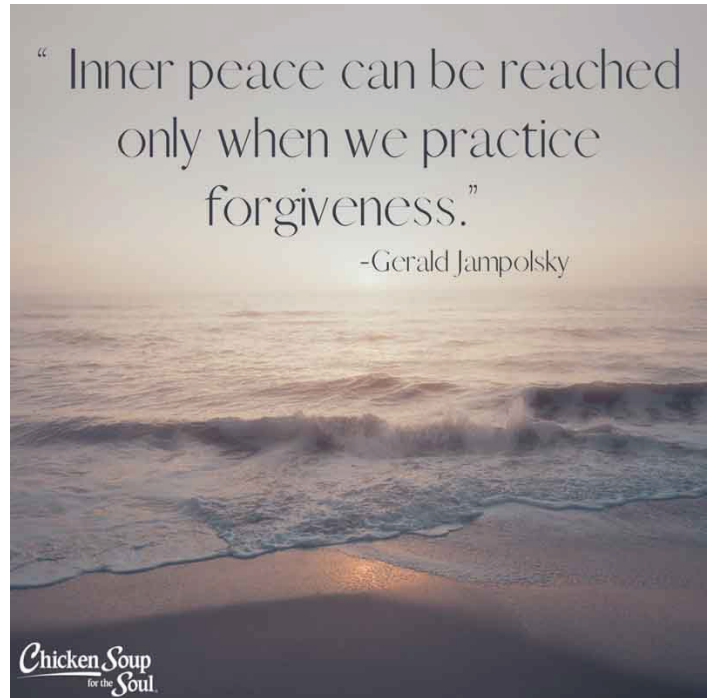


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2021 Sturgis Rally Vehicle Count - Through Day Four

STURGIS, S.D. – Vehicle traffic counts from the South Dakota Department of Transportation for vehicles entering Sturgis for the 81st Annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally Aug. 6-15, 2021, are available and will be updated daily.

Traffic counts at nine locations entering Sturgis for the 2021 Rally are as follows:

Friday, Aug. 6: 55,326 entering. Up 11.0% from Friday last year. Down 13.2% from the 75th Rally
Saturday, Aug. 7: 67,482 entering. Up 23.1% from Saturday last year. Down 18% from the 75th Rally
Sunday, Aug. 8: 65,771 entering. Up 17.1 % from Sunday Last year. Down 27.2% from the 75th Rally
Monday, Aug. 9: 64,158 entering. Up 12.6 % from Monday Last year. Down 33.5% from the 75th Rally
Four Day Total:
2021: 252,737 Vehicles 2020: 217,778 Vehicles 2015 (75th Rally): 359,692 Vehicles



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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Highway Patrol Sturgis Rally Daily Information
Compiled from 6 a.m. Saturday August 7, 2021 to 6 a.m. Tuesday August 10, 2021

Item	Sturgis	Rapid City District	District Total	Last Year to Date
DUI Arrests	42	8	50	64
Misd Drug Arrests	47	10	57	104
Felony Drug Arrests	24	6	30	52
Total Citations	434	209	643	595
Total Warnings	1247	539	1786	1409
Cash Seized	\$1862.00	\$0.00	\$1862.00	\$3296.00
Vehicles Seized	0	0	0	4
For Drug Poss.	0	0	0	4
For Serial No.	0	0	0	0
Non-Injury Accidents	4	9	13	22
Injury Accidents	11	11	22	28
Fatal Accidents	0	1	1	1
# of Fatalities	0	1	1	2

Fatal Crashes: No Fatal Crashes Reported

Injury Crashes:

At 8:27 a.m., Interstate 90, mile marker 67, one mile from Box Elder: A 2015 Harley-Davidson FLTRXS motorcycle was eastbound on Interstate 90 when it struck a deer. The 63-year-old male driver was thrown from the motorcycle. He suffered serious non-life threatening injuries and was transported to a Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet.

At 10:26 a.m., Monday, South Dakota Highway 87, mile marker 75, 1.5 miles north of Needles Highway: A 2019 Harley-Davidson FLH motorcycle was southbound on South Dakota Highway 87 when the driver failed to negotiate a curve. The motorcycle went off the roadway and hit a boulder. The 63-year-old male driver was transported to the Custer hospital with minor injuries. He was wearing a helmet.

At 11:07 a.m., Monday, South Dakota Highway 44, mile marker 102, Badlands National Park: A 2009 Harley-Davidson Street Glide motorcycle was eastbound on South Dakota Highway 44 when it slowed down to pull onto the shoulder of the road. The motorcycle was rear-ended by an eastbound 2021 Harley-Davidson CVO motorcycle. The 74-year-old male driver of the Street Glide motorcycle received minor injuries and was transported to the Philip hospital. The 73-year-old male driver of the CVO motorcycle was not injured and charges are pending against him. Neither driver was wearing a helmet.

At 11:13 a.m., Monday, U.S. Highway 385, mile marker 118, five miles south of Lead: A 2002 Harley-Davidson motorcycle was southbound on U.S. Highway 385 when the driver failed to negotiate a curve. The 64-year-old male driver suffered serious non-life threatening injuries and was airlifted to a Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet. Charges are pending.

At 1:02 p.m., Monday, U.S. Highway 14A, mile marker 50, two miles west of Sturgis: A 2021 Vanederhall BlackJack trike was eastbound on U.S. Highway 14A when the driver failed to negotiate a curve and went into the westbound lane, colliding with a westbound 2020 Nissan Amanda. The 42-year-old female driver of the trike sustained serious non-life threatening injuries and was transported to a Rapid City hospital. She was wearing a seat belt and charges are pending. None of the three occupants in the Nissan – the 59-year-old male driver, a 60-year-old female passenger and a 62-year-old male passenger – were injured. All three were wearing their seat belts.

At 2:29 p.m., Monday, Interstate 90, mile marker 139, 11 miles west of Kadoka: A 1990 Harley-Davidson motorcycle was eastbound on Interstate 90 when the motorcycle blew a tire, causing the driver to lose control. Both occupants were thrown from the motorcycle. The 51-year-old male driver suffered minor injuries and the 39-year-old female driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries. Both were transported to the Philip hospital. Both were wearing helmets.

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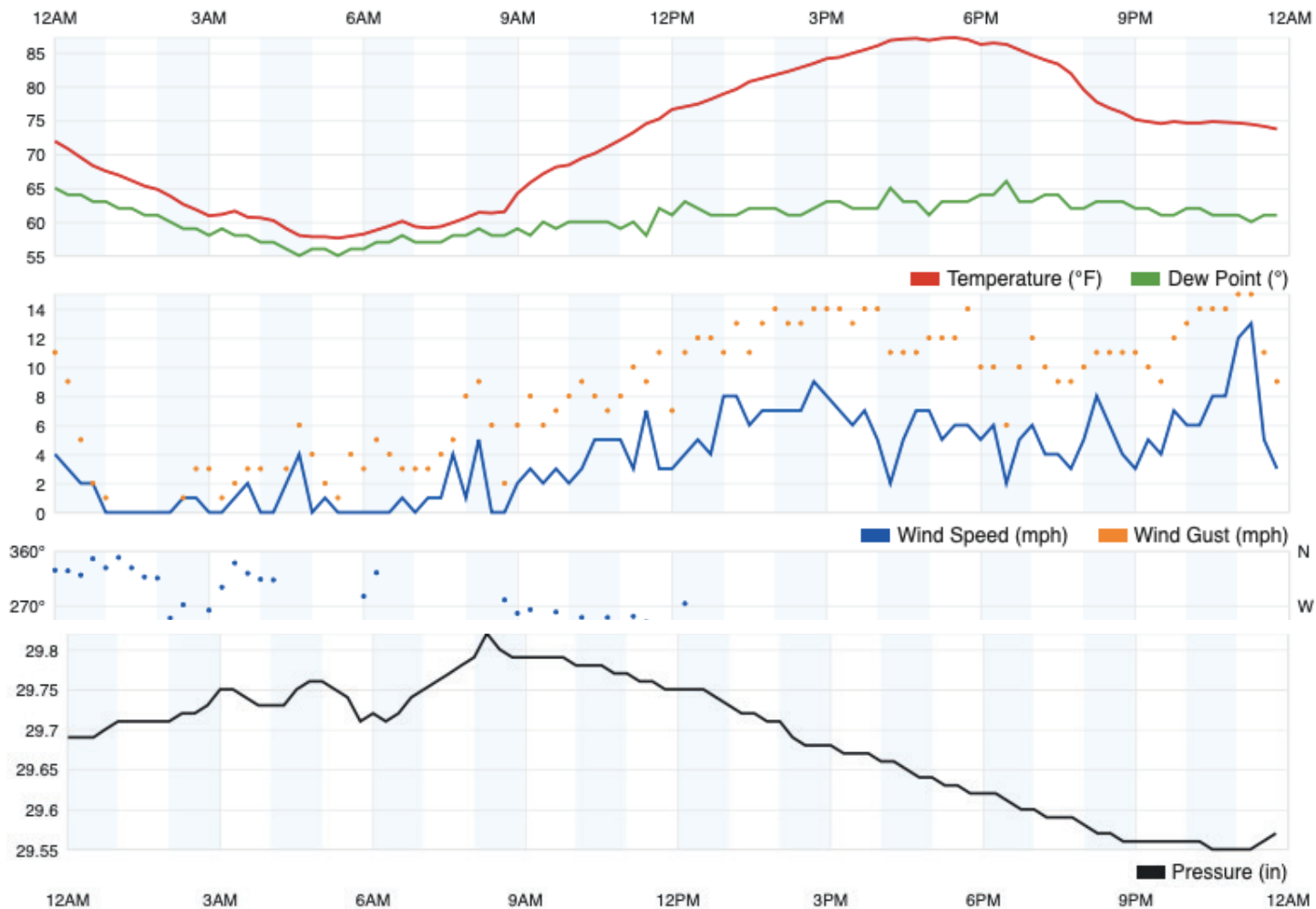


The new book shelves are at the Wage Memorial Library. Kellie Locke and April Abeln were busy putting the shelves in the book cases as they prepare to put more books on the shelves. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 86 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 61 °F

Thursday



Sunny

High: 79 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 51 °F

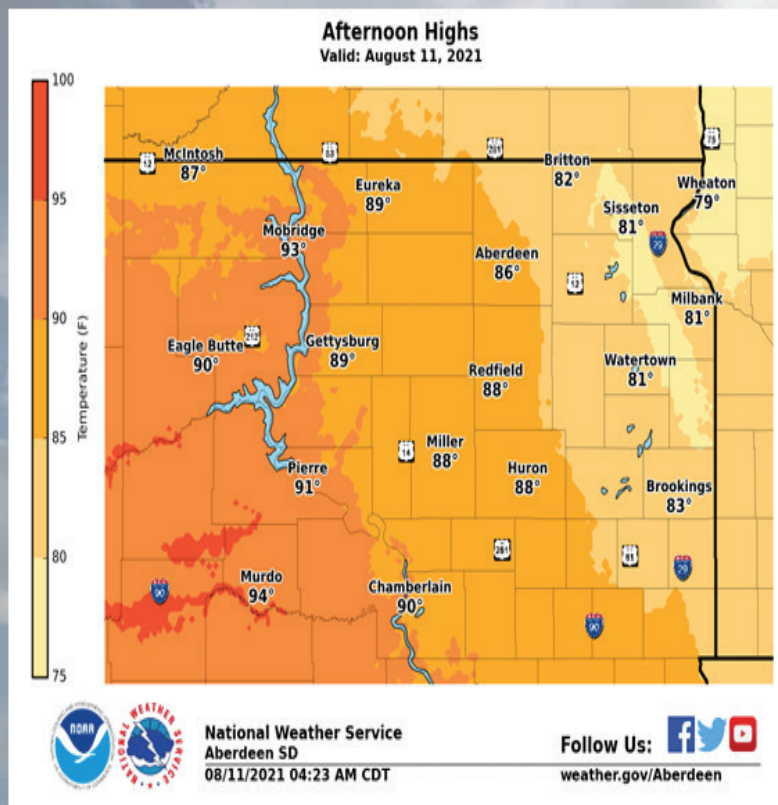
Friday



Sunny

High: 82 °F

Dry and Warm Today



Cooler Thursday
and Friday

Warmer air
returns over the
weekend

NWS Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 8/11/2021 4:31 AM CST

Conditions will be dry through the week and into the weekend. Look for slightly cooler air Thursday and Friday before warmer temperatures return over the weekend.

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Today in Weather History

August 11, 1975: A line of thunderstorms raced across portions of central and eastern South Dakota during the early morning hours. Winds gusted to 70 mph, causing considerable damage to trees. At Canton, in Lincoln County, the winds were estimated as high as 70 mph. In Sioux Falls, the peak wind gust measured 69 mph. Wind damage was also reported in Miller and Ree Heights in Hand County, as well as in Selby and Mobridge in Walworth County.

August 11, 1985: Lightning set off eleven fires in the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation area. Twenty acres of grassland were burned two miles northeast of Bear Creek. About 600 acres of grassland were burned 8 miles southwest of Lantry. About 3,000 acres of grassland burned near Eagle Butte.

August 11, 2011: Severe thunderstorms brought hail up to the size of ping pong balls and damaging winds up to 90 mph to parts of central South Dakota. Jones and Lyman Counties received the brunt of the strong winds with eighty mph winds downing several grain bins along with knocking a few semis off of Interstate-90 near Murdo. The winds also downed some power lines and poles along with destroying a hanger. The two planes in the hanger were damaged at the Murdo Airport. Near Kennebec in Lyman County, eighty mph winds took shingles off the house and also damaged the deck. A barn was also destroyed with a horse being injured. Many tree branches were also downed.

1940: A Category 2 hurricane struck the Georgia and South Carolina coast. A 13-foot storm tide was measured along the South Carolina coast, while over 15 inches of rain fell across northern North Carolina. Significant flooding and landslides struck Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia during the system's slow trek as a weakening tropical storm, and then as an extratropical cyclone, through the Southeast. The landslides which struck North Carolina were considered a once in a century event. Damages relating to the storm totaled \$13 million (1940 USD), and 50 people perished.

1999: An F2 tornado touched down in the metropolitan area of Salt Lake City. The tornado lasted ten minutes and killed one person, injured more than 80 people, and caused more than \$170 million in damages. It was the most destructive tornado in Utah's history and awakened the entire state's population to the fact that the Beehive State does experience tornadoes.

1940 - A major hurricane struck Savannah, GA, and Charleston, SC, causing the worst inland flooding since 1607. (David Ludlum)

1944 - The temperature at Burlington, VT, soared to an all-time record high of 101 degrees. (The Weather Channel) The Dog Days officially come to an end on this date, having begun the third day in July. Superstition has it that dogs tend to become mad during that time of the year. (The Weather Channel)

1980 - Clouds and moisture from Hurricane Allen provided a brief break from the torrid Texas heatwave, with daily highs mostly in the 70s to lower 90s. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - An early evening thunderstorm in Wyoming produced hail up to two inches in diameter from Alva to Hulett. Snow plows had to be used to clear Highway 24 south of Hulett, where hail formed drifts two feet deep. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Moisture from what remained of Tropical Storm Beryl resulted in torrential rains across eastern Texas. Twelve and a half inches of rain deluged Enterprise TX, which was more than the amount received there during the previous eight months. Philadelphia PA reported a record forty-four days of 90 degree weather for the year. Baltimore MD and Newark NJ reported a record fourteen straight days of 90 degree heat. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - One of the most severe convective outbreaks of record came to a climax in southern California after four days. Thunderstorms deluged Benton CA with six inches of rain two days in a row, and the flooding which resulted caused more than a million dollars damage to homes and highways. Thunderstorms around Yellowstone Park WY produced four inches of rain in twenty minutes resulting in fifteen mudslides. Thunderstorms over Long Island NY drenched Suffolk County with 8 to 10 inches of rain. Twenty-three cities in the southeastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. It was, for some cities, the fourth straight morning of record cold temperatures. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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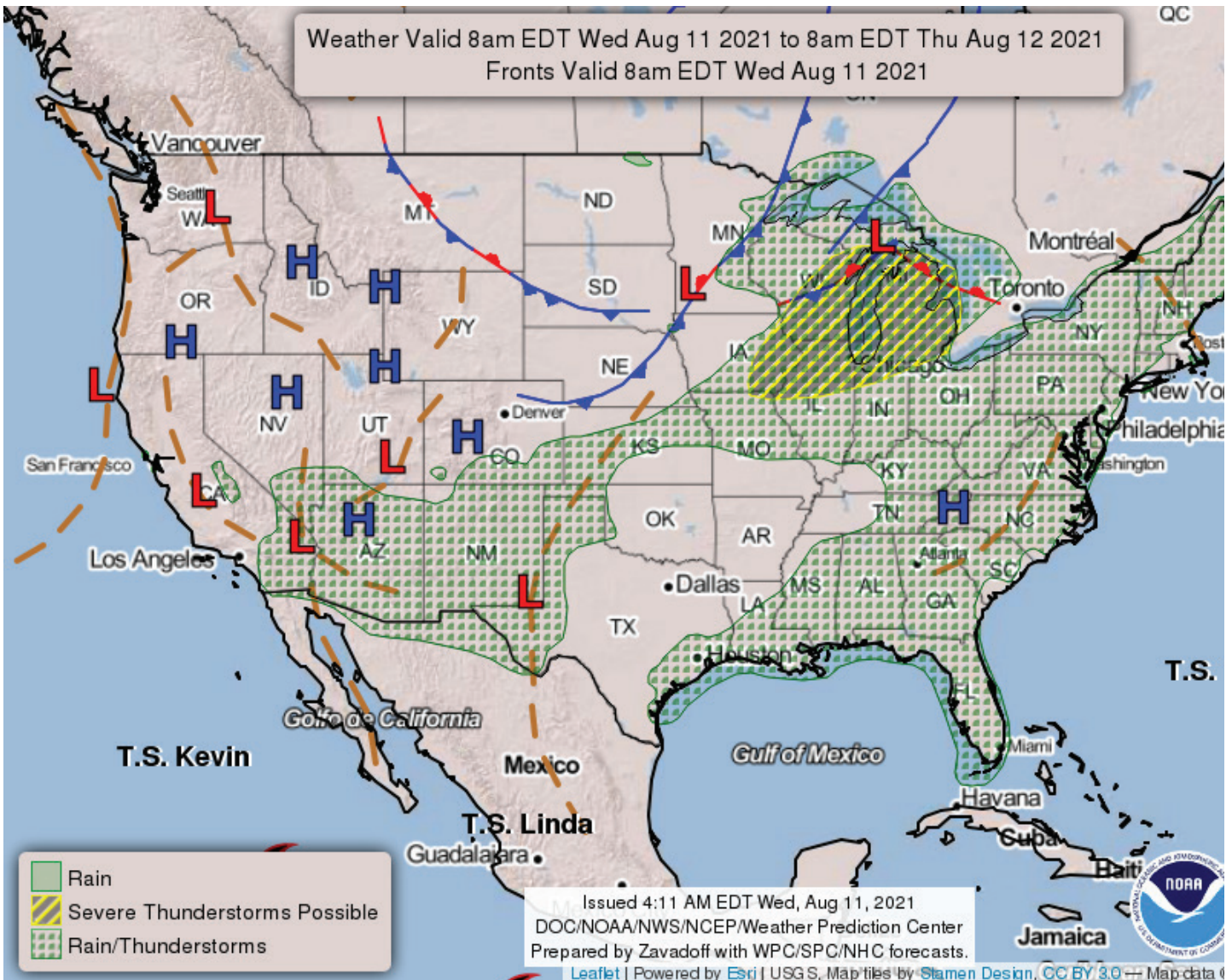
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 87.2°F at 5:30 PM
Low Temp: 57.6 °F at 5:30 AM
Wind: 15 mph at 11:00 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 103° in 1965, 1988
Record Low: 34° in 1902
Average High: 84°F
Average Low: 58°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 0.73
Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12
Average Precip to date: 14.83
Precip Year to Date: 8.39
Sunset Tonight: 8:47 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:31 a.m.



