

Groton Daily Independent

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Britton

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shift
assemblers!





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
wanted. Must be able
to lift 50lbs. Usual
hours Monday-Friday
8 to 5.

\$15/hr starting wage.
Contact Bob Wegner at
New Deal Tire Groton,
SD.

605-397-7579

HELP

WANTED!

(0711.0808)

Region VFW Baseball Tournament

Bats Blistered As Groton Jr. Teeners Falls To Clark In High-Scoring Game

SDVFW 14U Groton's bats were strong against SDVFW 14U Clark on Thursday, but it wasn't enough as SDVFW 14U Groton fell 21-7.

The SDVFW 14U Groton struggled to contain the high-powered offense of SDVFW 14U Clark, giving up 21 runs.

SDVFW 14U Clark fired up the offense in the first inning, when Jack Helkenn doubled on a 0-1 count, scoring one run.

SDVFW 14U Clark took the lead for good with five runs in the fourth inning. In the fourth an error scored one run for SDVFW 14U Clark, an error scored one run for SDVFW 14U Clark, and Emmerson Larson singled on a 1-2 count, scoring two runs.

SDVFW 14U Groton put up four runs in the third inning. Braxton Imrie, Korbin Kucker, and Nicholas Morris each had RBIs in the big inning.

SDVFW 14U Clark scored 11 runs in the seventh inning. SDVFW 14U Clark batters contributing to the big inning included Larson, Collin Gaikowski, Waylon Olson, Cooper Pommer, Josh Kannegieter, and Ky Vandersnick, all driving in runs in the frame.

Conner Mudgett got the win for SDVFW 14U Clark. The ace surrendered five runs on six hits over five and two-thirds innings, striking out three. Pommer threw one and one-third innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Kucker took the loss for SDVFW 14U Groton. The hurler surrendered seven runs on four hits over four innings, striking out four.

Taylor Diegel went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead SDVFW 14U Groton in hits. SDVFW 14U Groton stole ten bases during the game as two players stole more than one. Imrie led the way with five.

SDVFW 14U Clark collected 13 hits. Gaikowski, Helkenn, Pommer, Larson, and Tyson Huber all managed multiple hits for SDVFW 14U Clark. Huber led SDVFW 14U Clark with three stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with 12 stolen bases.

Clark Takes Victory Over Groton Jr. Teeners In Pitcher's Duel

Both teams were strong on the mound Thursday, but SDVFW 14U Clark defeated SDVFW 14U Groton 3-2. Max Bratland allowed just four hits to SDVFW 14U Groton.

Bratland was credited with the victory for SDVFW 14U Clark. Bratland went seven innings, allowing two runs on four hits, striking out one and walking one.

Nicholas Morris took the loss for SDVFW 14U Groton. The pitcher surrendered three runs on four hits over five innings, striking out four and walking zero.

Josh Kannegieter led SDVFW 14U Clark with two hits in three at bats. Waylon Olson led SDVFW 14U Clark with two stolen bases, as they ran wild on the base paths with six stolen bases.

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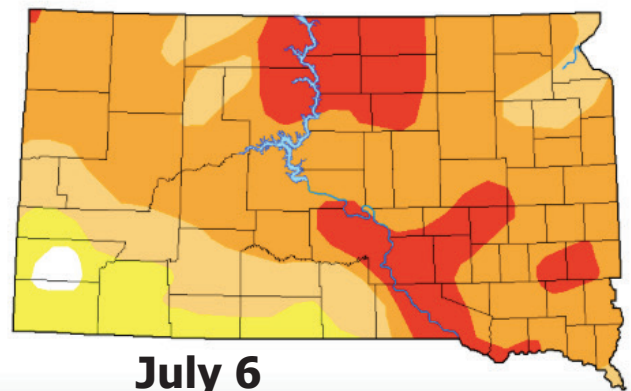
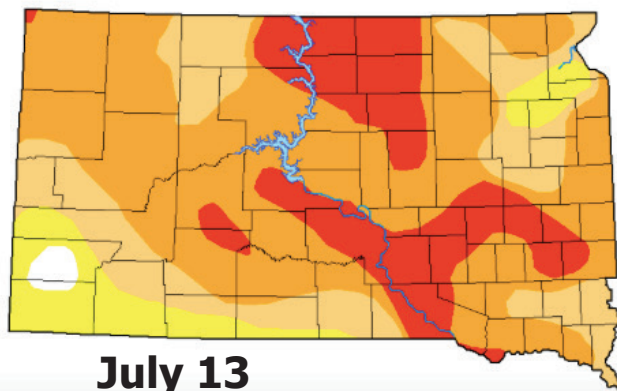
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

The western half of the High Plains Region experienced above-normal average temperatures this week underneath a mid-level ridge, while the eastern half experienced below-normal average temperatures, associated with increased cloud-cover and heavy rainfall for several locations. Improvements were mainly designated to the Middle Missouri River basin, encompassing parts of eastern South Dakota and northeastern Nebraska, which received more than 2 inches of rainfall (more than 1 inch above-normal for the week). Elsewhere in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, below-normal precipitation coupled with antecedent dryness warranted several 1-category deteriorations. In the western half of the High Plains Region, deteriorations were more a function of above-normal temperatures helping to exacerbate ongoing drought conditions in the Eastern Rockies and along the Front Range. Furthermore, this region is void of snowpack due to the below-normal rainy season in the West leading up to this period of above-normal temperatures since Spring, which has caused further depletion of soil moisture, stream flows, and ground water in many locations.

Groton Area valuation drops \$40 million

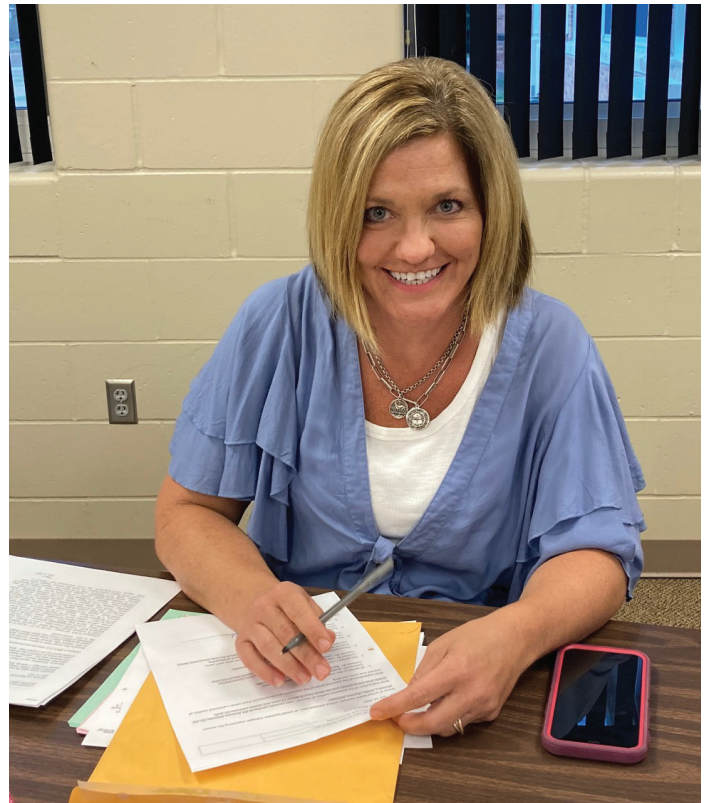
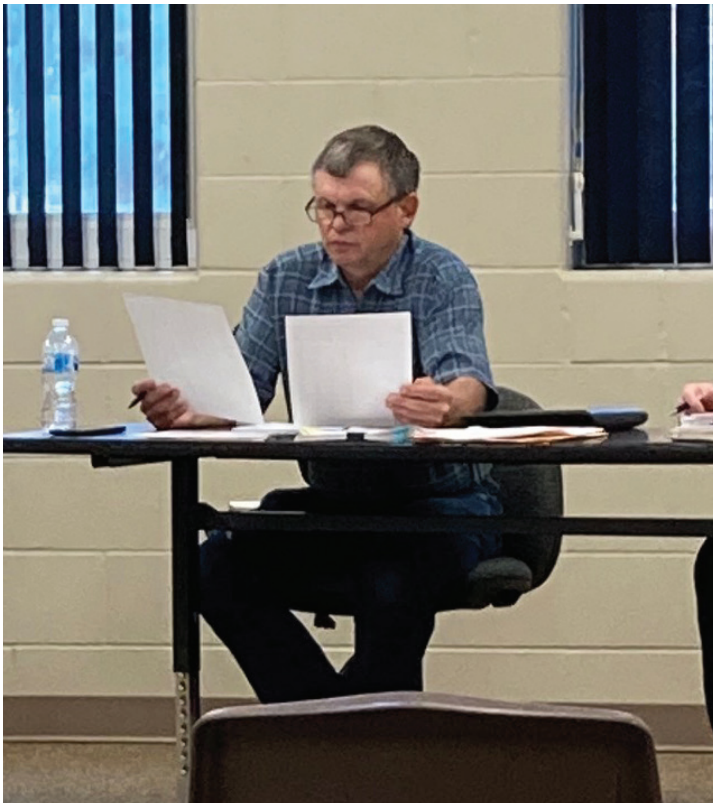
The Groton Area School may have to raise its tax levy due to the reduction in \$40 million in property valuation in the past year - most of it being in ag land. However, on the positive side, the district received over \$300,000 in COVID-19 relief funds. The board will continue to grapple with the facts before making a final determination.

A change in the procedure of home-schooling is in the works. Those who are home-schooled will be able to fill out an on-line application which will be sent to the state and the district. In addition, it no longer needs to be an annual application, only when they make the transition from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school.

President Steve Smith announced that he would like to have his name removed from being nominated as president. "It's time for a new face in this position," he said. As a result, Deb Gengerke was voted as the new board president with Marty Weismantel voted as vice-president.

There were a number of lane changes approved with Scott Thorson going from BS+15 to BS+45, and Melissa Smith and Alexia Schuring both going from BS to BS+15.

There were no changes made to the admission fees, breakfast and lunch funds and OST services. The student lunch fund is a mute point right now as everyone is entitled to free lunches at the school for the upcoming school year.



Steve Smith announced at the beginning of the school board meeting Thursday night that he wants to be removed from consideration for being the board president. He has served many years in the position and said it was time for a new face in that position. As a result, the smiley face on the right is the new board president, Deb Gengerke. (Photos by Paul Kosel)

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**GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT
2022 Non-Bond Taxable #6-6 Valuation**

7/15/2021

OF-Tax Valuations.xlsx

	Brown	Clark	Day	Marshall	Spink	Non-Bond Totals
AG	24,545,475	2,396,371	304,607,414	800,000	45,241,783	377,591,043
OO	429,161	0	18,438,361	70,000	897,593	19,835,115
Other	345,413	24,200	11,278,769	130,000	51,760	11,830,142
Util	566,710	2,904,324	64,500,000	0	3,850,000	71,821,034
Totals	25,886,759	5,324,895	398,824,544	1,000,000	50,041,136	481,077,334

2022 Bond Taxable #6-6B Valuation

	Brown	Clark	Day	Marshall	Spink	Bond Taxable Totals
AG	535,418,305	0	0	0	0	535,418,305
OO	111,193,978	0	0	0	0	111,193,978
Other	41,686,487	0	0	0	0	41,686,487
Util	64,528,354	0	0	0	0	64,528,354
Totals	752,827,124	0	0	0	0	752,827,124

2022 District-Wide Valuation

	Brown	Clark	Day	Marshall	Spink	District-wide Totals
AG	559,963,780	2,396,371	304,607,414	800,000	45,241,783	913,009,348
OO	111,623,139	0	18,438,361	70,000	897,593	131,029,093
Other	42,031,900	24,200	11,278,769	130,000	51,760	53,516,629
Util	65,095,064	2,904,324	64,500,000	0	3,850,000	136,349,388
Totals	778,713,883	5,324,895	398,824,544	1,000,000	50,041,136	1,233,904,458

- Enter last year's effort and total tax dollars
- Enter last year's valuation numbers into formula
- Enter state levy amount and district request

Levy Calculations and Comparisons

Valuation % (+/-)	2022 Levy	New		2021 Levy	Levy % (+/-)
		Recognized Effort - GF	2021 Levy		
-4.9956%	0.001409	1,286,430	0.001443	-2.35620%	
5.3492%	0.003153	413,135	0.003229	-2.35367%	
1.0673%	0.006525	349,196	0.006682	-2.34960%	
0.8816%	0.006525	889,680	0.006682	-2.34960%	
-3.1094%	'22 GF Effort	2,938,441			
	2021 GF Effort	3,045,580		% (+/-)	
	\$ (+/-)	(107,139)		-3.5179%	

State Aid increase - ?

Levy change ?
Levy change ?

	Valuation % (+/-)	2022 Levy	2022 Request	2021 Levy	Levy % (+/-)
Capital Outlay	-3.1094%	0.001378	1,700,000	0.001335	3.20153%
Special Ed	-3.1094%	0.000729	900,000	0.000707	3.16718%
Bond Redemption	0	0	0	0	0
Total 2022 Tax Dollars		5,538,441			
Total 2021 Tax Dollars		5,645,580		% (+/-)	
		\$ (+/-)		(107,139)	
				-1.8978%	

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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

July 15, 2021

State Superintendent Conference – July 19-21. I am registered for the annual state Superintendent Conference in Chamberlain scheduled for next week. The primary presenters are John and Antoinette Griffin from Griff Development of Atlanta Georgia. Both are members of the John Maxwell Team. There are also sessions with the South Dakota Department of Education and a presenter from AASA, The School Superintendents Association (national).

ASBSD/SASD Joint Convention. Associated School Boards of South Dakota and School Administrators of South Dakota are planning a full in-person joint convention for August 5 and 6 in Sioux Falls. There are two keynote speakers scheduled along with many breakout sessions on a wide variety of education-related topics. If you're interested or would like additional information, please let me know. The early registration deadline for this is Friday, July 16.

21-22 School Year/COVID. COVID-19 will again be a discussion item at our August 9 board meeting and will include recommendations for protocols for the upcoming school year. There are informational webinars in the coming weeks (July 26) with the SD Departments of Education/Health. This morning we received an electronic copy of the DOE Strong Schools Document essentially replacing the DOE 20-21 Return to Learn documents.

Medical Marijuana. We expect to hear updated information from Department of Education along with Associated School Boards of South Dakota legal counsel on policy recommendations at the July 29 meeting with Department of Education. The State Board of Education Standards adopted revised administrative rules at their meeting last week at the request of the Legislative Interim Rules Committee. The revisions will go back to the Legislative Committee for final approval. If these timelines are met, we could tentatively be reviewing local policy recommendations at our August meeting.

SB 177 Alternative Instruction (homeschool/non-accredited schools) Legislation. Department of Education is planning to release an online homeschool application/registration for the 21-22 school year on July 20, 2021. We may not see any paper applications this year under the new law and will have to adjust to the new system once it becomes available. Under the new statute annual notification is not required after this year. Rather families only must provide notification at certain milestones. We anticipate arrival of an FAQ document from DOE pending final review from their legal counsel.

Pandemic EBT Program. In the next couple of days, the Departments of Education and Social Services are going provide a press release about the P-EBT program. The program will likely get some attention statewide. There are two primary qualifiers for this program one of which is a student's school must have been closed or operating on a reduced attendance basis for five consecutive days during the 2020-21 school year. The other is income eligibility according to National School Lunch Program criteria. None of our schools (Elementary, Middle, or High School) met the five consecutive day criteria and, therefore, none of our students/families are eligible for this program.

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General Fund Balance History

Budget Comments	Year End	Expenditure Budget	Actual Expenditures	Exp/Bud %	Revenue Budget	Actual Revenue	Rev/Bud %	Fund Balance	FB %	Student Enroll.	Certified Staff	Square Miles	Comp ACT	Comments
1,129,198.66	'10	4,254,235.00	3,942,528.03	0.927	4,072,291.00	4,211,943.76	1.034	1,398,614.39	35.5	623.00	54.45	871	23.1	Conde, SB91 CO trsf
8.6% Gov cut	'11	4,313,824.00	3,985,760.70	0.924	3,912,373.00	3,991,360.30	1.020	1,404,213.99	35.2	612.00	54.05	871	22.8	
	'12	4,028,892.00	3,666,644.45	0.910	3,743,265.00	3,866,638.53	1.033	1,604,208.07	43.8	591.00	51.91	871	24.0	
	'13	4,175,803.00	3,814,595.97	0.913	3,714,180.00	3,908,841.75	1.052	1,698,453.85	44.5	588.00	49.91	871	22.6	
SB91 items in GF	'14	4,578,300.00	4,156,844.84	0.908	3,995,856.00	4,081,148.87	1.021	1,622,757.88	39.0	581.00	49.77	871	22.6	
	'15	4,575,714.00	4,236,962.33	0.926	4,003,067.00	4,181,748.25	1.045	1,567,543.80	37.0	596.00	48.75	871	22.6	
	'16	4,719,838.00	4,308,652.85	0.913	4,167,437.00	4,283,531.74	1.028	1,542,422.69	35.8	582.00	47.75	871	22.9	
Governor's Plan	'17	5,020,123.00	4,818,605.99	0.960	4,434,298.00	4,671,571.79	1.054	1,395,388.49	29.0	589.00	49.00	871	21.9	
Show Choir Major	'18	5,322,308.00	5,033,221.09	0.946	4,690,523.00	4,535,461.34	0.967	897,628.74	17.8	568.00	49.00	871	22.0	taxes 190k short
w/500K CO transfer	'19	5,268,301.00	4,947,209.61	0.939	4,973,177.00	5,229,727.13	1.052	1,180,146.26	23.9	578.87	48.00	871	22.4	received Jul'18
w/500K CO transfer	'20	5,386,694.00	4,881,966.85	0.906	5,051,944.00	5,011,841.41	0.992	1,310,020.82	26.8	580.86	46.00	871	22.7	COVID-19
Dec & Jun bonuses	'21	5,457,627.00	5,019,448.16	0.920	5,233,525.00	5,262,103.71	1.005	1,552,676.37	30.9	611.86	46.00	871		CRF-240; Esser-79
w/550K CO transfer raises, Dec bonus	'22	5,596,983.00	5,200,000.00	0.929	5,194,569.00	5,200,000.00	1.001	1,552,676.37	29.9		46.00	871		Esser II-108,244
			3-year Average	0.922		3-year Average	1.016							

Capital Outlay Fund Balance History

Budget Comments	Year End	Expenditure Budget	Actual Expenditures	Exp/Bud %	Revenue Budget	Actual Revenue	Rev/Bud %	Fund Balance	FB %	Student Enroll.	Certified Staff	Square Miles	Comp ACT	Comments
574,256.16	'10	1,059,750.00	968,418.09	0.914	932,150.00	947,482.79	1.016	553,320.86	57.1	623.00	54.45	871	23.1	Conde, SB91 CO trsf
8.6% Gov cut	'11	1,101,225.00	1,077,262.93	0.978	999,324.00	1,001,804.88	1.002	477,862.81	44.4	612.00	54.05	871	22.8	
	'12	1,026,345.00	968,201.14	0.943	1,066,950.00	1,083,298.84	1.015	592,960.51	61.2	591.00	51.91	871	24.0	
	'13	1,161,645.00	1,093,583.25	0.941	1,076,750.00	1,092,798.38	1.015	592,175.64	54.2	588.00	49.91	871	22.6	
SB91 items to GF	'14	1,126,385.00	1,001,948.60	0.890	1,097,639.00	1,082,447.51	0.986	672,674.55	67.1	581.00	49.77	871	22.6	
	'15	1,152,652.00	1,076,249.68	0.934	1,105,296.00	1,118,139.77	1.012	714,564.64	66.4	596.00	48.75	871	22.6	
	'16	1,146,493.00	985,721.02	0.860	1,059,700.00	1,073,624.60	1.013	802,468.22	81.4	582.00	47.75	871	22.9	
Governor's Plan	'17	1,128,443.00	1,039,463.92	0.921	1,030,550.00	1,040,009.45	1.009	803,013.75	77.3	589.00	49.00	871	21.9	
	'18	1,486,180.00	1,459,415.62	0.982	1,282,651.00	1,145,835.95	0.893	489,434.08	33.5	568.00	49.00	871	22.0	taxes 125k short
w/500K GF transfer	'19	1,792,950.00	1,696,324.82	0.946	2,726,718.00	2,779,826.68	1.019	1,572,935.94	92.7	578.87	48.00	871	22.4	received Jul '18
w/500K GF transfer	'20	1,974,319.00	1,815,766.86	0.920	1,732,332.00	1,737,263.10	1.003	1,494,432.18	82.3	580.86	46.00	871	22.7	COVID-19
w/500K GF transfer	'21	1,920,275.00	1,758,870.95	0.916	1,834,679.00	1,889,387.46	1.030	1,624,948.69	92.4	611.86	46.00	871		CRF-55;Esser-3;B-51
w/550K CO transfer	'22	1,986,690.00	1,845,000.00	0.929	2,049,111.00	2,060,000.00	1.005	1,839,948.69	99.7		46.00	871		Esser II-287,588
			3-year Average	0.927		3-year Average	1.017							

Special Ed Fund Balance History

Budget Comments	Year End	Expenditure Budget	Actual Expenditures	Exp/Bud %	Revenue Budget	Actual Revenue	Rev/Bud %	Fund Balance	FB %	Student Enroll.	Certified Staff	Square Miles	Comp ACT	Comments
127,193.08	'10	830,626.00	689,133.45	0.830	729,844.00	759,562.52	1.041	197,622.15	28.7	623.00	54.45	871	23.1	Conde
IDEA to coop	'11	684,787.00	585,163.82	0.855	593,832.00	595,945.37	1.004	208,403.70	35.6	612.00	54.05	871	22.8	
ARRA ends	'12	639,682.00	569,547.68	0.890	539,850.00	537,564.88	0.996	176,420.90	31.0	591.00	51.91	871	24.0	
	'13	654,057.00	531,223.80	0.812	564,100.00	571,330.10	1.013	216,527.20	40.8	588.00	49.91	871	22.6	
Sesquestration	'14	716,621.00	611,598.17	0.853	600,950.00	626,593.92	1.043	231,522.95	37.9	581.00	49.77	871	22.6	
	'15	752,362.00	663,841.19	0.882	639,026.00	642,339.72	1.005	210,021.48	31.6	596.00	48.75	871	22.6	
	'16	822,231.00	764,958.42	0.930	669,700.00	678,500.72	1.013	123,563.78	16.2	582.00	47.75	871	22.9	
Governor's Plan	'17	879,333.00	818,261.89	0.931	754,250.00	769,975.03	1.021	75,276.92	9.2	589.00	49.00	871	21.9	
	'18	928,526.00	851,751.37	0.917	871,050.00	788,780.68	0.906	12,306.23	1.4	568.00	49.00	871	22.0	taxes 70k short
	'19	895,557.00	822,885.84	0.919	920,910.00	1,004,018.75	1.090	193,439.14	23.5	578.87	48.00	871	22.4	received Jul '18
	'20	928,409.00	835,605.37	0.900	918,150.00	925,137.93	1.008	282,971.70	33.9	580.86	46.00	871	22.7	COVID-19
Dec & Jun bonuses	'21	946,433.00	909,100.54	0.961	918,200.00	940,278.34	1.024	314,149.50	34.6	611.86	46.00	871		
	'22	990,570.00	935,000.00	0.944	920,500.00	935,000.00	1.016	314,149.50	33.6		46.00	871		
			3-year Average	0.926		3-year Average	1.041							

OF-Fund Balance History.xls

Cub Cadet®

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HURRY IN!



