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Passport Processing Delays Disrupting Travel Plans

AAA Urges Those Considering International Travel thru 2022 to Initiate Passport Processing Now

July 22, 2021 - A significant increase in the time it is taking the U.S. State Department to process passports is forcing many travelers to postpone previously booked vacations. With that in mind, AAA is urging anyone planning or hoping to travel out of the United States this year or next to initiate the passport process now or risk having those plans derailed by the delays.

"At AAA we are seeing travelers, sometimes entire families, that have been forced to cancel or postpone their trips because passport processing has taken longer than they anticipated," says Terry TenCate, spokesperson for AAA Travel. "One of the first questions we are now asking our clients is about the passport status of all travelers."

At this time, the State Department says passport application is taking more than four months (18 weeks). And, 'expedited' service may only shorten the wait to three months.

AAA travel advisors say passport processing times are three times as long as the average wait time prior to the pandemic. The State Department website indicates the dramatic delays are the result of COVID-related issues and high demand.

"Some travelers with bookings this summer have already had to postpone until next year," TenCate adds. "The cancellation is much more than an inconvenience. It's a costly miscalculation."

The passport delay issue is not just affecting those applying for new passports or renewing passports set to expire. AAA is reminding travelers that many countries now require the passport expiration date to be at least six months after the date of return travel so anyone planning travel through 2022 is strongly urged to begin the passport renewal process now.

Passport Tips for Travelers

Check passport status of everyone with whom you plan to travel

Share passport status information with your travel advisor

Book travel that ensures your return date is at least six months before passport expiration

Initiate passport processing for:

New passport applicants

Passports that have expired or are set to expire within 6 months of travel

Passports that require a name change

Check with your nearest AAA office for your passport photo, application and instructions. For more information, visit AAA Passport Services.

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Region 6B

Redfield Post Early Lead Over Groton Sets Stage For Victory

Redfield Post 92 jumped out to an early lead over Groton Post 39 and took home a 10-6 victory on Wednesday. Redfield Post 92 scored on an error, a double by Cooper Hainy, a single by Camden Osborn, a fielder's choice by Seth Siebrecht, and a walk by Owen Osborn in the first inning.

Bats blistered as Redfield Post 92 collected nine hits and Groton Post 39 tallied 13 in the high-scoring game.

Peyton Osborn led the Redfield Post 92 to victory on the pitcher's mound. The ace lasted seven innings, allowing 13 hits and six runs while striking out five.

Chandler Larson took the loss for Groton Post 39. The hurler surrendered nine runs on seven hits over five innings.

Redfield Post 92 totaled nine hits in the game. Osborn, Hainy, and Christian DeYoung each collected multiple hits for Redfield Post 92. DeYoung, Hainy, and Osborn each managed two hits to lead Redfield Post 92. Redfield Post 92 didn't commit a single error in the field. Siebrecht had the most chances in the field with six.

Groton Post 39 tallied 13 hits. Jonathan Doeden, Larson, Peyton Johnson, and Tate Larson all managed multiple hits for Groton Post 39. Doeden went 3-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Post 39 in hits.

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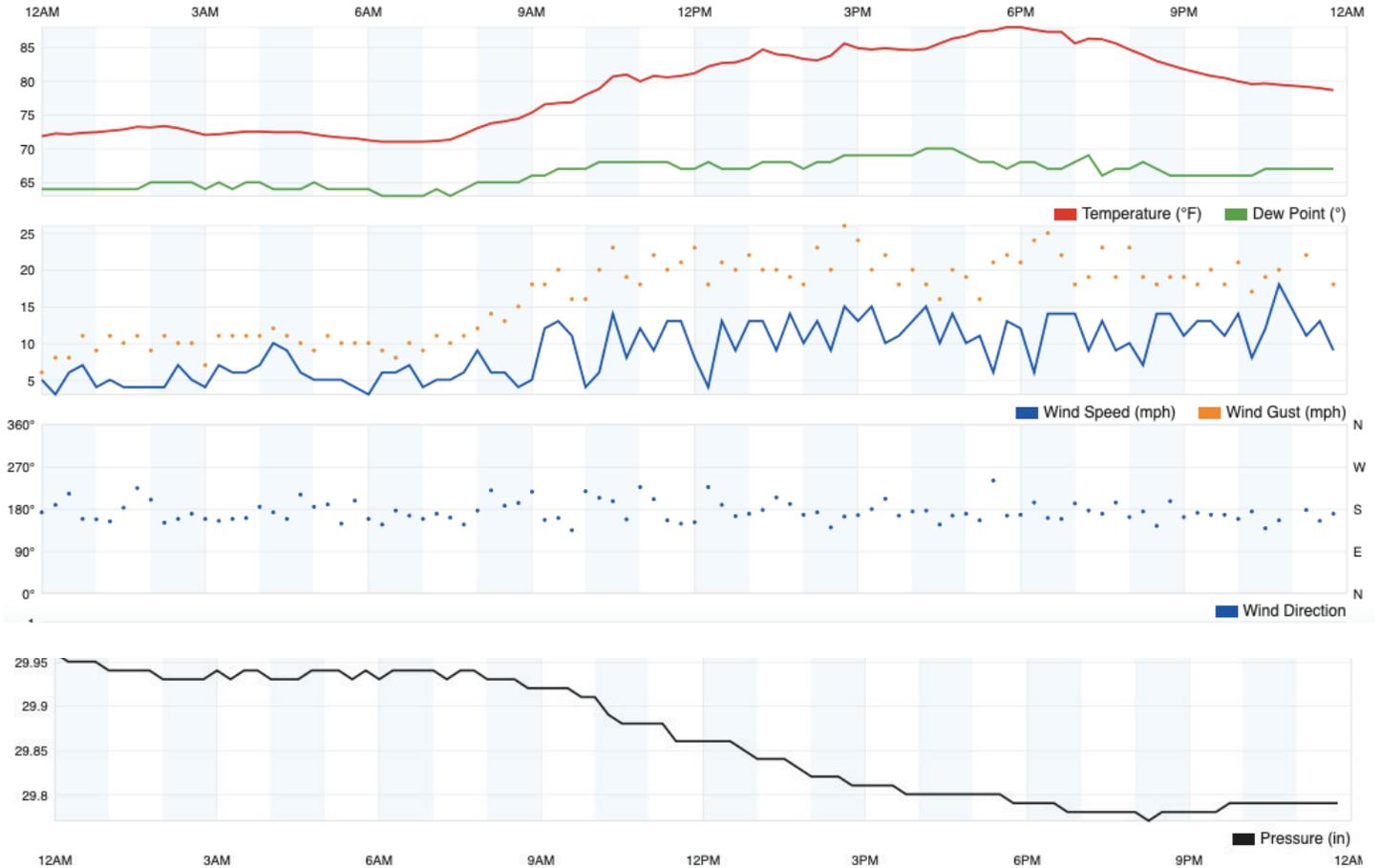
Annual Salad Buffet

The Groton American Legion Auxiliary held its annual Salad Buffet on Wednesday. According to Bonnie Cooper, the event started in 2012 and has been held every year except 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pictured are in back, left to right, Wendy Cooper, Mindi Jones, Mary Sippel, Sam Oswald, and Sippel; and in front, left to right, are Bonnie Cooper, Anna Oswald, Grace Oswald, Tami Zimney and Debra McKiver. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Hot

High: 94 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 69 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny
then Chance
T-storms

High: 92 °F

Friday
Night



Chance
T-storms

Low: 66 °F

Saturday

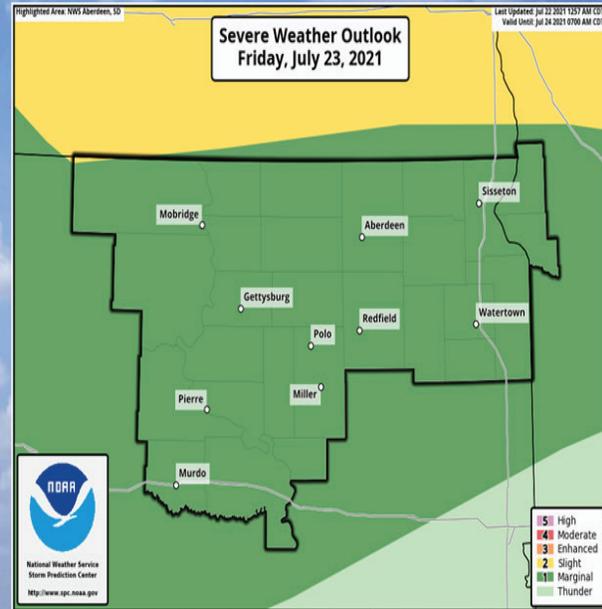
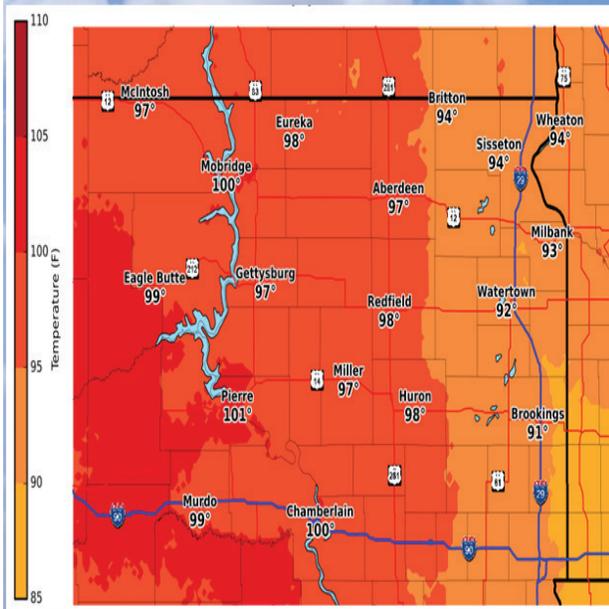


Hot

High: 90 °F

Hot Temperatures Persist Today

Isolated to Scattered Thunderstorms on Friday.
Some Storms Could be Strong to Severe.



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 7/22/2021 4:15 AM Central

Another warm day is expected across the area with highs in the 90s, to around 100 degrees along the Missouri River valley. A frontal boundary crossing the area late tonight through Friday evening will bring isolated to scattered showers and thunderstorms. Some storms could become strong to severe.

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Today in Weather History

July 22, 1926: An estimated F2 tornado moved east across the northern part of Hyde County, destroying two barns.

July 22, 1999: An F0 tornado touched down briefly on a farm southeast of Onida. Over half of the roof of a 40 by 45-foot building was torn off and deposited in a tree belt 200 yards to the north. A grain auger was also damaged when it was pushed up against a granary. A semi-trailer was blown over. About 400 acres of ripe wheat was also flattened, and some sunflowers suffered damage as a result of the tornado.

July 22, 2011: Numerous severe thunderstorms brought hail up to the size of golf balls, damaging winds over 70 mph, along with flash flooding to parts of north central and northeast South Dakota. Most of the hail occurred in Grant and Codington counties. Several roads were flooded by nearly 4 inches of rain in Grant County. Five miles west of South Shore in Codington County, over 3 inches of rain brought flash flooding to several roads. The strong winds were observed in Corson, Walworth, and McPherson counties. About 9 miles west of Long Lake, eighty mph winds ripped a grain bin from the fasteners, pushed the north wall of a garage in, snapped several corral poles, moved a semitrailer four feet, and caused some minor damage to the house. Also, many branches were broken off along with several trees uprooted.

1988: Dust devils are not a unique phenomenon, but usually they stay minimal. This was not the case in Dickinson County, Iowa where a powerful dust devil developed on the edge of Lake Okoboji. It picked up whole sections of several docks and swept away all of the loose dirt in the area. Estimated winds exceeded 60 mph.

1993: The levee, holding back the flooding Mississippi River at Kaskaskia, Illinois, ruptures, forcing the town's people to flee on barges. The incident at Kaskaskia was the most dramatic event of the flood. At 9:48 a.m., the levee broke, leaving the people of Kaskaskia with no escape route other than two Army Corp of Engineers barges. By 2 p.m., the entire town was underwater.

1918 - A single bolt of lightning struck 504 sheep dead in their tracks at the Wasatch National Forest in Utah. Sheep often herd together in storms, and as a result the shock from the lightning bolt was passed from one animal to another. (David Ludlum)

1986 - Hurricane Estelle passed 120 miles south of the Hawaiian Islands creating a ten to twenty foot surf. The large swells resulted from a combination of high tides, a full moon, and 50 mph winds. The hurricane also deluged Oahu Island with as much as 6.86 inches of rain on the 24th and 25th of the month. (Storm Data)

1987 - Barrow, AK, receives 1.38 inches in 24 hours on the 21st and 22nd, an all-time record for that location. The average annual precipitation for Barrow is just 4.75 inches. Thunderstorms in Montana produced 4 to 6 inches of rain in Glacier County causing extensive flooding along Divide Creek. Missoula, MT, received 1.71 inches of rain in 24 hours, a record for the month of July. (The National Weather Summary) (The Weather Channel)

1988 - Six cities in the south central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Pueblo, CO, with a reading of 48 degrees. Thunderstorms over the Atlantic Coast Region drenched Wilmington, NC, with 6.49 inches of rain in about eight hours. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms prevailed across the southeastern third of the country. Afternoon thunderstorms in Florida produced wind gusts to 86 mph at Zephyrhills, and gusts to 92 mph at Carrollwood and Lutz. Thunderstorm winds gusting to 69 mph at Crystal Lake damaged nineteen mobile homes. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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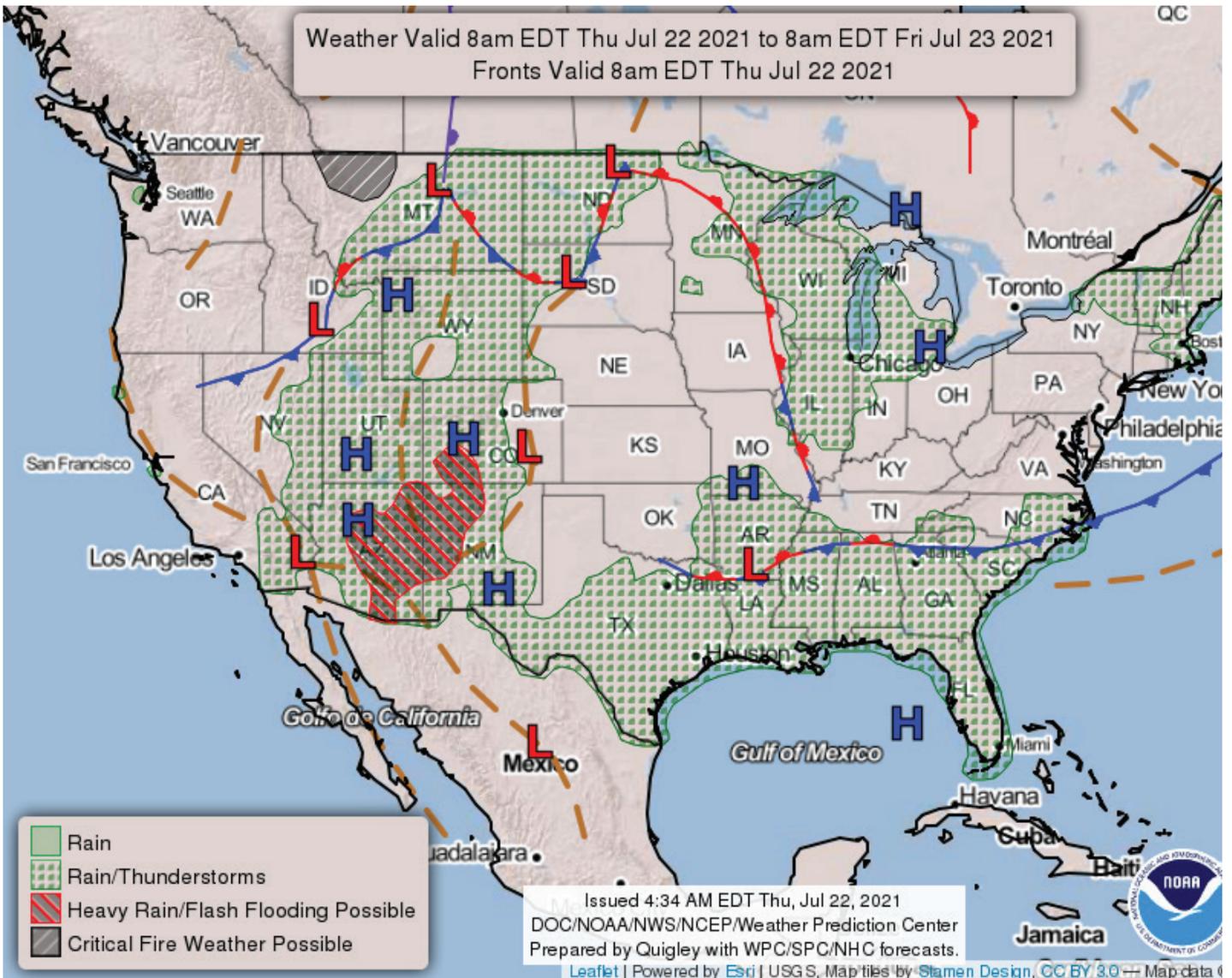
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 88 °F at 5:49 PM
Low Temp: 71 °F at 6:18 AM
Wind: 26 mph at 2:40 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 111° in 1934
Record Low: 46° in 1925, 1980
Average High: 85°F
Average Low: 60°F
Average Precip in July.: 2.27
Precip to date in July.: 1.73
Average Precip to date: 13.28
Precip Year to Date: 6.48
Sunset Tonight: 9:13 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:08 a.m.



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CLEANSED!

Recently there was an article tucked away in a newspaper about a young girl in Georgia who feels no pain. She suffers from a rare congenital disease that affects the nervous system. She and other individuals who are born with congenital insensitivity must be carefully guarded. They must be taught that fire burns or that if they fall a bone might be broken or if they are struck in the head, it may result in a concussion. It is frightening to think of them having to live with no warning system to alert them to pain or sickness. It requires them to be under constant surveillance for their own protection.

There is another insensitivity, however, that is more serious – it is becoming insensitive to sin. Our minds become numb to the dangers of sin as we see degrading pictures of people improperly exposing themselves to attract attention to their sensuality. Or the constant stories of the happiness and pleasures that come from abusing alcoholic beverages or other drugs. Then there are the endless stories about children being born out of wedlock to famous Hollywood celebrities and attractive pictures of them being praised and celebrated for what they did. Children, not old enough to understand God's plan for marriage, are taught that it is appropriate for families to have two moms or two dads. What was once identified as wrong is now right.

But thank God that His Spirit is alive and anxious to convict hearts and change lives. "Deliver us and forgive us our sins for Your name's sake," said the psalmist. If we awaken to the danger of sin and confess, God will forgive and restore us first, and then others.

Prayer: Open our eyes, Father, and give us sensitive hearts and a willingness, to reject the ways of this world that will destroy us. May our lives honor You! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake. Psalm 79:9

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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

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

04-08-26-32-35

(four, eight, twenty-six, thirty-two, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

04-12-17-23-52, Star Ball: 6, ASB: 4

(four, twelve, seventeen, twenty-three, fifty-two; Star Ball: six; ASB: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.05 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$138 million

Powerball

27-28-44-67-68, Powerball: 11, Power Play: 2

(twenty-seven, twenty-eight, forty-four, sixty-seven, sixty-eight; Powerball: eleven; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$161 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. July 19, 2021.

Editorial: The Wreckage Of A 'Cultural Genocide'

Nine Native American children finally came home to their Dakota soil last Friday.

Their remains were returned to the Rosebud Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota after these children were forcibly removed from their tribal homes in 1880 and shipped away to a boarding school in Pennsylvania. And there, 1,400 miles away, they had rested for 140 years, practically forgotten by all but a few remaining family members back at their tribal homeland.

Their lives completed a bittersweet circle last week. Friday's burial ceremony was preceded by a solemn caravan that carried the remains from Sioux City through Santee, Nebraska, and Pickstown. Many people lined the way to pay their respects to the nine children, who were mourned and celebrated

victims of a brutal policy, they were not nameless. They were Lucy Take the Tail (Pretty Eagle), Rose Long Face (Little Hawk), Ernest Knocks Off (White Thunder), Dennis Strikes First (Blue Tomahawk), Maud Little Girl (Swift Bear), Friend Hollow Horn Bear, Warren Painter (Bear Paints Dirt), Alvan (Kills Seven Horses) and Dora Her Pipe (Brave Bull).

The burials brought closure for these souls, but the history to which they are tragically tied remains a mystery to the broader population.

Beginning in 1789, the U.S. military began rounding up tens of thousands of Native American children and shipping them off to boarding schools to be reeducated. These assimilation efforts included forcing children to cut their hair, give up their culture, speak only English, wear school uniforms and become indoctrinated in Christianity. Many of the abducted children — and that is the proper adjective for it — survived this trauma, but thousands (one researcher put the number at nearly 40,000, according to Reuters) did not, dying of abuse and disease. Several thousand of these children are believed to remain missing to this day.

Among those schools involved in this practice was the Carlisle Indian Industrial Boarding School, an icily named institution that one media report referred to as the "flagship" of this boarding-school system until the school closed in 1918. That's where those nine kids from Rosebud were sent and it's where they died.

This story is not unique to America's "conquest" of the frontier and our sense of Manifest Destiny.

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Canada is also grappling with this tragic history, confronting a practice that began in 1831 and was carried out until as recently as 1996, according to Reuters. These children were subjected to abuse and neglect in what Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 deemed "cultural genocide." In the last few months, the bodies of more than 1,500 indigenous children have been found on the grounds of seven former boarding schools in Canada, according to NBC News. It's likely that more graves with many more remains exist.

And "cultural genocide" is the correct term for this crime: It was an effort to erase what these children were, to "European-ize" them and to extinguish the indigenous culture across vast parts of this continent.

This is a past that cannot be forgotten or dismissed as a relic from another time. Our history is woven into the fabric of who we are now.

We owe it to the victims and those family members who mourn them, and we owe it to all people of both the U.S. and Canada, to confront and understand this dark, vague chapter in our history, which must not remain buried and unmarked in the past.

"We must uncover the truth about the loss of human life and the lasting consequences of the schools," Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland vowed recently.

"The truth is coming out," Steve Moose, a blood relative of one of the nine, told the Press & Dakotan last Friday in Santee, "and people understand what happened."

This grim but necessary process of unearthing (literally) the truth has only just begun.

END

Sioux Falls woman sentenced for embezzling from employer

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls woman has been sentenced to prison for embezzling from her former employer.

Molly Marie Ades was sentenced to eight years at the South Dakota State Penitentiary with four years suspended on Tuesday, KFSY-TV reported.

Ades was the office coordinator at Summit Food Services in Sioux Falls between 2014 and 2019. Court documents say during that time Ades used company credit cards to buy tens of thousands of dollars worth of office supplies, groceries, gift cards, gas, hotels, and more, totaling more than \$154,000.

Ades turned herself in November 2020 after she was charged with felony embezzlement.

Norway mourns 77 dead a decade after extremist attack

By DAVID KEYTON and MARK LEWIS Associated Press

OSLO, Norway (AP) — Church bells rang out across Norway on Thursday, marking 10 years since the country's worst ever peacetime slaughter as commemoration ceremonies took place throughout the day.

On July 22, 2011, right wing extremist Anders Breivik set off a bomb in the capital, Oslo, killing eight people, before heading to tiny Utoya island where he stalked and shot dead 69 mostly teen members of the Labor Party's youth wing.

Events were held around the country, including a service in Oslo Cathedral that ended with the first peal of bells. Thousands of people gathered in the streets outside to mourn the 77 victims.

Arriving on crutches, 84-year-old King Harald took his seat for the service beside Queen Sonja at the front of Oslo Cathedral as the country observed a minute's silence.

Speaking in front of 77 roses arranged into the shape of a heart, Jens Stoltenberg, Norway's prime minister at the time of the attacks in 2011, told the congregation that "10 years ago we met hatred with love, but the hatred is still there."

Stoltenberg, currently NATO Secretary General, said Breivik was "one of us."

"The perpetrator was a right-wing extremist. He misused Christian symbols. He grew up in our streets, belonged to the same religion and had the same skin color as the majority in this country. He was one of us," Stoltenberg said.