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HOW TO BEGIN EACH DAY

The day began with sunshine, blue skies, and gentle breezes. The deep blue waters were calm and peaceful. A lovely new sailing vessel rocked gently from side to side as the passengers walked around the deck. Each one had been personally met by the captain who greeted them with a smile, a handshake, and the words, "Welcome aboard!" They felt confident with him as their commander.

Soon after the ship set sail a storm appeared on the horizon. Angry waves swept over the sides of the ship and the passengers were forced to go below where they were safe from the winds and waters. In fact, the captain had to be tied to the bridge so he would not be swept overboard. The ship was no longer a place of serenity but of fear and worry.

Finally, one of the passengers, overcoming his fear and anxiety, decided that he would climb from beneath the deck to see if the captain was still alive. He hesitatingly crawled up the stairs, opened the hatch, and saw a sight that steadied his nerves and calmed his racing heart. Returning to the frightened passengers he shouted, "Everything's fine. I saw the face of the Captain, looked into his eyes, and realized we were safe with him at the helm."

"In the morning," prayed the Psalmist, "my prayer comes before you." What a wise way to begin every day. If we go to the Lord before we are in a storm, we can depend on His presence and power when we are engulfed by a storm. With His arms around us, His wisdom to guide us, His strength to sustain us, and His enduring love to comfort us, we will surely be able to face life's storms with confidence.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to realize that whatever we need to face the challenges of life is available through You. May we come to trust in Your greatness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 88:13b in the morning my prayer comes before you.

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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
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
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
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween) 5:30-7:00
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)
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. August 10, 2021.
Editorial: Daily COVID Updates Should Be Revived

With the new school year approaching and with autumn on the horizon with all its major events and increasing indoor activities, it would be smart and essential for the state health departments for both South Dakota and Nebraska to go back to posting daily updates on their COVID-19 online dashboards.

Those updates were invaluable last year as we staggered through the pandemic. The reports offered the public a good sense of the status of the coronavirus in their states and counties, and it also helped local officials craft guidance in how to deal with the evolving COVID threat.

This summer, the updates in both states have dropped from five days a week to just one. In fact, Nebraska stopped its statewide updates altogether for a few weeks as of July 1, but after receiving criticism, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) resumed weekly updates on Wednesdays, which is also when South Dakota's Department of Health (DOH) now posts its weekly reports.

The COVID situation, which has always been fluid, is changing once again. The Delta variant has become the dominant COVID strain at this moment, and it is producing rising case numbers and deaths in parts of the nation, particularly in those areas lagging in vaccinations. If the past is any indication of what could happen next, this region may see a sharp rise in cases in the coming weeks; indeed, infections in both states are already on the climb.

Many local governments and school districts are proceeding with caution since their situations generally appear manageable right now. On Monday night, the Yankton School Board opted on a 3-2 vote not to approve a mandatory masking policy for the start of the school year, but board member Terry Crandall said the district must remain "nimble" and move quickly if the situation changes. Trying to make such gear shifts in policy will be much more difficult if the officials responsible for those shifts must base their decisions on weekly — and, thus, extremely lagging — data updates.

Vermillion Mayor Kelsey Collier-Wise told South Dakota Public Broadcasting that daily updates are invaluable to making decisions regarding COVID-19. "The more information that we can get, especially when it's already being collected, gives us the opportunity to make better, more informed decisions," she said.

This could be particularly important for university towns like Vermillion, which draw people to the community from around the country through enrollment as well as with activities such as football games and homecomings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the crucial need for good, timely information, as well as highlighted the specters of misinformation and disinformation that can threaten the public health. With the virus still part of our lives and the unknowns once again increasing, the return of daily COVID updates from the DOH and DHHS, at least on weekdays, would provide an essential resource for everyone on a day-to-day basis.

END

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined
PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

29-45-50-59-62, Mega Ball: 12, Megaplier: 2

(twenty-nine, forty-five, fifty, fifty-nine, sixty-two; Mega Ball: twelve; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$208 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$241 million

Indigenous history, culture cut from South Dakota standards

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Teachers, educators and other South Dakota citizens charged with crafting new state social studies standards said Tuesday that Gov. Kristi Noem's administration deleted many elements intended to bolster students' understanding of Native American history and culture from their draft standards.

Members of the working group — appointed by the Department of Education to review and update the standards — said they were caught by surprise on Friday when the department released a document with significant changes. New standards are released every seven years. They said changes made to the draft they submitted in late July gave it a political edge they had tried to avoid, instead aligning with the Republican governor's rhetoric on what she calls patriotic education.

The working group's draft recommended including Native American culture from Oceti Sakowin stories in kindergarten to studying tribal banking systems in high school, but the department cut many of those recommendations.

The Forum News Service and South Dakota Public Broadcasting first reported the changes.

"Here we are again; the Native population is not worthy of being taught," said Sherry Johnson, the education director with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate and a member of the working group. "I feel it's important for all students to learn. This is how you combat racism and you build resiliency."

She joined the group after trying unsuccessfully for years to get the state government to implement a greater emphasis on Indigenous history and culture in public schools. Johnson said she was one of two tribal members on the 46-member working group, but felt encouraged by the draft they submitted.

When the revised draft was released, she watched in real-time as Native American history was erased. The Department of Education cut in half the number of references to Indigenous Native Americans, tribal, or Oceti Sakowin — the Sioux Nation tribes located in the region.

"We don't show up for great periods of time. It's like we don't exist," she said.

The Department of Education said in a statement that it "relied heavily on the recommendations" from the workgroup but that the proposed standards put a greater emphasis on learning about the experience of Native Americans in South Dakota than the previous set of standards.

"The department made certain adjustments before the release of the draft to provide greater clarity and focus for educators and the public," the department said. "The draft standards provide a balanced, age-appropriate approach to understanding our nation's history, government, economy, and geography, including opportunities to teach about the experiences of all peoples."

But Paul Harens, a retired teacher and another member of the working group, said the changes subverted their work. He said they worked hard to build a consensus on the draft and tried to make the standards "apolitical."

"The new document takes sides," he said. "They have turned it into a political football."

While the preface submitted by the workgroup explained their purpose was to "prepare students to be active, aware, and engaged citizens of their communities, state, country, and world," the Department of Education released an entirely new preface. It places more emphasis on the "framers of our nation's constitution," and references Noem's effort to create a state history and civics curriculum for K-12 students.

The revised preface states: "The founders of our nation emphasized the important role education played in equipping people for the knowledgeable practice of their responsibilities and the respectful enjoyment of their liberties, realizing the common good, and understanding other points of view and cultural beliefs are all equally protected."

The department will hold public hearings on the proposed standards throughout the school year, and the Board of Education Standards will adopt the final standards in March. The standards are widely followed by school districts but are not mandatory.

Harens predicted the revisions from the Department of Education would stoke divisions at school boards across the state as they wade through a wider political debate on how history and racism are taught. "All of a sudden you have a political agenda," he said.

Officials: Jet fuel shortage not affecting Sturgis rally

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The executive director of the Rapid City Regional Airport said Tuesday that the jet fuel shortage seen in areas of the western U.S. is not having an impact on visitors traveling to the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

Airport Executive Director Patrick Dame said that although air traffic is up in Rapid City, the western South Dakota airport has not heard as many complaints regarding jet fuel as have been expressed in other airports further west.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem issued an executive order on July 17 to address concerns about looming fuel shortages in the western part of the state, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"There has been fuel shortage discussions. The governor has reached out to us a few times on this," Dame said Tuesday. "They did declare an emergency under the fuel piece of it, but I don't believe at this point we've seen any real impact."

The executive order extended the hours of service for the commercial delivery of petroleum products in South Dakota by declaring a state of emergency and exempting delivery of gasoline, diesel, jet fuel and ethyl alcohol from federal motor carrier regulations on drivers' hours of service. It expires at midnight Aug. 16, the day after the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally officially ends.

Ethiopia armed group says it has alliance with Tigray forces

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The leader of an armed group that Ethiopia's government has designated a terrorist organization says his group has struck a military alliance with the Tigray forces who are now pressing toward the capital, as the conflict that erupted in the Tigray region last year spreads into other parts of Africa's second-most populous country.

"The only solution now is overthrowing this government militarily, speaking the language they want to be spoken to," Oromo Liberation Army leader Kumsa Diriba, also known as Jaal Marroo, told The Associated Press in an interview on Wednesday.

He said the agreement was reached a few weeks ago after the Tigray forces proposed it. "We have agreed on a level of understanding to cooperate against the same enemy, especially in military cooperation," he said. "It is underway." They share battlefield information and fight in parallel, he said, and while they're not fighting side by side, "there is a possibility it might happen."

Talks are underway on a political alliance as well, he said, and asserted that other groups in Ethiopia are involved in similar discussions: "There's going to be a grand coalition against (Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's) regime."

The alliance brings together the Tigray People's Liberation Front, who long dominated Ethiopia's repressive government but were sidelined when Abiy took office in 2018, and the OLA, which last year broke away from the opposition party Oromo Liberation Front and seeks self-determination for the Oromo people. The Oromo are Ethiopia's largest ethnic group.

Ethiopia's government earlier this year declared both the TPLF and OLA terrorist organizations.

There was no immediate comment from Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae with the Tigray forces, nor from the spokeswoman for Abiy's office.

The OLA leader spoke a day after the prime minister called on all capable Ethiopians to join the military and stop the Tigray forces "once and for all" after they retook much of the Tigray region in recent weeks and crossed into the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions. Tigray forces spokesman Getachew Reda has told the AP they are fighting to secure their long-blockaded region but if Abiy's government topples, "that's icing on the cake."

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With access to parts of Ethiopia increasingly restricted and journalists often harassed, it is difficult to tell how citizens will respond to the prime minister's call, or whether they will join the fight against him. The government has supported large military recruiting rallies in recent weeks.

The Tigray leaders embittered many Ethiopians during their nearly three decades in power by putting in place a system of ethnic federalism that led to ethnic tensions that continue to simmer in the country of 110 million people.

The OLA leader acknowledged that agreeing to the TPLF's proposal for an alliance took some thought. "There were so many atrocities committed" against the Oromo people during the TPLF's time in power, he said, and the problems it created have never been resolved.

But the OLA decided it was possible to work with the TPLF, he said, though some doubts remain. "I hope the TPLF has learned a lesson," he said. "I don't think the TPLF will commit the same mistakes unless they're out of their mind." If they do, there will be chaos in Ethiopia and it could collapse as a state, he said.

It was not clear how many fighters the OLA would bring to the alliance. "This, madam, is a military secret," the OLA leader said.

He said he hoped the TPLF's talks with other groups would become public in the near future. He also warned the international community, which led by the United Nations and the United States has urged a halt to the Tigray conflict and negotiations, that the crisis has to be handled carefully "if Ethiopia is to continue together."

Taliban complete northeast Afghan blitz as more cities fall

By TAMEEM AKHGAR and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban seized three more provincial capitals in Afghanistan and a local army headquarters completing their blitz across the country's northeast and pressing their offensive elsewhere, officials said Wednesday. The insurgents now control some two-thirds of the nation as the U.S. and NATO finalize their withdrawal after a decades-long war there.

The fall of the capitals of Badakhshan and Baghlan provinces to the northeast and Farah province to the west put increasing pressure on the country's central government to stem the tide of the advance, even as it lost a major base in Kunduz. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani rushed to Balkh province, already surrounded by Taliban-held territory, to seek help in pushing back the insurgents from warlords linked to allegations of atrocities and corruption.

While Kabul itself has not been directly threatened in the advance, the stunning speed of the offensive raises questions of how long the Afghan government can maintain control of its countryside. The multiple fronts of the battle have stretched the government's special operations forces — while regular troops have often fled the battlefield — and the violence has pushed thousands of civilians to seek safety in the capital. The U.S. military, which plans to complete its withdrawal by the end of the month, has conducted some airstrikes but largely has avoided involving itself in the ground campaign.

The Afghan government and military did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the losses.

Humayoon Shahidzada, a lawmaker from the western province of Farah, confirmed Wednesday to The Associated Press his province's capital of the same name fell. Neighboring Nimroz province was overrun in recent days after a weeklong campaign by the Taliban.

In Farah, Taliban fighters dragged the shoeless, bloody corpse of one Afghan security force member through the street, shouting: "God is great!" Taliban fighters carrying M-16 rifles and driving Humvees and Ford pickup trucks donated by the Americans rolled through the streets of the capital.

"The situation is under control in the city, our mujahedeen are patrolling in the city," one Taliban fighter who did not give his name said, referring to his fellow insurgents as "holy warriors."

The crackle of automatic weapon fire continued throughout the day in Farah.

Hujatullah Kheradmand, a lawmaker from Badakhshan, said the Taliban had seized his province's capital, Faizabad. An Afghan official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to speak about an unacknowledged loss, said Baghlan's capital, Poli-Khumri, also fell.

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The insurgents earlier captured six other provincial capitals in the country in less than a week.

On Wednesday, the headquarters of the Afghan National Army's 217th Corps at Kunduz airport fell to the Taliban, according to Ghulam Rabani Rabani, a provincial council member in Kunduz, and lawmaker Shah Khan Sherzad. The insurgents posted video online they said showed surrendering troops.

The corps is one of seven across the army and its loss represents a major setback. The province's capital, also called Kunduz, was already among those seized, and the capture of the base now puts the country's northeast firmly in Taliban hands.

It wasn't immediately clear what equipment was left behind for the insurgents, though a Taliban video showed them parading in Humvees and pickup trucks. Another video showed fighters on the airport's tarmac next to an attack helicopter without rotor blades.

In southern Helmand province, where the Taliban control nearly all of the capital of Lashkar Gar, a suicide car bomber targeted the government-held police headquarters, provincial council head Attaullah Afghan said. The building has been under siege for two weeks.

The rapid fall of wide swaths of the country to the Taliban raises fears that the brutal tactics they used to rule Afghanistan before will also return. Some civilians who have fled Taliban advances have said that the insurgents imposed repressive restrictions on women and burned down schools. There have also been reports of revenge killings in areas where the Taliban have gained control.

Speaking to journalists Tuesday, a senior EU official said the insurgents held some 230 districts of the over 400 in Afghanistan. The official described another 65 in government control while the rest were contested. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the internal figures.

In addition to the northeast, much of northern Afghanistan has also fallen to the Taliban, except for Balkh province. There, warlords Abdul Rashid Dostum, Atta Mohammad Noor and Mohammad Mohaqiq planned to mobilize forces in support of the Afghan government to push back the Taliban.

Dostum in particular has a troubled past, facing investigations after the 2001 U.S.-led invasion for killing hundreds of Taliban fighters last year by letting them suffocate in sealed shipping containers.

On Wednesday, Dostum said that the Taliban "won't be able to leave north and will face the same fate" as the suffocated troops.

After a 20-year Western military mission and billions of dollars spent training and shoring up Afghan forces, many are at odds to explain why the regular forces have collapsed, fleeing the battle sometimes by the hundreds. The fighting instead has fallen largely to small groups of elite forces and the Afghan air force.

The success of the Taliban blitz has added urgency to the need to restart the long-stalled talks in Qatar that could end the fighting and move Afghanistan toward an inclusive interim administration. The insurgents have so far refused to return to the negotiating table.

U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad brought a warning to the Taliban on Tuesday that any government that comes to power through force in Afghanistan won't be recognized internationally.

Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes in the country's north to escape battles that have overwhelmed their towns and villages. Families have flowed into the capital, Kabul, living in parks and streets with little food or water.

Pacific Northwest braces for another multiday heat wave

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — People in the Pacific Northwest braced for another major, multiday heat wave starting Wednesday, just over a month after record-shattering hot weather killed hundreds of the region's most vulnerable people when temperatures soared to 116 degrees Fahrenheit (47 Celsius).

In a "worst-case scenario," the temperature could reach as high as 111 F (44 C) in some parts of western Oregon by Friday before a weekend cooldown, the National Weather Service in Portland, Oregon, warned this week. It's more likely temperatures will rise above 100 F (38 C) for three consecutive days, peaking around 105 F (40.5 C) on Thursday.

Those are eye-popping numbers in a usually temperate region and would break some all-time records if

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the late June heat wave hadn't done so already, meteorologist Tyler Kranz said. Seattle will be cooler than Portland, with temperatures in the mid-90s, but it still has a chance to break records, and many people there, like in Oregon, don't have air conditioning.

"We'll often hear people say, 'Who cares if it's 106 or 108? It gets this hot in Arizona all the time.' Well, people in Arizona have air conditioning, and here in the Pacific Northwest, a lot of people don't," Kranz said. "You can't really compare us to the desert Southwest."

Gov. Kate Brown has declared a state of emergency over the heat and activated an emergency operations center, citing the potential for disruptions to the power grid and transportation. City and county governments are opening cooling centers and misting stations in public buildings, extending public library hours and waiving bus fare for those headed to cooling centers. A statewide help line will direct callers to the nearest cooling shelter and offer tips on how to stay safe.

The back-to-back heat waves, coupled with a summer that's been exceptionally warm and dry overall, are pummeling a region where summer highs usually drift into the 70s or 80s. Both the heat and a historic drought across the American West reflect climate change that makes weather more extreme in the historically temperate region.

The June heat in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia killed hundreds of people and was a wake-up call. It was virtually impossible without human-caused climate change, a scientific analysis found.

In Oregon, officials say at least 83 people died of heat-related illness, and the hot weather is being investigated as a possible cause in 33 more deaths. Washington state reported at least 91 heat deaths, and officials in British Columbia say hundreds of "sudden and unexpected deaths" were likely due to the soaring temperatures.

The toll exposed huge blind spots in emergency planning in a region unaccustomed to dealing with such high temperatures, said Vivek Shandas, a professor of climate adaptation at Portland State University.

Most of those who died in Oregon were older, homebound and socially isolated, and many were unable, or unwilling, to get to cooling centers.

The call center designed to provide information about cooling centers was unstaffed during part of the peak heat, and hundreds of callers got stuck in a voicemail menu that didn't include a prompt for heat-related help. Portland's famed light-rail train also shut down to reduce strain on the power grid, eliminating a transportation option for low-income residents seeking relief.

"We knew a week in advance. What would happen if we knew an earthquake was going to hit us a week in advance?" Shandas said. "That's the kind of thinking we need to be aligned with. We know something disastrous is coming, and we need to get all hands on deck and focus on the most vulnerable."