SC 300 HW SELF-PROPELLED WALK-BEHIND MOWER

- 159cc Cub Cadet® performance-tuned OHV engine
- Front wheel drive system for more control
- High rear wheels to maneuver with ease

STARTING AT:
\$369*



XT2™ LX46 LAWN TRACTOR WITH FABRICATED DECK

- 21.5 HP^{††} Kawasaki® FR 651V engine
- 46" AeroForce™ fabricated mowing deck
- Tuff Torq® foot-controlled hydrostatic transmission (K46)

STARTING AT:
\$2,899*



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- 23 HP^{††} Kawasaki® FR691V engine
- 50" AeroForce™ fabricated steel mowing deck
- Dual Hydro-Gear® EZT-2200™ transmission
- 2" x 2" tubular steel frame for enhanced durability

STARTING AT:
\$3,199*

FOR FULL PRODUCT SPECS **Cub Cadet®** VISIT CUBCADET.COM

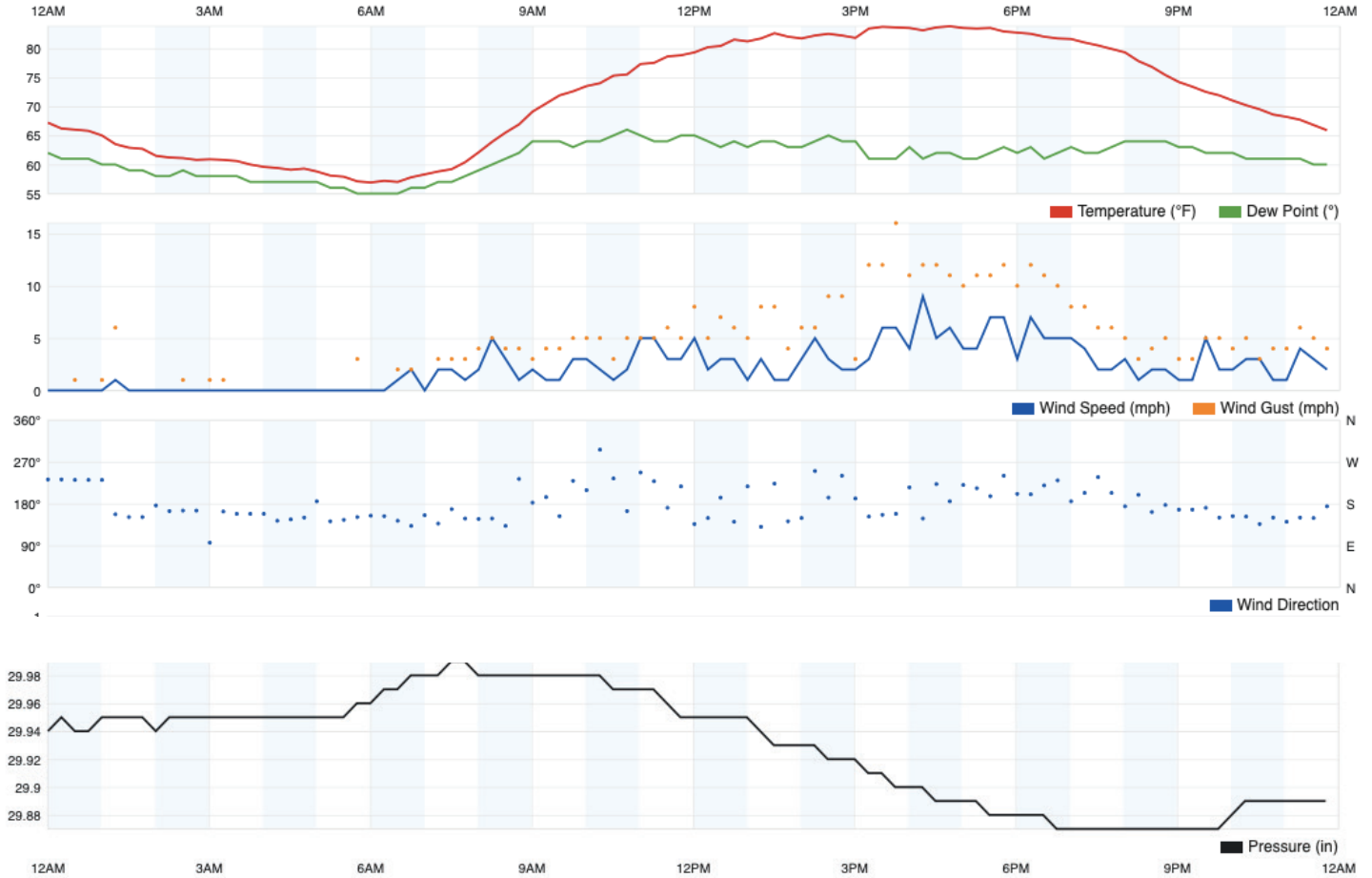
HARRY IMPLEMENT INC.
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*Product Price – Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes, freight, setup and handling charges may be additional and may vary. Models subject to limited availability. Specifications and programs are subject to 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



Groton Daily Independent

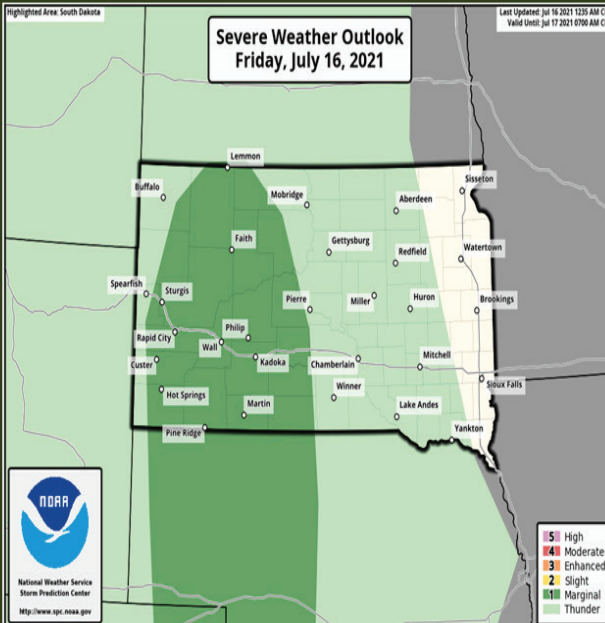
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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Sunny	Chance T-storms	Mostly Sunny
High: 88 °F	Low: 63 °F	High: 88 °F	Low: 65 °F	High: 86 °F



Highlighted Area: South Dakota

Severe Weather Outlook Friday, July 16, 2021



Last Updated: Jul 16, 2021 12:30 AM CDT
Valid Until: Jul 17, 2021 07:00 AM CDT

5 High


4 Moderate

3 Enhanced

2 Slight




1 Marginal


Thunder

 National Weather Service
Storm Prediction Center
<http://www.spc.noaa.gov>

Isolated showers and thunderstorms mainly along and west of the Missouri River Valley later today into early Saturday.

3 Day Forecast

Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		
82-92°	83-93°	82-93°



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
7/16/2021 4:49 AM

Temperatures will remain within a few degrees of mid-July normals today and through the upcoming weekend. Parts of the area, especially western and central South Dakota will see a chance for a shower or thunderstorm the next couple days. This activity looks to be more widely scattered, if not isolated today and tonight with perhaps a bit better chance Saturday night into Sunday morning. A couple of strong to severe storms will be possible, but no widespread severe weather is expected.

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Today in Weather History

July 16, 1993: Thunderstorms, dumping two to seven inches of rain caused flooding problems in north-eastern South Dakota. Several dams and many roads were washed out. Most of the damage was in Marshall County. Six families were evacuated about six miles southeast of Britton as two private earthen dams broke. Winds, as high as 70 mph were also reported in a couple of locations in Marshall County. The torrential rains resulted in flooded farmland, roads, and basements in northeast South Dakota through July 21st. In Groton and Claremont at least 90 percent of the homes had water in the basements. Some storm total rainfall amounts include 3.20 inches in Leola; 3.14 in Ipswich; 3.13 in Britton; and 2.77 in Eureka.

July 16, 2001: Very heavy rains of 3 to 7 inches fell across north central Corson County causing flash flooding. Oak Creek along with several other streams washed out several roads and damaged some fences from Watauga to McIntosh to McLaughlin and north. Travel stopped for a while on the Highway north of McLaughlin.

1920 - A severe hailstorm over parts of Antelope and Boone counties in Nebraska stripped trees of bark and foliage, ruined roofs, and broke nearly every window facing north. (The Weather Channel)

1946 - The temperature at Medford, OR, soared to an all-time high of 115 degrees to begin a two week heat wave. During that Oregon heat wave the mercury hit 100 degrees at Sexton Summit for the only time in forty years of records. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1975 - An early afternoon thunderstorm raked the east side of Tucson, AZ, with gale force winds, heavy rain, and numerous lightning strikes. A thirteen year old boy was swept through a forty foot long culvert by raging waters before being rescued. (The Weather Channel)

1979: The most damaging tornado in Wyoming history touched down 3 miles west-northwest of the Cheyenne airport. This strong tornado moved east or east-southeast across the northern part of Cheyenne, causing \$22 million in damage and one fatality. 140 houses and 17 trailers were destroyed. 325 other homes were damaged. Four C-130 aircraft and National Guard equipment sustained \$12 million damage. Municipal hangars and buildings suffered \$10 million in losses.

1987 - Showers and thundestorms in the southwestern U.S. ended a record string of thirty-nine consecutive days of 100 degree heat at Tucson, AZ. A thunderstorm at Bullhead City, AZ, produced wind gusts to 70 mph reducing the visibility to near zero in blowing dust. Southerly winds gusting to 40 mph pushed temperature readings above 100 degrees in the Northern Plains. Rapid City, SD, reported a record high of 106 degrees, following a record low of 39 degrees just three days earlier. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thirty-seven cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Highs of 96 degrees at Bluefield, WV, and 104 degrees at Charleston WV were all-time records, and afternoon highs of 98 degrees at Binghamton, NY, 99 degrees at Elkins, WV, and 103 degrees at Pittsburgh PA, tied all-time records. Highs of 104 degrees at Baltimore, MD, and 105 degrees at Parkersburg WV were records for July, and Beckley, WV, equalled their record for July with a high of 94 degrees. Martinsburg, WV, was the hot spot in the nation with a reading of 107 degrees. Afternoon and evening thunderstorms raked the northeastern U.S. with large hail and damaging winds. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms developing along a stationary front drenched the Middle Atlantic Coast States with heavy rain, causing flooding in some areas. More than five inches of rain was reported near Madison and Ferncliff, VA. Hot weather prevailed in Texas. San Angelo reported a record high of 106 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

2009: A hailstone, 3.3 inches in diameter, 6.8 inches circumference, and weighing 2.1 ounces fell in Westford, Vermont. This hailstone is the largest ever found in Vermont.

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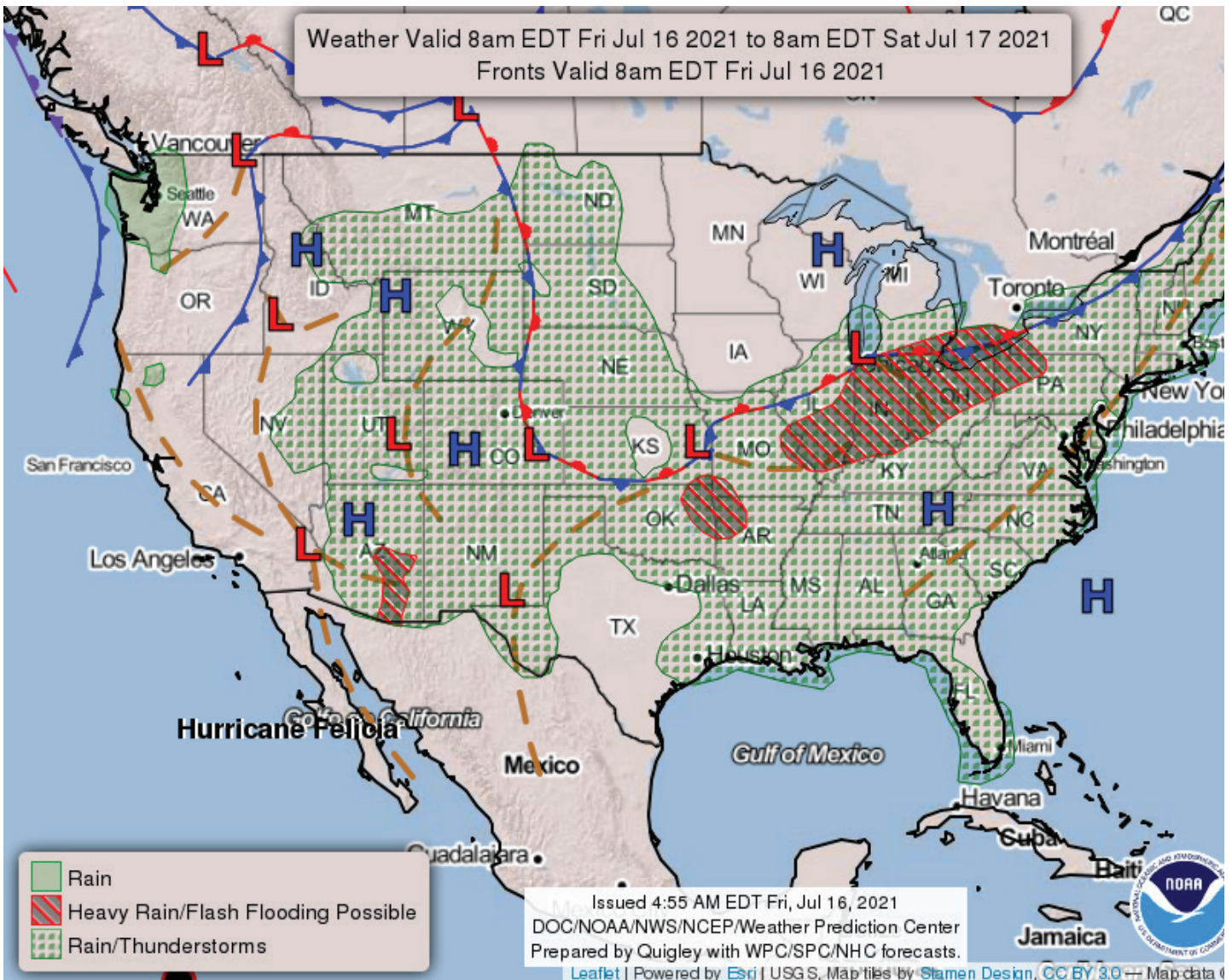
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 83.8 °F
Low Temp: 56.9 °F
Wind: 16 mph
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 112° in 1936
Record Low: 42° in 1976
Average High: 85°F
Average Low: 60°F
Average Precip in July.: 1.69
Precip to date in July.: 1.73
Average Precip to date: 12.70
Precip Year to Date: 6.48
Sunset Tonight: 9:18 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:02 a.m.



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PASS IT ON!

"How many more times do I have to tell you before you remember what I'm trying to teach you?" asked Jim's Dad.

"Probably as many times as it takes for me to see what's in it for me," answered Jim.

Most of us have been involved in similar "discussions." Some "lessons" are more difficult to learn than others if we see no immediate benefit for ourselves.

So it was with the children of Israel. Psalm 78 begins with a plea from God: "Oh my people, hear my teaching!" Notice that God is pleading with His people to hear Him. Notice, also, the difference between listening and hearing. Some listen but do not want to hear some messages. So God emphasized that fact: "listen to the words of my mouth."

Of course we want to know what He means when He asks us to "listen to the words of my mouth."

Then, as now, many only listen to any speaker who has something to say that pleases them – even God. If we do not believe that the words of the speaker – even God – will benefit us personally and tangibly we will not hear their voice. Sadly, what was true then is true today.

God spoke to the Israelites many times on many different occasions through many different individuals and unexpected miracles. Yet, His message did not penetrate into the depth of their hearts and make a lasting impression in their lives. They forgot the importance of obedience and the requirement to remain faithful,

If we listen carefully, remain faithful, and obey His Word, He will reward us.

Prayer: We pray, Father, for ears that listen for Your voice, hearts that are open to follow Your ways, so that our lives will reflect obedience to Your Word. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. Psalm 78:1-2

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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

Survey shows: Growth continues in rural parts of 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states are seeing continued economic growth in the region, according to a new monthly survey of bankers in the region, even as nonfarm jobs in most of those states remained below pre-pandemic levels.

The overall Rural Mainstreet economic index dropped from June's 70.0 to a still-strong 65.6 in July. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

The survey's new hiring index decreased to 67.6 in July from 71.7 in June. The Bureau of Labor Statistics showed nonfarm jobs across the region came in at 55,000 fewer — or 1.3% less — than before the COVID-19 pandemic began last year, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey. But three states — Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota — reported nonfarm employment levels above pre-pandemic levels.

"Even in small communities like Eldora, the local businesses are having trouble finding adequate staffing," said James Brown, CEO of Hardin County Savings Bank in Eldora, Iowa.

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

Bankers were less optimistic about the economy over the next six months than the previous month, with July's confidence index slipping to 65.6 from June's 71.7.

Nearly half of bankers surveyed reported damaging drought conditions for farmers in their area.

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

Noem fires prison warden, deputy following harassment claim

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Thursday fired the warden and deputy warden of the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls, following an investigation into an anonymous complaint that alleged supervising corrections officers regularly sexually harassed their fellow employees.

The governor had suspended Darin Young, the former warden, on Tuesday, along with Secretary of Corrections Mike Leidholt. Noem said Thursday she has also suspended Stefany Bawek, who was the director of a prison work program called Pheasantland Industries.

The anonymous complaint released by Noem's office alleges that supervising corrections officers at the prison were allowed to sexually harass employees and that attempts to report the harassment were ignored. The complaint states that schedules at the prison were adjusted so the officers could "work in the same vicinities as their interest/victims" and that employees who did not give in to the harassment were made to "suffer by being placed in less desirable posts."

Requests for comment left at phone numbers listed for Young, Jennifer Dreiske, the former deputy warden, and Bawek were not immediately returned.

The complaint further alleges that employee morale was low amid wages that lagged behind other industries, corrections officers did not have body armor that was "up to standards," and that promotions were based on personal connections. The organization that represents state employees, the South Dakota State Employees Organization, has said there have been widespread complaints of low employee morale at the prison since March.

Noem's statement said the investigation into the complaint is continuing.

EXPLAINER: South Dakota has \$315M to aid struggling renters

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A federal freeze on most evictions that was enacted last year is scheduled

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to expire July 31, after the Biden administration extended the date by a month. The moratorium, put in place by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in September, has been the only tool keeping millions of tenants in their homes. Many of them lost jobs during the coronavirus pandemic and have fallen months behind on their rent.

Landlords successfully challenged the order in court, arguing that they also had bills to pay. They pointed out that tenants could access more than \$45 billion in federal money set aside to help pay rents and related expenses.

Advocates for tenants say the distribution of the money has been slow and that more time is needed to distribute it and repay landlords. Without an extension, they feared a spike in evictions and lawsuits seeking to boot out tenants who are behind on their rent.

As of June 7, roughly 3.2 million people in the U.S. said they would face eviction within the next two months, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. The survey measures the social and economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic every two weeks through online responses from a representative sample of U.S. households.

Here's the situation in South Dakota:

WHAT'S THE STATUS OF EVICTION MORATORIUMS IN THE STATE?

South Dakota does not have its own eviction moratorium, leaving only the CDC moratorium.

WHAT'S BEING DONE TO HELP PEOPLE FACING EVICTION?

South Dakota has received \$360 million in federal funds to help tenants with outstanding rent, utility payments and other expenses. The money can go toward 15 months of rent and other expenses, including internet access. Renters who pay 30% of their income toward rent and earn 80% or less of their area's median income qualify.

So far, only a small fraction of the funds have been sent to renters. The South Dakota Housing Development Authority, which oversees the funds, estimates that it has distributed about \$10.7 million to 1,475 tenants.

Brent Thompson, the executive director of East River Legal Services, said there is a lack of awareness about the federal assistance available for renters facing evictions.

HOW ARE THE COURTS HANDLING EVICTION ACTIONS?

Thompson said during the CDC moratorium that courts have halted many eviction actions or landlords have decided not to file them.

Eviction filings have dipped during the pandemic. According to the state court system, evictions decreased by about 10% after the pandemic hit in March 2020. This year, evictions filings have been even lower, decreasing by about 22% from pre-pandemic levels.

HOW AFFORDABLE ARE THE STATE'S MAJOR RENTAL MARKETS?