"But he is not one of us, who respects democracy. He is one of those who believe they have the right

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to kill for their political objectives.”

Around the country, people listened as emotional survivors read aloud the names of the 77 victims at a televised memorial event.

Some parents of the victims reflected on the way the country coped with the slaughter, and said that “time does not heal all wounds.”

“(The victims) would be proud of how we reacted after the terror and how the rule of law stood strong,” said Lisbeth Kristine Roeyneland, whose daughter Synne was murdered by Breivik. Roeyneland now runs the national support group for victims and families.

“What would those who were so brutally and unfairly killed think of us now 10 years later? I think they would be sad to know that there still are survivors and bereaved with great needs,” Roeyneland said.

“I think they would be disappointed in seeing the public debate in many ways has moved in the wrong direction,” she added. “I also think they would be proud of us. Proud of how we reacted in the days after the terrorist attack and how our state under the rule of law firmly stood its ground in the face of brutality.”

Astrid Hoem, a survivor from Utoya who now leads the AUF, the youth wing of the center-left Labor Party, said “we have not stopped the hatred” and urged Norway to continue facing up to the racism in the country.

“It is so brutal that it can be difficult to fathom,” Hoem said. “But it’s our responsibility to do so. Because 10 years on, we must speak the truth. We haven’t stopped the hatred. Far-right extremism is still alive. The terrorist was one of us.”

She was speaking to a group of mourners, including Crown Prince Haakon, Prime Minister Erna Solberg, survivors and families of the victims.

Solberg said it hurt to think back “on that dark July day” and added: “We must not leave hate unchallenged.”

“The terror attack on the 22nd of July was an attack on our democracy,” Solberg, Norway’s prime minister since 2013, said. “It was a politically motivated terrorist act towards the Labor Party, AUF and their ideas. But it wasn’t just an attack on a political movement. A whole nation was struck. But we rose again. But Norway was changed by an experience which still causes pain.”

King Harald was expected to speak during a commemoration in Oslo later Thursday. He was to be joined by past and present prime ministers and leaders of the Labor Party youth wing. Events will also take place on Utoya.

The Latest: 3rd Czech athlete tests positive in Tokyo

The Latest on the Tokyo Olympics, which are taking place under heavy restrictions after a year’s delay because of the coronavirus pandemic:

A third athlete from the Czech Republic has tested positive for COVID-19 at the Tokyo Games.

The Czech team says beach volleyball player Markéta Sluková has entered a quarantine hotel, where two other athletes and two other coaches in its national delegation are staying.

Another Czech beach volleyball player, Ondřej Perušič, tested positive this week. Table tennis player Pavel Sirucek also tested positive.

The Czech Olympic team says it’s investigating if the outbreak of COVID-19 is linked to its charter flight to Tokyo.

—
A refugee team athlete who defected from Iran citing institutional sexism will face an Iranian opponent in the taekwondo competition at the Tokyo Olympics.

Kimia Alizadeh became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal when she took bronze at age 18 at the Rio de Janeiro Games.

Alizadeh later criticized wearing the mandatory hijab headscarf and left Iran to live in Germany.

On Sunday, Alizadeh will face Iran’s Nahid Kiyani Chandeh in the qualifying round of the women’s 57-kilogram class.

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The Olympic judo draw has created fascinating paths to gold for the two biggest stars in the sport. Japanese 73 kg superstar Shohei Ono and French two-time Olympic gold medal-winning heavyweight Teddy Riner both ended up in the same quarter of their draws as the No. 1 seeds in their weight classes. Both came into Tokyo unseeded because of recent inactivity, making them a potential disaster for every medal hopeful in their divisions.

Ono, the current pound-for-pound star of the sport, was placed in the same quarter of the men's field as Azerbaijan's top-seeded Rustam Orujov, one of his greatest rivals.

Ono didn't compete for the past 18 months, but only one judo player in the Olympic field has ever even scored a point against him.

Riner was drawn into the same quarter as the Russian team's Tamerlan Bashaev, who won silver at the world championships last month. The 6-foot-8 Riner is attempting to win his record-tying third gold medal and his fourth Olympic medal overall, but he recently revealed he tore knee ligaments in February.

Gymnast Oksana Chusovitina says her record eighth Olympics will be her last.

The 46-year-old from Uzbekistan is competing on vault at the Tokyo Games, nearly 30 years after making her Olympic debut while competing for the Russian Federation in Barcelona in 1992.

Chusovitina has won a pair of Olympic medals during her long career. She was part of the Russian Federation team that captured gold in 1992. She later added a silver medal on vault while competing for Germany in 2008.

Chusovitina says she wants to spend more time with her 22-year-old son Alisher, who recently completed college.

She credits gymnastics for helping save Alisher's life as a child. Alisher was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 3. Chusovitina moved to Germany to give him access to treatment and used the living she made there as a gymnast to help pay for his care.

Chusovitina needs to finish in the top eight during qualifying on Sunday to advance to the finals scheduled for Aug. 1.

German women's field hockey captain Nike Lorenz has been given approval to wear a rainbow armband and socks at the Olympics.

The German Olympic Committee says it got approval from the International Olympic Committee for Lorenz to wear the colors against Britain on Sunday.

The German Olympic Committee says it is "a symbol for sexual diversity."

Lorenz has previously worn a rainbow armband for games in other competitions.

The IOC has recently relaxed how it implements a rule which historically stopped athletes making political, religious or other statements of belief or identity.

A second Dutch athlete and a staff member have tested positive for COVID-19 at the Tokyo Games.

Team NL says taekwondo athlete Reshmie Oogink and a rowing team staff member have tested positive and will quarantine for 10 days.

"I am speechless" Oogink said. "I have done everything I could and have worked so hard to get so close to the Games. I even overcome major knee injuries and now it has come to a sudden end. This is the end of my career."

Chef de Mission of TeamNL Pieter van den Hoogenband says the team is doing everything to keep infection to a minimum, but the situation is having an impact.

A day earlier, on Wednesday, Dutch skateboarder Candy Jacobs said on Instagram that she had tested positive and been sent into quarantine.

U.S. gymnast Kara Eaker is doing well physically but remains in isolation three days after testing positive

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for COVID-19.

Annie Heffernon, the vice president of the women's program for USA Gymnastics, said Eaker is in isolation while teammate Leanne Wong is in quarantine.

Both athletes served as alternates for the U.S. team. Wong, who continues to test negative, was put in quarantine due to contact tracing.

Heffernon called the positive test a "nightmare scenario" and admitted she is dealing with anxiety while waiting for the team's daily COVID-19 test results.

"I mean, we're devastated for them," Heffernon said. "Of course, it's not anything we dreamed of happening or wanted to happen. And it was a rough 36 hours, I'm not going to lie. It was difficult for everybody. It was hard for me. It was hard for the athletes. It was hard for the staff."

The six-women U.S. delegation of Simone Biles, Sunisa Lee, Jordan Chiles, Grace McCallum, Jade Carey and MyKayla Skinner worked out on each event during podium training on Thursday.

The American women are staying in a hotel near the venue rather than the Olympic village, a decision made before they arrived for the Games.

Australia has evened its record to 1-1 in Olympic softball with a 1-0 victory over Italy in Olympic softball. Jade Wall hit a run-scoring single in the second inning and Kaia Parnaby took a three-hitter into the seventh. Australia is fourth among the six teams after an opening loss to Japan, and Italy fell to 0-2.

Taylah Tsitsikronis doubled off Greta Cecchetti leading off the second, advanced on Tarni Stepto's groundout and scored on a two-out infield hit by Wall, who beat the throw to first after second baseman Andrea Filler's diving, backhand stop.

Italy's Giulia Longhi singled with two outs in the seventh, pinch-runner Fabrizia Marrone stole second and Laura Vigna worked out a nine-pitch walk.

Ellen Roberts, who played college ball for Memphis, made her Olympic debut after Parnaby had thrown 85 pitches, and Marta Gasparotto took a called third strike.

American beach volleyball player Taylor Crabb is out of the Olympics after four positive COVID-19 tests, and Tri Bourne will take his place as the partner of four-time Olympian Jake Gibb when the competition begins this weekend.

Crabb confirmed his withdrawal Thursday in a statement to The Associated Press, noting that he was vaccinated and tested negative before he left the United States but tested positive when he arrived in Japan.

"I'm symptom-free, thankfully, but deeply disappointed to not be able to join Jake on the sand and compete as a member of Team USA," Crabb said. "I want Jake to play in his fourth Olympic games and I want him to bring home a medal. Tri Bourne, an incredible athlete, person and close friend will be competing alongside Jake and filling my spot on Team USA."

The Olympic beach volleyball tournament begins Saturday at Tokyo's Shiokaze Park, with Gibb and Bourne scheduled to play their first match on Sunday night against Italy.

The International Olympic Committee says it will start including images of athletes taking a knee in its official highlights reels and social media channels.

Players from five women's soccer teams knelt in support of racial justice Wednesday, the first day it was allowed at the Olympic Games after a ban lasting decades.

But those images were excluded from the official Tokyo Olympic highlights package provided by the IOC to media including The Associated Press that could not broadcast the games live.

Official Olympic social media channels also did not include pictures of the athlete activism.

"The IOC is covering the Games on its owned and operated platforms and such moments will be included as well," the Olympic body said Thursday in an apparent change of policy.

Host Japan beat Mexico 3-2 in softball to improve to 2-0 at the Tokyo Games.

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Mana Atsumi's squeeze bunt single with one out in the eighth inning scored automatic runner Eri Yamada. Haruka Agatsuma's grounder to second off Danielle O'Toole advanced Yamada to third, and Atsumi bunted on a 0-1 pitch. Yamada was running on the pitch and slid home ahead of Amanda Sanchez's throw. Mexico, 0-2 at its first Olympics, tied the score 2-2 when Yamada dropped Anissa Urtez's fly to center in the seventh inning for what was ruled a single.

One of the social media sensations of the Rio Olympics won't be competing in Tokyo. Namibia's Dan Craven tested positive for COVID-19 in Spain, where the former professional cyclist lives with his family. Even more devastating was the timing of it.

Craven told The Namibian newspaper that he had been trying to receive a COVID-19 vaccine through Spain's national health care system, "but the bureaucratic system to get registered has just been crazy."

"Two hours after I tested positive," Craven said, "I got a phone call saying I can come in for my vaccine."

The tall, lanky rider with the bushy red beard said on his Instagram page that he caught the virus on a training ride with three other people. He was supposed to have the single starting spot for Namibia, where he was born, but tested positive in a pre-event test and will be replaced in Saturday's race to Fuji International Speedway by Tristan de Lange.

Four more residents of the Olympic Village, including two athletes, have tested positive for COVID-19. A total of 91 people accredited for the Tokyo Games have tested positive since the beginning of July.

Skateboarder Candy Jacobs of the Netherlands and table tennis player Pavel Sirucek of the Czech Republic tested positive and had to leave the village to enter a quarantine hotel.

Two additional "games-concerned personnel" — a category that includes team coaches and officials — staying in the village overlooking Tokyo Bay tested positive.

The 91 cases do not include athletes who tested positive at home before their scheduled travel to Tokyo for events they will now miss.

The United States beat Canada 1-0 for a 2-0 start in Olympic softball.

Monica Abbott pitched a one-hitter and center fielder Haylie McCleney and second baseman Ali Aguilar combined to throw out the potential tying run at the plate in the sixth inning.

The Americans are getting just enough offense as they try to regain the gold medal they lost to Japan in 2008.

Abbott struck out nine, walked three and needed 102 pitches to throw the Americans' second consecutive one-hitter. Cat Osterman, at age 38 the Americans' senior player, struck out nine over six innings and Abbott struck out the side in the seventh to finish an opening 2-0 win over Italy on Wednesday.

Amanda Chidester hit an RBI single in the fifth off loser Jenna Caira that scored McCleney, who went 3 for 3 with a walk and has reached base seven times in the two games.

The Tokyo Olympic organizing committee has fired the director of the opening ceremony because of a Holocaust joke he made during a comedy show in 1998.

Organizing committee president Seiko Hashimoto says opening ceremony director Kentaro Kobayashi has been dismissed. Kobayashi was accused of using a joke about the Holocaust in his comedy act, including the phrase "Let's play Holocaust," in one of his shows.

His dismissal comes the day before Friday's opening ceremony of the pandemic-delayed Games.

Earlier this week, a composer whose music is expected to be used at the opening ceremony was forced to resign because of past bullying of his classmates, which he boasted about in magazine interviews.

Home hope Naomi Osaka will face 52nd-ranked Zheng Saisai of China and Novak Djokovic will play 139th-ranked Hugo Dellien of Bolivia in the opening round of the Olympic tennis tournament in Tokyo.

Draws were held two days before play opens at Ariake Tennis Park.

Osaka is returning to competition after she withdrew from the French Open following the first round to

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take a mental health break.

Djokovic is attempting to become the first man to complete a Golden Slam by winning all four major tennis tournaments and an Olympic singles gold medal in the same year.

Defending Olympic champion Andy Murray received a tough opening round draw against 15th-ranked Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada.

Russian swimmer Ilya Borodin, the European champion in the 400-meter individual medley, will miss the Tokyo Olympics after testing positive for the coronavirus.

The Russian Swimming Federation says Borodin tested positive at a training camp in the city of Vladivostok in the Russian Far East.

The positive test came shortly before he was expected to travel to Japan with other Russian swimmers.

Federation vice-president Viktor Avdienko tells the Tass state news agency that Borodin has been placed into isolation, the rest of the team has tested negative and no one was deemed a close contact in Borodin's case.

Jill Biden has embarked on her first solo international trip as first lady, leading a U.S. delegation to the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

On her way she stopped in Alaska, where she praised efforts to vaccinate residents in the rugged, remote state but noted the work is not done.

She has a robust agenda for roughly 48 hours on the ground in Japan's capital.

She is set to arrive in Tokyo Thursday afternoon and have dinner with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his wife, Mariko Suga.

She will hold a virtual get-together with members of Team USA Friday before meeting Emperor Naruhito at the Imperial Palace. She attends the opening ceremony for the Games in the evening.

She also will host a U.S.-vs.-Mexico softball watch party at the U.S. Embassy for staff and their families, and cheer U.S. athletes competing in several events before leaving Tokyo.

Australia's highest-ranking Olympic official and the current premier of the state of Queensland, where the 2032 Summer Games will be held, have put an early test to the old adage that sports and politics don't mix.

Hours after Brisbane was given the hosting rights for the Games 11 years down the track following an International Olympic Committee vote in Tokyo on Wednesday, Australian Olympic Committee President John Coates had a public disagreement with Queensland state Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk.

The issue at the late night news conference in Tokyo? Whether Palaszczuk and other members of the city's delegation should attend the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony on Friday.

Palaszczuk indicated she'd be staying in her hotel room.

That didn't sit well with Coates, a powerful vice-president for the IOC and one of the driving forces behind Brisbane having received the hosting rights so soon without any real competition.

Coates told Palaszczuk that she and the others could not stay home and sit in their rooms.

Olympic scandals march on long after torch goes out

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

TOKYO (AP) — From doping to demonstrations to dirty officials, the Olympics have never lacked their share of off-the-field scandals and controversies that keep the Games in the headlines long after the torch goes out. The five-year gap since the last Summer Olympics has been no different. A brief look at some of the most notable news to hit the Olympic world since it last convened for the Summer Games:

SEX ABUSE — Larry Nassar's sexual abuse of hundreds of gymnasts in the U.S. opened a window into an abusive culture that permeates throughout the sport and in all corners of the globe. Since Rio de Janeiro, the U.S. Center for SafeSport opened to investigate complaints about abuse in sports. It took the decision-making process of these cases out of the hands of organizations such as USA Gymnastics, which

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for years had been forced to pit members (gymnasts) against members (coaches) when abuse allegations arose. Other abuse allegations in taekwondo, water polo and figure skating were among those that came to light in the United States, and the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee rewrote its own bylaws to, in part, prioritize the mental and physical well-being of its athletes instead of the chase for Olympic medals.

RUSSIA DOPING — In Rio, the IOC rejected a World Anti-Doping Agency recommendation to ban all Russian competitors from the Olympics as punishment for a wide-ranging scheme the country designed to help its athletes dope without getting caught. As a result, around 270 Russians were permitted to compete in 2016. Possibly emboldened by the IOC move, Russia continued to cover up its misdeeds. In 2019, WADA investigators determined that Russia had manipulated 23 gigabytes of data that could have been used to pursue cases related to the original cheating. WADA suggested a four-year ban with heavy restrictions on which Russians could compete, but the Court of Arbitration for Sport watered it down. The end result: Some 335 Russian athletes will compete in Tokyo, though not wearing team uniforms and not under the Russian flag. They officially will be competing as members of the "ROC," or Russian Olympic Committee. Only 10 of those athletes will be in track and field; that sport's governing body, whose former leaders enabled some of the cheating (see below), has since taken a much harder stance on the Russia case than most.

DOPING RULES — A spotlight shined on anti-doping rules that call on athletes to submit their whereabouts so they can be subjected to testing without notice. Reigning Olympic champions Christian Coleman and Brianna McNeal and world champion Salwa Eid Naser are among those missing the Olympics after being banned for violations of this rule. ... And only weeks before the start of the Olympics, the ban of American sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson for a positive marijuana test fueled a debate about whether that drug — not considered a performance enhancer and legal in some parts of the globe — should be forbidden anymore.

WEIGHTLIFTING — Three of weightlifting's longtime leaders were charged with a number of offenses for a decade's worth of doping coverups and other crimes. The misconduct included 146 unresolved doping cases from 2009 through 2019. The international federation's president, Tamás Aján, was ousted after a German documentary exposed the misdeeds. Weightlifting's status for 2024 is in jeopardy; the IOC is calling for reforms and wants to see the sport cleaned up.

DEMONSTRATIONS — A summer of unrest and activism in the United States in 2020 forced the IOC and the USOPC to reckon with their policies on demonstrations at the Olympics. The USOPC, after months of meetings and negotiations, determined it would not sanction its athletes for violating Rule 50, which has long disallowed protests and demonstrations inside the lines. Though the IOC recently relaxed the rule to allow some forms of demonstration near the starting line, the ban on the medals podium remains, setting up what could be a conflict at the Olympics.

SPORTS GOVERNANCE — The IOC stripped the International Boxing Association's Olympic status in the wake of an investigation in which the U.S. Treasury accused the organization's president of involvement in drug production and heroin trafficking. ... Influential Kuwaiti IOC member Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahad al-Sabah is awaiting trial on a forgery charge linked to an alleged coup attempt. ... The former president of track's governing body, Lamine Diack, and other top officials were found guilty of corruption for covering up cases in the Russian doping scandal in exchange for bribes. ... Swimming's international federation (FINA) has been under the microscope for a number of reasons, including electing a leader who was named an unindicted co-conspirator in a bribery case involving soccer's top body. FINA also was criticized for not coming down harshly enough on Chinese Olympic champion Sun Yang, whose own doping/testing case meandered through the sports legal system for several years; Yang will miss Tokyo but be eligible for the Paris Games in 2024.

Biden says getting COVID-19 vaccine 'gigantically important'

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

CINCINNATI (AP) — President Joe Biden expressed pointed frustration over the slowing COVID-19 vaccination rate in the U.S. and pleaded that it's "gigantically important" for Americans to step up and get

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inoculated against the virus as it surges once again.

Biden, speaking Wednesday night at a televised town hall in Cincinnati, said the public health crisis has turned largely into a plight of the unvaccinated as the spread of the delta variant has led to a surge in infections around the country.

"We have a pandemic for those who haven't gotten the vaccination — it's that basic, that simple," he said on the CNN town hall.

The president also expressed optimism that children under 12 will be approved for vaccination in the coming months. But he displayed exasperation that so many eligible Americans are still reluctant to get a shot.

"If you're vaccinated, you're not going to be hospitalized, you're not going to be in the IC unit, and you're not going to die," Biden said at the forum at Mount St. Joseph University. "So it's gigantically important that ... we all act like Americans who care about our fellow Americans."

Over 80 minutes, Biden fielded questions on many of the pressing issues of the day, including his infrastructure package, voting rights and the makeup of the congressional commission that will investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol. He also reflected on what it's like to be president, saying he's sometimes taken aback by the pomp that comes with the job and the weight of being "the last guy in the room" left to make the call on daunting decisions.

Six months into his presidency, taming the coronavirus remains his most pressing problem.

U.S. hospitalizations and deaths are nearly all among the unvaccinated. But COVID-19 cases nearly tripled in the U.S. over two weeks amid an onslaught of vaccine misinformation that is straining hospitals, exhausting doctors and pushing clergy into the fray.

Across the U.S., the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases rose over the past two weeks to more than 37,000 on Tuesday, up from less than 13,700 on July 6, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Just 56.2% of Americans have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Democratic president noted that the rise has become so concerning that even his critics are pushing back against vaccine disinformation.

Biden made an indirect reference to high-profile conservative personalities at Fox News Channel who have "had an altar call" and are now more openly speaking to their skeptical guests about the benefits of getting vaccinated. Sean Hannity recently told viewers, "I believe in the science of vaccination" and urged them to take the disease seriously. Steve Doocy, who cohosts "Fox & Friends," this week told viewers the vaccination "will save your life."

Before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington, Biden told reporters he was "glad they had the courage to say what they've said."

Asked about rising prices, Biden acknowledged "there will be near-term inflation" as the economy rebounds from the pandemic but said it was "highly unlikely long-term inflation will get out of hand."

Biden, who traveled to Ohio as he's trying to rev up support for his economic agenda, visited a union training center ahead of the town hall.

The trip comes as the fate of his infrastructure proposal remains unclear after Senate Republicans rejected a \$1 trillion blueprint in a key test vote Wednesday. A bipartisan group of 22 senators said in a joint statement after the vote that they were close to coming to terms on a deal and requested a delay until Monday.

Biden expressed confidence in the outcome, saying, "It's a good thing and I think we're going to get it done."

While lawmakers wrangle over the details of that proposal on Capitol Hill, Biden made the case that his nearly \$4 trillion package is needed to rebuild the middle class and sustain the economic growth the country has seen during the first six months of his presidency.

The president's visit took him near the dangerously outdated Brent Spence Bridge — a chokepoint for trucks and emergency vehicles between Ohio and Kentucky that the past two presidents promised without

success to replace.

Biden made a passing reference to the structure, telling town hall attendees it's time to "fix that damn bridge of yours."

He delved into the personal when he faced a question about the scourge of drug addiction, noting he's "so damn proud" of his son Hunter Biden, who has published a memoir about his struggles with substance abuse. The president also noted he feels a bit self-conscious about some of the fringe benefits that come with the office. He elicited laughter when he said he told some of the White House staff not to come in to serve breakfast. The real reason: The president likes to eat breakfast in his robe.

Biden defended the filibuster against repeated questions from CNN moderator Don Lemon about why he feels the need to protect what some critics argue is a legislative tactic once used to protect racist policies.

He said he's trying to bring the country together around the need to protect voting rights, and he doesn't want "the debate to only be about whether or not we have a filibuster." Biden said if Democrats removed the filibuster "you're going to throw the entire Congress into chaos and nothing will get done."

Back in Washington, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday rejected two Republicans selected by House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy to sit on a committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. McCarthy said the GOP won't participate in the investigation if Democrats won't accept the members he appointed.

Lemon asked how Biden could have confidence that Republicans and Democrats can get together on anything when they can't even come to agreement on investigating the most brazen attack on the U.S. Capitol in 200 years.

Biden simply replied, "These people," a nod to forum's spectators and his faith in Americans writ large. But Biden seemed to also acknowledge the partisan rift in Washington had become maddening.

"I don't care if you think I'm Satan reincarnated," Biden said. "The fact is you can't look at that television and say nothing happened on the 6th and listen to people who say this was a peaceful march."

Death rates soar in Southeast Asia as virus wave spreads

By DAVID RISING and EILEEN NG Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Indonesia has converted nearly its entire oxygen production to medical use just to meet the demand from COVID-19 patients struggling to breathe. Overflowing hospitals in Malaysia had to resort to treating patients on the floor. And in Myanmar's largest city, graveyard workers have been laboring day and night to keep up with the grim demand for new cremations and burials.