Yet even younger residents struggled with the heat in June and dreaded this week's sweltering temperatures.

Katherine Morgan, 27, has no air conditioning in her third-floor apartment and can't afford a window unit on the money she makes working at a bookstore and as a hostess at a brewery.

She estimated that it hit 112 F (44 C) in her apartment in June. She tried to keep cool by taking cold showers, dousing her hair with water, eating Popsicles and sitting immobile in front of a fan for hours.

Morgan, who doesn't have a car, got ill from the heat after walking 20 minutes to work when it was 106 F (41 C). She took the following two days off rather than risk it again. The heat from the sidewalk, she said, felt like it was "cooking my ankles."

This week, she'll have to walk to work Thursday, the day when temperatures could again soar just as high.

"All my friends and I knew that climate change was real, but it's getting really scary because it was gradually getting hot — and it suddenly got really hot, really fast," Morgan said. "It's eye-opening."

China sentences Canadian to 11 years in case tied to Huawei

By JOE McDONALD and NG HAN GUAN Associated Press

DANDONG, China (AP) — A Canadian entrepreneur was sentenced to 11 years in prison Wednesday in a spying case linked to Beijing's effort to push his country to release an executive of tech giant Huawei,

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prompting an unusual joint show of support for Canada by the United States and 24 other governments.

China is stepping up pressure as a Canadian judge hears final arguments about whether to send the Huawei executive to the United States to face charges related to possible violations of trade sanctions on Iran. On Tuesday, a court rejected another Canadian's appeal of his sentence in a drug case that was abruptly increased to death after the executive's arrest.

Entrepreneur Michael Spavor and a former Canadian diplomat were detained in what critics labeled "hostage politics" after Huawei's Meng Wanzhou was arrested Dec. 1, 2018, at the Vancouver airport.

Spavor was sentenced by a court in Dandong, about 210 miles (340 kilometers) east of Beijing on the North Korean border. The government has released few details other than to accuse Spavor of passing along sensitive information to the former diplomat, Michael Kovrig, beginning in 2017. Both have been held in isolation and have little contact with Canadian diplomats.

The Canadian government condemned Spavor's sentence. It said he and Kovrig are "detained arbitrarily" and called for their immediate release.

The legal process in Spavor's case "lacked both fairness and transparency," said Ambassador Dominic Barton outside a detention center where the sentence was announced.

Spavor has two weeks to decide whether to appeal, according to Barton.

"While we disagree with the charges, we realize that this is the next step in the process to bring Michael home, and we will continue to support him through this challenging time," Spavor's family said in a statement.

"Michael's life passion has been to bring different cultures together through tourism and events shared between the Korean peninsula and other countries including China and Canada," his family said. "This situation has not dampened, but strengthened his passion."

Diplomats from the United States, Japan, Britain, Australia, Germany and other European countries plus the European Union gathered at the Canadian Embassy in Beijing in a show of support. They also have issued separate appeals for Spavor and Kovrig to receive fair trials or to be released.

"These proceedings are a blatant attempt to use human beings as bargaining leverage," the top American diplomat in China, David Meale, said in a statement. "Human beings should never be used as bargaining chips."

Meng, the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Ltd. and daughter of the company's founder, was arrested on U.S. charges of lying to the Hong Kong arm of the British bank HSBC about possible dealings with Iran in violation of trade sanctions.

Meng's lawyers argue the case is politically motivated and what she is accused of isn't a crime in Canada.

China's government has criticized the arrest as part of U.S. efforts to hamper its technology development. Huawei, a maker of network equipment and smartphones, is China's first global tech brand and is at the center of U.S.-Chinese tension over technology and the security of information systems.

Beijing denies there is a connection between Meng's case and the arrests of Spavor and Kovrig, but Chinese officials and state media frequently mention the two men in relation to whether or not Meng is allowed to return to China.

Earlier, Barton said he didn't think it was a coincidence the cases in China were happening while Meng's case was advancing in Vancouver.

Asked whether Canada was negotiating over possibly sending Meng home in exchange for the release of detained Canadians, Barton said, "there are intensive efforts and discussions. I don't want to talk in any detail about that. But that will continue."

Diplomats from the United States and Germany went to the detention center in Dandong but weren't allowed in, according to Barton.

"Our collective presence and voice send a strong message to China and the Chinese government that the eyes of the world are watching," the ambassador said.

Barton said Chinese authorities cited photos taken by Spavor at airports that included military aircraft.

"A lot of it was around the photo evidence," the ambassador said. "He obviously had a different view

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on that.”

Spavor worked in China but had extensive links with North Korea in tourism and other commercial ventures that brought him into contact with the isolated communist state’s leadership. The Canadian Embassy noted Spavor had been held for 975 days as of Wednesday.

Barton met with Spavor after the sentencing and said he sent three messages: “Thank you for all your support, it means a lot to me. Two, I am in good spirits. And three, I want to get home.”

“He’s strong, resilient, focused on what’s happening,” Barton said. “We had a very good conversation.”

Kovrig, who also was detained in December 2018, stood trial in March. There has been no word on when a verdict might be announced.

On Tuesday, a Chinese court rejected the appeal of Robert Schellenberg, whose 15-year prison term for drug smuggling was abruptly increased to death in January 2019 following Meng’s arrest. The case was sent to China’s supreme court for a mandatory review before it can be carried out.

Canada and other countries, including Australia and the Philippines, face trade boycotts and other Chinese pressure in disputes with Beijing over human rights, the coronavirus and control of the South China Sea. The United States has warned American travelers face a “heightened risk of arbitrary detention” in China for reasons other than to enforce laws.

China has tried to pressure Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government by imposing restrictions on imports of canola seed oil and other products from Canada.

Meanwhile, Beijing is blocking imports of Australian wheat, wine and other products after its government called for an investigation into the origin of the coronavirus pandemic.

Dems renew push on elections bill that GOP vows to block

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats are renewing their push to enact their marquee voting bill, pledging to make it the first order of business when the Senate returns in the fall even though they don’t have a clear strategy for overcoming steadfast Republican opposition.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced early Wednesday his plan for floor action in September on the bill, known as the For the People Act, which Democrats have tried to pass for months. The measure, blocked by Republicans from debate in June, would affect virtually every aspect of the electoral process, curbing the influence of big money in politics, limiting the partisan considerations in the drawing of congressional districts and expanding options for voting.

Democrats acknowledge that their latest effort is doomed to fail — and that’s the point. They are looking to show that Republicans will not waver in their opposition to voting and election legislation, which Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has called “a solution looking for a problem.”

That could help make a case to moderate Democrats that there is little chance of making headway on this key issue for the party unless changes are made to Senate rules that require 60 votes to overcome a filibuster.

“Republicans have formed a total wall of opposition against progress on voting rights,” Schumer said just after 4:30 a.m. “That’s what we have come to: total Republican intransigence.”

His remarks came after a marathon voting session that paved the way for Democrats’ big-ticket spending goals before the Senate adjourned for its August recess.

“After ramming through this reckless taxing and spending spree, here in the dead of night, they also want to start tearing up the ground rules of our democracy,” McConnell said, “writing new ones, of course, on a purely partisan basis.”

Democratic leaders have said the voting legislation would serve as a powerful counterbalance to a wave of new restrictive voting laws approved in Republican-controlled states after the 2020 election. But the effort stalled in the Senate months ago.

Liberal activists have advocated for the elimination of the filibuster, though a handful of moderate Democrats, including Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have rejected such an

approach, denying Democrats the votes needed to make the change.

That's where the early Wednesday push to take up the legislation came.

"These are important points to build a case that Republicans are going to filibuster everything and are bad-faith actors on this topic," said Adam Bozzi, a longtime Senate aide who is now helping lead a \$30 million campaign to build support for the bill.

President Joe Biden has faced increasing pressure from the party's base to get more involved in the fight over voting legislation. Many activists say Biden has only paid lip service to the issue, instead prioritizing a \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package, which the Senate approved Tuesday.

With that done, they hope he will be more engaged on the issue.

"The White House must now prioritize voting rights legislation with the same level of urgency and commitment as the bipartisan infrastructure bill," NAACP President Derrick Johnson said. "Time is running out."

Though once an area where there could be bipartisan compromise, election laws have become an increasingly partisan flashpoint after President Donald Trump falsely blamed voting fraud for his 2020 election loss. Republican and Democratic election officials across the country certified the outcome and Trump's own attorney general said he saw no evidence of widespread voter fraud.

But it's also proved difficult for Senate Democrats to unify their own caucus around the issue. Manchin initially balked at voting for the bill, though he agreed to do so after Senate leaders pledged to work with him to narrow the measure's focus.

After weeks of work, they neared completion of a bill. But that's not what they voted on Wednesday.

Instead, they took a piecemeal approach. First, Democrats tried to take up the For the People Act, which Republicans blocked.

After that, Schumer tried to advance other popular provisions from the bill, which would limit partisan gerrymandering and force so-called dark money groups to disclose their donors. The provisions were broken into two separate bills that Republicans blocked.

"It's publicly proving that the Republicans are going to obstruct everything," said Fred Wertheimer, the founder of the nonprofit group Democracy 21, who helped write the initial bill. "It sets the stage for when they come back (from recess) and figure out how to move forward."

Time is of the essence if Democrats want to get the measure signed into law before 2022 midterm elections.

"There is a tight deadline for getting all this done," said Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga.

In Iran, slow vaccinations fuel anger in unending pandemic

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranians are suffering through yet another surge in the coronavirus pandemic — their country's worst yet — and anger is growing at images of vaccinated Westerners without face masks on the internet or on TV while they remain unable to get the shots.

Iran, like much of the world, remains far behind countries like the United States in vaccinating its public, with only 3 million of its more than 80 million people having received both vaccine doses. But while some countries face poverty or other challenges in obtaining vaccines, Iran has brought some of the problems on itself.

After Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei refused to accept vaccine donations from Western countries, the Islamic Republic has sought to make the shots domestically, though that process lags far behind other nations.

The supply of non-Western shots remains low, creating a black market offering Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech shots for as much as \$1,350 in a country where the currency, the Iranian rial, is on the verge of collapse. Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran mean the cash-strapped government has limited funds to purchase vaccines abroad.

And even as the delta variant wreaks havoc, filling the country's already overwhelmed hospitals, many

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Iranians have given up on wearing masks and staying at home.

The need to earn a living trumps the luxury of social distancing.

"What is next? A sixth wave? A seventh wave? When is it going to end?" asked Reza Ghasemi, a 27-year-old delivery man without a face mask, smoking a cigarette next to his motorbike on a recent day in Tehran. "It is not clear when this situation will change to a better one."

Since the start of the pandemic, Iran has recorded nearly 4 million COVID-19 cases and more than 91,000 deaths — the highest numbers across the Middle East.

In a video message broadcast Wednesday on state TV, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei described the skyrocketing death toll as "very painful," urging officials to roll out free virus tests and the fatigued public to follow health measures.

The true count is believed to be much higher. In April 2020, Iran's parliament warned its case number was "eight to 10 times" higher than the reported figures, due to undercounting. While coronavirus testing capacity has surged since then, officials repeatedly have suggested the case count remains far off. The death toll is likely three times higher, officials say, as Iran only counts those who die in a hospital while being treated for coronavirus.

Khamenei in January slammed shut any possibility of American or British vaccines entering the country, calling them "forbidden."

"I really do not trust," them, Khamenei said of those nations. "Sometimes they want to test" their vaccines on other countries.

The decision, after Khamenei earlier floated conspiracy theories about the virus' origin in March 2020, saw Iran turn inward and try to develop its own vaccines. Those efforts, relying on traditional "dead virus" vaccines rather than the Pfizer and Moderna method of targeting the coronavirus' spike protein using RNA, have yet to reach mass production. And while the government claims local shots are 85% effective, they've released no data from their trials.

For now, the majority of Iranians receiving vaccines rely on foreign-made shots. A health ministry spokesman clarified on Tuesday that Iran could import Western vaccines "as long as they're not produced in the U.S. or Britain."

Japan has donated 2.9 million doses of its locally produced AstraZeneca shots. China has sent 10 million doses of its shots. Iran also made a deal with Russia to buy 60 million doses of Sputnik V, but so far, Moscow has delivered just over 1 million shots.

Doctors received the first set of vaccines, while the government now offers shots to those 50 and older, as well as to taxi drivers, journalists and those with diabetes. But it hasn't been nearly enough to keep up with demand. Only 4% of the Iranian public are fully vaccinated, according to government statistics.

Those with residency permits have sought shots in the United Arab Emirates. Others have gone to Armenia where authorities offer free shots to visiting foreigners. In Tehran, word-of-mouth claims that Pfizer and Moderna shots smuggled in over the border from Irbil, Iraq, including the ultra-cold freezers needed for them, are now for sale in the Iranian capital.

A two-dose Moderna or AstraZeneca vaccine goes for \$390, while two Pfizer shots cost \$1,350. Those paying go on faith that the products have not expired — or are even legitimate vaccines.

Mahsa, a 31-year-old woman in Tehran, said she got the Moderna vaccine through her boyfriend's friend, a doctor working at a pharmacy.

"I am sure the vaccine is genuine because I trust the doctor," she said.

Amirali, a 39-year-old father of a baby girl, said he bought shots of the Japanese-made AstraZeneca vaccine from an Iranian doctor secretly vaccinating people for profit. Amirali said he took the chance as his wife, a permanent U.S. resident, received the Pfizer vaccine while visiting America.

"I was not sure when the government will provide vaccines for my age group, so I decided to vaccinate myself," he said.

Both Amirali and Mahsa spoke on condition that only their first names be used for fear of retribution from the authorities.

But for those who can't pay, there are no shots yet.

Iran's civilian government, now undergoing a transition of power to hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, has been overwhelmed by the crisis. And with the Islamic Republic also facing protests over economic issues, water shortages and blackouts, the government likely wants to avoid triggering wider unrest.

"They want us to accept any situation simply because they failed to do their duty with vaccinations," said Abbas Zarei, who sells mobile phone accessories in northern Tehran. "From time to time, they announce that businesses should close because of corona restrictions though it damages our lives."

"It is not fair," said Zarei, who like many in Iran, struggles to make a living. "I do not care about the restrictions anymore."

Amnesty reports widespread rapes 'with impunity' in Tigray

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Dozens of women have described shocking sexual assaults by Ethiopian soldiers and allied forces in the country's Tigray conflict, says an Amnesty International report published Wednesday, and its researcher calls it striking how the perpetrators appeared to act without fear of punishment from their commanders.

"All of these forces from the very beginning, everywhere, and for a long period of time felt it was perfectly OK with them to perpetrate these crimes because they clearly felt they could do so with impunity, nothing holding them back," Donatella Rovera told The Associated Press.

She would not speculate on whether any leader gave the signal to rape, which the report says was intended to humiliate both the women and their Tigrayan ethnic group. In her years of work investigating atrocities around the world, these are some of the worst, Rovera said.

More than 1,200 cases of sexual violence were documented by health centers in Tigray between February and April alone, Amnesty said. No one knows the real toll during the nine-month conflict, as most of the health facilities across the region of 6 million people were looted or destroyed.

These numbers are likely a "small fraction" of the reality, Amnesty said. It interviewed 63 women, along with health workers.

A dozen women described being held for days or weeks while being raped multiple times, usually by several men. And 12 other women said they were raped in front of family members. Five women said they were pregnant at the time they were assaulted. Two said they had nails, gravel and shrapnel shoved into their vaginas.

"I don't know if they realized I was a person," one woman told Amnesty, describing how she was attacked in her home by three men. She was four months pregnant at the time.

The AP separately has spoken with women who described being gang-raped by combatants allied with the Ethiopian military, notably soldiers from neighboring Eritrea but also fighters with the neighboring Amhara region.

Amnesty has not received allegations against Tigray forces, who regained control of much of the Tigray region in late June and have since crossed into the Amhara and Afar regions in what they call an attempt to break the blockade on their land and pressure Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to step down.

While Ethiopian and allied forces retreated from much of Tigray in June, some remain in western Tigray, and Ethiopia's government on Tuesday essentially abandoned its unilateral cease-fire as Abiy called all able citizens to fight.

The Amnesty report calls for accountability for the sexual violence during the conflict, saying rape and sexual slavery constitute war crimes. Many women in Tigray now live with the physical and mental effects of the assaults including HIV infections and continued bleeding, it said.

Ethiopia's government has not responded to the report, Rovera said. A spokesman for the attorney general's office did not respond to a request for an update Wednesday on any investigations.

Earlier this year, the government said three soldiers had been convicted and 25 others indicted for rape and other acts of sexual violence. But Amnesty said no information has been made available about those trials or other measures to bring perpetrators to justice.

Ethiopia's government has not allowed human rights researchers into the Tigray region, though a joint investigation into alleged atrocities is underway by the United Nations human rights office and the government-created Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

Senate OKs Dems' \$3.5T budget in latest win for Biden

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats pushed a \$3.5 trillion framework for bolstering family services, health, and environment programs through the Senate early Wednesday, advancing President Joe Biden's expansive vision for reshaping federal priorities just hours after handing him a companion triumph on a hefty infrastructure package.

Lawmakers approved Democrats' budget resolution on a party-line 50-49 vote, a crucial step for a president and party set on training the government's fiscal might on assisting families, creating jobs and fighting climate change. Higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations would pay for much of it. Passage came despite an avalanche of Republican amendments intended to make their rivals pay a price in next year's elections for control of Congress.

House leaders announced their chamber will return from summer recess in two weeks to vote on the fiscal blueprint, which contemplates disbursing the \$3.5 trillion over the next decade. Final congressional approval, which seems certain, would protect a subsequent bill actually enacting the outline's detailed spending and tax changes from a Republican filibuster in the 50-50 Senate, delays that would otherwise kill it.

Even so, passing that follow-up legislation will be dicey with party moderates wary of the massive \$3.5 trillion price tag vying with progressives demanding aggressive action. The party controls the House with just three votes to spare, while the evenly divided Senate is theirs only due to Vice President Kamala Harris tie-breaking vote. Solid GOP opposition seems guaranteed.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., once a progressive voice in Congress' wilderness and now a national figure wielding legislative clout, said the measure would help children, families, the elderly and working people — and more.

"It will also, I hope, restore the faith of the American people in the belief that we can have a government that works for all of us, and not just the few," he said.

Republicans argued that Democrats' proposals would waste money, raise economy-wounding taxes, fuel inflation and codify far-left dictates that would harm Americans. They were happy to use Sanders, a self-avowed democratic socialist, to try tarring all Democrats backing the measure.

If Biden and Senate Democrats want to "outsource domestic policy to Chairman Sanders" with a "historically reckless taxing and spending spree," Republicans lack the votes to stop them, conceded Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "But we will debate. We will vote."

The Senate turned to the budget hours after it approved the other big chunk of Biden's objectives, a compromise \$1 trillion bundle of transportation, water, broadband and other infrastructure projects. That measure, passed 69-30 with McConnell among the 19 Republicans backing it, also needs House approval.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., assured progressives that Congress will pursue sweeping initiatives going beyond that infrastructure package.

