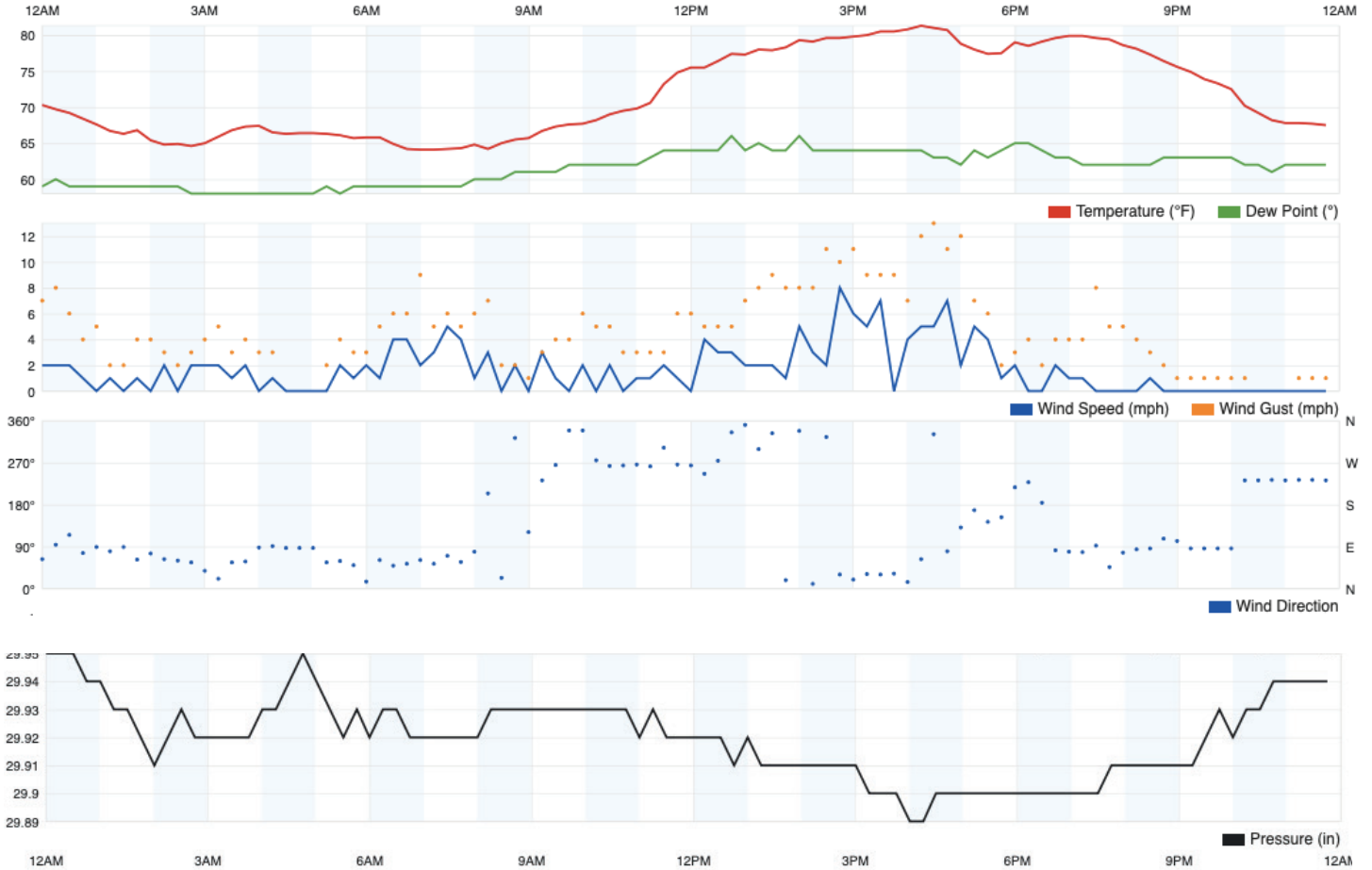
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*Product Price – Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes, freight, setup and handling charges may be additional and may vary. Models subject to limited availability. Specifications and programs are subject to change without notice. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications. †† As required by Kawasaki, horsepower tested in accordance with SAE J1995 and rated in accordance with SAE J2723 and certified by SAE International. **See your local Cub Cadet Independent Dealer for warranty details. © 2021 Cub Cadet3PV_Q_ECOMMERCE

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Patchy Fog then Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Sunny
High: 86 °F	Low: 59 °F	High: 88 °F	Low: 62 °F	High: 88 °F

Forecast High Temperatures

What We Know

- Near normal temperatures continue through the weekend
- Most of the forecast area will be dry during the 7-day

What Could Change

- High temperatures could trend warmer heading into next week

	7/15	7/16	7/17	7/18	7/19	7/20	7/21
	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
Aberdeen	88	89	88	88	93	94	95
Britton	85	86	85	86	90	91	92
Eagle Butte	84	87	88	87	89	91	93
Eureka	86	88	87	87	92	93	94
Gettysburg	84	86	84	84	88	89	91
Kennebec	83	85	85	83	86	89	91
McIntosh	85	89	88	89	91	91	94
Milbank	84	86	85	86	89	92	90
Miller	83	86	84	81	87	89	89
Mobridge	88	91	90	90	92	94	96
Murdo	84	90	88	88	88	91	94
Pierre	87	90	89	89	91	94	97
Redfield	85	87	86	84	89	91	92
Sisseton	85	87	86	87	91	91	91
Watertown	82	84	84	84	88	89	88
Wheaton	85	86	86	86	90	92	91

* Table values in °F



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD



Updated: 7/15/2021 3:04 AM Central

Most of the forecast area is going to experience a dry 7 day forecast through next Wednesday. All of the forecast area is going to see high temperatures trending to warmer than normal next week.

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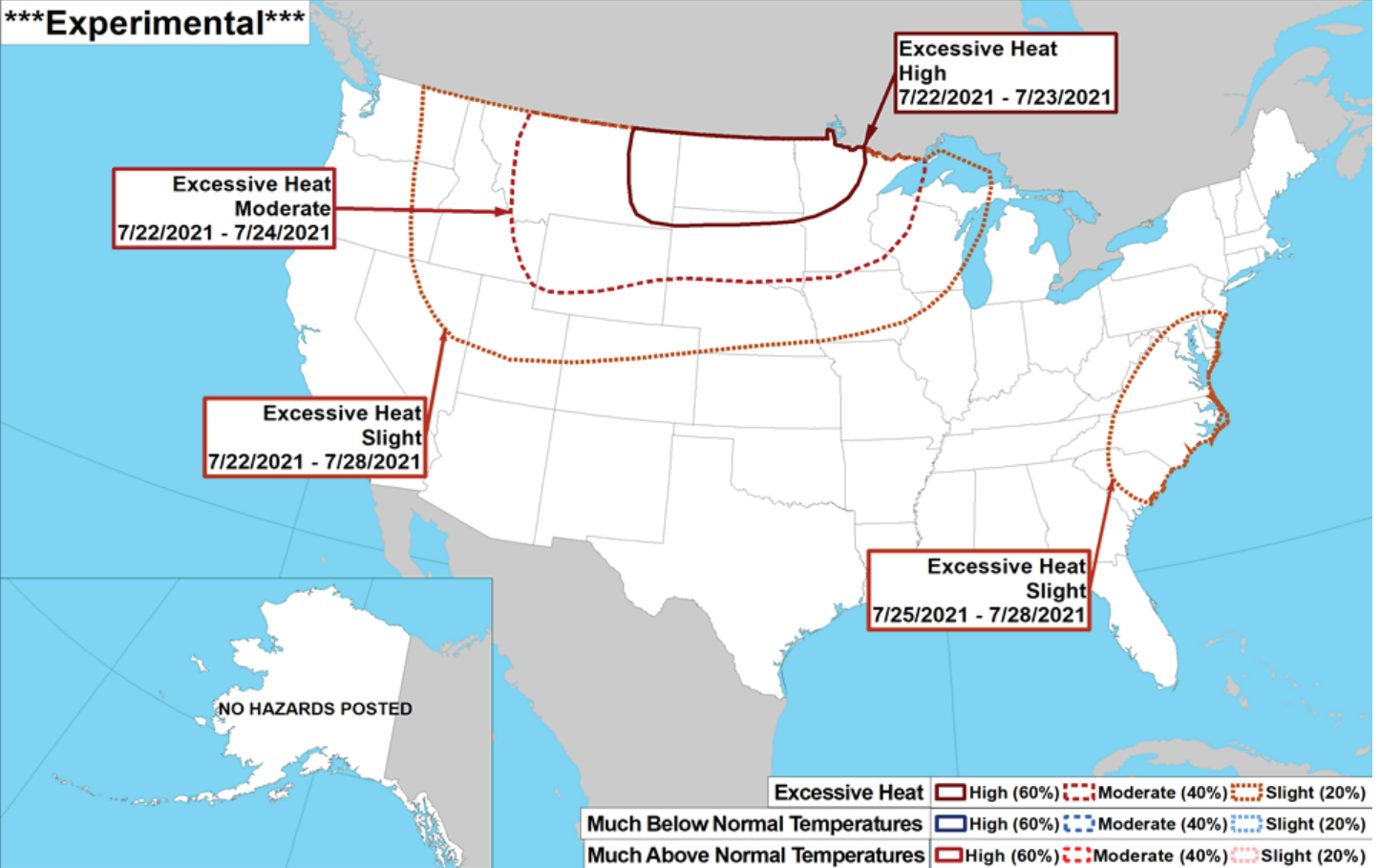
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Risk of Hazardous Temperatures Valid: 07/22/2021-07/28/2021



Experimental



Climate Prediction Center

Made: 07/14/2021 3PM EDT

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www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov

While still a ways out, confidence is already high for excessive heat to return to the region beginning by about this time next week. Parts of the Northern Great Plains and Upper Mississippi Valley may experience high temperatures near or above 100 F on multiple days, and daily records may even be in jeopardy. Just how hot it gets here in central and northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota will be much better determined over the next several days. Below average precipitation is forecast through this time as well. Find more information at <https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/.../pre.../threats/threats.php>.

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Today in Weather History

July 15, 1885: The first of three damaging tornadoes hit 7 miles NNE of Highmore, Hyde County, and moved to the northeast. Two small homes were destroyed before the funnel turned to the east, then northeast and north before lifting. This tornado was estimated to have an F2 strength and was seen in all directions for 20 miles. The second tornado appeared to be motionless 3 miles east of Harrold, and then moved east to Holabird, in Hyde County, where it destroyed two homes and dissipated. A third tornado, this one with an estimated F3 strength, formed to the west of Highmore and moved east into town, then lifted about 4 miles east of town. Three homes were destroyed, and about 20 other buildings were damaged at Highmore. A farmer was killed 2 miles east of town. Losses totaled about \$55,000, which included many new buildings, including a church and a skating rink.

July 15, 1986: Thunderstorms brought locally heavy rainfall to portions of Walworth to Marshall Counties. Three inches of rain in an hour and a half was reported in extreme northwest Marshall County. The highest rainfall amount was seven inches southeast of Bowdle. The rains caused lowland flooding, with water over several roads in Marshall County, including Highway 10, two miles east of Britton. In Britton, 3.86 inches of rain was reported.

July 15, 2006: Record heat occurred across central and north central South Dakota and into parts of northeast South Dakota. Afternoon high temperatures ranged from 105 to as high as 120 degrees. Record highs were set at Pierre, Mobridge, Kennebec, and Timber Lake. Pierre set a new all-time record high of 117 degrees, and Mobridge tied their all-time record high of 116 degrees. Kennebec and Timber Lake both hit a record high temperature of 112 degrees. The coop observer station 17 miles west-southwest of Fort Pierre tied the state record high temperature with 120 degrees. Other high temperatures for the day were 116 degrees at Onida and Mission Ridge, 114 degrees at Murdo, 112 degrees at Redfield and Blunt, 111 degrees at Stephan, 110 degrees at Conde and Gann Valley, and 109 degrees at Aberdeen.

July 15, 2011: A large upper-level high-pressure area built over the region bringing sweltering and humid conditions. This heat was the worst to hit the area since July 2006. Beginning on Friday, July 15th and persisting through Wednesday, July 20th, many locations experienced high temperatures in the 90s to lower 100s, with low temperatures in the 70s at night. Also, humidity levels rose to extreme levels. Surface dew point temperatures in the 70s and lower 80s brought extreme heat index values of up to 110 to 125 degrees. The dew points were some of the highest ever recorded in the region on July 17th. The dew point at Aberdeen tied the previous record with 82 degrees. Sisseton also tied their record with 83 degrees. Watertown came a degree shy of matching their record with 80 degrees.

The prolonged heat took its toll on livestock with fifteen hundred cattle perishing during the heat. Numerous sports and outdoor activities were canceled. Some of the highest heat index values included; 110 degrees at Mobridge; 111 degrees at Watertown; 113 degrees at Miller and Gettysburg; 114 degrees at Wheaton and Faulkton; 116 degrees at Pierre; 118 degrees at Sisseton; and 121 degrees at Aberdeen. The highest heat index value occurred at Leola with a temperature of 98 degrees and a dewpoint of 82 degrees, and the heat index hit 125 degrees. Click [HERE](#) for more information.

1888: The Bandai volcano erupts on the Japanese island of Honshu on this day in 1888, killing hundreds and burying many nearby villages in ash.

1901: The city of Marquette, Michigan set their all-time record high temperature with 108-degree reading.

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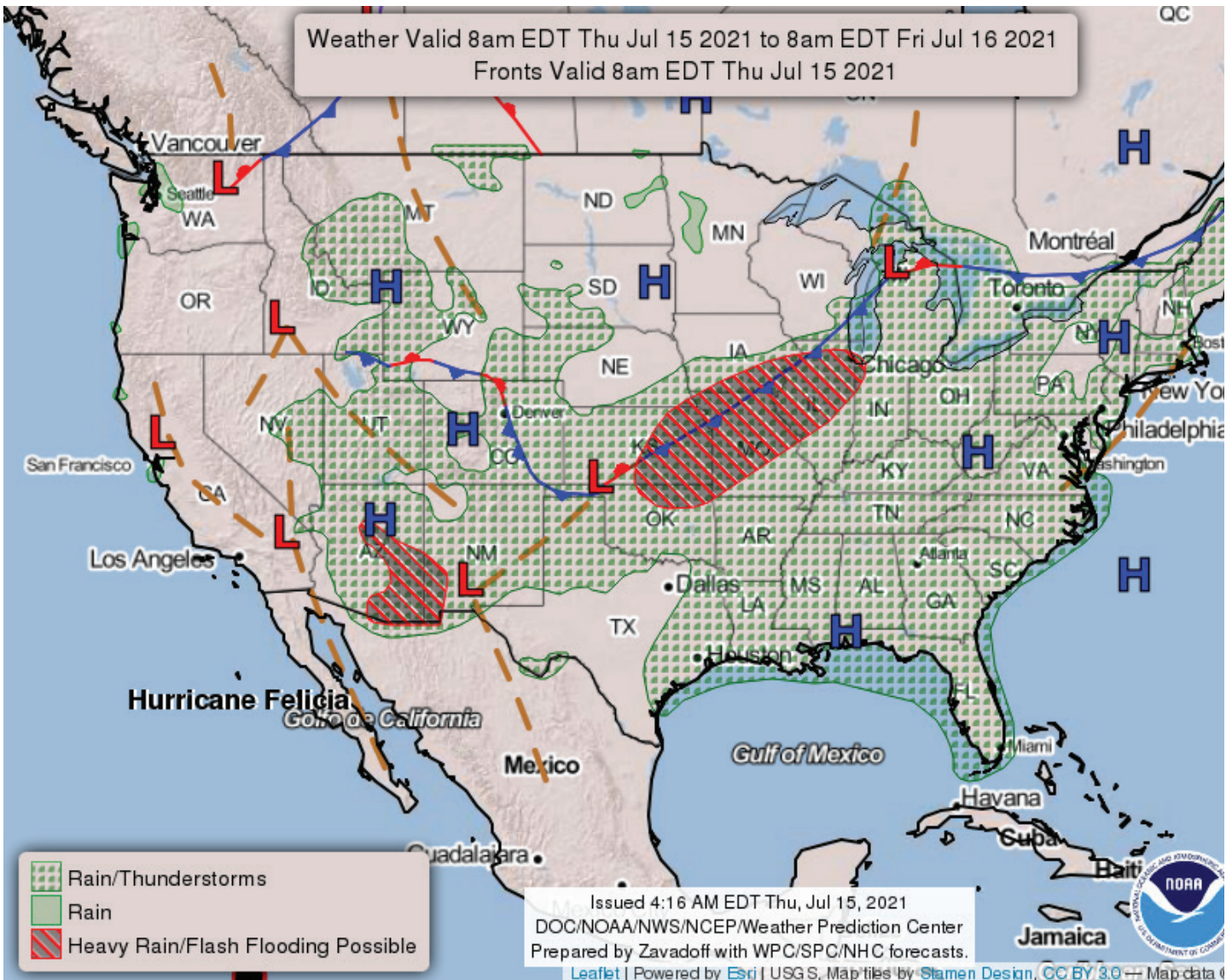
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 4:09 PM
Low Temp: 64 °F at 7:06 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 4:21 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 114° in 1931
Record Low: 41° in 1912
Average High: 85°F
Average Low: 60°F
Average Precip in July.: 1.59
Precip to date in July.: 1.73
Average Precip to date: 12.60
Precip Year to Date: 6.48
Sunset Tonight: 9:19 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:01 a.m.



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GOD'S WAY – THE ONLY WAY

There is, perhaps, no more reassuring picture of God's presence and protection than that of a shepherd carrying a sheep or leading and protecting his flock. In fact, that image which we recall from Psalm 23 brings us comfort and assurance whenever we face insecure moments when our lives are filled with uncertainties. It brings to memory the grace and goodness, mercy and might, tenderness and thoughtfulness of our God.

In bringing Psalm 77 to a conclusion, our author presents a picture of the Good Shepherd – the One who was with the children of Israel and of the One who would come as Redeemer and one day Ruler. He writes, "You led your people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

Can you picture in your mind the scene he wanted those who read this Psalm to visualize in their minds? Seas writhing and convulsing, drenching rains falling from dark clouds that covered their path; skies that cried out and echoed with deafening thunder; flaming arrows flying above their heads; a whirlwind with noise and lightning; earthquakes that shook the ground under their feet. He wanted to remind them that through it all and in it all was their Creator-Sustainer-God who not only brought them into existence and would not let them perish, but had a plan and purpose for their lives.

Listen carefully to what the Psalmist said to them at that moment in their journey then, and hear what he is saying to us today: "Whenever life seems to be coming to an end, it is only the beginning for My chosen. I am your Shepherd and will love you and lead you. You are mine, and no one can take you from me! I am and always will be with you."

Prayer: May we sense Your presence at all times and in all places, Father, and be assured that You are with us. Help us to trust in Your love! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Psalm 77:20

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
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

05-12-18-22-29

(five, twelve, eighteen, twenty-two, twenty-nine)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

19-22-46-48-51, Star Ball: 10, ASB: 2

(nineteen, twenty-two, forty-six, forty-eight, fifty-one; Star Ball: ten; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$8.04 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$117 million

Powerball

33-46-52-59-62, Powerball: 10, Power Play: 2

(thirty-three, forty-six, fifty-two, fifty-nine, sixty-two; Powerball: ten; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$137 million

Nebraska resumes reporting some coronavirus statistics

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Two weeks after Nebraska quit publicly reporting daily coronavirus statistics, the state launched a new website Wednesday to provide weekly updates on some of the information.

The state's decision to stop providing daily COVID-19 updates was widely criticized by health experts who use the data to track the virus' spread.

"I don't think that was a well-timed decision," said Dr. James Lawler, who is one of the leaders of the Global Center for Health Security at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. "I think that if you are trying to drive down a rivet at night in the rain, blindfolding yourself is probably not the best idea."

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services spokeswoman Olga Dack said the state's new website will be updated on Wednesdays with some of the latest information about the virus' spread. The site includes the number of virus cases, hospitalizations and deaths in the state along with statistics on the vaccination campaign, but it doesn't include as much detail as the previous version of the dashboard.

Dack said that part of the problem is that much of the data the state had been reporting previously is covered by state and federal health privacy laws, which were suspended as long as the state's official virus emergency continued but that ended June 30. The executive orders that allowed HHS to release potentially identifiable information on the dashboard expired when the emergency ended.

Nebraska is not alone in changing what virus data it reports, but most states have continued to update their online COVID-19 dashboards at least on weekdays. Iowa and South Dakota recently switched to reporting virus data only on a weekly basis.

In South Dakota, health officials also stopped holding monthly news conferences. They justified the decision to scale back reporting because infection rates in the state hit their lowest rate since the pandemic began. But state health officials also have continued to issue reminders that the pandemic is not over and the delta variant poses a new threat.

South Dakota state epidemiologist Josh Clayton last month said he is concerned that coronavirus cases in the state will follow a similar trend as last year, slowing during the summer only to make a resurgence in the fall.

Although health officials say they still think the state can reach a goal of getting 70% of eligible people

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vaccinated, the rate of vaccinations has slowed to a trickle. About 53% of eligible people have been fully vaccinated, according to the Department of Health.

Iowa health officials said switching to weekly updates is part of the state's "transition to COVID-19 pandemic recovery." Gov. Kim Reynolds has said she believes it is time for the state to get back to normal now that case counts have slowed and nearly half of Iowa's population has been vaccinated.

When Nebraska stopped reporting virus statistics late last month, officials said data on the pandemic will still be available through public records requests, and they said statistics on the virus' spread are available from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But they said the data reported on those sites may differ from what the state had been reporting. And television station KETV reported that its public records request for COVID-19 case and vaccination numbers was denied.

In the weeks since the state stopped providing the figures, Nebraska has seen its cases per week nearly double as the highly contagious delta variant of the virus spreads. CDC figures showed 489 cases last week, up from 456 the week before and 253 cases two weeks earlier.

Nationwide, the average number of new cases doubled over the past three weeks, going from 11,300 a day on June 23 to about 23,600 a day on Monday.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska has more than doubled over the past two weeks from 43 new cases per day on June 28 to 86.29 new cases per day on Monday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

On its new website, the state reported 225,600 virus cases and 2,267 deaths on Wednesday. That is up from 224,488 cases and 2,261 deaths that were reported June 30 on the last day of the old dashboard, but the demographic and regional breakdowns of the data the state used to provide are gone.

Nebraska said 78 people are now hospitalized with the virus, up from 28 on June 30 but still well below last November's peak of 987.

The state also said that 49.1% of Nebraska's residents have now been fully vaccinated against the virus.

Lawler said the state virus dashboards have been a valuable source of information throughout the pandemic even though the data reported in each state has varied. For instance, he said, only about half the states are reporting cumulative hospitalization data by age groups, so it's not clear how many children have been hospitalized.

"We have to extrapolate and do estimates to try and arrive at that number. In 2021, that's just nuts. There's no excuse," Lawler said. "I've rarely seen a situation where more data is a bad thing — and certainly not in emergencies."

Indigenous children's remains turned over from Army cemetery

By MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

CARLISLE, Pa. (AP) — The disinterred remains of nine Native American children who died more than a century ago while attending a government-run school in Pennsylvania were headed home to Rosebud Sioux tribal lands in South Dakota on Wednesday after a ceremony returning them to relatives.

The handoff at a graveyard on the grounds of the U.S. Army's Carlisle Barracks was part of the fourth set of transfers to take place since 2017. The remains of an Alaskan Aleut child were returned to her tribe earlier this summer.

"We want our children home no matter how long it takes," said U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who in June announced a nationwide investigation into the boarding schools that attempted to assimilate Indigenous children into white society.

Haaland, the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary, said at the event that "forced assimilation practices" stripped away the children's clothing, their language and their culture. She said the government aims to locate the schools and burial sites and identify the names and tribal affiliations of children from the boarding schools around the country.

Nearly a thousand unmarked graves have been discovered in recent months at former residential school sites for Indigenous children in Canada.

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In Pennsylvania, the nine sets of remains inside small wooden coffins were carried past a phalanx of tribal members and well-wishers before being loaded into a vehicle trailer to be driven to Sioux City, Iowa. The children died between 1880 and 1910.

Ione Quigley, the tribe's historic preservation officer, recounted how she attended the disinterment earlier this week and used red ochre to prepare the remains in a traditional way.

"We got everything done as respectfully and honorably as possible," Quigley said.

Russell Eagle Bear, a Rosebud Sioux tribal council representative, said a lodge was being prepared for a Friday ceremony at a Missouri River landing near Sioux City where children boarded a steamboat for the journey to the government-run Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

The Carlisle school, founded by an Army officer, took drastic steps to separate Native American students from their culture, including cutting their braids, dressing them in military-style uniforms and punishing them for speaking their native languages. They were forced to adopt European names.

More than 10,000 Native American children were taught there and endured harsh conditions that sometimes led to death from such diseases as tuberculosis.

Eagle Bear said children from the tribe endured ridicule along the trip to Carlisle in 1879, three years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Tribal officials said that when the remains arrive in South Dakota, some will be buried in a veterans' cemetery and others are destined for family graveyards.

"We're here today and we are going to take our children home," Eagle Bear said to about 100 attendees on Wednesday. "We have a big homecoming on the other end."

Since August 2017, the Army has disinterred 22 remains of Native American children from the cemetery, including the 10 that occurred this year. In previous years, remains were turned over to the Northern Arapaho, Blackfeet, Oglala Sioux, Oneida, Omaha, Modoc and Iowa tribes.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. July 13, 2021.

Editorial: AG Car Accident Finds A New Twist

The tragedy of last September's car accident involving South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg has taken a new twist that adds more mystery and pain to what has been a slow-motion search for accountability, but it also stands as an essential part of this process.

Late on Sept. 12, a vehicle driven by Ravnsborg struck a pedestrian, Joe Boever, who was walking on the side of a highway in Hyde County. Ravnsborg, knowing he had struck something given the damage to his vehicle, contacted the sheriff, who then allowed the AG to drive to Pierre in another vehicle. The next morning, Ravnsborg returned to the crash site to, he said, clear debris from the road, and that's when he found Boever's body.

Late last week, Ravnsborg's attorney filed a motion asking that Boever's "psychiatric and/or psychological records" be included in the court proceedings because, the defense now alleges, Boever may have been suicidal and could have possibly thrown himself in front of Ravnsborg's car on that dark night. The judge granted the request.

To most of us, this filing looks like a desperate tactic to shift the blame in the incident to the victim. However, it's spurred by a claim made by one of the victim's cousins who said, "I believe with a very high degree of confidence Joe committed suicide."