Images of bodies burning in open-air pyres during the peak of the pandemic in India horrified the world in May, but in the last two weeks the three Southeast Asian nations have now all surpassed India's peak per capita death rate as a new coronavirus wave, fueled by the virulent delta variant, tightens its grip on the region.

The deaths have followed record numbers of new cases being reported in countries across the region which have left health care systems struggling to cope and governments scrambling to implement new restrictions to try to slow the spread.

When Eric Lam tested positive for COVID-19 and was hospitalized on June 17 in the Malaysian state of Selangor, the center of the country's outbreak, the corridors of the government facility were already crowded with patients on beds with no room left in the wards.

The situation was still better than in some other hospitals in Selangor, Malaysia's richest and most populous state, where there were no free beds at all and patients were reportedly treated on floors or on stretchers. The government has since added more hospital beds and converted more wards for COVID-19 patients.

Lam, 38, recalled once during his three weeks in the hospital hearing a machine beeping continuously for two hours before a nurse came to turn it off; he later learned the patient had died.

A variety of factors have contributed to the recent surge in the region, including people growing weary of the pandemic and letting precautions slip, low vaccination rates and the emergence of the delta variant of the virus, which was first detected in India, said Abhishek Rimal, the Asia-Pacific emergency health

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coordinator for the Red Cross, who is based in Malaysia.

"With the measures that countries are taking, if people follow the basics of washing the hands, wearing the masks, keeping distance and getting vaccinated, we will be seeing a decline in cases in the next couple of weeks from now," he said.

So far, however, Malaysia's national lockdown measures have not brought down the daily rate of infections. The country of some 32 million saw daily cases rise above 10,000 on July 13 for the first time and they have stayed there since.

The vaccination rate remains low but has been picking up, with nearly 15% of the population now fully inoculated and the government hoping to have a majority vaccinated by year's end.

Doctors and nurses have been working tirelessly to try to keep up, and Lam was one of the fortunate ones.

After his condition initially deteriorated, he was put on a ventilator in an ICU unit filled to capacity and slowly recovered. He was discharged two weeks ago.

But he lost his father and brother-in-law to the virus, and another brother remains on a ventilator in the ICU.

"I feel I have been reborn and given a second chance to live," he said.

With India's massive population of nearly 1.4 billion people, its total number of COVID-19 fatalities remains higher than the countries in Southeast Asia. But India's 7-day rolling average of COVID-19 deaths per million peaked at 3.04 in May, according to the online scientific publication Our World in Data, and continues to decline.

Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia have been showing sharp increases since late June and their seven-day averages hit 4.37, 4.29 and 4.14 per million, respectively, on Wednesday. Cambodia and Thailand have also seen strong increases in both coronavirus cases and deaths, but have thus far held the seven-day rate per million people to a lower 1.55 and 1.38, respectively.

Individual countries elsewhere have higher rates, but the increases are particularly alarming for a region that widely kept numbers low early in the pandemic.

With the Indian experience as a lesson, most countries have reacted relatively quickly with new restrictions to slow the virus, and to try to meet the needs of the burgeoning number of people hospitalized with severe illnesses, Rimal said.

"People in this region are cautious, because they have seen it right in front of them — 400,000 cases a day in India — and they really don't want it to repeat here," he said in a telephone interview from Kuala Lumpur.

But those measures take time to achieve the desired effect, and right now countries are struggling to cope. Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous nation with some 270 million people, reported 1,449 deaths on Thursday, its deadliest day since the start of the pandemic.

Daily cases through about mid-June had been about 8,000, but then began to spike and peaked last week with more than 50,000 new infections each day. Because Indonesia's testing rate is low, the actual number of new cases is thought to be much higher.

As hospitals there began to run out of oxygen, the government stepped in and ordered manufacturers to shift most production from industrial purposes and dedicate 90% to medical oxygen, up from 25%.

Before the current crisis, the country needed 400 tons of oxygen for medical use per day; with the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases, daily use has increased fivefold to more than 2,000 tons, according to Deputy Health Minister Dante Saksono.

Though the production of oxygen is now sufficient, Lia Partakusuma, secretary general of Indonesia's Hospital Association, said there were problems with distribution so some hospitals are still facing shortages.

In Indonesia, about 14% of the population has had at least one vaccine dose, primarily China's Sinovac. There are growing concerns that Sinovac is less effective against the delta variant, however, and both Indonesia and Thailand are planning booster shots of other vaccines for their Sinovac-immunized health workers.

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In Myanmar, the pandemic had taken backseat to the military's power seizure in February, which set off a wave of protests and violent political conflict that devastated the public health system.

Only in recent weeks, as testing and reporting of COVID-19 cases has started recovering, has it become clear that a new wave of the virus beginning in mid-May is pushing cases and deaths rapidly higher.

Since the start of July its death rate has been climbing almost straight up, and both cases and fatalities are widely believed to be seriously underreported.

"With little testing capacity, low numbers in the country vaccinated, widespread shortages of oxygen and other medical supplies, and an already beleaguered health care system under increasing strain, the situation is expected to get increasingly worse in the coming weeks and months," said ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, a regional advocacy group.

"Meanwhile, the junta's confiscation of oxygen, attacks on health care workers and facilities since the coup, and the lack of trust in any services they provide by the majority of the population, risks turning a crisis into a disaster."

On Tuesday, the government reported 5,860 new cases and 286 new deaths. There are no solid figures on vaccinations, but from the number of doses that have been available, it's thought that about 3% of the population could have received two shots.

Officials this week pushed back at social media postings that cemeteries in Yangon were overwhelmed and could not keep up with the number of dead, inadvertently confirming claims that hospitals were swamped and many people were dying at home.

Cho Tun Aung, head of the department that oversees the cemeteries told military-run Myawaddy TV news on Monday that 350 staff members had been working three shifts since July 8 to ensure proper cremations and burials of people at Yangon's seven major cemeteries.

He said workers had cremated and buried more than 1,200 people on Sunday alone, including 1,065 who had died at home of COVID-19 and 169 who had died in hospitals.

"We are working in three shifts day and night to inter the dead," he said. "It is clear that there is no problem like the posts on Facebook."

Dirty Games? Testing slowdown during COVID raises questions

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The low numbers came in from across the globe and covered most every distance, from 100 meters through the marathon. The reasons behind all the improving times throughout the sport of track and field were every bit as diverse: better shoe technology, better running surfaces, less wear and tear on bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic and just a good old-fashioned itch to start running for real again.

Another possibility: For the better part of three months during the pandemic, testing for performance-enhancing drugs came to a virtual standstill worldwide. Only in recent months has it begun to ramp back to normal.

It's one of the uncomfortable realities of the Tokyo Olympics. Not a single one of the approximately 11,000 athletes competing over the next 17 days has been held to the highest standards of the world anti-doping code over the critical 16-month period leading into the Games.

Statistics provided by the World Anti-Doping Agency pointed to a steadily improving situation as the Olympics approached, but they do not mask the reality that over the entirety of 2020, there was a 45% reduction in testing around the world compared with 2019 — a non-Olympic year in which the numbers wouldn't normally be as high anyway. In the first quarter of 2021, there was roughly a 20% reduction in overall testing compared with the same three months of 2019.

"Unless you're a fool, you'd have to be concerned," said Travis Tygart, the CEO of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency.

The thought of simply abandoning testing for any period of time runs counter to one of the central tenets of the anti-doping system — the prospect that any athlete can be tested anywhere and at any time.

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The uncertainties and danger presented by the coronavirus, especially during the opening months of the pandemic, resulted not only in the suspensions of leagues across the world and eventually the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics themselves but to the virtual halt of the drug-testing programs that are designed to reinforce the competitive balance in sports.

In April and May 2020, while business as usual was shut down in nearly every aspect around the globe, WADA reported a total of 3,203 tests. There were 52,365 during those months in 2019.

USADA, along with anti-doping agencies in Norway and Denmark, were among the agencies that tried to bridge the gap. They started pilot programs in which they sent in-home drug tests to athletes, asking them to give urine samples and small dried blood samples while collection agents looked on via Zoom. But those programs, while notable for their ingenuity, covered only a small fraction of athletes in a small segment of the globe.

"We would be naïve to think that there were no people who sought to take advantage of this lull to break the anti-doping rules," WADA director general Oliver Niggli told The Associated Press. "However, there are a number of factors that mitigate that risk."

Among them, according to Niggli:

— The requirement that athletes submit their whereabouts remained fully in force during the entirety of the pandemic, which at least raised the possibility of a test even in times when they weren't being conducted frequently.

— Most effective doping programs work in conjunction with intensive training and a target competition in site; many training centers were closed and sporting events were canceled during large portions of the pandemic.

— The anti-doping system has other deterrents, including long-term sample storage, investigations and athlete biological passports, all of which can lead to positive findings over time.

— Though the most attention goes to those who violate anti-doping protocols, the vast majority of athletes don't break the rules.

Still, some athletes were well aware of the breaks in testing and said it was hard to simply ignore.

"That's always a concern for an athlete," said American steeplechaser Emma Coburn, who won bronze in Rio de Janeiro.

The concern lies outside of running, as well.

"I would definitely say some of the countries that have not been as trusted are probably taking advantage of the time that they had without testing," said swimmer Lilly King, who has been outspoken about the long shadow that doping casts in her sport. "Personally, I know I have been tested over 20 times in the past year, so I know the Americans are being well taken care of and myself especially."

USADA is among the few anti-doping agencies that lists the number of tests given to each athlete, and Edwin Moses, the two-time Olympic champion in the 400-meter hurdles and chairman emeritus of USADA, is among those who believe WADA and others should strive for the same transparency.

"Without transparency to the testing numbers, we have to ask if these Games will be clean, as the IOC promises," Moses said in anti-doping testimony to Congress this week.

The independent observers that WADA assigned to review testing protocols before the 2016 Rio Games found that of the 11,470 entrants, 4,125 had no record of being tested before those Olympics, and 1,913 of those athletes competed in higher risk sports. It was, the observers wrote, a data set "which highlights the (in)adequacy of test distribution planning by IFs and NADOs in these sports."

"You were starting in a totally unacceptable place for athletes who were being held to the highest standards, and the badness has only potentially gotten worse because of the reductions in testing due to COVID," Tygart said.

Despite that, there are several plausible explanations for the wide swath of personal bests, national and NCAA records, and world records that spread across track and field over the past year-plus.

Among the possibilities spelled out in a recent Runners' World story were ideal racing conditions that in some instances included time trials, where runners run alone and against the clock, so as to avoid person-

to-person contact that can occur in crowded conditions.

There were the much-debated benefits of shoes, the technology for which has improved both for long-distance runners and sprinters. And then there were the possible benefits of long stretches of training uninterrupted by the demands of an athletic schedule that calls for peaking at precisely the right times.

By the time that story was printed in February, there were no fewer than a dozen examples of eye-opening times that had been produced during the pandemic, in and around a time when the sport had shut down normal operations. The trend continued through the spring and has kept going as the Olympic season has neared — a period when more athletes might be expected to be maxing out their performance.

Tokyo new virus cases near 2,000 a day before Olympics open

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Tokyo hit another six-month high in new COVID-19 cases on Thursday, one day before the Olympics begin, as worries grow of a worsening of infections during the Games.

Thursday's 1,979 new cases are the highest since 2,044 were recorded on Jan. 15.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who is determined to hold the Olympics, placed Tokyo under a state of emergency on July 12, but daily cases have sharply increased since then.

The emergency measures, which largely involve a ban on alcohol sales and shorter hours for restaurants and bars, are to last until Aug. 22, after the Olympics end on Aug. 8.

Japan has reported about 853,000 cases and 15,100 deaths since the pandemic began, most of them this year. Still, the number of cases and deaths as a share of the population are much lower than in many other countries.

The Olympics, delayed for a year by the pandemic, begin Friday. Spectators are banned from all venues in the Tokyo area, with limited audiences allowed at a few outlying sites.

Suga's government has been criticized for what some say is prioritizing the Olympics over the nation's health. His public support ratings have fallen to around 30% in recent media surveys, and there has been little festivity ahead of the Games. On Thursday, the director of the opening ceremony, Kentaro Kobayashi, was dismissed over a past Holocaust joke.

In Olympics-related diplomacy, Suga is to meet with U.S. first lady Jill Biden on Thursday and have dinner at the state guest house. Earlier in the day, he was visited by World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Also Thursday, Emperor Naruhito received a courtesy visit from International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach at the Imperial Palace. Naruhito said he hoped all athletes will compete in good health and achieve their best performances. Bach said the Olympic community is doing its best not to pose any risk to the Japanese.

Experts say virus infections among unvaccinated people younger than age 50 are rising sharply.

Japan's vaccinations began late and slowly, but the pace picked up in May as the government pushed to accelerate the drive before the Olympics, though the pace has since slowed due to a shortage of imported vaccines.

About 23% of Japanese are fully vaccinated, way short of the level believed necessary to have any meaningful effect on reducing the risk in the general population.

Experts warned on Wednesday that infections in Tokyo are likely to continue to worsen in coming weeks.

Garland launches gun trafficking strike forces in 5 cities

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is launching an effort in five cities in the U.S. to reduce spiking gun violence by addressing illegal trafficking and prosecuting offenses that help put guns in the hands of criminals.

Attorney General Merrick Garland will launch the gun trafficking strike forces in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. The effort will include stepped-up enforcement in so-called

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supply areas — cities and states where it's easier to obtain firearms that are later trafficked into other cities with more restrictive gun laws.

Besides prioritizing gun crimes, the strike forces will embrace intelligence sharing and prosecutions across jurisdictions, Justice Department officials said. Authorities have also embedded federal agents in homicide units of police departments across the U.S., have been deploying additional crime analysts and are conducting fugitive sweeps to arrest people who have outstanding state and federal warrants for violent crimes.

Violent crimes, particularly homicides and shootings, are up in many cities around the country, and the Biden administration has sought to aid communities hamstrung by violence. But the initiative launched this week differs from other recent federal efforts to address violence, because it is not sending agents or prosecutors into cities with crime spikes. Justice officials say the strike forces are targeted prosecutions meant to be a longer-term effort to combat gun trafficking.

There is no federal gun trafficking law, so federal agents often must rely on other statutes, like lying on a firearms purchase form, to prosecute gun trafficking cases or stop straw purchasers, people who buy weapons legally to then provide them to others who can't legally have them.

Officials hope the new plan will mean federal prosecutors in some of the supply cities will be more likely to bring charges in those cases.

But if the effort sounds familiar, it is. In 2017, Chicago police, federal agents and prosecutors launched a similar initiative — the Chicago Crime Gun Strike Force — to try to stem the flow of illegal firearms in the city and curb rampant gun violence.

The Justice Department said that strike force was formed in response to a surge in firearm violence and its work is continuing, but it has been focused locally in Chicago on reducing violence and not on gun trafficking from other jurisdictions that put the guns in the hands of criminals. That's been the case with similar gun task forces, too, including in New York.

"These previous approaches generally surged resources to specific areas, without a sustained focus on cross-jurisdictional trafficking," the department said. "Now we are formalizing and standardizing coordination between districts. This strategy is focused on trafficking -- keeping firearms out of the hands of those who will pull the trigger."

Police statistics released earlier this month showed that fewer killings were reported over the first six months of 2021 in Chicago compared with the same period last year, but the number of shootings and people shot increased.

While crime is rising in many U.S. cities, violent crime overall remains lower than it was a decade ago or even five years ago.

Experts say this year's spike in crime defies easy explanation and point to a number of potential causes, including the coronavirus pandemic, worries about the economy and large gatherings after months of stay-at-home orders.

China rebuffs WHO's terms for further COVID-19 origins study

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China cannot accept the World Health Organization's plan for the second phase of a study into the origins of COVID-19, a senior Chinese health official said Thursday.

Zeng Yixin, the vice minister of the National Health Commission, said he was "rather taken aback" that the plan includes further investigation of the theory that the virus might have leaked from a Chinese lab.

He dismissed the lab leak idea as a rumor that runs counter to common sense and science.

"It is impossible for us to accept such an origin-tracing plan," he said at a news conference called to address the COVID-19 origins issue.

The search for where the virus came from has become a diplomatic issue that has fueled China's deteriorating relations with the U.S. and many American allies. The U.S. and others say that China has not been transparent about what happened in the early days of the pandemic. China accuses critics of seeking to blame it for the pandemic and politicizing an issue that should be left to scientists.

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Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of WHO, acknowledged last week that there had been a "premature push" after the first phase of the study to rule out the theory that the virus might have escaped from a Chinese government lab in Wuhan, the city where the disease was first detected in late 2019.

Most experts don't think a lab leak is the likely cause. The question is whether the possibility is so remote that it should be dropped, or whether it merits further study.

The first phase was conducted earlier this year by an international team of scientists who came to Wuhan to work with their Chinese counterparts. The team was accused of bowing to demands from the Chinese side after it initially indicated that further study wasn't necessary.

Zeng said the Wuhan lab has no virus that can directly infect humans and noted that the WHO team concluded that a lab leak was highly unlikely. He added that speculation that staff and graduate students at the lab had been infected and might have started the spread of the virus in the city was untrue.

Yuan Zhiming, the director of the biosafety lab at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, said they had not stored or studied the new coronavirus before the outbreak. "I want to emphasize that ... the Wuhan Institute of Virology has never designed, made or leaked the novel coronavirus," he said.

The WHO team concluded that the virus most likely jumped from animals to humans, probably from bats to an intermediate animal. The experts visited markets in Wuhan that had sold live animals, and recommended further study of the farms that supplied the market.

"In the next step, I think animal tracing should still be the priority direction. It is the most valuable field for our efforts," Liang Wannian, who headed the Chinese side, said at Thursday's news conference.

Tedros said last week that he hoped for better cooperation and access to data from China. "We are asking China to be transparent, open and cooperate, especially on the information, raw data that we asked for in the early days of the pandemic," he said.

His words were echoed at the same virtual news conference by Germany's health minister, Jens Spahn, who called on China to intensify cooperation in the search for the origin of the virus.

Zeng said China has always supported "scientific virus tracing" and wants to see the study extended to other countries and regions. "However, we are opposed to politicizing the tracing work," he said.

China has frequently sought to deflect accusations that the pandemic originated in Wuhan and was allowed to spread by early bureaucratic missteps and an attempted coverup.

Government spokespersons have called for an investigation into whether the virus might have been produced in a U.S. military laboratory, a theory not widely shared in the scientific community.

China has largely ended local transmission of COVID through lockdowns and mask-wearing requirements, and has now administered more than 1.4 billion doses of Chinese vaccines. Just 12 new domestically spread cases were reported Thursday and China's death toll from the virus has remained unchanged for months at 4,636.

For South Sudan mothers, COVID-19 shook a fragile foundation

Associated Press undefined

JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — Paska Itwari Beda knows hunger all too well. The young mother of five children — all of them under age 10 — sometimes survives on one bowl of porridge a day, and her entire family is lucky to scrape together a single daily meal, even with much of the money Beda makes cleaning offices going toward food. She goes to bed hungry in hopes her children won't have to work or beg like many others in South Sudan, a country only a decade old and already ripped apart by civil war.

But the pandemic scares Beda in ways that even hunger doesn't.

In South Sudan, lives are built and teeter on the edge of uncertainty. A peace deal to end the civil war lags far behind schedule. Violence erupts between ethnic groups. Corruption is widespread. Hunger haunts more than half the population of 12 million people. And even the land itself doesn't guarantee solid footing, as climate change sparks flooding in swaths of the country.

Yet many women say it's the pain of the pandemic they feel most — a slow-moving disaster, in contrast

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to the sudden trauma of war and its fallout of famine — as they try to hold families together in what is already one of the world's most difficult places to raise children.

With COVID-19 came the shrinking of humanitarian aid, a lifeline for many in South Sudan, as faraway donors turned attention and funding toward their own citizens instead. Closed borders cut off imports, and the oil sector on which the economy largely relies was hit hard by a crash in global prices. A lockdown wiped out the informal, untaxed labor and other work that many South Sudanese relied on for their daily meal.

This story is part of a yearlong series on how the pandemic is impacting women in Africa, most acutely in the least developed countries. AP's series is funded by the European Journalism Centre's European Development Journalism Grants program, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AP is responsible for all content.

And the pandemic has only exacerbated South Sudan's widespread hunger. As the country marks a decade of independence this month, the United Nations warns that are "more children in need of urgent humanitarian assistance than ever before." Over 1 million are expected to face acute malnutrition this year, more than during the civil war, and the county has the highest proportion of out-of-school children in the world, some 2.8 million.

Beda, now 27, delivered her youngest children, twin girls, just weeks before coronavirus arrived in Africa. Along with the closing of borders and other pandemic restrictions, prices began rising for basic items such as cooking oil. Schools closed, and the paychecks for teachers — including Beda's husband, who had long supported the family with his steady salary — abruptly stopped.

Beda's family, like many in South Sudan, was suddenly without its breadwinner. To meet this stark new reality, children even younger than 10 were sent to work or to panhandle. Girls barely in puberty were married off — one less person to feed as the family received money or cattle in return.

Beda told herself she wouldn't allow her own children to become part of what some see as a lost generation of South Sudan, entrenched in poverty without education. She found a job outside the family compound and commutes an hour each way to an office in the capital city of Juba — a rare move for a woman in parts of this largely conservative country. As a cleaner, she makes 16,000 South Sudanese pounds a month, or about \$35. She earns additional money by making cupcakes to sell in her office building.

But the money doesn't buy much. Inflation hollowed out Beda's earnings, even when combined with her husband's salary once schools reopened. Before the pandemic, Beda said, 100 pounds "could get you something," but now 1,000 or even 1,500 "won't do anything." The cost of white sorghum, a staple food, rose from 1,000 South Sudanese pounds to 1,500 for 3.5 kilograms in just six months.

Beda tries not to dwell on her family's situation before COVID-19. But she remembers: "Before corona, life was good."

Then, Juba was a refuge of sorts. Beda was able to stay home and raise the three children she had before the twins arrived, thanks to her husband's pay and the humanitarian food aid that supplemented it — South Sudan received \$1.1 billion in funding in 2019.

At their compound near a military base, Beda's family — including her father- and mother-in-law — ate three meals a day. Drinkable water was delivered to their home, a relative luxury in a country where many women carry containers long distances from wells or rivers.

Now, Beda wakes before dawn for the morning routine of getting her family out the door. Her elder children, slender under their schoolbags, climb onto their father's motorbike and disappear into the Juba streets to attend school — where the fees for attendance have risen. Beda then commutes to work while the twins stay with extended family.

The family's water deliveries dried up with their savings. So, with the help of her children, Beda now hauls water herself. They walk to the well several times a week, where she heaves a plastic container onto her head. She tries to keep it steady, though stray rivulets run down her neck, past small metal earrings that say "Jesus."

Beda constantly watches her children for any sign of illness. Medical care was easier before coronavirus.

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Medicines once available at the government hospital are hard to find now. And hospital services are no longer free because of the pandemic's economic toll.

When the children fall ill, Beda might choose to save money and rely on herbal remedies alone. But recently one of the twins came down with a cough and fever — serious enough for a hospital visit. She received medicine, but Beda hasn't been able to take her back for follow-up care.

South Sudan's local health centers were never prepared to deal with an outbreak as widespread as COVID-19. They're seeing infections rise as countries across Africa grapple with a wave of increasingly dangerous cases. Overall, the country has had over 10,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, but that number is likely an undercount because of a lack of testing. Oxygen, ICU beds and other critical supplies are scarce, even in the capital.

South Sudan has received a fraction of the vaccines it needs, 60,000 doses so far, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Like much of Africa, the country will have to wait months, likely well into next year, to receive substantially more.

Beda is among those unvaccinated in her community. There, she has become a role model: She found a job in a country where women make up less than half of the workforce. Beda demonstrated independence, and her neighbors look to her as a leader.

The hardships of COVID-19 have bonded them. With resources scarce, Beda and nine women formed a group that meets and contributes two of the barest necessities for warding off hunger and illness — money and bars of soap.

They gather weekly, pooling supplies and handing them out to a different family every time. Over coffee, they share advice. They are from different ethnic groups — a counterpoint to the tensions of the civil war — and say the group is a reflection of their shared trust.