"To my colleagues who are concerned that this does not do enough on climate, for families, and making corporations and the rich pay their fair share: We are moving on to a second track, which will make a generational transformation in these areas," Schumer said.

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., missed the budget votes to be with his ailing wife.

In a budget ritual, senators plunged into a "vote-a-rama," a nonstop parade of messaging amendments that often becomes a painful all-night ordeal. This time, the Senate held more than 40 roll calls by the time it approved the measure at around 4 a.m. EDT, more than 14 hours after the procedural wretchedness began.

With the budget resolution largely advisory, the goal of most amendments was not to win but to force

the other party's vulnerable senators to cast troublesome votes that can be used against them in next year's elections for congressional control.

Republicans crowed after Democrats opposed GOP amendments calling for the full-time reopening of pandemic-shuttered schools and boosting the Pentagon's budget and retaining limits on federal income tax deductions for state and local levies. They were also happy when Democrats showed support for Biden's now suspended ban on oil and gas leasing on federal lands, which Republicans said would prompt gasoline price increases.

One amendment may have boomeranged after the Senate voted 99-0 for a proposal by freshman Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., to curb federal funds for any municipalities that defund the police. That idea has been rejected by all but the most progressive Democrats, but Republicans have persistently accused them anyway of backing it.

In an animated, sardonic rejoinder, Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., called Tuberville's amendment "a gift" that would let Democrats "put to bed this scurrilous accusation that somebody in this great esteemed body would want to defund the police." He said he wanted to "walk over there and hug my colleague."

Republicans claimed two narrow victories with potential implications for future votes, with West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, one of the chamber's more conservative Democrats, joining them on both nonbinding amendments.

One indicated support for health care providers who refuse to participate in abortions. The other voiced opposition to teaching critical race theory, which considers racism endemic to American institutions. There's scant evidence that it's part of public school curriculums.

The budget blueprint envisions creating new programs including tuition-free pre-kindergarten and community college, paid family leave and a Civilian Climate Corps whose workers would tackle environmental projects. Millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally would have a new chance for citizenship, and there would be financial incentives for states to adopt more labor-friendly laws.

Medicare would add dental, hearing and vision benefits, and tax credits and grants would prod utilities and industries to embrace clean energy. Child tax credits beefed up for the pandemic would be extended, along with federal subsidies for health insurance.

Besides higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, Democrats envision savings by letting the government negotiate prices for pharmaceuticals it buys, slapping taxes on imported carbon fuels and strengthening IRS tax collections. Democrats have said their policies will be fully paid for, but they'll make no final decisions until this fall's follow-up bill.

Senegal's ambulance teams struggle amid a wave of COVID-19

By LEO CORREA and CHEIKH A.T. SY Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — The paramedics get the urgent call at 10:30 p.m.: A 25-year-old woman, eight months pregnant and likely suffering from COVID-19, is now having serious trouble breathing.

Yahya Niane grabs two small oxygen cylinders and heads to the ambulance with his team. Upon arrival, they find the young woman's worried father waving an envelope in front of her mouth, a desperate effort to send more air her way.

Her situation is dire: Niane says Binta Ba needs to undergo a cesarean section right away if they are to save her and the baby. But first they must find a hospital that can take her.

"All the hospitals in Dakar are full so to find a place for someone who is having trouble breathing is very difficult," he says.

It's a scenario that has become all too common as Senegal confronts a rapid increase in confirmed coronavirus cases. Instead of motorcycle accidents and heart attacks, the vast majority of ambulance calls in the country's capital are now COVID-19 cases.

"We have had an influx of calls for respiratory distress," said Dr. Abdallah Wade, head of the regulation department at SAMU, Senegal's emergency medical service. "We had a few in the first wave, a few in the second wave, but since the beginning of the third wave, 90% of the calls are for respiratory distress."

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During the first year of the pandemic, Senegal was frequently cited as a success story in Africa: After quickly closing the country's airport and land borders, President Macky Sall mandated mask-wearing and temporarily halted interregional travel.

The delta variant, though, has changed all that. While the country of 16 million people received more 500,000 AstraZeneca vaccines through the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative, the demand has now outstripped the supply leaving many still waiting for their second doses.

Hospital beds, too, are in short supply, leaving COVID-19 patients to languish at home while they wait for a spot or until their condition further deteriorates.

"Now there is an overflow of calls and an overflow of patients and very few places available," said Dr. Mouhamed Lamine Dieng, who works at the emergency services control center trying to triage and place patients.

"The main challenge for the team is to find a place at the right time to save a person before they die," he said.

Binta Ba, the young expectant mother, ultimately got a spot since her oxygen levels had dropped sharply. Doctors estimated that 50% of her lungs had been affected by the virus by the time she made it there.

Doctors delivered her baby girl by cesarean in time. Four days later though, the mother remains on oxygen support in the intensive care unit while hospital workers tend to the newborn.

"There are people who thought that COVID did not exist," said Djiba Ba, the baby's grandfather.

"This is because some people denied its existence on social media networks and TV channels," he said. "I swear to you that COVID is real and that people who refuse to be vaccinated should be punished."

'River Dave' doesn't think he can go back to being a hermit

By KATHY McCORMACK Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — An off-the-grid New Hampshire man's days living as a hermit appear to be over. "River Dave," whose cabin in the woods burned down after nearly three decades on property that he was ordered to leave, says he doesn't think he can return to his lifestyle.

"I don't see how I can go back to being a hermit because society is not going to allow it," David Lidstone said in an interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Lidstone, 81, said even if he could rebuild his cabin, which burned down last week, "I would have people coming every weekend, so I just can't get out of society anymore. I've hidden too many years and I've built relationships, and those relationships have continued to expand."

Lidstone, a logger by trade who chopped his firewood and grew his food in the woods along the Merrimack River in the town of Canterbury, said he's not grieving the loss of his life in isolation.

"Maybe the things I've been trying to avoid are the things that I really need in life," said Lidstone, who drifted apart from his family. "I grew up never being hugged or kissed, or any close contact.

"I had somebody ask me once, about my wife: 'Did you really love her?' And the question kind of shocked me for a second. I ... I've never loved anybody in my life. And I shocked myself because I hadn't realized that. And that's why I was a hermit. Now I can see love being expressed that I never had before."

He was jailed on July 15 on a civil contempt sanction and was told he'd be released if he agreed to leave the cabin following a property dispute that goes back to 2016. The landowner, 86-year-old Leonard Giles, of South Burlington, Vermont, wanted Lidstone off the property.

The property, undeveloped and mostly used for timber harvests, has been owned by the same family since 1963.

Lidstone had said a prior owner in the family gave his word years ago that he could live there, but had nothing in writing. He later disputed that he was even on the property. A hearing on the matter is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. Wednesday.

A fire destroyed the cabin on Aug. 4, hours after Lidstone defended himself during a court hearing. He was released from jail the next day after a judge ruled that he would have less incentive to return to "this particular place in the woods," now that the cabin had burned down.

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Canterbury Fire Chief Michael Gamache said that while the investigation isn't over and arson is not being ruled out as a potential cause, the fire was more likely caused by accident. He said a representative of Giles who was starting to demolish the cabin on Aug. 4 disabled solar panels, which still had electrical charge in them. He also used a power saw to cut into metal supports that held the panels onto the roof. Either action could have created sparks to start making things smoke.

"He finished his day at about a quarter of three, and a fire is noticed at about 3:15," Gamache said.

He also said it's also possible the results could be inconclusive. "Right now, there's nothing left to go on at the site."

In the meantime, many people across the country and beyond have offered to help Lidstone, either through fundraising or offering him a place to live. Lidstone said he is thankful for all the support. He's still trying to figure out where he would go next, although he wouldn't mind staying in New Hampshire, where he's developed some strong connections.

One proposal under consideration is for him to live on property belonging to the Concord Friends Meeting, a Quaker meeting in Canterbury that's not far from the cabin site. Lidstone worked on the meetinghouse as it was being constructed in 2010. The congregation would have to agree on the matter.

The property overlooks the Merrimack.

"It has certainly occurred to us that here is a neighbor in need," said Richard Kleinschmidt, co-clerk of the Quaker meeting, "and how can we help him?"

Hochul prepares for spotlight as Cuomo steps aside

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Kathy Hochul, a western New York Democrat unfamiliar to many people in the state even after six years as its lieutenant governor, was set to begin reintroducing herself to the public Wednesday as she prepared to take the reins of power after Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced he would resign from office.

Hochul, 62, in two weeks will become the state's first female governor, following a remarkable transition period in which Cuomo has said he will stay on and work to ease her into a job that he dominated over his three terms in office.

She stayed out of public sight Tuesday but said in a statement that she was "prepared to lead." Hochul planned to hold her first news conference Wednesday afternoon at the State Capitol, in the very room where Cuomo became a familiar face to people across the U.S. and beyond for his televised briefings on New York's fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

Cuomo, 63, announced Tuesday that he would step down rather than face a likely impeachment trial over allegations that he sexually harassed at least 11 women, including one who accused him of groping her breast.

Cuomo has continued to deny that he touched anyone inappropriately, and said his instinct was to fight back against claims he felt were unfair or fabricated. But he said that with the state still in a pandemic crisis, it was best for him to step aside so the state's leaders could "get back to governing."

That job will fall to Hochul, who served briefly in Congress representing a Buffalo-area district, but purposely kept a modest profile as lieutenant governor in a state where Cuomo commanded — and demanded — the spotlight.

A seasoned veteran of retail politics, Hochul shares some of Cuomo's centrist politics, but is a stylistic contrast with a governor famous for his love of steamrolling opponents and holding grudges, state political veterans say. She's well-liked by colleagues, who say voters shouldn't confuse her quiet approach under Cuomo with a lack of confidence or competence.

"Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul will be an extraordinary governor," Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, another upstate political veteran, told reporters at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday. "She understands the complexities and needs of our state, having been both a congresswoman and having been lieutenant governor for the last several years."

It remains to be seen how involved Cuomo will be in state government over the next two weeks, or how he'll manage handing over authority — something he rarely ceded during his time in office.

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His circle of advisers has shrunk, but his closest aide and policymaking partner — Melissa DeRosa — made a surprise return to Cuomo's side after having announced her resignation from the administration Sunday. The governor's office said she will remain in her job as secretary to the governor until Cuomo departs.

Leaders in the state legislature have yet to say whether they plan on dropping an impeachment investigation that has been ongoing since March, and which had been expected to conclude in the coming weeks.

In addition to examining his conduct with women, lawyers hired by the state Assembly had been investigating whether the administration' manipulated data on COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes and whether Cuomo improperly got help from his staff writing a book about the pandemic.

Republicans have urged the Democratic-controlled legislature to go ahead with impeachment, possibly to prevent Cuomo from running for office again.

For Biden and senators, a sense that 'world was watching'

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — When President Joe Biden first announced the framework he'd reached with a bipartisan group of senators for a big infrastructure bill, he said it meant more than building roads and bridges.

Agreement, he said two months ago, would send a signal "to ourselves and to the world that American democracy can deliver."

The senators who led the legislation to passage Tuesday agreed.

"We all knew that, quite honestly, that the world was watching," said Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.

Approved on an overwhelming 69-30 vote, the nearly \$1 trillion package would boost federal spending for major improvements of roads, bridges, internet access and other public works in communities from coast to coast. The bill goes next to the House.

What should have been routine, a task Biden recalled as "probably the least difficult thing to do" when he was a senator, became an exercise in showing how damaged the legislative process has become in partisan Washington and how a president and core group of senators were determined to try to fix it.

Powering past skeptics, the five Democratic and five Republican senators who negotiated the deal were interested in Biden's call to "build back better" after so many failed attempts at an infrastructure overhaul. But they also wanted to build back the confidence of Americans and the world that the U.S. government could tackle big problems.

"We really realized that this was going to be important for the country and I think it's important for the institution," Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said recently after a long day at the Capitol. "I'm really worried that everybody believes that we're as dysfunctional as we appear to be, and so prove otherwise, it's kind of important."

Since Biden took office, small groups of senators had been talking and meeting quietly on their own and sometimes with the White House, searching for ways to reach across the aisle on a range of issue — among them the minimum wage, immigration and infrastructure.

Many were alumni of the bipartisan coalition that stitched together a year-end COVID-19 relief package and saw an opportunity for compromise in the evenly split 50-50 Senate, where typically 60 votes are needed to advance any legislation over an opposing filibuster.

Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Murkowski held private lunches with senators in a committee room. Others hosted dinners at their homes.

These were the early days of the Biden administration, not long after rioters stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 in the deadly insurrection that shattered civic norms and left a deepening unease among lawmakers.

Biden had delivered an inaugural address with a call for unity after the turbulent 2020 election, and some of the Republican senators had joined in voting to convict Donald Trump of inciting the insurrection to upend Biden's presidency. The former president was ultimately acquitted in his impeachment trial.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said those issues, along with the history of failed efforts to invest in infrastructure, were on her mind as she joined the effort.

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"It was a major motivation for me," Collins said, "to demonstrate to the American people that we could overcome the hyper-partisanship in Washington on a very important issue that administrations of both parties have been calling for, for the past 20 years."

Biden had been in talks with another bipartisan coalition led by Manchin and fellow West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican, but once that effort collapsed, he reached out to Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, the Democratic senator from Arizona.

A newer lawmaker, better known for her purple pandemic wig and chatting on the GOP side of the Senate aisle, Sinema made no secret of her reluctance to embrace Biden's big infrastructure plan, which initially topped \$4 trillion.

She had already been working behind the scenes with Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, and others in what another member of the group, Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, described as a "backburner" coalition. They became the group of 10.

The White House sprang into action, eventually engaging in hundreds of meetings and phone calls with lawmakers of both parties in the House and Senate. The administration coordinated visits by members of the president's "Jobs Cabinet," and counselor Steve Ricchetti became a fixture on Capitol Hill.

"If there was a special sauce it was relationships," Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in an interview.

The president was highly engaged, briefed multiple times a day about the talks and often directing the strategy. He worked the phones.

Biden "was able to establish a tone," Buttigieg said.

Trump had tried and failed to assemble an infrastructure package during his time at the White House, as did others before him. But senators said it was clear when Biden sent his top aides to talk with the senators, "they had the president's proxy," Collins said. "That made a difference."

As final weeks of negotiations moved to Portman's basement office at the Capitol, the group popped bottles of wine and ordered pizza for the difficult late-night sessions. Tempers flared, frustration mounted and exhaustion set in.

"We didn't fully throw pizza," said Democratic Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia. But there were "lots of time when people do get mad with each other."

The whole deal almost collapsed the June day it was first announced when Biden suggested at a news conference he would not sign it into law without also having his broader \$3.5 trillion package alongside it, infuriating the Republicans who staunchly oppose that bill.

Collins was waiting at the airport for a flight back home to Maine when she read the headline and immediately called Biden's top staff for an explanation.

Tester, sitting on his tractor at home in Montana, was dumbfounded.

Biden sent a lengthy statement two days later assuring the group that he would fight for both bills and putting negotiations back on track.

After Tuesday's overwhelming vote in the Senate, the president called each of the 10 senators personally, reaching Sinema in the Senate cloakroom.

"They sent me a note. It said, 'Biden on three for you.' I literally said, 'I don't know what that means,'" Sinema told The Associated Press.

"He said congratulations and we spent some time talking about how important this victory is, not just for the work we're doing on infrastructure but also to demonstrate that bipartisanship is still alive and our Congress can function," she said.

"And then we talked about continuing to work together to get this bill across the finish line and onto his desk."

As Senate debates Dems' \$3.5T budget, GOP launches attacks

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats pushed their expansive \$3.5 trillion framework for bolstering family

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services, health, and environment programs toward Senate passage early Wednesday, as Republicans unleashed an avalanche of amendments aimed at making their rivals pay a price in next year's elections.

Congressional approval of the budget resolution, which seems assured, would mark a crucial first step by Democrats toward enacting the heart of President Joe Biden's domestic agenda. It would open the door to a follow-up measure aiming the government's fiscal might at assisting families, creating jobs and fighting climate change, with higher taxes on the wealthy and big companies footing much of the bill.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., once a progressive voice in Congress' wilderness and now a national figure with legislative clout, said the measure would help children, families, the elderly and working people — and more.

"It will also, I hope, restore the faith of the American people in the belief that we can have a government that works for all of us, and not just the few," he said.

Republicans argued that Democrats' proposals would waste money, raise economy-wounding taxes, fuel inflation and codify far-left dictates that would harm Americans. They were happy to use Sanders, a self-avowed democratic socialist, to try tarring all Democrats backing the measure.

If Biden and Senate Democrats want to "outsource domestic policy to Chairman Sanders" with a "historically reckless taxing and spending spree," Republicans lack the votes to stop them, conceded Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "But we will debate. We will vote."

Budget resolution passage is critical because in the 50-50 Senate, it would let Democrats alone approve a subsequent bill actually enacting their \$3.5 trillion in spending and tax policies over the next decade. Approval of the budget would shield the follow-on legislation from Republican filibusters, procedural delays that kill bills.

Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, No. 2 House Democratic leader, announced Tuesday that the chamber would return from recess Aug. 23 to vote on that blueprint and perhaps other measures. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has praised the budget resolution.

The Senate turned to the budget minutes after it approved the other big chunk of Biden's objectives, a compromise \$1 trillion bundle of transportation, water, broadband and other infrastructure projects. That measure, passed 69-30 with McConnell among the 19 Republicans backing it, now needs House approval.

In contrast, every Republican present was opposed as the Senate voted 50-49 to begin considering the budget. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., missed the roll call to be with his ailing wife.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., assured progressives that Congress will pursue sweeping initiatives going beyond the infrastructure compromise. It was a nod to divisions between the party's moderates and liberals that he and Pelosi will have to resolve before Congress can approve their fiscal goals. Democrats also control the House but only narrowly.

"To my colleagues who are concerned that this does not do enough on climate, for families, and making corporations and the rich pay their fair share: We are moving on to a second track, which will make a generational transformation in these areas," Schumer said.

In a budget ritual, senators plunged into a "vote-a-rama," a nonstop parade of messaging amendments that often becomes a painful all-night ordeal. The Senate had held roll calls on more than two dozen of them as midnight came and went, more than 10 hours after the wretchedness began.

With the budget resolution largely advisory only, the goal of most amendments was not to win but to force the other party's vulnerable senators to cast troublesome votes that can be used against them in next year's elections for congressional control.

Republicans crowed after Democrats opposed GOP amendments calling for the full-time reopening of pandemic-shuttered schools, boosting the Pentagon's budget and retaining limits on federal income tax deductions for state and local levies. Those deduction caps are detested by lawmakers from upper-income, mostly Democratic states.

Republicans were also happy when Democrats opposed restricting IRS access to some financial records, which McConnell's office said would prompt political "witch hunts," and when Democrats showed support for Biden's now suspended ban on oil and gas leasing on federal lands, which Republicans said would prompt gasoline price increases.

One amendment may have boomeranged after the Senate voted 99-0 for a proposal by freshman Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., to block federal funds for any municipalities that defund the police. That idea has been rejected by all but the most progressive Democrats, but Republicans have persistently accused them anyway of backing it.

In an animated, sardonic rejoinder, Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., called Tuberville's amendment "a gift" that would let Democrats "put to bed this scurrilous accusation that somebody in this great esteemed body would want to defund the police." He said he wanted to "walk over there and hug my colleague."