Another Boever cousin, Nick Nemec, disagreed with the accusation and criticized the maneuver as a "fishing expedition." Yet another Boever cousin, Victor Nemec, also dismissed the charge, noting Boever had said "suicide is not an option."

This has turned what has already been an issue filled with grim twists and turns into an even darker episode.

But Ravnsborg, who is scheduled to go to trial late next month on misdemeanor charges related to the

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incident, does have the right to a fair trial, like any person, and is presumed innocent until proven guilty. And if this latest defensive tactic is part of that path, it can be given due consideration.

However, it remains difficult to find much sympathy for the attorney general in this tragic situation.

He is facing three misdemeanor charges — using an electronic device while driving, illegal lane change and careless driving — none of which technically have anything to do with Boever's death. So, trying to, in effect, shift the blame to a dead man whose own death isn't even the subject of any legal charge here is a bluntly calculated maneuver.

This is an effort to change the perception of the situation. An investigation of the scene indicated the collision occurred on the shoulder of the highway, and the victim's glasses were found in the car after his head smashed into the windshield on the impact. Claiming now that this may have happened more in the middle of the road and was part of a suicide attempt seems to be a reach.

Ultimately, the latest tactic might be viewed as an attempt to change the focus of this matter in order to salvage the political fortunes of the accused, who is up for reelection next year.

But again, this is Ravensborg's right and it is part of our judicial process.

However, this latest twist also magnifies the pain for Boever's family and friends — which may be legally irrelevant, but it is not unimportant — and it continues to drag out a process that has already gone on for too long.

South Dakotans will certainly watch all this play out to its conclusion, but no matter the outcome, there can be no sense of satisfaction, one way or the other.

END

Vaccine deliveries rising as delta virus variant slams Asia

By DAVID RISING and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — As many Asian countries battle their worst surge of COVID-19 infections, the slow flow of vaccine doses from around the world is finally picking up speed, giving hope that low inoculation rates can increase and help blunt the effect of the rapidly spreading delta variant.

With many vaccine pledges still unfulfilled and rates of infection spiking across multiple countries, however, experts say more needs to be done to help nations struggling with the overflow of patients and shortages of oxygen and other critical supplies.

Some 1.5 million doses of the Moderna vaccine arrived Thursday afternoon in Indonesia, which has become a dominant hot spot with record high infections and deaths.

The U.S. shipment follows 3 million other American doses that arrived Sunday, and 11.7 million doses of AstraZeneca that have come in batches since March through the U.N.-backed COVAX mechanism, the last earlier this week.

"It's quite encouraging," said Sowmya Kadandale, health chief in Indonesia of UNICEF, which is in charge of the distribution of vaccines provided through COVAX. "It seems now to be, and not just in Indonesia, a race between the vaccines and the variants, and I hope we win that race."

Many, including the World Health Organization, have been critical of the vaccine inequalities in the world, pointing out that many wealthy nations have more than half of their populations at least partially vaccinated, while the vast majority of people in lower-income countries are still waiting on a first dose.

The International Red Cross warned this week of a "widening global vaccine divide" and said wealthy countries needed to increase the pace of following through on their pledges.

"It's a shame it didn't happen earlier and can't happen faster," Alexander Matheou, the Asia-Pacific director of the Red Cross, said of the recent uptick in deliveries. "There's no such thing as too late — vaccinating people is always worth doing — but the later the vaccines come, the more people will die."

Vietnam, Thailand and South Korea have all imposed new lockdown restrictions over the past week as they struggle to contain rapidly rising infections amid sluggish vaccination campaigns.

In South Korea — widely praised for its initial response to the pandemic that included extensive testing and contact tracing — a shortage in vaccines has left 70% of the population still waiting for their first shot.

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Thailand, which only started its mass vaccination in early June, is seeing skyrocketing cases and record deaths, and only about 15% of people have had at least one shot. In Vietnam, only about 4% have.

"Parts of the world ... are talking about reclaiming lost freedoms such as going back to work, opening the cinemas and restaurants," Matheou told The Associated Press. "This part of the world is far away from that."

Indonesia started aggressively vaccinating earlier than many in the region, negotiating bilaterally with China for the Sinovac jabs. Now about 14% of its population — the fourth largest in the world — has at least one dose of a vaccine, primarily Sinovac. Several countries also have their own production capabilities, including South Korea, Japan and Thailand, but still need more doses to fill the needs of the region's huge population.

"Both Moderna and AstraZeneca have been really critical in ramping up these numbers and ensuring that the supplies are available," said UNICEF's Kadandale, noting that Indonesia plans to have some additional 208.2 million people vaccinated by year's end and is giving 1 million shots daily. "Every single dose does make a huge difference."

Many other countries in the region have vaccination rates far below Indonesia's for a variety of reasons, including production and distribution issues as well as an initial wait-and-see attitude from many early on when numbers were low and there was less of a sense of urgency.

Some were shocked into action after witnessing the devastation in India in April and May as the country's health system collapsed under a severe spike in cases that caught the government unprepared and led to mass fatalities.

At the same time, India — a major regional producer of vaccines — stopped exporting doses so that it could focus on its own suffering population.

The U.S. has sent tens of millions of vaccine doses to multiple countries in Asia recently, part of President Joe Biden's pledge to provide 80 million doses, including Vietnam, Laos, South Korea and Bangladesh. The U.S. plans to donate an additional 500 million vaccines globally in the next year, and 200 million by the end of 2021.

"Indonesia is a critical partner for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia and the vaccines come without strings attached," said Scott Hartmann, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta. "We're doing this with the object of saving lives and ending the global pandemic, and equitable global access to safe and effective vaccines is essential."

Earlier in the week, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, whose country is one of the largest financial backers of COVAX, accused Russia and China of using their delivery of vaccines for policy leverage.

"We note, in particular with China, that the supply of vaccines was also used to make very clear political demands of various countries," he said, without providing specific examples.

There are also growing questions about the effectiveness of China's Sinovac vaccine against the delta variant of the virus.

Thai officials said that booster doses of AstraZeneca would be given to front-line medical personnel who earlier received two doses of Sinovac, after a nurse who received two doses of Sinovac died Saturday after contracting COVID-19.

Sinovac has been authorized by WHO for emergency use but Indonesia also said it was planning boosters for health workers, using some of the newly delivered Moderna doses, after reports that some of the health workers who had died since June had been fully vaccinated with the Chinese shot.

"We have still found people getting severe symptoms or dying even when they are vaccinated," Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist with the University of Indonesia, said about the Sinovac shot. "It's only proven that some vaccines are strong enough to face the delta variant — AstraZeneca, Moderna and Pfizer seem capable."

While the majority of recent deliveries have been American, Japan was sending 1 million doses of AstraZeneca on Thursday each to Indonesia, Taiwan and Vietnam as part of bilateral deals, and Vietnam said it was receiving 1.5 million more AstraZeneca doses from Australia.

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The Philippines is expecting a total of 16 million doses in July, including 3.2 million from the U.S. later this week, 1.1 million from Japan, 132,000 of Sputnik V from Russia, as well as others through COVAX.

Japan is also sending 11 million through COVAX this month to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Iran, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and others.

Canada this week committed an additional 17.7 million surplus doses to the 100 million already pledged through COVAX, which is coordinated by Gavi, a vaccine alliance. France delivered 1.7 million doses worldwide through June with COVAX and is sending millions more this summer.

In addition to distributing some donated vaccines, financial contributions to COVAX also help fund the purchase of doses to distribute for free to 92 low or moderate income nations.

Earlier this month, it took blistering criticism from the African Union for how long it was taking for vaccines to reach the continent, noting that just 1% of Africans are fully vaccinated.

Gavi said the vaccine shortfall so far this year is because the major COVAX supplier, the Serum Institute of India, diverted production to domestic use.

In its latest supply forecast, however, Gavi shows deliveries just beginning a sharp uptick and still on track to meet the goal of about 1.5 billion doses by year's end, representing 23% coverage in lower and middle income nations, and more than 5 billion doses by the end of 2022.

"It's better to focus on vaccinating the world and to avoid hoarding doses," said Matheou of the Red Cross. "Sharing vaccines makes everyone safer."

More than 20 dead, dozens missing in heavy Europe floods

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — More than 20 people have died and dozens of people are missing in Germany and neighboring Belgium after heavy flooding turned streams and streets into raging torrents, sweeping away cars and causing buildings to collapse.

Storms across parts of western Europe in recent days caused rivers and reservoirs to burst their banks, resulting in flash floods as rain-soaked soil failed to absorb any more water.

Authorities in the western German region of Euskirchen said Thursday that eight deaths had been reported there in connection with the floods. Rescue operations were hampered by the fact that phone and internet connections were down in parts of the county, which is southwest of Cologne.

Police in the western city of Koblenz said four people had died in Ahrweiler county. Up to 70 people were reported missing after several houses collapsed overnight in the village of Schuld in the Eifel, a volcanic region of rolling hills and small valleys southwest of Cologne.

Dozens more were trapped on the roofs of their houses awaiting rescue. Authorities used inflatable boats and helicopters, and the German army deployed 200 soldiers to assist in the rescue operation.

"There are people dead, there are people missing, there are many who are still in danger," the governor of Rhineland-Palatinate state, Malu Dreyer, told the regional parliament. "We have never seen such a disaster. It's really devastating."

Across the border in Belgium, the Vesdre river broke its banks and sent masses of water churning through the streets of Pepinster, close to Liege, its destructive power bringing down some buildings.

"Several homes have collapsed," mayor Philippe Godin told RTBF network. It was unclear whether all inhabitants had been able to escape unhurt.

In eastern Eupen, on the German border, one man was reported dead after he was swept away by a torrent, a local governor told RTBF network. Another man was reported missing in eastern Belgium, where some towns saw water levels rise to unprecedented levels and had their centers turned into gushing rivers.

Major highways were inundated and in the south and east of the nation, the railway service said all traffic was stopped.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to help those affected.

"My thoughts are with the families of the victims of the devastating floods in Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands and those who have lost their homes," she tweeted. "The EU is ready to help."

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The full extent of the damage across the region was still unclear after many villages were cut off by floodwater and landslides that made roads impassable. Videos posted on social media showed cars floating down streets and houses partly collapsed in some places.

Many of the dead were only discovered after floodwaters began to recede again. Police said four people died in separate incidents after their basements were flooded in Cologne, Kamen and Wuppertal, where authorities warned that a dam threatened to burst.

Authorities in the Rhine-Sieg county south of Cologne ordered the evacuation of several villages below the Steinbachtal reservoir amid fears the dam there could also break.

A fireman drowned Wednesday during rescue work in the western German town of Altena and another collapsed during rescue operations at a power plant in Werdohl-Elverlingsen. One man was missing in the eastern town of Joehstadt after disappearing while trying to secure his property from rising waters, authorities said.

Rail connections were suspended in large parts of North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany's most populous state. Governor Armin Laschet, who is running to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor in this fall's German election, was expected to visit the flood-hit city of Hagen later Thursday.

German weather service DWD predicted the rainfall would ease Thursday, though there might still be localized storms.

Authorities in the southern Dutch town of Valkenburg, close to the German and Belgian borders, evacuated a care home and a hospice overnight amid flooding that turned the tourist town's main street into a river, Dutch media reported.

The Dutch government sent some 70 troops to the southern province of Limburg late Wednesday to help with tasks including transporting evacuees and filling sandbags as rivers burst their banks.

A section of one of the Netherlands' busiest highways was closed due to rising floodwaters threatening to inundate the road and Dutch media showed a group of holidaymakers being rescued from a hotel window with the help of an earth mover.

Unusually intense rains have also inundated a swath of northeast France this week, downing trees and forcing the closure of dozens of roads. A train route to Luxembourg was disrupted, and firefighters evacuated dozens of people from homes near the Luxembourg and German border and in the Marne region, according to local broadcaster France Bleu.

The equivalent of two months of rain has fallen on some areas in the last one or two days, according to the French national weather service. With the ground already saturated, the service forecast more downpours Thursday and issued flood warnings for 10 regions.

Meanwhile, high temperatures of 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit) or higher were expected Thursday in parts of northern Europe.

The night between Wednesday and Thursday was the hottest in history, the Finnish weather service company Foreca said Thursday with the mercury reaching 24.2 Celsius degrees (75.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, tweeted that the extreme weather of recent days should not be regarded as "the new normal."

"We're at the very beginning of a climate and ecological emergency, and extreme weather events will only become more and more frequent," she said on Twitter.

Authoritarianism advances as world battles the pandemic

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Here's some of what happened while the world was distracted by the coronavirus: Hungary banned the public depiction of homosexuality. China shut Hong Kong's last pro-democracy newspaper. Brazil's government extolled dictatorship. And Belarus hijacked a passenger plane to arrest a journalist.

COVID-19 has absorbed the world's energies and isolated countries from one another, which may have accelerated the creep of authoritarianism and extremism across the globe, some researchers and activists believe.

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"COVID is a dictator's dream opportunity," said Theary Seng, a Cambodian-American human rights lawyer who has been indicted on charges including treason in the ostensibly democratic southeast Asian nation, where Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in power for more than three decades.

Human Rights Watch accuses Cambodia's government of using the pandemic as cover to imprison political opponents without due process. Scores have been indicted and face mass trials.

When it comes to government opposition, "the fear of COVID, on its own and as a political weapon, has substantially restricted mobility for a gathering or movement to take shape," Seng said.

The biggest global public health emergency in a century has handed power to government authorities and restricted life for billions of people.

Luke Cooper, a London School of Economics researcher and author of the book "Authoritarian Contagion," said the vast economic, health and social resources poured into fighting the pandemic mean "the state is back as a force to manage society and to deliver public goods."

Restrictions on civil liberties or political opponents have been stepped up during the pandemic on several continents.

For a decade in Hungary, conservative nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has curtailed media and judicial freedom, criticized multiculturalism and attacked Muslim migrants as a threat to Europe's Christian identity.

During the pandemic, Orban's government brought in an emergency powers bill allowing it to implement resolutions without parliamentary approval -- effectively a license to rule by decree. In June, it passed a law prohibiting the sharing of content portraying homosexuality or sex reassignment with anyone under 18. The government claims the purpose is to protect children from pedophiles, but it effectively outlawed discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools and the media.

Poland's conservative government has chipped away at the rights of women and gay people. A ruling last year by a government-controlled court that imposed a near-total ban on abortion triggered a wave of protests that defied a ban on mass gatherings during the virus outbreak.

In India, the world's biggest democracy, populist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been accused of trying to silence voices critical of his administration's response to a brutal pandemic wave that tore through the country in April and May. His government has arrested journalists and ordered Twitter to remove posts that criticized its handling of the outbreak after introducing sweeping regulations that give it more power to police online content.

Even before the pandemic, Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was accused by opponents of squashing dissent and introducing policies aimed at refashioning a multifaith democracy into a Hindu nation that discriminates against Muslims and other minorities.

In Russia, the government of President Vladimir Putin has used the pandemic as its latest excuse to arrest opposition figures. Associates of jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny have been subjected to house arrest and charges that the mass protests against his arrest violated regulations on mass gatherings.

In neighboring Belarus, authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko extended his quarter-century iron grip on power by winning an August 2020 election that the opposition -- and many Western countries -- said was rigged. The huge protests that erupted were met with tear gas, rubber bullets and mass arrests.

Then, in May, a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius was forced to land in the Belarusian capital of Minsk after the crew was told of an alleged threat. Opposition journalist Raman Pratasevic, a passenger, was taken off the plane along with his girlfriend and arrested.

Western nations called the forced diversion a brazen hijacking and slapped sanctions on Belarus, but those seem unlikely to induce Lukashenko to change his ways and underscore the weakness of democracies in confronting hardline regimes. Hungary's acts have drawn sharp words from fellow European Union leaders, but the 27-nation bloc has no unified response to restrictive regimes like those in Hungary or Poland.

Even before COVID-19 came along, extremism was on the march.

"Over the last 15 years, authoritarian politics has replicated all over the world," Cooper said. "Democracy feels very fragile. Democracy doesn't have a clear vision for what it's trying to do in the 21st century."

The 2008 global financial crisis, which saw governments pump billions into teetering banks, shook con-

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fidence in the Western world order. And the years of recession and government austerity that followed boosted populism in Europe and North America.

In China, authorities saw the 2008 economic crash as evidence that they, and not the world's democracies, were on the right path.

Historian Rana Mitter, director of the University of Oxford China Center, said the crisis persuaded China's communist government that "the West no longer had lessons to teach them." Since then, Beijing has increasingly flexed China's economic muscle abroad while cracking down on opposition inside its borders.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Muslim Uyghurs have been confined in re-education camps in China's western Xinjiang region, where activists and former detainees accuse authorities of imposing forced labor, systematic forced birth control and torture. Beijing instead characterizes the camps as vocational training centers.

Beijing also has tightened control on Hong Kong, stifling dissent in the former British colony. Protesters, publishers and journalists critical of Beijing have been jailed and the last remaining pro-democracy newspaper, Apple Daily, stopped publishing in June after the arrest of its top editors and executives.

When the coronavirus first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan, authorities responded firmly -- though far from transparently -- with draconian lockdowns that got the virus in check.

Mitter said the pandemic has cemented a view -- among many ordinary Chinese, as well as the country's leaders -- "that something had gone very wrong in terms of the way in which the democratic world had dealt with the virus, and something had gone right in China."

"That is now being used very much as a lesson, not just about the pandemic, but about the virtues of China's system as opposed to the systems of liberal countries," he said.

Last year, curfews and travel restrictions also became commonplace across Europe. People in France needed to show a signed declaration to travel more than 1 kilometer (just over a half-mile) from home. And Britons were banned by law from going on vacation abroad, while some attendees at a London vigil for a murdered woman were arrested for gathering illegally.

British lawmakers have expressed concern about the scope of the Conservative government's emergency powers, many passed without debate in Parliament.

"Since March 2020, the government has introduced a large volume of new legislation, much of it transforming everyday life and introducing unprecedented restrictions on ordinary activities," said Ann Taylor, an opposition Labour Party politician who chairs the House of Lords Constitution Committee. "Yet parliamentary oversight of these significant policy decisions has been extremely limited."

Politicians and intelligence agencies in the West also have warned of the threat from coronavirus conspiracy theories that dovetail with existing extremist narratives. Many countries have seen large anti-lockdown, anti-mask, anti-vaccine protests attended by a mix of the far right, the far left and assorted conspiracists.

The British government has warned of "extremists exploiting the crisis to sow division and undermine the social fabric of our country," with different hate groups variously blaming Muslims, Jews and 5G phone technology for the pandemic.

But there are signs of fighting back. The pandemic also has boosted trust in scientists and spurred demands for more accountable political leadership.

In Hungary, which has one of the world's highest per-capita coronavirus death rates, there is growing opposition both to the government's pandemic policies and to its wider authoritarian thrust, and thousands have taken to the streets in support of academic freedom and LGBT rights. With an election due in 2022, a six-party opposition coalition has united to try to unseat Orban's Fidesz party.

Both extremism and resistance can be seen in Brazil, where the far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has expressed nostalgia for the country's two-decade military dictatorship and last year attended protests against the country's courts and Congress. He dismissed the virus as a "little flu," cast doubt on the effectiveness of vaccines and opposed social and economic restrictions.

Renato Meirelles, director of Brazilian polling company Locomotive Institute, said authoritarianism had advanced through "a strategy of fake news and attacks on factual truth." "The next step will be question-

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ing the electronic vote and, as such, the result of the next election," he said.

Bolsonaro has so far been held in check by Brazil's institutions, especially the Supreme Court, which stopped him from preventing states and cities from implementing restrictions to curb COVID-19 and has ordered an inquiry into the government's pandemic response. And protests have finally spilled out onto the streets. Twice over the past month, demonstrators marched in dozens of cities across the country.

"I'm here to fight for the rights of those in need, for the rights of my children, for my right to live, to have vaccines for all," said Claudia Maria, a protester in Rio de Janeiro.

In the United States, President Joe Biden has veered away from the populism of Donald Trump, but a Republican Party radicalized by the former president's supporters has every chance of winning power again. Cooper, of the LSE, said the authoritarian tide was unlikely to recede soon.

"This is a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism that's going to last decades," he said.

Money in the bank: Child tax credit dollars head to parents

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The child tax credit had always been an empty gesture to millions of parents like Tamika Daniel.

That changes Thursday when the first payment of \$1,000 hits Daniel's bank account — and dollars start flowing to the pockets of more than 35 million families around the country. Daniel, a 35-year-old mother of four, didn't even know the tax credit existed until President Joe Biden expanded it for one year as part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package that passed in March.

Previously, only people who earned enough money to owe income taxes could qualify for the credit. Daniel went nearly a decade without a job because her oldest son is autistic and needed her. So she got by on Social Security payments. And she had to live at Fairfield Courts, a public housing project that dead-ends at Interstate 64 as the highway cuts through the Virginia capital of Richmond.

But the extra \$1,000 a month for the next year could be a life-changer for Daniel, who now works as a community organizer for a Richmond nonprofit. It will help provide a security deposit on a new apartment.

"It's actually coming right on time," she said. "We have a lot going on. This definitely helps to take a load off."

Biden has held out the new monthly payments, which will average \$423 per family, as the key to halving child poverty rates. But he is also setting up a broader philosophical battle about the role of government and the responsibilities of parents.

Democrats see this as a landmark program along the same lines as Social Security, saying it will lead to better outcomes in adulthood that will help economic growth. But many Republicans warn that the payments will discourage parents from working and ultimately feed into long-term poverty.

Some 15 million households will now receive the full credit. The monthly payments amount to \$300 for each child who is 5 and younger and \$250 for those between 5 and 17. The payments are set to lapse after a year, but Biden is pushing to extend them through at least 2025.

The president ultimately would like to make the payments permanent — and that makes this first round of payments a test as to whether the government can improve the lives of families.

Biden will deliver a speech Thursday at the White House to mark the first day of payments, inviting beneficiaries to join him as he seeks to raise awareness of the payments and push for their continuation.

"The president felt it was important to elevate this issue, to make sure people understand this is a benefit that will help them as we still work to recover from the pandemic and the economic downturn," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday.

Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, who successfully championed increasing the credit in 2017, said that the Democrats' plans will turn the benefits into an "anti-work welfare check" because almost every family can now qualify for the payment regardless of whether the parents have a job.

"Not only does Biden's plan abandon incentives for marriage and requirements for work, but it will also destroy the child-support enforcement system as we know it by sending cash payments to single parents

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without ensuring child-support orders are established," Rubio said in a statement Wednesday.

An administration official disputed those claims. Treasury Department estimates indicate that 97% of recipients of the tax credit have wages or self-employment income, while the other 3% are grandparents or have health issues. The official, who requested anonymity to discuss internal analyses, noted that the credit starts to phase out at \$150,000 for joint filers, so there is no disincentive for the poor to work because a job would just give them more income.

Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet said the problem is one of inequality. He said that economic growth has benefited the top 10% of earners in recent decades, while families are struggling with the rising costs of housing, child care and health care. He said his voters back in Colorado are concerned that their children will be poorer than previous generations and that requires the expansion of the child tax credit.

"It's the most progressive change to America's tax code ever," Bennet told reporters.

Parenthood is an expensive undertaking. The Agriculture Department estimated in 2017, the last year it published such a report, that a typical family spends \$233,610 to raise a child from birth to the age of 17. But wealthier children get far more invested in their education and upbringing, while poorer children face a constant disadvantage. Families in the top third of incomes spend about \$10,000 more annually per child than families in the lower third.

The child tax credit was created in 1997 to be a source of relief, yet it also became a driver of economic and racial inequality as only parents who owed the federal government taxes could qualify for its full payment. Academic research in 2020 found that about three-quarters of white and Asian children were eligible for the full credit, but only about half of Black and Hispanic children qualified.

In the census tract where Daniel lives in Richmond, the median household income is \$14,725 —almost five times lower than the national median. Three out of every 4 children live in poverty. For a typical parent with two children in that part of Richmond, the expanded tax credit would raise income by almost 41%.

The tax credit is as much about keeping people in the middle class as it is about lifting up the poor.

Katie Stelka of Brookfield, Wisconsin, was laid off from her job as a beauty and haircare products buyer for the Kohl's department store chain in September as the pandemic tightened its grip on the country. She and her sons, 3-year-old Oliver and 7-year-old Robert, were left to depend on her husband's income as a consultant for retirement services. The family was already struggling to pay for her husband's kidney transplant five years earlier and his ongoing therapies before she was laid off, she said.

With no job prospects, Stelka re-enrolled in college to study social work in February. Last month she landed a new job as an assistant executive director for the nonprofit International Association for Orthodontics. Now she needs day care again. That amounts to \$1,000 a week for both kids.

All the tax credit money will go to cover that, said Stelka, 37.

"Every little bit is going to help right now," she said. "I'm paying for school out-of-pocket. I'm paying for the boys' stuff. The cost of food and everything else has gone up. We're just really thankful. The tide feels like it's turning."

On farewell visit to US, Merkel brings message of stability

By FRANK JORDANS and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden welcomes German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the White House for what is likely to be her last official visit and one to which she's bringing a bag full of issues and an overarching message for Berlin's close ally: You've got a friend.

The veteran German leader is expected Thursday to discuss the coronavirus pandemic, the rise of China and a Russian gas pipeline that Washington opposes. She will meet with Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and other senior U.S. officials.

"In part, this is a farewell visit. In part, she is signaling continuity and stability in the German-U.S. relationship," said Johannes Thimm, a senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, a think tank in Berlin.

After 16 years of dealing with Merkel, many officials in Washington and elsewhere are wondering what

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course Germany might take after the next election. The longtime chancellor — who has dealt with four U.S. presidents in her time — will seek to reassure them that there won't be a huge shift, Thimm said.

Merkel's party is leading in polls ahead of Germany's Sept. 26 election, but the environmentalist Greens and the center-left Social Democrats are also vying to lead a future government. While the three parties differ in many policy areas, all are committed to a strong trans-Atlantic relationship.

One sour note that preceded and outlasted the Trump era of diplomatic discord with Washington has been the thorny issue of a new pipeline taking natural gas from Russia to Germany.

The United States has long argued that the Nord Stream 2 project threatens European energy security and harms allies in Eastern Europe. But Biden recently waived looming sanctions against German entities involved in the project. The move angered many Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

Biden is expected to raise his concerns about the pipeline project when the two leaders speak privately, but the White House was not anticipating any sort of formal announcement to come out of the leaders' talk, according to a senior Biden administration official who briefed reporters ahead of the chancellor's visit.

Merkel sought this week to dampen expectations for an imminent breakthrough, but she is likely to want to resolve the issue before leaving office. "It weighs on German-U.S. relations and German-EU relations," Thimm said.