At first, they admit, they didn't take COVID-19 seriously. They already faced the relentless pressures of just getting by in South Sudan. But as they saw the virus killing thousands in countries near and far, depression spread and frustrations at home grew, until the women decided to form the group — first to help themselves, then others.

"It will help to save us," said one member, Margaret Peter. "You cannot do anything alone. How will you manage to save lives if you are alone?"

Beda's twins have known life only in the pandemic. They can now stand, they cling, they speak. Yet they're still so small that each can curl up in a bucket in the family courtyard and peek over the brim.

Beda wants more for them than she had for herself. She witnessed five years of civil war that killed an estimated 400,000 people. She carries a scar where a bullet struck her arm when she was young during the liberation movement. In the chaos of the conflict, she never finished her schooling, instead becoming pregnant with her first child.

Beda is determined. She vows that she won't stop working or fighting. She will forge on with her roles as a helper in her community and as her children's protector and provider. Each Friday, when the women's gathering breaks up, the twins rush to Beda to breastfeed, nestled against each other.

Olympic opening ceremony director fired for Holocaust joke

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The Tokyo Olympic organizing committee fired the director of the opening ceremony on Thursday because of a Holocaust joke he made during a comedy show in 1998.

Organizing committee president Seiko Hashimoto said a day ahead of the opening ceremony that director Kentaro Kobayashi has been dismissed. He was accused of using a joke about the Holocaust in his comedy act, including the phrase "Let's play Holocaust."

"We found out that Mr. Kobayashi, in his own performance, has used a phrase ridiculing a historical tragedy," Hashimoto said. "We deeply apologize for causing such a development the day before the opening ceremony and for causing troubles and concerns to many involved parties as well as the people in Tokyo and the rest of the country."

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Tokyo has been plagued with scandals since being awarded the Games in 2013. French investigators are looking into alleged bribes paid to International Olympic Committee members to influence the vote for Tokyo. The fallout forced the resignation two years ago of Tsunekazu Takeda, who headed the Japanese Olympic Committee and was an IOC member.

The opening ceremony of the pandemic-delayed Games is scheduled for Friday. The ceremony will be held without spectators as a measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus infections, although some officials, guests and media will attend.

"We are going to have the opening ceremony tomorrow and, yes, I am sure there are a lot of people who are not feeling easy about the opening of the Games," Hashimoto said. "But we are going to open the Games tomorrow under this difficult situation."

Earlier this week, composer Keigo Oyamada, whose music was to be used at the ceremony, was forced to resign because of past bullying of his classmates, which he boasted about in magazine interviews. The segment of his music will not be used.

Soon after a video clip and script of Kobayashi's performance were revealed, criticism flooded social media.

"Any person, no matter how creative, does not have the right to mock the victims of the Nazi genocide," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean and global social action director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Los Angeles-based human rights group.

He also noted that the Nazis gassed Germans with disabilities.

"Any association of this person to the Tokyo Olympics would insult the memory of 6 million Jews and make a cruel mockery of the Paralympics," he said.

Kobayashi is a former member of a popular comedy duo Rahmens and known overseas for comedy series including "The Japanese Tradition."

Japan is pushing ahead with the Olympics against the advice of most of its medical experts. This is partially due to pressure from the IOC, which is estimated to face losses of \$3 billion to \$4 billion in television rights income if the Games were not held.

The official cost of the Olympics is \$15.4 billion, but government audits suggest it's much more. All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

"We have been preparing for the last year to send a positive message," Hashimoto said. "Toward the very end now there are so many incidents that give a negative image toward Tokyo 2020."

Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the Tokyo organizing committee, also acknowledged the reputational damage.

"Maybe these negative incidents will impact the positive message we wanted to deliver to the world," he said.

The last-minute scandals come as Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government faces criticism for prioritizing the Olympics despite public health concerns amid a resurgence of coronavirus infections.

Koichi Nakano, who teaches politics at Sophia University, wrote on Twitter that the opening ceremony chaos underscores a lack of awareness in Japan about diversity.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said she learned of Kobayashi's comments from Hashimoto.

"I was astonished," she said.

Kobayashi's Holocaust joke and Oyamada's resignation were the latest to plague the Games. Yoshiro Mori resigned as organizing committee president over sexist remarks. Hiroshi Sasaki also stepped down as creative director for the opening and closing ceremonies after suggesting a Japanese actress should dress as a pig.

Also this week, the chiropractor for the American women's wrestling team apologized after comparing Olympic COVID-19 protocols to Nazi Germany in a social media post. Rosie Gallegos-Main, the team's chiropractor since 2009, will be allowed to finish her planned stay at USA Wrestling's pre-Olympic camp in Nakatsugawa, Japan.

EXPLAINER: What's the history of the Olympics protest rule?

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By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The simple act of taking a knee felt like something more monumental when it happened on Olympic soccer pitches in Japan on the opening night of action.

Players from the United States, Sweden, Chile, Britain and New Zealand women's teams went to a knee before their games Wednesday night, anti-racism gestures the likes of which had not been seen before on the Olympic stage. They figured to be the first of many of these sort of demonstrations over the three-week stay in Tokyo.

The Olympic rule banning such demonstrations at the Games has been hotly debated and contested for decades, and those issues reached a flashpoint over the past two years. What resulted were changes in the rules, and the willingness of some sports organizations to enforce them.

How have protests and demonstrations at the Games evolved over the years? Here's a brief rundown.

WHAT: The Olympics have always billed themselves as a nonpolitical entity designed to bring countries together to celebrate sports and international unity. One of the best-recognized symbols of that nonpolitical ideal is a prohibition of "propaganda" at the Games. Rule 50 of the IOC charter states: "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

WHO: The ideals of the rule were most notably put to the test before it was officially enshrined in the Olympic charter. American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists while their national anthem played during the 200-meters medals ceremony at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. They would not only eventually be sent home for disregarding the ban on demonstrations, but ended up being ostracized from the Olympic movement for nearly a half century. Not until 2016 did the U.S. Olympic Committee bring them to an official event. Not until 2019 did it enshrine them in its hall of fame.

WHEN: The basic structure of Rule 50 was written into the Olympic charter in 1975. At that time, it was actually part of Rule 55 and it stated: "Every kind of demonstration or propaganda, whether political, religious or racial, in the Olympic areas is forbidden." It would be refined and rewritten over the years. Only a few months ago, in the face of mounting pressure to do away with the rule, the IOC made its latest tweak, saying it would allow some demonstrations but only "prior to the start of competitions" and not on the medals podium. The IOC has also given discretion to the international agencies that run the individual sports on how — and whether — to enforce the bans.

WHERE: The rule became a sticking point two summers ago, a half a world away from Tokyo, in Lima, Peru. It was on the medals stands at the Pan-American Games that U.S. hammer thrower Gwen Berry raised her fist and U.S. fencer Race Imboden took a knee. They both received letters from the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee that put them on a yearlong probation and, with the Tokyo Games scheduled for the following year, sent a message to other American athletes who were thinking of doing anything similar. The coronavirus pandemic pushed the Games back by 12 months, and the killing of George Floyd in the United States — and the activism that followed — prompted a thorough rethinking of the rule. The USOPC decided it would no longer sanction athletes who violated Rule 50, thus placing pressure on the IOC, which often depends on the national committees to enforce its rules at the Games.

WHY: While the USOPC was undergoing its review, the IOC also tasked its athletes commission to re-think the rule. The commission sent out a worldwide survey that found broad support for the rule as it was written. Following that lead, the IOC chose to keep the rule largely intact. It set up the possibility for tension throughout the Games in Tokyo, where, in addition to the soccer teams, Berry and U.S. sprinter Noah Lyles had telegraphed themselves as among the athletes to watch. Lyles wore a black glove and raised his fist at the starting line at Olympic trials, while Berry turned away from the flag during a playing of the national anthem.

Biden admin stepping up community grants from COVID bill

By ZEKE MILLER and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration is beginning to make \$3 billion in economic

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development grants available to communities — a tenfold increase in the program paid for by this year's COVID-19 relief bill.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said her agency on Thursday will begin accepting applications for the competitive grants, which officials hope will create hundreds of thousands of jobs and help struggling cities and towns make long-term investments to drive development for years to come.

"This is about real help for communities across the country as they rebuild," Raimondo said Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press. "It's about longer-term investments to help communities build themselves back from the bottom up in the ways that work best for them."

The grants will be targeted at supporting local infrastructure, job training programs and developing new industries. Recipients will be selected on the basis of the anticipated return on investment to taxpayers. Raimondo was set to appear at Thursday's White House press briefing to promote the new program.

"These are taxpayer dollars we are investing in communities, so we want to help them get recovery right," said Raimondo. "These investments can help ensure they can rebuild more sustainably and more equitably in the ways that work best for them."

The administration hopes that the competitive nature of the program will also coax private businesses and philanthropies to focus on rehabilitating their communities by making their own development commitments. There will be \$1 billion available in a competitive process for 20 to 30 regions to spend on projects that would rebuild their economies, as well as \$750 million in grants targeted for travel, tourism and outdoor recreation.

Fully 10% of the total will be earmarked for coal communities, which have struggled for decades amid the nation's shift away from fossil fuels and are set to bear the economic brunt of the Biden administration's even more aggressive efforts to move toward clean energy technologies.

"This is not hypothetical," Raimondo said. "This is about real good-paying jobs today and investments needed to keep them coming."

Room for 10,000: Inside China's largest detention center

By DAKE KANG Associated Press

DABANCHENG, China (AP) — The Uyghur inmates sat in uniform rows with their legs crossed in lotus position and their backs ramrod straight, numbered and tagged, gazing at a television playing grainy black-and-white images of Chinese Communist Party history.

This is one of an estimated 240 cells in just one section of Urumqi No. 3 Detention Center in Dabancheng, seen by Associated Press journalists granted extraordinary access during a state-led tour to China's far west Xinjiang region. The detention center is the largest in the country and possibly the world, with a complex that sprawls over 220 acres — making it twice as large as Vatican City. A sign at the front identified it as a "kanshousuo," a pre-trial detention facility.

Chinese officials declined to say how many inmates were there, saying the number varied. But the AP estimated the center could hold roughly 10,000 people and many more if crowded, based on satellite imagery and the cells and benches seen during the tour. While the BBC and Reuters have in the past reported from the outside, the AP was the first Western media organization allowed in.

This site suggests that China still holds and plans to hold vast numbers of Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in detention. Satellite imagery shows that new buildings stretching almost a mile long were added to the Dabancheng detention facility in 2019.

China has described its sweeping lockup of a million or more minorities over the past four years as a "war against terror," after a series of knifings and bombings by a small number of extremist Uyghurs native to Xinjiang. Among its most controversial aspects were the so-called vocational "training centers" — described by former detainees as brutal internment camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards.

China at first denied their existence, and then, under heavy international criticism, said in 2019 that all the occupants had "graduated." But the AP's visit to Dabancheng, satellite imagery and interviews with experts and former detainees suggest that while many "training centers" were indeed closed, some like

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this one were simply converted into prisons or pre-trial detention facilities. Many new facilities have also been built, including a new 85-acre detention center down the road from No. 3 in Dabancheng that went up over 2019, satellite imagery shows.

The changes seem to be an attempt to move from the makeshift and extrajudicial "training centers" into a more permanent system of prisons and pre-trial detention facilities justified under the law. While some Uyghurs have been released, others have simply been moved into this prison network.

However, researchers say many innocent people were often thrown in detention for things like going abroad or attending religious gatherings. Darren Byler, an anthropologist studying the Uyghurs at the University of Colorado, noted that many prisoners have not committed "real crimes by any standards," and that they go through a "show" trial without due process.

"We're moving from a police state to a mass incarceration state. Hundreds of thousands of people have disappeared from the population," Byler said. "It's the criminalization of normal behavior."

During the April tour of No. 3 in Dabancheng, officials repeatedly distanced it from the "training centers" that Beijing claims to have closed.

"There was no connection between our detention center and the training centers," insisted Urumqi Public Security Bureau director Zhao Zhongwei. "There's never been one around here."

They also said the No. 3 center was proof of China's commitment to rehabilitation and the rule of law, with inmates provided hot meals, exercise, access to legal counsel and televised classes lecturing them on their crimes. Rights are protected, officials say, and only lawbreakers need worry about detention.

"See, the BBC report said this was a re-education camp. It's not - it's a detention center," said Liu Chang, an official with the foreign ministry.

However, despite the claims of officials, the evidence shows No. 3 was indeed an internment camp. A Reuters picture of the entrance in September 2018 shows that the facility used to be called the "Urumqi Vocational Skills Education and Training Center". Publicly available documents collected by Shawn Zhang, a law student in Canada, confirm that a center by the same name was commissioned to be built at the same location in 2017.

Records also show that Chinese conglomerate Hengfeng Information Technology won an \$11 million contract for outfitting the Urumqi "training center". A man who answered a number for Hengfeng confirmed the company had taken part in the construction of the "training center," but Hengfeng did not respond to further requests for comment.

A former construction contractor who visited the Dabancheng facility in 2018 told the AP that it was the same as the "Urumqi Vocational Skills Education and Training Center," and had been converted to a detention facility in 2019, with the nameplate switched. He declined to be named for fear of retaliation against his family.

"All the former students inside became prisoners," he said.

The vast complex is ringed by 25-foot-tall concrete walls painted blue, watchtowers, and humming electric wire. Officials led AP journalists through the main entrance, past face-scanning turnstiles and rifle-toting guards in military camouflage.

In one corner of the compound, masked inmates sat in rigid formation. Most appeared to be Uyghur. Zhu Hongbin, the center's director, rapped on one of the cell's windows.

"They're totally unbreakable," he said, his voice muffled beneath head-to-toe medical gear.

At the control room, staff gazed at a wall-to-wall, God's-eye display of some two dozen screens streaming footage from each cell. Another panel played programming from state broadcaster CCTV, which Zhu said was being shown to the inmates.

"We control what they watch," Zhu said. "We can see if they're breaking regulations, or if they might hurt or kill themselves."

The center also screens video classes, Zhu said, to teach them about their crimes.

"They need to be taught why it's bad to kill people, why it's bad to steal," Zhu said.

Twenty-two rooms with chairs and computers allow inmates to chat with lawyers, relatives, and police via video, as they are strapped to their seats. Down the corridor, an office houses a branch of the Urumqi

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prosecutor's office, in another sign of the switch to a formal prison system.

A nearby medical room contains a gurney, a tank of oxygen and a cabinet stocked with medicine. Guidelines hanging on the wall instruct staff on the proper protocol to deal with sick inmates – and also to force-feed inmates on hunger strikes by inserting tubes up their noses.

Zhao, the other official, said inmates are held for 15 days to a year before trial depending on their suspected crime, and the legal process is the same as in the rest of China. He said the center was built to house inmates away from the city because of safety concerns.

Urumqi No. 3 Detention Center is comparable in size to Rikers Island in New York City, but the region serves less than four million people compared to nearly 20 million for Rikers. At least three other detention centers are sprinkled across Urumqi, along with ten or more prisons.

The No. 3 center did not appear to be at full capacity; one section was closed, officials said, and six to ten inmates sat in each cell, taking up only half the benches. But the latest official government statistics available, for 2019, show that there were about twice as many arrests in Xinjiang that year than before the crackdown started in 2017. Hundreds of thousands have been sentenced to prison, many to terms of five years or more.

Xu Guixiang, a Xinjiang spokesperson, called the higher incarceration rates "severe measures" in the "war against terror."

"Of course, during this process, the number of people sentenced in accordance with the law will increase. This is a concrete indication of our work efficiency," Xu said. "By taking these measures, terrorists are more likely to be brought to justice."

But many relatives of those imprisoned say they were sentenced on spurious charges, and experts caution that the opacity of the Xinjiang legal system is a red flag. Although China makes legal records easily accessible otherwise, almost 90 percent of criminal records in Xinjiang are not public. The handful which have leaked show that some are charged with "terrorism" or "separatism" for acts few would consider criminal, such as warning colleagues against watching porn and swearing, or praying in prison.

Researcher Gene Bunin found that Uyghurs were made to sign confessions for what the authorities called "terrorist activities." Some were subsequently released, including one detained in the Dabancheng facility, a relative told The Associated Press, declining to be named to avoid retribution against the former detainee.

Others were not. Police reports obtained by the Intercept detail the case of eight Uyghurs in one Urumqi neighborhood detained in the "Dabancheng" facility in 2017 for reading religious texts, installing file-sharing applications, or simply being an "untrustworthy person". In late 2018, the reports show, prosecutors summoned them to makeshift meetings and sentenced them to two to five years of "study."

AP journalists did not witness any signs of torture or beating at the facility, and were unable to speak directly to any former or current detainees. But a Uyghur who had fled Xinjiang, Zumret Dawut, said a now-deceased friend who worked at Dabancheng had witnessed treatment so brutal that she fainted. The friend, Paride Amati, said she had seen a pair of teens forced to sign confessions claiming they were involved in terrorism while studying in Egypt, and their skin had been beaten bloody and raw.

A teacher at the Dabancheng facility also called it "worse than hell," according to a colleague at a different camp, Qelbinur Sedik. The teacher said that during classes she could hear the sounds of people being tortured with electric batons and iron chairs, according to Sedik.

Accounts of conditions in detention centers elsewhere in Xinjiang vary widely: some describe restrictive conditions but no physical abuse, while others say they were tortured. Such accounts are difficult to verify independently, and the Xinjiang authorities deny all allegations of abuse.

Chinese officials also continue to deny that they are holding Uyghurs on false charges. Down the road from the No. 3 center, high walls and guard towers were visible in the same location as the new detention facility shown in satellite imagery.

When asked what it was, officials pleaded ignorance.

"We don't know what it is," they said.

Politics foil replacing hazardous bridge to Jerusalem site

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A rickety bridge allowing access to Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site is at risk of collapse, according to experts. But the flashpoint shrine's delicate position at ground-zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has prevented its repair for more than a decade.

The tenuous state of the Mughrabi Bridge has raised fears of another disaster months after a stampede at a religious festival in northern Israel left 45 people dead.

Days after the stampede last May, a municipal engineer hired by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation inspected the Mughrabi Bridge. Citing its poor condition, he urged its immediate replacement and authorized its use only until September.

With a Supreme Court lawsuit pushing for the structure to be repaired, the government could soon be forced into taking action on a problem that it has long evaded due to its broad diplomatic sensitivities with Jordan, the Palestinians and the broader Muslim world.

The bridge is the sole access point for non-Muslims to reach the contested hilltop compound revered by Jews as the Temple Mount and by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary.

Foot traffic has grown considerably since its construction in 2004 after an earthen ramp leading to one of the compound's gates collapsed following an earthquake and heavy snowfall.

Engineers have warned for more than a decade that it is increasingly unsafe. But religious sensitivities and diplomatic deadlock have translated into years of inaction.

The Temple Mount is the holiest place in Judaism, the site where two ancient Temples stood. Today, the compound is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and iconic gold-topped Dome of the Rock, and is the third-holiest site in Islam after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

The competing claims to the site have sparked repeated bouts of violence over the years and helped fuel an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip in May.

Days before the Gaza war erupted, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, the government-backed organization that manages the Jewish prayer plaza at the base of the mount, had an engineer inspect the bridge.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press, engineer Ofer Cohen said the hastily constructed bridge's wooden beams were "in a state of extreme dryness" and severely cracked. He approved use of the bridge until no later than September and urged authorities "to act immediately to replace the bridge in order to make safe its use."

His inspection came less than a week after the deadly stampede earlier this year at Mount Meron, where 100,000 worshippers had gathered for an annual pilgrimage despite coronavirus restrictions and longstanding warnings the complex could not handle large crowds.

A government commission is now investigating the April 30 incident, the deadliest civilian accident in Israeli history.

The Mughrabi Bridge hangs over the women's prayer section of the Western Wall plaza, the holiest place where Jews can pray.

In June, a group of women who pray at the wall petitioned Israel's Supreme Court to demand answers from the various authorities, saying the bridge's continued existence was "a violation of the provisions of the law and also creates a real risk to the public." The court is expected to hold a hearing on the matter this week.

The petitioners' attorneys have also called on the commission probing the Mount Meron disaster to investigate the "dangerous and dilapidated temporary bridge situated illegally above the women's section."

The original permit issued by City Hall approved the temporary bridge for the use of police until the ramp could be repaired. It never was.

A 2006 Prime Minister's Office memo said "it's understood that the temporary wooden bridge cannot continue to serve the community for a long time" and called upon the Western Wall Heritage Foundation to finalize plans for a permanent replacement.

But diplomatic pressure by neighboring Jordan, which serves as custodian of the Islamic trust managing

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the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, has made it difficult to act.

Day-to-day affairs at the site are governed by a set of understandings referred to as the "status quo," and any perceived change to these precarious rules has the potential to ignite outrage across the Muslim world.

The Palestinians and Muslims worldwide fear that any shifts — even one meant to protect public safety — could lead to an Israeli takeover or partition of the site.

"For Jordan, it's connected to the status quo of the Temple Mount. If you breach the status quo, it's a Pandora's box," said Yitzhak Reiter, chair of the Israel studies department at Ashkelon Academic College, and an expert on disputed holy sites.

Israel and Jordan reportedly reached an agreement to replace the bridge in 2011, but that deal fell through. At the time, Israel accused Jordan of reneging.

Relations between the two neighbors further soured in the past decade and "since then, nothing has been done because the Jordanians still oppose it," Reiter said. Israel's new government has moved to repair ties with Jordan, an important Arab ally, but it is unclear whether they will be able to make progress on the bridge.

In the meantime, Jewish visits to the compound have grown from around 5,800 per year in 2010 to more than 37,000 in 2019, according to police figures cited by Hebrew newspaper Makor Rishon. Israeli police declined requests to confirm those figures.

On Sunday alone, over 1,500 Jews visited to mark the Jewish holy day of Tisha B'Av. The higher-than-usual number, along with some of the visitors violating a ban on Jewish prayer, added to Muslim concerns that Israel is trying to disrupt the status quo.

The bridge's replacement has become a cause célèbre for opposition lawmakers.

Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and his religious nationalist allies, recently ousted from power after 12 years, seek to confound Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's delicate coalition of disparate political parties.

Earlier this month, former Transportation Minister Miri Regev called for an "immediate discussion about the danger caused by a collapse of the bridge," saying "hundreds of thousands of people are at risk" during the upcoming Jewish High Holidays.

Officials from all sides involved have been tight-lipped about the issue.

Cohen, the engineer, declined to comment, directing inquiries to the Prime Minister's Office, which manages Israel's affairs at the Jerusalem holy site. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office declined to comment. Neither the Jordanian government nor the Waqf would comment.

Reiter, the academic, said he believed the current push by Israeli religious nationalists to fix the bridge was "an attempt to capitalize on the political situation in complete disregard of Jordan."

He didn't believe this bid would work because "Israel's interest in protecting good relations with Jordan as a strategic partner are more important and weighty."

AP FACT CHECK: Biden goes too far in assurances on vaccines

By CALVIN WOODWARD and HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden offered an absolute guarantee Wednesday that people who get their COVID-19 vaccines are completely protected from infection, sickness and death from the coronavirus. The reality is not that cut and dried.

The vaccines are extremely effective but "breakthrough" infections do occur and the delta variant driving cases among the unvaccinated in the U.S. is not fully understood.

Also Biden inflated the impact of his policies on U.S. jobs created in his first half-year in office, misleadingly stating his administration had done more than any other president. He neglects to mention he had population growth on his side in his comparison.

A look at his remarks in a CNN town hall:

PANDEMIC

BIDEN: "If you're vaccinated, you're not going to be hospitalized, you're not going to be in the IC unit,

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and you're not going to die." — town hall.

THE FACTS: His remark accurately captures the strong protection the COVID-19 vaccines provide as cases spike among people who have resisted the shots. But it overlooks the rare exceptions.

As of July 12, the government had tallied 5,492 vaccinated people who tested positive for coronavirus and were hospitalized or died. That's out of more than 159 million fully vaccinated Americans. The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said "99.5% of all deaths from COVID-19 are in the unvaccinated."

BIDEN: "You're not going to get COVID if you have these vaccinations." — town hall.