South Dakota's rental housing market has tightened, partly due to the strong economy and a shortage of affordable housing. From 2015 through 2020, rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Sioux Falls, the state's largest city, increased by 17%, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The state's vacancy rate was about 7% before the pandemic, which roughly matched the national average.

Data on rental housing during the pandemic hasn't been released yet. But lawmakers have sounded the alarm about a run on affordable housing during the pandemic and formed a special committee to try to find solutions to the problem. Republican Rep. Roger Chase, who also works as a realtor, said this month that the housing market is as tight as he's seen in over 30 years.

ARE EVICTIONS EXPECTED TO CREATE A SURGE IN HOMELESSNESS?

It's hard to say how much homelessness will increase in South Dakota. Thompson, of East River Legal Services, expects evictions and eviction-related lawsuits to spike after the CDC's moratorium ends. One indication of the scope of the problem is census data estimating that there are 21,500 adults in the state who are not confident they will be able to pay next month's rent.

Thompson feared the moratorium's end would create a "crisis event" in evictions, and his legal clinic is bracing for a surge in people facing evictions or owing multiple months of rent.

"Housing was already a very serious problem and you are adding literally a natural disaster that is a

worldwide pandemic," he said. "It's just the perfect storm."

Pope reverses Benedict, reimposes restrictions on Latin Mass

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis cracked down Friday on the spread of the old Latin Mass, reversing one of Pope Benedict XVI's signature decisions in a major challenge to traditionalist Catholics who immediately decried it as an attack on them and the ancient liturgy.

Francis reimposed restrictions on celebrating the Latin Mass that Benedict relaxed in 2007. The pontiff said he was taking action because Benedict's reform had become a source of division in the church and been used as a tool by Catholics opposed to the Second Vatican Council, the 1960s meetings that modernized the liturgy.

Francis issued a new law requiring individual bishops to approve celebrations of the old Mass, also called the Tridentine Mass, and requiring newly ordained priests to receive explicit permission to celebrate it from their bishops in consultation with the Vatican.

Under the new law, bishops must also determine if the current groups of faithful attached to the old Mass accept Vatican II, which allowed for Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin. These groups can no longer use regular parishes for their Masses; instead, bishops must find an alternate location for them.

In addition, Francis said bishops are no longer allowed to authorize the formation of any new pro-Latin Mass groups in their dioceses.

Francis said he was taking action to promote unity and heal divisions within the church that had grown since Benedict's 2007 document, *Summorum Pontificum*, relaxed the restrictions on celebrating the old Mass. He said he based his decision on a 2020 Vatican survey of all the world's bishops, whose "responses reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me, and persuades me of the need to intervene."

The pope's rollback immediately created an uproar among traditionalists already opposed to Francis' more progressive bent and still nostalgic for Benedict's doctrinaire papacy.

"This is an extremely disappointing document which entirely undoes the legal provisions," of Benedict's 2007 document, said Joseph Shaw, chairman of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales.

While Latin celebrations can continue, "the presumption is consistently against them: bishops are being invited to close them down," Shaw said, adding that the requirement for Latin Masses to be held outside a parish was "unworkable" in practical terms.

"This is an extraordinary rejection of the hard work for the church and the loyalty to the hierarchy which has characterized the movement for the Traditional Mass for many years, which I fear will foster a sense of alienation among those attached to the Church's ancient liturgy," he said in an email.

Benedict had issued his document in a bid to reach out to a breakaway, schismatic group that celebrates the Latin Mass, the Society of St. Pius X, and which had split from Rome over the modernizing reforms of Vatican II.

But Francis said Benedict's effort to foster unity had essentially backfired.

The opportunity offered by Benedict, the pope said in a letter to bishops accompanying the new law, was instead "exploited to widen the gaps, reinforce the divergences, and encourage disagreements that injure the Church, block her path, and expose her to the peril of division."

Francis said he was "saddened" that the use of the old Mass "is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the Tradition and the 'true Church.'"

Traditionalists and Catholics attached to the old liturgy were devastated. Some of these Catholics already were among Francis' fiercest critics, with some accusing him of heresy for having, for example, opened the door to letting divorced and civilly remarried Catholics have Communion.

Rorate Caeli, a popular traditionalist blog, said Francis' "attack" was the strongest rebuke of a pope against his predecessors in living memory.

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"Shocking, and terrifying," the group tweeted. "Francis HATES US. Francis HATES Tradition. Francis HATES all that is good and beautiful."

Nick Donnelly, a tradition-minded deacon active on social media, termed Francis' new law "the wither & die" law.

"Bergoglio's attack on the Mass of the Ages is much worse than feared," he tweeted, referring to Francis, who was born as Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

Cardinals who are critics of Francis did not immediately comment on the law. In recent days, however, Cardinal Robert Sarah, the retired head of the Vatican's liturgy office and a fierce supporter of the old liturgy, sent a series of preemptive tweets insisting on the "irreversible" reform that Benedict had ushered in. Sarah featured a photo of the retired pope in his ermine-laced red velvet cape.

Reuters photographer killed as Afghan forces fight Taliban

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Afghan government forces battled Friday to retake a border crossing with Pakistan from Taliban insurgents, and the Reuters news agency said one of its photographers was killed in the area.

The Taliban had overrun the Spin Boldak crossing earlier in the week. On Friday, witnesses on the Pakistan side of the border said they saw intense fighting and reported seeing bodies.

Reuters said Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Danish Siddiqui, who was embedded with the Afghan special forces, was killed as the commando unit sought to recapture Spin Boldak.

The agency said Siddiqui and a senior Afghan officer were killed in what they described as Taliban crossfire. "We are urgently seeking more information, working with authorities in the region," Reuters President Michael Friedenber and Editor-in-Chief Alessandra Galloni said in a statement.

Siddiqui was an Indian national. Afghanistan's ambassador to India, Farid Mamundzay, tweeted his condolences.

The Taliban have overrun dozens of districts in Afghanistan since the start of the final phase of the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops, after a 20-year military presence. The U.S. says its withdrawal is 95 percent complete.

The fighting at Spin Boldak was confirmed by Fawad Aman, Afghanistan's deputy defense ministry spokesman. The Associated Press also obtained footage of fighters, apparently Taliban, receiving treatment in a hospital in the Pakistani border town of Chaman.

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are fraught with suspicion. Afghanistan routinely accuses Pakistan of giving safe haven to Afghan Taliban, whose leadership is headquartered in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan provincial capital of Quetta. The Chaman border crossing opposite Spin Boldak is also in Baluchistan province.

Afghanistan and the United States have criticized Pakistan in the past for allowing Taliban fighters to cross into Pakistan to receive medical treatment. Nearly 2 million Afghan refugees live in Pakistan, having fled decades of war in their homeland.

Pakistan has used its influence over the Taliban to press the religious movement into talks with the U.S. and the Afghan government.

In the latest round of accusations, Afghanistan's vice-president, Amrullah Saleh, tweeted that Pakistan's air force warned the Afghan army and air force against trying to dislodge Taliban from Spin Boldak, an accusation Pakistan dismissed.

In response, Pakistan issued a statement saying 40 Afghan soldiers slipped across the border to Pakistan during the Taliban takeover of the crossing earlier this week.

The soldiers were returned to Afghanistan "with respect and dignity," said the statement, which added that Pakistan also offered Afghanistan's security force any logistical support it needed.

Greenland suspends oil exploration because of climate change

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — The left-leaning government of Greenland has decided to suspend all

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oil exploration off the world's largest island, calling it is "a natural step" because the Arctic government "takes the climate crisis seriously."

No oil has been found yet around Greenland, but officials there had seen potentially vast reserves as a way to help Greenlanders realize their long-held dream of independence from Denmark by cutting the annual subsidy of 3.4 billion kroner (\$540 million) the Danish territory receives.

Global warming means that retreating ice could uncover potential oil and mineral resources which, if successfully tapped, could dramatically change the fortunes of the semiautonomous territory of 57,000 people.

"The future does not lie in oil. The future belongs to renewable energy, and in that respect we have much more to gain," the Greenland government said in a statement. The government said it "wants to take co-responsibility for combating the global climate crisis."

The decision was made June 24 but made public Thursday.

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates there could be 17.5 billion undiscovered barrels of oil and 148 trillion cubic feet of natural gas off Greenland, although the island's remote location and harsh weather have limited exploration.

When the current government, led by the Inuit Ataqatigiit party since an April's parliamentary election, it immediately began to deliver on election promises and stopped plans for uranium mining in southern Greenland.

Greenland still has four active hydrocarbon exploration licenses, which it is obliged to maintain as long as the licensees are actively exploring. They are held by two small companies.

The government's decision to stop oil exploration was welcomed by environmental group Greenpeace, which called the decision "fantastic."

"And my understanding is that the licenses that are left have very limited potential," Mads Flarup Christensen, Greenpeace Nordic's general secretary, told weekly Danish tech-magazine Ingenioeren.

Denmark decides foreign, defense and security policy, and supports Greenland with the annual grant that accounts for about two-thirds of the Arctic island's economy.

Europe floods: Death toll over 110 as rescues continue

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — At least 110 people have died in devastating floods across parts of western Germany and Belgium, officials said Friday, as rescue operations and the search for hundreds still unaccounted for continued.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said he was "stunned" by the devastation caused by the flooding and pledged support to the families of those killed and to cities and towns facing significant damage.

"In the hour of need, our country stands together," Steinmeier said in a statement Friday afternoon. "It's important that we show solidarity for those from whom the flood has taken everything."

Authorities in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate said 60 people had died there, including at least nine residents of an assisted living facility for people with disabilities. In neighboring North Rhine-Westphalia state officials put the death toll at 43, but warned that the figure could rise further.

Rescuers were rushing Friday to help people trapped in their homes in the town of Erftstadt, southwest of Cologne. Regional authorities said several people had died after their houses collapsed due to subsidence, and aerial pictures showed what appeared to be a massive sinkhole.

"We managed to get 50 people out of their houses last night," said Frank Rock, the head of the county administration. "We know of 15 people who still need to be rescued."

Speaking to German broadcaster n-tv, Rock said that authorities had no precise number yet for how many had died.

"One has to assume that under the circumstances some people didn't manage to escape," he said.

Authorities said late Thursday that about 1,300 people in Germany were still listed missing, but cautioned that the high figure could be due to duplication of data and difficulties reaching people because of disrupted roads and phone connections.

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In a provisional tally, the Belgian death toll rose to 12, with 5 people still missing, local authorities and media report early Friday.

The flash floods this week followed days of heavy rainfall which turned streams and streets into raging torrents that swept away cars and caused houses to collapse across the region.

The governor of North Rhine-Westphalia state, Armin Laschet, has called an emergency Cabinet meeting Friday. The 60-year-old's handling of the flood disaster is widely seen as a test for his ambitions to succeed Merkel as chancellor in Germany's national election on Sept. 26.

Steinmeier called for greater efforts to combat global warming.

"Only if we decisively take up the fight against climate change will we be able to limit the extreme weather conditions we are now experiencing," he said.

Experts say such disasters could become more common due to climate change.

"Some parts of Western Europe ... received up to two months of rainfall in the space of two days. What made it worse is that the soils were already saturated by previous rainfall," said Clare Nullis, spokesperson for the World Meteorological Organization.

It was too soon to blame the floods and preceding heat wave on global warming rising global temperatures, she said, but added: "Climate change is already increasing the frequency of extreme events. And many single events have been shown to be made worse by global warming."

Malu Dreyer, the governor of Rhineland-Palatinate state, said the disaster showed the need to speed up efforts to curb global warming.

"Climate change isn't abstract anymore. We are experiencing it up close and painfully," she told the Funke media group.

She accused the Laschet and Merkel's center-right Union bloc of hindering efforts to achieve greater greenhouse gas reductions in Germany, Europe's biggest economy and a major emitter of planet-warming gases.

Thousands of people remain homeless after their houses were destroyed or deemed at-risk by authorities, including several villages around the Steinbach reservoir that experts say could collapse under the weight of the floods.

Defense Ministry spokesman Arne Collatz said the German military had deployed over 850 troops as of Friday morning, but the number is "rising significantly because the need is growing." He said the ministry had triggered a "military disaster alarm," a technical move that essentially decentralizes decisions on using equipment to commanders on the ground.

Across the border in Belgium, most of the drowned were found around Liege, where the rains hit hardest. Skies were largely overcast in eastern Belgium, with hopes rising that the worst of the calamity was over.

Italy sent a team of civil protection officials and firefighters, as well as rescue dinghies, to Belgium to help in the search for missing people from the devastating floods.

The firefighters tweeted a photo of one team working in Tilly, south of Liege, to help evacuate residents of a home who were trapped by the rising waters.

In the southern Dutch province of Limburg, which also has been hit hard by flooding, troops piled sandbags to strengthen a 1.1 kilometer (0.7 miles) stretch of dike along the Maas river and police helped evacuate some low-lying neighborhoods.

Caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Thursday night that the government was officially declaring flood-hit regions a disaster area, meaning businesses and residents are eligible for compensation for damage.

Dutch King Willem-Alexander visited the region Thursday night and called the scenes "heart-breaking."

Meanwhile, sustained rainfall in Switzerland has caused several rivers and lakes to break their banks. Public broadcaster SRF reported that a flash flood swept away cars, flooded basements and destroyed small bridges in the northern villages of Schleithem und Beggingen late Thursday.

Erik Schulz, the mayor of the hard-hit German city of Hagen, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) northeast of Cologne, said there had been a wave of solidarity from other regions and ordinary citizens to help those affected by the devastating floods.

"We have many, many citizens saying 'I can offer a place to stay, where can I go to help, where can I

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registered, where can I bring my shovel and bucket?," he told n-tv. "The city is standing together and you can feel that."

Eiffel Tower reopens; COVID passes required as of next week

PARIS (AP) — The Eiffel Tower is reopening Friday for the first time in nine months even though the French government introduced new virus rules this week aimed at taming the fast-spreading delta variant.

The "Iron Lady" of Paris was ordered shut in October as France battled its second virus surge of the pandemic. The tower remained shut for renovations even after most of France's major tourist draws reopened last month.

Its reopening comes four days after President Emmanuel Macron announced new measures aimed at warding off a fourth surge, including mandatory vaccinations for health workers and mandatory COVID-19 passes to enter restaurants and venues such as the Eiffel Tower.

Starting Wednesday, all visitors to the monument over age 18 will need to show a pass proving they've been fully vaccinated, had a negative virus test or recently recovered from COVID-19.

The number of daily visitors to the tower will be limited to 10,000 a day instead of 25,000.

France has opened to international tourists this summer, but the rules vary widely depending on which country they are coming from. The number of visitors has been nowhere near normal levels given continued border restrictions and virus risks.

IOC's Bach gets mixed reaction in one-day visit to Hiroshima

By HARUKA NUGA and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

HIROSHIMA, Japan (AP) — IOC President Thomas Bach got a mixed reception in his visit on Friday to Hiroshima to mark the first day of the so-called Olympic Truce.

Such a one-day visit by a dignitary would ordinarily be routine, but the Olympics are set to open next week with Tokyo under a state of emergency and with a substantial part of the population opposed to the Games being held during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bach's vice president John Coates also appeared Friday in Nagasaki, the second city that was hit by an American atomic bomb in 1945.

Bach and Coates have been meeting daily with Japanese officials from Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, repeating their message that the Olympics will be "safe and secure." He was accompanied to Hiroshima by Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee.

The Olympics and Paralympic involve 15,400 athletes and tens of thousands of others entering Japan, including media, broadcasters, officials, and judges and others.

The Olympics, already delayed by 12 months because of the pandemic, will be held with virtually no fans. Fans from abroad were banned several months ago, and last week Tokyo and three neighboring prefectures banned all local fans. A few outlying venues are expected to allow a smattering of fans.

Japan's Kyodo news agency reported earlier this week that Bach asked Suga about the possibility of having some fans if conditions improve.

New COVID-19 cases on Friday in Tokyo were reported at 1,271. They were 822 a week ago, and it marks the 27th straight day that cases were higher than a week previous. New cases on Thursday were reported at 1,308, which was the highest in six months.

Bach has said there is "zero" risk of athletes in the Olympic Village on Tokyo Bay passing on the virus to Japanese or other residents of the village.

A group of 11 anti-Olympic and pacifists groups submitted a letter to the city earlier this week opposing Bach's visit. Separately, an online petition opposing the visit garnered 70,000 signatures.

Bach laid a wreath and observed a minute of silence in the rain in front of the Peace Memorial Park cenotaph. Faint voices of protesters, who were kept at a distance, could be heard shouting "go home Bach" and "you're not welcome here."

Dozens of protesters were seen near the Atomic Bomb Dome with signs that read "Cancel The Olympics"

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and "No Bach."

"You should understand you are not welcome here," one protester said, speaking into a microphone.

"The COVID-19 situation is getting worse, it hasn't come to an end, and I wonder why this has to go ahead," said Sayuri Yamada, who identified herself as a medical worker. She was not among the protesters.

She said she did not oppose Bach's visit, but raised questions about running unnecessary risks for the Olympics.

"It's not that I don't want him to come absolutely," she said. "But rather, thinking about the safety of people, including the athletes, my opinion is like he doesn't have to do this at a time when the risk is high."

Takayoshi Kayano, who said he was an office worker, respected Bach's right to visit but raised other issues.

"I think it's fine to host the Olympics. But the no-spectator policy is a bit disappointing," he said. "But to me, I feel the IOC seems to be only focused on making money."

The official cost of the Tokyo Olympics is \$15.4 billion, although government auditors have suggested it's much larger. All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

As Bach was in Hiroshima, a Ugandan athlete was reported missing by local officials.

The 20-year-old man was training as part of the nine-member Ugandan team in Izumisano, Osaka prefecture, city officials said.

Teammates realized the athlete was absent around noon Friday when his saliva test sample was not delivered and they found his hotel room empty, city officials said. There was no training Friday morning and he was last seen in his room in the early hours of Friday.

Top Senate Dem sets infrastructure vote, pressures lawmakers

By KEVIN FREKING and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is pressuring lawmakers to reach agreement by next week on a pair of massive domestic spending measures, signaling Democrats' desire to push ahead aggressively on President Joe Biden's multitrillion-dollar agenda.

Schumer, D-N.Y., said Thursday he was scheduling a procedural vote for next Wednesday to begin debate on a still-evolving bipartisan infrastructure bill. Senators from both parties, bargaining for weeks, have struggled to reach final agreement on a \$1 trillion package of highway, water systems and other public works projects.

Schumer said he also wanted Democratic senators to reach agreement among themselves by then on specific details of a separate 10-year budget blueprint that envisions \$3.5 trillion in spending for climate change, education, an expansion of Medicare and more.

"The time has come to make progress. And we will. We must," Schumer said on the Senate floor.

The majority leader's plans were an attempt to push lawmakers to work out differences so Democrats can advance their plans to fortify the economy for the long term and help lower-earning and middle-class families while imposing higher taxes on wealthy people and large corporations.

"There may be some last-minute discussion as to who, what mechanism is used to pay for each of these items," Biden said of the two measures during a White House press conference Thursday. "But I believe we will get it done."

Lawmakers working on the smaller infrastructure package met Thursday to discuss the details, but chafed at Schumer's deadline. They indicated that substantial hurdles remain, including how to pay for the nearly \$579 billion in new spending over five years that they agreed to with the White House. The rest of the money in the infrastructure proposal is a renewal of existing programs.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., said senators differed over whether Schumer's timeline was helping the bipartisan effort. Warner said the White House is trying to work with senators on ways to pay for the new spending without raising corporate taxes or fees such as the federal gas tax.

"We're still short on pay-fors," said Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D.

It will take 60 votes to start debating the infrastructure measure because Republicans are expected to use a filibuster — procedural delays — to try killing it.

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That means the chamber's 50 Democrats will need support from at least 10 Republicans. Democratic leaders hope a bipartisan deal on the widely popular projects on roads and other projects would attract enough Republicans to succeed. Yet bargainers have faced major hang-ups over which revenues they would raise to finance the infrastructure legislation.

One of the biggest revenue-raisers, bolstering IRS enforcement to bring in an estimated \$100 billion over 10 years, has been a major discussion point in negotiations. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said the group was looking at alternative measures.

Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, predicted lawmakers will be able to craft a final bill, although he was unsure they will meet "anybody's arbitrary deadline."

"I appreciate the fact that the majority leader wants to have a vote as soon as possible. I don't disagree with that, but soon as possible means when it's ready," Portman said.

Meanwhile, Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., want Congress to approve a \$3.5 trillion budget resolution before lawmakers begin a summer recess next month. Approval of that measure is crucial for Democrats because it would protect a subsequent bill actually providing that money for specific programs, probably this fall, from more GOP filibusters, meaning Democrats could pass it on their own.

The Democrats' accord this week 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 it's 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.

Hungary: Writers, bookstores brace for ban on LGBT content

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Some bookstores in Hungary placed notices at their entrances this week telling customers that they sell "non-traditional content." The signs went up in response to a new law that prohibits "depicting or promoting" homosexuality and gender transitions in material accessible to children.

While some writers, publishers and booksellers say the law curtails free thought and expression in Hungary, the country's second-largest bookstore chain, Lira Konyv, posted the advisory notices to be safe. The new prohibition took effect last week, but the government has not issued official guidance on how or to whom it will be applied and enforced.

"The word 'depicts' is so general that it could include anything. It could apply to Shakespeare's sonnets or Sappho's poems, because those depict homosexuality," Krisztian Nyary, the creative director for Lira Konyv, said of the legislation passed by Hungary's parliament last month.

The law, which also prohibits LGBT content in school education programs, has many in Hungary's literary community puzzled, if not on edge, unsure if they would face prosecution if minors end up with books that contain plots, characters or information discussing sexual orientation or gender identity.

Hungary's populist government insists that the law, part of a broader statute that also increases criminal penalties for pedophilia and creates a searchable database of sex offenders, is necessary to protect children.

But critics, including high-ranking European Union officials, say the measure conflates LGBT people with pedophiles and is another example of Hungarian government policies and rhetoric that marginalize individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.