While German officials have been unusually coy about which topics will be discussed during the trip, Merkel's spokesperson confirmed Wednesday that China will come up.

"That can be said with relative certainty," Steffen Seibert told reporters. "This also played an important role at the G-7 summit, where the chancellor and the American president last met."

Germany has strong trade ties with China but has also been critical of Beijing's human rights record. Merkel is keen to avoid a situation in which Germany, or the European Union, might be forced to choose sides between China and the United States.

Merkel has insisted on the need to cooperate with China on global issues such as combating climate change and tackling the coronavirus pandemic, even while Biden's predecessor Donald Trump was accusing Beijing of having started it.

The humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders urged Biden on Wednesday to lean on Merkel to drop her opposition to proposals for suspending vaccine patents. Merkel, a trained scientist, has argued that lifting the patents wouldn't be effective and could harm future research and development efforts.

Ahead of her visit, a group of Democratic lawmakers this week called on Germany to drop its "blockade" of a COVID-19-related waiver of intellectual property rights under global trade rules. Such a waiver, the lawmakers argued, would help scale production of effective vaccines around the world.

The Biden administration has expressed support for the waiver being discussed at the World Trade Organization, but White House officials do not anticipate differences being resolved during Merkel's visit.

And while there are points of tension, Biden seems eager to offer Merkel a proper farewell. Harris will host Merkel for a working breakfast at her residence on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory. After afternoon meetings with Biden and his team at the White House and a joint news conference, the president plans to host a small dinner in honor of Merkel and her husband, chemist Joachim Sauer.

Merkel will also receive an honorary doctorate, her 18th, from Johns Hopkins University and is scheduled to speak at the university's School of Advanced International Studies.

Merkel's trip may not be her last, either. The 66-year-old said that growing up in East Germany she dreamed of being able to travel to America on her retirement, when the communist bloc tended to relax some of the restrictions on its citizens.

So far, Merkel has announced no plans for her time after office.

What pairs with beetle? Startups seek to make bugs tasty

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Tiziana Di Costanzo makes pizza dough from scratch, mixing together flour, yeast, a pinch of salt, a dash of olive oil and something a bit more unusual — ground acheta domesticus, better

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known as cricket powder.

Di Costanzo is an edible insect entrepreneur who holds cricket and mealworm cooking classes at her West London home, where she also raises the critters in a backyard shed with her husband, Tom.

Her startup, Horizon Insects, is part of Europe's nascent edible insect scene, which features dozens of bug-based businesses offering cricket chips in the Czech Republic, bug burgers in Germany and Belgian beetle beer. The European Union headquarters in Brussels is also backing research into insect-based proteins as part of a broader sustainable food strategy.

As the Earth's growing population puts more pressure on global food production, insects are increasingly seen as a viable food source. Experts say they're rich in protein, yet can be raised much more sustainably than beef or pork.

Around the world, 2 billion people in 130 countries eat insects regularly. The global edible insect market is poised to boom, according to investment bank Barclay's, citing data from Meticulous Research that forecasts it will grow from less than \$1 billion in 2019 to \$8 billion by 2030.

But despite all the European startups working to make insects appetizing, don't expect them to start appearing at mainstream restaurants or on dinner tables just yet. One big reason is a strong cultural "yuck" factor in Western countries that Arnold van Huis, a professor of tropical entomologist at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, says will be hard to change.

"It's very difficult to turn people's minds around but insects are absolutely safe to eat, maybe even more nutritious than meat products," with the only risk coming from allergies, because insects are closely related to crustaceans like shrimp, van Huis said.

Instead, humans may end up eating more insects indirectly because the market that shows the most promise is for feeding animals. The EU approved insect protein as feed for fish farming in 2017. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved it for chicken feed in 2018, while EU approval for poultry and pigs is due later this year.

Regulatory change has also made things easier for European companies looking to market insects directly to consumers. The EU didn't previously govern edible insects because they weren't considered food, leaving individual countries to impose their own rules. To bring rules in line across countries, the EU in 2018 launched a directive that covers insects but requires approvals for individual species, paving the way for a wave of authorizations.

European production of insect-based food products is forecast to mushroom from from 500 metric tons currently to 260,000 metric tons by 2030, according to the International Platform of Insects for Food and Feed, a Brussels-based lobby group.

Insects require a tenth of the land, account for a fraction of greenhouse gas or ammonia emissions and need much less water than cattle or pigs, van Huis said.

The first approval came earlier this year for *Tenebrio molitor* larva, or dried yellow mealworm, after an application from French insect farm Micronutris. The EU Commission's food safety regulators said in a scientific opinion that mealworms are safe to eat, though they warned of possible reactions in people allergic to crustaceans or dust mites.

Regulators issued another positive opinion this month for grasshoppers, based on an application from Protix, a Netherlands-based insect farming company.

"Our vision is that insects will go from niche to normal," said Protix CEO Kees Aarts, who predicted an "explosion of food applications" to EU regulators.

At Protix's state-of-the-art vertical farm in Bergen op Zoom, green plastic crates stacked in towering columns are filled with wriggling black soldier fly larvae.

The high-tech facility turns the larvae into protein meal and oil for use in fish feed and pet food. The company also has a line of bug-based snacks and ingredients like cinnamon mealworms and cricket protein falafel mix and, after getting final approval, plans to market frozen, dried or powdered grasshoppers as an ingredient for breakfast cereals, pasta, baked goods, sauces and imitation meat.

In London, Di Costanzo's Horizon Insects is developing an insect-based cooking ingredient after discover-

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ing that there wasn't much of a local market for the fresh edible mealworms they were selling.

Di Costanzo says the cricket powder she uses in her pizza gives it "a very nice, meaty, healthy taste" while boosting the nutritional content with protein, macronutrients and omega acids. Mealworm burgers, meanwhile, are "tasty and very easy to make," and powdered mealworms have a mild taste that allows them to be incorporated into cakes, bread and pasta.

"Definitely, I think the future is products made with insects rather than the actual insect," said Di Costanzo, who also bemoaned post-Brexit government red tape that's leaving small U.K. edible insect entrepreneurs in limbo.

Antoine Hubert, CEO of France's Ynsect, says the most lucrative opportunity will come from the sports and health nutrition markets for its mealworm-based protein powder. The company also makes insect protein for fish feed that Hubert said helps farmed salmon grow bigger and faster while reducing the need for fishmeal — smaller fish caught in huge quantities — which helps improve the ocean's biodiversity.

Investors including Hollywood star Robert Downey Jr.'s FootPrint Coalition were among the backers contributing to Ynsect's latest round of funding worth \$224 million. The money will fund a vertical farm north of Paris that it says will be one of the world's biggest when it's completed next year, capable of producing 100,000 tons year of commercial mealworm products, as well as expansion in North America, where it plans to build another farm in the U.S. and apply for FDA approval for its food products.

Downey Jr. has been promoting the benefits of mealworm powder, supplying a tub of it to talk show host Stephen Colbert.

"I could put this in a smoothie or something?" Colbert asked.

"You'll be making all kinds of stuff out of it," Downey Jr. replied.

Worries over racism, waterways inspire push to rename fish

By JOHN FLESHER AP Environmental Writer

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) —

Minnesota state Sen. Fong Hawj was never a fan of the "Asian carp" label commonly applied to four imported fish species that are wreaking havoc in the U.S. heartland, infesting numerous rivers and bearing down on the Great Lakes.

But the last straw came when an Asian business delegation arriving at the Minneapolis airport encountered a sign reading "Kill Asian Carp." It was a well-intentioned plea to prevent spread of the invasive fish. But the message was off-putting to the visitors.

Hawj and fellow Sen. John Hoffman in 2014 won approval of a measure requiring that Minnesota agencies refer to the fish as "invasive carp," despite backlash from the late radio commentator Rush Limbaugh, who ridiculed it as political correctness.

"I had more hate mail than you could shake a stick at," Hoffman said.

Now some other government agencies are taking the same step in the wake of anti-Asian hate crimes that surged during the coronavirus pandemic. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service quietly changed its designation to "invasive carp" in April.

"We wanted to move away from any terms that cast Asian culture and people in a negative light," said Charlie Wooley, director of its Great Lakes regional office.

The Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee, representing agencies in the U.S. and Canada that are trying to contain the carp, will do likewise Aug. 2, he said.

The moves come as other wildlife organizations consider revising names that some consider offensive, including the Entomological Society of America, which this month dropped "gypsy moth" and "gypsy ant" from its insect list.

Yet the switch to "invasive carp" might not be the final say. As experts and policymakers have learned in their long struggle against the prolific and wily fish, almost nothing about them is simple. Scientists, technical journals, government agencies, language style guides, restaurants and grocery stores may have ideas about what to call them, based on differing motives — including getting more people to eat the critters.

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That's a priority for researchers who have spent years developing technologies to stem the incursion — from underwater noisemakers and electric currents to netting operations.

But the dish hasn't caught on with U.S. consumers, despite its popularity in much of the world. For many Americans, "carp" calls to mind the common carp, a bottom-feeder with a reputation for a "muddy" flavor and bony flesh.

"It's a four-letter word in this country," said Kevin Irons, assistant fisheries chief with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

The four species described collectively as Asian carp — bighead, silver, grass and black carp — were brought from China a half-century ago to rid Southern sewage and aquaculture ponds of algae, weeds and parasites. They escaped into the wild and have migrated up the Mississippi and other major rivers. The Great Lakes and their \$7 billion sport fishery are vulnerable.

Voracious and aggressive, silver and bighead gobble plankton that other fish need. Grass carp munch ecologically valuable wetland plants, and black carp feast on mussels and snails. Silvers can also hurtle from the water like missiles, causing nasty collisions with boaters.

So far they've been netted mostly for bait, pet food and a few other uses. Philippe Parola, a Louisiana chef, trademarked the label "silverfin" for Asian carp fishcakes he developed around 2009.

The state of Illinois and partner organizations hope a splashy media campaign in the works will get bigger results. Dubbed "The Perfect Catch," it will describe Asian carp as "sustainably wild, surprisingly delicious" — high in protein and omega-3 fatty acids, low in mercury and other contaminants.

And it will give the fish a market-tested new name, which will remain secret until the makeover rollout, Irons said. A date hasn't been announced.

"We hope it will be new and refreshing and better represent these fish for consumers," he said.

The goal is to spur interest all along the chain — from commercial netters to processors, grocery stores and restaurants.

The tactic has worked before. After the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service rechristened "slimehead" as "orange roughy" in the late 1970s, demand for the deep-sea dweller rose so sharply that some stocks were depleted. Chilean sea bass, another cold-water favorite, once was known less appealingly as "Patagonian toothfish."

But what new label for Asian carp will be considered official — "invasive carp," which has been criticized as imprecise, or whatever the marketing blitz comes up with?

It could be either. Or neither.

The rebranding campaign will seek U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval to use the new moniker for interstate commerce. But even if the FDA goes along and consumers buy in, scientists are another matter.

The American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists and the American Fisheries Society have a committee that lists fish titles, including scientific names in Latin and common ones thought up by people "who originally described the species or included them in a field guide or other reference," said panel chairman Larry Page, curator of fishes at the Florida Museum of Natural History.

For example, there's "Micropterus salmoides," which became known as largemouth bass, and "Oncorhynchus mykiss," or rainbow trout.

The committee has never adopted "Asian carp" as a term for the four invasive species, Page said.

So where did it come from? According to a paper in the journal *Fisheries*, the label began showing up in scientific literature in the mid-1990s and took hold in the early 2000s as worries about the fish grew.

It was never a good idea, said Patrick Kocovsky, a fish ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and one of the paper's authors, because the species affect the environment in different ways.

Song Qian, a University of Toledo environmental sciences professor who teamed with Kocovsky on the article, said carp is a valued protein source in many Asian nations. It's a good-luck symbol in his native China.

"If you say it's invasive, bad and needs to be eradicated, even though it's because of miscommunication,

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that's why there's talk about cultural insensitivity," Qian said.

It's most accurate to refer to the fish species individually, he said, acknowledging a collective name is sometimes convenient. The challenge now is finding the right one.

Regardless of which one eventually sticks, said Hawj, the Minnesota legislator, who immigrated to the U.S. from Laos as a child refugee after the Vietnam War, he's glad "Asian carp" is on its way out. He recalled the warm applause he received at an Asian-American conference after announcing his state had made the change.

"It's a nuisance, a small thing, but it can resonate greatly," he said.

India internet law adds to fears over online speech, privacy

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — It began in February with a tweet by pop star Rihanna that sparked widespread condemnation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of massive farmer protests near the capital, souring an already troubled relationship between the government and Twitter.

Moving to contain the backlash, officials hit Twitter with multiple injunctions to block hundreds of tweets critical of the government. Twitter complied with some and resisted others.

Relations between Twitter and Modi's government have gone downhill ever since.

At the heart of the standoff is a sweeping internet law that puts digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook under direct government oversight. Officials say the rules are needed to quell misinformation and hate speech and to give users more power to flag objectionable content.

Critics of the law worry it may lead to outright censorship in a country where digital freedoms have been shrinking since Modi took office in 2014.

Police have raided Twitter's offices and have accused its India chief, Manish Maheshwari, of spreading "communal hatred" and "hurting the sentiments of Indians." Last week, Maheshwari refused to submit to questioning unless police promised not to arrest him.

On Wednesday, the company released a transparency report showing India had submitted most government information requests -- legal demands for account information -- to Twitter. It accounted for a quarter of worldwide requests in July- December last year.

It was the first time since Twitter started publishing the report in 2012 that the U.S. was displaced as the "top global requester," it added.

"India's plans for the internet appear to be like that of a closed ecosystem like China," said Raheel Khurshed, co-founder of Laminar Global and Twitter India's former head of Politics, Policy and Government. "Twitter's case is the basis of a touchstone on how the future of the internet will be shaped in India."

Tech companies are facing similar challenges in many countries. China has been aggressively tightening controls on access to its 1.4 billion-strong market, which is already largely sequestered by the Communist Party's Great Firewall and by U.S. trade and technology sanctions.

India is another heavyweight, with 900 million users expected by 2025.

"Any internet company knows that India is probably the biggest market in terms of scale. Because of this, the option of leaving India is like the button they'd press if they had no options left," said tech analyst Jayanth Kolla.

The new rules, in the works for years and announced in February, apply to social media companies, streaming platforms and digital news publishers. They make it easier for the government to order social media platforms with over 5 million users to take down content that is deemed unlawful. Individuals now can request that companies remove material. If a government ministry flags content as illegal or harmful it must be removed within 36 hours. Noncompliance could lead to criminal prosecutions.

Tech companies also must assign staff to answer complaints from users, respond to government requests and ensure overall compliance with the rules.

Twitter missed a three-month deadline in May, drawing a strong rebuke from the Delhi High Court. Last week, after months of haggling with the government, it appointed all three officers as required.

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"Twitter continues to make every effort to comply with the new IT Rules 2021. We have kept the Government of India apprised of the progress at every step of the process," the company said in a statement to the Associated Press.

Apar Gupta, executive director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, says he worries the rules will lead to numerous cases against internet platforms and deter people from using them freely, leading to self-censorship. Many other critics say Modi's Hindu nationalist government is imposing what they call a climate of "digital authoritarianism."

"If it becomes easier for user content to be taken down, it will amount to the chilling of speech online," Gupta said.

The government insists the rules will benefit and empower Indians.

"Social media users can criticize Narendra Modi, they can criticize government policy, and ask questions. I must put it on the record straight away . . . But a private company sitting in America should refrain from lecturing us on democracy" when it denies its users the right to redress, the ex-IT minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, told the newspaper The Hindu last month.

Despite the antagonisms between Modi and Twitter, he has been an enthusiastic user of the platform in building popular support for his Bharatiya Janata Party. His government has also worked closely with the social media giant to allow Indians to use Twitter to seek help from government ministries, particularly during health emergencies. Bharatiya Janata Party's social media team has meanwhile been accused of initiating online attacks against critics of Modi.

Still, earlier internet restrictions had already prompted the Washington-based Freedom House to list India, the world's most populous democracy, as "partly free" instead of "free" in its annual analysis.

The law announced in February requires tech companies to aid police investigations and help identify people who post "mischievous information." That means messages must be traceable, and experts say this it could mean end-to-end encryption would not be allowed in India.

Facebook's WhatsApp, which has more than 500 million users in India, has sued the government, saying breaking encryption, which continues for now, would "severely undermine the privacy of billions of people who communicate digitally."

Officials say they only want to trace messages that incite violence or threatening national security. WhatsApp says it can't selectively do that.

"It is like you are renting out an apartment to someone but want to look into it whenever you want. Who would want to live in a house like that?" said Khursheed of Laminar Global.

The backlash over online freedom of expression, privacy and security concerns comes amid a global push for more data transparency and localization, said Kolla, the tech expert.

Germany requires social media companies to devote local staff and data storage to curbing hate speech. Countries like Vietnam and Pakistan are drafting legislation similar to India's. In Turkey, social media companies complied with a broad mandate for removing content only after they were fined and faced threats to their ad revenues.

Instead of leaving, some companies are fighting the new rules in the courts, where at least 13 legal challenges have been filed by news publishers, media associations and individuals. But such cases can stretch for months or even years.

Mishi Choudhary, a technology lawyer and founder of India's Software Freedom Law Center, says that under the rules, social media platforms might lose their safe harbor protection, which shields them from legal liability over user-generated content. Courts have to decide that on a case-by-case basis, she said. And their legal costs would inevitably soar.

"You know how it is in India. The process is the punishment," Choudhary said. "And until we get to a place where the courts will actually come and tell us what the legal position is and determine those legal positions, it is open season for tech backlash."

California blaze erupts near site of deadliest US wildfire

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PULGA, Calif. (AP) — A blaze that erupted near the flashpoint of the deadliest wildfire in recent U.S. history was heading away from homes on Thursday but survivors of the 2018 blaze in the town of Paradise worried that history could repeat itself.

The Dixie Fire had burned a couple of square miles of brush and timber near the Feather River Canyon area of Butte County and moved into national forest land in neighboring Plumas County.

There was zero containment and officials said people in the tiny, remote communities of Pulga and east Concow should prepare to leave at a moment's notice.

Flames raced along steep and hard-to-reach terrain about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from Paradise, the foothill town that was virtually incinerated by the Camp Fire that killed 85 people.

Larry Peterson, whose home in neighboring Magalia survived the previous blaze, said some of his neighbors were getting their belongings together in case they had to flee.

"Anytime you've got a fire after what we went through, and another one is coming up, you've got to be concerned," he told KHSL-TV.

Other locals stocked up on water and other items.

"We pretty much left with our clothes on our backs" during the previous fire, said Jennifer Younie of Paradise. "So this time we are looking to be more prepared and more vigilant."

Joyce Mclean's home burned last time but she has rebuilt it and will again if necessary, she told the station.

"We just take each day as it comes and if it happens, it happens," Mclean said. "There's not much that we can do about it."

Ironically, the blackened scar of the previous blaze was standing between the fire and homes.

"Everything's pretty much burned between them and the fire," Butte County Supervisor Bill Connelly told the Sacramento Bee. "Some bushes and grass have grown back, but it's probably not a direct threat at this time."

The blaze is just one of nearly 70 active wildfires that have destroyed homes and burned through about 1,562 square miles (4,047 square kilometers) — a combined area larger than Rhode Island — in a dozen mostly Western states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

In southern Oregon the Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire currently burning in the U.S., had torched an area larger than New York City and destroyed 20 houses. It threatened 2,000 structures in an area just north of California that's been gripped by a historic drought.

Tim and Dee McCarley could see trees exploding into flames in their rearview mirror as they fled the fire last week at the last minute. They had put off their departure to pack more belongings and search for their missing cat.

"The sheriff's department had been there and they said, 'If you don't get out of here now, then you are going to die,'" said Tim McCarley, 67, as he, his wife and stepson rested Wednesday at a shelter at the Klamath County Fairgrounds.

"We were running around like a chicken with its head cut off, throwing stuff into the car. Then we say, 'Okay, that's it ... we got to go.'"

Tim McCarley was allowed to return briefly after the fire had passed over their rural community northwest of Bly. He found his home still standing and their cat inside unharmed. But the flames had crept within 5 feet (1.5 meters) of their house, the heat melting their trailer and storage units until they looked "like a melted beer can," he told The Associated Press in a phone interview.

The National Weather Service tweeted late Wednesday that a "terrifying" satellite image showed gigantic clouds fueled by smoke and hot air had formed over the fire — a sign that the blaze was so intense it was creating its own weather, with erratic winds and the potential for fire-generated lightning.

"Please send positive thoughts and well wishes to the firefighters. ... It's a tough time for them right now," the tweet read.

Extremely dry conditions and heat waves tied to climate change have swept the region, making wildfires harder to fight. Climate change has made the American West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

An extreme heat wave late last month sucked vegetation dry in the Pacific Northwest, where firefighters

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say they are facing conditions more typical of late summer or fall than early July. The Northwest Inter-agency Coordination Center moved the region up to the highest alert level Wednesday as dry gusts were expected in some areas and new fires popped up.

In Washington, firefighters braced for the arrival of strong winds that could fan the flames of existing wildfires. The National Weather Service issued a red flag warning for much of eastern Washington beginning Wednesday afternoon and ending Thursday evening.

A fire in Chelan County in central Washington was threatening 1,500 homes along with orchards and a power station, authorities said. Mandatory evacuations were in effect. The Sheriff's Office said detectives and county and federal fire investigators served a search warrant at a home believed to be the place where the fire started but the news release didn't provide any other details.

In north-central Washington, about 200 people in the town of Nespelem on Colville tribal land were evacuated Monday night as the largest of five wildfires caused by dozens of lightning strikes tore through grass, sagebrush and timber.

Seven homes burned, but four were vacant.

That fire grew Wednesday but so did containment and it was now 20% surrounded.

China's economic growth slows to still-robust 7.9%

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China's economic growth slowed to a still-strong 7.9% over a year earlier in the three months ending in June as a rebound from the coronavirus leveled off.

As expected, the growth reported Thursday fell from the previous quarter's explosive 18.3%, which was magnified by comparison with early 2020, when the world's second-largest economy closed factories, stores and offices to fight the coronavirus. China led a global recovery after the ruling Communist Party declared the disease under control last March and reopened most industries.

The United States and other major economies are bouncing back, but some are hampered by the spread of new virus variants. The rapid U.S. recovery has led the Federal Reserve to suggest it might start unwinding its stimulus earlier than planned, late next year instead of in 2023.

China's growth in the April-June quarter over the previous three months, the way other major economies report results, was 1.3%, reflecting a return to normal for factory activity and consumer spending as government stimulus and easy credit wind down. That was up from the January-March period's 0.6% expansion over the final three months of 2020 but still was among the past decade's weakest quarters.

"Overall, China's economy looks to be on track for recovery," said Chaoping Zhu of JP Morgan Asset Management in a report. The latest data, Zhu said, suggest the economy "has already peaked and is easing back to its long-term average growth rate."

China's outlook is clouded by a lingering trade war with Washington over Beijing's industrial development tactics. President Joe Biden has said he wants better ties with Beijing but has yet to say whether he will roll back tariff hikes imposed by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen called this week for a "unified front" with Europe against China's "unfair economic practices." Biden has expanded the list of Chinese companies Americans are barred from investing in due to possible military connections.

Still, Chinese manufacturing, auto sales and consumer spending have recovered to above pre-pandemic levels.

Exporters benefited from their relatively early return to work while foreign competitors were hampered by anti-disease controls. Exports surged 32.2% in June over a year earlier, though a government spokesman warned growth might weaken due to uncertain global conditions.

The International Monetary Fund and private sector forecasters expect economic growth this year of about 8% but say that should decline in 2022. The government is in the midst of a marathon effort to steer China to slower, more sustainable growth based on domestic consumption instead of exports and investment.

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"With output already above its pre-virus trend, the economy is struggling to gain ground at its usual pace," Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics said in a report. "Headwinds to growth are likely to intensify during the second half of the year."

China's economy shrank by 6.8% in last year's first quarter, the worst performance since at least the mid-1960s. Activity started to recover in the second quarter, when the economy expanded by 3.2% over a year earlier. That accelerated to 4.9% in the third quarter and 6.5% in the final three months of the year. For the full year, growth was 2.3%, while the U.S., European and Japanese economies contracted.

In an apparent effort to reassure the public and financial markets, the government took the unusual step Thursday of reporting average growth in the second quarter and the same period of 2020 was 5.5%, up from 5.0% for the first quarters of the two years.

World markets took the update in stride. Benchmarks rose in Hong Kong and Shanghai, while U.S. futures were marginally lower.

Beijing is in the midst of dual campaigns to step up oversight of a fledgling industry of online finance competitors such as tycoon Jack Ma's Ant Group and to reduce risks to the financial system by forcing the real estate industry to cut its debt levels.

"Both will put downward pressure on growth in the short term," Iris Pang of ING said in a report.

Retail spending has revived more slowly than manufacturing, prompting concern that might weigh on the recovery. That led Beijing to inject extra money last week into the pool available for lending to shore up business and consumer activity. But the central bank and economic planners say they are sticking to plans that call for a return to normal policy.

Retail sales in June rose 12.1%. That was down from 13.9% for the full quarter and well below the 33.9% surge in the January-March period.

"Domestic demand remained muted," Louis Kuijs of Oxford Economics said in a report.

Factory output rose 8.3% in June over a year ago and was up 0.6% from the previous month.

Manufacturers face hurdles including shortages of processing chips.

Auto production fell 13.7% in June from a year earlier and sales fell 11.1% to 1.6 million, according to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers. It blamed "insufficient supply of chips."

Investment in factories, real estate and other fixed assets rose 12.6% in the first half but was up only 0.4% in June over the previous month.

Watching for birds & diversity: Audubon groups pledge change

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — When Boston socialites Minna Hall and Harriet Hemenway sought to end the slaughter of birds in the name of 19th century high fashion, they picked a logical namesake for their cause: John James Audubon, a naturalist celebrated for his stunning watercolors of American birds.

Now, 125 years after the founding of the Massachusetts Audubon Society for the Protection of Birds, the organization and the nearly 500 Audubon chapters nationwide it helped inspire are reckoning with another side of Audubon's life: He was also a slaveholder and staunch opponent of abolition.

In the year-plus since George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police, Audubon chapters have pledged to do more to atone for the past, including diversifying their staff and finding ways to make natural spaces more welcoming to people of color. It's part of a broader reckoning within the wider environmental movement, which for years has faced criticism for its racist origins and lack of diversity.

"At this point, if people are not part of what they're trying to protect, that's an issue," said Debbie Njai, an Illinois resident who founded the outdoor group BlackPeopleWhoHike.