THE FACTS: Again, he painted with too broad a brush as he described in stark terms the disparity between those who got their shots and those who haven't. The disparity is real, but a small number of breakthrough infections happen and health officials say they are not a cause for alarm.

No vaccines are perfect, and the government is keeping a close eye on whether new coronavirus mutants start to outsmart the COVID-19 shots. But for now, federal health officials say even when breakthrough infections occur, they tend to be mild — the vaccines so far remain strongly protective against serious illness.

BIDEN, asked about vaccinated people who get infected: "It may be possible, I know of none where they're hospitalized, in ICU and or have passed away so at a minimum I can say even if they did contract it, which I'm sorry they did, it's such a tiny percentage and it's not life threatening." — remarks to reporters after the event.

THE FACTS: Once again, too far. That is evident from the CDC's finding that 5,492 vaccinated people who tested positive for coronavirus were hospitalized or died as of July 12. That's not "none." But he is correct that it is a small percentage of the more than 159 million fully vaccinated Americans.

JOBS

BIDEN: "We've created more jobs in the first six months of our administration than any time in American history. No president, no administration, has ever created as many jobs." — town hall.

THE FACTS: His claim is misleading.

While Biden's administration in the first half year as president has seen more jobs created than any other president — just over 3 million in the five months tracked by jobs reports — that's partly because the U.S. population is larger than in the past.

When calculated as a percentage of the workforce, job growth under President Jimmy Carter increased more quickly from February through June 1977 than the same five months this year: 2.2% for Carter, compared with 2.1% for Biden.

Since the late 1970s, the U.S. population has grown by more than 100 million people.

It's true, though, that the economy is growing rapidly — it expanded at a 6.4% annual rate in the first three months of the year — and is expected to grow this year at the fastest pace since 1984.

Biden's \$1.9 trillion rescue package contributed to the vigorous growth, but much of the expansion also reflects a broader bounce-back from the unusually sharp pandemic recession, the deepest downturn since the 1930s. Even before Biden's package, for example, the International Monetary Fund was projecting U.S. growth of over 5% for this year.

Biden is also leaving out the fact that the U.S. economy remains 6.8 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level, and the unemployment rate is an elevated 5.9%, up from a five-decade low of 3.5% before the pandemic.

Men accused in Arbery's death to get jury selection hearing

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — A judge is expected to delve into the jury selection process at a hearing Thursday for the upcoming murder trial of three men accused of killing Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was

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chased and shot after he was spotted running in a Georgia neighborhood.

Judge Timothy Walmsley scheduled a pre-trial conference with attorneys at the Glynn County Courthouse in Brunswick. The agenda also includes scheduling for the trial, which is set to begin on Oct. 18.

Attorneys for two of the defendants — Greg McMichael and Travis McMichael — have moved to keep media outlets out of the courtroom when lawyers question potential jurors to determine whether they have biases in the widely publicized case. They said it was critical that potential jurors feel as comfortable as possible answering questions about race and other sensitive topics to ensure their clients are tried by an impartial jury.

Media outlets including The Associated Press have pushed back on that request. They have argued that it would violate well-established precedent and said the questioning of potential jurors — a process known as voir dire — must be open to the public and the press. Closure can only be considered in “extraordinary circumstances” when a potential juror makes that request and evidence shows public questioning would significantly harm the person’s privacy, the outlets said in a court filing on Tuesday.

Arbery’s killing sparked a national outcry last year amid protests over racial injustice. The McMichaels — a white father and son — armed themselves with guns and pursued Arbery in a pickup truck when they spotted him running in their neighborhood on Feb. 23, 2020. The third defendant, William “Roddie” Bryan, joined the chase and took cellphone video of Travis McMichael shooting Arbery three times at close range with a shotgun.

All three defendants have said they committed no crimes. Defense attorneys say the McMichaels had a valid reason to pursue Arbery, thinking he was a burglar, and that Travis McMichael shot him in self-defense as Arbery grappled for his shotgun.

Western wildfires: California blaze crosses into Nevada

By HAVEN DALEY Associated Press

GARDNERVILLE, Nev. (AP) — A Northern California wildfire crossed into Nevada, prompting new evacuations, but better weather has been helping crews battling the nation’s largest blaze in southern Oregon.

The Tamarack Fire south of Lake Tahoe had burned more than 68 square miles (176 square kilometers) of timber and head-high chaparral in national forest land. It erupted on July 4 and was one of nearly two dozen blazes sparked by lightning strikes.

More than 1,200 firefighters were battling the Alpine County blaze, which has destroyed at least 10 buildings, forced evacuations in several communities and had closed parts of U.S. 395 in Nevada and California. Fire officials expected active or extreme fire behavior on Thursday, which could see 14-mph winds and temperatures approaching 90 degrees.

A request for voluntary evacuations was also issued for portions of Douglas County, Nevada. An evacuation center was set up at a community center in Gardnerville, Nevada.

Evacuee Morgana-Le-Fae Veatch said she already had boxed up most of her belongings because she is starting community college next week but her parents lost their house in a 1987 blaze.

“So this has been really, really stressing to them,” she said.

Meanwhile, Oregon on Wednesday banned all campfires on state-managed lands and in state campgrounds east of Interstate 5, the major highway that is commonly considered the dividing line between the wet western part of the state and the dry eastern half.

The nation’s largest wildfire, Oregon’s Bootleg Fire, grew to 618 square miles (1,601 square kilometers) — just over half the size of Rhode Island.

However, authorities said lower winds and temperatures allowed crews to improve fire lines. The fire also was approaching an area burned by a previous fire on its active southeastern flank, raising hopes that lack of fuel could reduce its spread.

The Oregon fire, which was sparked by lightning, has ravaged the sparsely populated southern part of the state and had been expanding by up to 4 miles (6 kilometers) a day, pushed by strong winds and critically dry weather that turned trees and undergrowth into a tinderbox.

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Fire crews have had to retreat from the flames for 10 consecutive days as fireballs jump from treetop to treetop, trees explode, embers fly ahead of the fire to start new blazes and, in some cases, the inferno's heat creates its own weather of shifting winds and dry lightning. Monstrous clouds of smoke and ash have risen up to 6 miles (10 kilometers) into the sky and are visible for more than 100 air miles (161 kilometers).

The blaze, which is being fought by more than 2,200 people, is about one-third contained.

At least 2,000 homes were ordered evacuated at some point during the fire and an additional 5,000 were threatened. At least 70 homes and more than 100 outbuildings have burned, but no one is known to have died.

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

Pelosi bars Trump allies from Jan. 6 probe; GOP vows boycott

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi rejected two Republicans tapped by House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy to sit on a committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, a decision the Republican denounced as “an egregious abuse of power.”

McCarthy said the GOP won't participate in the investigation if Democrats won't accept the members he appointed.

Pelosi cited the “integrity” of the probe in refusing Wednesday to accept the appointments of Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, picked by McCarthy to be the top Republican on the panel, or Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan. The two men are outspoken allies of former President Donald Trump, whose supporters laid siege to the Capitol that day and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden's win. Both of them voted to overturn the election results in the hours after the siege.

Democrats have said the investigation will go on whether the Republicans participate or not, as Pelosi has already appointed eight of the 13 members — including Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, a Trump critic — and that gives them a bipartisan quorum to proceed, according to committee rules.

Pelosi said she had spoken with McCarthy and told him that she would reject the two names.

“With respect for the integrity of the investigation, with an insistence on the truth and with concern about statements made and actions taken by these members, I must reject the recommendations of Representatives Banks and Jordan to the Select Committee,” Pelosi said in a statement.

Pelosi has the authority to approve or reject members, per committee rules, though she acknowledged her move was unusual. She said “the unprecedented nature of January 6th demands this unprecedented decision.”

The move is emblematic of the raw political tensions in Congress that have only escalated since the insurrection and raises the possibility that the investigation — the only comprehensive probe currently being conducted of the attack — will be done almost entirely by Democrats. The House voted in May to create an independent investigation that would have been evenly split between the parties, but Senate Republicans blocked that approach in a vote last month.

McCarthy said Pelosi's move will damage the institution of Congress.

“Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts,” McCarthy said.

It is unclear how McCarthy would lead a separate investigation, as the minority does not have the power to set up committees. He said the panel has lost “all legitimacy” because Pelosi wouldn't allow the Republicans to name their own members.

Most in the GOP have remained loyal to Trump despite the violent insurrection of his supporters that sent many lawmakers running for their lives. McCarthy wouldn't say for weeks whether Republicans would even participate in the probe, but he sent the five names to Pelosi on Monday.

Pelosi accepted McCarthy's three other picks — Illinois Rep. Rodney Davis, North Dakota Rep. Kelly

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Armstrong and Texas Rep. Troy Nehls. But McCarthy said that all five or none would participate.

Like Jordan and Banks, Nehls voted to overturn Biden's victory. Armstrong and Davis voted to certify the election.

Banks recently traveled with Trump to the U.S.-Mexico border and visited him at his New Jersey golf course. In a statement after McCarthy tapped him for the panel, he sharply criticized the Democrats who had set it up.

"Make no mistake, Nancy Pelosi created this committee solely to malign conservatives and to justify the Left's authoritarian agenda," Banks said.

Democrats whom Pelosi appointed to the committee earlier this month were angry over that statement, according to a senior Democratic aide familiar with the private deliberations and who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss them. They were also concerned over Banks' two recent visits with Trump, the person said.

Jordan, the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, was one of Trump's most vocal defenders during his two impeachments and last month likened the new investigation to "impeachment three." Trump was impeached by the House and acquitted by the Senate both times.

The back-and-forth came after all but two Republicans opposed the creation of the select committee in a House vote last month, with most in the GOP arguing that the majority-Democratic panel would conduct a partisan probe. Only Cheney and another frequent Trump critic, Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, voted in favor of the panel.

Cheney told reporters she believes that the rhetoric from McCarthy, Jordan and Banks is "disgraceful" and she agrees with Pelosi's decision to reject the two Republicans.

"At every opportunity, the minority leader has attempted to prevent the American people from understanding what happened — to block this investigation," Cheney said of McCarthy.

The panel will hold its first hearing next week, with at least four rank-and-file police officers who battled rioters that day testifying about their experiences. Dozens of police officers were injured as the violent mob pushed past them and broke into the Capitol building.

Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the chair of the panel, said the committee would carry out its duties.

"It has been more than 6 months since the attack, we owe it to our democracy to stay the course and not be distracted by side-shows," Thompson said in a statement. "That is exactly what we will be doing next Tuesday, when the bipartisan committee members take testimony from frontline heroes who put their lives on the line to protect our democracy."

Seven people died during and after the rioting, including a woman who was shot by police as she tried to break into the House chamber and three other Trump supporters who suffered medical emergencies.

Two police officers died by suicide in the days that followed, and a third officer, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, collapsed and later died after engaging with the protesters. A medical examiner determined he died of natural causes.

Infrastructure bill fails first vote; Senate to try again

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans rejected an effort to begin debate on the big infrastructure deal that a bipartisan group of senators brokered with President Joe Biden, but pressure was mounting as supporters insisted they just needed more time before another vote possibly next week.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., had scheduled the procedural vote Wednesday to nudge along negotiations that have dragged for weeks. But Republicans mounted a filibuster, saying the bipartisan group still had a few unresolved issues and needed to review the final details. They sought a delay until Monday.

"We have made significant progress and are close to a final agreement," the bipartisan group of senators, 11 Republicans and 11 Democrats, said in a joint statement after the vote. The senators said they were optimistic they could finish up "in the coming days."

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The nearly \$1 trillion measure over five years includes about \$579 billion in new spending on roads, broadband and other public works projects — a first phase of Biden's infrastructure agenda, to be followed by a much broader \$3.5 trillion measure from Democrats next month.

Biden's top priority is at a critical juncture, posing a test of his ability to forge bipartisan cooperation in Washington and make investments the White House views as crucial to the nation's ability to pull out of the COVID-19 crisis and spur economic growth.

The president traveled to Ohio later Wednesday to promote his economic policies, and was calling his infrastructure agenda a "blue-collar blueprint for building an American economy back." He has said that Americans overwhelmingly support his plan.

In a CNN town hall, Biden also talked up the benefits of the bipartisan framework, saying, "It's a good thing and I think we're going to get it done." He also made passing reference to the dangerously outdated Brent Spence Bridge across the Ohio River, saying they'll "fix that damn bridge of yours."

At another point, Biden was asked by a union electrician if it was possible to bring Congress together to pass an infrastructure bill that would help the region replace the bridge.

"The answer is, absolutely, positively, yes," the president said.

The party-line vote blocked the bill from advancing, 51-49, and fell far short of the 60 votes required under Senate rules. Schumer switched his vote to "no" at the end, a procedural step that would allow him to move to quickly reconsider.

The bipartisan group has labored for days with Biden aides to strike a deal, which would be a first phase of the president's eventual \$4 trillion-plus package of domestic outlays — not just for roads and bridges, but foundations of everyday life including child care, family tax breaks, education and an expansion of Medicare for seniors.

The next steps are uncertain, but the bipartisan group insists it is close to a deal and expects to finish soon.

"We're voting no today because we're not ready, but we're saying we do want to take up this bill as soon as we are," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, a leader of the effort. "I think that'll be Monday."

At least 11 Republicans signed on to a letter to Schumer saying they would vote yes to proceed on Monday, if certain details about the package are ready.

Republican Sen. Todd Young of Indiana was among the Republicans who signed the letter and said he was "cautiously optimistic" they can reach a bipartisan deal.

Restless Democrats, who are facing a crowded calendar while trying to deliver on Biden's priorities, nevertheless said they are willing to wait if a deal is within reach.

"I'm willing to give it another chance next week," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. "But we need to fish or cut bait."

The senators in the bipartisan group were joined for a private lunch ahead of the vote by the two leaders of the House's Problem Solvers Caucus, Rep. Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., and Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., a bipartisan group generally supportive of the effort.

Schumer said senators are in the fourth week of negotiations after reaching agreement on a broad framework for infrastructure spending with the White House. He said Wednesday's vote was no different from other times when the Senate sought to get the ball rolling on debate and "not a deadline to have every final detail worked out."

But Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky encouraged Republicans to vote against it, called the vote a "stunt" that would fail, but he emphasized senators were "still negotiating in good faith across the aisle."

"Around here, we typically write the bills before we vote on them," he said.

Biden has been in touch with both Democrats and Republicans for several days, and White House press secretary Jen Psaki traveling with the president Wednesday on Air Force One, said the administration was "encouraged."

While Biden proposes paying for his proposals with a tax hike on corporations and wealthy Americans

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who earn more than \$400,000 a year, the bipartisan group has been working almost around the clock to figure out a compromise to pay for its package, having dashed ideas for boosting the federal gas tax or strengthening the IRS to go after tax scofflaws.

Instead, senators in the bipartisan group are considering rolling back a Trump-era rule on pharmaceutical rebates that could bring in \$170 billion, some of which could be used for infrastructure. They are also targeting unspent COVID-19 relief aid to health care providers and extending multiyear, modest reductions in a wide array of federal benefit programs, according to two people familiar with the talks who described the details on condition of anonymity.

Senators are also still haggling over public transit funds. Typically, spending from the federal Highway Trust Fund has followed the formula of 80% for highways and 20% for transit. Some Republicans are concerned that the ratio would change to 82%-18% under the bipartisan bill, said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

"Big numbers are involved," Romney said.

But Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said: "There's not a lot of sentiment for public transit on their side. They don't really believe in the word 'public.'"

Ten Republicans would have been needed in the evenly split Senate to join all 50 Democrats in reaching the 60-vote threshold required to advance the bill past a filibuster to formal consideration.

Many Republicans are wary of moving ahead with the first, relatively slim package, fearing it will pave the way for the broader \$3.5 trillion effort Democrats are preparing to pass on their own under special budget rules that only require 51 votes. Vice President Kamala Harris can break a tie.

Democrats hope to show progress on that bill before lawmakers leave Washington for their recess in August.

Meanwhile, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has been working to keep restless House Democrats in line as they grow impatient with the sluggish Senate pace.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, sent a letter with 30 Democrats on the panel warning that the Senate proposal was inadequate and that House lawmakers want a seat at the negotiating table for any final product.

EXPLAINER: As wildlife smoke spreads, who's at risk?

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Smoke from wildfires in the western U.S. and Canada is blanketing much of the continent, including thousands of miles away on the East Coast. And experts say the phenomenon is becoming more common as human-caused global warming stokes bigger and more intense blazes.

Pollution from smoke reached unhealthy levels this week in communities from Washington state to Washington D.C.

Get used to it, researchers say.

"These fires are going to be burning all summer," said University of Washington wildfire smoke expert Dan Jaffe. "In terms of bad air quality, everywhere in the country is to going to be worse than average this year."

Growing scientific research points to potential long-term health damage from breathing in microscopic particles of smoke. Authorities have scrambled to better protect people from the harmful effects but face challenges in communicating risk to vulnerable communities and people who live very far away from burning forests.

WHY SO MUCH SMOKE AND HOW DANGEROUS IS IT?

Decades of aggressive fire fighting allowed dead trees and other fuels to build up in forests. Now climate change is drying the landscape, making it easier for fires to ignite and spread even as more people move into fire-prone areas.

The number of unhealthy air quality days recorded in 2021 by pollution monitors nationwide is more than double the number to date in each of the last two years, according to figures provided to the Associated Press by the Environmental Protection Agency. Wildfires likely are driving much of the increase, officials said.

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The amount of smoke wildfires spew stems directly from how much land burns — more than 4,100 square miles (10,600 square kilometers) in the U.S. and 4,800 square miles (12,500 square kilometers) in Canada so far in 2021. That's behind the 10-year average for this time of year for both nations, but forecasters warn conditions could worsen as a severe drought afflicting 85% of the West intensifies.

Wildfire smoke contains hundreds of chemical compounds, and many can be harmful in large doses. Health officials use the concentration of smoke particles in the air to gauge the severity of danger to the public.

In bad fire years over the past decade, infernos across the West emitted more than a million tons of the particles annually, according to U.S. Forest Service research.

Scientists link smoke exposure with long-term health problems including decreased lung function, weakened immune systems and higher rates of flu. In the short term, vulnerable people can be hospitalized and sometimes die from excessive smoke, according to physicians and public health officials.

When communities burn, the smoke can be especially hazardous. The 2018 fire in Paradise, California that killed 85 people and torched 14,000 houses also generated a thick plume blanketing portions of Northern California for weeks. Smoke from burning houses and buildings contains more toxic plastics and other manufactured materials as well as chemicals stored in garages.

WHERE ARE THE FIRES?

Almost 80 large wildfires are now burning across the U.S., including 19 in Montana. The largest — eastern Oregon's Bootleg fire — has grown to 618 square miles (1,600 square kilometers). That's half the size of Rhode Island, yet fewer than 200 houses and other structures have been confirmed as lost because the fire is burning in a sparsely populated area.

More than 200 fires are burning in Manitoba and Ontario, according to Canadian officials.

Weather patterns and fire intensity determine who gets hit by smoke. Huge fires generate so much heat that they can produce their own clouds that funnel smoke high into the atmosphere.

"It just carries across the country and slowly spreads out, forming sort of this haze layer in the sky," said meteorologist Miles Bliss with the National Weather Service in Medford, Oregon.

The combined plume from Canada and the U.S. largely passed over parts of the Midwest this week before settling to ground level across an area that stretches from Ohio northeast to New England and south to the Carolinas, air pollution data shows.

Health effects can occur thousands of miles from the flames. The smoke loses its tell-tale odor but remains a potential hazard even when it drifts that far, said Jeff Pierce, an atmospheric scientist at Colorado State University.

"It's certainly unhealthy," Pierce said of the air along the East Coast in recent days. "If you have asthma or any sort of respiratory condition, you want to be thinking about changing your plans if you're going to be outside."

People who live close to fires are more likely to be prepared and take precautions, while those who live farther away unwittingly remain exposed, according to a recent study by Colorado State University epidemiologist Sheryl Magzamen and Pierce.

HOW DO I PROTECT MYSELF?

Listen for warnings about smoke and, if advised, avoid outdoor activities to reduce exposure. Keep doors and windows closed, and run an air filter to clean inside air. Face masks can protect against breathing in smoke. As with COVID-19, most effective are N95 masks because they are designed to block the smallest particles.

An online, interactive smoke map launched by the EPA and the U.S. Forest Service last year on a pilot basis has drawn millions of viewers. To reach people more quickly, officials are considering using mobile phone push notifications that would alert users when heavy smoke could inundate their communities, according to agency spokeswoman Enesta Jones.

Biden says getting vaccinated 'gigantically important'

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

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CINCINNATI, Ohio (AP) — President Joe Biden expressed pointed frustration Wednesday over the slowing COVID-19 vaccination rate in the U.S. and pleaded that it's "gigantically important" for Americans to step up and get inoculated against the virus as it surges once again.

Biden, speaking at a televised town hall in Cincinnati, said the public health crisis has turned largely into a plight of the unvaccinated as the spread of the delta variant has led to a surge in infections around the country.

"We have a pandemic for those who haven't gotten the vaccination — it's that basic, that simple," he said on the CNN town hall.

The president also expressed optimism that children under 12 will be approved for vaccination in the coming months. But he displayed exasperation that so many eligible Americans are still reluctant to get a shot.

"If you're vaccinated, you're not going to be hospitalized, you're not going to be in the IC unit, and you're not going to die," Biden said at the forum at Mount St. Joseph University. "So it's gigantically important that ... we all act like Americans who care about our fellow Americans."

Over 80 minutes, Biden fielded questions on many of the pressing issues of the day, including his infrastructure package, voting rights and the makeup of the congressional commission that will investigate the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol. He also reflected on what it's like to be president, saying he's sometimes taken aback by the pomp that comes with the job and the weight of being "the last guy in the room" left to make the call on daunting decisions.

Six months into his presidency, taming the coronavirus remains his most pressing problem.

U.S. hospitalizations and deaths are nearly all among the unvaccinated. But COVID-19 cases nearly tripled in the U.S. over two weeks amid an onslaught of vaccine misinformation that is straining hospitals, exhausting doctors and pushing clergy into the fray.

Across the U.S., the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases rose over the past two weeks to more than 37,000 on Tuesday, up from less than 13,700 on July 6, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Just 56.2% of Americans have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The president noted that the rise has become so concerning that even his critics are pushing back against vaccine disinformation.

Biden made an indirect reference to high-profile conservative personalities at Fox News who have "had an altar call" and are now more openly speaking to their skeptical guests about the benefits of getting vaccinated. Sean Hannity recently told viewers, "I believe in the science of vaccination" and urged them to take the disease seriously. Steve Doocy, who cohosts "Fox & Friends," this week told viewers the vaccination "will save your life."

Before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington, Biden told reporters he was "glad they had the courage to say what they've said."

Asked about rising prices, Biden acknowledged "there will be near-term inflation" as the economy rebounds from the pandemic but said it was "highly unlikely long-term inflation will get out of hand."

Biden, who traveled to Ohio as he's trying to rev up support for his economic agenda, visited a union training center ahead of the town hall.

The trip comes as the fate of his infrastructure proposal remains unclear after Senate Republicans rejected a \$1 trillion blueprint in a key test vote Wednesday. A bipartisan group of 22 senators said in a joint statement after the vote that they were close to coming to terms on a deal and requested a delay until Monday.

Biden expressed confidence in the outcome, saying, "It's a good thing and I think we're going to get it done."

While lawmakers wrangle over the details of that proposal on Capitol Hill, Biden made the case that his nearly \$4 trillion package is needed to rebuild the middle class and sustain the economic growth the country has seen during the first six months of his presidency.

The president's visit took him near the dangerously outdated Brent Spence Bridge — a chokepoint for trucks and emergency vehicles between Ohio and Kentucky that the past two presidents promised without

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success to replace.

Biden made a passing reference to the structure, telling town hall attendees it's time to "fix that damn bridge of yours."

He delved into the personal when he faced a question about the scourge of drug addiction, noting he's "so damn proud" of his son Hunter Biden, who has published a memoir about his struggles with substance abuse. The president also noted he feels a bit self-conscious about some of the fringe benefits that come with the office. He elicited laughter when he said he told some of the White House staff not to come in to serve breakfast. The real reason: The president likes to eat breakfast in his robe.