Last week, a government office in the capital of Budapest announced it had fined Lira Konyv \$830 for failing to clearly label a children's book that depicts families headed by same-sex parents.

The office said the bookstore broke consumer protection rules by failing to indicate that the book contained "content which deviates from the norm."

The fine, Nyary said, set a precedent for further potential sanctions against publishers and booksellers. With the threat of further penalties looming, all of Lira Konyv's roughly 90 bookstores will now carry

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customer warnings that read, "This store sells books with non-traditional content."

Noemi Kiss, the author of several novellas that address contemporary social problems and feature some characters that are not straight or whose gender identity does not match the one they were assigned at birth, said she supports parts of the law that are intended to stop pedophilia and to protect children from pornographic content.

But she called making literature off-limits based on whether it contains LGBT themes "absurd" and "a limitation of freedom of opinion and expression."

"Based on what will writers be categorized? If (an author) writes a gay story, will they be completely discredited, or shall we completely rewrite all of world literature?" Kiss said.

The EU's executive commission launched two legal actions against Hungary on Thursday over the new law and in response to earlier labeling requirements for children's books that "display patterns of behavior that differ from traditional gender roles" — though authorities did not make clear what non-traditional gender roles entail.

"Hungary restricts the freedom of expression of authors and book publishers, and discriminates on grounds of sexual orientation in an unjustified way," the European Commission said in a statement, adding that the government had not provided "any justification as to why exposure of children to LGBTIQ content would be detrimental to their well-being."

Along with outlawing LGBT content for children, the law also prohibits depicting "sexuality for its own sake" to young audiences - a proscription that Nyary said could arguably apply to the majority of titles Lira Konyv sells.

"If someone wanted to, they could report three-quarters of world literature based on this definition," he said.

Hungary's government did not respond to a request for comment.

Nyary says he is compiling an anthology of classic literature that contain LGBT themes. The collection of stories, poetry and plays will include writings by Homer, Shakespeare and Sappho, among others — and will come marked with an 18+ sticker to indicate only adults should read it.

"We want to show what this law prohibits young people from accessing," Nyary said.

Mark Mezei, a novelist in Budapest who has published a book featuring a lesbian relationship, says that while he believes established authors will not practice self-censorship, the new law could "knock the pen out of the hands" of young wordsmiths and stunt a new generation of Hungarian writers.

"If they find that they are facing huge resistance to their early work, it can certainly set them back in the creative process or even push them away from their calling," he said.

Mezei said he is likely to simply ignore the law, insisting that authors must "create and live autonomously."

"I think interfering in people's private lives is one of the attributes of a governing power. But the really good works are born one way or another," he said. "They'll be on the shelves of libraries when the current powers are just a footnote in the pages of history books."

Freedom or folly? UK's end to mandatory masks sows confusion

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For many, it's a common courtesy or a sensible precaution. For others, it's an imposition, a daily irritation.

The face mask — a highly charged source of debate, confusion and anger around the world during the coronavirus pandemic — is now dividing people as the crisis eases.

Britain is bracing for acrimony on Monday, when the government lifts a legal requirement to wear face coverings in most indoor settings, including shops, trains, buses and subways. Donning a mask in many places will stop being an order and become a request.

Already, people are split about how to respond.

"I'm glad," said London café owner Hatice Kucuk. "I don't think they really help much."

But Lucy Heath, a filmmaker, said she would prefer to see masks remain mandatory on the subway and

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in supermarkets.

"I just think vulnerable people will feel that they don't want to venture out," she said.

The end of many pandemic restrictions next week — once touted in British newspapers as "freedom day" — comes as the U.K. faces soaring coronavirus cases and rising deaths, despite an inoculation program that has given two-thirds of adults both doses of vaccine.

This week Britain recorded more than 40,000 cases in one day for the first time in six months. Globally, the World Health Organization says cases and deaths are climbing after a period of decline, spurred by the more contagious delta variant. Last week there were nearly 3 million new infections and more than 55,000 lives lost around the world.

Against that backdrop, British politicians' talk of freedom has been replaced with words of caution.

"This pandemic is not over," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said this week. "We cannot simply revert instantly from Monday the 19th of July to life as it was before COVID."

So while people no longer have to wear masks, they're being told that they should.

The government says it "expects and recommends" masks to be worn by workers and customers in crowded, enclosed spaces such as shops. London's mayor says masks will continue to be required on the city's public transit system, and the National Health Service will insist on them in hospitals. And while the rules are changing in England, masks will still be mandatory in Scotland and Wales, which make their own health regulations.

Opposition politicians and some doctors have urged the government not to remove the mask mandate, while businesses and unions worry the change from mandatory to optional is a recipe for chaos.

"It is a real mess," said Paddy Lillis, general secretary of retail workers union USDAW. "Protection for retail workers through wearing face coverings and maintaining social distancing in busy public areas like shops should be backed up by the law."

The prime minister has appealed to Britons' common sense. "I generally urge everyone to keep thinking of others and to consider the risks," Johnson said.

It's not always obvious, though, what the risks are. Most scientists say masks can help curb the spread of COVID-19 by preventing people who may be unknowingly carrying the virus from passing it on to others. But studies suggest masks may be useful only if a high percentage of people wear them.

"There is evidence to suggest it does good, but only if everybody does it," said Graham Medley, a professor of infectious disease modelling who is on a panel of scientists advising the British government. "I understand the government's reluctance to actually mandate it. On the other hand, if it's not mandated, it probably won't do any good."

But Robert Dingwall, a professor of sociology at Nottingham Trent University who is also a government science adviser, said letting people "find their own comfort level" is a sensible move.

"We need to tolerate each other's different risk appetites," he said. "We've had all this behavioral science in the background, trying to encourage compliance through amplifying fear and anxiety. And that really needs to reverse tack. We should stop talking about the dangerous situations and start talking much more about the safe ones."

Britain is not alone in grappling with masks. In recent months, Israel has reopened businesses, schools and event venues, lifting nearly all restrictions after it inoculated some 85% of its adults. Now cases are rising again, and authorities have reimposed a rule requiring people to wear masks indoors, as the country scrambles to contain the delta variant.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says fully vaccinated people don't need to wear masks in most settings, in contrast to the WHO, which advises them to cover up. Some U.S. states and cities are trying to decide what to do as cases rise again.

In many East Asian countries, it was common even before the pandemic for people to wear masks when sick or on high-pollution days. There is little in the way of an anti-mask movement.

In the United States, however, they have become an often partisan issue, epitomized during the 2020 presidential election by the contrast between often maskless Republican Donald Trump and mask-wearing

Democrat Joe Biden.

European nations are less divided, but recent research by King's College London and pollster Ipsos MORI identified masks as a "culture war" fault line, dividing people in the U.K. in a similar way to Brexit and the Black Lives Matter movement.

The large majority who supported masks and other coronavirus restrictions tended to regard the minority who opposed them as selfish, hypocritical and closed-minded. A lower proportion of lockdown opponents said the same about the other side.

"The face mask is such a minimal object — this small piece of fabric, it's a very low-tech device. But it's become imbued with so much symbolic power," said Deborah Lupton, professor at the Center for Social Research in Health at Australia's University of New South Wales and co-author of the book "The Face Mask in COVID Times."

A mask against COVID-19 "is an object which can offer some degree of certainty and protection in this very, very chaotic and uncertain and constantly changing risk environment," she said. "I think for that reason alone, it has incredible power and significance."

'I numb myself': Hospital fire deepens Iraq's COVID crisis

By ABDULRAHMAN ZEYAD and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — No beds, medicines running low and hospital wards prone to fire — Iraq's doctors say they are losing the battle against the coronavirus. And they say that was true even before a devastating blaze killed scores of people in a COVID-19 isolation unit this week.

Infections in Iraq have surged to record highs in a third wave spurred by the more aggressive delta variant, and long-neglected hospitals suffering the effects of decades of war are overwhelmed with severely ill patients, many of them this time young people.

Doctors are going online to plea for donations of medicine and bottled oxygen, and relatives are taking to social media to find hospital beds for their stricken loved ones.

"Every morning, it's the same chaos repeated, wards overwhelmed with patients," said Sarmed Ahmed, a doctor at Baghdad's Al-Kindi Hospital.

Widespread distrust of Iraq's crumbling health care system only intensified after Monday's blaze at the Al-Hussein Teaching Hospital in the southern city of Nasiriyah, the country's second catastrophic fire at a coronavirus ward in less than three months.

Days after the latest fire, the death toll was in dispute, with the Health Ministry putting it at 60, local health officials saying 88, and Iraq's state news agency reporting 92 dead.

Many blame corruption and mismanagement in the medical system for the disaster, and Iraq's premier ordered the arrest of key health officials.

Doctors said they fear working in the country's poorly constructed isolation wards and decried what they called lax safety measures.

"After both infernos, when I'm on call I numb myself because every hospital in Iraq is at high risk of burning down every single moment. So what can I do? I can't quit my job. I can't avoid the call," said Hadeel al-Ashabl, a doctor in Baghdad who works in a new isolation ward similar to the one in Nasiriyah. "Patients are also not willing to be treated inside these hospitals, but it's also out of their hands."

Iraq recorded over 9,600 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday in the highest 24-hour total since the pandemic began. Daily case numbers have slowly been rising since May. More than 17,600 people have died of the virus, according to the Health Ministry.

In April, at least 82 people — most of them severely ill virus patients in need of ventilators to breathe — died in a fire at Baghdad's Ibn al-Khateeb Hospital that broke out when an oxygen tank exploded. Iraq's health minister resigned over the disaster.

Faulty construction and inadequate safety practices, involving in particular the handling of oxygen cylinders, have been blamed for the two hospital fires. The 70-bed ward at Al-Hussein Hospital was built three months ago using highly flammable interior wall panels, according to hospital workers and civil defense

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officials.

Inside one major Baghdad emergency room this week, relatives of COVID-19 patients sat on the floor because there were no chairs available.

With hospital space limited, Ahmed calls on Baghdad's health directorate to advise him where to send patients. "They say, 'Send five patients to this hospital, another five to this other,' and so on," he said.

Hadeel Almainy, a dentist in Baghdad, resorted to Facebook to find a place for her COVID-19-stricken father, pleading: "He can't breathe, his skin is turning blue. The hospital couldn't take us."

In the southern city of Karbala, doctors have begged on social media for donations of remdesivir, an antiviral medication used to treat coronavirus patients.

Al-Shabl said medications and ventilators are running low at her hospital, and 60% of the COVID-19 patients there need the breathing machines.

For the first time since the start of the pandemic, children have come to the hospital with severe virus symptoms, said Alya Yass, a pediatrician at Al-Numan Teaching Hospital in Baghdad.

Doctors blame widespread vaccine hesitancy for the current surge and fear the actual number of infections may be higher than ministry figures. Many Iraqis forgo testing because they don't trust public hospitals.

Less than 3% of Iraq's population has been vaccinated, according to a Health Ministry official who was not authorized to talk to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity. The ministry has openly blamed the public for flouting pandemic restrictions.

Health workers said they have expressed their concerns to superiors with little results.

Mohammed Jamal, a former doctor at Al-Sader Teaching Hospital in Basra, said he confronted a ministry inspection committee and asked: Why haven't the medications been restocked or fire extinguishers replaced? Where is the fire system?

"They didn't listen. They didn't see," he said.

Pacific Rim leaders discuss economic way out of pandemic

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden, his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and Russian President Vladimir Putin are among Pacific Rim leaders gathering virtually to discuss strategies to help economies rebound from a resurgent COVID-19 pandemic.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will chair the special leaders' meeting Friday of the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

But the pandemic and vaccine diplomacy have proved to be divisive issues among members of a forum that says its primary goal is to support sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Biden spoke by phone with Ardern on Friday ahead of the leaders' retreat and discussed U.S. interest in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region, a White House statement said.

"They also discussed our cooperation on and engagement with Pacific Island nations," the statement said.

The Biden administration has put a premium on tending to relations with allies in the Pacific early in his administration.

One of his first high-profile acts of diplomacy as president was hosting a virtual summit with fellow leaders of the Quad — Australia, India and Japan — a group central to his efforts to counter China's growing military and economic power. And he hosted Suga and South Korea President Moon Jae-in for the first in-person foreign leader meetings of his presidency. South Korea is a APEC member and India is the only country in the Quad that is not.

Biden plans to use the virtual APEC retreat to talk to leaders about his administration's efforts to serve "as an arsenal of vaccines to the world" in the battle against COVID-19 pandemic and how members of the alliance can collaborate to bolster the global economy, according to a senior Biden administration who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The U.S. has donated 4.5 million vaccine doses to Indonesia, 2 million to Vietnam, 1 million to Malaysia,

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and 3.2 million doses will soon be delivered to the Philippines. The White House says donations to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Papua New Guinea, will also soon be delivered. Laos and Cambodia are the only countries among those eight vaccine recipients that are not APEC members.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said the "important meeting" came at a critical time as the world was facing a resurgence in COVID-19 infection numbers and international cooperation against the pandemic had entered a new stage.

"We hope all parties can uphold the vision of an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future, carry forward the Asia-Pacific partnership, send a positive message of fighting the coronavirus with solidarity and deepen economic recovery and cooperation," Zhao said.

Suga will speak about his determination to hold a safe and secure Olympics when the games start in Tokyo on July 23, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said.

Suga will also emphasize Japan's determination to secure fair access to vaccines for all countries and regions to support the global effort toward ending the COVID-19 pandemic, and Tokyo's vision to expand a free and fair economic bloc, Kato said.

Ardern said APEC's first leaders' meeting outside the usual annual summits "reflects our desire to navigate together out of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis."

"APEC economies have suffered their biggest contraction since the Second World War over the past year, with 81 million jobs lost. Responding collectively is vital to accelerate the economic recovery for the region," said Ardern, whose South Pacific island nation has been among the most successful in the world in containing the virus.

The pace of a global vaccine rollout and conditions attached to international vaccine deals are vexed issues among APEC members.

The United States has been accused by some of hoarding vaccines. Biden came up well short on his goal of delivering 80 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to the rest of the world by the end of June as a host of logistical and regulatory hurdles slowed the pace of U.S. vaccine diplomacy.

Although the Biden administration has announced that about 50 countries and entities will receive a share of the excess COVID-19 vaccine doses, the U.S. had shipped fewer than 24 million doses to 10 recipient countries by July 1, according to an Associated Press tally.

Taiwan, an APEC member that China claims as a renegade territory, has accused Beijing of tying the delivery of coronavirus vaccines to political demands. The government of the self-ruled island says China has intervened to block vaccine deliveries to Taiwan from fellow APEC members Japan and the United States.

China has accused Australia of interfering in the rollout of Chinese vaccines in former Australian colony Papua New Guinea. Both Australia and Papua New Guinea are also APEC members.

Sino-Australian relations plummeted last year when Australia called for an independent investigation into the origins of and responses to the pandemic.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who will also join the meeting, said in a statement now was a "critical time for Australia to engage with regional partners to promote free trade facilitation, in particular for vaccines and essential goods; build momentum for strengthening the multilateral trading system; and secure a sustainable and inclusive recovery."

China said that by May it was providing COVID-19 vaccines to nearly 40 African countries, describing its actions as purely altruistic.

The vaccines were donated or sold at "favorable prices," a Chinese Foreign Ministry official said.

The online leaders' meeting that is chaired from the New Zealand capital Wellington and straddles 11 time zones comes before the scheduled annual summit in November.

New Zealand's pandemic response has been among the most effective in the world and the isolated nation of 5 million people has recorded just 26 COVID-19 deaths. But its vaccination campaign has been far slower than in most developed countries.

Ardern said leading a regional response to the pandemic was one of New Zealand's highest priorities when it took over as APEC's chair from Malaysia in an annual rotation among the 21 members.

"I will be inviting discussion on immediate measures to achieve more coordinated regional action to

assist recovery, as well as steps that will support inclusive and sustainable growth over the long term," she said. "APEC leaders will work together to get through the pandemic and promote a sustainable and inclusive recovery, because nobody is safe until everyone is safe."

The long, 'surreal' days of the runaway Texas legislators

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sheltered in a downtown D.C. hotel, the Democratic lawmakers who left Texas to block a restrictive voting bill are living a life of stress and scrutiny.

After bolting the state Monday in order to sabotage the bill by denying a quorum in the Texas House of Representatives, the more than 50 state legislators find themselves balancing a punishing schedule of political lobbying, outside work and family obligations, all under a national spotlight.

Many have left young children behind; most have other professional obligations back in Texas. All seem to be operating on minimal sleep.

"It's surreal," said Rep. Gene Wu of Houston. "I can't even describe to you how weird it has been."

Wu said he realized just how big a story their exodus had become when they arrived via private plane at Dulles airport on Monday. He overheard a group of German tourists talking in the airport about the fugitive Texas legislators.

Their goal is to hold out until the end of their special legislative session on Aug. 7, but Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott can call another special session 30 days after that. Abbott has also threatened the legislators with arrest the moment they return to Texas.

In the meantime, they're working the Capitol and the White House, seeking some sort of federal voter-protection move that would supersede any state-level laws.

The Texas State Legislature is a part-time body with an annual salary of \$7,200. So the vast majority of the delegates have other primary jobs back in Texas that they abruptly left behind.

The lawmakers describe 16-hour days of essentially operating in shifts, with some working the Capitol and doing media interviews, while others carve out four hours or so to handle their other jobs.

"We have a number of attorneys. We've had several folks doing Zoom hearings," said Rep. Erin Zweiner of Austin.

The Covid-19 pandemic weirdly turned out to be an unexpected training ground, she said, since everybody is already practiced in teleworking. "Without that cultural shift, a lot of people's ability to earn a living would be severely hindered," she said.

And not everyone has a job or a business they can handle via Zoom.

"We've got a lot of practice during the pandemic, said Rep. John Bucey of Austin. But several, he said, "are here at the total expense of their careers."

Bucey came to Washington with his 17-month old daughter Bradley and his wife Molly, who is 27-weeks pregnant. The trio actually drove 23-hours straight rather than fly with the other representatives because Bradley is too young to wear a facemask on a plane.

"It's really hard," he said. "There's no childcare here. My wife works. I work."

Zweiner came to Washington with her three-year-old daughter Lark, for "both practical and sentimental reasons," she said. Her husband's work schedule didn't allow him to solo-parent and Zweiner said the idea of being away from her daughter for weeks was heart-wrenching.

Now Lark is a low-key Twitter star: the toddler attended a group meeting with New York Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand; she watched the movie "Frozen" on an iPad sitting on a Gillibrand staffer's lap and Gillibrand gave her a U.S. Capitol coloring book.

Zweiner said Lark has been "an absolute champ," but acknowledged Thursday that "By day 4, she's getting a little grumpy with the process ... she needs some kid time."

The balancing act is not just causing family sacrifices. Some Democrats are already paying a price back home in the Legislature, as Speaker Pro Tempore Joe Moody was stripped of his leadership position Thursday.

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It is only one of the ways the Texas GOP is trying to turn up the heat just days into the showdown. Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan said he would have a plane ready in Washington this weekend to bring Democrats back home, while Abbott began running targeted campaign ads against absent lawmakers in likely competitive House districts in 2022, putting absent Democrats' faces on milk cartons.

"There is no excuse for their PR stunt, and I join thousands of Texans in demanding that these Democrats get back to work," Abbott said.

The non-stop meetings have been a mixed bag so far. On Thursday the Texas lawmakers huddled with Sen. Joe Manchin, a moderate West Virginia Democrat. Manchin's vote is pivotal to pass the stalled voting-rights legislation through Congress, which would preempt much of the measure that Texas Republicans are advancing in their legislature.

"Very good meeting," Manchin said after exiting the gathering.

But approving the bill, known as the For the People Act, also hinges on weakening a procedural rule called the filibuster, which requires 60 votes to advance most legislation in the Senate. Senate Republicans used the rule last month to block debate on the measure. And Manchin, whose vote would also be required, has rejected the idea.

Texas state Sen. Nathan Johnson, said after the meeting that Manchin, "described (the For the People Act) as aspirational."

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The accusation that they're wasting public money particularly rankles. The delegation had maintained that the entire trip is being funded by donations through the state's Democratic Caucus. They're also in the midst of a public debate as to whether to decline their \$221 per diems.

Some pointed out that their presence in D.C. was a personal financial disaster because of the jobs they left behind. Wu, an attorney with two young children, said he worried about making his next mortgage payment.

"Our mission here, in Washington, is to use this time in this legislative session between now and Aug. 7 to say to the U.S. Senate that we need to pass federal voting rights legislation. And we need it now, said Rep. Chris Turner of Arlington, the leader of the Texas House Democrats. "And we're going to get into some good trouble, as best we can, while we're doing it. "

Largest wildfire in Oregon expands further; new evacuations

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Firefighters scrambled on Friday to control a raging inferno in southeastern Oregon that's spreading miles a day in windy conditions, one of numerous conflagrations across the U.S. West that are straining resources.

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Authorities ordered a new round of evacuations Thursday amid worries the Bootleg Fire, which has already destroyed 21 homes, could merge with another blaze that also grew explosively amid dry and blustery conditions.

The Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire currently burning in the U.S., has now torched an area larger than New York City and has stymied firefighters for nearly a week with erratic winds and extremely dangerous fire behavior. Early on, the fire doubled in size almost daily and strong winds from the south on Thursday afternoon yet again pushed the flames rapidly to the north and east.

The fire has the potential to move 4 miles (6 kilometers) or more in an afternoon and there was concern it could merge with the smaller, yet still explosive Log Fire, said Rob Allen, incident commander for the blaze. That fire started Monday as three smaller fires but exploded to nearly 5,000 acres (2,000 hectares) in 24 hours and was still growing, fanned by the same winds, Allen said.

Firefighters were all pulled back to safe areas late Thursday due to intense fire behavior and were scouting ahead of the main blaze for areas where they could make a stand by carving out fire lines to stop the inferno's advance, he said.

Crews are watching the fire, nearby campgrounds "and any place out in front of us to make sure the public's out of the way," Allen said. He said evacuation orders were still being assessed.