The Mass Audubon published an essay last fall acknowledging how Audubon's family's wealth came in large part from running a Caribbean sugar plantation. It has also pledged to have people of color make up 25% of its board of directors, and hopes to open more wildlife sanctuaries in communities of color.

The National Audubon Society, which is based in New York and is separate from the Mass Audubon, has similarly delved into its namesake's legacy in a series of essays.

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And the Sierra Club publicly apologized last July for the racist views of its founder, John Muir, who openly dismissed American Indians as dirty savages. The Oakland-based group has also committed \$5 million to boost its environmental justice work and recently voiced support for Black reparations.

Environmental groups understand the future of their movement hinges on changing their white, elitist reputation, said David O'Neill, president of the Mass Audubon.

"If we don't get younger and we don't get more diverse, we're not going to have people to advocate on behalf of nature, and that's not good for anyone," he said during a recent visit to the group's Boston Nature Center, an urban wildlife sanctuary in a majority Black neighborhood that it hopes to replicate in other Massachusetts communities of color.

Green organizations appear to be making progress on improving staff diversity, but their leadership remains predominantly white, said Andres Jimenez, head of Green 2.0, a Washington, D.C., group that puts out an annual report card on diversity in the environmental sector.

In its most recent report, Green 2.0 found that the nation's largest green groups added, on average, six people of color to their staff, two to their senior management and one to their board of directors between 2017 and 2020.

"We need to see that change up top to move the ball in an accelerated way," Jimenez said.

Bird conservation brought the country's latest racial reckoning to the environmental movement's doorsteps, and, in many ways, it's where the calls for change are most acutely felt.

There's a growing campaign, for example, to drop the eponyms of birds that honor slaveholders and white supremacists — Bird Names for Birds.

The catalyst was a dispute between a Black birdwatcher and a white woman with her dog in New York's Central Park that went viral last summer, sparking #BlackBirdersWeek and other similar efforts to highlight Black nature enthusiasts and the discrimination and other challenges they face in the outdoors.

Christian Cooper, the birder at the center of that controversy, stressed organizations like the Audubon have been taking steps to address diversity long before his viral moment, even if some have yielded mixed results.

A board member with the New York City Audubon Society, Cooper said his chapter has been trying to draw more diverse members through modest events like last month's Juneteenth birdwatching and potluck picnic.

"The organizations that are having the most success are those that are trying new things," Cooper said. "The reality is that fixing centuries of ingrained racial bias as it manifests in the environmental movement is hard and uncomfortable work."

At the National Audubon Society, the racial reckoning has boiled over into staff unrest.

Spurred by complaints of a toxic workplace, an outside audit concluded in April that a "culture of retaliation, fear, and antagonism toward women and people of color" existed at the organization. Longtime CEO David Yarnold swiftly resigned.

Tykee James, who serves as the organization's government affairs officer in Washington, is among the staffers pushing to form a labor union to address diversity and other workplace problems. He also wants the Audubon to be more vocal in publicly advocating for environmental justice causes.

"The culture that we've had in this organization hasn't been one for workers of color, hasn't been one for women, hasn't been one for nonbinary folks," James said.

Matt Smelser, a spokesperson for the Audubon Society, referred to a May statement from the group, which said "bullying and other bad behavior" won't be tolerated going forward. The organization also continues to search for a permanent CEO and has committed to remaining neutral in the unionization efforts, he added.

Back at the Mass Audubon, O'Neill says the organization's board has added new members so that 17% of them are people of color. The staff of more than 950 is about 65% white.

Scott Edwards, an ornithologist at Harvard, said the jury's still out on whether these early steps are enough. Some green groups will have to re-imagine their mission and pivot to more urban populations, he said.

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"Organizations will have to think creatively about how to get communities of color more connected with nature," said Edwards, who is Black. "Show them that their voices are needed and wanted. Make them feel included in the larger effort of conservation."

Mamie Parker, who worked for decades at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and was its first Black regional director, advises environmental groups to approach racial equity like a conservation challenge.

"When you plant a tree to restore a forest or take care of bald eagles to rebuild their population," the retired biologist from Dulles, Virginia, said, "it takes years before those efforts bear fruit."

Middleton sends Bucks past Suns to tie NBA Finals at 2-2

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Khris Middleton is an All-Star with unwavering confidence in his shot, always believing that no matter how poorly he starts that he can turn things around.

"Khris has no fear and he never has," Milwaukee guard Jrue Holiday said.

Middleton's big shots — and throw in Giannis Antetokounmpo's big block — may have turned around the course of these NBA Finals.

Middleton scored 40 points, including 10 straight for the Bucks down the stretch to send them past the Phoenix Suns, 109-103 on Wednesday night to tie the series 2-2.

"We wanted this bad and the team showed it tonight," Antetokounmpo said.

Middleton's hot hand and a big block from Antetokounmpo gave the Bucks their second straight victory in the first close game of the series.

Antetokounmpo had 26 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists. His streak of 40-point games ended at two but the only number that matters for the Bucks is on the series scoreboard.

Devin Booker scored 42 points for the Suns, but his foul trouble cost them a chance to build a big lead in the second half. Chris Paul struggled through a 5-for-13 night, finishing with 10 points and five turnovers.

Game 5 is Saturday night in Phoenix.

"This is a tough one but we've got to bounce back," Paul said. "That's why we fought all season to get home court."

Phoenix led by two with 2 1/2 minutes left before Middleton made the next two baskets to give Milwaukee a 101-99 edge with 1:28 to play. It appeared the Suns would tie it with a lob pass to center Deandre Ayton but Antetokounmpo swooped in to block it, flexing his muscles to the crowd behind the basket as the Bucks broke the other way on the fast break.

"That's an NBA Finals special moment right there, and we're going to need more of them," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said.

Middleton missed a couple of jumpers but Paul lost the ball after the second one when he slipped and fell down while dribbling. That sent Middleton off for a layup and he followed with four free throws to make it 107-101.

"Nobody caved," Middleton said. "We stayed with it."

Brook Lopez had 14 points for the Bucks and Holiday added 13 points, seven rebounds and seven assists. He shot only 4 for 20, but his defense helped knock Paul off his game.

Before Middleton's run, it appeared it was going to be Booker's night. He bounced back in a big way from a 3-for-14 night in Game 3 with his third 40-point game of this postseason.

But he had to spend portions of the third and fourth quarters on the bench after picking up fouls and his teammates couldn't handle things without him.

With the leaders of their only title team in the arena, the Bucks improved to 9-1 at home in the playoffs. They are trying to overcome a 2-0 deficit for the second time in this postseason.

The Suns never got more than two wins in their two previous trips to the NBA Finals but it seemed they were finally headed there Wednesday. Booker had a big finish to the third quarter to send them to the fourth leading 82-76, but he picked up his fifth foul barely a minute into the period and sat for about five minutes.

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The Bucks trimmed only three points off the lead before he returned midway through the fourth, but Middleton made sure they surged ahead when it mattered.

"When you have that kind of lead in the fourth, if we can just hold on to the ball and get good possessions, you feel like you can at least hold it there," Suns coach Monty Williams said.

Antetokounmpo had dominated the previous game with his offense, but the 2020 Defensive Player of the Year made his biggest mark on this game on the other end of the floor.

Perhaps sensing the pressure, both teams fumbled the ball around in the early going, diving on the floor in desperate attempts to save it. The Bucks turned what looked like lost possessions into baskets that way in the first quarter, giving them a boost while their outside shooting was off.

The Bucks, who had a big second quarter in Game 3, had another nice stretch midway through this one with an 8-0 run. That gave them a four-point lead and the margin stayed right around there, with the teams trading the lead, until Middleton's 3-pointer made it 52-all at the break.

TIP-INS

Suns: Booker has 542 points, most ever for a player in his first postseason. Rick Barry scored 521 in 1967. ... Jae Crowder scored 15 points.

Bucks: Milwaukee shot just 7 for 29 (24%) from 3-point range. ... Pat Connaughton had 11 points and nine rebounds.

BEST OF THE BUCKS

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Oscar Robertson sat next to each other and were given a loud ovation when shown during the first half. Bob Dandridge and Jon McGlocklin were the other members of the Bucks' only NBA championship team who were at the game.

Uncovering boarding school history makes for monumental task

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — They sat inside a dust-covered box that had been stashed away, untouched, for years: black-and-white photographs of Apache students who were among the first sent to a New Mexico boarding school bankrolled by East Coast parishioners and literary fans.

The first showed the girls bundled in blankets with moccasins on their feet. The next, taken just weeks later, was starkly different, the children posing in plaid uniforms, high-laced boots and wide-brimmed straw hats.

Adjunct history professor Larry Larrichio said he stumbled upon the 1885 photos while researching a military outpost, and "it just brought a tear to my eye."

The images represented the systematic attempt by the U.S. government, religious organizations and other groups to assimilate Indigenous youth into white society by removing them from their homes and shipping them off to boarding school. The effort spanned more than a century and is now the focus of what will be a massive undertaking by the U.S. government as it seeks to uncover the troubled legacy of the nation's policies related to Native American boarding schools, where reports of physical and sexual abuse were widespread.

"I looked at the faces of these beautiful Apache girls in their Native attire and then those ugly American bonnets," said Larrichio, a research associate with the Latin American and Iberian Institute at the University of New Mexico. "It just knocked me on my butt."

The U.S. Interior Department has started combing through records in hopes of identifying past boarding schools and the names and tribes of students. The project also will try to determine how many children perished while attending those schools and were buried in unmarked graves.

As part of an effort that began years earlier, the disinterred remains of nine Native American children who died more than a century ago while attending a government-run school in Pennsylvania were handed over to relatives during a ceremony Wednesday so they could be returned to Rosebud Sioux tribal lands in South Dakota.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, a member of Laguna Pueblo and the first Native American to lead a

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Cabinet agency, has promised a comprehensive review while acknowledging it would be a painful and difficult process.

Larrichio's discovery hints at the immensity of the challenge, as each bit of new information leads down another avenue that needs to be researched.

While some records are kept by the agency and the National Archives, most are scattered across jurisdictions — from the bowels of university archives, like those Larrichio found, to government offices, church archives, museums and personal collections.

That's not to mention whatever records were lost or destroyed over the years.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition has been working to amass information about the schools for almost a decade. With the help of grant funding and the work of independent researchers across the country, the Minnesota-based group has identified nearly 370 schools and estimates hundreds of thousands of Native American children passed through them between 1869 and the 1960s.

"It's going to be a monumental task, and the initiative that was launched by the Interior is great, but it's a short timeline and we'll need further investigation," said Christine Diindiisi McCleave, the group's CEO and a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe Nation.

The coalition knows firsthand how difficult uncovering the truth will be. The group years ago filed public records requests with the federal government for information about the schools. The government didn't have answers, Diindiisi McCleave said.

Of the schools identified by the group so far, she said records have been found for only 40% of them. The whereabouts of the rest are unknown.

What is known from the research and from family accounts is that there were children who never made it home.

With the Interior Department taking a first formal step to uncover more about the history, Diindiisi McCleave and others are renewing their push for a federal commission to be established in the U.S., much like one created in Canada, where the remains of more than 1,000 children were discovered in recent weeks at residential schools there.

In the United States, the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 and other laws and policies were enacted to establish and support Indian boarding schools across the nation. For over 150 years, Indigenous children were taken from their communities and forced into boarding schools that focused on assimilation.

The discoveries in Canada and the renewed spotlight in the U.S. have stirred strong emotions among tribal communities, including grief, anger, reflection and a deep desire for healing.

Haaland, Diindiisi McCleave and New Mexico Indian Affairs Secretary Lynn Trujillo have all recounted stories about their grandparents being sent away to boarding schools. They talk about the intergenerational trauma that was triggered by the experience and the effects that have manifested themselves on younger generations seeking to maintain their language and cultural practices, which were banned in boarding schools.

For some families, the boarding school experience was a forbidden topic, never to be talked about.

For others, the recent attention has spurred fresh conversations. Trujillo talked about her grandmother being taken when she was 6 and telling stories about how she was always so hungry and cold.

Trujillo said while her grandmother made it home, unlike other children, that experience shaped who she was.

"Our communities and Indigenous people have known about these atrocities for a very long time, but being able to bring them to light and talk about them — no matter how painful — is part of that process toward healing," said Trujillo, a member of Sandia Pueblo who has been focused on bringing together Indigenous youth to highlight the need for more mental health resources and educational opportunities.

For Diindiisi McCleave, moving forward with healing will require more research, data and understanding.

"The biggest part of the work starts with the truth, and that includes not only truth from the federal government in this case and the churches that ran the schools, but hearing the truth from the perspective of the people who experienced it, listening to the testimony of survivors and descendants and understanding the full scope and impact of these experiences," she said.

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Experts say the list of known boarding schools — and burial sites — will only expand as more grassroots research sheds light on schools that have otherwise been lost to history.

Already some researchers have spent years piecing together records, old newspaper reports and oral histories to find and identify lost children. Others have searched properties using ground-penetrating radar. Some state agencies that focus on Indigenous affairs are considering launching investigations into known schools.

The Interior Department said it's working on ways to "create a safe space," such as a hotline or special website where people can share information about the schools and seek resources.

In New Mexico, the Ramona Industrial School for Indian Girls opened in the mid-1880s and housed mostly Apache students, many of whom had parents who were being held prisoner by the U.S. Army at Fort Union, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) away.

Not far from Santa Fe's historic plaza, the school was founded by Horatio Ladd, a congregational minister who contracted with the military to send Indigenous students there. The endeavor was supported by parishioners and admirers of author and activist Helen Hunt Jackson through fundraising newsletters and postcards.

Larrichio was working on a project for the National Park Service years ago when he happened upon brochures and other documents related to the school. It was a month-long effort that involved combing through hundreds of archival collections at the Center for Southwest Research at the University of New Mexico.

With only brief references in books on other subjects, the school is an example of the difficult work facing the Interior Department as it embarks on its investigation. While Larrichio is sharing the materials he uncovered with the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, he said "it's the tip of the iceberg," and much more work needs to be done.

"A lot of this information is probably buried — literally buried with respect to this collection I uncovered," he said. "How many other stories are buried, and how much was purposefully destroyed? I think it's going to be very hard to really get a comprehensive understanding of the impact of this."

Afghanistan's neighbors wary as US seeks nearby staging area

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

American diplomats are escalating a charm offensive with Central Asian leaders this week as they work to secure a close-by spot to respond to any resurgence of outside militants in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdraws.

But even as high-level U.S. diplomats head to the region, they're meeting with more doubts from Afghanistan's neighbors about any such security partnering with the United States. That stands in contrast to 2001, when Central Asian countries made available their territory for U.S. bases, troops and other access as America hit back for the 9/11 attacks plotted by al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

There's distrust of the U.S. as a reliable long-term partner, after an only partly successful war in Afghanistan and after years of widely fluctuating U.S. engagement regionally and globally, former American diplomats say. There's Russia, blasting out this week that a permanent U.S. military base in its Central Asia sphere of influence would be "unacceptable."

Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership, more internationally savvy than it had been in 2001, has been visiting regional capitals and Moscow this summer in a diplomatic push of its own, offering broad pledges that it will pursue regional security, peace and trade whatever comes of its fight with the Kabul government.

"I mean, I personally can see the value of an American base in Central Asia, but I'm not sure the Central Asian states see such value" currently, said John Herbst, who as U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan helped arrange military access in Central Asia in 2001.

"We've taken a hit through our failures in Afghanistan" in credibility, Herbst said, after the U.S. neutralized al-Qaida in Afghanistan but struggled in fighting against the fundamentalist Taliban and in trying to strengthen a Kabul-based state. "Is that a mortal hit? Probably not. But it's still a very powerful factor."

The former Soviet republics of Central Asia, which neighbor Afghanistan, watched years of fervent

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democracy-building calls abroad by the United States, then watched President Barack Obama disengage to an extent, and then President Donald Trump almost entirely, says Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, a former U.S. Agency for International Development official in Central Asia, now a researcher on the region at the University of Pittsburgh.

"I think it made the U.S. seem sort of aimless," Murtazashvili said. "The U.S. hasn't had a very strong strategy, or a strong presence, in Central Asia for a long time."

But relations with Central Asia are now a security issue for the Biden administration as it seeks to make sure the fundamentalist Taliban doesn't again allow foreign Islamist extremists to use Afghanistan as a base to mount attacks on the United States or other outside targets.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said Wednesday that the Central Asian nations "will make sovereign decisions about their level of the cooperation with the United States" after the Afghanistan withdrawal.

"It's not only in our interests and, in fact, it is much more and certainly in the immediate interests of Afghanistan's neighbors" that Afghanistan be stable and secure, Price said.

The administration has given few details of what kind of security access it is seeking in the region, or from which countries. While the U.S. can manage strike and counterterror capability for Afghanistan from Gulf nations or from U.S. aircraft carriers, closer is much better. That's especially true for intelligence operations to track developments in Afghanistan.

Any such agreement would likely be discreet.

The U.S. also reportedly looked at neighboring countries for the temporary relocation of Afghan translators and other U.S. employees.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby confirmed this week that the United States still was actively courting countries in Central Asia. "We are talking about and discussing with countries in the region about the possibilities of being able to use facilities and infrastructure" closer to Afghanistan, he said.

To that end, the Biden administration invited the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to Washington earlier this month, shining the bright light of U.S. diplomacy on them.

And Biden's homeland security adviser, Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, joined by U.S.-Afghanistan special representative Zalmay Khalilzad, headed with other Americans to a conference opening Thursday in Uzbekistan's capital drawing foreign ministers and presidents of almost all the regional countries and powers.

All are countries urgently and directly affected by whether Afghanistan again becomes a refuge for extremism upon the U.S. withdrawal.

For landlocked Uzbekistan, hopes of rapidly reaching outside markets hinge on completing a railroad to Pakistan's seaports — through Afghanistan.

"For us, it is vitally important," Uzbekistan's ambassador to the U.S., Javlon Vakhobov, said. Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government in Kabul has promised its support for the project, and probably more importantly, so have Taliban leaders, in two visits to Uzbekistan.

"We've been reassured that these people would not attack or ... harm" the project, Vakhobov said.

Uzbek law meant to keep the former Soviet republic from aligning with any bloc now prohibits the country from hosting any foreign base or counterterror effort, he said, while stressing his country's positive feelings for the United States.

The region waits now to see if the Taliban makes good on its pledge to be a good neighbor, despite what may happen among Afghanistan's rival forces. If not, cooperation with U.S. security aims will likely increase, former diplomats said.

"All the countries in the region, they have to worry about Taliban intentions. If the Taliban behaves, than great" for them, Herbst, the former U.S. ambassador, said. "If the Taliban doesn't behave, they need some help — and help from us."

Biden pitches huge budget, says Dems will 'get a lot done'

By ALAN FRAM and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden made a quick foray to the U.S. Capitol hunting support for his multitrillion-dollar agenda of infrastructure, health care and other programs, a potential landmark achievement that would require near-unanimous backing from fractious Democrats.

His visit Wednesday came a day after Senate Democratic leaders capped weeks of bargaining by agreeing to spend a mammoth \$3.5 trillion over the coming decade on initiatives focusing on climate change, education, a Medicare expansion and more. That's on top of a separate \$1 trillion bipartisan compromise on roads, water systems and other infrastructure projects that senators from both parties are negotiating, with Biden's support.

The president spent just under an hour at a closed-door lunch with Democratic senators in the building where he served for 36 years as a Delaware senator and where his party controls the House and Senate, though just barely. Participants said Biden paced the room with a microphone taking questions and received several standing ovations.

"It is great to be home," Biden told reporters after his first working meeting at the Capitol with lawmakers since becoming president. "It is great to be with my colleagues, and I think we are going to get a lot done."

Democrats' accord on their overall \$3.5 trillion figure was a major step for a party whose rival moderate and progressive factions have competing visions of how costly and bold the final package should be. But many of them say bolstering lower-earning and middle-class families, and raising taxes on wealthy people and big corporations to help pay for it, would nurture long-term economic growth and pay political dividends in next year's elections for control of Congress.

Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut said the president urged them to consider whether their plan would help people in Biden's blue-collar hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania. "His point was that we need to be thinking about folks who have given up on democracy," Murphy said.

Democrats' agreement on a topline spending figure, while significant, is merely an initial move that leaves the toughest decisions for later. They must translate their plan into legislation with specific spending and revenue figures, then line up the needed votes to enact it, a process likely to grind right through autumn.

With unanimous Republican opposition likely, Democrats would need support from all their lawmakers in the 50-50 Senate and could lose no more than three votes in the House.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, top Republican on the Budget Committee, belittled the emerging plan as a wasteful liberal wish list that would fuel inflation and boost taxes.

"Count me in for real infrastructure. Count me out for a tax and spend plan from Hell," he said in a statement.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Republicans simply want to help the rich. "They don't want their taxes to rise. They don't want the government to help people," he said.

To reach their legislative goal, Democrats want to approve a budget resolution before Congress' August recess that would let them push a subsequent, sprawling spending bill actually financing their priorities through the Senate by a simple majority vote. Without that protection, Republicans could kill the follow-on spending measure with a filibuster that would require an insurmountable 60 votes to overcome. The budget resolution itself cannot be filibustered.

Democrats said little about one challenge they will face. The measures Democrats contemplate total a bit less than the roughly \$4.5 trillion for new spending that Biden wants for infrastructure, family services, climate change and other programs. To accommodate their lower figure, lawmakers will have to curtail or eliminate some of his proposals.

"I think we're in good shape. There may be some slight adjustments in the pay-fors," meaning revenue increases, Biden told governors and mayors visiting the White House. The proposed tax boosts loom as one of the plan's most politically sensitive items, especially for moderate Democrats facing competitive reelections.

In an unsurprising harbinger of potential problems, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps his chamber's most conservative Democrat, signaled he would oppose proposals to curb fossil fuels, long a lifeblood for his state's economy. His demands to trim other spending forced Democrats to drop a longtime progressive

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goal, a minimum wage increase, from pandemic relief legislation early this year.

Manchin said of cutting fossil fuels, which are major contributors to global warming, "It won't happen, it can't happen and it doesn't do a darn thing but makes the world worse." He said Democrats could achieve their spending plans "if they understand fossil is going to play a part."

Key backing for the overall plan has come from Senate Budget Committee Chair Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a self-proclaimed democratic socialist and a leader of the Democrats' progressive wing. He's repeatedly called the agreement historic and said Wednesday that while he'd like more spending — he earlier sought \$6 trillion — the reality is that all 50 Democratic senators are needed to prevail.

"I think this is very, very significant," he said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the Senate plan would address her chamber's Democratic priorities on climate, health care and family services and make "historic, once-in-a-generation progress for families across the nation." Yet in a letter to colleagues, she seemed to leave the door open to seeking more, saying, "We will fight to ensure that our priorities become law."

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, told reporters that while her group's support isn't guaranteed, "We see this as a very big, positive step forward."

Details of the package began emerging, even though all are merely proposals that await final decisions later.

A senior Democratic aide said the party will seek extensions of tax credits for children, child care and some low-income people, money for environmentally friendly energy technologies and a federal standard aimed at encouraging a shift to clean energy. The plan would fund pre-kindergarten for toddlers, aid for college students, paid family leave, food and housing programs and a pathway to citizenship for potentially several million immigrants in the U.S. illegally, said the aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe Democrats' plans.

Also included is a top progressive priority — an expansion of Medicare, the health insurance program for older Americans, to include vision, dental and hearing coverage. Sanders suggested there also might be an effort to lower that program's eligibility age to 60.

That would be expensive, but the senior aide said Democrats are also looking at savings from letting the government negotiate prescription drug costs. The aide said there would also be language barring tax boosts on people earning under \$400,000 annually, on small businesses and on family farms.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., a leading moderate, said the entire measure would be paid for with new revenue. Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said in an interview that he's working on proposals to "ensure that the superwealthy and mega-corporations pay their fair share" of taxes and for extra funding for the IRS to crack down on tax scofflaws.

Will COVID-19 vaccines work if I have a weak immune system?

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Will COVID-19 vaccines work if I have a weak immune system?

Probably not as well as they do in healthy people, but the shots should offer some protection.

It's why vaccinations are still recommended for people with immune systems weakened by disease or certain medications. It's also important that your family, friends and caregivers get vaccinated, which will make it far less likely that they pass on the virus.

About 3% of U.S. adults have weakened immune systems. Among them are people with HIV or AIDS, transplant recipients, some cancer patients and people with autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease and lupus.

COVID-19 shots weren't studied in large numbers of people with weak immune systems. But limited data and experience with flu and pneumonia vaccines suggest they won't work as well as they do in others. That means people with weakened immune systems should keep taking precautions like wearing masks and avoiding large crowds.

"It's prudent to use all the precautions you were using before you were vaccinated," said Dr. Ajit Limaye,

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a transplant expert at University of Washington Medicine in Seattle.

Although most cancer patients should get vaccinated as soon as they can, people getting stem cell transplant or CAR T-cell therapy should wait at least three months after treatment to get vaccinated, according to guidance from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network. That delay will make sure the vaccines work as well as they can.

For transplant recipients, researchers are looking at whether an extra dose might make the vaccines more effective.

French guidelines recommend a third COVID-19 dose for the immunocompromised, including organ recipients. Israel recently began giving an extra dose of the Pfizer vaccine to transplant patients and others with weak immune systems. Some U.S. transplant recipients seek out a third dose on their own in hopes of more protection even though the federal government hasn't authorized extra vaccinations.

Cuba's leader lays some blame for protests on his government

HAVANA (AP) — Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel for the first time is offering some self-criticism while saying that government shortcomings in handling shortages and other problems played a role in this week's protests.

But in a televised address Wednesday night he also called on Cubans to not act with hate — a reference to the violence that occurred at some of the rare street demonstrations in which protesters voiced grievances over high prices, food shortages and power outages, while some people also called for a change in the government.

Until now, the Cuban government had only blamed social media and the U.S. government for the week-end protests, which were the biggest seen in Cuba since a quarter century ago, when then-President Fidel Castro personally went into the streets to calm crowds of thousands furious over dire shortages following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its economic subsidies for the island.

Díaz-Canel, however, said that failings by the state played a role in the unrest.

"We have to gain experience from the disturbances," he said. "We also have to carry out a critical analysis of our problems in order to act and overcome, and avoid their repetition."

In the protests, many Cubans expressed anger over long lines and shortages of food and medicines, as well as repeated electricity outages. Some demanded a faster pace of vaccination against the coronavirus. But there were also calls for political change in a country governed by the Communist Party for some six decades.

Police moved in and arrested dozens of protesters, sometimes violently, and the government has accused protesters of looting and vandalizing shops. Smaller protests continued Monday and officials reported at least one death. No incidents were reported Wednesday.