Biden defended the filibuster against repeated questions from CNN moderator Don Lemon about why he feels the need to protect what some critics argue is a legislative tactic once used to protect racist policies.

He said he's trying to bring the country together around the need to protect voting rights, and he doesn't want "the debate to only be about whether or not we have a filibuster." Biden said if Democrats removed the filibuster "you're going to throw the entire Congress into chaos and nothing will get done."

Back in Washington, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday rejected two Republicans selected by House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy to sit on a committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. McCarthy said the GOP won't participate in the investigation if Democrats won't accept the members he appointed.

Lemon asked how Biden could have confidence that Republicans and Democrats can get together on anything when they can't even come to agreement on investigating the most brazen attack on the U.S. Capitol in 200 years.

Biden simply replied, "These people," a nod to forum's spectators and his faith in Americans writ large. But Biden seemed to also acknowledge the partisan rift in Washington had become maddening.

"I don't care if you think I'm Satan reincarnated," Biden said. "The fact is you can't look at that television and say nothing happened on the 6th and listen to people who say this was a peaceful march."

Wildfire smoke clouds sky, hurts air quality on East Coast

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and SARA CLINE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Smoke and ash from massive wildfires in the American West clouded the sky and led to air quality alerts Wednesday on parts of the East Coast as the effects of the blazes were felt 2,500 miles (4,023 kilometers) away.

Strong winds blew smoke east from California, Oregon, Montana and other states all the way to other side of the continent. Haze hung over New York City, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The nation's largest wildfire, Oregon's Bootleg Fire, grew to 618 square miles (1,601 square kilometers) — just over half the size of Rhode Island. Fires also burned on both sides of California's Sierra Nevada and in Washington state and other areas of the West.

The smoke blowing to the East Coast was reminiscent of last fall, when large blazes burning in Oregon's worst wildfire season in recent memory choked the local sky with pea-soup smoke but also affected air quality several thousand miles away. So far this year, Seattle and Portland have largely been spared the foul air.

People in parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and elsewhere with heart disease, asthma and other health issues were told to avoid the outdoors. Air quality alerts for parts of the region were in place through Thursday.

"One of the things about this event that makes it so remarkable is that the smoke is affecting such a large swath of the U.S.," said Jesse Berman, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health and an expert on air quality. "You're not just seeing localized and perhaps upstate New York being affected, but rather you're seeing numerous states all along the East Coast that are being impacted."

David Lawrence, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said wildfire smoke usually thins out by the time it reaches the East Coast, but this summer it's "still pretty thick."

In California, a wildfire burning completely uncontained south of Lake Tahoe crossed the state line into

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Nevada. New voluntary evacuation orders were issued for portions of Douglas County, Nevada.

The Tamarack Fire, started by lightning in Alpine County, California, has now burned more than 68 square miles (176 square kilometers). Authorities say more than 1,200 firefighters are battling the blaze, which has destroyed at least 10 structures.

Meanwhile, Oregon on Wednesday banned all campfires on state-managed lands and in state campgrounds east of Interstate 5, the major highway that is commonly considered the dividing line between the wet western part of the state and the dry eastern half.

The regulation includes the designated fire rings at campsites, as well as candles and tiki torches. Propane grills are still allowed, but the state still urged campers to pack food that doesn't require heating or cooking.

The lightning-caused Oregon fire has ravaged the sparsely populated southern part of the state and has been expanding by up to 4 miles (6 kilometers) a day, pushed by gusting winds and critically dry weather that's turned trees and undergrowth into a tinderbox.

Fire crews have had to retreat from the flames for 10 consecutive days as fireballs jump from treetop to treetop, trees explode, embers fly ahead of the fire to start new blazes and, in some cases, the inferno's heat creates its own weather of shifting winds and dry lightning. Monstrous clouds of smoke and ash have risen up to 6 miles (10 kilometers) into the sky and are visible for more than 100 air miles (161 kilometers).

Authorities in Oregon said lower winds and temperatures allowed crews to improve fire lines, and they hoped to make more progress Wednesday. The fire was approaching an old burn area on its active south-eastern flank, raising hopes it would not spread as much.

The blaze, which is being fought by more than 2,200 people, is about one-third contained. It was within a few hundred acres of becoming Oregon's third-largest wildfire in modern history.

At least 2,000 homes have been evacuated at some point during the fire and an additional 5,000 threatened. At least 70 homes and more than 100 outbuildings have burned, but no one is known to have died.

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

While Berman is hopeful that the smoke will last only a couple of days, he said we may see more of it due to climate change.

"We fully expect that you're going to see more situations where smoke, from fires occurring farther away, is going to travel long distances and affect people in other parts of the country," Berman said. "I would not be surprised at all if these events did become more frequent in the future."

EXPLAINER: Surfing, where the playing field is never level

By SALLY HO The Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Surfing is as much skill and science as instinct and timing. That begins with learning how to read ocean swells to anticipate the formation of the wave to quickly execute a maneuver.

Here, we explain what you need to know about surfing to appreciate its Olympic debut at the Tokyo Games this month.

LEARN THE LINGO

Surfing has its own language, and the first thing you need to know about surfers is that they have a lot of popular phrases to convey their excitement and enthusiasm for a good ride.

Stoked. Frothy. Gnarly. Sick. Rad.

Waves are created by the way the swells interact with the bottom contours of the ocean, called the break. Beach breaks — like the Olympic site at Tsurigasaki beach — happen because of sandbars, which can shift over time or due to storms. Point breaks are made against a point of land, such as a jetty. Reef breaks are often further out in the ocean.

The technical makeup of a wave is also important oceanography to know. The lip of the wave is the curling part at the top, the face of the wave is the blue water, and the whitewater is the foam that results from the energy of the breaking wave.

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READ THE OCEAN

Think of it as a mental warmup that's necessary for successful surfing.

Hit the beach early in the morning and you'll find swarms of surfers paddling out to the ocean, seemingly full of zen and sitting on their surfboards bobbing in the water. What they're actually doing is concentrating to gauge the feel of the surf conditions.

Serious surfers also study up on the oceanography and atmospheric data before jumping in the water. Smart surfers become science junkies. They study the weather forecast, wave height, wind direction and tidal movement in obsessive detail.

"A lot of surfers will look at the satellite maps and look at the storms out on the ocean, which are going to create swells. And then there's buoys that measure the height of the swell in the interval between the waves and there's tides and there's wind," says Richard Schmidt, a retired pro surfer who now runs a surf school in his native Santa Cruz, California. "And in order to get really great surf, a lot of those elements have to all coincide and come together."

RIDE THE WAVE

Timing and positioning are everything when it comes to riding a wave. Competitive surfing in a nutshell is all about deciding which wave to take and what move or moves make the best use of what the ocean delivers in the moment.

"Doing any maneuver, you want to get a lot of speed and going into a turn, it's laying it all on rail and pushing really hard but matching the power of the waves so that you don't slide out," says Carissa Moore, the reigning world champion and the woman to beat at surfing's Olympic debut.

Whereas the men's competition typically dazzles with explosive airs, the women's game often features a more dance-like rhythm that showcases the speed, power and flow of the ride.

Most maneuvers are types of turns; where you look is where your body will go.

To do a barrel — where the surfer is riding inside the tube of the wave — it's crucial to find the section of the water that is steep and hollow, then stay balanced within the height of the curl in order for the water to surround you. Surfers who disappear in the barrel and then exit smoothly at the end show control. Short surfers can rejoice in fitting in the tube without crouching or squatting down.

For an air, look for a soft crumble of the wave to gain speed against before launching towards the beach to harness the momentum of the wave.

"You have like a wave that's never the same, so you're constantly having to adjust to what you're seeing and adapt to the situation," Moore says.

JUDGE THE RIDE

Unlike other sports, competitive surfing is done on a literally uneven playing field: the mighty and uncontrollable ocean.

Each ocean wave and each beach are different, so the judging criteria depends on what the surf conditions are during the heat and how well the maneuvers are executed. The scoring is admittedly subjective and the conditions are unpredictable, which makes surfing a uniquely four-dimensional sport with the vagaries of the ocean as the X factor.

In competitive surfing, athletes take turns in timed heats riding their chosen waves based on their position in the surf zone during heats.

For the Olympics, a panel of five judges will then assign scores — up to a perfect 10 — for each wave a surfer rides during the heat, which can be 20 to 35 minutes. The highest and lowest scores are tossed out, leaving the middle three to be averaged as the ride score. Then, each surfer's top two ride scores are combined to become their heat score, out of 20 total points. Scores do not carry over, so each heat is a new start.

Judges take into consideration difficulty, innovation, combinations, variety, and speed, power and flow, for an overall impression of each wave surfed. Where they perform in the wave is important; the most critical section lies where the blue water meets the white water.

There's no hierarchy to the way maneuvers are scored. But if there were two identical moves, the bigger wave would prove to be more difficult to pull off.

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"Someone could do a really crappy air in a little tiny water section — it's like 2.5 (in score). And then someone could do like a really sick carve (turn) in a critical section — that's like 6," says Tory Gilkerson, who will be scoring as an Olympic judge. "There's no ceiling or floor to each maneuver. It's about how they're executed and the technique and the quality of the maneuver."

Violence flares in Haiti ahead of slain president's funeral

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

QUARTIER-MORIN, Haiti (AP) — Hundreds of workers fled businesses in northern Haiti on Wednesday after demonstrations near the hometown of assassinated President Jovenel Moïse grew violent ahead of his funeral.

Associated Press journalists observed the body of one man who witnesses said was shot in the community of Quartier-Morin, which is near Trou-du-Nord, where Moïse was born. Roadblocks were set up between the two communities, temporarily barring cars from entering or leaving as two plumes of thick, black smoke rose nearby.

Many workers walked hurriedly in a single file along the main road that connects Quartier-Morin with Cap-Haitien, the city where events to honor Moïse were scheduled to start Thursday ahead of Friday's funeral.

Fleeing people said they saw burning tires and men with weapons demanding justice for Moïse. One woman who was out of breath said the armed men told her, "Go! Go! Go!" as employees clad in uniforms of all colors obeyed and left the area. She declined to give her name, saying she feared for her life.

Abnel Pierre, who works at the Caracol Industrial Park, said he was forced to walk 45 minutes home because the bus that transports employees was stuck behind blockades. He declined further comment as he walked swiftly toward his house as the sky began to darken.

These were the first violent demonstrations since Moïse was shot to death at his private home. They came a day after Ariel Henry was sworn in as the country's new prime minister, pledging to form a provisional consensus government and to restore order and security.

In the capital of Port-au-Prince, Martine Moïse, widow of the slain president, made her first public appearance since her surprise return to Haiti on Saturday, although she did not speak. She had been recuperating at a hospital in Miami after she was wounded in the July 7 attack at the couple's private home.

She wore a black dress and black face mask and her right arm was in a black sling as she met with officials near the National Pantheon Museum, where ceremonies are being held to commemorate her husband. She was accompanied by her three children.

The capital remained peaceful in contrast with the community in northern Haiti.

Authorities have said at least 26 suspects have been detained as part of the investigation into the assassination, including 18 former Colombian soldiers and three Haitian police officers. At least seven high-ranking police officers have been placed in isolation, but not formally arrested, Police Chief Léon Charles has said.

On Wednesday, Colombia's government said it would have a consular mission in Haiti on July 25-27 to help the detained ex-soldiers and repatriate the bodies of the three others killed by Haitian authorities in the aftermath of the assassination.

Infrastructure bill fails first vote; Senate to try again

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republicans rejected an effort Wednesday to begin debate on the big infrastructure deal that a bipartisan group of senators brokered with President Joe Biden, but pressure was mounting as supporters insisted they just needed more time before another vote possibly next week.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., had scheduled the procedural vote to nudge along negotiations that have dragged for weeks. But Republicans mounted a filibuster, saying the bipartisan group still had a few unresolved issues and needed to review the final details. They sought a delay until Monday.

"We have made significant progress and are close to a final agreement," the bipartisan group of senators, 11 Republicans and 11 Democrats, said in a joint statement after the vote. The senators said they

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were optimistic they could finish up "in the coming days."

The nearly \$1 trillion measure over five years includes about \$579 billion in new spending on roads, broadband and other public works projects — a first phase of Biden's infrastructure agenda, to be followed by a much broader \$3.5 trillion measure from Democrats next month.

Biden's top priority is at a critical juncture, posing a test of his ability to forge bipartisan cooperation in Washington and make investments the White House views as crucial to the nation's ability to pull out of the COVID-19 crisis and spur economic growth.

The president traveled to Ohio later Wednesday to promote his economic policies, and was calling his infrastructure agenda a "blue-collar blueprint for building an American economy back." He has said that Americans overwhelmingly support his plan.

In a CNN town hall, Biden also talked up the benefits of the bipartisan framework, saying, "It's a good thing and I think we're going to get it done." He also made passing reference to the dangerously outdated Brent Spence Bridge across the Ohio River, saying they'll "fix that damn bridge of yours."

At another point, Biden was asked by a union electrician if it was possible to bring Congress together to pass an infrastructure bill that would help the region replace the bridge.

"The answer is, absolutely, positively, yes," the president said.

The party-line vote blocked the bill from advancing, 51-49, and fell far short of the 60 votes required under Senate rules. Schumer switched his vote to "no" at the end, a procedural step that would allow him to move to quickly reconsider.

The bipartisan group has labored for days with Biden aides to strike a deal, which would be a first phase of the president's eventual \$4 trillion-plus package of domestic outlays — not just for roads and bridges, but foundations of everyday life including child care, family tax breaks, education and an expansion of Medicare for seniors.

The next steps are uncertain, but the bipartisan group insists it is close to a deal and expects to finish soon.

"We're voting no today because we're not ready, but we're saying we do want to take up this bill as soon as we are," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, a leader of the effort. "I think that'll be Monday."

At least 11 Republicans signed on to a letter to Schumer saying they would vote yes to proceed on Monday, if certain details about the package are ready.

Republican Sen. Todd Young of Indiana was among the Republicans who signed the letter and said he was "cautiously optimistic" they can reach a bipartisan deal.

Restless Democrats, who are facing a crowded calendar while trying to deliver on Biden's priorities, nevertheless said they are willing to wait if a deal is within reach.

"I'm willing to give it another chance next week," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. "But we need to fish or cut bait."

The senators in the bipartisan group were joined for a private lunch ahead of the vote by the two leaders of the House's Problem Solvers Caucus, Rep. Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., and Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., a bipartisan group generally supportive of the effort.

Schumer said senators are in the fourth week of negotiations after reaching agreement on a broad framework for infrastructure spending with the White House. He said Wednesday's vote was no different from other times when the Senate sought to get the ball rolling on debate and "not a deadline to have every final detail worked out."

But Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky encouraged Republicans to vote against it, called the vote a "stunt" that would fail, but he emphasized senators were "still negotiating in good faith across the aisle."

"Around here, we typically write the bills before we vote on them," he said.

Biden has been in touch with both Democrats and Republicans for several days, and White House press secretary Jen Psaki traveling with the president Wednesday on Air Force One, said the administration was "encouraged."

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While Biden proposes paying for his proposals with a tax hike on corporations and wealthy Americans who earn more than \$400,000 a year, the bipartisan group has been working almost around the clock to figure out a compromise to pay for its package, having dashed ideas for boosting the federal gas tax or strengthening the IRS to go after tax scofflaws.

Instead, senators in the bipartisan group are considering rolling back a Trump-era rule on pharmaceutical rebates that could bring in \$170 billion, some of which could be used for infrastructure. They are also targeting unspent COVID-19 relief aid to health care providers and extending multiyear, modest reductions in a wide array of federal benefit programs, according to two people familiar with the talks who described the details on condition of anonymity.

Senators are also still haggling over public transit funds. Typically, spending from the federal Highway Trust Fund has followed the formula of 80% for highways and 20% for transit. Some Republicans are concerned that the ratio would change to 82%-18% under the bipartisan bill, said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

"Big numbers are involved," Romney said.

But Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said: "There's not a lot of sentiment for public transit on their side. They don't really believe in the word 'public.'"

Ten Republicans would have been needed in the evenly split Senate to join all 50 Democrats in reaching the 60-vote threshold required to advance the bill past a filibuster to formal consideration.

Many Republicans are wary of moving ahead with the first, relatively slim package, fearing it will pave the way for the broader \$3.5 trillion effort Democrats are preparing to pass on their own under special budget rules that only require 51 votes. Vice President Kamala Harris can break a tie.

Democrats hope to show progress on that bill before lawmakers leave Washington for their recess in August.

Meanwhile, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has been working to keep restless House Democrats in line as they grow impatient with the sluggish Senate pace.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, sent a letter with 30 Democrats on the panel warning that the Senate proposal was inadequate and that House lawmakers want a seat at the negotiating table for any final product.

Cuba: US protest narrative paving way for military incursion

By ANDREA RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Cuba criticized the United States and President Joe Biden on Wednesday for a series of statements by senior officials after the unprecedented protests on the island last week, accusing the U.S. government of seeking to justify a military intervention.

Johana Tablada, deputy director for U.S. affairs at Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said U.S. officials are painting a false picture of the situation in Cuba, which is struggling with severe economic problems amid a surge in coronavirus infections.

"There is a Walt Disney narrative of a bad government and people fighting for their freedom — stereotypes that scare anyone who has never set foot in Cuba, because of their arrogance and disregard for the truth," Tablada said in an interview with The Associated Press.

"They are very interested in fabricating an alternative reality because the riots of July 11 weren't enough to justify the war that is being waged on us," she added.

Communicating via social networks, thousands of Cubans took to the streets July 11 in various parts of the country to voice complaints over power cuts, long lines at stores, shortages of goods and rising prices, while some called for changes in the government. The protests ended in acts of vandalism, destruction of patrol cars, stone throwing at hospitals and looting.

There were also violent arrests of protesters by the police, witnessed by AP, and according to authorities one death. Officials have not released a list of prisoners, but Human Rights Watch said in a reported Wednesday that about 500 had been arrested.

The day before, Col. Víctor Alvarez at the Ministry of the Interior said that some detainees had been

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released when there wasn't enough evidence to prove they participated in protests, but others were being processed by the judicial system. He did not give any numbers or other details.

The protests were the largest in more than two decades, while groups of government supporters also took to the streets, including tens of thousands on Saturday.

Authorities suspended cellphone internet data service on the island, charging that a campaign orchestrated from the United States used robot messaging on Twitter and other social media to instigate the demonstrations. Officials also insisted that U.S. sanctions imposed by the Trump administration are responsible for the island's shortages of food, medicine and fuel.

A petition on the Change.org platform created by a citizen in Belgium asking for the U.S. government to invade Cuba has been signed by almost 500,000 people, and some Florida politicians have raised such an action as a possibility.

Tablada said that while there are no current U.S. military movements aimed at Cuba, there are signs of extreme aggressiveness, such as those that led to an interventions in Libya and Iraq.

"We are at a time when discourse has deteriorated to unprecedented levels," she said. "From the Biden government in regards to Cuba, we have seen parading several times a day, every day since July 11, senior United States officials saying things that are not true" about Cuba.

Biden promised during his election campaign that he would resume President Barack Obama's policy of rapprochement with the island, but after entering the White House, he kept in place all the toughened sanctions imposed by President Donald Trump, including adding Cuba's government to a list of sponsors of terrorism.

The White House has said a working group has been told to review the U.S. policy blocking Cuban Americans from sending money to Cuba but to ensure that the Cuban government does not serve as intermediary in the flow of cash. Washington says it is also considering increasing the staff at its embassy in Havana to facilitate the participation of civil society.

Cuba is going through one of the worst economic crises in its history, a mixture of its own inefficiencies, the blow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact from U.S. sanctions.

Pelosi bars Trump allies from Jan. 6 probe; GOP vows boycott

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday rejected two Republicans tapped by House GOP leader Kevin McCarthy to sit on a committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, a decision the Republican denounced as "an egregious abuse of power."

McCarthy said the GOP won't participate in the investigation if Democrats won't accept the members he appointed.

Pelosi cited the "integrity" of the probe in refusing to accept the appointments of Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, picked by McCarthy to be the top Republican on the panel, or Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan. The two men are outspoken allies of former President Donald Trump, whose supporters laid siege to the Capitol that day and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden's win. Both of them voted to overturn the election results in the hours after the siege.

Democrats have said the investigation will go on whether the Republicans participate or not, as Pelosi has already appointed eight of the 13 members — including Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, a Trump critic — and that gives them a bipartisan quorum to proceed, according to committee rules.

Pelosi said she had spoken with McCarthy and told him that she would reject the two names.

"With respect for the integrity of the investigation, with an insistence on the truth and with concern about statements made and actions taken by these members, I must reject the recommendations of Representatives Banks and Jordan to the Select Committee," Pelosi said in a statement.

Pelosi has the authority to approve or reject members, per committee rules, though she acknowledged her move was unusual. She said "the unprecedented nature of January 6th demands this unprecedented decision."

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The move is emblematic of the raw political tensions in Congress that have only escalated since the insurrection and raises the possibility that the investigation — the only comprehensive probe currently being conducted of the attack — will be done almost entirely by Democrats. The House voted in May to create an independent investigation that would have been evenly split between the parties, but Senate Republicans blocked that approach in a vote last month.

McCarthy said Pelosi's move will damage the institution of Congress.

"Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts," McCarthy said.

It is unclear how McCarthy would lead a separate investigation, as the minority does not have the power to set up committees. He said the panel has lost "all legitimacy" because Pelosi wouldn't allow the Republicans to name their own members.

Most in the GOP have remained loyal to Trump despite the violent insurrection of his supporters that sent many lawmakers running for their lives. McCarthy wouldn't say for weeks whether Republicans would even participate in the probe, but he sent the five names to Pelosi on Monday.

Pelosi accepted McCarthy's three other picks — Illinois Rep. Rodney Davis, North Dakota Rep. Kelly Armstrong and Texas Rep. Troy Nehls. But McCarthy said that all five or none would participate.

Like Jordan and Banks, Nehls voted to overturn Biden's victory. Armstrong and Davis voted to certify the election.

Banks recently traveled with Trump to the U.S.-Mexico border and visited him at his New Jersey golf course. In a statement after McCarthy tapped him for the panel, he sharply criticized the Democrats who had set it up.

"Make no mistake, Nancy Pelosi created this committee solely to malign conservatives and to justify the Left's authoritarian agenda," Banks said.

Democrats whom Pelosi appointed to the committee earlier this month were angry over that statement, according to a senior Democratic aide familiar with the private deliberations and who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss them. They were also concerned over Banks' two recent visits with Trump, the person said.

Jordan, the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, was one of Trump's most vocal defenders during his two impeachments and last month likened the new investigation to "impeachment three." Trump was impeached by the House and acquitted by the Senate both times.

The back-and-forth came after all but two Republicans opposed the creation of the select committee in a House vote last month, with most in the GOP arguing that the majority-Democratic panel would conduct a partisan probe. Only Cheney and another frequent Trump critic, Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, voted in favor of the panel.

Cheney told reporters she believes that the rhetoric from McCarthy, Jordan and Banks is "disgraceful" and she agrees with Pelosi's decision to reject the two Republicans.

"At every opportunity, the minority leader has attempted to prevent the American people from understanding what happened — to block this investigation," Cheney said of McCarthy.

The panel will hold its first hearing next week, with at least four rank-and-file police officers who battled rioters that day testifying about their experiences. Dozens of police officers were injured as the violent mob pushed past them and broke into the Capitol building.

Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the chair of the panel, said the committee would carry out its duties.

"It has been more than 6 months since the attack, we owe it to our democracy to stay the course and not be distracted by side-shows," Thompson said in a statement. "That is exactly what we will be doing next Tuesday, when the bipartisan committee members take testimony from frontline heroes who put their lives on the line to protect our democracy."

Seven people died during and after the rioting, including a woman who was shot by police as she tried to break into the House chamber and three other Trump supporters who suffered medical emergencies.

Two police officers died by suicide in the days that followed, and a third officer, Capitol Police Officer

Brian Sicknick, collapsed and later died after engaging with the protesters. A medical examiner determined he died of natural causes.

Experts: Spend opioid settlement funds on fighting opioids

By BEN FINLEY and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

As a \$26 billion settlement over the toll of opioids looms, some public health experts are citing the 1998 agreement with tobacco companies as a cautionary tale of runaway government spending and missed opportunities for saving more lives.