The Bootleg fire is affecting an area north of the Oregon-California border that has been gripped by extreme drought. It was 7% contained as of Thursday, when authorities decided to expand previous evacuation orders near Summer Lake and Paisley. Both towns are located in Lake County, a remote area of lakes and wildlife refuges just north of the California border with a total population of about 8,000.

It has periodically generated enormous smoke columns that could be seen for miles — a sign that the blaze is so intense it is creating its own weather, with erratic winds and the potential for fire-generated lightning.

Meanwhile, a fire near the northern California town of Paradise, which burned in a horrific 2018 wildfire, caused jitters among homeowners who were just starting to return to normal after surviving the deadliest blaze in U.S. history.

Chuck Dee and his wife, Janie, returned last year to Paradise on the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada to rebuild a home lost in that fire. So when they woke up Thursday and saw smoke from the new Dixie Fire, it was frightening, even though it was burning away from populated areas.

"It made my wife and I both nervous," he told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

The Dixie Fire was tiny when it began on Tuesday, but by Thursday morning it had burned 3.5 square miles (9 square kilometers) of brush and timber near the Feather River Canyon area of Butte County northeast of Paradise. It also moved into national forest land in neighboring Plumas County.

There was zero containment and officials kept in place a warning for residents of the tiny communities of Pulga and east Concow to be ready to leave.

The Dixie Fire is part of a siege of conflagrations across the West. There were 71 active large fires and complexes of multiple fires that have burned nearly 1,553 square miles (4,022 square kilometers) in the U.S., mostly in Western states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

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.

In the Pacific Northwest, firefighters say they are facing conditions more typical of late summer or fall than early July.

A wildfire threatening more than 1,500 homes near Wenatchee, Washington, grew to 14 square miles (36 square kilometers) by Thursday morning and was about 10% contained, the Washington state Department of Natural Resources said.

About 200 firefighters were battling the Red Apple Fire near the north-central Washington city renowned for its apples. The fire was also threatening apple orchards and an electrical substation, but no structures have been lost, officials said.

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The long, 'surreal' days of the runaway Texas legislators

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sheltered in a downtown D.C. hotel, the Democratic lawmakers who left Texas to block a restrictive voting bill are living a life of stress and scrutiny.

After bolting the state Monday in order to sabotage the bill by denying a quorum in the Texas House of Representatives, the more than 50 state legislators find themselves balancing a punishing schedule of political lobbying, outside work and family obligations, all under a national spotlight.

Many have left young children behind; most have other professional obligations back in Texas. All seem to be operating on minimal sleep.

"It's surreal," said Rep. Gene Wu of Houston. "I can't even describe to you how weird it has been."

Wu said he realized just how big a story their exodus had become when they arrived via private plane at Dulles airport on Monday. He overheard a group of German tourists talking in the airport about the fugitive Texas legislators.

Their goal is to hold out until the end of their special legislative session on Aug. 7, but Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott can call another special session 30 days after that. Abbott has also threatened the legislators with arrest the moment they return to Texas.

In the meantime, they're working the Capitol and the White House, seeking some sort of federal voter-protection move that would supersede any state-level laws.

The Texas State Legislature is a part-time body with an annual salary of \$7,200. So the vast majority of the delegates have other primary jobs back in Texas that they abruptly left behind.

The lawmakers describe 16-hour days of essentially operating in shifts, with some working the Capitol and doing media interviews, while others carve out four hours or so to handle their other jobs.

"We have a number of attorneys. We've had several folks doing Zoom hearings," said Rep. Erin Zweiner of Austin.

The Covid-19 pandemic weirdly turned out to be an unexpected training ground, she said, since everybody is already practiced in teleworking. "Without that cultural shift, a lot of people's ability to earn a living would be severely hindered," she said.

And not everyone has a job or a business they can handle via Zoom.

"We've got a lot of practice during the pandemic, said Rep. John Bucy of Austin. But several, he said, "are here at the total expense of their careers."

Bucy came to Washington with his 17-month old daughter Bradley and his wife Molly, who is 27-weeks pregnant. The trio actually drove 23-hours straight rather than fly with the other representatives because Bradley is too young to wear a facemask on a plane.

"It's really hard," he said. "There's no childcare here. My wife works. I work."

Zweiner came to Washington with her three-year-old daughter Lark, for "both practical and sentimental reasons," she said. Her husband's work schedule didn't allow him to solo-parent and Zweiner said the idea of being away from her daughter for weeks was heart-wrenching.

Now Lark is a low-key Twitter star: the toddler attended a group meeting with New York Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand; she watched the movie "Frozen" on an iPad sitting on a Gillibrand staffer's lap and Gillibrand gave her a U.S. Capitol coloring book.

Zweiner said Lark has been "an absolute champ," but acknowledged Thursday that "By day 4, she's getting a little grumpy with the process ... she needs some kid time."

The balancing act is not just causing family sacrifices. Some Democrats are already paying a price back home in the Legislature, as Speaker Pro Tempore Joe Moody was stripped of his leadership position Thursday.

It is only one of the ways the Texas GOP is trying to turn up the heat just days into the showdown. Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan said he would have a plane ready in Washington this weekend to bring Democrats back home, while Abbott began running targeted campaign ads against absent lawmakers in likely competitive House districts in 2022, putting absent Democrats' faces on milk cartons.

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"There is no excuse for their PR stunt, and I join thousands of Texans in demanding that these Democrats get back to work," Abbott said.

The non-stop meetings have been a mixed bag so far. On Thursday the Texas lawmakers huddled with Sen. Joe Manchin, a moderate West Virginia Democrat. Manchin's vote is pivotal to pass the stalled voting-rights legislation through Congress, which would preempt much of the measure that Texas Republicans are advancing in their legislature.

"Very good meeting," Manchin said after exiting the gathering.

But approving the bill, known as the For the People Act, also hinges on weakening a procedural rule called the filibuster, which requires 60 votes to advance most legislation in the Senate. Senate Republicans used the rule last month to block debate on the measure. And Manchin, whose vote would also be required, has rejected the idea.

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US-Australia basketball game canceled because of protocols

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The United States' men's basketball exhibition game against Australia scheduled for Friday night in Las Vegas has been canceled because of health and safety protocols.

USA Basketball cited "an abundance of caution" in making the decision Thursday night. The U.S. women's game against Australia will be played as scheduled Friday in Las Vegas.

The decision to cancel the game came hours after Washington Wizards star Bradley Beal was ruled out of the Olympics after being placed into health and safety protocols. The team also said Detroit Pistons forward Jerami Grant also was in health and safety protocols "out of an abundance of caution."

The Americans are still scheduled to play Spain on Sunday before heading to Tokyo, with their opening

game against France set for July 25.

The U.S. lost its opening two exhibition games to Nigeria and Australia and beat Argentina in the third Tuesday night.

Judge orders NFL's Richard Sherman released without bail

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — A judge ordered former Seattle Seahawks and San Francisco 49ers star Richard Sherman released from jail without bail Thursday following his arrest on suspicion of trying to break in to his in-laws' home.

King County District Court Judge Fa'amomoi Masaniai found probable cause that Sherman committed criminal trespassing, malicious mischief, driving under the influence and resisting arrest. Prosecutors did not ask the judge for a finding on a felony residential burglary allegation for which he was initially booked. They have not yet filed charges.

Masaniai declined to set \$10,000 bail as prosecutors requested. The judge called Sherman, who did not attend the hearing, a "pillar of the community" and noted that it was presumed he would be released because this was his first arrest. He ordered that Sherman not have contact with his father-in-law and that he not use alcohol or nonprescription drugs.

"I love and support my husband," Sherman's wife, Ashley Sherman, said in a statement after the hearing. "I am committed to helping Richard get the support and care that he needs. Richard has always been a loving father and husband. And we are looking forward to seeing him at home with his family."

Sherman was belligerent, had been drinking heavily and had spoken of killing himself when he left his home in the Seattle suburb of Maple Valley late Tuesday, according to police reports. Ashley Sherman called 911 to try to have police stop him.

He was arrested early Wednesday after police said he crashed his car in a construction zone along a busy highway east of Seattle and then tried to break into his in-laws' home in the suburb of Redmond.

His father-in-law, Raymond Moss, told officers that he armed himself with a handgun and fired pepper spray at the NFL cornerback to protect his family as Sherman tried to bust in the door with his shoulder.

As she spoke with a 911 operator, another daughter of Moss pleaded for officers to arrive quickly and told her children to hide in a bathroom behind a shower curtain, according to audio of the call released Thursday.

"The family began to yell in fear," Moss told police. "I used pepper spray on Sherman's face through the partially opened door as he was still banging and attempting to gain entry. I told him to stop. I armed myself with my handgun at this time fearing for the safety of myself and my family."

Officers were cautious about arresting Sherman because of his size, strength and belligerence, according to police reports released Thursday. After trying to deescalate the situation, they decided to use less-lethal force after warning Sherman that they would if he didn't comply with their orders.

They could not use a Taser because they worried about igniting whatever chemical Sherman's father-in-law had sprayed him with and could not fire a bean-bag round because they were too close to him. Instead, they released a police dog, which bit his ankle and caused a minor cut, as other officers wrestled with him on the ground, the reports say.

In February, King County prosecutors and the sheriff obtained an "extreme risk protection order" for Sherman, which barred him from having guns after a judge determined he posed a danger to himself or others. Details of the case were sealed, and it was not immediately clear if any weapons had been seized from him.

Ashley Sherman told police her husband had been on anti-depressants and was receiving mental health counseling.

At Thursday's hearing, Sherman's attorney, Cooper Offenbecher, did not contest that probable cause existed for the arrest. But he said Sherman should be released without bail, noting his good works in the community, including founding the Blanket Coverage Foundation, a charity that provides low-income

students with school supplies and clothes.

"Richard Sherman is among the best in our community," Offenbecher said. "He is a good person and a good soul. He is taking these allegations very seriously."

Sherman, 33, became a Seattle sports legend during seven seasons with Seahawks. The cornerback was a star in their run to a 2014 Super Bowl victory, making a game-saving play to deflect a pass in the NFC Championship Game against the 49ers.

He left the Seahawks after the 2017 season and played three seasons with San Francisco. He is now a free agent.

Biden bids Merkel farewell: Friends — with disagreements

By AAMER MADHANI, ALEXANDRA JAFFE and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Welcoming Angela Merkel to the White House for a final time, President Joe Biden renewed his concerns to the German chancellor Thursday about a major, nearly complete Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline but said they agreed Russia must not be allowed to use energy as a weapon.

The two discussed — though made no apparent headway — on differences over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline during a largely friendly farewell visit for Merkel as she nears the end of a political career that has spanned four American presidencies.

"On a personal note, I must tell you I will miss seeing you at our summits," Biden said as he stood by Merkel, the second-longest serving chancellor in Germany's history, at a late afternoon White House press conference. "I truly will."

Merkel, who had a famously difficult relationship with former President Donald Trump, showed her ease and familiarity with Biden, who has long been a fixture in international politics, repeatedly referring to him as "Dear Joe."

Asked to compare her relationship with Biden to hers with Trump, Merkel remained diplomatic, saying only that it was in any German chancellor's interest to "work with every American president." She added with a smile, "Today was a very friendly exchange."

But their personal warmth notwithstanding, the U.S.-German relationship is entering new territory as Merkel, who is not seeking another term in September elections, nears her departure from office. There are concerns on both sides about how the two nations will negotiate growing disagreements.

The United States has long argued that the Nord Stream 2 project will threaten European energy security by increasing the continent's reliance on Russian gas and allowing Russia to exert political pressure on vulnerable Eastern and Central European nations, particularly Ukraine. But Biden recently waived sanctions against German entities involved in the project, a move that angered many in Congress.

Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, in a letter to Biden on Thursday ahead of the leaders' meeting raised concerns that the pipeline is already having an economic impact on U.S. ally Ukraine. Rubio said Gazprom, the company that operates Nord Stream 2, "has already started to reduce its use of pipelines in Ukraine" as the new gas pipeline nears completion.

Merkel sought to downplay the differences, and to stress that the pipeline was in addition to — not meant to displace — Ukrainian pipelines.

"Our idea is and remains that Ukraine remains a transit country for natural gas, that Ukraine just as any other country in the world has a right to territorial sovereignty," Merkel said. She added that Germany stood ready to react to Moscow "should Russia not respect this right of Ukraine that it has as a transit country."

Merkel also raised concerns about COVID-19 travel restrictions that prevent most Europeans from traveling to the U.S.

Biden said he had brought in the head of his coronavirus task force to discuss the issue and that he expected to be able to offer a more definitive answer "within the next seven days" about when the restrictions might be eased.

Merkel started her day with a working breakfast with Vice President Kamala Harris, and Harris' office said the two had a "very candid discussion."

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Back home in Germany, Merkel's country and neighboring Belgium dealt with the aftermath of heavy flooding that left more than 60 people dead and dozens missing.

"My sympathy goes to the relatives and of the dead and missing," she said.

Officials in Washington and elsewhere are wondering what course Germany might take after the September vote.

Merkel's Christian Democratic Union is leading in polls, 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.

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 climate change and the coronavirus pandemic, even while then-President Trump was accusing Beijing of having started it the pandemic.

Still, Merkel stressed in her comments to reporters that she wants Germany and the European Union to coordinate their policy toward China with Washington, including on issues such as labor rights, trade and cybersecurity.

"I believe that the foundations of our dealings with China should be based on the common values" of the U.S. and Germany, she said.

The humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders urged Biden 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.

A group of Democratic lawmakers 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 did not anticipate differences being resolved during Merkel's visit.

While there are points of tension, Biden seemed eager to offer Merkel a proper farewell.

He hosted Merkel and her husband, as well as an array of lawmakers and administration officials, current and past, at the White House for a dinner Thursday evening. The guest list included Secretary of State Antony Blinken, as well as two of his predecessors — Hillary Clinton and Colin Powell.

The Republican Senate and House leaders, Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy, were also in attendance along with other top U.S. and German officials. The menu featured crispy sea bass and black pepper tagliatelle.

Earlier Thursday, Harris hosted Merkel for breakfast at her residence on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory, commending her for her "extraordinary career." Merkel in turn noted the historic nature of the Harris vice presidency.

"I can only say that I'm delighted, too, for this opportunity here to meet the first madam vice president of the United States of America," Merkel said before the two leaders stepped into a residence to talk over a breakfast of Gruyère soufflé, seasonal fruit and charcuterie.

Also Thursday, Merkel received an honorary doctorate, her 18th, from Johns Hopkins University and spoke at the university's School of Advanced International Studies.

Cuomo to be questioned in sexual harassment investigation

By MARINA VILLENEUVE, MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is expected to be interviewed Saturday as the state attorney general's office winds down its investigation into sexual harassment and misconduct allegations that upended his national reputation and threatened his hold on power as he gears up to run for a fourth term next year.

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The timing of the interview in Albany, the state's capital, was confirmed Thursday to The Associated Press by two people familiar with the investigation. They were not authorized to speak publicly about the case and did so on condition of anonymity.

Investigators were always expected to speak with Cuomo, who said at the start of the probe in March that he would "fully cooperate." Cuomo is also facing an impeachment inquiry in the state assembly.

Saturday's interview signals that investigators are nearly done with their work, which has included interviews with the governor's accusers, though they may need some time to tie up loose ends before a report is issued.

Several women have accused Cuomo, a Democrat, of unwanted kisses, touches and groping and inappropriate sexual remarks.

Cuomo initially apologized and said that he "learned an important lesson" about his behavior around women, though he's since denied that he did anything wrong and questioned the motivations of accusers and fellow Democrats who've called for his resignation.

Cuomo, in office since 2011, has rebuffed calls to step aside over the allegations.

Cuomo's popularity has dipped this year: about 62% of voters said Cuomo should resign or not seek re-election in a late June poll by Siena College. Still, supporters point out that 61% of Democrats in that poll said they have a favorable opinion of him.

A message seeking comment was left with Cuomo's lawyer, Rita Glavin. A Cuomo spokesperson said Thursday he had no comment. The state attorney general's office declined comment.

"We have said repeatedly that the governor doesn't want to comment on this review until he has cooperated, but the continued leaks are more evidence of the transparent political motivation of the attorney general's review," Cuomo senior advisor Richard Azzopardi said.

The scheduled interview with Cuomo was reported first by The New York Times.

Former aide Lindsey Boylan accuses Cuomo of having harassed her throughout her employment and said he once suggested a game of strip poker aboard his state-owned jet.

Another former aide, Charlotte Bennett, said Cuomo once asked her if she ever had sex with older men. Bennett's lawyer, Debra Katz, said Bennett met via Zoom for more than four hours with investigators and also provided them with 120 pages of records to corroborate her accusations.

A message seeking comment was left with Katz and lawyers for Boylan and another Cuomo accuser, aide Alyssa McGrath.

The investigation into the allegations against Cuomo is being overseen by the state's independently elected attorney general, Letitia James, who named former federal prosecutor Joon Kim and employment discrimination attorney Anne Clark to conduct the probe and document its findings in a public report.

Azzopardi's statement Thursday was at least the second time that Cuomo's top spokesperson has claimed James, also a Democrat, and her probe were politically motivated. Azzopardi didn't provide evidence Thursday that the attorney general had leaked information.

In April, Azzopardi blasted James for confirming her office was also investigating whether Cuomo broke the law by having staff help write and promote his recent memoir, "American Crisis: Leadership Lessons From the Covid-19 Pandemic."

"Both the comptroller and the attorney general have spoken to people about running for governor and it is unethical to wield criminal referral authority to further political self-interest," Azzopardi said at the time.

Some of Cuomo's top allies in the state Legislature have called on the public to await the results of James' investigation and not to undermine her integrity.

Sen. Gustavo Rivera, a Bronx Democrat, said he trusts the independent investigators selected by James, and said "their credibility and professionalism can't be questioned."

"There was a sense from people early on that because the governor was so instrumental in helping her become AG that she would then become responsive to his political needs," Rivera, Senate health committee chair, said. "Now she's proven over and over again that she's responsible to the people of the state of New York."

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Manhattan Assemblymember Richard Gottfried, Democrat and Assembly health committee chair, agreed: "Tish James is not going to let anyone undermine her."

Sen. John Liu, majority assistant whip, called Azzopardi's statement the "typical Cuomo playbook."

"Obviously, Cuomo's trying to undermine the AG," Liu said.

"Those kinds of comments, trying to run interference, trying to deflect, trying to implicate, at least politically — my read of it is that folks in the governor's circle including the governor are at least nervous and at most running terrified," said Liu, a Queens Democrat who, like Gottfried and Rivera, has called on Cuomo to resign.

This year's legislative session has concluded, but lawmakers could return later in the summer or fall if the probe winds up.

"I think Tish James is being as thorough as she can, knowing that no matter what she will be accused of politics," Liu said.

The state Assembly's judiciary committee has launched its own probe into whether there are grounds to impeach the governor on issues from sexual misconduct to his administration's reporting of COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents.

It's also unclear when the Assembly investigation will wrap up, but it's likely it'll be after James' investigation concludes. Boylan has said she only wants to speak with investigators in the attorney general's probe.

Liu said the AG's report and recommendations will "carry a great deal of weight" with lawmakers.

With virus cases rising, mask mandate back on in Los Angeles

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Los Angeles County will again require masks be worn indoors in the nation's largest county, even by those vaccinated against the coronavirus, while the University of California system also said Thursday that students, faculty and staff must be inoculated against the disease to return to campuses.

The announcements come amid a sharp increase in virus cases, many of them the highly transmissible delta variant that has proliferated since California fully reopened its economy on June 15 and did away with capacity limits and social distancing. The vast majority of new cases are among unvaccinated people.

The rapid and sustained increase in cases in Los Angeles County requires restoring an indoor mask mandate, said Dr. Muntu Davis, public health officer for the county's 10 million people. The public health order will go into effect just before midnight Saturday.

"This is an all-hands-on-deck moment," Davis said during a virtual news conference.

He didn't fully detail what would be some exceptions to the mask rule but said, for example, people could still take off their masks while eating and drinking at restaurants.

Davis said officials will focus on education rather than enforcement. Handing out citations to people who don't comply is "not something we really want to have to do," he said.

Los Angeles County has been recording more than 1,000 new cases each day for a week, and there is now "substantial community transmission," Davis said. On Thursday, there were 1,537 new cases, and hospitalizations have now topped 400.

"The next level is high transmission, and that's not a place where we want to be," he said.

It comes after a winter where Los Angeles County experienced a massive surge in infections and deaths, with hospitals overloaded with COVID-19 patients and ambulances idling outside, waiting for beds to open.

Now, hospitalizations in California are above 1,700, the highest level since April. More than 3,600 cases were reported Thursday, the most since late February, but a far cry from the winter peak that saw an average of more than 40,000 per day.

Other counties, including Sacramento and Yolo, are strongly urging people to wear masks indoors but not requiring it.

"The drastic increase in cases is concerning — as is the number of people choosing not to get vaccinated," Sacramento County Public Health Officer Olivia Kasirye said.

The Los Angeles County decision came within hours of the University of California's announcement that students, faculty and staff must be vaccinated for the upcoming semester.

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UC President Michael V. Drake said in a letter to the system's 10 chancellors that unvaccinated students without approved exemptions will be barred from in-person classes, events and campus facilities, including housing.

"Vaccination is by far the most effective way to prevent severe disease and death after exposure to the virus and to reduce spread of the disease to those who are not able, or not yet eligible, to receive the vaccine," Drake wrote.

He said the decision came after consulting UC infectious disease experts and reviewing evidence from studies on the dangers of COVID-19 and emerging variants like the delta strain.

In San Francisco, cases are rising among the unvaccinated. Black and Latino people are getting shots at a lower rate than others, and Mayor London Breed urged them to get the vaccine.

She said Thursday that every person hospitalized with COVID-19 at San Francisco General Hospital is unvaccinated and most are African American.

San Francisco Supervisor Shamann Walton said the highest number of cases are in the Bayview district, a largely Black neighborhood, "because we are not doing everything we can to protect each other. This is a cry to my community. ... We need you to get vaccinated."