"Our society is not a society that generates hatred and those people acted with hatred," Díaz-Canel said. "The feeling of Cubans is a feeling of solidarity and these people carried out these armed acts, with vandalism ... yelling for deaths ... planning to raid public places, breaking, robbing, throwing stones."

Authorities did not report the number of people arrested, Col. Moraima Bravet of the Interior Ministry said Wednesday only that they are mostly between the ages of 25 and 37 and will be prosecuted such crimes as public disorder, assault, contempt, robbery or damage.

Cuba is suffering its worst crisis in years from a combination of the coronavirus pandemic that has paralyzed its economy, including the vital tourism industry, inefficiencies in the state-run economy and the tightening of U.S. sanctions on the island. The administration of President Donald Trump imposed more than 200 measures against the island in four years.

Díaz-Canel said that this "complex situation" was taken advantage of "by those who do not really want the Cuban revolution to develop or a civilized relationship with respect with the United States."

Shortly before the president's remarks, Prime Minister Manuel Marrero announced some measures such as customs flexibility for Cuban citizens who go on foreign trips to bring home toiletries, food and medicines, which are among the most hard to find items in Cuba.

Marrero also said that work is being done to improve the stability of the national electricity system and that officials will seek to improve the supply of medicines, many of which are produced on the island but whose inputs must be imported.

Meanwhile, Economy Minister Alejandro Gil announced the directors of state-owned enterprises will be allowed to determine salaries beyond the regulations. He also said that in the coming weeks long-promised rules will be instituted for small- and medium-size enterprises to be formed, a step once unthinkable under the communist government.

Miami security firm faces questions in Haiti assassination

By GISELA SALOMON and ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — For the owner of a small private security company with a history of avoiding paying debts and declaring bankruptcy, it looked like a good opportunity: Find people with military experience for a job in Haiti.

Antonio "Tony" Intriago, owner of Miami-based CTU Security, seems to have jumped at the chance, hiring more than 20 former soldiers from Colombia for the mission. Now the Colombians have been killed or captured in the aftermath of the July 7 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, and Intriago's business faces questions about its role in the killing.

On Wednesday evening, Léon Charles, head of the Haiti's National Police, accused Intriago of traveling to Haiti numerous times as part of the assassination plot and of signing a contract while there, but provided no other details and offered no evidence.

"The investigation is very advanced," Charles said.

A Miami security professional believes Intriago was too eager to take the job and did not push to learn details, leaving his contractors in the lurch. Some of their family members back in Colombia have said the men understood the mission was to provide protection for VIPs.

Three Colombians were killed and 18 are behind bars in Haiti, Colombia's national police chief, Gen. Jorge Luis Vargas, told reporters in Bogota. Colombian diplomats in Haiti have not had access to them.

Vargas has said that CTU Security used its company credit card to buy 19 plane tickets from Bogota to Santo Domingo for the Colombian suspects allegedly involved in the killing. One of the Colombians who was killed, Duberney Capador, photographed himself wearing a black CTU Security polo shirt.

Nelson Romero Velasquez, an ex-soldier and attorney who is advising 16 families of the Colombians held in Haiti, said Wednesday that the men had all served in the Colombian military's elite special forces and could operate without being detected, if they had desired. He said their behavior made it clear they did not go to Haiti to assassinate the president.

"They have the ability to be like shadows," Romero Velasquez said.

The predawn attack took place at the president's private home. He was shot to death and his wife wounded. It's not clear who pulled the trigger. The latest suspects identified in the sweeping investigation included a former Haitian senator, a fired government official and an informant for the U.S. government.

Miami has become a focus of the probe. The city has long been a nest of intrigue, from being a CIA recruitment center for the failed Bay of Pigs operation to overthrow Cuban dictator Fidel Castro to being a key shipment point for Colombian cocaine in the 1980s. Its palm-fringed shores have also been a place of exile for people from Latin American and Caribbean countries when political winds blew against them at home, and where some plotted their returns.

Homeland Security Investigations, a U.S. agency responsible for investigating crimes that cross international borders, is also investigating the assassination, said a Department of Homeland Security official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk about the case. He declined to provide details.

The FBI says it is "providing investigative assistance" to Haitian authorities.

Intriago, who immigrated from Venezuela over a decade ago and participated in activities in Miami opposing the leftist regime in his homeland, did not respond to multiple requests for an interview.

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He likes to be around powerful people and has posted photos on social media showing himself with them, including Colombian President Ivan Duque.

Duque's office on Monday disavowed any knowledge of Intriago, saying Duque was in Miami while campaigning for the presidency in February 2018. He posed for photographs with some of those in attendance, but Duque did not have any meeting or any ties with Intriago, the Colombian president's office said.

Florida state records show Intriago's company has changed names in the past dozen years: CTU Security to CS Security Solutions to Counter Terrorist Unit Federal Academy LLC.

CTU lists two Miami addresses on its website. One is a shuttered warehouse with no signage. The other is a small office suite under a different name. A receptionist said the CTU owner stops by once a week to collect mail.

The company website says it offers "first-class personalized products and services to law enforcement and military units, as well as industrial customers."

But it ducked paying some of those wholesale companies for their products. Florida records show Intriago's company was ordered by a court to pay a \$64,791 debt in 2018 to a weapons and tactical gear supply company, RSR Group. Propper, a military apparel manufacturer, also sued for nonpayment.

Alexis Ortiz, a writer who worked with Intriago organizing meetings of expatriate Venezuelans in the United States, described him as a "very active, skilled collaborator."

"He seemed nice," Ortiz said.

Richard Noriega, who runs International Security Consulting in Miami, said he does not know Intriago personally but has been observing the developing situation. Noriega, who is also originally from Venezuela, believes Intriago was lured by the prospect of fast money and did not perform due diligence.

Putting himself in Intriago's shoes, Noriega said: "I'm coming out of a complicated situation — of work, of income, of money. An opportunity arises. I don't want to lose it."

Normally, a security company would seek all the details of an operation, to determine how many people to use and what level of insurance they would need. A priority would be to plan an escape route in case things go awry, he said.

"The first thing we (security professionals) have to take into account is the evacuation. Where will they exit? That's the first thing I do," Noriega said.

But apparently that planning never happened, perhaps because the Colombians, or at least some of them, thought their mission was benign.

He said it does not seem logical that if the highly trained Colombians were there to kill the president, that they would not have had an escape route. Instead they were caught, some hiding in bushes, by the local population and police.

"It is very murky," Noriega said.

Cuba's president says government has some blame for protests

HAVANA (AP) — Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on Wednesday acknowledged shortcomings in his government's handling of shortages and of neglecting certain sectors, but he urged Cubans to not act with hate — a reference to violence during recent street protests.

Until now, the Cuban government had only blamed social media and the U.S. government for the weekend protests, which were the biggest seen in Cuba since a quarter century ago, when then-President Fidel Castro personally went into the streets to calm crowds of thousands furious over dire shortages following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its economic subsidies for the island.

In a nighttime address on state television, Díaz-Canel for the first time was self critical and acknowledged that failings by the state played a role in the protests over food shortages, rising prices and other grievances.

"We have to gain experience from the disturbances," he said. "We also have to carry out a critical analysis of our problems in order to act and overcome, and avoid their repetition."

In the protests, many Cubans expressed anger over long lines and shortages of food and medicines, as

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well as repeated electricity outages. Some demanded a faster pace of vaccination against the coronavirus. But there were also calls for political change in a country governed by the Communist Party for some six decades.

Police moved in and arrested dozens of protesters, sometimes violently, and the government has accused protesters of looting and vandalizing shops. Smaller protests continued Monday and officials reported at least one death. No incidents were reported Wednesday.

"Our society is not a society that generates hatred and those people acted with hatred," Díaz-Canel said. "The feeling of Cubans is a feeling of solidarity and these people carried out these armed acts, with vandalism ... yelling for deaths ... planning to raid public places, breaking, robbing, throwing stones."

Authorities did not report the number of people arrested, Col. Moraima Bravet of the Interior Ministry said Wednesday only that they are mostly between the ages of 25 and 37 and will be prosecuted such crimes as public disorder, assault, contempt, robbery or damage.

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Watchdog: FBI mishandled Nassar-USA Gymnastics abuse case

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI made "fundamental" errors in investigating sexual abuse allegations against former USA Gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar and did not treat the case with the "utmost seriousness," the Justice Department's inspector general said Wednesday. More athletes said they were molested before the the FBI swung into action.

The FBI acknowledged conduct that was "inexcusable and a discredit" to America's premier law enforcement agency and all.

The long-awaited watchdog report raises troubling questions about how the department and the FBI handled the case and it highlights major missteps at the FBI between the time the allegations were first reported and Nassar's arrest.

The inspector general's investigation was spurred by allegations that the FBI failed to promptly address complaints made in 2015 against Nassar. USA Gymnastics had conducted its own internal investigation and then the organization's then-president, Stephen Penny, reported the allegations to the FBI's field office in Indianapolis. But it took months before the bureau opened a formal investigation.

At least 40 girls and women said they were molested over a 14-month period while the FBI was aware of other sexual abuse allegations involving Nassar. Officials at USA Gymnastics also contacted FBI officials in Los Angeles in May 2016 after eight months of inactivity from agents in Indianapolis.

The inspector general's office found that "despite the extraordinarily serious nature" of the claims against Nassar, FBI officials in Indianapolis did not respond with the "utmost seriousness and urgency that the

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allegations deserved and required.”

When they did respond, the report said, FBI officials made “numerous and fundamental errors” and also violated bureau policies. Among the missteps was a failure to conduct any investigative activity until more than a month after a meeting with USA Gymnastics. Agents interviewed by phone one of three athletes, but never spoke with two other gymnasts despite being told they were available to meet.

The watchdog investigation also found that when the FBI’s Indianapolis field office’s handling of the matter came under scrutiny, officials there did not take any responsibility for the missteps and gave incomplete and inaccurate information to internal FBI inquiries to make it look like they had been diligent in their investigation.

The FBI rebuked its own employees who failed to act in the case and said it “should not have happened.”

“The actions and inactions of certain FBI employees described in the Report are inexcusable and a discredit to this organization,” the agency said in a statement.

“The FBI has taken affirmative steps to ensure and has confirmed that those responsible for the misconduct and breach of trust no longer work FBI matters,” the statement said. “We will take all necessary steps to ensure that the failures of the employees outlined in the Report do not happen again.”

The inspector general interviewed an FBI supervisory special agent last September who said the original allegations reported by Penny and USA Gymnastics were “very vague” and who questioned Penny’s credibility, describing him as “kind of a snake oil salesman kind of guy.”

That special agent also told investigators that the Indianapolis field office didn’t appear to have jurisdiction to investigate because the alleged crimes did not take place in Indiana. That agent and an FBI supervisor in the office said they told Penny to contact local law enforcement — a claim contradicted by Penny and the chairman of the USA Gymnastics Board of Directors.

The FBI said the supervisory special agent “violated multiple policies” and that the agency took immediate action when it learned that the agent did not properly document the sexual abuse complaints, had mishandled evidence and failed to report abuse.

The report also detailed that while the FBI was investigating the Nassar allegations, the head of the FBI’s field office in Indianapolis, W. Jay Abbott, was talking to Penny about getting a job with the Olympic Committee. He applied for the job but didn’t get it and later retired from the FBI, the report said.

Abbott also lied to investigators from the inspector general’s office multiple times in an effort “to minimize errors” made by his office in handling the case, the report found.

Nassar was ultimately charged in 2016 with federal child pornography offenses and sexual abuse charges in Michigan.

He is now serving decades in prison after hundreds of girls and women said he sexually abused them under the guise of medical treatment when he worked for Michigan State and Indiana-based USA Gymnastics, which trains Olympians.

The inspector general’s office said it reviewed thousands of documents and interviewed more than 60 witnesses, including several victims, their parents, prosecutors and current and former FBI employees.

The FBI’s handling of the case was strongly condemned by members of Congress, and some senators called for the inspector general, Michael Horowitz, FBI Director Christopher Wray and Attorney General Merrick Garland to testify about the case.

“We are appalled by the FBI’s gross mishandling of the specific warnings its agents received about Larry Nassar’s horrific abuse years before he was finally arrested,” said Sens. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., and Jerry Moran, R-Kan.

Nassar’s victims also strongly criticized the FBI for its poor handling of the investigation.

“The dozens of little girls abused after the FBI knew who Larry was and exactly what he was doing, could have and should have been saved,” tweeted Rachel Denhollander, one of the first women to publicly accuse Nassar of abuse.

John Manly, an attorney for over 150 of Nassar’s victims, said Abbott should be prosecuted and insisted that anyone responsible for missteps in the investigation should be held accountable.

"The OIG report released shocks the conscience," Manly said. "These women and girls not only deserved to have their case thoroughly investigated but deserved the respect and full attention of those investigating their case."

USA Gymnastics is still reeling from the fallout of the Nassar scandal six years after Penny first approached authorities. The sport's national governing body has undergone a massive overhaul in leadership — current president Li Li Leung is the fourth person to hold the position since the 2016 Olympics — and safety protocols in hopes of providing better protection for athletes.

USA Gymnastics also remains in court as it continues mediation with dozens of Nassar survivors, though Leung hopes settlement can be reached by the end of the year.

"At the end of the day, what has happened is something that we are learning from and we're using the past to inform how we go forward," Leung told reporters last month.

The report came on the same day the 2021 U.S. Olympic gymnastics team, a group that includes reigning world and Olympic champion and Nassar abuse survivor Simone Biles, flew to Tokyo for the Games.

Bad hiccups, but no immediate surgery for Brazil's president

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — After 10 straight days of hiccups, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro was admitted to a hospital Wednesday with an intestinal obstruction, but doctors said they would not operate immediately.

Bolsonaro, 66, was admitted to the Armed Forces Hospital in the capital of Brasilia in the morning and was "feeling well," according to an initial statement that said physicians were examining his persistent hiccups.

But hours later, the president's office said the surgeon who operated on Bolsonaro after he was stabbed in the abdomen during the 2018 presidential campaign decided to transfer him to Sao Paulo, where he underwent additional tests. By Wednesday night, the Hospital Nova Star released a statement saying the president would receive "a conservative clinical treatment," meaning he will not go through surgery for now.

Bolsonaro, who is both Catholic and evangelical, posted on his official Twitter account a photo of himself lying on a hospital bed, eyes closed, several monitoring sensors stuck to his bare torso. At the edge of the photo, a hand reaches out from an unseen person wearing what appears to be a black religious robe and a long chain with a gold cross.

The 2018 stabbing caused intestinal damage and serious internal bleeding and the president has gone through several surgeries since, some unrelated to the attack.

In recent weeks, Bolsonaro has appeared to struggle with speaking on various occasions and said that he suffers from recurring hiccups.

"I apologize to everyone who is listening to me, because I've been hiccupping for five days now," the president said in an interview with Radio Guaiba on July 7. He suggested that some medications prescribed after dental surgery might be the cause. "I have the hiccups 24 hours a day."

The following day, during his weekly Facebook Live session, Bolsonaro apologized again for not being able to express himself well due to the weeklong hiccups.

Chronic hiccups are usually the manifestation of an underlying problem, such as an obstructed intestine, that might require surgery, said Dr. Anthony Lembo, a gastroenterologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. In some cases, part of the intestine might need to be removed, he said.

"Any time you're moving bowels, it's not a small surgery," Lembo said, adding that in the case of repeated surgeries, as in Bolsonaro's case, interventions get more complicated.

Bolsonaro has been under growing pressure from a congressional inquiry into his administration's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and alleged corruption in the acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines. Recent polls have shown record-low approval ratings and indications that he could lose next year's election.

On Tuesday night, in a 20-minute encounter with the president in Brasilia, supporters repeatedly asked him to look after his health.

Dispiriting setback: COVID deaths, cases rise again globally

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By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and MARIA CHENG Associated Press

COVID-19 deaths and cases are on the rise again globally in a dispiriting setback that is triggering another round of restrictions and dampening hopes for a return to normal life.

The World Health Organization reported Wednesday that deaths climbed last week after nine straight weeks of decline. It recorded more than 55,000 lives lost, a 3% increase from the week before.

Cases rose 10% last week to nearly 3 million, with the highest numbers recorded in Brazil, India, Indonesia and Britain, WHO said.

The reversal has been attributed to low vaccination rates, the relaxation of mask rules and other precautions, and the swift spread of the more-contagious delta variant, which WHO said has now been identified in 111 countries and is expected to become globally dominant in the coming months.

Sarah McCool, a professor of public health at Georgia State University, said the combination amounts to a "recipe for a potential tinderbox."

"It's important that we recognize that COVID has the potential for explosive outbreaks," warned Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins University.

Amid the surge, the death toll in hard-hit Argentina surpassed 100,000. Daily coronavirus deaths in Russia hit record highs this week. In Belgium, COVID-19 infections, driven by the delta variant among the young, have almost doubled over the past week. Britain recorded a one-day total of more than 40,000 new cases for the first time in six months.

In Myanmar, crematoriums are working morning to night. In Indonesia, which recorded almost 1,000 deaths and over 54,000 new cases Wednesday, up from around 8,000 cases per day a month ago, people near Jakarta are pitching in to help gravediggers keep up.

"As the diggers are too tired and do not have enough resources to dig, the residents in my neighborhood decided to help," Jaya Abidin said. "Because if we do not do this, we will have to wait in turn a long time for a burial."

In the U.S., with one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, newly confirmed infections per day have doubled over the past two weeks to an average of about 24,000, though deaths are still on a downward trajectory at around 260 a day.

Los Angeles County, the most populous county in the U.S., reported its fifth straight day Tuesday of more than 1,000 new cases.

Tokyo is under a fourth state of emergency ahead of the Summer Games this month, with infections climbing fast and hospital beds filling up. Experts have said caseloads could rise above 1,000 before the Olympics and multiply to thousands during the games.

The spike has led to additional restrictions in places like Sydney, Australia, where the 5 million residents will remain in lockdown through at least the end of July, two weeks longer than planned. South Korea has placed the Seoul area under its toughest distancing rules yet because of record case levels.

Parts of Spain, including Barcelona, moved to impose an overnight curfew. London Mayor Sadiq Khan said masks will be required on buses and trains even after other restrictions in England are lifted next week. Italy warned all those going abroad that they might have to quarantine before returning home.

Chicago announced that unvaccinated travelers from Missouri and Arkansas must either quarantine for 10 days or have a negative COVID-19 test.

Connecticut lawmakers voted Wednesday to again extend Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont's emergency declarations, despite pushback from Republicans and some Democrats who argued it is time to get back to normal. Among other things, the move keeps in place orders requiring masks in certain settings.

An Alabama military base has ordered troops to show proof of vaccination before they can go maskless as the state sees an uptick in COVID-19 cases, a rise attributed to low vaccination rates. The measure was put in place Tuesday at Fort Rucker, home to the Army's aviation program.

As troubling as the figures are around the world, they are still well below the alarming numbers seen earlier this year.

Seven months into the vaccination drive, global deaths are down to around 7,900 a day, after topping out

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at over 18,000 a day in January, according to Johns Hopkins data. Cases are running at around 450,000 a day, down by half since their peak in late April.

WHO acknowledged that many countries are now facing “considerable pressure” to lift all remaining precautions but warned that failing to do it the right way will just give the virus more opportunity to spread. Pressure is growing worldwide to boost vaccination rates to counter the rise.

“If you have been waiting, if you have been on the fence, sign up and get that shot as soon as possible,” New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Dave Chokshi pleaded.

Eighteen-year-old actress and singer Olivia Rodrigo appeared at the White House on Wednesday as part of an effort by President Joe Biden to persuade more young people. Getting a vaccination is something “you can do more easily than ever before,” she said.

While nearly 160 million Americans have been fully vaccinated, or over 55% of the population, young adults have shown less interest.

Ohio is planning another prize program to encourage vaccinations, and Gov. Mike DeWine urged the government to give the vaccines full approval instead of just emergency authorization to ease people’s doubts.

“The reality is we now have two Ohios,” said Bruce Vanderhoff, the state’s chief medical officer. “An Ohio that is vaccinated and protected on the one hand, and an Ohio that is unvaccinated and vulnerable to delta on the other.”

Michigan already started a COVID-19 vaccine sweepstakes and announced the first four \$50,000 winners Wednesday. Bigger prizes, including a \$2 million jackpot, are coming.

In Missouri, second only to Arkansas with the worst COVID-19 diagnosis rate over the past week, political leaders in and around St. Louis have stepped up efforts to get people vaccinated through gift cards and by enlisting beauty salons and barbershops to dispense information.

Mexico abandons fishing-free zone for endangered porpoise

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The Mexican government officially abandoned the policy of maintaining a fishing-free zone around the last 10 or so remaining vaquita marina.

The measure announced Wednesday replaces the fishing-free “zero tolerance” zone in the upper Gulf of California with a sliding scale of punishments if more than 60 boats are seen in the area on multiple occasions.

Given that Mexico has been unable to enforce the current restrictions — which bans boats in the small area — the sliding-scale punishments also seem doomed to irrelevance.

Environmental experts say the move essentially abandons the world’s most endangered marine mammal to the gill nets that trap and drown them. The nets are set for totoaba, a fish whose swim bladder is a delicacy in China, and sells for thousands of dollars per pound (kilogram).

Alex Olivera, the Mexico representative for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the rules establish a sliding scale of responses to a situation that shouldn’t be allowed to occur in the first place. For example, the Agriculture and Fisheries Department says it will use 60% of its enforcement personnel if 20 fishing boats or less are seen in the restricted area.

“This is stupid. They are waiting to count boats in an area designated as ‘zero tolerance,’ where there shouldn’t be a single boat,” Olivera said. “They are letting in dozens of boats.”

“This is the end of the concept of zero tolerance,” Olivera said. “There is just going to be dissuasion.”

One conservation expert who is familiar with the case, but who cannot be quoted by name for fear of repercussions, said the new rules “imply not protecting the vaquita.”

“It appears that fisheries authorities want to drive the vaquita to extinction,” the expert said.

Two ships from the conservationist group Sea Shepherd have worked with Mexican marines to try to grab banned fishing nets from the area, but they are frequently outnumbered and attacked by fishermen, who have no fear at all of the marines.

In January, two fishermen rammed their small boat into a larger vessel used by Sea Shepherd to haul

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out nets. Sea Shepherd said its vessel, the Farley Mowat, was pulling illegal gill nets out of the waters of the gulf, also known as the Sea of Cortez, when people on a group of about a half dozen small, open fishing boats began tossing gasoline bombs at the vessel, setting the bow and another part of the ship afire.

The nets confiscated by Sea Shepherd vessels are expensive, so fishermen often harass the conservationists' boats to try to get them back. The fishermen claim they have not received compensation from the Mexican government for lost fishing income. Groups representing fishermen were not immediately available to comment.

The upper Gulf of California is the only place the vaquita lives.

Mexico's Environment Department had previously said the drop in the number of vaquitas and the area where they have been seen in recent years justified reducing the protection zone, which in theory once covered most of the upper Gulf.

Formally known as the vaquita "reserve," that zone starts around the Colorado river delta and extends south past the fishing town of San Felipe and near Puerto Peñasco.

But as vaquita numbers dwindled to a few dozen, and then to less than a dozen, scientists and environmentalists decided to make a last-ditch stand in the 'zero tolerance' zone, a far smaller area where the last vaquita were seen.

Their numbers are confirmed by subaquatic listening devices that graph the squeaks and squeals the animals make, even as visual sighting become rare.

Britney Spears' new attorney says father must step aside

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A judge allowed Britney Spears to hire an attorney of her choosing at a hearing Wednesday in which she broke down in tears after describing the "cruelty" of her conservatorship.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Brenda Penny approved Spears hiring former federal prosecutor Mathew Rosengart, who called on Spears' father to immediately resign as her conservator.

"The question remains, why is he involved," Rosengart said outside the courthouse.

Britney Spears, taking part in the hearing by phone, told the judge she approved of Rosengart after several conversations with him. She then asked to address the court, but asked that the courtroom be cleared.

As Rosengart began to argue for a private hearing, Spears interrupted him to say "I can talk with it open."

"My dad needs to be removed today," she said, adding that she would like to see him charged with abusing his position.

She spoke so rapidly she was at times difficult for the court reporter and the dozens of media members in the courtroom to understand.

She said she wanted the conservatorship to end immediately but not if it required going through any more "stupid" evaluations. She said she did not want another opportunity for "people to question my intelligence for the millionth time."

She described being denied things as basic as coffee, her driver's license and her "hair vitamins" by the conservatorship.

"If this is not abuse, I don't know what is," Spears said.

She recalled that "I thought they were trying to kill me" in the early years of the conservatorship as she was being overworked and constantly examined.

She began to sob as she talked about taking comfort in a therapy dog when she felt abandoned by her family.

James Spears would not be stepping down as Rosengart challenged, his attorney Vivan Thoreen said in court, adding that he has only ever had his daughter's best interests in mind.

Thoreen said Britney Spears had many inaccurate beliefs, among them that "her father is responsible for all the bad things that have happened to her."

"Whether it's misinformation, lack of correction, or being wrongly advised, I don't know," Thoreen said.

Thoreen emphasized that for nearly two years James Spears has had control only over his daughter's money, ceding power over her life choices to a court-appointed professional, Jodi Montgomery.

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Thoreen argued that an evidentiary hearing was necessary to look into the allegations that Britney Spears made at the June 23 hearing, including that she was being forced to take medications and use an intra-uterine device for birth control.

Thoreen said she found it odd Britney Spears would describe those circumstances, which the pop star called "abusive," then approve of Montgomery continuing in her role as overseer.

Montgomery's lawyer, Lauriann Wright, responded that the last thing Britney Spears needed was to be put on the stand and cross-examined over the truth of what she said during her emotional testimony.

"I don't think it's a secret that we're dealing with someone with mental illness," Wright said.

Wright added that it's been "strongly recommended by her medical team that her father Mr. Spears needs to be off the conservatorship."

Britney Spears has been under court supervision since February 2008. She was in the midst of a public meltdown at the time and her family sought the conservatorship for her protection.

She has had throughout the proceedings a court-appointed attorney to represent her interests, Samuel Ingham III, but he resigned after the dramatic hearing three weeks ago in which the pop star told Penny: "I just want my life back."

Fans from the #FreeBritney movement outside the courthouse cheered the decision to appoint Rosengart, then cheered Rosengart himself when he walked out.

In court, he called into question whether the conservatorship should ever have been put into place, and said he and a team of attorneys from his firm would be taking a close look at the details of the arrangement.

"This is not working," Rosengart said. "We know that."

Florida congressman Matt Gaetz made a brief appearance addressing the Spears supporters outside the downtown Los Angeles courthouse, at one point shouting "Free Britney!"