Mere fractions of the \$200 billion-plus tobacco settlement have gone toward preventing smoking and helping people quit in many states. Instead, much of the money has helped to balance state budgets, lay fiber-optic cable and repair roads.

And while the settlement was a success in many ways — smoking rates have dropped significantly — cigarettes are still blamed for more than 480,000 American deaths a year.

"We saw a lot of those dollars being spent in ways that didn't help the population that had been harmed by tobacco," said Bradley D. Stein, director of the RAND Corporation's Opioid Policy Center. "And I think it's critical that the opioid settlement dollars are spent wisely."

Lawyers for states and local governments and the companies laid out key details of the settlement on Wednesday and said there are provision to make sure the money is used as intended.

The deal calls for the drugmaker Johnson & Johnson to pay up to \$5 billion, in addition to billions more from the major national drug distribution companies. AmerisourceBergen and Cardinal Health are each to contribute \$6.4 billion. McKesson is to pay \$7.9 billion.

Nearly \$2 billion of the funds would be reserved for private lawyers who were hired by governments to work on their suits against the industry. State attorney general offices could also keep some of the money.

States — except West Virginia, which has already settled with the companies but could receive more through the deal — will have 30 days to approve the agreements. After that, local governments will have four months to sign on. Each company will decide whether enough jurisdictions agree to the deal to move ahead with it. The more governments sign on, the more the companies will pay.

"While the companies strongly dispute the allegations made in these lawsuits, they believe the proposed settlement agreement and settlement process it establishes ... are important steps toward achieving broad resolution of governmental opioid claims and delivering meaningful relief to communities across the United States," the distribution companies said in a statement.

Connecticut Attorney General William Tong said it would be the second-biggest cash settlement of its kind in U.S. history behind the tobacco deal in the 1990s.

North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein said the opioid agreement requires state and local governments to use the vast majority of the money on abatement — and that will be subject to a court order. The deal calls for at least 70% of the money to go to a list of abatement activities such as providing naloxone, a drug that reverses overdoses; helping house homeless people with addictions; or educating the public on the dangers of the drugs, among many other possibilities.

"We all are experiencing the consequences in communities across North Carolina, across the country," Stein said on a video news conference Wednesday.

Not every state is ready to agree. Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson said he would reject the deal as "insufficient" and move ahead with a trial on claims against the distributors scheduled to start in September.

Grant Woods, a former Arizona Attorney General who's been involved in both the tobacco and opioid lawsuits, said the difference this time is that "everybody wants this money to go towards opioids and abatement around the country"

The deal would be part of the ongoing effort to address the nationwide opioid addiction and overdose crisis. Prescription drugs and illegal ones like heroin and illicitly produced fentanyl have been linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. since 2000. The number of cases reached a record high in 2020.

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If approved, the settlement will likely be the largest of many in the opioid litigation playing out nationwide. It's expected to bring more than \$23 billion to abatement and mitigation efforts to help get treatment for people who are addicted along with other programs to address the crisis. The money would come in 18 annual payments, with the biggest amounts in the next several years.

This is likely to be the biggest group of settlements, but other companies, including OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma, generic drugmaker Mallinckrodt and the consulting firm McKinsey have all reached or nearly reached national settlements over opioids, too. Some drugmakers, smaller distributors and pharmacy companies are still being sued by thousands of government entities.

A group of advocacy organizations, public health experts and others are pushing for governments to sign on to a set of principles for how settlement money should be used. They include establishing a dedicated fund for combating the epidemic with the settlement money and making sure that it doesn't just replace other funding streams in the budget.

The group has pointed out that many state and local governments have already made cuts to substance use and behavioral health programs because of economic downturn wrought by the coronavirus pandemic. And government officials may be tempted to fill holes in budgets with the money.

Joshua Sharfstein, a vice dean at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said it's crucial that the money is spent to combat the opioid scourge because the overdose epidemic is raging.

Last year, there were a record 93,000 fatal overdoses from all drugs in the U.S. The majority of them involved fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid that has medical uses but is also produced illicitly.

"Everybody is both excited and a little worried," Sharfstein said of the expected funds, "a little worried that they may be squandered."

Paul Geller, a lawyer representing local governments, said the structure of the settlement ensures the money will be used as intended.

"It won't be used to fill potholes or build libraries or balance budgets," Geller said.

Those are the kind of things that a significant portion of the tobacco settlement money has been spent on, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which tracks the money.

Campaign President Matthew L. Myers said the tobacco settlement is "one of the greatest missed public health opportunities of our lifetime."

"We would have saved massively more lives," he said if more money was spent on cessation and prevention.

The settlement was the result of states wanting to recoup healthcare costs associated with tobacco-related illnesses, while alleging the industry misled the public.

Joelle Lester, director of commercial tobacco control programs at the Public Health Law Center in Minnesota, said the tobacco settlement was "both a huge success and a cautionary tale."

It led to rising cigarette prices, which caused smoking rates to drop. Marketing, particularly to kids, was curtailed. And adult smoking fell from 24.1% in 1998 to 13.7% in 2018, according to the American Lung Association.

But the money that was diverted could still have made a bigger difference, she said.

"The folks negotiating these settlements have to keep their focus on the destruction to health and communities caused," she said of industry settlements in general. "Every element of the settlement should either try to remediate the harm caused or prevent it from continuing."

US virus cases nearly triple in 2 weeks amid misinformation

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and JIM SALTER Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — COVID-19 cases nearly tripled in the U.S. over two weeks amid an onslaught of vaccine misinformation that is straining hospitals, exhausting doctors and pushing clergy into the fray.

"Our staff, they are frustrated," said Chad Neilsen, director of infection prevention at UF Health Jacksonville, a Florida hospital that is canceling elective surgeries and procedures after the number of mostly unvaccinated COVID-19 inpatients at its two campuses jumped to 134, up from a low of 16 in mid-May.

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"They are tired. They are thinking this is déjà vu all over again, and there is some anger because we know that this is a largely preventable situation, and people are not taking advantage of the vaccine."

Across the U.S., the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases rose over the past two weeks to more than 37,000 on Tuesday, up from less than 13,700 on July 6, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Health officials blame the delta variant and slowing vaccination rates. Just 56.2% of Americans have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In Louisiana, health officials reported 5,388 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday — the third-highest daily count since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020. Hospitalizations for the disease rose to 844 statewide, up more than 600 since mid-June. New Orleans leaders urged people to resume wearing masks indoors.

Utah reported having 295 people hospitalized due to the virus, the highest number since February. The state has averaged about 622 confirmed cases per day over the last week, about triple the infection rate at its lowest point in early June. Health data shows the surge is almost entirely connected to unvaccinated people.

"It is like seeing the car wreck before it happens," said Dr. James Williams, a clinical associate professor of emergency medicine at Texas Tech, who has recently started treating more COVID-19 patients. "None of us want to go through this again."

He said the patients are younger — many in their 20s, 30s and 40s — and overwhelmingly unvaccinated.

As lead pastor of one of Missouri's largest churches, Jeremy Johnson has heard the reasons congregants don't want the COVID-19 vaccine. He wants them to know it's not only OK to get vaccinated, it's what the Bible urges.

"I think there is a big influence of fear," said Johnson, whose Springfield-based church also has a campus in Nixa and another about to open in Republic. "A fear of trusting something apart from scripture, a fear of trusting something apart from a political party they're more comfortable following. A fear of trusting in science. We hear that: 'I trust in God, not science.' But the truth is science and God are not something you have to choose between."

Now many churches in southwestern Missouri, like Johnson's Assembly of God-affiliated North Point Church, are hosting vaccination clinics. Meanwhile, about 200 church leaders have signed onto a statement urging Christians to get vaccinated, and on Wednesday announced a follow-up public service campaign.

Opposition to vaccination is especially strong among white evangelical Protestants, who make up more than one-third of Missouri's residents, according to a 2019 report by the Pew Research Center.

"We found that the faith community is very influential, very trusted, and to me that is one of the answers as to how you get your vaccination rates up," said Ken McClure, mayor of Springfield.

The two hospitals in his city are teeming with patients, reaching record and near-record pandemic highs. Steve Edwards, who is the CEO of CoxHealth in Springfield, tweeted that the hospital has brought in 175 traveling nurses and has 46 more scheduled to arrive by Monday.

"Grateful for the help," wrote Edwards, who previously tweeted that anyone spreading misinformation about the vaccine should "shut up."

Jacob Burmood, a 40-year-old Kansas City, Missouri, artist, said his mother has been promoting vaccine conspiracy theories even though her husband — Burmood's stepfather — is hospitalized on a ventilator in Springfield.

"It is really, really sad, and it is really frustrating," he said.

Burmood recalled how his mother had recently fallen ill and "was trying to tell me that vaccinated people got her sick, and it wasn't even COVID. I just shut her down. I said, 'Mom, I can't talk to you about conspiracy theories right now.' ... You need to go to a hospital. You are going to die."

His mother, who is in her 70s, has since recovered.

In New York City, workers in city-run hospitals and health clinics will be required to get vaccinated or get tested weekly as officials battle a rise in COVID-19 cases, Mayor Bill de Blasio said Wednesday.

De Blasio's order will not apply to teachers, police officers and other city employees, but it's part of the city's intense focus on vaccinations amid an increase in delta variant infections.

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The number of vaccine doses being given out daily in the city has dropped to less than 18,000, down from a peak of more than 100,000 in early April. About 65% of all adults are fully vaccinated, compared with about 60% of public hospital system staffers, said system leader Dr. Mitchell Katz.

Meanwhile, caseloads have been rising in the city for weeks, and health officials say the variant makes up about 7 in 10 cases they sequence.

"We have got to deal with it aggressively. And in the end, there is also a thing called personal responsibility," de Blasio said, urging inoculated people to raise the issue with unvaccinated relatives and "get up in their face."

Back in Louisiana, New Orleans officials issued the new guidance on indoor masks, hoping to avoid the kind of virus-related shutdowns that devastated the city's tourism economy in 2020. Mayor LaToya Cantrell stopped short of requiring masks. She said the advisory "puts the responsibility on individuals themselves."

The announcement came as the city's seven-day average of new cases rose to 117, the highest level since early February. It had fallen as low as eight in mid-June.

Rare 'breakthrough' COVID cases are causing alarm, confusion

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Reports of athletes, lawmakers and others getting the coronavirus despite vaccination may sound alarming but top health experts point to overwhelming evidence that the shots are doing exactly what they are supposed to: dramatically reducing severe illness and death.

The best indicator: U.S. hospitalizations and deaths are nearly all among the unvaccinated, and real-world data from Britain and Israel support that protection against the worst cases remains strong. What scientists call "breakthrough" infections in people who are fully vaccinated make up a small fraction of cases.

"When you hear about a breakthrough infection, that doesn't necessarily mean the vaccine is failing," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease specialist, told a worried Senate panel this week. The shots are holding up, he said, even in the face of the highly contagious delta variant that is burning through unvaccinated communities.

Health authorities have warned that even though the COVID-19 vaccines are incredibly effective -- the Pfizer and Moderna ones about 95% against symptomatic infection in studies -- they're not perfect. No vaccine is.

But it wasn't until delta variant began spreading that the risk of breakthroughs started getting much public attention. The barrage of headlines is disconcerting for vaccinated people wondering how to balance getting back to normal with more exposure to unvaccinated strangers — especially if they have vulnerable family members, such as children too young to qualify for the shots.

Sports fans are seeing daily reports about infected athletes, from the New York Yankees to the Summer Olympics. With the Games soon to start, Kara Eaker, a member of the U.S. women's gymnastic team who said she was vaccinated, tested positive in a training camp just outside Tokyo. WNBA player Katie Lou Samuelson pulled out of the Olympics and the 3-on-3 basketball competition after testing positive despite being vaccinated.

And politicians in the nation's capital are being rattled by reports of breakthrough cases, including from a congressman, Florida Republican Vern Buchanan; some Texas Democratic lawmakers visiting Washington as a political protest; at least two people in the White House and several congressional staff members.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that with 2,000 people on the White House campus each day some breakthrough cases are inevitable, but that the administration will release information if doctors determine any staffer had close contact with the president, vice president or their spouses.

One critical question about breakthrough cases is whether the person actually had symptoms, Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, told The Associated Press. "Or is this somebody just being sampled out of an abundance of caution because they had to go into some place like the Congress?" he added.

Indeed, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said for months that vaccinated people don't even need to get tested after a virus exposure unless they develop symptoms. The agency cites

limited evidence that they're less likely to infect others than unvaccinated people who get an asymptomatic infection.

But different places have different rules. In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson -- who survived COVID-19 early in the pandemic and now is fully vaccinated -- began quarantining over the weekend after contact with someone experiencing mild symptoms from a breakthrough infection.

And rigorous testing is required as thousands of athletes, coaches, officials and media -- not all of whom are vaccinated -- descend on Tokyo for the pandemic-delayed Olympics.

While there's not a specific count, it's clear breakthrough infections are rare. As of July 12, the CDC had tallied 5,492 vaccinated people who were hospitalized or died and also tested positive for coronavirus — out of more than 159 million fully vaccinated Americans. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky has said 99.5% of all deaths from COVID-19 are in the unvaccinated.

There isn't a separate count of mild or asymptomatic breakthroughs, although CDC is tracking those through studies such as one that gives weekly virus tests to more than 5,000 essential workers, she told senators.

Breakthroughs tend to be mild because a vaccinated person's immune system doesn't have to start from scratch to fight the coronavirus. Even if the virus sneaks past vaccine-spurred antibodies and starts replicating in your nose or throat, secondary defenses jump into action and usually, "the virus is stopped in its tracks within a few days," said University of Pennsylvania immunologist Scott Hensley.

There are caveats. The vaccines don't work as well in people with severely weak immune systems, such as organ transplant recipients.

And the government is watching closely for signs that breakthrough cases, especially serious ones, are rising, because that might signal the need for booster vaccinations.

But meanwhile White House officials want to "normalize" the concept of breakthrough infections for the public, because they're worried that these rare, inevitable events could play into the misinformation wars that have helped to keep millions from rolling up their sleeves.

"The vaccines were developed to keep us out of those terrible institutions we call hospitals," said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert at Vanderbilt University. "We have to keep coming back to that."

Biden nominates Victoria Kennedy for Austria ambassadorship

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is nominating Victoria Kennedy, an attorney and the widow of Sen. Ted Kennedy, to serve as his ambassador to Austria. He's naming a top political fundraiser — Comcast executive David Cohen -- to serve as his ambassador to Canada, the White House said Wednesday.

Kennedy, a gun control advocate, came to know the president during the years when Biden served with her husband in the Senate.

She is the president of the board and co-founder of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate, a non-partisan nonprofit that educates the public about the U.S. Senate, and also leads the education committee of the board of trustees for the Kennedy Center in Washington.

Kennedy has also served on the boards of gun control advocacy groups, the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence in Washington, D.C., as well as Stop Handgun Violence in Boston. She founded the group Common Sense about Kids and Guns, aimed at reducing guns deaths and injuries to children.

"My parents and grandparents taught us through the example of their own lives how important it is to serve and give back," Kennedy said in a statement. "And my late husband, and his extended family, embodied the noblest qualities of service to country. I am humbled by the confidence the President has placed in me, and if confirmed, I look forward to being able to serve my country as ambassador to Austria."

Biden is also giving serious consideration to another member of the Kennedy family.

Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of President John F. Kennedy who served as ambassador to Japan during the Obama administration, is being weighed as a contender to serve in a high-profile ambassadorial

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role -- perhaps in Asia or Australia, according to a person familiar with the deliberations who was not authorized to comment.

Cohen is a senior executive at the cable company Comcast, and previously served as chief of staff to another powerful Biden ally, Ed Rendell, when Rendell was the mayor of Philadelphia. He was an early backer of the president's third White House run, hosting Biden's first 2020 presidential campaign fundraiser.

Cohen said in a statement that, if confirmed, he would look to grow "the important relationship" as both nations look to rebound from the coronavirus pandemic. Canada announced this week that it would ease restrictions at the border next month, allowing U.S. citizens and permanent residents living in the United States who are fully vaccinated to enter without quarantining.

The U.S. government on Wednesday extended the closure of the land borders with Canada and Mexico to non-essential travelers until at least Aug. 21.

The White House also announced that Biden was nominating Jamie Harpootlian, a South Carolina attorney and influential Democrat in the early primary state, to serve as his ambassador to Slovenia. She is married to another powerful South Carolina Democratic operative and Biden ally, state Sen. Dick Harpootlian.

The president's victory in the South Carolina primary turned out to be the turning point for a campaign that struggled out of the gate.

50-year war on drugs imprisoned millions of Black Americans

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

Landscaping was hardly his lifelong dream.

As a teenager, Alton Lucas believed basketball or music would pluck him out of North Carolina and take him around the world. In the late 1980s, he was the right-hand man to his musical best friend, Youtha Anthony Fowler, who many hip hop and R&B heads know as DJ Nabs.

But rather than jet-setting with Fowler, Lucas discovered drugs and the drug trade at the height of the so-called war on drugs. Addicted to crack cocaine and involved in trafficking the drug, he faced decades-long imprisonment at a time when the drug abuse and violence plaguing major cities and working class Black communities were not seen as the public health issue that opioids are today.

By chance, Lucas received a rare bit of mercy. He got the kind of help that many Black and Latino Americans struggling through the crack epidemic did not: treatment, early release and what many would consider a fresh start.

"I started the landscaping company, to be honest with you, because nobody would hire me because I have a felony," said Lucas. His Sunflower Landscaping got a boost in 2019 with the help of Inmates to Entrepreneurs, a national nonprofit assisting people with criminal backgrounds by providing practical entrepreneurship education.

Lucas was caught up in a system that imposes lifetime limits on most people who have served time for drug crimes, with little thought given to their ability to rehabilitate. In addition to being denied employment, those with criminal records can be limited in their access to business and educational loans, housing, child custody rights, voting rights and gun rights.

It's a system that was born when Lucas was barely out of diapers.

Fifty years ago this summer, President Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs. Today, with the U.S. mired in a deadly opioid epidemic that did not abate during the coronavirus pandemic's worst days, it is questionable whether anyone won the war.

Yet the loser is clear: Black and Latino Americans, their families and their communities. A key weapon was the imposition of mandatory minimums in prison sentencing. Decades later those harsh federal and state penalties led to an increase in the prison industrial complex that saw millions of people, primarily of color, locked up and shut out of the American dream.

An Associated Press review of federal and state incarceration data shows that, between 1975 and 2019, the U.S. prison population jumped from 240,593 to 1.43 million Americans. Among them, about 1 in 5 people were incarcerated with a drug offense listed as their most serious crime.

The racial disparities reveal the war's uneven toll. Following the passage of stiffer penalties for crack

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cocaine and other drugs, the Black incarceration rate in America exploded from about 600 per 100,000 people in 1970 to 1,808 in 2000. In the same timespan, the rate for the Latino population grew from 208 per 100,000 people to 615, while the white incarceration rate grew from 103 per 100,000 people to 242.

Gilberto Gonzalez, a retired special agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration who worked for more than 20 years taking down drug dealers and traffickers in the U.S., Mexico and in South America, said he'll never forget being cheered on by residents in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood near Los Angeles as he led away drug traffickers in handcuffs.

"That gave me a sense of the reality of the people that live in these neighborhoods, that are powerless because they're afraid that the drug dealers that control the street, that control the neighborhood are going to do them and their children harm," said Gonzalez, 64, who detailed his field experiences in the recently released memoir "Narco Legenda."

"We realized then that, along with dismantling (drug trafficking) organizations, there was also a real need to clean up communities, to go to where the crime was and help people that are helpless," he said.

Still, the law enforcement approach has led to many long-lasting consequences for people who have since reformed. Lucas still wonders what would happen for him and his family if he no longer carried the weight of a drug-related conviction on his record.

Even with his sunny disposition and close to 30 years of sober living, Lucas, at age 54, cannot pass most criminal background checks. His wife, whom he'd met two decades ago at a fatherhood counseling conference, said his past had barred him from doing things as innocuous as chaperoning their children on school field trips.

"It's almost like a life sentence," he said.

Although Nixon declared the war on drugs on June 17, 1971, the U.S. already had lots of practice imposing drug prohibitions that had racially skewed impacts. The arrival of Chinese migrants in the 1800s saw the rise of criminalizing opium that migrants brought with them. Cannabis went from being called "reefer" to "marijuana," as a way to associate the plant with Mexican migrants arriving in the U.S. in the 1930s.

By the time Nixon sought reelection amid the anti-Vietnam War and Black power movements, criminalizing heroin was a way to target activists and hippies. One of Nixon's domestic policy aides, John Ehrlichman, admitted as much about the war on drugs in a 22-year-old interview published by Harper's Magazine in 2016.

Experts say Nixon's successors, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, leveraged drug war policies in the following decades to their own political advantage, cementing the drug war's legacy. The explosion of the U.S. incarceration rate, the expansion of public and private prison systems and the militarization of local police forces are all outgrowths of the drug war.

Federal policies, such as mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses, were mirrored in state legislatures. Lawmakers also adopted felony disenfranchisement, while also imposing employment and other social barriers for people caught in drug sweeps.

The domestic anti-drug policies were widely accepted, mostly because the use of illicit drugs, including crack cocaine in the late 1980s, was accompanied by an alarming spike in homicides and other violent crimes nationwide. Those policies had the backing of Black clergy and the Congressional Black Caucus, the group of African-American lawmakers whose constituents demanded solutions and resources to stem the violent heroin and crack scourges.

"I think people often flatten this conversation," said Kassandra Frederique, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, a New York-based nonprofit organization pushing decriminalization and safe drug use policies.

"If you're a Black leader 30 years ago, you're grabbing for the first (solution) in front of you," said Frederique, who is Black. "A lot of folks in our community said, 'OK, get these drug dealers out of our communities, get this crack out of our neighborhood. But also, give us treatment so we can help folks.'"

The heavy hand of law enforcement came without addiction prevention resources, she said.

Use of crack rose sharply in 1985, and peaked in 1989, before quickly declining in the early 1990s, according to a Harvard study.

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Drug sales and use were concentrated in cities, particularly those with large Black and Latino populations, although there were spikes in use among white populations, too. Between 1984 and 1989, crack was associated with a doubling of homicides of Black males aged 14 to 17. By the year 2000, the correlation between crack cocaine and violence faded amid waning profits from street sales.

Roland Fryer, an author of the Harvard study and a professor of economics, said the effects of the crack epidemic on a generation of Black families and Black children still haven't been thoroughly documented. A lack of accountability for the war on drugs bred mistrust of government and law enforcement in the community, he said.

"People ask why Black people don't trust (public) institutions," said Fryer, who is Black. "It's because we have watched how we've treated opioids — it's a public health concern. But crack (cocaine) was, 'lock them up and throw away the key, what we need is tougher sentencing.'"

Another major player in creating hysteria around drug use during the crack era: the media. On June 17, 1986, 15 years to the day after Nixon declared the drug war, NBA draftee Len Bias died of a cocaine-induced heart attack on the University of Maryland campus.

Coverage was frenzied and coupled with racist depictions of crack addiction in mostly Black and Latino communities. Within weeks of Bias's death, the U.S. House of Representatives drafted the Anti-Abuse Act of 1986.

The law, passed and signed by Reagan that October, imposed mandatory federal sentences of 20 years to life in prison for violating drug laws. The law also made possession and sale of crack rocks harsher than that of powder cocaine.

The basketball player's death could have been one of the off-ramps in Lucas's spiral into crack addiction and dealing. By then, he could make \$10,000 in four to five hours selling the drug.

"One of the things that I thought would help me, that I thought would be my rehab, was when Len Bias died," Lucas said. "I thought, if they showed me evidence (he) died from an overdose of smoking crack cocaine, as much as I loved Len Bias, that I would give it up."

"I did not quit," he said.

He was first introduced to crack cocaine in 1986, but kept his drug use largely hidden from his friends and family.

"What I didn't know at the time was that this was a different type of chemical entering my brain and it was going to change me forever," Lucas said. "Here I am on the verge of being the right-hand man to DJ Nabs, to literally travel the world. That's how bad the drug did me."