San Francisco has one of the highest overall vaccination rates in the nation's most populated state. At least 83% of residents 12 and older have received at least one dose.

Meanwhile, north of San Francisco, at least 59 residents at a homeless shelter have tested positive for the virus. Of those infected at the Santa Rosa shelter, 28 were fully vaccinated, Dr. Sundari Mase, Sonoma County's health officer, said Wednesday. Officials were reviewing an additional 26 possible positive cases.

Of those with confirmed infections at Samuel L. Jones Hall, nine were hospitalized, including six who were fully vaccinated and had "multiple, significant" underlying health conditions, including diabetes and pulmonary disease, health officials said.

Fewer than half of the shelter's 153 residents had received at least a partial vaccination, officials said, and they don't know if the outbreak started with a vaccinated or unvaccinated resident.

"We know congregate settings are at much higher risk," Mase said. "We also know there is a very high proportion of unvaccinated individuals that were in this setting."

Most of the 69 vaccinated residents had received the single-shot Johnson & Johnson dose, but Mase said it was hard to determine whether that was a factor in the outbreak.

Vaccines decrease the severity of the illness, reduce hospitalizations and decrease the risk of death. Clinical trials showed that a single dose of the J&J vaccine was 72% effective against moderate to severe COVID-19 in the United States, compared with 95% for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

A Food and Drug Administration analysis cautioned that it's not clear how well the vaccines work against each variant.

So-called breakthrough cases among the fully vaccinated are unusual. Between Jan. 1 and June 30, California identified 8,699 such cases out of the more than 20 million who have received the vaccine.

Biden: US will protect Haiti embassy, won't send troops

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Thursday that the U.S. will bolster security at its embassy in Haiti following last week's assassination of that country's president, but sending American troops to stabilize the country was "not on the agenda."

Haiti's interim government last week asked the U.S. and the United Nations to deploy troops to protect key infrastructure following President Jovenel Moïse's assassination. Biden signaled he was not open to the request, which comes as he is drawing down U.S. forces in Afghanistan this summer.

"We're only sending American Marines to our embassy," Biden said. "The idea of sending American forces to Haiti is not on the agenda," he added.

Mathias Pierre, Haiti's elections minister, told The Associated Press Thursday that he believes the request for U.S. troops is relevant given what he called a "fragile situation" and the need to create a secure environment for elections scheduled to happen in 120 days.

He also said Biden's comment that sending U.S. troops was "not on the agenda" still leaves the option

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open.

"This is not a closed door. The evolution of the situation will determine the outcome," Pierre said. "In the meantime, the government is doing everything we can to stabilize the country, return to a normal environment and organize elections while trying to come to a political agreement with most political parties."

The request for U.S. intervention recalled the tumult following Haiti's last presidential assassination, in 1915, when an angry mob dragged President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam out of the French Embassy and beat him to death. In response, President Woodrow Wilson sent Marines into Haiti, justifying an American military occupation — which lasted nearly two decades — as a way to avert anarchy.

Biden addressed the situation in Haiti during a joint press conference at the White House with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Over 60 dead, dozens missing as severe floods strike Europe

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — More than 60 people have died and dozens were missing Thursday as severe flooding in Germany and Belgium turned streams and streets into raging torrents that swept away cars and caused houses to collapse.

Among those killed were nine residents of an assisted living facility for people with disabilities and two firefighters involved in rescue efforts across the region.

"I grieve for those who have lost their lives in this disaster," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said during a visit to Washington, expressing shock at the scope of the flooding.

Speaking alongside U.S. President Joe Biden at the White House, Merkel said her thoughts were with all those who had lost loved ones or were still searching for them.

"I fear the full extent of this tragedy will only be seen in the coming days," she said.

Biden likewise paid his condolences for the devastating loss of life and the destruction due to the flooding.

"Our hearts go out to the families who've lost loved ones," he said.

Authorities said at least 30 people died in North Rhine-Westphalia state and 28 in neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate to the south. Belgian media reported eight deaths in that country.

Recent storms across parts of western Europe made rivers and reservoirs burst their banks, triggering flash floods overnight after the saturated soil couldn't absorb any more water.

Among the worst-hit German villages was Schuld, where several homes collapsed and dozens of people remained unaccounted for.

Rescue operations were hampered by blocked roads and phone and internet outages across the Eifel, a volcanic region of rolling hills and small valleys. Some villages were reduced to rubble as old brick and timber houses couldn't withstand the sudden rush of water, often carrying trees and other debris as it gushed through narrow streets.

Karl-Heinz Grimm, who had come to help his parents in Schuld, said he had never seen the small Ahr River surge in such a deadly torrent.

"This night, it was like madness," he said.

Dozens of people had to be rescued from the roofs of their houses with inflatable boats and helicopters. Hundreds of soldiers were deployed to assist in the rescue efforts.

"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."

The 52nd Civil Engineer squadron and several volunteers from the U.S. air base at Spangdahlem filled and distributed hundreds of sandbags to help protect homes and businesses in the area, the U.S. European Command said.

In Belgium, the Vesdre River spilled over its banks and sent water churning through the streets of Pepinster, near Liege, where a rescue operation by firefighters went wrong when a small boat capsized and three elderly people disappeared.

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"Unfortunately, they were quickly engulfed," said Mayor Philippe Godin. "I fear they are dead."

In Verviers, the prosecutor's office said several bodies had been found but could not confirm local media reports that four people were killed there.

In Liege, a city of 200,000, the Meuse River overflowed its banks Thursday and the mayor asked people living nearby to move to higher ground.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to help, and Pope Francis sent condolences, with his office saying the pontiff was praying for those injured and missing, as well as those who have lost their livelihoods.

The full extent of the damage was still unclear, with many villages cut off by floods and landslides that made roads impassable. Many of the dead were only discovered after floodwaters receded.

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

Armin Laschet, the governor of North-Rhine Westphalia state, paid tribute to two firefighters who died and pledged swift help.

"We don't know the extent of the damage yet, but we won't leave the communities, the people affected alone," he said during a visit to the city of the flood-hit city of Hagen.

Laschet, a conservative who is running to succeed Merkel as chancellor in this fall's election, said the unusually heavy storms and an earlier heat wave could be linked to climate change. Political opponents have criticized Laschet, the son of a miner, for supporting the region's coal industry and hampering the expansion of wind power during his tenure.

Stefan Rahmstorf, a professor of ocean physics at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, said it was unclear whether the extreme rainfall seen in Germany was a direct result of planetary warming.

"But one can state that such events are becoming more frequent due to global warming," he told The Associated Press, noting that warmer air can absorb more water vapor that eventually falls as rain.

"The increase in heavy rain and decrease in days with weak rain is now also clearly seen in observational data, especially in the mid-northern latitudes, which includes Germany," Rahmstorf said.

The weakening of the summer circulation of the atmosphere, causing longer-lasting weather patterns such as heat waves or continuous rain, might also play a role, he added.

Rainfall eased later Thursday across Germany, although water levels on the Mosel and Rhine rivers were expected to continue rising.

In the Netherlands, King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima visited the hard-hit Dutch town of Valkenburg on Thursday evening to support residents and emergency services. Flooding turned the main street into a torrent of brown water, inundating homes and businesses.

The Dutch government sent about 70 troops to the southern province of Limburg late Wednesday to help with evacuations and filling sandbags.

Thousands of people in the city of Maastricht and villages along the Maas River were ordered to evacuate Thursday evening amid threats of flooding, and centers were set up to house them. The Maas is the Dutch name for the Meuse River.

In northeastern France, heavy rains flooded vegetable fields, many homes and a World War I museum in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon.

The Aire River rose to its highest levels in 30 years in some areas, according to the L'Est Republicain newspaper.

The equivalent of two months of rain has fallen over two days, according to the French national weather service, with flood warnings issued for 10 regions. No injuries or deaths have been reported, but forecasters warned of mudslides and more rain Friday.

Child tax credit starts hitting US families' bank accounts

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

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

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Tamika Daniel.

That changed Thursday when the first payment of \$1,000 hit Daniel's bank account — and dollars started 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 eldest son is autistic and needed her. So she got by on Social Security payments. And she had to live at Fairfield Court, 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 invited beneficiaries to the White House to mark the first round of payments, saying in a Thursday speech that the day carried a historic resonance because of the boost it will give families across the nation.

"This would be the largest ever one-year decrease in child poverty in the history of the United States of America," the president said. "Millions of children and their families, starting today, their lives are about to change for the better. And our country would be better off for it as well."

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

The administration 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 credit also 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.

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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 Strelka, of Brookfield, Wisconsin, was laid off from her job as a beauty and hair care 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, Strelka reenrolled 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 Strelka, 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."

Haiti police reject reports implicating govt in slaying

By DÁNICA COTO, AAMER MADHANI and EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Authorities in Haiti on Thursday forcefully pushed back against reports that current government officials were involved in the killing of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, calling them "a lie."

Léon Charles, head of Haiti's National Police, denied a report from Caracol news, a Colombian-based private TV station, that claimed interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph was the mastermind of the July 7 killing.

"The police warns of all propaganda creating a diversion," he said, adding that the government has no evidence to support those claims.

Haitian authorities have otherwise not been very forthcoming with information about who might have been behind the killing, suggesting that media reports implicating current officials had struck a nerve in the government.

In Colombia, Gen. Jorge Luis Vargas, the head of that country's national police force, told reporters that he had no information suggesting Joseph had any role in the plot.

Meanwhile, U.S. President Joe Biden said Thursday that he will send U.S. Marines to bolster security at its embassy in Haiti but that deploying American troops to stabilize the country is "not on the agenda."

Haiti's interim government last week asked the U.S. and the United Nations to deploy troops to protect key infrastructure following the assassination. Biden had signaled he was not open to the request, which comes as he is drawing down U.S. forces in Afghanistan this summer.

Mathias Pierre, Haiti's elections minister, told The Associated Press that he believes the request for U.S. troops is relevant given what he called a "fragile situation" and the need to create a secure environment for elections scheduled to happen in 120 days.

He also said the words "not on the agenda" leave the option open.

"This is not a closed door. The evolution of the situation will determine the outcome," Pierre said. "In the meantime, the government is doing everything we can to stabilize the country, return to a normal environment and organize elections while trying to come to a political agreement with most political parties."

Charles, the police chief, said the head of Moïse's security detail, Dimitri Hérard, had been removed from

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his post and placed in isolated detention after officials interrogated him. Police had announced his detention in recent days. Charles said authorities will meet with him a third time before deciding the next steps.

Hérard has not officially been named as a suspect in the investigation, but many Haitians have questioned how attackers could have invaded the president's house and killed him with no injuries among those assigned to protect him.

The press conference was held a day after the Colombian TV station aired a report it said was based on information from FBI sources and Haitian authorities as well as telephone calls, pictures and testimony from those accused of participating in the plot.

"I'm issuing a formal denial to these allegations," Charles said, calling them "a lie."

Joseph, the interim prime minister, was about to be replaced when the assassination occurred. Moïse had named him to the post in April following the resignation of Joseph Jouthe, who held the post for just over a year.

Two days before the assassination, Moïse announced that he had chosen a new prime minister, neurosurgeon Ariel Henry. But the new prime minister had not yet been sworn into office as of July 7, and Joseph has insisted he is in charge of the government, a claim that has been recognized by the U.S. and others.

Charles said police have arrested 23 people in the killing, including 18 former Colombian soldiers, three Haitians and two Haitian-Americans. Police also have issued seven arrest warrants, searched 10 buildings, conducted 27 interrogations and placed four high-ranking police officers in isolation, he said.

He added that the investigation has benefited from the help of the FBI and foreign countries that he did not name.

On Thursday, a group of FBI agents gathered at Moïse's private home and met with other officials as they entered and exited the compound under the gaze of curious onlookers while Haitian police officers walked to their vehicles with bags containing unknown items.

Eight FBI agents are on the ground in Haiti helping with the probe, said to a senior Biden administration official, who agreed to give the information only if not quoted by name because he was not authorized to comment publicly. In addition, officials from the Justice Department's criminal and national security divisions, the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. attorney's office for the southern district of Florida are working with Haitian national police.

The U.S. law enforcement officials are focused on tracing the origin of weapons used in the attack, investigating any possible U.S. link to the killing and looking into potential charges that could be filed against anyone involved in the United States.

He added that a U.S. delegation that arrived in Haiti on Sunday visited the airport and seaport in Port-au-Prince and discussed additional training and equipment that could be provided to secure that critical infrastructure.

The official noted international "fatigue" for Haiti, adding that U.S. officials said they made clear to the competing Haitian factions that building a coalition government would go far to "reenergize support" in the international community.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon issued a statement saying that a small number of the Colombian suspects had received U.S. military training and education programs while serving in the Colombian military. It said it had no additional details to offer pending a review that is still in progress.

The U.S. has provided substantial support to the Colombian military over the years and has trained many of its forces.

On Thursday, Colombian President Iván Duque told private radio station La FM that only a small group of the former Colombian soldiers linked to the killing knew it was going to be a criminal operation. He said the others were duped and thought they would be traveling for a mission to provide protection.

"Once they were over there, the information they were given changed," Duque said, adding that "they ended up involved in these unfortunate events."

Top Senate Dem sets infrastructure vote, pressures lawmakers

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By KEVIN FREKING and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pressured lawmakers Thursday to reach agreement by next week on a pair of massive domestic spending measures, signaling Democrats' desire to push ahead aggressively on President Joe Biden's multitrillion-dollar agenda.

Schumer, D-N.Y., said he was scheduling a procedural vote for next Wednesday to begin debate on a still-evolving bipartisan infrastructure bill. Senators from both parties, bargaining for weeks, have struggled to reach final agreement on a \$1 trillion package of highway, water systems and other public works projects.

Schumer said he also wanted Democratic senators to reach agreement among themselves by then on specific details of a separate 10-year budget blueprint that envisions \$3.5 trillion in spending for climate change, education, an expansion of Medicare and more.

"The time has come to make progress. And we will. We must," Schumer said on the Senate floor.

The majority leader's plans were an attempt to push lawmakers to work out differences so Democrats can advance their plans to fortify the economy for the long term and help lower-earning and middle-class families while imposing higher taxes on wealthy people and large corporations.

"There may be some last-minute discussion as to who, what mechanism is used to pay for each of these items," Biden said of the two measures during a White House press conference Thursday. "But I believe we will get it done."

Lawmakers working on the smaller infrastructure package met Thursday to discuss the details, but chafed at Schumer's deadline. They indicated that substantial hurdles remain, including how to pay for the nearly \$579 billion in new spending over five years that they agreed to with the White House. The rest of the money in the infrastructure proposal is a renewal of existing programs.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., said senators differed over whether Schumer's timeline was helping the bipartisan effort. Warner said the White House is trying to work with senators on ways to pay for the new spending without raising corporate taxes or fees such as the federal gas tax.

"We're still short on pay-fors," said Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D.

It will take 60 votes to start debating the infrastructure measure because Republicans are expected to use a filibuster — procedural delays — to try killing it.

That means the chamber's 50 Democrats will need support from at least 10 Republicans. Democratic leaders hope a bipartisan deal on the widely popular projects on roads and other projects would attract enough Republicans to succeed. Yet bargainers have faced major hang-ups over which revenues they would raise to finance the infrastructure legislation.

One of the biggest revenue-raisers, bolstering IRS enforcement to bring in an estimated \$100 billion over 10 years, has been a major discussion point in negotiations. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said the group was looking at alternative measures.

Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, predicted lawmakers will be able to craft a final bill, although he was unsure they will meet "anybody's arbitrary deadline."

"I appreciate the fact that the majority leader wants to have a vote as soon as possible. I don't disagree with that, but soon as possible means when it's ready," Portman said.

Meanwhile, Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., want Congress to approve a \$3.5 trillion budget resolution before lawmakers begin a summer recess next month. Approval of that measure is crucial for Democrats because it would protect a subsequent bill actually providing that money for specific programs, probably this fall, from more GOP filibusters, meaning Democrats could pass it on their own.

The Democrats' accord this week 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 it's 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.

California approves 1st state-funded guaranteed income plan

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California lawmakers on Thursday approved the first state-funded guaranteed income plan in the U.S., \$35 million for monthly cash payments to qualifying pregnant people and young adults who recently left foster care with no restrictions on how they spend it.

The votes — 36-0 in the Senate and 64-0 in the Assembly — showed bipartisan support for an idea that is gaining momentum across the country. Dozens of local programs have sprung up in recent years, including some that have been privately funded, making it easier for elected officials to sell the public on the idea.

California's plan is taxpayer-funded, and could spur other states to follow its lead.

"If you look at the stats for our foster youth, they are devastating," Senate Republican Leader Scott Wilk said. "We should be doing all we can to lift these young people up."

Local governments and organizations will apply for the money and run their programs. The state Department of Social Services will decide who gets funding. California lawmakers left it up to local officials to determine the size of the monthly payments, which generally range from \$500 to \$1,000 in existing programs around the country.

The vote came on the same day millions of parents began receiving their first monthly payments under a temporary expansion of the federal child tax credit many view as a form of guaranteed income.

"Now there is momentum, things are moving quickly," said Michael Tubbs, an advisor to Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was a trailblazer when he instituted a guaranteed income program as mayor of Stockton. "The next stop is the federal government."

For decades, most government assistance programs have had strict rules about how the money could be spent, usually limiting benefits to things like food or housing. But a guaranteed income program gives money to people with no rules on how to spend it. The idea is to reduce the stresses of poverty that cause health problems and make it harder for people to find and keep work.

"It changes the philosophy from 'big brother government knows what's best for you,'" said state Sen. Dave Cortese, a Democrat from San Jose. "We've been very prescriptive with that population as a state and as counties go. Look at the failure. Half of them don't get their high school diplomas, let alone advance like other people their age."

But critics like Republican Assemblyman Vince Fong of Bakersfield say guaranteed income programs "undermine incentives to work and increase dependence on government."

"We should be pushing policies that encourage the value of work," said Fong, who abstained from Thursday's vote. "Guaranteed income doesn't provide the job training and skills needed for upward mobility."

Guaranteed income programs date back to the 18th century. The U.S. government even experimented with them in the 1960s and 1970s during the Nixon administration before they fell out of favor.

But recently, guaranteed income programs have been making a comeback. Programs have been announced in New Orleans; Oakland, California; Tacoma, Washington; Gainesville, Florida; and Los Angeles — the nation's second largest city, which has a plan to give \$1,000 a month to 2,000 needy families.

The state wants to target the money on programs that benefit pregnant people and young adults aged out of the foster care system to help them transition to life on their own. The latter includes people like Naihla De Jesus, who was removed from her mother's custody at 17 and bounced between living with an aunt, a godmother and a boyfriend until landing in a transitional housing program.

She became ineligible for that program when she turned 24 last year, which normally would have ended her government assistance as a foster child. Instead, the taxpayers of Santa Clara County have been paying her \$1,000 a month with no restrictions on how she can spend it, part of a guaranteed income program targeting former foster care children.

De Jesus is also caring for her 9-year-old brother as his temporary guardian while battling anxiety and depression. She said her condition made it hard for her to keep a job because some days she wouldn't have enough energy to get out of bed and wouldn't go to work.

Now, she has a full-time job as a client support specialist with the Bill Wilson Center, where she works

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with young people who are in situations like hers. She says she doesn't worry about money like she used to, choosing to save most of what she gets from the guaranteed income program. She used some of it to buy things for her brother, whose interest in expensive electronics grows as he gets older.

And she used the money to save for a down payment for her "dream car," a blue Subaru WRX.

"I'm proud of myself, of where I am," she said. "I don't have to stress and then isolate myself and overthink, 'Oh, I'm not going to have enough money to pay my rent or pay my phone bill.'"

Santa Clara County's program has cost the county \$1.4 million so far. Participants get the money on a debit card, which they can use for purchases or to withdraw money from an ATM. County officials ask them to fill out surveys to monitor how they are doing, but they haven't completed a thorough analysis, said Melanie Jimenez Perez, who oversees the program.

An analysis of a guaranteed program in Stockton found full-time employment increased among participants after the first year of receiving the money.

Too much, too soon? USA Gymnastics in midst of culture shift

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

FORT WORTH, Texas (AP) — The U.S. gymnastics championships were over. The pressure — mercifully if only momentarily — gone. On the floor at Dickies Arena, Olympic hopefuls milled about aimlessly. Some talked. Some grabbed their phones. Others searched the stands for their families.

Jordan Chiles did what she usually does when there's a lull in the action. She danced. Soon, a couple joined in. Then a few more. Then a few more. Within a minute or two, nearly the entire group was doing "The Cha Cha Slide" for all the world to see.

Martha Karolyi's program, this is not.

The vibe around the top level of the sport in the United States has loosened in the five years since the highly successful yet highly divisive national team coordinator retired. The impromptu flash mob at national championships last month offered a symbolic if somewhat superficial glimpse at how the landscape is evolving.

"I feel like the trainings are actually kind of a lot more fun and not — I mean, it's still stressful, but it's not as stressful as it used to be," said MyKayla Skinner, an alternate on the 2016 Olympic team who will be one of six American women competing in Tokyo this month.

Still, the greatest gymnast of all time wonders if the pendulum has swung too far, too fast.

Simone Biles has embraced the long-overdue push to create a more athlete-centric environment. Her concern, however, is that the sport's brave new world might make it difficult for the coaches hired to mold prodigies into champions to effectively do their jobs.

"I think the culture shift is happening, but it's almost as if the athletes almost have too much power and the coaches can't get a rein on it," Biles told The Associated Press in May. "So then it's kind of wild. It's like a horse out of the barn: You can't get it back in."

Biles, among the most outspoken critics of USA Gymnastics in the wake of the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal and herself a Nassar survivor, is not complaining. It's unlikely she would have returned to the sport in late 2017 if Karolyi was still in charge. Things needed to change.

Yet the 24-year-old is also acutely aware of the pressure that follows when the perennially loaded U.S. team is on the international stage.

The Americans have produced the last four Olympic all-around gold medalists and captured every major team title since the 2011 world championships, a streak they are heavily favored to extend in Tokyo thanks in large part to Biles' unmatched brilliance.