In Washington, D.C., a group of Spears supporters demonstrated on the National Mall in support of the singer.

The case had for several years operated with little drama, though questions about how its length and the singer's feelings about the proceedings, arose in recent years. That has culminated into intense public scrutiny of the court proceedings, which have been conducted largely in secret due to medical and private information about the singer and her condition.

There has also been focus on the complex network of lawyers and others involved in the conservatorship.

Penny again gave little indication of what moves she'll make next, scheduling another hearing for late September and expressing hope that the warring factions will find common ground for Britney Spears' sake.

"Everybody should be working collaboratively," the judge said. "It's not about anybody else, it's about her."

US overdose deaths hit record 93,000 in pandemic last year

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Overdose deaths soared to a record 93,000 last year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government reported Wednesday.

That estimate far eclipses the high of about 72,000 drug overdose deaths reached the previous year and amounts to a 29% increase.

"This is a staggering loss of human life," said Brandon Marshall, a Brown University public health researcher who tracks overdose trends.

The nation was already struggling with its worst overdose epidemic but clearly "COVID has greatly exacerbated the crisis," he added.

Lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions isolated those with drug addictions and made treatment harder to get, experts said.

Jordan McGlashen died of a drug overdose in his Ypsilanti, Michigan, apartment last year. He was pronounced dead on May 6, the day before his 39th birthday.

"It was really difficult for me to think about the way in which Jordan died. He was alone, and suffering emotionally and felt like he had to use again," said his younger brother, Collin McGlashen, who wrote

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openly about his brother's addiction in an obituary.

Jordan McGlashen's death was attributed to heroin and fentanyl.

While prescription painkillers once drove the nation's overdose epidemic, they were supplanted first by heroin and then by fentanyl, a dangerously powerful opioid, in recent years. Fentanyl was developed to treat intense pain from ailments like cancer but has increasingly been sold illicitly and mixed with other drugs.

"What's really driving the surge in overdoses is this increasingly poisoned drug supply," said Shannon Monnat, an associate professor of sociology at Syracuse University who researches geographic patterns in overdoses. "Nearly all of this increase is fentanyl contamination in some way. Heroin is contaminated. Cocaine is contaminated. Methamphetamine is contaminated."

Fentanyl was involved in more than 60% of the overdose deaths last year, CDC data suggests.

There's no current evidence that more Americans started using drugs last year, Monnat said. Rather, the increased deaths most likely were people who had already been struggling with addiction. Some have told her research team that suspensions of evictions and extended unemployment benefits left them with more money than usual. And they said "when I have money, I stock up on my (drug) supply," she said.

Overdose deaths are just one facet of what was overall the deadliest year in U.S. history. With about 378,000 deaths attributed to COVID-19, the nation saw more than 3.3 million deaths.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reviewed death certificates to come up with the estimate for 2020 drug overdose deaths. The estimate of over 93,000 translates to an average of more than 250 deaths each day, or roughly 11 every hour.

The 21,000 increase is the biggest year-to-year jump since the count rose by 11,000 in 2016.

More historical context: According to the CDC, there were fewer than 7,200 total U.S. overdose deaths reported in 1970, when a heroin epidemic was raging in U.S. cities. There were about 9,000 in 1988, around the height of the crack epidemic.

The CDC reported that in 2020 drug overdoses increased in all but two states, New Hampshire and South Dakota.

Kentucky's overdose count rose 54% last year to more than 2,100, up from under 1,400 the year before. There were also large increases in South Carolina, West Virginia and California. Vermont had the largest jump, of about 58%, but smaller numbers — 118 to 186.

The proliferation of fentanyl is one reason some experts do not expect any substantial decline in drug overdose deaths this year. Though national figures are not yet available, there is data emerging from some states that seems to support their pessimism. Rhode Island, for example, reported 34 overdose deaths in January and 37 in February — the most for those months in at least five years.

For Collin McGlashen, last year was "an incredibly dark time" that began in January with the cancer death of the family's beloved patriarch.

Their father's death sent his musician brother Jordan into a tailspin, McGlashen said.

"Someone can be doing really well for so long and then, in a flash, deteriorate," he said.

Then came the pandemic. Jordan lost his job. "It was kind of a final descent."

911 recordings show panic, disbelief when Florida condo fell

By CURT ANDERSON, FREIDA FRISARO and LYNNE SLADKY Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Recordings of 911 calls after an oceanfront Florida condominium building collapsed in the middle of the night show disbelief, panic and confusion as people tried to comprehend the disaster.

"Oh my God! The whole building collapsed!" one caller said to a dispatcher at the Miami-Dade Police Department, which released the recordings Wednesday from the June 24 collapse of Champlain Towers South. The names of the callers were not released.

"We've gotta get out. Hurry up, hurry up. There's a big explosion," a second caller said. "There's a lot of smoke. I can't see anything. We gotta go. I can't see nothing but smoke."

At least 97 people died in the collapse, and a handful of others are still missing. A cause has not yet been

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pinpointed, although there were several previous warnings of major structural damage at the 40-year-old building in Surfside.

One 911 caller, a woman, said she saw what appeared to be a large depression near the swimming pool, which had concrete problems that investigators are looking into as they try to identify a cause.

"I woke up because I was hearing some noise. I couldn't understand what was happening. I looked outside and I saw the patio area sinking down. The pool area started sinking down," the caller said. "There are many parts of the building that went down. The building just went into a sinkhole. There will be many, many people dead."

Yet another female caller said she was stuck near the building parking garage and needed help. Part of the condo remained standing after the collapse but was taken down later by a demolition crew.

"Can somebody help me get out, please? If the building comes down, it will come down on my head," the caller said.

Release of the calls Wednesday came as a judge approved the sale of the oceanfront property, with proceeds intended to benefit victims of the deadly disaster.

At a hearing, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Michael Hanzman ordered that the process begin to sell the site of Champlain Towers South, which could fetch \$100 million to \$110 million according to court records.

The court-appointed receiver handling finances related to the condo, attorney Michael Goldberg, said the judge wants the sale to move quickly.

"He wants us to start exploring a potential sale," Goldberg said of the judge in an email. "He did say he wants the land to be sold and the proceeds to go directly to the victims as soon as possible."

Goldberg said the decision did not necessarily preclude a buyer from turning at least a portion of the site into a memorial, as some people have advocated. Other survivors want the structure rebuilt so they can move back in.

Hanzman's ruling came as part of a series of lawsuits filed in the wake of collapse. The judge put the lawsuits on a fast track and authorized Goldberg to begin disbursing Champlain Towers insurance money to the victims and families.

The judge also approved returning \$2.4 million in deposits that some Champlain condo owners had already made toward an assessment to pay for \$15 million in planned major repairs.

In nearby Miami Beach, residents of an 82-year-old, two-story apartment building were ordered to evacuate because of concrete deterioration. The city ordered the evacuation of Devon Apartments on Monday and is giving residents until next Monday to leave the building, city spokeswoman Melissa Berthier said in an email Wednesday.

The apartment building is about 2 miles (3 kilometers) from Champlain Towers South.

After the collapse, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava ordered an audit of all buildings over 40 years old. A condominium in nearby North Miami Beach also was ordered evacuated over safety concerns shortly after that audit started.

The collapse left officials around the county grappling with concerns about older residential buildings.

Manny J. Vadillo, an attorney who represents the owners of the Devon Apartments, told WTVJ that they have worked "diligently" with the city since deciding in May to demolish the building by December.

He said they have started to "vacate the building in an orderly fashion," adding that 14 people remained inside. He said the owners are helping residents move.

"My clients are extremely sensitive to safety and, in fact, visited the property several times since last week to speak with tenants when communications started with the city to ensure tenants were not caught by surprise," Vadillo said. "Some tenants have been there many years."

Resident Esmart Romero told WSVN that he was not surprised the city deemed the building unsafe.

"If you look at the condition of this apartment, it's not good," Romero said. "You get what you pay for."

US to begin evacuating Afghans who aided American military

By AAMER MADHANI and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Wednesday that it is prepared to begin evacuation flights for Afghan interpreters and translators who aided the U.S. military effort in the nearly 20-year war — but their destinations are still unknown and there are lingering questions about how to ensure their safety until they can get on planes.

The Operation Allies Refuge flights out of Afghanistan during the last week of July will be available first for special immigrant visa applicants already in the process of applying for U.S. residency, according to the White House.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki declined to detail how many Afghans are expected to be among those evacuated in the first flights or where those evacuated will be taken, citing security concerns.

“The reason that we are taking these steps is because these are courageous individuals,” Psaki said. “We want to make sure we recognize and value the role they’ve played over the last several years.”

Confirmation on the timeline of the evacuation flights came as President Joe Biden met Wednesday with Gen. Austin “Scott” Miller, who earlier this week stepped down as the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan. Psaki said Biden wanted to personally thank Miller for conducting an “orderly and safe” drawdown of U.S. troops.

Miller, who oversaw the war effort for nearly three years, expressed dire concern in his final days as commander about the rapid loss of districts around the country to the Taliban, telling reporters that “a civil war is certainly a path that can be visualized if this continues on the trajectory it’s on right now.” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who met separately with Miller at the Pentagon, praised the general for planning a “complex withdrawal of millions of tons of equipment and thousands of personnel” that “thus far been conducted without a single casualty.”

Biden has faced pressure from lawmakers on both parties to come up with a plan to help evacuate Afghan military helpers before next month’s U.S. troop withdrawal. The White House began briefing lawmakers on the outlines of their plans last month.

The evacuation planning could potentially affect tens of thousands of Afghans. Several thousand Afghans who worked for the United States — plus their family members — are already in the application pipeline for special immigrant visas.

The Biden administration has also been working on identifying a third country or U.S. territory that could host Afghans while their visa applications are processed.

Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said that much about the Biden evacuation plan remains unknown, including how the administration will help those in areas outside the capital of Kabul evacuate. The Taliban have made rapid gains in taking over huge swaths of the country, particularly in more rural areas.

“Unfortunately, there are still far too many questions left unanswered, including who exactly and how many people are eligible for evacuation. ... How will those outside the capital access safety?” said Vignarajah, whose group has helped resettle thousands of Afghans in the U.S. “And to what countries will they be evacuated? We have serious concerns about the protection of our allies’ human rights in countries that have been rumored as potential partners in this effort.”

The administration is weighing using State Department-chartered commercial aircraft, not military aircraft, according to an administration official, who was not authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity.

But if the State Department requests military aircraft, the U.S. military would be ready to assist, the official said. The Pentagon said as of Wednesday no requests for such assistance have been made by State.

Tracey Jacobson, a three-time chief of mission in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kosovo, is leading the State Department coordination unit charged with overseeing Operation Allies Refuge. That unit also includes representatives from the departments of Defense and Homeland Security.

Russ Travers, deputy homeland security adviser and former head of the National Counterterrorism Center, is coordinating the interagency policy process for the evacuation, officials said.

Separately, the White House announced that Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, the White House homeland

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security adviser, would lead a U.S. delegation to a security conference in Uzbekistan this week to discuss Afghanistan's security issues with leaders from Central Asia.

The Biden administration is considering a number of locations, including military installations both abroad and in the continental United States, to temporarily house Afghans while their visa applications are considered.

Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said Wednesday the Pentagon has identified an unspecified number of overseas locations as "potential candidates," but no final decisions have been made.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul issued 299 special immigrant visas in March, 356 in April and 619 in May, according to the State Department. Biden said last week that the federal government has approved 2,500 special immigrant visas to come to the U.S. since his January inauguration.

An estimated 18,000 Afghans have worked for the U.S. as interpreters, drivers and other positions have applied for visas and await their applications being processed. Psaki reiterated that the White House is working with Congress on legislation to streamline the application process.

Biden announced last week that the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan will end on Aug. 31.

The firming of the date to end the war comes after President Donald Trump's administration negotiated a deal with the Taliban to end the U.S. military mission by May 1, 2021. Biden, after taking office, announced that U.S. troops would be out by the 20th anniversary of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The attacks were plotted by al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden from Afghanistan, where he had been given refuge by the Taliban.

George W. Bush, who as president launched the war, criticized the Western withdrawal in an interview with a German broadcaster released Wednesday, saying he fears for Afghan women and girls as the Taliban regains control of much of the country.

"It's unbelievable how that society changed from the brutality of the Taliban, and all of a sudden — sadly — I'm afraid Afghan women and girls are going to suffer unspeakable harm," Bush said.

Time on their side, Texas GOP waits for Democrats to return

By PAUL J. WEBER, ACACIA CORONADO and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — On Day 3 of Texas Democrats hunkering down in Washington to block tighter voting laws, Republicans back home settled into a new routine that boils down to turning the Democrats' gambit into yet another advantage for the GOP in 2022.

With time and a commanding majority on their side, Texas Republicans who began the summer with a long to-do list aimed at pushing the state farther to the right were filling their sudden free time Wednesday hammering Democrats as obstructionists.

Despite being unable to pass any bills, GOP lawmakers promised to keep coming to work at the Texas Capitol. They say Democrats are blocking widely popular measures to lower property taxes and give teachers more money. And they are showing their resolve to eventually pass a new voting bill that includes a raft of changes that on the whole would make it harder to cast a ballot in Texas.

"While these Texas Democrats collect taxpayer money as they ride on private jets to meet with the Washington elite, those who remain in the chamber await their return to begin work on providing our retired teachers a 13th check, protecting our foster kids, and providing taxpayer relief," Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan said.

The Republican criticism hinted at how the party is hoping to turn the screws on Democrats for the weeks to come. Both parties are mindful that the voting debate and the Democratic walkout are likely to resonate into next year, when the parties are battling over the governors office, as well as dozens of newly drawn statehouse districts.

In Washington, Texas Democrats were also settling into a new routine: meeting with members of Congress to press for action on voting rights at the federal level, but coming away with little signs of movement. President Joe Biden on Tuesday appeared to tacitly acknowledge the fading hopes for voting legislation, saying he would launch a nationwide campaign to arm voters with information on rule changes and restric-

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tions ahead of the midterm elections.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell blasted the Texas Democrats from the floor of the Senate Wednesday, characterizing their flight to Washington, D.C., as an effort to “snap selfies, bask in the lime-light, and beg Senate Democrats to take over Texas’ elections.”

“State legislators from Texas decided to grab some beer, hop on a private jet, and flee the state in what they are pretending is some great moral crusade,” the Kentucky Republican said, later adding, “the outrage is completely phony.”

Outside the hotel where the contingent is living and working after flying to Washington on chartered planes Monday, about a dozen demonstrators held signs with messages that included “Do your job!” and “Who paid for the private jet?”

The legislators insisted multiple times that no taxpayer funds were being used. The entire trip, they said, was paid for through donations and out of their own pockets.

The representatives also defended their decision to leave Texas, saying the move had already partially succeeded by shining a national spotlight on voting rights. More than a dozen states this year have already passed tougher election laws in response to former President Donald Trump’s false claims that the 2020 election was stolen.

“We are not here on vacation,” Democratic state Rep. Jose Menendez said. “I’d much rather be home with my family. We are here to do a job.”

Republicans say the voting changes are needed to fight fraud. However, fraud is very rare, and Democrats say the measures target their supporters.

“We will stay here for as long as it takes, and come back as many times as it takes, to give these protections to every Texas voter,” said Republican state Sen. Bryan Hughes, one of the lead GOP authors of the voting bill.

For his part, state Rep. Chris Turner, the Texas House Democratic chairman, said his caucus was “actively raising” funds to sustain a long-term stay in Washington. He said the Democrats fully intend to remain outside of Texas until the current session ends on Aug 7 “in order to kill this bill.”

“And in the meantime,” he said, “we are going to shine a harsh national spotlight on Republican voter-suppression efforts.”

Asked how long they could hold out, Turner replied, “We’re not worried about it.”

The agenda Republican Gov. Greg Abbott ordered at the start of the 30-day session included hot-button conservative priorities such as border security measures and rules over how race can be taught in public schools. Republicans have not given up on those efforts, but since Democrats left, they have instead highlighted more middle-of-the-road issues.

Although Texas Republicans authorized state troopers to find and corral missing legislators, there remained no indication Wednesday that any action was being taken. Abbott has threatened Democrats with arrest once they return, as state troopers have no jurisdiction beyond Texas.

Taking off to Washington is the second time that Democratic lawmakers have staged a walkout over the voting overhaul, which they say will make it harder for young people, people of color and people with disabilities to vote. The legislation would outlaw 24-hour polling places, ban drop boxes for mail ballots and empower partisan poll watchers.

Biden pitches huge budget, says Dems will ‘get a lot done’

By ALAN FRAM and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden made a quick foray to the Capitol on Wednesday hunting support for his multitrillion-dollar agenda of infrastructure, health care and other programs, a potential landmark achievement that would require near-unanimous backing from fractious Democrats.

His visit came a day after Senate Democratic leaders capped weeks of bargaining by agreeing to spend a mammoth \$3.5 trillion over the coming decade on initiatives focusing on climate change, education, a Medicare expansion and more. That’s on top of a separate \$1 trillion bipartisan compromise on roads,

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water systems and other infrastructure projects that senators from both parties are negotiating, with Biden's support.

The president spent just under an hour at a closed-door lunch with Democratic senators in the building where he served for 36 years as a Delaware senator and where his party controls the House and Senate, though just barely. Participants said Biden paced the room with a microphone taking questions and received several standing ovations.

"It is great to be home," Biden told reporters after his first working meeting at the Capitol with lawmakers since becoming president. "It is great to be with my colleagues, and I think we are going to get a lot done."

Democrats' accord on their overall \$3.5 trillion figure was a major step for a party whose rival moderate and progressive factions have competing visions of how costly and bold the final package should be. But many of them say bolstering lower-earning and middle-class families, and raising taxes on wealthy people and big corporations to help pay for it, would nurture long-term economic growth and pay political dividends in next year's elections for control of Congress.

Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut said the president urged them to consider whether their plan would help people in Biden's blue-collar hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania. "His point was that we need to be thinking about folks who have given up on democracy," Murphy said.

Democrats' agreement on a topline spending figure, while significant, is merely an initial move that leaves the toughest decisions for later. They must translate their plan into legislation with specific spending and revenue figures, then line up the needed votes to enact it, a process likely to grind right through autumn.

With unanimous Republican opposition likely, Democrats would need support from all their lawmakers in the 50-50 Senate and could lose no more than three votes in the House.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, top Republican on the Budget Committee, belittled the emerging plan as a wasteful liberal wish list that would fuel inflation and boost taxes.

"Count me in for real infrastructure. Count me out for a tax and spend plan from Hell," he said in a statement.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Republicans simply want to help the rich. "They don't want their taxes to rise. They don't want the government to help people," he said.

To reach their legislative goal, Democrats want to approve a budget resolution before Congress' August recess that would let them push a subsequent, sprawling spending bill actually financing their priorities through the Senate by a simple majority vote. Without that protection, Republicans could kill the follow-on spending measure with a filibuster that would require an insurmountable 60 votes to overcome. The budget resolution itself cannot be filibustered.

Democrats said little about one challenge they will face. The measures Democrats contemplate total a bit less than the roughly \$4.5 trillion for new spending that Biden wants for infrastructure, family services, climate change and other programs. To accommodate their lower figure, lawmakers will have to curtail or eliminate some of his proposals.

"I think we're in good shape. There may be some slight adjustments in the pay-fors," meaning revenue increases, Biden told governors and mayors visiting the White House. The proposed tax boosts loom as one of the plan's most politically sensitive items, especially for moderate Democrats facing competitive reelections.

In an unsurprising harbinger of potential problems, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps his chamber's most conservative Democrat, signaled he would oppose proposals to curb fossil fuels, long a lifeblood for his state's economy. His demands to trim other spending forced Democrats to drop a longtime progressive goal, a minimum wage increase, from pandemic relief legislation early this year.

Manchin said of cutting fossil fuels, which are major contributors to global warming, "It won't happen, it can't happen and it doesn't do a darn thing but makes the world worse." He said Democrats could achieve their spending plans "if they understand fossil is going to play a part."

Key backing for the overall plan has come from Senate Budget Committee Chair Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a self-proclaimed democratic socialist and a leader of the Democrats' progressive wing. He's repeatedly called the agreement historic and said Wednesday that while he'd like more spending — he earlier sought

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\$6 trillion — the reality is that all 50 Democratic senators are needed to prevail.

"I think this is very, very significant," he said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the Senate plan would address her chamber's Democratic priorities on climate, health care and family services and make "historic, once-in-a-generation progress for families across the nation." Yet in a letter to colleagues, she seemed to leave the door open to seeking more, saying, "We will fight to ensure that our priorities become law."

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, told reporters that while her group's support isn't guaranteed, "We see this as a very big, positive step forward."

Details of the package began emerging, even though all are merely proposals that await final decisions later.

A senior Democratic aide said the party will seek extensions of tax credits for children, child care and some low-income people, money for environmentally friendly energy technologies and a federal standard aimed at encouraging a shift to clean energy. The plan would fund pre-kindergarten for toddlers, aid for college students, paid family leave, food and housing programs and a pathway to citizenship for potentially several million immigrants in the U.S. illegally, said the aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe Democrats' plans.

Also included is a top progressive priority — an expansion of Medicare, the health insurance program for older Americans, to include vision, dental and hearing coverage. Sanders suggested there also might be an effort to lower that program's eligibility age to 60.

That would be expensive, but the senior aide said Democrats are also looking at savings from letting the government negotiate prescription drug costs. The aide said there would also be language barring tax boosts on people earning under \$400,000 annually, on small businesses and on family farms.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., a leading moderate, said the entire measure would be paid for with new revenue. Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said in an interview that he's working on proposals to "ensure that the superwealthy and mega-corporations pay their fair share" of taxes and for extra funding for the IRS to crack down on tax scofflaws.

Device taps brain waves to help paralyzed man communicate

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

In a medical first, researchers harnessed the brain waves of a paralyzed man unable to speak — and turned what he intended to say into sentences on a computer screen.

It will take years of additional research but the study, reported Wednesday, marks an important step toward one day restoring more natural communication for people who can't talk because of injury or illness.

"Most of us take for granted how easily we communicate through speech," said Dr. Edward Chang, a neurosurgeon at the University of California, San Francisco, who led the work. "It's exciting to think we're at the very beginning of a new chapter, a new field" to ease the devastation of patients who lost that ability.

Today, people who can't speak or write because of paralysis have very limited ways of communicating. For example, the man in the experiment, who was not identified to protect his privacy, uses a pointer attached to a baseball cap that lets him move his head to touch words or letters on a screen. Other devices can pick up patients' eye movements. But it's a frustratingly slow and limited substitution for speech.

Tapping brain signals to work around a disability is a hot field. In recent years, experiments with mind-controlled prosthetics have allowed paralyzed people to shake hands or take a drink using a robotic arm -- they imagine moving and those brain signals are relayed through a computer to the artificial limb.

Chang's team built on that work to develop a "speech neuroprosthetic" -- decoding brain waves that normally control the vocal tract, the tiny muscle movements of the lips, jaw, tongue and larynx that form each consonant and vowel.

Volunteering to test the device was a man in his late 30s who 15 years ago suffered a brain-stem stroke that caused widespread paralysis and robbed him of speech. The researchers implanted electrodes on the surface of the man's brain, over the area that controls speech.

A computer analyzed the patterns when he attempted to say common words such as "water" or "good,"

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eventually becoming able to differentiate between 50 words that could generate more than 1,000 sentences.

Prompted with such questions as "How are you today?" or "Are you thirsty" the device eventually enabled the man to answer "I am very good" or "No I am not thirsty" -- not voicing the words but translating them into text, the team reported in the New England Journal of Medicine.

It takes about three to four seconds for the word to appear on the screen after the man tries to say it, said lead author David Moses, an engineer in Chang's lab. That's not nearly as fast as speaking but quicker than tapping out a response.

In an accompanying editorial, Harvard neurologists Leigh Hochberg and Sydney Cash called the work a "pioneering demonstration."

They suggested improvements but said if the technology pans out it eventually could help people with injuries, strokes or illnesses like Lou Gehrig's disease whose "brains prepare messages for delivery but those messages are trapped."

Chang's lab has spent years mapping the brain activity that leads to speech. First, researchers temporarily placed electrodes in the brains of volunteers undergoing surgery for epilepsy, so they could match brain activity to spoken words.

Only then was it time to try the experiment with someone unable to speak. How did they know the device interpreted his words correctly? They started by having him try to say specific sentences such as, "Please bring my glasses," rather than answering open-ended questions until the machine translated accurately most of the time.

Next steps include ways to improve the device's speed, accuracy and vocabulary size — and maybe one day allow a computer-generated voice rather than text on a screen — while testing a small number of additional volunteers.

Argentina logs 100,000 virus deaths as Delta variant looms

By ALMUDENA CALATRAVA Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — Argentina on Wednesday reported more than 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began, a heavy blow to a country that intermittently imposed some of the most severe lockdowns in the world, only to see erratic compliance by many people.

Some 614 people died from the disease in the past 24 hours, bringing the total death toll to 100,250, the Health Ministry said.

"I feel bad, it's not what we thought would happen. ... This is a hard, very hard statistic," said Luis Cámara, a doctor who specializes in gerontology and is an adviser on the pandemic to the government of President Alberto Fernández.

Cámara attributed the high toll to "some errors" during periodic lockdowns as well damage inflicted by virus variants that swept through the region.

"The Argentine quarantine was prolonged on paper but not on how people behaved," Cámara said.

He was alluding to large gatherings of people that defied social distancing guidance and may have helped spread the virus in late 2020. There were demonstrations over the death of soccer star Diego Maradona and the approval in Congress of a law allowing abortion in most instances.

Cámara added that a second wave of the coronavirus at the end of March "came earlier than it should have come," in part "due to the misconduct of the people and with new, very aggressive variants."

Moreover, Argentina was struggling economically even before the pandemic and many citizens ignored quarantine regulations so they could make a living and support their families.

Then restrictions on gatherings were relaxed over the Christmas holidays and Argentina's southern hemisphere summer, encouraging people to let down their guard and spend time together. The vaccination effort has also been lagging.

The United States has confirmed the most COVID-19 deaths at about 608,000, followed by Brazil (536,000), India (411,000), Mexico (235,000) and Peru (195,000). France, Russia, Britain, Italy and Colombia have each reported well over 100,000 deaths, according to the coronavirus resource center of Johns Hopkins

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University.

The center said about 4,052,000 people around the world are confirmed to have died from COVID-19. The death toll is believed to be much higher in many countries because of misdiagnoses, inadequate testing and other factors.

Argentina has reported more than 4.6 million coronavirus infections. Doctors say many of those who are dying are between 40 and 60 years old and were infected about two months ago, before they had the chance to get vaccinated. The longer the hospital stay, the more likely the chance of increasing health complications and death.