Republicans claimed one victory with potential long-term implications when Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., joined them in approving, 50-49, nonbinding language indicating support for health care providers who refuse to participate in abortions.

The budget blueprint envisions creating new programs including tuition-free pre-kindergarten and community college, paid family leave and a Civilian Climate Corps whose workers would tackle environmental projects. Millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally would have a new chance for citizenship, and there would be financial incentives for states to adopt more labor-friendly laws.

Medicare would add dental, hearing and vision benefits, and tax credits and grants would prod utilities and industries to embrace clean energy. Child tax credits beefed up for the pandemic would be extended, along with federal subsidies for health insurance.

Besides higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, Democrats envision savings by letting the government negotiate prices for pharmaceuticals it buys, slapping taxes on imported carbon fuels and strengthening IRS tax collections. Democrats have said their policies will be fully paid for, but they'll make no final decisions until this fall's follow-up bill.

Battle gains challenge US hopes of better-behaved Taliban

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and KATHY GANNON Associated Press

Taliban conquests in Afghanistan are challenging the Biden administration's hopes that a desire for international respect — and for international aid and cash — may moderate the fundamentalist militia's worst behaviors when the U.S. ends its war there.

Showing little interest in a diplomatic settlement, Taliban commanders have sped up their battlefield advances ahead of the U.S. military's withdrawal at the end of this month. They've seized six provincial capitals in the past week.

And while some Taliban commanders have behaved with restraint in newly captured territory, rights groups say others have acted much like the brutal Taliban the U.S. overthrew in 2001. That includes allegedly killing detainees en masse and demanding, in an allegation denied by a Taliban spokesman, that communities provide them with females above age 15 to marry.

Still, Biden administration officials have kept up the hopeful claim that a desire for international approval might influence Taliban actions. They reject criticism by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who opposes the withdrawal and dismisses what he calls "diplomatic carrots."

"If the Taliban claim to want international legitimacy these actions are not going to get them the legitimacy they seek," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday, in one of many such administration warnings.

U.S. envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad traveled to Qatar on Tuesday to make that point to Taliban officials directly, telling Voice of America that if the Taliban took over Afghanistan by force "they will become a pariah state."

Regardless of whether the Taliban heeds that warning, President Joe Biden is showing no sign of slowing or reversing a decision to withdraw from the war.

The United States is ending its nearly 20-year combat mission in Afghanistan on Aug. 31 under a deal that President Donald Trump signed with the Taliban in 2020. The U.S. invasion beginning in October 2001 broke up the Afghanistan-based al-Qaida that had plotted the Sept. 11 attacks. It overthrew, with Afghan allies, the Taliban government that had refused to surrender Osama bin Laden.

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Only three countries — Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — recognized the old Taliban government. The inward-looking regime enforced the strictest interpretation of Islamic law. It banned singing, kite-flying and watching TV, and staged public hangings at Kabul's main sports stadium.

Then-Taliban ruler Mullah Mohammed Omar made a gesture to the international community before 9/11 by ending cultivation of heroin poppies, something U.N. officials verified. But Omar told his ruling council he thought there was nothing his government could do end international condemnation.

Omar's Taliban council members at the time acknowledged the financial pain sanctions were causing.

For today's Taliban, U.S. talk of things like international inclusion, aid and reconstruction money might have mattered more had it come even a few years ago, said Andrew Watkins, senior Afghanistan analyst for the International Crisis Group.

A stronger Taliban today has been emboldened by the U.S. withdrawal. Hopes of grabbing all or much of Afghanistan, with all the border import fees and other revenues a country offers, make international support less essential.

In talks in Qatar, "Taliban political representatives did express genuine interest in international legitimacy and all the benefits that come with it," Watkins said. But "what the Taliban never did was indicate a willingness to compromise" their behavior enough to lock down any such global recognition or financial support, he said.

Trump and Biden officials have hoped the prospect of ending its old outcast status would moderate the ethnic Pashtun fundamentalist group's behavior in a range of ways: negotiating its place in Afghanistan's power structure rather than grabbing it, treating Afghanistan's minority groups humanely and barring Islamic extremist groups from using the country as a base to attack regionally or globally.

Yet the Taliban's political and military wings often seem at odds with the Taliban representatives in Qatar, who negotiate while the Taliban field commanders roll over territory at home.

As the political leaders talk compromise and power-sharing, Pakistani officials who are familiar with private discussions with the insurgent movement say they want complete power.

They also envision a strict religious government, accepting girls going to school and women working, but only within their Islamic injunctions. The Pakistani officials spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Some European diplomats are more skeptical than Americans that international opinion can sway the Taliban. So is Afghanistan's president.

"Yes, they have changed, but negatively," Ashraf Ghani, himself widely blamed for not doing more to strengthen his government and its defenders vs. the Taliban, told his Cabinet this month.

The Taliban have become "more cruel, more oppressive," and would only share power if forced to on the battlefield, Ghani said.

Scenes of black-turbaned Taliban officials signing the U.S. withdrawal deal with Trump officials itself granted the Taliban new legitimacy. So did Trump's praise of America's Taliban battlefield enemies as "very tough, very smart."

Eager to maintain trade and economic ties regionally if not globally, Taliban officials have been calling on Central Asian governments and diplomats in Russia and China, assuring the Taliban would be good neighbors.

The Taliban largely have honored at least one part of their deal with Trump, holding off from attacks on withdrawing U.S. forces.

The deal's core requirement for Americans says the Taliban can't again allow al-Qaida or anyone else to use Afghanistan to threaten the United States or its allies.

But an April Pentagon report said the Taliban maintained "mutually beneficial" relations with al-Qaida-related groups, and called it unlikely the militia would take substantive action against them.

Overall, "I don't think the U.S. is going to get what it hoped for," said Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Afghanistan researcher and former U.S. development official in Central Asia.

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The Taliban “don’t really have an incentive,” unless their plans for any governing have changed, and it’s not clear that they have, she said. “I think there was a lot of wishful thinking that the Taliban had changed, you know, in the fundamental sense.”

Brazil’s Bolsonaro loses major vote after military display

By DÉBORA ÁLVARES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — President Jair Bolsonaro suffered a major defeat in Congress when Brazilian lawmakers didn’t adopt his proposal to require printed receipts from some electronic ballot boxes.

Bolsonaro has insisted printed receipts are needed to avoid fraud, without providing any evidence that Brazil’s electronic voting system is prone to cheating. His allies needed 308 votes to pass the proposed constitutional change, but got only 229 Tuesday night.

The opposition, however, also fell short of its goal of rebuffing the president with an overwhelming majority, but got only 218 votes.

Earlier in the day, dozens of military vehicles and hundreds of soldiers paraded past the presidential palace as Bolsonaro looked on, then continued past the congressional building and Defense Ministry. The military vehicles left the city at night.

The navy issued a statement saying the convoy had been planned long before the congressional vote. But it was announced only on Monday and critics said it looked like an attempt to intimidate opponents of a president who has often praised the country’s past military dictatorship.

Military parades in the capital are usually limited to independence day events. Tuesday’s procession was described as a ceremonial invitation for Bolsonaro to attend annual navy exercises that are held in a town outside the capital.

Critics contend Bolsonaro is trying to sow doubt among his passionate supporters about the 2022 election results, setting the stage for potential conflicts similar to those spawned by then U.S. President Donald Trump’s allegations of fraud in the United States.

Bolsonaro has repeatedly insulted Luis Roberto Barroso, a Supreme Court justice who is president of Brazil’s electoral court, accusing him of working to benefit former leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has been leading in the polls for next year’s election.

The measure voted on Tuesday was a watered-down version of an initial proposal to adopt printouts at all of the nation’s voting ballot boxes. That measure was rejected last week by a congressional committee.

Electoral authorities and even many of Bolsonaro’s political allies opposed the proposal, saying it would attack a nonexistent problem and could create opportunities for vote buying.

Cláudio Couto, a political scientist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, said Tuesday’s rejection marked the biggest legislative defeat for Bolsonaro.

“The administration is getting more frail in every aspect. It suffers in polls, it is investigated in the Senate inquiry on the COVID-19 pandemic, and the chances that Bolsonaro is not reelected are getting bigger,” Couto said. “By insisting in today’s proposal to solve a problem that does not exist, Bolsonaro has made this defeat to be important.”

The call for a vote appeared to be a bid by lower house Speaker Arthur Lira, a Bolsonaro ally, to settle the dispute for good and ease tensions.

On Monday, Lira called the military exercise taking place the same day as the vote a “tragic coincidence.” “We hope that this subject is finally ended in the lower house,” Lira said after the vote.

Juan Gonzalez, the U.S. National Security Council’s senior director for the Western Hemisphere, told reporters Monday that Biden administration officials were “very candid” speaking last week with Bolsonaro about elections, particularly in light of parallels with what has happened in the U.S.

Military display rolls into Brazil capital before tense vote

DÉBORA ÁLVARES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — Brazil’s military staged an unusual convoy of troops and armored vehicles

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through the capital Tuesday — an event that was announced only a day before and that coincided with a scheduled vote in Congress on one of President Jair Bolsonaro's key proposals.

Hours later, Congress' lower house did not approve the constitutional reform sought by Bolsonaro to require printed receipts from some electronic ballot boxes that the president alleges are prone to fraud. His allies needed 308 votes and got only 229. The opposition, which had hoped to get an overwhelming majority against the president, fell short, getting 218 votes.

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Military parades in the capital are usually limited to independence day events. Tuesday's procession was described as a ceremonial invitation for Bolsonaro to attend annual navy exercises that are held in a town outside the capital. The army and air force also are participating for the first time.

The parade upset some lawmakers. Omar Aziz, the president of a Senate probe into the government's COVID-19 pandemic response, said the parade was "a clear attempt to intimidate lawmakers and opponents. He (Bolsonaro) imagines he is showing strength, but he is showing a president weakened by investigations."

Critics allege that Bolsonaro, who trails rivals in early opinion polls, is trying to sow doubt among his passionate supporters about the 2022 election results, setting the stage for potential conflicts similar to those spawned by former U.S. President Donald Trump's allegations of fraud in the United States.

Bolsonaro's son Eduardo, a lawmaker, on Monday reinforced the family's close association with Trump by posting on social media what appeared to be a recent photo of himself standing alongside the former U.S. leader and saying he (Eduardo) is "on the side of men with unblemished reputations and the moral authority to walk down the street, head held high."

Tuesday's military procession shows Bolsonaro is either a poor judge of the political climate or is knowingly straining against democratic norms, said Kai Kenkel, a specialist on Brazil's military at Rio de Janeiro's Pontifical Catholic University.

"We still need to know for sure whether there is a connection between Bolsonaro's agenda and the motivations of the navy to do this, because the navy has been much more careful not to make political statements," Kenkel told The Associated Press.

Electoral authorities have repeatedly denied any problems with the voting system and Bolsonaro has failed to present proof despite a Supreme Court order to substantiate his allegations.

The president has repeatedly insulted Luis Roberto Barroso, a Supreme Court justice and the electoral court's president, accusing him of working to benefit former leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has been leading in the polls.

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"The administration is getting more frail in every aspect. It suffers in polls, it is investigated in the Senate inquiry on the COVID-19 pandemic, and the chances that Bolsonaro is not reelected are getting bigger," Couto said. "By insisting in today's proposal to solve a problem that does not exist, Bolsonaro has made this defeat to be important."

Bolsonaro has repeatedly hammered on the fraud claims to rally supporters and shows no sign of dropping the issue.

"We will do everything for our freedom, for clean, democratic elections and public count of votes," he told backers Saturday at a rally in Santa Catarina state. Any election without that isn't an election."

He led another rally, a motorcycle convoy, in the capital on Sunday.

"It isn't just now that there are rumors about fraud in the ballot boxes, but now there's this proposal and he (Bolsonaro) resolved to go in head first," said Maria da Silva, a 61-year-old homemaker from Sao Paulo. "I trust him."

Hours before the tense vote, Bolsonaro had another defeat in Congress. A dictatorship-era national security law, which was frequently used by police against critics of the president, was scrapped by the Senate. The law, which dates from 1983, made it a crime to harm the heads of the three branches of government or expose them to danger.

Juan Gonzalez, the U.S. National Security Council's senior director for the Western Hemisphere, told reporters on Monday that Biden administration officials were "very candid" speaking last week with Bolsonaro about elections, particularly in light of parallels with what has happened in the U.S.

"We were also very direct, expressing great confidence in the ability of the Brazilian institutions to carry out a free and fair election with proper safeguards in place and guard against fraud," Gonzalez said. "And we stressed the importance of not undermining confidence in that process, especially since there were no signs of fraud in prior elections." ___ Mauricio Savarese reported from Sao Paulo. AP journalist Eraldo Peres contributed from Brasilia

Hospitals run low on nurses as they get swamped with COVID

By TERRY SPENCER, JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

The rapidly escalating surge in COVID-19 infections across the U.S. has caused a shortage of nurses and other front-line staff in virus hot spots that can no longer keep up with the flood of unvaccinated patients and are losing workers to burnout and lucrative out-of-state temporary gigs.

Florida, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oregon all have more people hospitalized with COVID-19 than at any other point in the pandemic, and nursing staffs are badly strained.

In Florida, virus cases have filled so many hospital beds that ambulance services and fire departments are straining to respond to emergencies. Some patients wait inside ambulances for up to an hour before hospitals in St. Petersburg, Florida, can admit them — a process that usually takes about 15 minutes, Pinellas County Administrator Barry Burton said.

One person who suffered a heart attack was bounced from six hospitals before finding an emergency room in New Orleans that could take him in, said Joe Kanter, Louisiana's chief public health officer.

"It's a real dire situation," Kanter said. "There's just not enough qualified staff in the state right now to care for all these patients."

Michelle Thomas, a registered nurse and a manager of the emergency department at a Tucson, Arizona, hospital, resigned three weeks ago after hitting a wall.

"There was never a time that we could just kind of take a breath," Thomas said Tuesday. "I hit that point ... I can't do this anymore. I'm so just tapped out."

She helped other nurses cope with being alone in rooms with dying patients and holding mobile phones so family members could say their final goodbyes.

"It's like incredibly taxing and traumatizing," said Thomas, who is unsure if she will ever return to nursing.

Miami's Jackson Memorial Health System, Florida's largest medical provider, has been losing nurses to staffing agencies, other hospitals and pandemic burnout, Executive Vice President Julie Staub said. The hospital's CEO says nurses are being lured away to jobs in other states at double and triple the salary.

Staub said system hospitals have started paying retention bonuses to nurses who agree to stay for a set period. To cover shortages, nurses who agree to work extra are getting the typical time-and-a-half for overtime plus \$500 per additional 12-hour shift. Even with that, the hospital sometimes still has to turn

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to agencies to fill openings.

"You are seeing folks chase the dollars," Staub said. "If they have the flexibility to pick up and go somewhere else and live for a week, months, whatever and make more money, it is a very enticing thing to do. I think every health care system is facing that."

Nearly 70% of Florida hospitals are expecting critical staffing shortages in the next week, according to the Florida Hospital Association.

In Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown announced Tuesday that state employees must be fully vaccinated by Oct. 18 or six weeks after a COVID-19 vaccine receives full federal approval, whichever is later. Her office planned to announce a statewide indoor mask requirement on Wednesday.

"Oregon is facing a spike in COVID-19 hospitalizations — consisting overwhelmingly of unvaccinated individuals — that is quickly exceeding the darkest days of our winter surge," Brown said. "When our hospitals are full, there will be no room for additional patients needing care."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday directed state officials to use staffing agencies to find additional medical staff from beyond the state's borders as the delta variant overwhelms its present staffing resources. He also has sent a letter to the Texas Hospital Association to request that hospitals postpone all elective medical procedures voluntarily.

Parts of Europe have so far avoided a similar hospital crisis, despite wide circulation of the delta variant, with help from vaccines.

The United Kingdom on Monday had more than 5,900 COVID-19 patients in hospitals, but the latest surge has not overwhelmed medical centers. As of Tuesday, the government said 75 percent of adults have been fully vaccinated.

The same was true in Italy, where the summer infections have not resulted in any spike in hospital admissions, intensive care admissions or deaths. About 3,200 people in the nation of 60 million were hospitalized Tuesday in regular wards or ICUs, according to Health Ministry figures.

Italian health authorities advising the government on the pandemic attribute the relatively contained hospital numbers to the nation's inoculation campaign, which has fully vaccinated 64.5% of Italians 12 years of age or older.

The U.S. is averaging more than 116,000 new coronavirus infections a day along with about 50,000 hospitalizations, levels not experienced since the winter surge. Unlike other points in the pandemic, hospitals now have more non-COVID patients for everything from car accidents to surgeries that were postponed during the outbreak.

That has put even more burden on nurses who were already fatigued after dealing with constant death among patients and illnesses in their ranks.

"Anecdotally, I'm seeing more and more nurses say, 'I'm leaving, I've had enough,'" said Gerard Brogan, director of nursing practice with National Nurses United, an umbrella organization of nurses unions across the U.S. "The risk to me and my family is just too much."

Hawaii is seeing more new daily virus cases than ever.

In a Honolulu hospital's emergency department, patients have had to wait for beds for more than 24 hours on gurneys in a curtained-off section because there's not enough staff to open more beds, nurse Patrick Switzer said.

"Somebody who's been sitting in the emergency room for 30 hours is miserable," he said.

He described being "in this constant state of anxiety, knowing that you don't have the tools that you need to take care of your patients because we're stretched so thin."

COVID-19 hospitalizations have now surpassed the pandemic's worst previous surge in Florida, with no signs of letting up, setting a record of 13,600 on Monday, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. More than 2,800 required intensive care. At the height of last year's summer surge, there were more than 10,170 COVID-19 hospitalizations.

At Westside Regional Medical Center in Plantation, Florida, the number of COVID-19 patients has doubled each week for the past month, wearing down the already short staff, said Penny Ceasar, who handles admissions there.

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The hospital has converted overflow areas to accommodate the rise in admissions. Some staffers have fallen ill with COVID-19.

"It's just hard. We're just tired. I just want this thing over," Ceasar said.

Space station supplies launched with a pizza delivery for 7

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Northrop Grumman's latest space station delivery includes pizza for seven.

The company's Cygnus cargo ship rocketed away from Virginia's eastern shore Tuesday. It should reach the International Space Station on Thursday.

The 8,200-pound (3,700-kilogram) shipment includes fresh apples, tomatoes and kiwi, along with a pizza kit and cheese smorgasbord for the seven station astronauts.

Also flying: a mounting bracket for new solar wings launching to the orbiting lab next year, a material simulating moon dust and dirt that will be used to create items from the space station's 3D printer, slime mold for a French educational experiment called Blob and an infrared-detecting device meant as a prototype for future tracking satellites.

It is Northrop Grumman's 16th supply run for NASA and its biggest load yet. The company's Antares rocket hoisted the capsule from NASA's Wallops Flight Facility.

"Aloha to the S.S. Ellison Onizuka," Northrop Grumman said via Launch Control minutes before liftoff. The capsule was named for Hawaii's Onizuka, the first Asian American in space who died in the 1986 Challenger launch disaster.