The question is what comes next. How will one of the gold standards of the U.S. Olympic movement foster a healthy, positive climate and a competitive one at the same time?

The two are not mutually exclusive by any stretch. Biles need only point to her relationship with former coach Aimee Boorman and current coaches Laurent and Cecile Landi as proof. Yet she also knows her experience is not exactly commonplace for a sport in the middle of a reckoning.

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Gymnastics federations from the U.S. to Great Britain to Australia are grappling with their own version of a #MeToo movement as athletes in each country have come forward to detail a culture they viewed as toxic. Despite measures by leadership to push USA Gymnastics forward, the Nassar fallout isn't going away anytime soon.

Even as Biles and her teammates flew to Tokyo on Wednesday, the Justice Department's inspector general released a long-awaited report that pointed out repeated failures by the FBI to properly investigate Nassar while making sure not to let the organization off the hook.

The air needs to be cleared. It's one of the many reasons why World Champions Centre is awash in floor-to-ceiling windows. There are 36 cameras placed throughout the 50,000 square-foot facility in the northern Houston suburbs, each with the volume turned all the way up.

"Everything needs to be visible, and the coaches know that," said Nellie Biles, who opened the gym to give daughter Simone a place to train. "The coaches know that they are watched at all times, not only from the viewing arena but by cameras. They know that. That should not distract from what they're doing if they're doing their job. They just know that there are cameras and they know that nothing is a secret. So yeah, just do whatever is right and you don't even have to worry that anyone is watching you."

That level of transparency — as necessary as it may be — has created an athlete-coach dynamic that's a marked departure from what Laurent Landi grew up with while training and competing for France in the 1990s.

"Now kids sometimes, you don't want to offend them, so you tiptoe," said Landi, who is serving as the head coach of the U.S. women in Japan.

While Landi made it a point to praise USA Gymnastics for being proactive in its attempt to make things safer for athletes at all levels, he also is wary.

Yes, the gymnasts need to be empowered. At the same time, the Olympics don't hand out participation trophies. Biles headlines a group expected to come home with a fistful of medals. Anything less would be a disappointment.

Winning might not be the sole focus anymore, but it still needs to be in the conversation.

"You need expectations," Landi said. "I don't think right now there is expectation. Before the expectation was (under Karolyi), they were not said. We were not told. But we knew the expectation. Everybody knows the expectation."

Landi laughed as he completed the sentence, a glimpse at the thorny relationship the U.S. program has with its recent past. Karolyi took over a program in disarray in 2001 and turned it into one of the most dominant forces in any Olympic sport, using an authoritarian approach that some Nassar survivors say contributed to allowing the former national team doctor's behavior to run unchecked for years.

While USA Gymnastics has undergone a drastic overhaul since the 2016 Olympics — current president Li Li Leung is the fourth person to hold the position since the closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro — the external standards have not.

Biles wonders if that level will be sustainable at least in the short term after Tokyo as the organization searches for middle ground.

"It's hard for a country to stay on top for so many years," she said. "So I do believe there will be a little bit of a downfall but then go back up again because there will be that cultural change that you'll have to go through. I don't think the results will always be the same because so much will be going on at one time when you can't get control of it. That's my only worry."

Finding the right balance is difficult. It's also where real, substantive, long-lasting transformation lies.

Dancing after a meet is one thing. What happens near the end of another muscle-sapping, mentally-draining practice on an anonymous Tuesday is another.

"There's a time to coddle, a time to be positive, but sometimes you've got to hold the law," said Tom Meadows, an elite men's coach at Cypress Academy in Houston. "You tell them, 'You say you want to do this? Well let's go.'"

It's a conversation Biles has had with her coaches in some form or another for years. She isn't sure how long it might take for the next wave to understand the difference between constructive criticism from a

coach designed to maximize an athlete's potential and criticism that crosses over into the personal, or worse.

Biles wants all sports to eradicate the latter.

She's still an advocate, however, for the former.

"There's a big line on what you can and can't do, what you can and can't say to these kids rather than whenever I was growing up," Biles said. "I would say (back then): 'OK, you say that. I'm pissed off but I'm going to do my work.' Now it's like, I've even told the other girls: 'Don't take it to heart. They don't mean to say that to you. So just let it roll off your shoulder.'"

Donations for racial equity have surged. But by how much?

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

More than a year after the police killing of George Floyd and the avalanche of donations toward racial equity initiatives that followed, the actual gift amounts and their destinations remain largely unknown, complicating efforts to gauge the effectiveness of the donations and their recipients.

According to a joint report released Thursday by PolicyLink, a research firm that focuses on advancing racial and economic equity, and The Bridgespan Group, a New York-based consulting firm that has advised billionaire philanthropist MacKenzie Scott on her massive contributions, more than 90% of donors who supported racial equity initiatives in 2018 have yet to report how much they gave in 2020.

The study further highlights the limitations experts have experienced tracking charitable dollars for racial equity causes amidst America's racial reckoning. So far, only \$1.5 billion of the nearly \$12 billion that was pledged can be tracked to actual charitable recipients, according to the philanthropy research organization Candid.

A comparison of Candid's preliminary 2020 data to 2018, the most recent year for which there's comprehensive figures, led researchers to the findings released Thursday. There has always been a lag in reporting philanthropic data since it's tied to tax filings. Because of the limitations, the report is calling for institutional funders to proactively share information about their grants to Candid.

"One of the larger takeaways is around what's not possible to say at this point about the data for 2020," said Laura Lanzerotti, a partner at The Bridgespan Group.

Another complication with tracking the donations has been defining what 'racial equity funding' really means. There is no sector-wide consensus in the donor world about what contributions fall under that term.

Michael McAfee, the president and CEO of PolicyLink, says a consensus is needed to distinguish "between really good acts of charity," and "the liberatory work that is necessary to create" a just and fair society.

Though, Una Osili, the associate dean for research and international programs at the Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, says that might also present more challenges.

"There may be a need for more systematic definition because this work is boundary spanning," she said. But, Osili added, advocacy efforts aimed at influencing public policy - and other things recommended in the report - may not fall under traditional activities for tax-exempt nonprofits.

"That also presents another complication, because generally speaking, those are tracked separately by the IRS as 501(c)(4)s" - social welfare groups that don't get tax exemptions.

COVID-19 takes toll on Catholic clergy in hard-hit countries

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

The coronavirus has taken a heavy toll among Roman Catholic priests and nuns around the world, killing hundreds of them in a handful of the hardest-hit countries alone.

The dead include an Italian parish priest who brought the cinema to his small town in the 1950s; a beloved New York pastor who ministered to teens and the homeless; a nun in India who traveled home to bury her father after he died from COVID-19 only to contract the virus herself.

In some countries, most of those lost were older and lived in nursing or retirement homes where they didn't regularly engage in person-to-person pastoral work. Other places, though, saw a bigger hit to active clergy, accelerating a decades-old decline in the ranks that Pope Francis in 2017 called a "hemorrhage."

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Coronavirus deaths among clergy are not just a Catholic problem, said Andrew Chesnut, chair of Catholic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, with faith leaders across denominations having elevated exposure rates as "spiritual front-line workers" ministering to the sick and dying in hospitals and nursing homes.

But the impact is particularly acute for a church that is experiencing a "perennial priest shortage" in most countries amid difficulties in recruiting seminarians, he added. And with Catholicism placing a greater emphasis on the role of the priest compared with some other denominations, the losses are keenly felt.

"If you already have so few priests and they're being decimated by COVID-19," Chesnut said, "of course that affects the church's ability to minister to its parishioners."

INDIA

Catholics are a small minority in India, comprising about 20 million of the 1.38 billion people in the mostly Hindu nation, according to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

But soaring reports of deaths among the clergy so alarmed the Rev. Suresh Mathew during a devastating second wave of the coronavirus this spring that he began emailing bishops nationwide, asking for daily updates. Many mornings, he woke up to multiple alerts.

"It was a shock," said Mathew, a priest at Holy Redeemer's Church in New Delhi.

Roughly two priests and nuns were dying every day in April. The rate doubled in May, when Mathew recorded the deaths of 129 nuns and 116 priests.

The worst of the pandemic has abated in India, but not before he compiled a list of more than 500 priests and nuns lost since mid-April.

One of those losses hit close to home: Sister Josephine Ekka of the Surya Nagar convent at his parish. She had traveled to bury her father in the village of Jharsuguda in eastern India, only to fall ill herself.

Ekka joined the community in September 2020 amid the pandemic and became responsible for the liturgy and organizing the choir at a time when church attendance was limited. She was remembered for her kindness and devotion to the poor.

In the western state of Gujarat, where vaccinations were stalled by a powerful cyclone that hit as the pandemic surged, the Rev. Cedric Prakash of St. Ignatius Loyola Church has been mourning five priests.

They include the Rev. Jerry Sequeira, a close friend who on Easter Sunday baptized a newborn whose father died of COVID-19. A day later Sequeira found out that he, too, had contracted the virus.

"His attitude was that 'nothing is going to happen to me, God is good,'" Prakash said. "He was always available to people."

THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says there is no comprehensive count of how many priests and nuns are among the more than 600,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in the United States.

It's well-established, however, that the toll includes dozens upon dozens of nuns who lived in congregate settings across the country, from upstate New York to Milwaukee and Detroit suburbs and beyond. Many were older retirees who dedicated their lives to teaching or nursing.

One order alone, the Felician Sisters, lost 21 nuns at four convents.

"Faith and hope both have played a role in my life as I watch the devastating news of loss," said Sister Mary Jeanine Morozowich of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. "I couldn't go on without believing that there is some purpose, some reason for all of this."

The Rev. Jorge Ortiz-Garay of St. Brigid Church in Brooklyn, New York, died March 27, 2020, and is believed to be the first priest in the U.S. to fall to COVID-19. The 49-year-old, who oversaw the diocese's annual Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day and pilgrimage for thousands of attendees, was remembered by congregants for his devotion to the community and leading youth groups.

Also among the lives lost was Reginald Foster, 81, a Wisconsin-born priest who served for four decades as one of the Vatican's top experts on Latin. He died at a Milwaukee nursing home on Christmas Day.

ITALY

Italy was one of the hottest of hot spots early on in the pandemic.

Through March of this year, 292 mostly older diocesan priests died of the virus, according to news outlets

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of the Italian bishops conference.

SIR, the conference's news agency, noted that the toll nearly equaled the 299 new ordinations in Italy for all of 2021.

Among the dead was the Rev. Raffaele Falco, a priest in Ercolano, near Naples. The 77-year-old was known for using his work to combat the Naples-area crime syndicate, the Camorra.

Also dying was the Rev. Franco Minardi, 94, who arrived in Ozzano Taro in 1950 and served as its priest for 70 years. So committed to rekindling the faith in young people, he arranged for the construction of a theater where he projected the farming town's first movies. His legacy of outreach also includes a tennis court and a game room.

Sister Maria Ortensia Turati, 88, was one of several nuns who died at a convent in the northern town of Tortona. Trained as a social worker, she served as mother general of the Little Missionary Sisters of Charity from 1993 to 2005 and founded missions in the Philippines and Ivory Coast.

BRAZIL

Through March of this year, at least 1,400 priests in Brazil contracted COVID-19 and at least 65 of them plus three bishops died, according to a commission linked to the National Conference of Bishops.

Among them was Cardinal Eusebio Scheid, 88. He became Rio de Janeiro's archbishop in 2001 and was named cardinal two years later by then-Pope John Paul II. In his 60 years in the church, he was known for his deep interest in the quality of the education for priests.

Scheid was also known for a comment some understood as political, others as a gaffe; he referred to then-President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as "chaotic" instead of Catholic. After a minor uproar, Scheid softened his tone, saying Silva sounded "confusing" on matters of faith.

25,000 troops deployed to quell South Africa riots, 117 dead

By ANDREW MELDRUM and MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — In one of the largest deployments of soldiers since the end of white minority rule, 25,000 South African troops began taking up positions Thursday to help quell weeklong riots sparked by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma. At least 117 people have been killed in the violence, authorities said.

The government said 10,000 soldiers were on the streets by Thursday morning patrolling alongside police, and the South African National Defence Force had also called up all of its reserve force of 12,000 troops.

In a show of strength, a convoy of more than a dozen armored personnel carriers brought soldiers into Gauteng province, South Africa's most populous, which includes the largest city, Johannesburg, and the capital, Pretoria.

Buses, trucks, airplanes and helicopters were also being used to move the large deployment of troops to trouble spots in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal province that have seen violence in mainly poor areas.

The unrest 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.

Protests in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal quickly escalated into a spree of theft in township areas, although it has not spread to South Africa's seven other provinces, where police are on alert.

More than 2,200 people have been arrested for theft and vandalism and 117 people have died, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, acting minister in the presidency said Thursday. Many were trampled to death in chaotic stampedes when shops were being looted, according to police.

"These are not demonstrations. This is economic sabotage and we are investigating with a view to apprehending the instigators," Ntshavheni said at a briefing Thursday. One person has been arrested and 11 others are under surveillance for inciting and planning the unrest, she said.

The armed patrols have brought stability to Gauteng, authorities said. Army troops stood guard at the large Maponya mall in Soweto, which was one of the few retail centers not badly hit by the rampage but remained closed.

Volunteer groups cleaned up shattered glass and debris from shops that had been stormed and looted

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in Johannesburg's Soweto, Alexandra and Vosloorus areas.

"I spoke to some of the guys who are unemployed in my area to come and help. The mayor supported us with transport to get here. We came here with two buses," said George Moswetsa, a resident of Vosloorus in eastern Johannesburg who was helping to clean up a mall that had been trashed.

The unrest, however, continued Thursday in KwaZulu-Natal, Zuma's home province. There were renewed attacks on shopping centers and several factories and warehouses were smoldering after being hit by arson attacks.

Police discovered more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition in Durban on Wednesday night, which Minister of Police Bheki Cele said belonged to people who were instigating the violent riots in the province.

The continued violence in KwaZulu-Natal appears well-planned, said South African analyst William Gumede. "In KwaZulu-Natal, it's well-coordinated, well-funded. If you look at it, strategic commercial hubs were blocked, strategic roads were blocked at really key points. It was very organized," said Gumede, chairman of the Democracy Works Foundation, a group supporting governance in Africa.

Zuma, throughout his political career, including his nine years as president, acquired many allies in South Africa's military and security services who were reluctant to respond to the violence in his home province, Gumede said.

"The arson, the looting and then the burning of malls, the burning of warehouses, I mean, that indicates a really strategic destruction of the economy of KwaZulu-Natal," said Gumede. "There's a whole lot of organization behind that."

Soldiers and police worked to reopen the N2 and N3 toll highways, which have been closed for days as burned-out trucks blocked the roads. The highways are important transport routes carrying fuel, food and other goods to all parts of the country and their prolonged closure threatens to cause shortages of essential goods.

The rail line to the strategic Indian Ocean ports of Durban and Richard's Bay was also closed by the unrest, the state-owned transportation company, Transnet said. The 688-kilometer (427-mile) rail line ferries hundreds of tons of goods weekly to the ports, including vehicles, gold ore, aviation fuel, petrol, wheat and citrus fruit. The goods are then shipped to markets in Asia, Europe, and the United States.

Security forces increased their presence in the Durban suburb of Phoenix, where the riots caused racial tensions to flare. The predominantly Indian residents of Phoenix had been patrolling their area against the unrest and are accused of shooting Black people suspected of being rioters.

"Lives have been lost. The communities have a standoff and are in a bad way because it is the Indian community and the neighboring communities, who are African," Cele told a news conference in Phoenix, where he said 15 people had been killed.

Gumede said the way forward for South Africa is to prosecute the perpetrators, both those that stole property and those who may have instigated the violence.

"This is going to be very important," the analyst said. "First to restore the rule of law in South Africa and to prevent impunity, because if people can get away with looting without being prosecuted, they will do it again. ... So it's going to be very important. I think we may have to set up special courts."

In neighboring Zimbabwe, the police issued a warning Thursday against people getting goods stolen from South Africa.

"With sad events happening in South Africa, the Zimbabwe Republic Police will not hesitate to arrest anyone who has received or is in possession of stolen goods from South Africa," the police statement said, advising people to have receipts for verification that goods were purchased legally. "A criminal in South Africa is a criminal in Zimbabwe."

The largest deployment of soldiers since South Africa won democracy in 1994 was in March 2020, when 70,000 army troops were sent out to enforce the country's strict lockdown to combat the spread of COVID-19.

WHO chief says it was 'premature' to rule out COVID lab leak

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By FRANK JORDANS and MARIA CHENG Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The head of the World Health Organization acknowledged it was premature to rule out a potential link between the COVID-19 pandemic and a laboratory leak, and he said Thursday he is asking China to be more transparent as scientists search for the origins of the coronavirus.

In a rare departure from his usual deference to powerful member countries, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said getting access to raw data had been a challenge for the international team that traveled to China earlier this year to investigate the source of COVID-19. The first human cases were identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Tedros told reporters that the U.N. health agency based in Geneva is “asking actually China to be transparent, open and cooperate, especially on the information, raw data that we asked for at the early days of the pandemic.”

He said there had been a “premature push” to rule out the theory that the virus might have escaped from a Chinese government lab in Wuhan - undermining WHO’s own March report, which concluded that a laboratory leak was “extremely unlikely.”

“I was a lab technician myself, I’m an immunologist, and I have worked in the lab, and lab accidents happen,” Tedros said. “It’s common.”

In recent months, the idea that the pandemic started somehow in a laboratory — and perhaps involved an engineered virus — has gained traction, especially with President Joe Biden ordering a review of U.S. intelligence to assess the possibility in May.

China has struck back aggressively, arguing that attempts to link the origins of COVID-19 to a lab are politically motivated and has suggested that the outbreak might have started abroad. At WHO’s annual meeting of health ministers in the spring, China said that the future search for COVID-19’s origins should continue — in other countries.

Most scientists suspect that the coronavirus originated in bats, but the exact route by which it first jumped into people - via an intermediary animal or in some other way - has not yet been determined. It typically takes decades to narrow down the natural source of an animal virus like Ebola or SARS.

Tedros said that “checking what happened, especially in our labs, is important” to nailing down if the pandemic had any laboratory links.

“We need information, direct information on what the situation of this lab was before and at the start of the pandemic,” the WHO chief said, adding that China’s cooperation was critical. “If we get full information, we can exclude (the lab connection).”

Throughout the pandemic, Tedros has repeatedly praised China for its speed and transparency despite senior WHO officials internally griping about obfuscation from their Chinese counterparts.

Last year, The Associated Press found that WHO was frustrated by a lack of details from China during the early stages of the coronavirus’ spread and showed that China was clamping down on the hidden hunt for the pandemic’s origins.

Numerous public health experts have also called for an independent examination of COVID-19’s origins, arguing WHO does not have the political clout to conduct such a forensic analysis and that the U.N. agency has failed after more than a year to extract critical details from China.

Jamie Metzl, who has led a group of scientists calling for a broader origins investigation, welcomed Tedros’ comments but said it was “deeply unfortunate and dangerous” that there were no current plans for a probe led by experts beyond the U.N. health agency, saying that China has repeatedly blocked requests for all relevant records and samples.

Georgetown University law professor Lawrence Gostin, an expert in public health law, said Tedros’ unusual plea for Chinese cooperation underlines how weak WHO is.

“WHO has no powers or political heft to demand access to information critical for global health,” Gostin, who also is director of a WHO Collaborating Center on Public Health Law and Human Rights, “All Tedros can do is use the bully pulpit, but it will fall on deaf ears,” he said.

Any WHO-led mission to China also requires government approval for all experts who travel to the

country, as well as permission to visit field sites and final approval on any trip report.

Tedros' appeal for transparency was echoed by German Health Minister Jens Spahn, who urged Chinese officials to allow the investigation into the origins of the virus to proceed.

"We do appreciate the cooperation of the Chinese government so far for the first mission," Spahn said. "But that's not yet enough."

Palestinians shaken but steadfast as PA suppresses dissent

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Nearly two weeks after he was severely beaten by Palestinian security forces, Akil Awawdeh is still short of breath, still shielding his bruised chest with his hand and still haunted by the screams inside the police station.

"Never in my life have I seen such brutality," said Awawdeh, a local radio reporter who has been covering Mideast unrest for more than a decade. "The sound of people screaming inside the police station, to this day I still hear it. It echoes in my head ... I can't forget."

He was among several people who were beaten and detained at a police station on July 5, in one of the most violent incidents in weeks of protests against the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The demonstrations were sparked by the death of Nizar Banat, an outspoken critic of the PA who died shortly after being violently arrested by Palestinian security forces last month. The PA is widely seen as corrupt and increasingly authoritarian, and it has faced mounting dissent since calling off the first elections in 15 years in April.

Palestinian security forces, including what appeared to be plainclothes officers, violently dispersed the protesters, drawing expressions of concern from the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the State Department.

Despite the crackdown, the U.S. and European countries still view the PA as a crucial partner in managing the conflict, especially after the Gaza war in May. Western countries have trained and equipped PA security forces, who work with Israel to suppress Hamas and other armed groups — a policy that is extremely unpopular among Palestinians.

The security forces arrested at least six activists when they gathered in central Ramallah, where the PA is headquartered, on the evening of July 5. Family members, fearful that the detainees would meet the same fate as Banat, went to the police station to check on them.

Ubai Aboudi, a Palestinian-American civil society activist who was among those arrested, said his wife came with their three children, his 77-year-old father, who is a retired professor, and his brother. He said he and the original detainees were not physically abused, but that security officers turned their family members away.

"It wasn't actually a political demonstration, the families were simply requesting to see us," he said. His wife chanted "State of freedom, no political arrests!"

Awawdeh said he and a colleague arrived at the sit-in and began filming. When a security officer told them to stop filming they identified themselves as journalists but complied with the request, he said. Then riot police gathered in front of the station and an officer ordered everyone to leave within 10 minutes.

About three minutes later, the attack began.

Multiple witnesses said the police attacked everyone on the street — activists, journalists and observers — firing pepper spray, beating them with batons and pulling women by their hair.