By 1988, Fowler's music career had outgrown Durham. He and Lucas moved to Atlanta and, a few years later, Fowler signed a deal to become the official touring DJ for the hip hop group Kris Kross under famed music producer Jermaine Dupri's So So Def record label. Fowler and the group went on to open for pop music icon Michael Jackson on the European leg of the "Dangerous" tour.

Lucas, who began trafficking crack cocaine between Georgia and North Carolina, never joined his best friend on the road. Instead, he slipped further into his addiction and returned to Durham, where he took a short-lived job as a preschool instructor.

When he lacked the money to procure drugs to sell or to use, Lucas resorted to robbing businesses for quick cash. He claims that he was never armed when he robbed "soft targets," like fast food restaurants and convenience stores.

Lucas spent four and a half years in state prison for larceny after robbing several businesses to feed his addiction. Because his crimes were considered nonviolent, Lucas learned in prison that he was eligible for an addiction treatment program that would let him out early. But if he violated the terms of his release or failed to complete the treatment, Lucas would serve more than a decade in prison on separate drug trafficking charges under a deal with the court.

He accepted the deal.

After his release from prison and his graduation from the treatment program, Fowler paid out of his pocket to have his friend's fines and fees cleared. That's how Lucas regained his voting rights.

On a recent Saturday, the two best friends met up to talk in depth about the secret that Lucas intention-

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ally kept from Fowler. The DJ learned of his friend's addiction after seeing a Durham newspaper clipping that detailed the string of robberies.

Sitting in Fowler's home, Lucas told his friend that he doesn't regret not being on the road or missing out on the fringe benefits from touring.

"All I needed was to be around you," Lucas said.

"Right," Fowler replied, choking up and wiping tears from his eyes.

Lucas continued: "You know, when I was around you, when there was a party or whatnot, my job, just out of instinct, was to watch your back."

In a separate interview, Fowler, who is a few years younger than Lucas, said, "I just wanted my brother on the road with me. To help protect me. To help me be strong. And I had to do it by my damn self. And I didn't like that. That's what it was."

Not everyone was as lucky as Lucas. Often, a drug offense conviction in combination with a violent gun offense carried much steeper penalties. At the heights of the war on drugs, federal law allowed violent drug offenders to be prosecuted in gang conspiracy cases, which often pinned homicides on groups of defendants, sometimes irrespective of who pulled the trigger.

These cases resulted in sentences of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, a punishment disproportionately doled out to Black and Latino gang defendants.

That's the case for Bill Underwood, who was a successful R&B and hip hop music promoter in New York City in the late '70s through the '80s, before his 33-year incarceration. A judge granted him compassionate release from federal custody in January, noting his lauded reputation as a mentor to young men in prison and his high-risk exposure to COVID-19 at age 67.

As the AP reported in 1990, Underwood was found guilty and sentenced to life without parole for racketeering, racketeering conspiracy and narcotics conspiracy, as part of a prosecution that accused his gang of committing six murders and of controlling street-level drug distribution.

"I actually short-changed myself, and my family and my people, by doing what I did," said Underwood, who acknowledges playing a large part in the multimillion-dollar heroin trade, as a leader of a violent Harlem gang from the 1970s through the 1980s.

Underwood is now a senior fellow with The Sentencing Project, a nonprofit pushing for an end to life imprisonment. He testified to Congress in June that his punishment was excessive.

"As human beings, we are capable of painful yet transformative self reflection, maturity, and growth, and to deny a person this opportunity is to deny them their humanity," he said in the testimony.

Sympathy for people like Underwood can be hard to come by. Brett Roman Williams, a Philadelphia-based independent filmmaker and anti-gun violence advocate, grew up watching his older brother, Derrick, serve time in prison for a serious drug offense. But in 2016, his brother was only a month out on parole when he was killed by gunfire in Philadelphia.

"The laws are in place for people to obey, whether you like it or not," Williams said. "We do need reform, we do need opportunities and equity within our system of economics. But we all have choices."

Rep. Cori Bush of St. Louis, following similar action by several members of Congress before her, last month introduced legislation to decriminalize all drugs and invest in substance abuse treatment.

"Growing up in St. Louis, the War on Drugs disappeared Black people, not drug use," Bush, who is Black, wrote in a statement sent to the AP. "Over the course of two years, I lost 40 to 50 friends to incarceration or death because of the War on Drugs. We became so accustomed to loss and trauma that it was our normal."

The deleterious impacts of the drug war have, for years, drawn calls for reform and abolition from mostly left-leaning elected officials and social justice advocates. Many of them say that in order to begin to unwind or undo the war on drugs, all narcotics must be decriminalized or legalized, with science-based regulation.

Drug abuse prevention advocates, however, claim that broad drug legalization poses more risks to Americans than it would any benefits.

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Provisional data released in December from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show overdose deaths from illicit drug use continued to rise amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. And according to the latest Drug Enforcement Administration narcotics threat assessment released in March, the availability of drugs such as fentanyl, heroin and cocaine remained high or plateaued last year. Domestic and transnational drug trade organizations generate tens of billions of dollars in illicit proceeds from sales annually in the U.S., the DEA said.

"Many people think drug prevention is 'just say no,' like Nancy Reagan did in the '80s, and we know that did not work," said Becky Vance, CEO of the Texas-based agency Drug Prevention Resources, which has advocated for evidenced-based anti-drug and alcohol abuse education for more than 85 years.

"As a person in long-term recovery, I know firsthand the harms of addiction," said Vance, who opposes blanket recreational legalization of illicit drugs. "I believe there has to be another way, without legalizing drugs, to reform the criminal justice system and get rid of the inequities."

Frederique, of the Drug Policy Alliance, said reckoning with the war on drugs must start with reparations for the generations senselessly swept up and destabilized by racially biased policing.

"This was an intentional policy choice," Frederique said. "We don't want to end the war on drugs, and then in 50 years be working on something else that does the same thing. That is the cycle that we're in."

"It has always been about control," Frederique added.

As much as the legacy of the war on drugs is a tragedy, it is also a story about the resilience of people disproportionately targeted by drug policies, said Donovan Ramsey, a journalist and author of the forthcoming book, "When Crack Was King."

"Even with all of that, it's still important to recognize and to celebrate that we (Black people) survived the crack epidemic and we survived it with very little help from the federal government and local governments," Ramsey told the AP.

Fowler thinks the war on drugs didn't ruin Lucas' life. "I think he went through it at the right time, truth be told, because he was young enough. Luke's got more good behind him than bad," the DJ said.

Lucas sees beauty in making things better, including in his business. But he still dreams of the day when his past isn't held against him.

"It was the beautification of doing the landscaping that kind of attracted me, because it was like the affirmation that my soul needed," he said.

"I liked to do something and look back at it and say, 'Wow, that looks good.' It's not just going to wash away in a couple of days. It takes nourishment and upkeep."

Unvaccinated staff eyed in rising nursing home cases, deaths

By JASON DEAREN and RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lagging vaccination rates among nursing home staff are being linked to a national increase in COVID-19 infections and deaths at senior facilities, and are at the center of a federal investigation in a hard-hit Colorado location where disease detectives found many workers were not inoculated.

The investigation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of facilities in the Grand Junction, Colorado, area raises concerns among public health doctors that successes in protecting vulnerable elders with vaccines could be in peril as the more aggressive delta variant spreads across the country.

Nationally about 59% of nursing home staff have gotten their shots, about the same as the overall percentage of fully vaccinated adults — but significantly lower than the roughly 80% of residents who are vaccinated, according to Medicare. And some states have much lower vaccination rates of around 40%.

Some policy experts are urging the government to close the gap by requiring nursing home staffers get shots, a mandate the Biden administration has been reluctant to issue. Nursing home operators fear such a move could backfire, prompting many staffers with vaccine qualms to simply quit their jobs.

To be sure, the vast majority of fully vaccinated people who become infected with the delta variant suffer only mild symptoms.

But "older adults may not respond fully to the vaccine and there's enormous risk of someone coming in

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with the virus," said Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean for public health practice at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"Vaccinating workers in nursing homes is a national emergency because the delta variant is a threat even to those already vaccinated," he said.

The CDC conducted its investigation of delta variant outbreaks in elder care facilities in Mesa County, Colorado, in May and June. The area is a coronavirus hot spot. The agency said it is assisting states and counties throughout the nation as part of the White House's COVID-19 "surge teams."

Nationally, data collected by CDC show that deaths and confirmed infections among nursing home staff have decreased significantly since vaccinations began in January. But the number of deaths reported among staff have begun creeping up again, fueling new concerns.

At one memory care facility in the Grand Junction area, 16 fully vaccinated residents were infected and four died, according to a CDC slide provided to The Associated Press. The residents who died were described as being in hospice care, with a median age of 93, indicating they were particularly frail.

The CDC has not released the findings of its investigation publicly, but said it plans to publish the results in an upcoming Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. The slide was shared with the AP by a person involved in internal deliberations, who requested anonymity because they did not have permission to release the data.

Of the 16 fully vaccinated residents infected at the memory care facility, CDC found that 13 developed symptoms, described as mild in most cases.

The CDC investigated several nursing homes in Mesa County that were experiencing new outbreaks. At one location — described as "Facility A" — 42% of the staff were still not fully vaccinated, contrasting with only about 8% of residents who had failed to complete their shots.

The CDC found a COVID-19 infection rate of 30% among vaccinated residents and staff at the facility, with residents accounting for the vast majority of cases.

Throughout the pandemic, people in long-term care facilities have carried a disproportionate burden of suffering and death, not to mention increased isolation due to lockdowns. It's estimated that nursing home residents represent about 1% of the U.S. population, but they account for about 22% of COVID-19 deaths — more than 133,400 people whose lives have been lost.

Experts generally agree that staff are one of the main triggers of nursing home outbreaks, because workers may unwittingly bring the virus in from the surrounding community before developing symptoms.

With the arrival of vaccines and an aggressive effort to get residents immunized, cases and deaths plummeted and nursing homes emerged from lockdown. But COVID-19 has not been wiped out. As of the week ending July 4, there were 410 residents sickened nationwide and 146 who died.

Colorado is not alone in seeing nursing home outbreaks as large shares of staff remain unvaccinated.

In Indiana, seven residents died from COVID-19 at a facility where less than half the staff — 44% — was fully vaccinated, said Howard County health officer Dr. Emily Backer. Eleven additional residents tested positive in the outbreak that officials believe started in mid-June.

One of the people who died was fully vaccinated, and five fully vaccinated residents were among those who tested positive, Backer added. She would not name the facility.

Backer acknowledged that the facility's 44% staff vaccination rate was "lower than we'd like."

"But at this point," she added, "they can't force them."

Backer said she's troubled by continued resistance to vaccination, fueled by exaggerated claims about side effects. Some experts fear that hard-won progress in putting down nursing home outbreaks could be lost, at least in some communities.

Laura Gelezunas has firsthand experience with a breakthrough case in a nursing home.

After numerous calls and emails to her mother's Missouri nursing home and the company's headquarters in Tennessee, Gelezunas finally got confirmation that her mom's congestion, headache and sore throat were symptoms of COVID-19.

However, Gelezunas said the facility wasn't transparent about how her vaccinated mother, Joann, got sick.

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While the home has pointed to outside visitors, Gelezunas said her mother's only visitors have been her brother and his wife, who are both vaccinated. Gelezunas believes it was an unvaccinated staff member, but the home has yet to give her answers.

Gelezunas asked that her mother interact with only vaccinated workers, but the directors said they couldn't make promises because of privacy reasons and their inability to mandate inoculations for workers.

"My mom is bedridden. I got people taking intimate care of her and you're telling me you can't tell me that at \$7,500 a month that my mom can't have someone that's vaccinated take care of her," said Gelezunas, who lives in Mexico.

Joann told her daughter that between 12 and 15 residents were infected with the virus recently, which she found out from one of her aides.

When it comes to requiring vaccinations, one obstacle is that COVID-19 vaccines aren't yet fully approved by the Food and Drug Administration, and are being administered under emergency authorization.

"What we need to do is get past the emergency use basis, to have (vaccination) be a standard of care," said Terry Fulmer, president of the John A. Hartford Foundation, a nonprofit working to improve care for older adults.

Highlighting the potential vulnerability, government numbers show a wide disparity among states in nursing home vaccinations. Vermont has fully vaccinated 95% of its nursing home residents, but in Nevada the figure is 61%. Hawaii is the leader for staff vaccinations, with 84% completely vaccinated. But in Louisiana, it's half that, 42%.

Harvard health care policy professor David Grabowski said he believes trust is the core question for many nursing home staffers who remain unvaccinated. Low-wage workers may not have much confidence in vaccine messaging from management at their facilities.

"I think some of this mirrors what we see in the overall population, but among health care workers it is really disconcerting," Grabowski said.

Indiana county health official Backer blames swirling misinformation.

"There's a lot of really bad information out there that's completely untrue," she said. "It's really sad because I think we have the power to end this with vaccination. Nobody else needs to die from this."

Bette Midler, Berry Gordy among new Kennedy Center honorees

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Kennedy Center Honors will return in December with a class that includes Motown Records creator Berry Gordy, "Saturday Night Live" mastermind Lorne Michaels and actress-singer Bette Midler. Organizers expect to operate at full capacity, after last year's ceremony was delayed for months and later conducted under COVID-19 restrictions.

This 44th class of honorees for lifetime achievement in the creative arts is heavy on musical performers. The honorees also include opera singer Justino Diaz and folk music legend Joni Mitchell.

All will be honored on Dec. 5 with a trademark program that includes personalized tributes and performances that are kept secret from the honorees.

Deborah Rutter, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, said the current plan is to pack the center's opera house to full capacity and require all attendees to wear masks. But the plans remain fluid and Rutter said they're ready to adapt to changing circumstances depending on the country's COVID-19 situation.

"We don't know for sure what it's going to be like," Rutter said in an interview. "But don't you think we all deserve to have a party?"

The 43rd Kennedy Center Honors class was delayed from December 2020 as the center largely shut down its indoor programming. A heavily slimmed-down ceremony was finally held in May of this year, with a series of small socially distanced gatherings and pre-taped video performances replacing the normal gala event.

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"We know how to do it now. We will make whatever adjustments we need," Rutter said. "We're going to be wearing masks right up until we don't have to."

Midler, 75, has won four Grammy Awards, three Emmys, and two Tony Awards, along with two Oscar nominations. Her albums have sold over 30 million copies. In a statement, Midler said she was "stunned and grateful beyond words. For many years I have watched this broadcast celebrating the best talent in the performing arts that America has to offer, and I truly never imagined that I would find myself among these swans."

Mitchell, 77, emerged from the Canadian coffee shop circuit to become one of the standard-bearers for multiple generations of singer-songwriters. In 2020, Rolling Stone magazine declared her 1971 album "Blue" to be the third-best album of all time. In a brief statement, Mitchell, said, "I wish my mother and father were alive to see this. It's a long way from Saskatoon."

The Dec. 5 ceremony will be the centerpiece of the Kennedy Center's 50th anniversary of cultural programming. The center opened in 1971 and a young Diaz, now 81, actually performed at the grand opening of the opera house.

"It's a very special thing," said Diaz, a bass-baritone from San Juan, Puerto Rico. "It's such a great privilege to be able to say I shared this space with all these geniuses."

Gordy, 91, founded Motown Records — the Detroit-based hit factory that spawned what became known as the Motown Sound and launched the careers of a huge list of artists, including Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, Lionel Richie, Marvin Gaye and Martha and the Vandellas.

Gordy said in an interview that he always held President John Kennedy as one of the greatest leaders in American history.

"So to be honored in his name just means the world to me," he said.

Michaels, 76, is a comedy institution unto himself — creating and producing "Saturday Night Live" since 1975 and producing dozens of movies and television shows, including "Wayne's World," "Kids in the Hall" and "Mean Girls." He received the Kennedy Center's Mark Twain Award for lifetime achievement in comedy in 2004.

Not normally an on-stage performer, Michaels recalls the Mark Twain evening as "mostly nerve-wracking" because he spent the evening dreading the traditional end-of-night speech he had to deliver.

But the Kennedy Center Honors bring no such pressures, and Michaels said he intends to sit back in the special honorees box at the opera house and see what surprises the organizers have in store.

"You don't have to give a speech at the end, which is huge," he said. "You're just there with your friends."

A small victory: Used-car prices slip from dizzy heights

By TOM KRISHER and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

DEARBORN, Mich. (AP) — For months, anyone who wandered onto a dealer lot to look for a used car could be forgiven for doing a double take — and then wandering right off the lot.

Prices had rocketed more than 40% from their levels just before the viral pandemic struck, to an average of nearly \$25,000. The supply of vehicles had shrunk. And any hope of negotiating on price? Good luck with that.

But now, a sliver of hope has emerged. The seemingly endless streak of skyrocketing used-vehicle prices appears to be coming to a close.

Not that anyone should expect bargains. Though average wholesale prices that dealers pay are gradually dropping, they'll likely remain near record levels. So will the retail prices for consumers. Supply remains tight. And while demand has eased a bit, a steady flow of buyers could keep prices unusually high for a couple of years more.

"It's a short-term correction," suggested Paul Sugars, sales manager for pre-owned vehicles at Jack Demmer Lincoln in Dearborn, Michigan. "Buyers are sitting on the fence, waiting to see what happens."

Sugars should know. As internet and foot traffic at his dealership fell in the past few weeks, he began to cut prices on some of the 70 used vehicles on his lot. Now, he says, buyers are starting to return.

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One of them is Jessica Pitts of Detroit, who began shopping for a used vehicle last year after her car broke down. But as prices roared ever higher, Pitts delayed her purchase. Recently, though, after Sugars cut the price of a red Lincoln MKC she had been watching, Pitts took notice.

"That's what brought it back to my attention," she said. "The price had come down a little."

The red compact SUV, with 58,000 miles on it, cost Pitts roughly \$27,500, down just a little from \$28,000.

The return of buyers like Pitts has led experts to suggest that demand will be high enough to keep used-vehicle prices from falling significantly. One reason is that supply is still low. According to Cox Automotive, dealers last month had only enough vehicles to meet demand for 34 days — 11 days fewer than in the same month in 2019, the last year that was considered normal for used vehicle sales.

Few think the slight easing of used-car prices heralds any slowdown or reversal in overall inflation across the economy. With the notable exception of lumber prices, which initially skyrocketed only to fall back to earth, many goods, components and services — from semiconductors and gasoline to clothing, restaurant meals and household furnishings — have grown increasingly expensive. So have labor costs, as worker shortages in many industries have led employers to raise pay.

Still, the Federal Reserve under Chair Jerome Powell foresees inflation eventually easing after supply shortages are resolved. Bond investors appear to agree. The yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note, which generally reflects the outlook for inflation, has declined in recent weeks in a sign that investors remain more concerned about the prospect of an economic slowdown than about surging inflation.

Until the pandemic flattened the economy in March 2020 and shrank the supply of both new and used vehicles, average wholesale used vehicle prices paid by dealers rose only a little every year. Average prices briefly fell in April last year, only to soar over 60% to a peak in May this year, according to data kept by Manheim, a group of auction houses where dealers buy vehicles.

Any decline, however slight, would represent welcome relief for buyers. In June, the average retail list price of a used vehicle was just short of \$25,000, a record. Prices rose so high that some 2-year-old used vehicles were, counter-intuitively, selling for more than the sticker price when they were new.

Low-income buyers have been especially hurt. Anyone who was compelled to buy a used car to commute to work was often limited to vehicles with 100,000 miles or more. Yet the average price of even those vehicles jumped 31% in the past year — to \$16,489 — according to Edmunds.com. Buying a car — any car — became out of reach for many.

Some of the price increases were fueled by government stimulus payments that arrived in March, when a qualifying family of four could receive \$5,600. Retail prices for used vehicles surged so high that in April, May and June, they accounted for about one-third of the entire increase in the U.S. consumer price index. In June, used prices rose a record 10.5%, helping to drive inflation to 5.4% compared with the same month a year earlier. That was the highest such increase since 2008.

By late June and into July, used-vehicle shoppers had seen enough. Many decided to wait for the craziness to end, and their pullback caused wholesale prices to decline slightly. Dealers feared they had paid too much for vehicles on their lots. Some started cutting prices.

"The frenzy is over, so inventory is starting to build a little bit," said Michelle Krebs, an analyst for Cox Automotive. "Typically, used-vehicle prices drop after tax refunds, stimulus checks."

Alex Yurchenko, senior vice president of data for Black Book, which monitors vehicle costs, expects prices to decline a bit more but to remain well above 2019 levels for a couple more years. Eventually, he suggests, prices will fall further as supply catches up to demand.

Jonathan Smoke, chief economist of Cox Automotive, cautions against expecting a drop back to pre-pandemic used-car prices.

"That," he said, "would require a major decline in demand and a simultaneous expansion in supply. Neither are likely to happen."

The whole crazy price cycle began with the eruption of the pandemic, when many states issued stay-at-home orders. Prices plummeted, and automakers shuttered factories for eight weeks. The resulting decline in supply came just as many cooped-up consumers wanted a new or used vehicle to commute to

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work or to take road trips without coming in contact with others.

While the auto plants were shut down in April and May last year, computer chip makers shifted production to satisfy wild demand for laptops, gaming devices and tablets. That created a shortage of automotive-grade chips, which remains an acute problem that might not be resolved until next year.

With new-car inventory slipping and demand high, the resulting jump in prices for new vehicles sent many buyers into the used market. Their demand reduced supply and drove up used-vehicle prices, too.

Some new-vehicle dealers have run out of best-selling models of pickup trucks and large SUVs. For some models, there are only enough vehicles on dealer lots to satisfy eight days of consumer demand. Manufacturers prefer to keep 60 days on hand to provide a good selection.

Ernie Garcia, CEO of used vehicle upstart Carvana, said too many variables make it impossible to predict where used-vehicle prices will go from here. They could fall if the chip shortage and other supply-chain bottlenecks are resolved and new-vehicle prices ease. But they could shoot back up, too, under certain circumstances.

"It'll be hard for car prices to return all the way to normal until we have normalization in the supply chain of auto manufacturers," Garcia said.

Everyone who predicted auto prices over the past year, he said, "has been wrong in pretty short order."

Floods fuel climate debate in Germany's election campaign

By FRANK JORDANS and BRAM JANSSEN Associated Press

LUETZERATH, Germany (AP) — As Germany reels from the deadliest inland floods in living memory, one word has been on the lips of leading politicians: "klimawandel," the German word for climate change.

Last week's disaster has propelled the issue to the fore of an election campaign that will determine who succeeds Angela Merkel as German chancellor this fall after her 16 years in office.

It has also put the front-runner in the race, her party's new leader, Armin Laschet, on the defensive amid accusations that he stalled efforts to expand the use of renewable energy, phase out coal power and introduce universal highway speed limits during four years as governor of North Rhine-Westphalia state.

An industrial powerhouse, the state is home to almost a quarter of Germany's population and was among the regions hit hardest by the floods, which claimed more than 200 lives and caused billions of euros (dollars) worth of damage.

"I've known for a long time that climate change is a task that we'll have to deal with," Laschet said during a testy exchange with journalists on the morning after the worst flooding, insisting that he wanted "more speed" when it came to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Such statements offer a glimmer of hope to climate activists like Salome Dorfer, who is campaigning to save the tiny village of Luetzerath from being bulldozed to make way for a coal mine.

The village, located in Laschet's state and first mentioned in records dating back 853 years, stands a few hundred meters (yards) from a vast pit where German utility giant RWE is extracting lignite coal to burn in nearby power plants.

The practice is due to end by 2038, but environmentalists say it needs to stop at least 10 years earlier if Germany is to play its part in meeting the Paris climate accord goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

"Under every square meter below us is an average of 46 tons of coal," Dorfer said. "Every square meter we can defend will save a lot of emissions."

While Dorfer and fellow activists prepare to hole up in tree houses to stop the evictions of villagers, she hopes growing public awareness about the impact of climate change in the wake of the floods will make that fight unnecessary.

Scientists say that while it's hard to attribute specific storms to climate change, extreme weather of the kind that caused the flash floods in parts of Western Europe last week will become more severe and frequent in a warming world.

"I think people are starting to see now that they are actually affected, that it is necessary to act now,"