NASA's other shipper, SpaceX, will follow with a cargo run in a few weeks.

The space station is currently home to three Americans, two Russians, one French and one Japanese.

Big win for \$1T infrastructure bill: Dems, GOP come together

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — With a robust vote after weeks of fits and starts, the Senate approved a \$1 trillion infrastructure plan for states coast to coast on Tuesday, as a rare coalition of Democrats and Republicans joined together to overcome skeptics and deliver a cornerstone of President Joe Biden's agenda.

"Today, we proved that democracy can still work," Biden declared at the White House, noting that the 69-30 vote included even Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

"We can still come together to do big things, important things, for the American people," Biden said.

The overwhelming tally provided fresh momentum for the first phase of Biden's "Build Back Better" priorities, now heading to the House. A sizable number of lawmakers showed they were willing to set aside partisan pressures, at least for a moment, eager to send billions to their states for rebuilding roads, broadband internet, water pipes and the public works systems that underpin much of American life.

The vote also set the stage for a much more contentious fight over Biden's bigger \$3.5 trillion package that is next up in the Senate — a more liberal undertaking of child care, elder care and other programs that is much more partisan and expected to draw only Democratic support. That debate is expected to extend into the fall.

With the Republicans lockstep against the next big package, many of them reached for the current compromise with the White House because they, too, wanted show they could deliver and the government could function.

"Today's kind of a good news, bad news day," said Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, one of the negotiators. "The good news is that today we really did something historic in the United States Senate; we moved out an infrastructure package, something that we have talked about doing for years." The bad news, she said, is what's coming next.

Infrastructure was once a mainstay of lawmaking, but the weeks-long slog to strike a compromise showed how hard it has become for Congress to tackle routine legislating, even on shared priorities.

Tuesday's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act started with a group of 10 senators who seized on

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Biden's campaign promise to draft a scaled-down version of his initial \$2.3 trillion proposal, one that could more broadly appeal to both parties in the narrowly divided Congress, especially the 50-50 Senate.

It swelled to a 2,700-page bill backed by the president and also business, labor and farm interests. Over time, it drew an expansive alliance of senators and a bipartisan group in the House.

In all, 19 Republicans joined all Democrats in voting for Senate passage. Vice President Kamala Harris, as presiding officer, announced the final tally.

While liberal lawmakers said the package doesn't go far enough as a down-payment on Biden's priorities and conservatives said it is too costly and should be more fully paid for, the coalition of centrist senators was able to hold. Even broadsides from former President Donald Trump could not bring the bill down.

The measure proposes nearly \$550 billion in new spending over five years in addition to current federal authorizations for public works that will reach virtually every corner of the country — a potentially historic expenditure Biden has put on par with the building of the transcontinental railroad and Interstate highway system.

There's money to rebuild roads and bridges, and also to shore up coastlines against climate change, protect public utility systems from cyberattacks and modernize the electric grid. Public transit gets a boost, as do airports and freight rail. Most lead drinking water pipes in America could be replaced.

Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, the lead Republican negotiator, said the work "demonstrates to the American people that we can get our act together on a bipartisan basis to get something done."

The top Democratic negotiator, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, said rarely will a piece of legislation affect so many Americans. She gave a nod to the late fellow Arizona Sen. John McCain and said she was trying to follow his example to "reach bipartisan agreements that try to bring the country together."

More poetically, Democrat Mark Warner of Virginia called the agreement "a little balm to the psychic soul of the country."

Drafted during the COVID-19 crisis, the bill would provide \$65 billion for broadband, a provision Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, negotiated because she said the coronavirus pandemic showed that such service "is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity." States will receive money to expand broadband and make it more affordable.

Despite the momentum, action slowed last weekend when Sen. Bill Hagerty, a Tennessee Republican allied with Trump, refused to speed up the process.

Trump had called his one-time Japan ambassador and cheered him on, but it's unclear if the former president's views still carry as much sway with most senators. Trump issued fresh complaints hours before Tuesday's vote. He had tried and failed to pass his own infrastructure bill during his time in the White House.

Other Republican senators objected to the size, scope and financing of the package, particularly concerned after the Congressional Budget Office said it would add \$256 billion to deficits over the decade.

Rather than pressure his colleagues, Senate Republican leader McConnell of Kentucky stayed behind the scenes for much of the bipartisan work. He allowed the voting to proceed, and may benefit from enabling this package in a stroke of bipartisanship while trying to stop Biden's next big effort.

Unlike the \$3.5 trillion second package, which would be paid for by higher tax rates for corporations and the wealthy, the bipartisan measure is to be funded by repurposing other money, including some COVID-19 aid.

The bill's backers argue that the budget office's analysis was unable to take into account certain revenue streams that will help offset its costs — including from future economic growth.

Senators have spent the past week processing nearly two dozen amendments, but none substantially changed the framework.

The House is expected to consider both Biden infrastructure packages together, but centrist lawmakers urged Speaker Nancy Pelosi to bring the bipartisan plan forward quickly, and they raised concerns about the bigger bill in a sign of the complicated politics still ahead.

After the Senate vote, she declared, "Today is a day of progress ... a once in a century opportunity."

Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, No. 2 House Democratic leader, announced that the chamber would re-

turn from recess Aug. 23 to vote on the budget blueprint for the larger bill and perhaps other measures.

Cuomo resigns: What we know, what we don't and what's next

By MALLIKA SEN The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After months of holding on to power amid sexual harassment allegations, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo abruptly resigned Tuesday.

We take you through what happened and what's next:

REMIND ME — WHAT WAS CUOMO ACCUSED OF?

Cuomo was under investigation for several things, but the prevailing issue leading to his resignation concerned sexual harassment allegations. An investigative report released last week said he sexually harassed 11 women, many of whom had worked for him or the state. Other issues in play in a state Assembly impeachment probe: how his administration handled data on COVID-19-related deaths in nursing homes, his \$5 million pandemic leadership book deal and whether friends and relatives were given special access to COVID-19 tests early in the pandemic.

CUOMO SAID HE WASN'T GOING ANYWHERE. WHY DID HE RESIGN NOW?

Cuomo has denied the most serious allegations against him and acknowledged Tuesday that his "instinct is to fight." But he said the impeachment process would take months and consume resources that should go toward "managing COVID, guarding against the delta variant, reopening upstate, fighting gun violence and saving New York City."

SO WHO'S THE GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK NOW?

Still Cuomo. His resignation won't take effect for two weeks. But Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul is on deck to take over afterward.

WHY IS CUOMO WAITING 14 DAYS TO LEAVE?

Cuomo said he wanted to ensure a "seamless" transition to the new administration. He declared Hochul could be caught up to speed in a timely fashion.

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THE NURSING HOMES INVESTIGATION?

The U.S. Department of Justice has been investigating how the state handled data related to nursing home deaths during the coronavirus pandemic. The state's official tally left out many people who had died at hospitals. An aide said Cuomo's administration worried the true numbers would be "used against us" by President Donald Trump's administration.

IF CUOMO LEAVES OFFICE, WILL HE BE SAFE FROM CHARGES?

Prosecutors in Albany, Westchester and on Long Island have already said their investigations into whether Cuomo committed any crimes will continue. Cuomo might be hoping that prosecutors or the women who complained about his behavior might lose interest in pursuing a case now that he's out of office.

WHAT ABOUT CIVIL PENALTIES?

The women who have accused Cuomo could still file lawsuits, and at least one — Lindsey Boylan — has said she will.

CAN CUOMO STILL BE IMPEACHED?

It's currently unclear whether the state Assembly can — or will — continue the probe and draw up articles of impeachment once he's out of office. And lawmakers already said the process would take weeks, making it unlikely it would wrap up in Cuomo's last two weeks in office.

DOES CUOMO HAVE REGRETS?

He "deeply, deeply" apologized to the "11 women who I truly offended." But he continued to deny the most serious allegations outlined in the report and again blamed the allegations as misunderstandings attributed to "generational and cultural differences." Last week, he personally said sorry to two accusers — ex-aide Charlotte Bennett and a wedding guest he was photographed kissing, Anna Ruch. On Tuesday, he added the unnamed New York State Police trooper who said he inappropriately touched her to the list.

CAN CUOMO RUN AGAIN?

Sure. There's nothing currently precluding him from throwing his hat in the ring for 2022. And although

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his donations dipped in the wake of the initial allegations, he had amassed an \$18 million war chest as of mid-July. If he were to be impeached somehow, however, he could be barred from seeking statewide office again.

2022? IS THERE AN ELECTION NEXT YEAR?

Indeed. Cuomo would have been up for a fourth term next year. No high-profile Democrats have declared their candidacy yet, but U.S. Rep. Lee Zeldin and Andrew Giuliani — yes, son of Rudy and another New York political scion named “Andrew” — are among the Republican contenders.

WHAT CAN CUOMO ACTUALLY DO IN THE NEXT TWO WEEKS?

It’s unclear how engaged he’ll be in public policy in his final days, but the state is dealing with a soaring number of COVID-19 cases and has been struggling to get aid to tenants who fell behind on rent because of the pandemic.

IS CHRIS CUOMO GOING TO TALK ABOUT THIS?

We’re not expecting an appearance — let alone, a comment — from Chris Cuomo on his primetime CNN show, as he’s currently on vacation. The younger Cuomo brother’s role advising the governor was detailed in last week’s report, and he didn’t comment on that, either. The Cuomos were known for their on-air fraternal banter during the early days of the pandemic, but CNN eventually put the kibosh on the anchor covering his own brother.

WHERE WILL CUOMO LIVE?

He only moved to the governor’s mansion in Albany in 2019. He previously lived with his ex-girlfriend, TV chef Sandra Lee, in the New York City suburbs. Lee owned that house. It remains to be seen where the now-single Cuomo — and his dog, Captain — will crash.

Wisconsin Democrat Kind won’t seek 14th term in US House

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Democratic U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, who served more than 24 years in a southwestern Wisconsin district that former President Donald Trump carried in 2020, announced Tuesday that he won’t seek reelection next year.

Kind is one of just seven House Democrats serving in districts won by Trump. His departure only makes it more difficult for Democrats to maintain their majority in the House in next year’s midterm election.

“The truth is I’ve run out of gas,” Kind said during a news conference in his hometown of La Crosse. Kind, a moderate, said he was part of a “dying breed” of pragmatic politicians who believed in bipartisanship and finding common ground. He said politics shouldn’t be a “constant combat sport” where the goal is to destroy those on the other side.

Kind, the longest-serving Democrat in Wisconsin’s delegation, won reelection in 2020 by less than 3 points. Trump carried the sprawling district that borders Minnesota by nearly 5 points. Kind was a top target for Republicans in 2022 as he faced a rematch with Derrick Van Orden.

“Today’s announcement is indicative of what I hear every day as I travel the 3rd District: Wisconsinites want a change,” Van Orden said in a statement.

Kind is among a fading variety of upper Midwestern Democrats representing vastly rural stretches that have swung Republican over the past decade.

Like fellow moderate Democratic Rep. Cheri Bustos, of Moline, Illinois, Kind represents counties along the Mississippi River that were once reliably Democratic, as small, working-class manufacturing towns shifted toward Trump in 2016. Kind’s and Bustos’ districts are among seven in the country where voters split their vote in 2020, reelecting the Democratic House member and picking Trump.

Bustos also is not seeking reelection in 2022 after 10 years in the House.

Kind was first elected in 1996. His announcement that he’s not seeking a 14th term came one day before the U.S. Census Bureau was to release population data that will determine the lines of Wisconsin’s eight congressional districts. Wisconsin is not gaining or losing a seat, but the lines of the existing eight districts could change dramatically.

Kind's district has trended more conservative in recent years. Former President Barack Obama won it by 11 points in 2012, but Trump carried it by more than 4 points in both 2016 and 2020. Kind did not have an opponent in 2016, and won with nearly 60% of the vote in 2018, but he won by just 2.7 points over Van Orden, a retired Navy SEAL, in 2020.

Kind, 58, has said he would have a more difficult time facing Van Orden in 2022.

"Kind's retirement is the clearest sign yet that Democrats' House majority is toast," said Mike Berg, spokesman for the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District is one of three in the state held by Democrats. The other two are in Madison and Milwaukee, while Republicans hold five districts.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called Kind a "committed and effective champion," crediting his work as a longtime member of the House Ways and Means Committee, advocating for small businesses, good-paying jobs and working to protect the environment, particularly along the Mississippi River.

Kind said he would serve out the remainder of his term, but did not take questions from reporters or say whether he would run for another office.

Kind earlier this year did not rule out a possible run for U.S. Senate next year for the seat currently held by Republican Sen. Ron Johnson. Kind has long been mentioned as a potential candidate for statewide office.

Ethiopia calls "all capable" citizens to fight in Tigray war

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopia's government on Tuesday summoned all capable citizens to war, urging them to join the country's military to stop resurgent forces from the embattled Tigray region "once and for all."

The call to arms is an ominous sign that all of Ethiopia's 110 million people are being drawn into a conflict that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, once declared would be over within weeks. The deadly fighting has now spread beyond Tigray into neighboring regions, and fracturing in Africa's second most populous country could destabilize the entire Horn of Africa region.

Tuesday's announcement effectively ends the unilateral cease-fire the government declared in June as its military retreated from Tigray. It is also almost certain to magnify the toll of a nine-month war that has led to the massacre of thousands, widespread gang rapes and the displacement of entire communities, mostly Tigrayan. Hundreds of thousands of people in Tigray now face famine conditions in the world's worst hunger crisis in a decade.

The prime minister's summons chilled Tigrayans, even those outside Tigray, with the statement calling on all Ethiopians to be "the eyes and ears of the country in order to track down and expose spies and agents" of the Tigray forces. Witnesses and lawyers have said thousands of Tigrayans already have been detained during the conflict for their identity alone.

"The kind of war he's calling for is on another level, it's for a total annihilation of Tigray," said Teklehaymanot G. Weldemichel, whose family remains trapped in the Tigray region. "Once and for all" means to finish everyone out."

The expansion of fighting has alarmed some people of other ethnicities, such as the Amhara, who fear that the Tigray forces, now on the offensive, will take revenge.

"We know the (Tigray People's Liberation Front) is well-armed and the losers would again be the Amhara people," Demissie Alemayehu, a U.S.-based professor who was born in the Amhara region, said shortly after the prime minister's call to war. Without addressing Ethiopia's root problems, including a constitution based on ethnic differences, he said, it will be "very difficult to talk about peace."

The deputy head of the Amhara regional government, Fenta Mandefro, asserted that hundreds of Amhara residents have already been killed. "More people will be endangered if we continue adhering to a cease-fire ignored by the TPLF," he said.

The call to join the military is so far not compulsory, but with access to parts of Ethiopia increasingly

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blocked, it's difficult to know what kind of pressure is being applied. Spokespeople for Abiy's office, the military and the Tigray emergency task force did not respond to questions.

Ethiopia's sharply worded statement came after weeks of mobilization by the federal government, including military recruiting and blood donation drives, as Tigray forces pushed into the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions. On Tuesday, the spokesman for the Tigray forces, Getachew Reda, told The Associated Press that the prime minister "wants to send militia to the war front as cannon fodder" and called it unfortunate that "ill-trained, ill-equipped people" are now being pressed into the fight.

The war began as a political dispute. Tigray leaders dominated Ethiopia's repressive government for nearly three decades, embittering many across the country by helping to put in place a system of ethnic federalism that led to ethnic tensions. When Abiy came to office in 2018, the Tigray leaders were sidelined.

Fighting began in November and took a stunning turn in June when the Tigray forces, strengthened by new recruits among Tigrayans horrified by the war's atrocities, retook much of the region.

The Tigray forces now say they want to secure their long-blockaded region of 6 million people, end the fighting and see the prime minister leave office. Despite the resentment of many in Ethiopia, they are hoping for public support as they vow to press to the capital, Addis Ababa, if needed.

"If his government topples, that's icing on the cake," spokesman for the Tigray forces told the AP last week.

Like Ethiopia's government, they could use deprivation as means of pressure. Getachew confirmed that the Tigray forces' aim in the Afar region is to control a crucial supply line to the rest of Ethiopia from neighboring Djibouti, on a major shipping lane. He called it "part of the game," saying people in Tigray are starving.

"It's not to spite the other parts of Ethiopia," he said.

Last week the United Nations and the United States sent high-level officials to press Ethiopia's government for more access to the Tigray, where telephone, internet and banking services remain cut off. But Ethiopia's government has been angered by the international pressure over Tigray, especially as the fighting spreads.

Some 300,000 people have now been displaced outside Tigray, and this week the U.N. said it was "extremely alarmed" by reports that more than 200 people had been killed in attacks on displaced people in Afar. Ethiopia's government blamed the Tigray forces, whose spokesman denied it.

The new statement from the prime minister's office takes aim at some in the international community, blaming them for the "machinations of foreign hands" in the war, and alleging without evidence that some had been caught "red-handed supporting the (Tigray forces) under the disguise of humanitarian aid." The government has suspended the operations of Doctors Without Borders and the Norwegian Refugee Committee, accusing them of "disseminating misinformation."

The rhetoric in the government's new statement "could well presage renewed restrictions on the humanitarian relief efforts in Tigray, reversing the already modest progress made in recent weeks," Aly Verjee, a senior adviser at the United States Institute of Peace, told the AP.

The statement also "leaves little room for dialogue, and as we have seen, a war of words does little to end the war on the ground," he said. "When the federal government calls Tigrayan forces terrorists and traitors, it is not likely to encourage restraint on the part of the Tigrayans, who are already militarily ascendant."

The prime minister last month referred to the Tigray forces as "weeds" and "cancer," bringing a swift warning from the U.S. about dehumanizing rhetoric. Since then, Ethiopia's government has repeatedly said it is targeting the Tigray forces alone and the TPLF, which it declared a terrorist group earlier this year.

"The battle is not with Tigray but with the terrorist forces," its new statement said.

Lionel Messi signs 2-year contract with Paris Saint-Germain

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

Lionel Messi finally signed his eagerly anticipated Paris Saint-Germain contract on Tuesday night to

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complete the move that confirms the end of a career-long association with Barcelona and sends PSG into a new era.

The French club said in a statement that the 34-year-old Argentina star signed a two-year deal with the option for a third season.

"I am excited to begin a new chapter of my career at Paris Saint-Germain," Messi said. "Everything about the club matches my football ambitions. I know how talented the squad and the coaching staff are here. I am determined to help build something special for the club and the fans, and I am looking forward to stepping out onto the pitch at the Parc des Princes."

No salary details were given, but a person with knowledge of the negotiations earlier told The Associated Press that Messi is set to earn around 35 million euros (\$41 million) net annually. The person said on condition of anonymity before the contract was signed.

"I am delighted that Lionel Messi has chosen to join Paris Saint-Germain and we are proud to welcome him and his family to Paris," PSG chairman Nasser Al-Khelaifi said. "He has made no secret of his desire to continue competing at the very highest level and winning trophies, and naturally our ambition as a club is to do the same."

It is symbolic that Messi will wear the No. 30 jersey — the same number he wore in his first two seasons with Barcelona before switching to No. 19 and then the prized No. 10, which Neymar gets to keep at PSG.