Diala Ayesh, a human rights lawyer who was there as an observer, said she was handcuffed and dragged into the police station, and that some of the policemen harassed her and struck her on "sensitive places" on her body. She was among at least 15 people who were detained.

Once inside, Awawdeh and another man were dragged into a small room and severely beaten with batons. "I just kept telling them I'm a journalist," Awawdeh said. "I told them from the moment I arrived that I was a journalist."

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He was left on the floor of the cell until a physician who was among those detained alerted the police, telling them his pulse was weak. He and the other man were hospitalized, and Awawdeh was treated for severe bruising on his chest. All the detainees were released over the next 24 hours.

More than a week later, Awawdeh was visibly shaken and seemed to struggle for air while recounting his experience to The Associated Press. He paused several times and held his hand to his chest throughout the interview.

Aboudi says his wife and children, a seven-year-old and five-year-old twins, were left on the street when their mother, grandfather and uncle were detained. He said they are "deeply traumatized."

Palestinian officials have not commented publicly on the events of July 5. A police spokesman referred questions to a government spokesman, who did not respond to requests for comment.

Aboudi says Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh called his father, who had once been his professor at Birzeit University, to apologize. "His apology is not accepted, because he promised accountability and we did not see any accountability," Aboudi said.

Saleh Hijazi, the deputy regional director of Amnesty International, said the Palestinian Authority has attacked peaceful protesters in the past, going back at least to 2011. Israel also heavily restricts political activity in the occupied territories, and its security forces often clash with Palestinian protesters and detain prominent activists.

"Palestinians are getting it from both sides," Hijazi said. "The message from both authorities, Israel being the one with ultimate power, is that there is no freedom of expression or assembly for Palestinians."

If the PA's crackdown is aimed at halting the protests, it hasn't worked.

Demonstrators gathered in Ramallah again last Sunday, days after the attack on the sit-in. Awawdeh was back at his radio station this week and says he will continue to work as a reporter. Aboudi has been summoned to appear in court in September and could be taken into custody again, but he too says he is determined to continue his work.

"People are still shouting that we demand our freedom," he said. "We want basic human rights, we want freedom, we want emancipation. We don't care who has violated our rights, but these kinds of violations we will not tolerate."

Athletes go it alone in Tokyo as families watch from afar

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

Michael Phelps reached for his mother's hand through a chainlink fence near the pool. The 19-year-old swimmer had just won his first Olympic medal — gold, of course — at the 2004 Athens Games, and he wanted to share it with the woman who raised him on her own.

That kind of moment between loved ones won't be happening at the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics.

No spectators — local or foreign — will be allowed at the vast majority of venues, where athletes will hang medals around their own necks to protect against spreading the coronavirus. No handshakes or hugs on the podium, either.

"I like to feed off of the crowd," defending all-around champion gymnast Simone Biles said, "so I'm a little bit worried about how I'll do under those circumstances."

Catching sight of familiar faces during competition can bolster an athlete on a big stage. It helped Matthew Centrowitz at the U.S. track trials, where fans were allowed.

"Seeing my family in the crowd and hearing them gave me a little sense of comfort, and what I needed to hear and see to calm my nerves a little bit," said Centrowitz, the defending Olympic 1,500-meter champion.

The youngest athlete on the U.S. team in Tokyo calls it "weird" that her family won't be in the stands.

"They're usually at all my meets," said Katie Grimes, a 15-year-old swimmer from Las Vegas.

Katie Hoff was the same age as Grimes when she was the youngest member of the U.S. team in Athens. Nerves got to her in her first event, and Hoff hyperventilated and vomited on the pool deck.

"I hope us older swimmers can show them the ropes a little bit and create that family environment," three-time Olympian Katie Ledecky said. "We will make sure we stay in touch with our families and keep

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them connected to what we're doing."

The decision to prohibit fans was made for health and safety concerns. The Games will be held during a state of emergency in Tokyo, with rising coronavirus infections in a country where 16.8% of the population is fully vaccinated. Variant strains of the coronavirus are emerging around the world, too.

Those reaction shots of excited, shocked or crying family members in the stands? Forget it. Singing, chanting and cheering among flag-waving fans at the venues? TV producers will have to look elsewhere. Phelps' son, Boomer, who was 3 months old at the time, became an adorable sight at the Olympic pool in 2016. No kids allowed this time.

The people who raised them, comforted them, financed them, and encouraged them through injury and defeat will have to be content to keep up with their athletes through calls, texts and video chats, when they're not watching the competition on various devices.

"She said, 'On TV, I can see it better anyway,'" Dutch swimmer Kira Toussaint said of her mother, Jolanda de Rover, a gold medalist swimmer at the 1984 Olympics.

Building support and camaraderie among athletes who usually compete individually has taken on new importance for coaches during the pandemic. They're turning to veterans to inform and reassure younger first-timers.

"We're going to have to rely on each other a lot more than we would have to if our loved ones were able to come to Tokyo to watch," said Lindsay Mintenko, national team director for the American swimmers. "The bond might be stronger because we don't have that outlet."

American high jumper Vashti Cunningham will have her coach, Randall Cunningham, who is also her father, on hand. But she'll be missing the rest of the family.

"It just feels good to go and eat with them, for them to be at the Bible studies with me, just everything, going to the stores," she said. "But it doesn't really matter to me if there are fans or not. I'm just really excited to go out there and jump. I do wish that our families could come and watch, though."

American discus thrower Mason Finley is prepared to hunker down at the athletes village with his Nintendo Switch for endless gaming while his pregnant wife and two dogs wait at home.

"I'm just going to kind of nest in there and stay entertained," he said.

Some athletes' families will host watch parties back home. Biles' mother, Nellie, won't attend.

"I will be home watching gymnastics by myself," she said. "I just get too nervous."

The family of swimmer Chad le Clos is flying to the United States to watch on TV because the competition will air at 3 a.m. in their native South Africa.

"It must be terrible to watch me at 3 in the morning," Le Clos said. "Then what do you do afterwards?"

Caeleb Dressel, the world's dominant male swimmer, barely gets to see, let alone spend time with his wife and family at major meets.

"It's not something I'm dependent on," he said. "I know they will be back home and you can feel that energy, and I can text or FaceTime whenever I need to."

Nellie Biles and her husband run a gymnastics training center in Spring, Texas, so she knows about COVID-19 protocols and restrictions. Still, she thinks having spectators in the 12,000-seat venue in Tokyo would have worked.

"We could social distance and not see each other. That's how huge their complex is, their venues are," she said. "It's hard for me to understand that they cannot make accommodations. Of course, that's just me being selfish. This will be one gymnastics event that I will never forget because I will not be present."

How the expanded child tax credit payments work

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

The Biden administration is beginning to distribute expanded child tax credit payments, giving parents on average \$423 this month, with payments continuing through the end of the year.

President Joe Biden increased the size of the tax credit as part of his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, as well as making it fully available to families without any tax obligations. The benefit is set to expire

after a year, but Biden is pushing for it to be extended through 2025 and ultimately made permanent.

A closer look at how the payments work and who can receive them:

HOW BIG ARE THE CREDITS?

The credit is \$3,600 annually for children under age 6 and \$3,000 for children ages 6 to 17. But six months of payments will be advanced on a monthly basis through the end of the year. This means eligible families will receive \$300 monthly for each child under 6 and \$250 per child older than that.

This is a change from last year, when the credit totaled \$2,000 per child. Families who did not owe the government income taxes were also unable to claim the credit, a restriction that Biden and Congress lifted.

ARE THERE LIMITS ON WHO CAN QUALIFY?

The payments begin to phase out at incomes of \$75,000 for individuals, \$112,500 for heads of household and \$150,000 for married couples. Higher-income families with incomes of \$200,000 for individuals and \$400,000 for married couples can still receive the previous \$2,000 credit.

HOW CAN YOU APPLY?

If you filed taxes and the IRS already has your bank account information, the payments should be deposited directly into your account on the 15th of each month. The Treasury Department estimates that 35.2 million families will receive payments in July. If you didn't file taxes in 2019 or 2020, you might still be eligible for the credit and can apply here: <https://www.irs.gov/credits-deductions/child-tax-credit-non-filer-sign-up-tool>.

WHY ARE THE PAYMENTS MONTHLY?

Advocates say the monthly payments can help smooth out an impoverished family's income, making it easier for them to budget and less dependent on high-interest lenders.

CAN THE MONTHLY PAYMENTS BE STOPPED?

Yes. Some people are used to the child tax credit enabling them to get a refund on their taxes. They might not want the monthly advance and about 1 million people have opted out, according to administration officials. People can unenroll here: <https://www.irs.gov/credits-deductions/child-tax-credit-update-portal>.

For pregnant women, pandemic made hunt for drug rehab harder

By SALLY HO and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

After using drugs on and off for years, Megan Sims wanted to get clean again. But she couldn't bring herself to stop during the coronavirus pandemic, even when she discovered she was going to have a baby. She had been to rehab before but couldn't fathom how to do it while pregnant.

Sims, a 28-year-old from North Carolina, was forced to confront her heroin addiction like never before when her drug use was reported to child protective services last summer.

"None of my relapses had had a consequence until this last one," she said.

Social workers urged her to go to rehab, but none of the services were adequate because most substance abuse programs consider pregnancy to be high risk. Through word of mouth, Sims found UNC Horizons, a substance use disorder treatment program at the University of North Carolina's School of Medicine designed for pregnant women and mothers.

"I needed somewhere to go that would accept me and be able to take care of me being pregnant," Sims said. "Horizons saved my life."

Experts say programs like Horizons, which allow children to stay with their mothers during substance abuse and mental health treatment, are the kind of full-spectrum rehab needed to reduce the number of babies born to mothers who, like other Americans, are increasingly struggling with drug use.

With the rise of the opioid epidemic, there has been a growing movement among health care professionals and state social workers to help mothers get sober rather than punish their drug use by taking away their babies, which can have lifelong effects. But such programs are a rarity in the world of rehab, and experts fear that even more limitations during the pandemic will stifle what little progress has been made.

The Associated Press sought the number of babies who were exposed to drugs in all 50 states between 2018 and 2020 to assess the pandemic's toll on families and found that most child welfare agencies are

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only beginning to grasp the problem of drug use among pregnant women.

Several states have made policy changes in the last three years to help instead of penalize those women, but 31 states couldn't or wouldn't provide data showing whether more babies were being born exposed to drugs during the pandemic. That's despite a federal mandate to report those numbers, showing how far there is to go.

Hendrée Jones, Horizon's executive director, said she's seen a rise in the number of deaths and relapses among women who were stable in their recovery before the pandemic, an anecdotal trend in line with other populations struggling with drug abuse during the upheaval to American life over the past year and a half.

At the same time, Horizons was forced to cut its capacity because of social distancing. It has always had long waits for its 40 beds, but since the pandemic, the center is down eight spots because it can't have roommates share its apartments. Jones worries about the women the program hasn't been able to serve.

"The severity of substance use has increased markedly since the pandemic," Jones said of her client base. "That's really scary."

That comes amid a fourfold increase in opioid use disorders among pregnant women in the past two decades, according to the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare.

The federal government responded by requiring states in 2016 to track and address drug-exposed infants and by allowing states in 2018 to repurpose some foster care money to help families stay together. Much of that work, however, has been disrupted by the pandemic.

"The federal changes haven't really translated to local action," said Dr. Stephen Patrick, director of the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy who is a top national expert on drug-exposed babies. "States are kind of confused on what's supposed to be done and missing the broader picture."

Child welfare agencies are still learning to navigate the new policy implications. In about half the country, drug use during pregnancy is considered child abuse and doctors are required to report suspected cases, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports reproductive rights and tracks state laws on substance use during pregnancy.

More states are shifting away from removing babies, in an acknowledgement that the punitive era of the 1980s "crack baby" scare proved to be overblown and racially divisive.

The effort to support moms wanting to get sober is rooted in decades of research showing the lifelong consequences of removing a baby — especially if they show no signs of being affected by the mother's drug use — and negative outcomes for children stuck in the overburdened and expensive foster care system.

"Punishment doesn't make anybody a better mother or make them want to use less," Jones said. "If anything, it exacerbates it. When children are removed from mothers, it's a risk for relapse."

For pregnant women facing this reality, the disconnect begins with trying to find help.

Findtreatment.gov, the online directory run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, doesn't include a search function for pregnancy or even gender.

And while 19 states have or fund drug treatment programs for pregnant women, only 10 states protect them from discrimination in publicly funded rehab programs that may not want to take on the risk of treating them, the Guttmacher Institute said.

Sims, who went to rehab at Horizons and gave birth to a healthy son in April during treatment, said the program was exactly what she needed. She called it a safe, judgment-free place to get sober while allowing her to be with her greatest motivation — her child.

"Once I had the baby, I felt I had purpose again," Sims said.

US unemployment claims fall to 360,000, a new pandemic low

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits has reached its lowest level since the pandemic struck last year, further evidence that the U.S. economy and job market are quickly rebounding from the pandemic recession.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell by 26,000 last week to

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360,000. The weekly tally, a proxy for layoffs, has fallen more or less steadily since topping 900,000 in early January.

The U.S. recovery from the recession is proceeding so quickly that many forecasters have predicted that the economy will expand this year by roughly 7%. That would be the most robust calendar-year growth since 1984.

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines has sharply reduced new viral cases — from a seven-day average of around 250,000 in early January to roughly 25,000 recently — despite a recent uptick. As the health crisis has receded, cooped-up Americans have increasingly emerged from their homes, eager to spend on things they had missed during pandemic lockdowns — dinners out, a round of drinks, sports and entertainment events, vacation getaways and shopping trips.

In response, businesses have scrambled to meet the unexpected surge in customer demand: They are posting job openings — a record 9.2 million in May — faster than they can fill them. The worker shortage in many industries is causing employers to raise wages and in some cases to raise prices to offset their higher labor costs.

The supply of potential hires is being held back by a variety of factors. Many Americans still have health concerns about working around large numbers of people. Many people, mostly women, are no longer working or looking for work because they had to care for children when schools and day care centers shut down. And roughly 2.6 million older workers took advantage of enlarged stock portfolios and home values to retire early.

A temporary \$300-a-week federal unemployment benefit, on top of regular state jobless aid, may be enabling some people to be more selective in looking for and taking jobs. Roughly half the states plan to stop paying the supplement by the end of July in what proponents say is an effort to nudge more of the unemployed to seek jobs.

“As life normalizes and the service sector continues to gain momentum, we expect initial jobless claims to remain in a downtrend,” said Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the consulting firm Maria Fiorini Ramirez.

Last month, employers added a hefty 850,000 jobs, and hourly pay rose a solid 3.6% compared with a year ago — faster than the pre-pandemic annual pace and evidence that companies are being compelled to pay more to attract and keep workers. Even so, the United States remains about 6.8 million jobs short of the number it had in February 2020, just before the virus erupted across the country and paralyzed the economy.

And weekly applications for unemployment benefits remain high by historical standards: Just before the pandemic, they amounted to about 220,000 a week. All told, 13.8 million Americans were receiving some type of unemployment aid during the week of June 26, down from 30.6 million a year earlier.

\$10 million rewards bolster White House anti-ransomware bid

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — The State Department will offer rewards up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification of anyone engaged in foreign state-sanctioned malicious cyber activity, including ransomware attacks, against critical U.S. infrastructure. A task force set up by the White House will coordinate efforts to stem the ransomware scourge.

The Biden administration is also out with a website, stopransomware.gov, that offers the public resources for countering the threat and building more resilience into networks, a senior administration official told reporters.

In another move Thursday, the Treasury Department’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network will work with banks, technology companies and others on better anti-money-laundering efforts for cryptocurrency and more rapid tracing of ransomware proceeds, which are paid in virtual currency.

Officials are hoping to seize more extortion payments in ransomware cases, as the FBI did in recouping most of the \$4.4 million ransom paid by Colonial Pipeline in May.

The rewards come from the State Department’s Rewards for Justice program. It will offer a tips-reporting

mechanism on the dark web to protect sources who might identify cyber attackers and/or their locations, and reward payments may include cryptocurrency, the agency said in a statement.

The administration official would not comment on whether the U.S. government had a hand in Tuesday's online disappearance of REvil, the Russian-linked gang responsible for a July 2 supply chain ransomware attack that crippled well over 1,000 organizations globally by targeting Florida-based software provider Kaseya. Ransomware scrambles entire networks of data, which criminals unlock when they get paid.

Cybersecurity experts say REvil may have decided to drop out of sight and rebrand under a new name, as it and several other ransomware gangs have done in the past to try to throw off law enforcement.

Another possibility is that Russian President Vladimir Putin actually heeded President Joe Biden's warning of repercussions if he didn't rein in ransomware criminals, who enjoy safe harbor in Russia and allied states.

That seemed improbable, however, given Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov's statement to reporters Wednesday that he was unaware of REvil sites disappearing.

"I don't know which group disappeared where," he said. He said the Kremlin deems cybercrimes "unacceptable" and meriting of punishment, but analysts say they have seen no evidence of a crackdown by Putin.

The White House updated lawmakers Wednesday on the administration's response to the recent rash of high-profile ransomware attacks, a threat it has deemed a national security priority.

Sen. Angus King, an independent from Maine, said he was impressed with the "thoroughness with which they are confronting this issue," particularly with outreach to the private sector.

Uncovering boarding school history makes for monumental task

By SUSAN MONTROYA 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 immediately recognized their significance.

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.

"When I pulled that photo out, it just brought a tear to my eye. 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 Cabinet agency, has promised a comprehensive review while acknowledging it would be a painful and difficult process.

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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.

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.

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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 monthslong 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."

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 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."

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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. 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.”

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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.

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."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, July 16, the 197th day of 2021. There are 168 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On July 16, 1790, a site along the Potomac River was designated the permanent seat of the United States government; the area became Washington, D.C.

On this date:

In 1909, the Audi auto company was founded in Zwickau, Germany, by August Horch.

In 1945, the United States exploded its first experimental atomic bomb in the desert of Alamogordo (ahl-ah-moh-GOHR'-doh), New Mexico; the same day, the heavy cruiser USS Indianapolis left Mare (mar-AY') Island Naval Shipyard in California on a secret mission to deliver atomic bomb components to Tinian Island in the Marianas.

In 1951, the novel "The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger was first published by Little, Brown and Co.

In 1964, as he accepted the Republican presidential nomination in San Francisco, Barry M. Goldwater declared that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and that "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."

In 1969, Apollo 11 blasted off from Cape Kennedy on the first manned mission to the surface of the moon.

In 1980, former California Gov. Ronald Reagan won the Republican presidential nomination at the party's convention in Detroit.

In 1994, the first of 21 pieces of comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 smashed into Jupiter, to the joy of astronomers awaiting the celestial fireworks.

In 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife, Carolyn, and her sister, Lauren Bessette (bih-SEHT'), died when their single-engine plane, piloted by Kennedy, plunged into the Atlantic Ocean near Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

In 2002, the Irish Republican Army issued an unprecedented apology for the deaths of "noncombatants" over 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland.

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In 2004, Martha Stewart was sentenced to five months in prison and five months of home confinement by a federal judge in New York for lying about a stock sale.

In 2008, Florida resident Casey Anthony, whose 2-year-old daughter, Caylee, had been missing a month, was arrested on charges of child neglect, making false official statements and obstructing a criminal investigation. (Casey Anthony was later acquitted at trial of murdering Caylee, whose skeletal remains were found in December 2008; she was convicted of lying to police.)

In 2015, a jury in Centennial, Colorado, convicted James Holmes of 165 counts of murder, attempted murder and other charges in the 2012 Aurora movie theater rampage that left 12 people dead. A gunman unleashed a barrage of fire at a recruiting center and another U.S. military site a few miles apart in Chattanooga, Tennessee, killing four Marines and a sailor before he was shot to death by police; authorities identified the gunman as Kuwaiti-born Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez of Tennessee.

Ten years ago: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez left his country for Cuba to begin chemotherapy, vowing to win his fight against cancer and calling for his political allies to stay united in his absence. (Chavez, who would undergo additional cancer surgery and treatment in Cuba, died in March 2013.)

Five years ago: Republican presidential nominee-apparent Donald Trump formally introduced his running mate, Mike Pence, during an event in New York, hailing the Indiana governor as his "first choice" and his "partner in the campaign" a day after announcing the selection on Twitter. Basketball Hall of Famer Nate Thurmond, 74, died in San Francisco.

One year ago: The coronavirus surged in hot spots around the country; Florida reported nearly 14,000 new cases. Georgia Republican Gov. Brian Kemp sued the city of Atlanta over the city's COVID-19 restrictions, including the requirement to wear masks in public; Kemp said local governments couldn't impose measures that were more or less restrictive than statewide executive orders, which didn't require masks. (Kemp dropped the lawsuit in August.) Target, CVS Health and Publix Super Markets joined the growing list of major retailers requiring customers to wear masks. Oakland's City Council authorized \$32.7 million in payments to settle lawsuits over a 2016 fire that killed 36 people at an illegally converted warehouse during an electronic music party.

Today's Birthdays: Soul singer William Bell is 82. International Tennis Hall of Famer Margaret Court is 79. College Football Hall of Famer and football coach Jimmy Johnson is 78. Violinist Pinchas Zukerman is 73. Actor-singer Ruben Blades is 73. Rock composer-musician Stewart Copeland is 69. Playwright Tony Kushner is 65. Actor Faye Grant is 64. Dancer Michael Flatley is 63. Actor Phoebe Cates is 58. Actor Paul Hipp is 58. Actor Daryl "Chill" Mitchell is 56. Actor-comedian Will Ferrell is 54. Actor Jonathan Adams is 54. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Barry Sanders is 53. Actor Rain Pryor is 52. Actor Corey Feldman is 50. Rock musician Ed Kowalczyk (koh-WAHL'-chek) (Live) is 50. Rock singer Ryan McCombs (Drowning Pool) is 47. Actor Jayma Mays is 42. Actor AnnaLynne McCord is 34. Actor-singer James Maslow is 31. Actor Mark Indelicato is 27. Pop singer-musician Luke Hemmings (5 Seconds to Summer) is 25.