Edgardo Alvites Guerrero, head of intensive therapy at Llavallol Hospital in Buenos Aires, said the pace of the first doses of various vaccines had advanced well lately.

But, he said, "it is far from ideal" because it would be best for most people to get two vaccine doses ahead of the expected spread of the more contagious Delta variant.

So far, 15 cases of the delta variant of the coronavirus have been identified in Argentina and were linked to "international travelers" or people related to them, according to the Ministry of Health. Nine cases were detected in the last week and came from the United States, Mexico and Paraguay.

Argentina has a population of about 45 million. Some 20.6 million people have received a first dose of the three available types of vaccines — Sputnik, AstraZeneca and Sinopharm — and about 5.1 million have received two doses, according to official figures.

"It is to be expected that a new wave will come ... we are in the calm before the storm," said therapist Gubby Auza while monitoring several COVID-19 patients in an intensive care room at Llavallol. They were all under 60 years old.

Argentine Paola Almirón was hospitalized last year with COVID-19 and survived. Her mother, sister, aunt and brother-in-law died of the disease. On Tuesday, she wept while visiting a cemetery to lay flowers at the graves of her lost family members, a year after their funerals.

"My mother died first, two days later my sister and three days later my aunt. It was terrible going to the cemetery with my brother three times in a week," said 38-year-old Almirón, a nursing supervisor at the Luisa Cravenna de Gandulfo Interzonal General Hospital in the town of Lomas de Zamora, south of Buenos Aires.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Almirón said she feels some satisfaction whenever she vaccinates someone against COVID-19 and hopes that people will observe masking and social distancing until the pandemic subsides.

"We waited so long," she said. "We were locked up, we went out, we locked ourselves up again; let's wait a little longer, in a few months, we should all be vaccinated and get out of this."

'I was in tears': South Africans take stand against rioting

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Surveying the uneasy standoff between South African soldiers and huddles of young men faced off Wednesday across the rubble-strewn street in front of Soweto's Maponya mall, Katlego Motati shook her head sadly.

"I'm standing here against vandals and hooligans," the 32-year-old said of the weeklong unrest and looting sparked by the imprisonment of ex-President Jacob Zuma, which has left at least 72 people dead.

She was one of scores of residents who came out to stand against the rioting that has rocked poor areas of South Africa.

"When I saw the destruction ... I was in tears, seeing how all this has panned out," Motati said. "At the end of the day, we will be struggling because of this. Our economy is going to be really damaged."

South African police and the army grappled to bring order Wednesday to impoverished areas in Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu-Natal provinces that have been hit by rioting and theft sparked by Zuma's imprisonment last week.

More than 200 violent incidents happened overnight, the government said.

Authorities dramatically increased to 25,000 the number of army soldiers deployed to assist police in

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restoring order, Minister of Defense Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula announced Wednesday night, an acknowledgment that widespread patrols may be needed to prevent renewed attacks by gangs of poor youths.

Some 1,234 people have been arrested in the mayhem, and many of the deaths were caused by chaotic stampedes as thousands of people ransacked shops, stealing food, electrical appliances, liquor and clothes, police said.

Motati said she knows some of those who took part in the looting.

"People my age, in my neighborhood, are bragging about stealing things and getting shopping carts full of stuff," she said. "Soon they will be coming to my place to borrow sugar. Those things won't help them."

Motati, a trained chef with her own catering business, said it is hard to find clients amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"The pandemic has worsened things, for sure, but poverty, unemployment was bad already," she said of the economy, which was in recession before the pandemic.

South Africa's jobless rate of 32%, is even higher among people younger than 35. Although the country of 60 million has Africa's most developed economy, it is one of the most unequal in the world, with more than 50% of people living in poverty and many suffering chronic food insecurity, according to the World Bank.

South Africa's poverty has grown since 1994 when apartheid, the brutal system of racial oppression, ended with democratic elections, exacerbating frustrations.

"The pandemic and lockdowns put even more people out of work. ... This was just an opportunity for people to take whatever they could get," Motati said. "I don't think it stems from Zuma being locked up — it was building before that. Then one person kicks down the door and others follow."

The violence erupted last week after Zuma began serving a 15-month sentence for contempt of court for refusing to comply with a court order to testify at a state-backed inquiry investigating allegations of corruption while he was president from 2009 to 2018.

The protests in Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu-Natal provinces escalated into a spree of theft in township areas, although it has not spread to South Africa's other seven provinces, where police are on alert.

KwaZulu-Natal, the eastern province that is Zuma's home area and where the protests first ignited, has seen significant violence. Trucks going to and from Durban, South Africa's largest port, may have to travel in convoys protected by the army, business leaders said.

The province is the center of South Africa's largest ethnic group, the Zulus, where Zuma has drawn considerable support. However, the Zulu monarch, King Misuzulu kaZwelithini, appealed Wednesday for an end to the mayhem and for peace to be restored.

"My father's people are committing suicide," he said. "When food cannot be delivered because trucks and warehouses are burned, our people will go hungry."

The violence "has brought shame to all of us," he said.

Arson has damaged several factories and the government ordered gasoline not be sold in containers to discourage illegal fires.

A tense order appeared to have been achieved Wednesday by security forces in Gauteng, South Africa's most populous province which includes the largest city, Johannesburg.

"I can confirm that currently it's calm in Gauteng," said army Col. Mmathapelo Maine, as soldiers brandishing rifles stood by, protecting the large Maponya mall in Soweto.

"We have control of the situation and this is with the cooperation of the community," Maine said.

Across the street, scores of residents lined up to buy bread from a truck selling directly to people instead of delivering to shops that had been closed.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa met online Wednesday with National Assembly political party leaders to urge all to work together to restore order.

Ramaphosa had consultations "with different sectors of society to develop a society-wide response," said Tyrone Seale, the president's acting spokesman.

"The president said the destruction witnessed by the nation hurt all South Africans, not only those in the affected areas," he said. "And it hurt the poor, the elderly, and the vulnerable the most."

At Soweto's Diepkloof shopping center, business owners assessed the damage.

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"It's just like being raped," said Thandi Johnson, looking at her shop, TWJ Events Supply, that had been cleaned out the day before by rioters. "And then you see the rapist walking past you," she said gesturing toward residents walking by.

"Twelve years I've been working on this business and it's destroyed in one day," she said, shaking with anger as she looked at where she had sold balloons and decorations for children's parties and other events.

"They pushed me aside," she said of the rioters. "I pleaded with them that I am one of them, but they just came in and took everything. Look!" she said pointing to the bare shelves. "I didn't come here by train, I'm a Sowetan! I'm born here."

Johnson said she is worried that insurance will not cover her losses because she is not covered for political violence. "I'll be finished," she said.

Nearby, a group of young men was sweeping up broken beer bottles and trash in front of a liquor store that had been looted the day before.

"We're trying to be the youth who bring hope back to our country," said Thando Matsepe, 24, of the Zodwa Khoza Foundation, a youth development group.

"Yesterday this place was destroyed. So we are trying to clean up and get the country back up on its feet," he said.

"This was crime. It was not a 'Free Zuma' campaign. It started with Zuma, but this is not how things should be done in South Africa. They have the right to protest peacefully, nicely. But this brings destruction. Everybody will suffer."

Powell says inflation, though elevated, will likely moderate

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said Wednesday that inflation, which has been surging as the recovery strengthens, "will likely remain elevated in coming months" before "moderating."

At the same time, in testimony to the House Financial Services Committee, Powell signaled no imminent change in the Fed's ultra-low-interest rate policies.

The Fed chairman reiterated his long-held view that high inflation readings over the past several months have been driven largely by temporary factors, notably supply shortages and rising consumer demand as pandemic-related business restrictions are lifted.

Still, House members peppered Powell with questions about rising inflation in recent months, with some expressing concern that prices will continue to accelerate. The Fed chair replied that the central bank would not respond to short-term price spikes by raising rates and risk weakening the economic recovery.

"By inflation, we mean year after year after year prices go up," Powell said. "If something is a one-time price increase... you wouldn't react to something that is likely to go away."

"We really do believe," he added, "that these things will come down of their own accord."

Powell's remarks coincided with rising concerns, among economists as well as ordinary households, that intensifying inflation pressures are creating a burden for many people and posing a potential threat to the recovery from the pandemic recession. On Wednesday, the government reported that wholesale prices, which businesses pay, jumped 7.3% in June from a year earlier. It was the fastest such 12-month increase on records dating to 2010.

And on Tuesday, the government said that prices paid by U.S. consumers surged in June by the most in 13 years. It was the third straight month that consumer inflation has jumped. Excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called core inflation rose 4.5% in June, the fastest pace since November 1991.

Much of the consumer price gain was driven by categories that reflect the reopening of the economy and related supply shortages. Used car price increases accounted for about one-third of the jump. Prices for hotel rooms, airline tickets, and car rentals also rose substantially.

"It's still the same story we're seeing," Powell said. "It's a pretty narrow group of things that are producing these high (inflation) readings."

But some increases could persist. Restaurant prices rose 0.7% in June, the largest monthly rise since

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1981, and have increased 4.2% compared with a year ago. Those price increases likely are intended to offset higher wage and food costs as restaurants scramble to fill jobs.

The Fed has said it will keep its benchmark short-term rate pegged near zero until it believes maximum employment has been reached and annual inflation moderately exceeds 2% for some time. The central bank's policymakers have said they're prepared to accept inflation above its target to make up for years of inflation below 2%.

Powell said Wednesday that the economy is "still a ways off" from making the "substantial further progress" that the policymakers want to see before they will begin reducing their \$120 billion in monthly bond purchases. Those purchases are intended to keep long-term borrowing rates low to encourage borrowing and spending.

He was asked to clarify what the Fed means by "substantial further progress."

"It's very difficult to be precise about it," Powell replied. "We didn't try to write down a particular set of numbers that would capture what we mean by that."

At its most recent meeting in June, the Fed's policymakers began discussing a reduction in those purchases, and Powell said Wednesday that those discussions "will continue ... in coming meetings."

Powell added that the Fed might adjust its policies if inflation, or the public's expectations for inflation, "were moving materially and persistently beyond levels consistent with our goal." Americans' expectations for inflation are important because they can become self-fulfilling, as consumers may demand higher wages to offset rising prices.

The chairman was addressing the House committee Wednesday as part of his twice-a-year monetary policy report to Congress. On Thursday, he will testify to the Senate Banking Committee.

In his testimony, Powell was upbeat about the economy, with growth on track "to post its fastest rate of increase in decades." He said hiring has been "robust" but noted there "is still a long way to go," with the unemployment rate elevated at 5.9%.

At their most recent meeting last month, Fed officials forecast that they may raise their benchmark short-term rate twice by the end of 2023, an earlier time frame than they had previously signaled.

Powell, whose term as Fed chair will end in February, drew some bipartisan praise during questioning by House members. President Joe Biden could announce as soon as this fall whether he intends to reappoint him to another four-year term.

"You have earned and deserved another term as chair of the Federal Reserve," Rep. Patrick McHenry, a Republican from North Carolina, told him. "You have proven to be a steady hand throughout this pandemic or ongoing recovery."

Reps. Andy Barr, a Republican from Kentucky, and Brad Sherman, a California Democrat, echoed the notion that Powell should be reappointed. The Senate would have to confirm him for a second term. Though Powell enjoys broad support, some progressive groups oppose his reappointment because he has overseen the loosening of some regulations governing large banks.

On another topic, Powell said the Fed would publish research in early September on the potential for the central bank to issue a digital dollar. A digital currency would enable faster payments among banks, consumers and businesses and potentially allow Americans to hold dollars in electronic wallets on smart phones without needing an account at a conventional bank.

Powell said a digital dollar would be more efficient than having numerous cryptocurrencies and stablecoins issued by companies such as Facebook. A stablecoin is a digital currency that is backed by cash.

"I think that's one of the stronger arguments in its favor — that ... you wouldn't need stablecoins, you wouldn't need cryptocurrencies if you had a digital U.S. currency," he said. ____

AP Economics Writer Martin Crutsinger contributed to this report.

UNESCO: Italy's ban on cruise ships in Venice is 'good news'

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The United Nations culture agency, which was considering declaring Venice an imperiled

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world heritage site, on Wednesday hailed Italy's ban on big cruise ships in the heart of the lagoon city.

UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay tweeted that the Italian government's Tuesday decision to deny access to the mammoth liners as of Aug. 1 is "very good news and an important step that significantly contributes to the safeguarding of this unique heritage site."

Starting next month, ships over a certain size or weight or surpassing specific pollution levels can no longer ply the Giudecca Canal, a major sea artery in Venice, or cruise the waters near St. Mark's Square, the historic heart of the environmentally fragile city.

Until a permanent docking place can be selected and developed for the big cruise ships, the liners will be permitted to pull up in Marghera, an industrial suburb of Venice.

UNESCO, which is based in Paris, recommended last month adding Venice to its list of World Heritage in Danger sites.

While the Italian government announced the ban with a nervous eye on UNESCO, Venice remains on the agenda of the World Heritage Committee's meeting later this month in Fuzhou, China, the U.N. agency indicated.

For years, protesters hoisting signs proclaiming "No Big Ships" have demonstrated in Venice, sometimes taking to small boats to sail close to the cruise liners, which to people onshore look like lumbering giants slicing through the city.

Perhaps surprisingly, among those praising the Italian government's move was a cruise industry trade association.

"As an industry, we are very positive. We welcome the decision by the government," Francesco Galietti, Italy director for the Cruise Lines International Association, said.

Galietti said the trade group had been advocating for an alternative to the Giudecca Canal for some 10 years and therefore was happy the government has promised to find a permanent alternative docking area for the big cruise ships.

"We never wanted to stick to the Giudecca," he said, discounting activists' claims of cruise line company resistance.

"The negative damage this (publicity) causes to the industry is way bigger than the experience" of individual passengers savoring the thrill of sailing into the canal, Galietti said.

As for any logistical problems the ban might pose for imminent cruise itineraries, that wasn't immediately clear.

Galietti said that with tourism struggling to regain steam after the coronavirus pandemic restricted travel, many companies didn't put Venice on their itineraries.

The Italian government, in a Cabinet decree approved Tuesday, allocated funds to compensate those whose tourist-heavy businesses might suffer from the ban, as well as money so Marghera can be temporarily used for docking until a permanent solution is found.

It also declared Venice's Giudecca Canal and waterways near St. Mark's a "national monument" in urgent need of safeguarding.

The Italian Environmental Fund, or FAI, was among the groups that long lobbied for the ban. It received the government's move with mixed sentiments.

"We're happy for Venice," FAI President Andrea Carandini, a prominent Italian archaeologist and academic, told Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera. "But we're not at all (happy) for the lagoon in its overall context."

He said that to handle such big cruise ships, "it will be necessary to excavate canals. That means more water will enter the lagoon, thus an alteration of a complex system that's clearly an entire one for Marghera and for Venice."

Meanwhile, a conservation charity in Britain dedicated to Venice's considerable art works, monuments and buildings took a wait-and-see view of the ban.

"At Venice in Peril, we are in principle delighted with this news," the charity said in a statement. It lamented, though, that on "too many previous occasions vested interests in Venice" and the surrounding Veneto region "have frustrated the good intentions of those who want to clear the lagoon of these hideous

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floating hotels posing as ships.”

Venice is heavily dependent on tourism revenue.

Numbers explain how and why West bakes, burns and dries out

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The American West is baking, burning and drying in intertwined extreme weather. Four sets of numbers explain how bad it is now, while several others explain why it got this bad.

The West is going through “the trifecta of an epically dry year followed by incredible heat the last two months and now we have fires,” said University of California Merced climate and fire scientist John Abatzoglou. “It is a story of cascading impacts.”

And one of climate change, the data shows.

RECORD HEAT

In the past 30 days, the country has set 585 all-time heat records, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Of those, 349 are for daily high temperatures and 236 are the warmest overnight low temperatures, which are vital for people to recover from deadly heat waves.

And this doesn't include Death Valley hitting 130 degrees (54 degrees Celsius) preliminarily. If this is confirmed, it would be the hottest temperature on Earth in decades — and several meteorologists say it would be the hottest reliable temperature recorded because many don't trust the accuracy of two hotter records.

A different part of Death Valley likely set the world record on July 11 for hottest 24-hour period by averaging the daily high and overnight low to come up with 118.1 (47.9 degrees Celsius), according to meteorologist Maximiliano Herrera, who tracks weather extremes.

The average daily high temperature for the entire area from the Rockies and westward in June was 85.7 degrees (29.8 Celsius), which beat the old record by 1.3 degrees (0.7 Celsius), according to NOAA.

SEVERE DROUGHT

Nearly 60% of the U.S. West is considered in exceptional or extreme drought, the two highest categories, according to the University of Nebraska's Drought Monitor. That's the highest percentage in the 20 years the drought monitor has been keeping track. Less than 1% of the West is not in drought or considered abnormally dry, also a record.

LOW SOIL MOISTURE

How much moisture in the soil is key because normally part of the sun's energy is used to evaporate moisture in the soil and plants. Also, when the soil and plants are dry, areas burn much more often and hotter in wildfires and the available water supply shrinks for places like California, a “true indicator of just how parched things are,” Abatzoglou said.

Both NOAA and NASA show soil moisture levels down to some of the lowest recorded levels for much of the West. Most of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Arizona, Utah and Idaho are drier than in 99% of other years.

WILDFIRES BURNING

There are 68 active large fires burning, consuming 1,038,003 acres (420,000 hectares) of land, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. With those fires and ones in Canada, there is “one large area of smoke over much of the U.S. and Canada,” NOAA said Tuesday.

So far this year, wildfires have burned 2.2 million acres (899,000 hectares), which is less than the 10-year average for this time of year. But that may change because dry plants are at extra high risk of burning in much of the West as shown in what experts call fire's energy release component.

HOW WE GOT HERE

“The heat wave story cannot be viewed as an isolated extreme event, but rather part of a longer story of climate change with more related, widespread and varying impacts,” said climate scientist Jennifer Francis of the Woodwell Climate Research Center on Cape Cod.

SUMMERS GETTING HOTTER

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From 1991 to 2020, summers in the Rockies and westward have on average become 2.7 degrees (1.5 Celsius) warmer. The West is warming faster than the rest of the United States and the globe.

MORE HEAT DOMES FROM WEAKER JET STREAM

The weather phenomenon that is roasting the West now and that brought 116-degree (46.7 Celsius) temperatures to Portland, Oregon, at the end of June is often called a heat dome — where high pressure parks over an area and warm air sinks. This usually happens when the jet stream — the river of air that brings weather to places — gets stuck and doesn't move storms along.

Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann found the number of times the jet stream stalls in the Northern Hemisphere is increasing from about six times a summer in the early 1980s to about eight times a summer now.

"We've shown climate change is making these stuck summer jet stream patterns more common," Mann said.

LESS RAIN

The West on average received 13.6 inches (34.5 centimeters) of snow and rain from July 2020 to June 2021. Over the last 10 years, the region has averaged a bit more than 19 inches (48 centimeters) of precipitation a year in the middle of what scientists call a megadrought. In the 1980s and 1990s, before the megadrought started, the West averaged nearly 22 inches (56 centimeters) of rain.

A 2020 study said "global warming has pushed what would have been a moderate drought in southwestern North America into megadrought territory."

MORE WILDFIRES

From 2011 to 2020, on average 7.5 million acres (3 million hectares) burned in wildfires each year. That's more than double the average of 3.6 million acres (1.4 million hectares) a year from 1991 to 2000, according to data from the National Interagency Fire Center.

It's not just more acres burned, but more "very very large fires," said UC Merced's Abatzoglou, noting that the combination of drought and heat means plants are more likely to burn and fires to get bigger.

"The drought we've had this year and the warm temperatures has allowed the fire season to come on hard and really, really early," he said.

'God opened the door': Mystery surrounds US asylum picks

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

TIJUANA, Mexico (AP) — In a packed camp for migrant families on Mexico's side of the busiest U.S. border crossing, Nelson Membreño has lived through a chickenpox outbreak, people's heavy drug use and night prowlers wielding knives.

But he isn't more vulnerable than the thousands of others waiting in the camp in Tijuana for their chance to apply for humanitarian protection in the United States. He was surprised to get a call that he and his family were picked to seek asylum.

"God opened the door," the 30-year-old from Honduras said before a border officer shouted his name. Wheeling a large suitcase past concrete barriers topped with barbed wire, Membreño walked into the U.S. with his wife, son and stepson.

His confusion speaks to an opaque — if temporary — system the Biden administration has assembled that tasks immigration advocates with choosing which migrants get a limited number of slots to come to the U.S. to claim asylum.

President Joe Biden has kept in place a Trump administration order that quickly expels people from the country without a chance to seek asylum to prevent spread of the coronavirus. While Biden exempted children traveling alone shortly after taking office, his administration also is quietly allowing more families and single adults to avoid the ban. A Justice Department attorney said in federal court Tuesday that a new order dealing with children was coming this week, without elaborating.

There is neither a published list of advocacy groups deciding who is vulnerable enough to claim asylum nor an explanation of how they choose people, with migrants often learning by word of mouth. Final

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decisions on asylum rest with U.S. authorities, who don't disclose their criteria or say how many people are admitted to the country.

An advocacy group used to send psychologists tent to tent in the Tijuana camp of about 2,000 migrants to identify families who were the most vulnerable. Those who qualified got numbered, laminated cards that put them in a queue to claim asylum. The coalition stopped issuing cards when it discovered profiteers were selling them for \$500 to \$1,000 each.

Several advocates are uneasy about their unusual assignment. Soraya Vazquez, deputy director of advocacy group Al Otro Lado's Tijuana office, calls it "the best of bad options," noting that her group facilitated entry for about 2,000 people as of early July.

"This way of doing things is definitely not fair," said Vazquez, whose group collected 13,000 online questionnaires by early July asking people about their migration histories, medical issues and safety threats living in Mexico.

Advocates say U.S. officials have provided some guidance to characterize cases as urgent, though the specific criteria isn't public. They include serious medical conditions, imminent physical danger, being LG-BTQ or a single mother with young children. But many chosen fall outside those categories.

Recently in Tijuana, volunteer attorney Ian Seruelo of San Diego interviewed about 20 asylum-seekers staying at the camp who scored an appointment in the office of Border Line Crisis Center, part of a network of advocacy groups. The network has searched for vulnerable people at the camp but shifted to migrant shelters, hoping to dispel beliefs that the best chances of getting picked are at the increasingly dangerous and unsanitary camp.

Migrants aggressively trailed advocates who visited the camp, asking, "Why are you helping them and not us?" Seruelo said. With a mix of Latino and Black migrants, accusations of racism flew. The attorney says he feels "put in a corner" choosing who gets into the U.S.

Seruelo spends about 10 minutes with each person in a cubicle, focusing his questions narrowly on living conditions in Tijuana. Their reasons for fleeing their homelands are left for a U.S. immigration judge.

Silvia Portillo, 34, sat with an infant on her lap and told him that she had a difficult pregnancy and that a knife-wielding man threw a rock at her tent in the camp, threatened to set it on fire and asked for money.

"I do not feel safe, but I'm there out of necessity," said Portillo, who arrived from Honduras in a 2018 caravan, married a Mexican man and has lived in the camp since February because she cannot afford rent.

Manuel Antonio Segovia of El Salvador says he volunteers as a security guard at the camp, where criminals extorting migrants have punched him in the stomach and chest. Roberto Mejia of Guatemala says a man pulled a gun on him and others told him to leave the camp.

Migrants who are chosen are tested for COVID-19 and typically released into the United States, where a judge will rule on their request for asylum.

Since March, the American Civil Liberties Union has acted as an intermediary by forwarding requests from advocacy groups in Tijuana and elsewhere along the border for up to 35 families a day. The ACLU said in May that about 2,000 people were admitted through the efforts to settle a lawsuit it filed against the government. ACLU attorney Lee Gelernt said the Biden administration won't allow a more recent number to be released.

Separately, advocacy groups also have been choosing up to 250 asylum-seekers a day in other locations, not including San Diego. The group HIAS has facilitated entry for 2,857 people as of July 2, while the International Rescue Committee said it arranged entry for 540 people.

The U.S. Homeland Security Department didn't answer specific questions but said in a statement last month that the exemptions were aimed at "identifying and lawfully processing particularly vulnerable individuals who warrant humanitarian exceptions."

Nelson Hernandez, 33, of El Salvador, figured he may have his 4-year-old daughter or elderly mother-in-law to thank for his family getting picked from the Tijuana camp, but he's not sure.

"God wanted it," he said before a border official called his name and he set foot on U.S. soil. The family was headed to relatives in McAllen, Texas.

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For Membreño, he thinks he may have been chosen because he followed advocates for hours as they visited the camp. Within hours of crossing the border, he was released in San Diego and making plans with his family to join relatives in North Carolina.

AP FACT CHECK: Trump stokes Jan. 6 conspiracy theories

By COLLEEN LONG and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump is falsely describing the circumstances of Ashli Babbitt's death as he foments conspiracy theories about the siege of the Capitol on Jan. 6 and all the "love in the air" that day.

In comments over the past week, Trump insinuated that a Democratic partisan shot Babbitt — it was actually a Capitol Police officer defending the House chamber from attackers such as her. And Trump said Babbitt was shot in the head — in reality she was shot in the shoulder and died from the wound.

The defeated president's comments come as he and many of his supporters recast the pro-Trump insurrection as a patriotic display of "spirit and faith and love," as he put it Sunday on Fox News Channel.

As thoroughly documented by video, photographs and people who were there, the attackers barged into the Capitol during hours of chaos, many of them hunting for lawmakers in hiding and for Trump's vice president, Mike Pence, who was there to certify Joe Biden's election victory.

Trump had exhorted his followers at a staging rally to "fight like hell" to deny Biden the presidency. Five people died in the attack that followed or its aftermath, and dozens of law enforcement officers were injured.

A look at Trump's recent remarks:

TRUMP: "I will tell you they know who shot Ashli Babbitt. They're protecting that person. I have heard also that it was the head of security for a certain high official, a Democrat. And we will see, because it's going to come out. It's going to come out." — on Fox News' "Sunday Morning Futures."

THE FACTS: No, the officer who shot and killed Babbitt was not head of security for a Democratic official. He is a police lieutenant on the 2,000-member Capitol Police force that protects the buildings and grounds.

The force guards members of Congress regardless of their party. Democratic and Republican lawmakers do not employ their own security services at the Capitol. All depend on the nonpartisan force as well as on local police officers in some cases. Trump's linking of the officer to a top Democrat is baseless.

A few high-ranking members of Congress, such as the House speaker, the House majority leader and the Senate majority leader, have an extra level of protection because their prominence and power may put them under greater threat. They are assigned a security detail made up of a small, rotating group of Capitol police and local officers depending on where they are.