Throngs of PSG fans gathered at Le Bourget Airport in Paris to welcome Messi, who was wearing a T-shirt featuring "Ici c'est Paris" — "This is Paris."

The words are a long-familiar refrain from a favored fan chant at Parc des Princes stadium, where Messi is to be presented to them before kickoff of Saturday night's game against Strasbourg.

Such was the fervor of his arrival that police had to push back to stop metal barriers from toppling over at the airport as fans surged forward to get a better view. He then traveled into Paris with a police escort that included several officers on motorbikes and clad in black at the back of it.

As disbelief at landing one of soccer's all-time greats turned to sheer enthusiasm, many gathered for a glimpse of Messi at the stadium. They got their wish as the smiling superstar briefly waved to them before he underwent a medical check.

Earlier, Messi's father and agent, Jorge, had also confirmed his son was moving to PSG in a brief exchange with reporters at Josep Tarradellas Barcelona-El Prat Airport before he took his flight in the early afternoon.

Messi arrived with his wife and three children and boarded a private jet.

"With it all, toward a new adventure. The five together," Antonela Rocuzzo said on Instagram alongside a photo with her husband on the plane.

PSG supporters have seen their club transformed over the last decade since the influx of Qatari sovereign wealth investment linked to the emir. Once Messi's Barcelona contract expired — and the Catalan club was unable to afford to keep him — PSG was one of the few clubs that could finance a deal to sign the six-time world player of the year.

Messi's arrival gives PSG formidable attacking options as he links up with France World Cup winner Kylian Mbappe and Brazil forward Neymar.

"Back together," Neymar posted on Instagram over a video of them hugging, playing for Barcelona.

While PSG had to pay 222 million euros (then \$261 million) to sign Neymar from Barcelona in 2017, there was no transfer fee for Messi.

Messi became the most desired free agent in soccer history after his attempts to stay at Barcelona were rejected last week by the Spanish league because the salary would not comply with financial regulations, with the Catalan club burdened by debts of more than 1.2 billion euros (\$1.4 billion).

PSG coach Mauricio Pochettino quickly made contact with his fellow Argentine after Barcelona announced last Thursday that Messi would be leaving the club he joined as a 13-year-old.

Messi won every major honor with Barcelona and was granted a tearful exit news conference on Sunday to signal the end of an era. Only Cristiano Ronaldo in the current era challenges Messi's status as an all-time great.

PSG will be hoping not only that Messi helps the team regain the French title it lost to Lille last season but finally win the Champions League.

If Pochettino uses a 4-3-3 formation, the front three could see Messi deployed on the right with Neymar on the left and Mbappe between them as the center forward.

The quandary for Pochettino would be how to use Angel Di Maria, whose goal sealed the Copa America title last month, and another Argentine attacker — Mauro Icardi. It's a tactical challenge most coaches would relish, with a 4-2-3-1 or 3-5-2 also in the mix to accommodate the attacking talents available.

What should be less demanding is PSG complying with UEFA's Financial Fair Play. Some flexibility has been provided in the rules due to the pandemic and changes are due to the system that were designed to stem losses. It is PSG president Al-Khelaifi who, as chairman of the European Club Association and a member of UEFA's executive committee, is involved in the process of discussing a wider update to FFP that could allow more unchecked spending again.

EXPLAINER: Will we need vaccine passports to do fun things?

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

NEWPORT, R.I. (AP) — Ready to go out on the town before summer ends? In parts of the U.S., you might have to carry your COVID-19 vaccine card or a digital copy to get into restaurants, bars, nightclubs and outdoor music festivals.

After resisting the divisive concept of vaccine passports through most of the pandemic, a fast-growing number of private venues and some local officials are now requiring proof of immunization in public settings to reduce the spread of the highly transmissible delta variant of the coronavirus — and to assuage wary customers.

It's unlikely the U.S. will adopt a national mandate like the one in France, which on Monday began requiring people to show a QR code proving they have a special virus pass before they can enjoy restaurants and cafes or travel across the country.

But enough venues are starting to ask for digital passes to worry some privacy advocates, who fear the trend could habituate consumers to constant tracking.

WHO'S ASKING FOR VACCINE PASSPORTS?

New York City set the tone last week when Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city will soon require proof of COVID-19 vaccination for anyone who wants to dine indoors at a restaurant, see a performance or go to the gym.

But a growing number of private venues, from Broadway theaters to music clubs in Minneapolis and Milwaukee, have established their own similar rules for patrons.

"I'm a firm believer in the right for people to choose whether or not they get the vaccine," said Tami Montgomery, owner of Dru's Bar in Memphis, Tennessee, which will start asking for paper vaccine cards along with photo identification on Thursday. "But it's my business and I have to make decisions based on what will protect my staff, business and customers."

Organizers of the Lollapalooza music festival in Chicago said on its opening day in late July that more than 90% of some 100,000 attendees presented proof of a vaccination, while most of the rest showed they'd recently had a negative COVID-19 test. Hundreds of others were turned away for lack of paperwork.

Only in a handful of states — Texas and Florida are the biggest — are private businesses prohibited from requiring proof of vaccination.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

In some places, venues are simply asking you to bring your vaccination card — the same piece of paper you get from health providers and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Taking a picture of that card at home and then showing the image to the bouncer at the club can also work.

New York City offers a streamlined way of showing a photo through its NYC COVID Safe App, in which people can store images of their vaccine cards and then display them in the app when needed.

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Other places are encouraging people to register their credentials using a scannable digital pass like New York's statewide Excelsior Pass or similar systems adopted by California, Hawaii and Louisiana and private companies like Walmart and the airport security app Clear. Some of the state-sponsored digital passes verify a person's vaccine credentials through a state or local immunization registry.

Such passes are designed for convenience and to prevent fraud. But that's also where the biggest privacy concerns emerge, said Adam Schwartz, senior staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH QR CODES?

The barcode known as a QR code was originally designed to help track products in a factory. These days, it's increasingly being used to track people's devices.

"Those systems are a giant leap towards tracking people's location," Schwartz said. "There's a very real risk of mission creep once there are scanners at doors and people are showing their scannable token to pass through."

But the coalition that helped create the Smart Health Card framework used by New York, California and the Canadian province of Quebec say they've already set privacy safeguards to guard against misuse of health data.

So long as a venue is using a VCI-compliant scanner, there shouldn't be anything to worry about, said Dr. Brian Anderson, chief digital health physician at MITRE and co-lead of the Vaccination Credential Initiative, which counts Apple, Microsoft and the Mayo Clinic among its members. "That app won't store an individual's data beyond the time that the QR code is scanned," he said.

WHY NOT STICK WITH PAPER?

Proponents of digital passports say they're more convenient for already-overwhelmed restaurants and other venues because workers don't have to peer at everyone's vaccine cards before letting them in. Lines move faster, and the digital scan reassures those who don't want to risk damaging or losing their paper cards. It's also easy to fake a paper card or a photo of one.

The startup CrowdPass, which generates QR codes so vaccinated people can attend events, said it helped get about 15,000 people swiftly admitted into the recent Newport Folk and Newport Jazz festivals in Rhode Island. The events required attendees to digitally upload proof of full vaccination or a recent negative test.

Demand was slow at first, said Duncan Abdelnour, the startup's co-founder and president. "But since the delta variant has sprung, we've had a huge uptick." Among its clients are couples planning weddings and organizers of other small events. Abdelnour said the biggest spike in calls came after New York City's announcement.

It's a crowded market that includes apps made by Clear and Walmart, many of which have now signed onto the VCI's privacy standards and code of conduct.

But for Schwartz, of the EFF, the best advice for venues that need to see proof of vaccination is to stick to asking for the CDC card or a photo of it.

The process of making vaccination checks should end when the pandemic does, Schwartz said. "Some of the companies that are in this space have a track record of being in the business of monetizing data," he added. "I'm not going to name names, but they're the last people that should be involved in developing scanners for proof of vaccination."

Prince Andrew faces no good choice in Epstein accuser case

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's Prince Andrew is likely to do anything he can to avoid giving evidence in a U.S. lawsuit filed by an American woman who alleges that he sexually assaulted her when she was 17, lawyers on both sides of the Atlantic say.

Andrew may contest the U.S. court's jurisdiction, or ignore the civil lawsuit altogether, taking a chance the court might find him in default and order him to pay damages.

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No matter which way he goes, though, he will face the constant drumbeat of unsavory media coverage. "There's no good option," said Albert D'Aquino, a New York attorney who has defended clients in similar cases. The prince has repeatedly denied the allegations in the lawsuit, brought by one of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's longtime accusers, Virginia Giuffre.

"I don't think he will submit to the court's authority to order him to give a deposition, or to answer questions on which he wishes to demur," said D'Aquino, a partner at Goldberg Segalla in Buffalo, New York.

"He runs too much risk of self-incrimination, which could then spawn a criminal action against him," D'Aquino said.

However he decides to respond, the lawsuit filed Monday is another unwanted story for Queen Elizabeth II, reminding people of Andrew's links to Epstein two years after the convicted sex offender's death. Britain's royal family is also still recovering from allegations of racism and insensitivity leveled at them by Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, earlier this year.

Buckingham Palace tried to move past the story two years ago, forcing Andrew to step away from royal duties after he gave a disastrous TV interview in which he failed to express regret over his relationship with Epstein or offer sympathy for Epstein's victims.

"It's another big scandal for them," said Pauline MacLaran, a royal expert and author of "Royal Fever: The British Monarchy in Consumer Culture."

"You just have to feel very sorry for the queen. You know, just as Meghan and Harry had sort of started to quiet down ... then this comes back again. And, of course, the whole seediness of it is dragged through the media yet again."

Lawyers for Giuffre filed the suit Monday in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, alleging that Epstein forced her to have sex with Andrew in 2001, when she was 17. The suit says she had sexual encounters with Andrew in London, New York and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and that the prince knew she had been trafficked by Epstein.

Giuffre, now 37, has made similar allegations in the past, but the lawsuit is the first time she has directly confronted Andrew in court.

Andrew's representatives declined to comment on the lawsuit. In a 2019 interview with the BBC, he denied ever meeting Giuffre.

"It didn't happen," he said. "I can absolutely categorically tell you it never happened. I have no recollection of ever meeting this lady, none whatsoever."

David Boies, Giuffre's attorney, said his team tried to open settlement talks with Andrew's lawyers but they were ignored. Because of this, he said, Giuffre was forced to file the lawsuit before the deadline set by New York state law.

"He can ignore me and he can ignore Virginia, which is what he's been doing for the last five years. ... But he can't ignore judicial process," Boies told Britain's Channel 4 television. "This is now a matter for the courts to decide."

There is only a "small chance" Giuffre's lawsuit will ever be presented to a judge or jury because most civil cases in the U.S., especially high profile ones, are settled out of court, said Arick Fudali, a lawyer at The Bloom Firm, which has represented some of Epstein's victims.

The lawsuit does, however, increase pressure to settle the case.

"It certainly puts his name back in the news, back in the international news, back in American news and back associated with Jeffery Epstein," Fudali told the BBC.

But D'Aquino said a settlement is unlikely at this point.

If Andrew had wanted to settle the case, he would have done so before the lawsuit was filed when it could have been handled privately and kept out of the press, he said.

Mark Stephens, a specialist in international law at Howard Kennedy in London, said Andrew's lawyers could pursue another strategy, opting to delay the suit as long as possible.

First, he said, the ongoing criminal investigation surrounding Epstein in the U.S. could delay the case because international law requires criminal issues to be resolved before civil matters. In addition, Andrew's team is likely to wage a protracted battle over the U.S. court's jurisdiction while arguing that their client

is entitled to immunity as a member of the royal family.

"So I think it's almost a racing certainty that this case, filed by Virginia Giuffre to preserve her rights, will actually be stayed until the outcome of the law enforcement investigations in the United States," Stephens said.

"And only then will it have an opportunity to go forward."

Facebook bans firm behind Pfizer, AstraZeneca smear campaign

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Facebook said Tuesday that it has removed hundreds of accounts linked to a mysterious advertising agency operating out of Russia that sought to pay social media influencers to smear COVID-19 vaccines made by Pfizer and AstraZeneca.

A network of 65 Facebook accounts and 243 Instagram accounts was traced back to Fazze, an advertising and marketing firm working in Russia on behalf of an unknown client.

The network used fake accounts to spread misleading claims that disparaged the safety of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines. One claimed AstraZeneca's shot would turn a person into a chimpanzee. The fake accounts targeted audiences in India, Latin America and, to a lesser extent, the U.S., using several social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram.

Russia has been actively marketing its COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, abroad in what some analysts see as an effort to score geopolitical points. But Facebook representatives did not speculate on the possible motivation behind the smear campaign.

The Fazze network also contacted social media influencers in several countries with offers to pay them for reposting the misleading content. That ploy backfired when influencers in Germany and France exposed the network's offer.

Along with removing the network's accounts, Facebook also banned Fazze from its platforms. Messages seeking comment from the company were not immediately returned on Tuesday.

Fazze's effort did not get much traction online, with some posts failing to get even a single response. But, while the campaign may have fizzled, it's noteworthy because of its effort to enlist social media influencers, according to Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of security policy.

"Although it was sloppy and didn't have very good reach, it was an elaborate setup," Gleicher said on a conference call announcing Tuesday's actions.

As social media companies have improved their ability to spot and remove fake accounts, disinformation campaigns have had to adjust. Paying social media influencers to repost their content provides the potential of exposure to the influencer's audience, but there's the risk that social media influencers will refuse or, as happened in this case, call them out.

Facebook investigators say some influencers did post the material, but later deleted it when stories about Fazze's work began to emerge.

French YouTuber Léo Grasset was among those contacted by Fazze. He told The Associated Press in May that he was asked to post a 45- to 60-second video on Instagram, TikTok or YouTube criticizing the mortality rate of the Pfizer vaccine.

When Grasset asked Fazze to identify their client, the firm declined. Grasset refused the offer and went public with his concerns.

The offer from Fazze urged influencers not to mention that they were being paid, and also suggested they criticize the media's reporting on vaccines.

"Too many red flags," Grasset told the AP. "I decided not to do it."

EXPLAINER: How cryptocurrency fits into infrastructure bill

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — What does Bitcoin have to do with roads and bridges?

A lot right now in the U.S. Congress. One way lawmakers propose to pay for the \$1 trillion infrastructure

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bill the Senate approved Tuesday is by imposing tax-reporting requirements for cryptocurrency brokers, the way stockbrokers report their customers' sales to the IRS. It could open the way for tighter regulation of cryptocurrency — something the Biden administration is moving toward as it also pushes for tax compliance.

The plan could raise about \$28 billion in revenue over 10 years, congressional accountants estimate.

The \$28 billion could get stretched very quickly. Take bridges, for example. It would cost an estimated \$25.6 billion to replace all the bridges in the country that are classified as structurally deficient, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

So, currency you can't hold in your hand would effectively pay for roads, bridges, water systems, internet broadband access and shoring up the electrical grid, what President Joe Biden called "a generational investment" on par with building the transcontinental railroad in the 1800s or the Interstate highway system in the '50s. That's testament to the explosive growth of cryptocurrencies in recent years — an enticing potential revenue source — and the mounting push by some government officials to put new reins around a largely unregulated market.

After weeks of wrangling, the Senate passed the bipartisan infrastructure package in a 69-30 vote. It now moves to the House.

A look at the situation:

WHAT'S THE STORY WITH CRYPTOCURRENCY?

The market for cryptocurrencies has ballooned to an estimated \$1.8 trillion. They're basically lines of computer code that are digitally signed each time they travel from one holder to the next. Not tied to banks or governments, they allow users to spend or receive money anonymously. That appeals to libertarians, off-the-grid types and risk-taking millennials who believe the financial system is rigged.

But it's also favored by international criminals, money launderers, drug dealers and ransomware hackers.

The most widely traded cryptocurrency is Bitcoin, now worth around \$45,000 each, down from a high in April of about \$64,800. It's notoriously volatile, in some instances spiking or plunging on public pronouncements by Elon Musk, the provocative Tesla Inc. CEO. Some businesses now accept Bitcoin as payment. Other well-known cryptocurrencies include Ethereum, Dogecoin, Ripple and Litecoin. All told, there are thousands. Bitcoin and others can be bought and sold on exchanges with U.S. dollars and other national currencies.

WHERE DO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS STAND?

On both sides of the coin.

Some lawmakers see cryptocurrency as a font of technological innovation, especially in the development of blockchain, the digital ledger that records transactions.

Top U.S. regulators, on the other hand, are flashing danger signs. Gary Gensler, the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission appointed by Biden, said last week that investors need more protection in the cryptocurrency market, which he called "rife with fraud, scams and abuse" and "like the Wild West." While the SEC has won dozens of cases against crypto fraudsters, Gensler said the agency needs more authority from Congress — and more funding — to regulate the market.

The Federal Reserve, meanwhile, is considering developing its own digital currency pegged to the U.S. dollar. A so-called digital dollar could enable faster payments among banks, consumers and businesses.

"You've got federal agencies not talking on the same page," says Suzanne Lynch, a professor at Utica College who focuses on financial crime. "It's so grey right now."

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION WITH THE INFRASTRUCTURE BILL?

The debate over cryptocurrency landed in the middle of the Senate's work on the massive infrastructure package. An earlier plan to pay for the legislation, by bolstering IRS enforcement to crack down on tax cheating by individuals and businesses, went down as Republicans objected to expanding the agency's reach. That would have brought in an estimated \$100 billion over 10 years.

Going back to the drawing board on revenue raisers, the plan was hatched for stricter tax-reporting requirements for cryptocurrency brokers. The estimated \$28 billion it would generate over a decade is only about a quarter of what the IRS crackdown proposal envisaged. But it's still the biggest revenue raiser of several in the infrastructure bill.

It raised objections from some senators and unleashed an opposition lobbying blitz from the cryptocurrency industry as well as internet freedom advocacy groups.

The provision defines brokers too broadly, opponents say, potentially stifling innovation by unfairly putting new tax-reporting obligations on software developers and crypto "miners" — users who create coins by lending computing power to verify other users' transactions and receive coins in exchange. Those people don't have access to cryptocurrency users' data the IRS would be collecting, opponents say.

Opponents brought forward amendments to the provision and a compromise emerged. But it failed to muster Senate approval, pushing the debate over cryptocurrency, taxes and brokers to the House.

WHAT'S THE SITUATION NOW WITH CRYPTOCURRENCY AND TAXES?

Some cryptocurrency brokers already report transactions to the IRS, though most don't, experts say. Brokers place buy and sell orders for users on the cryptocurrency exchanges.

The exchanges are required to collect personal identifying information from users and report their annual activity to the IRS.

The IRS defines cryptocurrency as "property" similar to stocks or gold. That means you pay capital gains tax when you sell it or cash it in at a profit.

'We fought a great battle': Greece defends wildfire response

By NICHOLAS PAPHITIS and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — As the worst of Greece's massive wildfires were being tamed Tuesday, the country's civil protection chief defended the firefighting efforts, saying every resource was thrown into the battle against what he described as the fire service's biggest-ever challenge.

Nikos Hardalias said authorities "truly did what was humanly possible" against blazes that destroyed tens of thousands of hectares (acres) of forest and hundreds of homes, killed a volunteer firefighter and forced more than 60,000 people to flee. Two other firefighters were in intensive care with severe burns.