The officer who shot Babbitt on Jan. 6 was not a member of such a security detail, according to law enforcement officials and the officer's lawyer. He is assigned to security in the House. In any event, there is nothing Democratic or Republican about the security details for top members.

Babbitt was shot by the officer when she tried to climb through a door with the glass smashed out as she and others in the mob pressed to get into the Speaker's Lobby outside the House chamber. She was unarmed.

Federal prosecutors cleared the officer of any wrongdoing after an investigation into the shooting and did not publicly name him. Capitol Police, concerned for his safety, have also not released his name. The officer's attorney, Mark Schamel, said his client is facing "many credible death threats" and other "horrific threats" and was forced from his home because of them.

The Associated Press is not naming the officer because of the concerns for his safety.

The fact that the officer was not in uniform at the time has fed into the conspiracy theories that Trump is encouraging. Officers in the security details for high-ranking lawmakers wear plainclothes. But so do other members of the Capitol Police at times. It depends on their assignment.

TRUMP, demanding to know who is "the person that shot Ashli Babbitt, boom, right through the head ... why isn't that being studied?" — speaking to reporters Wednesday in Bedminster, New Jersey.

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TRUMP: "Who is the person that shot ... an innocent, wonderful, incredible woman, a military woman, right in the head?" — Sunday in the Fox News interview.

THE FACTS: Babbitt was shot in the shoulder, not in the head, and the circumstances of her death were "studied."

Babbitt, 35, was part of the mob breaching the House as Capitol Police officers were evacuating members of Congress from the chamber. The officers used furniture to try to barricade the glass doors separating the hallway from the Speaker's Lobby to try to stave off the attackers, who kept trying to break through those doors, smashing the glass with flagpoles, helmets and other objects.

Babbitt, wearing a stars and stripes backpack, was attempting to climb through one of the doors where the glass was broken out, when the officer fired one round from his service weapon, striking her.

Federal prosecutors investigated the shooting for several months and announced in April there would be no criminal charges. Prosecutors reviewed video of the shooting, along with statements from the officer involved and other officers and witnesses. They examined physical evidence from the scene and reviewed the autopsy results.

Officers are allowed to use deadly force if there is a serious risk of harm to them or others. Authorities said they did not find grounds to charge the lieutenant.

Trump described his supporters that day in glowing terms. "The crowd was unbelievable," he said Sunday. "And I mentioned the word 'love.' The love — the love in the air, I have never seen anything like it."

Cuba, Haiti stir fresh political pressures for US president

By AAMER MADHANI and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — They are two tiny Caribbean states whose intractable problems have vexed U.S. presidents for decades. Now, Haiti and Cuba are suddenly posing a growing challenge for President Joe Biden that could have political ramifications for him in the battleground state of Florida.

Cuban demonstrators have taken to the country's streets in recent days to lash out at the communist government and protest food shortages and high prices amid the coronavirus pandemic. In Haiti, officials are asking the U.S. to intercede in a roiling political crisis after last week's assassination of President Jovenel Moise in a nation where military and humanitarian interventions by U.S. presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama have proved to be politically harrowing.

Biden is facing increased pressure from Republican lawmakers for his administration to step up support of Cuban demonstrators. And his aides have demonstrated determined caution in response to requests for more U.S. involvement in Haiti.

The administration has come under fire from both sides of the political spectrum for its responses to each of the crises, both unfolding less than two hours' flying time from Miami. The troubled U.S. history in both countries has hardened positions, making virtually any policy decision politically unpalatable for a president seeking to toe a middle line.

In the background: How the Biden administration handles the crises looms large in electorally rich Florida.

Biden lost the state in 2020 to Donald Trump, as Republicans improved their performance while paying special attention to courting the state's large Cuban American population and other immigrant voters, noted Susan MacManus, a Florida political analyst and professor emerita at the University of South Florida.

"The caution Biden is showing reflects the poor showing in 2020 and a desire not to repeat it," said MacManus, who added that Haitian Americans are becoming a growing political force in South Florida. "Democrats learned in 2020 that country of origin is a much more powerful voting cue in Florida than historical voting affiliation, and Trump's hammering on socialism proved to be an effective message."

Indeed, as the situations play out in Cuba and Haiti, Biden administration officials have responded cautiously.

The White House on Sunday dispatched representatives from the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security and the White House National Security Council to meet with Haiti's interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph, designated Prime Minister Ariel Henry and Joseph Lambert, the head of its dis-

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mantled Senate, whom supporters have named as provisional president in a challenge to Joseph.

White House officials said Haiti's request for the U.S. to deploy troops was under review. At the State Department, spokesman Ned Price said Tuesday he was not aware that the administration had rejected any request from Haitian officials but said the focus was on supporting the investigation into the assassination rather than providing military assistance.

U.S. officials have also made clear that the administration remains concerned about the infighting over who is rightfully Moïse's successor in Haiti.

The White House is coordinating with Joseph in his capacity as acting prime minister, but is urging Haitian officials to work together to hold legislative and presidential elections as soon as feasibly possible.

Meanwhile, the White House said a review of its Cuba policy remains underway.

To be sure, U.S. efforts to press for regime change have had their fair share of failures over the years: the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, CIA-backed assassination attempts on Cuban leader Fidel Castro, and sanctions that inflicted pain but never produced the ultimate goal of ending communist rule.

"We're going to be taking a close look at what has and has not worked in the past, and unfortunately in the case of Cuba, there may be more that has not worked than what has worked," Price said.

This week, Cuban police have been out in force as President Miguel Díaz-Canel has accused Cuban Americans of using social media to spur a rare outpouring of weekend protests. The demonstrations in several cities and towns were some of the biggest displays of antigovernment sentiment seen in years in tightly controlled Cuba, which is facing a surge of coronavirus cases as it struggles with its worst economic crisis in decades.

There are political crosscurrents for Biden as he addresses both situations.

On Cuba, the political right in the U.S. has accused Biden — who said as a presidential candidate that he would revert to Obama-era policies that loosened decades of embargo restrictions on Havana — of not being supportive enough of Cuban dissidents.

Democrats, meanwhile, are unhappy that Biden has yet to reverse Trump's hard-line approach to the island's communist government as his administration carries out its review of Cuban policy.

Trump in a statement criticized Biden's past promises to loosen restrictions on Cuba.

"Don't forget that Biden and the Democrats campaigned on reversing my very tough stance on Cuba," Trump said.

Florida Republicans Sen. Marco Rubio and Rep. Carlos Gimenez, a freshman lawmaker who represents a Miami district that Democrats are hoping to flip in next year's midterm election, were among elected officials this week who called on the administration to maintain Trump's Cuba policy.

They also called on Biden to aid the protesters, including by making free satellite internet access available on the island to subvert the Cuban government's effort to stop activists from broadcasting their messages on social media to the world.

Gimenez said in an interview that simply maintaining the status quo is not enough at a moment when the island is seeing some of the most intense protests in more than 60 years — what Biden himself referred to as a "clarion call for freedom."

Biden lost Florida by about double the margin by which Trump beat Democrat Hillary Clinton there in 2016.

Trump was helped in part by narrowing the Democrats' margin of victory in population-rich Miami-Dade County by nearly 13 percentage points. Gimenez and another freshman lawmaker of Cuban descent, Maria Elvira Salazar, picked up Democratic-held seats as Trump and Republicans focused on courting Cuban Americans, an important voting bloc in the state.

The majority of Cubans in Florida supported Trump over Biden, 58% to 41%, according to AP VoteCast. The margin was nearly reversed among other Hispanic voters in the state, who were more likely to support Biden than Trump, 59% to 40%.

"Biden is no fool," said Gimenez. "It's not just the Cuba issue, it's the whole issue of socialism and communism and censorship that's shifted the people of Miami-Dade over to the right. The problem that the president has is the extreme parts of his own party seem to be driving the agenda, and that he just can't

escape right now.”

White House spokesman Chris Meagher said Biden, dating back to his days in the Senate, has been a fierce critic of the Castro regime and is committed to Cuban human rights.

“He’s committed to forming his policies toward Cuba based on two principles: that standing up for democracy and human rights is paramount, and that Americans — especially Cuban Americans — are the best ambassadors for freedom and prosperity in Cuba,” Meagher said.

Carlos Diaz-Rosillo, who served as a director of policy and interagency coordination in the Trump White House, said the situations in Cuba and Haiti offer Biden a chance to demonstrate his oft-repeated dictum that democracies can better service their people than autocracies as well as his preference for multilateral efforts to address big global problems.

“This is an administration that says that they believe in international organizations and that they believe in these multilateral bodies. If that’s the case, get our allies in the hemisphere together ... and see how they can rally others to help out,” Diaz-Rosillo said.

EXPLAINER: Are we going to need COVID-19 booster shots?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Just because Pfizer wants to offer COVID-19 vaccine boosters doesn’t mean people will be lining up anytime soon -- U.S. and international health authorities say that for now, the fully vaccinated seem well protected.

Globally, experts are watching closely to determine if and when people might need another shot. At the same time, many suggest the priority for the time being should be vaccinations, noting that worrisome coronavirus mutants wouldn’t be popping up so fast if more of the U.S. and the rest of the world had gotten the initial round of shots.

“If you want to stop hearing about the variant of the week,” said Jennifer Nuzzo, a Johns Hopkins University public health specialist, “we need to do more work to make sure all countries have more access to vaccines.”

Here are some questions and answers about vaccine immunity and boosters.

WHAT’S PROMPTING ALL THE BOOSTER DEBATE?

U.S. health officials have long said that people one day might need a booster -- after all, they do for many other vaccines. That’s why studies are underway to test different approaches: simple third doses, mix-and-match tests using a different brand for a third dose, or experimental boosters tweaked to better match different variants.

But last week, Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech announced that in August, they plan to seek Food and Drug Administration authorization of a third dose because it could boost levels of virus-fighting antibodies, possibly helping ward off worrisome mutants.

The companies haven’t publicly released data, and U.S. health officials issued a sharp response that boosters aren’t yet needed and that the government, not vaccine makers, will decide if and when that changes.

The World Health Organization said Monday there is not enough evidence to show that third doses are needed. It said the scarce shots should be shared with poor countries instead of being used by rich countries as boosters.

WHAT’S THE EVIDENCE THAT VACCINE PROTECTION REMAINS STRONG?

An Associated Press analysis last month found nearly all COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. are occurring among the unvaccinated.

In the last few weeks, infections and hospitalizations have begun rising as the highly contagious delta variant spreads. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the surges are driven by the least vaccinated parts of a country that has plenty of shots if people would only take them.

No vaccine is perfect, meaning fully vaccinated people occasionally will get infected, but those so-called breakthrough cases usually are mild. Officials monitoring the need for boosters are watching closely for any jumps in serious breakthrough infections.

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So far the news is good: The people first in line for vaccines back in December and January don't seem to be at higher risk for breakthrough infections than those vaccinated more recently, the CDC's Dr. Jay Butler said Tuesday.

IS THE BOOSTER QUESTION ALL ABOUT NEW VARIANTS?

No, scientists also are watching to see how much vaccinated people's overall immunity to the coronavirus wanes. That, too, could require a booster shot.

Virus-fighting antibodies do gradually wane. That's normal since the body doesn't need to be on high alert forever.

But antibodies aren't its only defense. By the time those levels drop, the body has formed backups. They include memory B cells that, the next time you're exposed, "explode, and they start dividing like mad" to make new antibodies, said University of Pennsylvania immunologist Scott Hensley.

Another backup: T cells that kill virus-infected cells to help keep a breakthrough case from becoming severe.

Lab studies signal antibodies aren't as potent against the delta variant as they are against some earlier versions of the coronavirus but are still protective. Specialists worry more about the prospect of future mutants that might escape today's vaccines, something preventable only by cracking down on viral spread everywhere.

HOW ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING AGAINST THE DELTA VARIANT?

Real-world data from England, Scotland, Canada and Israel shows that the vaccines most widely used in Western countries continue to provide strong protection. Researchers in Britain found two doses of the Pfizer vaccine, for example, are 96% protective against hospitalization with the delta variant and 88% effective against symptomatic infection.

Israel recently reported preliminary data suggesting protection against mild delta infection has dipped lower, to 64%. But protection against severe illness remained high.

There's less information about how well other vaccines hold up against the delta variant. Thailand announced this week that health workers who had received two doses of a Chinese vaccine would be given a booster shot made by AstraZeneca.

COULD SOME PEOPLE NEED A BOOSTER BEFORE THE ENTIRE POPULATION?

That's possible. Israel just began dispensing third doses of the Pfizer vaccine to transplant recipients and other patients with weak immune systems. The reason: People who take certain immune-suppressing medications don't react as strongly to any vaccinations -- not just COVID-19 vaccines -- as healthy people.

France already had a similar third-dose policy for the immunocompromised. And even though it's not authorized in the U.S., some transplant recipients seek out a third dose in hopes of more protection.

It's not yet proven if a third dose helps and, if so, who needs one and when. The first large study of the strategy is beginning in thousands of patients in Norway.

Taliban press advances, take key border post with Pakistan

By KATHY GANNON and RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban are pressing on with their surge in Afghanistan, saying they seized a strategic border crossing with Pakistan on Wednesday — the latest in a series of key border post to come under their control in recent weeks.

The development was the latest in Taliban wins on the ground as American and NATO troops complete their pullout from the war-battered country. On Tuesday, an Afghan official said a senior government delegation, including the head of the country's reconciliation council, would meet the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, to jump-start the long-stalled peace talks between the two sides.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid tweeted a video purporting to show Taliban fighters Wednesday in the southeastern town of Spin Boldak along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. On the Pakistani side, residents of the border town of Chaman reported seeing the Taliban's signature white flag flying just across the boundary line and Taliban fighters in vehicles driving in the area.

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However an Afghan government official from southern Kandahar province, where Spin Boldak is located, denied that the Taliban had taken control. The official declined to be identified by name, without explaining why.

The Taliban have in recent weeks taken a string of major Afghan border crossings, including with Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The border crossing with Iran at Islam Qala in Afghanistan's western Herat province is particularly lucrative and an important trade route.

Spin Boldak is a key crossing for all goods from Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi to Afghanistan, a landlocked nation dependent on the Arabian Sea port.

Last week, the Taliban said they now control 85% of Afghanistan's territory — a claim that is impossible to verify but that was considerably higher than previous Taliban statements that more than a third of the country's 421 districts and district centers were in their control.

Many Afghan districts have fallen to the Taliban without a fight as Afghan forces abandoned their posts. Reports indicated that Spin Boldak also fell without a fight.

In northern Afghanistan, a traditional stronghold of U.S.-allied warlords, more than 1,000 Afghan military men fled across the border into northern Tajikistan last week ahead of the advancing Taliban. Iran also reported a few hundred Afghan troops crossing into Iran.

The taking of key border crossings will likely mean significant revenue for the Taliban while also strengthening their hand in any future negotiations with the Kabul government.

The Taliban surge has also resulted in tens of thousands of Afghans fleeing their homes — some as a result of the fighting, but many out of fear of what life might be like under Taliban rule.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, acknowledged the ongoing chaos in remarks Wednesday. However, he pointed to the decades of unrest in the country since the 1979 Soviet invasion.

"The fact is that Afghanistan has been at war for 43 years — it isn't that Afghanistan has been peaceful and now we are withdrawing and therefore it's becoming a battleground," Khalilzad told an online seminar organized by the Beirut Institute. "The Taliban were making progress each year over the last several years while we were still there."

The Taliban leadership has tried to present a softer image — even saying that once they return to power in Afghanistan, girls can attend school and women will be allowed to work. However, in areas where they have gained control, reports from villagers say women are often being ordered inside, allowed out only when accompanied by a male relative.

In the video circulated by Mujahid, an unidentified Taliban fighter says that while they could have killed the Afghan soldiers at the border crossing, they were ordered by their leadership not to hurt them but to send them home.

The Taliban were expected to bring their senior leaders to the talks in Doha, where the insurgent movement has long maintained a political office.

The negotiations are aimed at ending the violence that has steadily increased since the U.S. signed a deal with the insurgent movement in February last year spelling out the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

There are rising concerns for what lies ahead and thousands of Afghans are trying to leave the country amid growing anxiety about the future. Outgoing U.S. commander Gen. Scott Miller, who officially stepped down at a ceremony in Kabul on Monday, has warned that increasing violence seriously hurts Afghanistan's chances of finding a peaceful end to decades of war.

Miller also warned of a possible civil war as U.S.-allied warlords have been resurrecting their militias in an attempt to stop the Taliban surge. The militias have a violent history.

Pope Francis returns to Vatican 10 days after surgery

By NICOLE WINFIELD, DOMENICO STINELLIS and GIANFRANCO STARA Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was discharged from a Rome hospital and returned home to the Vatican on

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Wednesday, 10 days after undergoing surgery to remove half his colon.

Francis, 84, stopped at St. Mary Major Basilica to give thanks for the success of the operation and pray for others before returning home, the Vatican said. The pope always visits the basilica after a foreign trip to pray at a beloved icon of the Virgin Mary.

Francis rode in the passenger seat of the Ford sedan, which left Rome's Gemelli Polyclinic around 10:45 a.m. (0845 GMT; 4:45 a.m. EDT).

After the detour to the basilica, his small motorcade approached a side entrance to the Vatican and stopped before reaching the gate, where Francis got out with the help of a bodyguard. He greeted some Italian security guards — two army soldiers and a handful of Italian police motorcycle escorts — and got back in the car, which then proceeded through the Perugino gate.

The Vatican hotel where Francis lives is located just inside the gate.

Francis had half of his colon removed on July 4 for a severe narrowing of his large intestine, his first major surgery since he became pope in 2013. It was a planned procedure, scheduled for early July when his audiences are suspended anyway and Francis would normally take some time off.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni confirmed Francis' return from the hospital and visit to the basilica. Praying before the icon, Francis "expressed his gratitude for the success of his surgery and offered a prayer for all the sick, especially those he had met during his stay in hospital," Bruni said in the statement.

Francis will have several more weeks to recover before traveling again in September. There are plans for him to visit Hungary and Slovakia from Sept. 12-15, and then make a quick stop in Glasgow, Scotland, in November to participate in the COP26 climate conference. Other possible trips are also under review.

The Vatican had originally said Francis could be discharged last weekend, but later said he would stay a few extra days for further recovery and rehabilitation therapy.

His discharge, which was not announced in advance, was greeted with joy and prayers by visitors to St. Peter's Square, who said they wished for his continued recovery and Italy's recovery from the pandemic.

"I'm happy the pope has left Gemelli hospital and has come back to his 'world,' among us faithful, to hopefully bring us a lot of serenity," said Rome resident Andrea Castellani.

The surgery had caught many Vatican watchers off guard: Francis had shown no signs of the pain that often accompanies the intestinal problem he had, and even had a busy week before the operation.

The Argentine pope had part of one lung removed when he was a young man but otherwise has enjoyed relatively robust health, with the exception of sciatica nerve pain that has flared recently.

The Vatican gave consistently reassuring daily updates about his recovery, saying it was proceeding as planned. Francis had one episode of fever three days after the operation, but the Vatican said diagnostic tests and scans showed no problems.

The pope had appeared for the first time in public since the surgery on Sunday, looking in good form as he delivered his weekly prayer from the 10th floor hospital balcony, surrounded by young cancer patients. He used the occasion to call for free health care for all.

On Tuesday afternoon, he visited the pediatric cancer ward, which is on the same 10th floor as the papal hospital suite.

Once home, Francis' official Twitter account @Pontifex posted an update: "I thank all those who have been close to me with prayer and affection during my hospital stay. Let us not forget to pray for the sick and for those who assist them," it said.

Indonesia reports 54,000 virus cases, becomes Asian hotspot

By EDNA TARIGAN Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia reported more than 54,000 new coronavirus cases for the first time Wednesday, surpassing recent daily infections in India, whose disastrous outbreak is declining, and becoming Asia's new virus hotspot.

Officials fear that the more highly transmissible delta variant is now spreading from the islands of Java and Bali, where outbreaks prompted a partial lockdown that closed places of worship, malls, parks and

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restaurants.

"I predict the outbreak will increase continuously in July as we are not able yet to prevent the spread of infections," epidemiology expert Pandu Riono at the University of Indonesia said Wednesday. "Emergency social restrictions are still inadequate. They should be twice as stringent since we are facing the delta variant, which is two times more contagious."

The Health Ministry reported 54,517 new cases and 991 deaths on Wednesday, bringing the number of confirmed cases since the pandemic began above 2.6 million and the number of confirmed fatalities to more than 69,000.

A month ago, daily cases were running at about 8,000.

Reported daily cases in Indonesia are now higher than in India, despite Indonesia having far less testing by population.

India reported fewer than 39,000 cases on Wednesday, far below its peak of more than 400,000 daily cases in May, following lockdowns in its worst-hit areas and a stepped-up vaccination drive.

Indonesian Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin said the government has identified the spread of the delta variant in some regions outside Java and Bali.

He told lawmakers on Tuesday that across the country, more than 90,000 of the 120,000 hospital beds for COVID-19 patients are occupied.

"Nationally, we still have some room. But the bed occupancy rate is very high in some provinces where the explosion of the delta variant is concentrated," Sadikin said.

With the increase in deaths over the past month, some residents near Jakarta have begun helping overburdened gravediggers.

"As the diggers are too tired and do not have enough resources to dig, the residents in my neighborhood decided to help," said Jaya Abidin, who lives in Bogor on the outskirts of the capital. "Because if we do not do this, we will have to wait in turn a long time for a burial in the middle of the night."

The government is struggling to acquire enough vaccines to reach its target of inoculating more than 181 million of its 270 million people by March 2022. So far, only 15.6 million people have been fully vaccinated.

So far, the world's fourth-most populous country has secured 137.6 million doses of Sinovac, AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines, enough for about 69 million people.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, July 15, the 196th day of 2021. There are 169 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On July 15, 1834, the Spanish Inquisition was abolished more than 3 1/2 centuries after its creation.

On this date:

In 1870, Georgia became the last Confederate state to be readmitted to the Union. Manitoba entered confederation as the fifth Canadian province.

In 1910, the term "Alzheimer's disease" was used to describe a progressive form of presenile dementia in the book "Clinical Psychiatry" by German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, who credited the work of his colleague, Alois (al-WAH') Alzheimer, in identifying the condition.

In 1913, Augustus Bacon, D-Ga., became the first person elected to the U.S. Senate under the terms of the recently ratified 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for popular election of senators.

In 1916, Boeing Co., originally known as Pacific Aero Products Co., was founded in Seattle.

In 1918, the Second Battle of the Marne, resulting in an Allied victory, began during World War I.

In 1975, three American astronauts blasted off aboard an Apollo spaceship hours after two Soviet cosmonauts were launched aboard a Soyuz spacecraft for a mission that included a linkup of the two ships in orbit.

In 1976, a 36-hour kidnap ordeal began for 26 schoolchildren and their bus driver as they were abducted

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near Chowchilla, California, by three gunmen and imprisoned in an underground cell. (The captives escaped unharmed; the kidnapers were caught.)

In 1985, a visibly gaunt Rock Hudson appeared at a news conference with frequent co-star Doris Day (it was later revealed Hudson was suffering from AIDS).

In 1997, fashion designer Gianni Versace (ver-SAH'-chay), 50, was shot dead outside his Miami Beach home; suspected gunman Andrew Phillip Cunanan (koo-NAN'-an), 27, was found dead eight days later, a suicide. (Investigators believed Cunanan killed four other people before Versace in a cross-country rampage that began the previous March.)

In 2002, John Walker Lindh, an American who'd fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, pleaded guilty in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, to two felonies in a deal sparing him life in prison.

In 2018, President Donald Trump arrived in Finland for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Earlier, in an interview with CBS News, Trump named the European Union as a top adversary of the United States.

In 2019, avowed white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. was sentenced to life in prison plus 419 years for killing one and injuring dozens of others when he deliberately drove his car into a crowd of anti-racism protesters during a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Ten years ago: Rupert Murdoch accepted the resignation of The Wall Street Journal's publisher, Les Hinton, and the chief of his British operations, Rebekah Brooks, as the once-defiant media mogul struggled to control an escalating phone hacking scandal. Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony announced they were breaking up after seven years of marriage.

Five years ago: Donald Trump chose Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, an experienced politician with deep Washington connections, as his running mate.

One year ago: George Floyd's family filed a lawsuit against the city of Minneapolis and the four police officers charged in his death, alleging the officers violated Floyd's rights when they restrained him and that the city allowed a culture of excessive force, racism and impunity to flourish in its police force. (The city would agree to pay \$27 million to settle the lawsuit in March 2021.) As coronavirus cases surged to record levels in the Los Angeles area, organizers canceled the 2021 New Year's Day Rose Parade in Pasadena for the first time in 75 years. Walmart became the largest retailer to require customers to wear face coverings at all of its stores. Thousands of auto racing fans gathered at Bristol Motor Speedway in Tennessee for a NASCAR All-Star race, the nation's largest sporting event since the pandemic began; it was won by Chase Elliott.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Patrick Wayne is 82. R&B singer Millie Jackson is 77. Rock singer-musician Peter Lewis (Moby Grape) is 76. Singer Linda Ronstadt is 75. Rock musician Artimus Pyle is 73. Arianna Huffington, co-founder of The Huffington Post, is 71. Actor Celia Imrie is 69. Actor Terry O'Quinn is 69. Rock singer-musician David Pack is 69. Rock musician Marky Ramone is 69. Rock musician Joe Satriani is 65. Country singer-songwriter Mac McAnally is 64. Model Kim Alexis is 61. Actor Willie Aames is 61. Actor-director Forest Whitaker is 60. Actor Lolita Davidovich is 60. Actor Shari Headley is 58. Actor Brigitte Nielsen is 58. Rock musician Jason Bonham is 55. Actor Amanda Foreman is 55. R&B singer Stokley (Mint Condition) is 54. Actor-comedian Eddie Griffin is 53. Actor Reggie Hayes is 52. Actor-screenwriter Jim Rash is 50. Rock musician John Dolmayan is 49. Actor Scott Foley is 49. Actor Brian Austin Green is 48. Rapper Jim Jones is 45. Actor Diane Kruger is 45. Actor Lana Parrilla (LAH'-nuh pa-REE'-uh) is 44. Rock musician Ray Toro (My Chemical Romance) is 44. Actor Laura Benanti is 42. Actor Travis Fimmel is 42. Actor Taylor Kinney is 40. Actor-singer Tristan "Mack" Wilds is 32. Actor Medalion Rahimi is 29. Actor Iain Armitage (TV: "Big Little Lies" "Young Sheldon") is 13.