"We handled an operationally unique situation, with 586 fires in eight days during the worst weather conditions we've seen in 40 years," Hardalias told a news conference. "Never was there such a combination of adverse factors in the history of the fire service."

Greece had just experienced its worst heat wave since 1987, which left its forests tinder-dry. Other nearby nations such as Turkey and Italy also faced the same searing temperatures and quickly spreading fires.

Worsening drought and heat — both linked to climate change — have also fueled wildfires this summer in the U.S. West and in Siberia in northern Russia.

Scientists say there is little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events. Researchers can directly link a single event to climate change only through intensive data analysis, but they say such calamities are expected to happen more frequently.

In Greece, the worst blaze still burning Tuesday was in the northern section of Evia, the country's second-largest island, which is linked by a bridge to the mainland north of Athens and is a favorite holiday destination for the Greek capital's residents.

Nearly 900 firefighters, 50 ground teams and more than 200 vehicles were fighting the blaze that broke out Aug. 3, the fire service said. They included crews from Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Cyprus and Poland — part of a huge international response to Greece's plea for assistance.

Fourteen helicopters provided air support Tuesday on Evia, including three from Serbia, two from Switzerland and two from Egypt. The wildfire on Evia, unlike many in the United States, was burning in an area in which villages and forests are entwined.

Hardalias said all the fire fronts on Evia were waning, but firefighters were guarding the perimeter of the blaze, particularly around a cluster of villages that were among the dozens evacuated on the island

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in recent days. However, heavy smoke from the fires has often reduced visibility to zero, making it too dangerous for water-dropping aircraft to assist ground forces.

According to EU wildfire data and satellite imagery, more than 49,000 hectares (121,000 acres) have burned up on Evia — by far the worst damage from any of the recent fires in Greece.

Several other wildfires were burning in the country, with the most significant in the southern Peloponnese region, where new evacuations were ordered Tuesday afternoon. About 400 firefighters, including teams from the Czech Republic and Britain, battled that blaze, assisted by five helicopters and 23 water-dropping planes from several countries.

A judicial investigation is under way into the causes of the fires, including any links to criminal activity. Several arson suspects have been arrested.

"I don't know whether there is any organized arson plan, that's not my job," Hardalias told the news conference. But it was his "feeling" that at least with the flames near ancient Olympia, the seven or eight fires that broke out in close succession could be due to arson.

Also on Tuesday, a woman convicted of intentionally starting a fire in an Athens park last week was sentenced to five years in prison.

Residents and local officials on Evia have complained about a lack of water-dropping planes in the early stages that they say left the fire to grow to such proportions that flying became too hazardous.

Hardalias argued that when the Evia blaze broke out, authorities were already facing other enormous challenges. A major forest fire was burning through the northern outskirts of Athens, forcing the evacuation of thousands, and another was coursing through villages towards ancient Olympia — a hugely important archaeological site in the Peloponnese where the ancient Olympic Games were held for more than 1,000 years.

"Every house lost is a tragedy for all of us. It's a knife in our heart," he said.

Asked whether he was satisfied with the country's firefighting response, Hardalias said: "Obviously, there can be no satisfaction after such a catastrophe. But all our available forces, ground and airborne, were sent immediately to the fires."

"Whether we could have done something different remains to be seen," he said. "But in any case, we fought a great battle, and the losses were among those fighting it, not among civilians."

Greek authorities have emphasized saving lives, issuing evacuation alerts for dozens of villages and neighborhoods this summer. In 2018, a deadly fire that engulfed a seaside settlement near Athens killed more than 100 people, including some who drowned trying to escape the flames and smoke by sea.

Critics say the government's focus on evacuating villages prevented villagers with local knowledge from helping firefighters and led to more property destruction.

Greece's center-right government has pledged to provide compensation to everyone who suffered loss from the wildfires and to undertake a massive reforestation effort to replace the trees that have burned.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told a special cabinet meeting Tuesday that owners of destroyed or damaged homes would receive up to 150,000 euros (\$176,000) in state compensation, with initial payments to begin next week, while businesses and farmers will also get support and tax breaks.

In southwest Turkey, crews battled two fires Tuesday in the coastal province of Mugla, including a brush fire near Bodrum's Gumusluk resort neighborhood. Bodrum's mayor said the fire was close to being extinguished and no residential areas were threatened.

Meanwhile, firefighters quickly put out a new blaze in a forest in Istanbul's Sariyer district.

Chinese, Russian militaries hold drills in northwest China

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese and Russian troops have engaged in joint exercises in northwestern China in a sign of growing military ties between Moscow and Beijing amid shared concerns over the instability in Afghanistan.

The military exercises involving ground troops and combat aircraft are to continue through Friday in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

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The region is located in northwestern China east of Xinjiang, where China has detained more than 1 million Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minorities in what it calls a campaign against terrorism and extremism. Critics say the detentions violate the human rights of a minority group.

Xinjiang shares a narrow frontier with Afghanistan, and Beijing is concerned about violence spilling over its border if the Taliban take control in Afghanistan following the pullout of U.S. troops.

While stopping short of creating a formal alliance, Russia and China have increasingly coordinated their military and foreign policies to oppose what they describe as the perceived U.S. global domination.

The official Xinhua News Agency said the exercises began Monday and were presided over by Li Zuo-cheng, a member of the ruling Communist Party's Central Military Commission.

The exercise aims to "deepen the joint anti-terrorism operations between the Chinese and Russian militaries and demonstrate the firm determination and strength of the two countries to jointly safeguard international and regional security and stability," Xinhua said, citing Chinese and Russian officials.

"It reflects the new height of the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and of the strategic mutual trust, pragmatic exchanges and coordination between the two countries," Xinhua said.

The Russian military sent several Su-30SM fighters and a motorized infantry unit to take part in the drills.

"The objectives of the combat training event are to strengthen the development of Russian-Chinese relations, comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction, build up the level of military cooperation and friendship between the armed forces of the two countries, demonstrate the determination and ability of Russia and China to fight terrorism, and jointly protect peace and stability in the region," the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russia has backed China in its claims in the South China Sea, over which Beijing clashed with common rival the U.S. on Monday at a high-level U.N. Security Council meeting on maritime security.

China, Taiwan and ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam have overlapping claims in the disputed waters and have been locked in an increasingly tense territorial standoffs for decades. China has built seven disputed reefs into missile-protected island bases in recent years, ratcheting up tensions with rival claimants, along with the United States and its allies.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken responded to China's increasingly assertive claims to the strategic waterway by warning that any conflict there or in any ocean "would have serious global consequences for security and for commerce."

The area has seen "dangerous encounters between vessels at sea and provocative actions to advance unlawful maritime claims" that seek to "intimidate and bully other states lawfully accessing their maritime resources," Blinken said.

China's deputy ambassador, Dai Bing, responded by accusing the U.S. of becoming "the biggest threat to peace and stability in the South China Sea" and calling its "hype" in the Security Council "entirely politically motivated."

China has refused to recognize an international arbitration ruling in 2016 that invalidated most of its claims in the South China Sea.

Wisconsin governor vetoes GOP bills to restrict absentees

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers vetoed a series of bills Tuesday passed by the state's Republican-controlled Legislature that would have imposed new restrictions on absentee ballots in the key battleground state.

The Democrat also said two Wisconsin counties should not comply with subpoenas to turn over ballots and voting equipment as part of an investigation being led by the Republican head of the Assembly elections committee.

"Hell no," Evers said when asked if the local election clerks should comply. "You've seen what's going on in Arizona. It's a clown show."

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The Wisconsin bills, and ongoing investigations, are part of a nationwide push by conservatives to reshape elections and voting after President Donald Trump narrowly lost a second term to Democrat Joe Biden. Evers' veto came as Republicans in Texas moved closer to mustering a quorum to pass voting changes stymied by Democrats fleeing the state.

Wisconsin Republicans don't have enough votes to override Evers' veto. No Democrats supported the legislation that passed in June.

Republican Senate President Chris Kapenga said the vetoes make elections less "accurate, transparent, and secure."

Biden beat Trump by just under 21,000 votes in Wisconsin. Numerous state and federal lawsuits brought by Trump and his allies after the defeat were rejected.

Still, Wisconsin Republicans have approved a review of the 2020 election by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos has authorized a separate investigation led by a former state Supreme Court justice. State Rep. Janel Brandtjen, who leads the Assembly's elections committee, is also pursuing her own "cyber-forensic" review of the results, with subpoenas to election clerks in two counties that demand they turn over ballots and voting equipment.

Evers said he expected the subpoenas to be fought in court.

"It's a ridiculous effort to subject our democracy to a new low," Evers said of attempts by Republicans in Arizona, Wisconsin and other states to conduct forensic audits of Trump's defeat in the November 2020 election. "We held a fair, free, secure election and Joe Biden is our president. ... People need to understand this election is over."

Brandtjen said if Evers was confident there were no issues with the election he wouldn't fight turning over the ballots or election equipment.

"What are they hiding?" Brandtjen said.

Evers decried the bills he vetoed as "anti-democratic," saying they make it more difficult for people to vote — particularly the elderly and those with disabilities. He vetoed the bills in the Capitol rotunda, surrounded by Democrats and advocates for the disabled.

One of the bills Evers vetoed would have required most elderly and disabled people who are indefinitely confined — unable to get to the polls on their own — to show photo ID to vote absentee. Such voters would have to apply for a ballot every year, rather than having one sent automatically. And all absentee voters would have had to fill out more paperwork and show their ID every time they vote absentee, rather than just the first time.

Another bill would have blocked the longstanding practice of allowing local election officials to fill in missing information on the envelopes that voters use to return absentee ballots.

Biden's victory over Trump in Wisconsin was confirmed in partial recounts that targeted the Democratic-dominated counties of Milwaukee and Dane, where Trump tried and failed to disqualify thousands of absentee votes. Among those Trump tried to throw out were 5,500 absentee ballots where election clerks filled in missing address information on certification envelopes that contained absentee ballots.

A third bill Evers vetoed would have disallowed ballot collection events any earlier than two weeks before an election. It also would have allowed for only one collection site for absentee ballots, located near the local clerk's office. Republican supporters said the goal was to prevent "ballot harvesting" by disallowing events or locations where ballots could be collected.

Another bill Evers vetoed would have made it a felony for an employee of a nursing home or other care facility to coerce an occupant to apply for, or not apply for, an absentee ballot. It would also require the nursing home to provide notice to relatives when special voting deputies planned to be on hand to assist residents with casting their ballots.

Vos, the Assembly GOP speaker, said Evers made "another momentous mistake" by vetoing the bills.

"These bills closed loopholes, standardized procedures, established uniformity, guaranteed only the voter can correct their own ballot and protected votes of seniors in long-term care," Vos said in a statement. "I am very disappointed Governor Evers refuses to do the right thing."

US vows to isolate Taliban if they take power by force

By KATHY GANNON and TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A U.S. peace envoy brought a warning to the Taliban on Tuesday that any government that comes to power through force in Afghanistan won't be recognized internationally after a series of cities fell to the insurgent group in stunningly quick succession.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy, traveled to Doha, Qatar, where the Taliban maintain a political office, to tell the group that there was no point in pursuing victory on the battlefield because a military takeover of the capital of Kabul would guarantee they would be global pariahs. He and others hope to persuade Taliban leaders to return to peace talks with the Afghan government as American and NATO forces finish their pullout from the country.

The insurgents have captured six out of 34 provincial capitals in the country in less than a week, including Kunduz in Kunduz province — one of the country's largest cities. On Sunday, they planted their flag in the main square, but government forces still controlled the strategic airport and an army base on the city's outskirts.

They are now battling the Western-backed government for control of several others. Late on Tuesday, Taliban forces entered Farah and were seen in front of the provincial governor's office.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed tweeted the insurgents had taken the city, which is the capital of a province with the same name. But Abdul Naser Farahi — a lawmaker from the area who is in Kabul — said the government still retained control of the intelligence department and a military base.

After a 20-year Western military mission and billions of dollars spent training and shoring up Afghan forces, many are at odds to explain why the regular forces have collapsed, fleeing the battle sometimes by the hundreds. The fighting has fallen largely to small groups of elite forces and the Afghan air force.

The success of the Taliban blitz has added urgency to the need to restart the long-stalled talks that could end the fighting and move Afghanistan toward an inclusive interim administration. The insurgents have so far refused to return to the negotiating table.

Khalilzad's mission in Qatar is to "help formulate a joint international response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan," according to the U.S. State Department.

He plans to "press the Taliban to stop their military offensive and to negotiate a political settlement, which is the only path to stability and development in Afghanistan," the State Department said.

Meanwhile, the Taliban military chief released an audio message to his fighters on Tuesday, ordering them not to harm Afghan forces and government officials in territories they conquer. The recording was shared on Twitter by the Taliban spokesman in Doha, Mohammad Naim.

In the nearly five-minute audio, Mohammad Yaqoob, the son of late Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, also told the insurgents to stay out of abandoned homes of government and security officials who have fled, leave marketplaces open and protect places of business, including banks.

It was not immediately clear if Taliban fighters on the ground would heed Yaqoob's instructions. Some civilians who have fled Taliban advances have said that the insurgents imposed repressive restrictions on women and burned down schools. The office of the U.N. human rights chief said it has received reports of summary executions and military use and destruction of homes, schools and clinics in captured areas.

There have also been reports of revenge killings. The insurgents have claimed responsibility for killing a comedian in southern Kandahar, assassinating the government's media chief in Kabul and a bombing that targeted acting Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, killing eight and wounding more. The minister was not harmed.

The intensifying war has driven thousands of people to Kabul, where many are living in parks. The fighting has also increased the number of civilian casualties.

The U.N. human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, said Tuesday that her office had counted at least 183 deaths and hundreds of injuries among civilians in a handful of cities in recent weeks — but cautioned that "the real figures will be much higher."

The International Committee of the Red Cross said that its staff has treated more than 4,000 Afghans

this month in their 15 facilities across the country, including in Helmand and Kandahar, where Afghan and U.S. airstrikes are trying to rein in the Taliban onslaught.

"We are seeing homes destroyed, medical staff and patients put at tremendous risk, and hospitals, electricity and water infrastructure damaged," Eloi Fillion, ICRC's head of delegation in Afghanistan, said in a statement. "The use of explosive weaponry in cities is having an indiscriminate impact on the population."

The surge in Taliban attacks began in April, when the U.S. and NATO announced they would end their military presence and bring the last of their troops home. The final date of the withdrawal is Aug. 31, but the U.S. Central Command has said the pullout is already 95% complete.

On Monday, the U.S. emphasized that the Biden administration now sees the fight as one for Afghan political and military leaders to win or lose — and showed no sign of stepping up airstrikes despite the Taliban gains.

Khalilzad, the architect of the peace deal the Trump administration brokered with the Taliban, was expected to hold talks with key regional players and will likely seek a commitment from Afghanistan's neighbors and other countries in the region not to recognize a Taliban government that comes to power by force. When the Taliban last ran Afghanistan, three countries recognized their rule: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Senior Afghan officials have also travelled to Doha, including Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the government's reconciliation council. Pakistan's national security adviser, Moeed Yusuf, on Monday called for "re-invigorated" efforts to get all sides in the conflict back to talks, describing a protracted war in Afghanistan as a "nightmare scenario" for Pakistan.

Yusuf refused to definitively say whether Pakistan, which holds considerable sway over the Taliban, would recognize a Taliban government installed by force, saying instead that Pakistan wants to see an "inclusive" government in Kabul.

Groups make own drugs to fight high drug prices, shortages

By LINDA A. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Impatient with years of inaction in Washington on prescription drug costs, U.S. hospital groups, startups and nonprofits have started making their own medicines in a bid to combat stubbornly high prices and persistent shortages of drugs with little competition.

The efforts are at varying stages, but some have already made and shipped millions of doses. Nearly half of U.S. hospitals have gotten some drugs from the projects and more medicines should be in retail pharmacies within the next year as the work accelerates.

Most groups are working on generics, while at least one is trying to develop brand-name drugs. All aim to sell their drugs at prices well below what competitors charge.

"These companies are addressing different parts of the problem and trying to come up with novel solutions" to produce cheaper medicines, said Stacie Dusetzina, a Vanderbilt University health policy professor. "People should be able to access the drugs that work for them without going broke."

While some of the projects are solving supply problems and reducing medication costs for hospitals, drug price experts are split on how much consumers will benefit.

Dusetzina said the efforts could bring needed price competition, at least for some drugs.

Dr. Aaron Kesselheim, a Harvard Medical School researcher and price expert at Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston, thinks for some drugs these projects "can lower patients' out-of-pocket costs ... absolutely."

But David Mitchell, founder of the independent consumer group Patients for Affordable Drugs, said the projects are workarounds that help in niches, but are "not enough to fix a broken system."

Civica Rx was started three years ago by a hospital consortium. It now provides over 50 generic injectable medicines in chronic shortage to more than 1,400 hospital members and the Veterans Affairs and Defense departments. It already has sold enough medication to treat 17 million people, including many hospitalized with COVID-19.

Now it's expanding to help patients directly, said chief executive Martin VanTrieste. Its new partnership

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with Anthem and Blue Cross health plans, CivicaScript, is picking six or seven expensive generic drugs to start. It will have contract manufacturer Catalent start producing those drugs to sell at 50,000 retail pharmacies starting in 2023.

Other "alternative drugmakers" include:

—Two enterprises, from Premier Inc. and Phlow Corp., focused on providing their hospital members with affordably priced generics that are chronically scarce.

— NP2, which is about to start producing cheaper generic IV cancer medicines.

— EQRx, which is creating brand-name drugs for cancer and inflammatory disorders to sell at "radically lower prices" than rival brands.

Walmart recently added insulin to its in-house brand of products for people with diabetes. It's selling its own version of the mealtime insulin NovoLog, in partnership with manufacturer Novo Nordisk, for less than half NovoLog's price.

Even entrepreneur Mark Cuban has jumped in, giving his name and money to a public-benefit company aiming to provide cheap alternatives to high-cost generic drugs at 15% above manufacturing costs, no insurance needed.

In January, Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drug Co. launched its first medication, a pill for parasitic worm infections that it sells through independent pharmacies for about \$40 per two-dose treatment, said founder and CEO Dr. Alex Oshmyansky. The company is building a factory in Dallas but paying other manufacturers for now and aims to launch up to 100 more drugs by year's end.

Vanderbilt's Dusetzina sees Cuban's company as best positioned to cut out-of-pocket costs.

"It's a really nice project to go after products where there's little competition — and price gouging," she said.

Brand-name drugs get monopolies lasting up to two decades under U.S. patent law, so most of the alternative drugmakers are targeting certain off-patent medicines whose prices have risen dramatically in recent years.

Generics are usually cheap. But as buyers pushed for barely break-even prices on these drugs over the last couple decades, generic manufacturers consolidated. With fewer factories making certain generics, even temporary plant closures triggered lasting shortages. And the reduced competition led to big price hikes, often forcing doctors to try costlier, less-effective alternatives and hospital pharmacists to spend long hours seeking alternatives for drugs in shortage.

Those years-long shortages spurred Civica's formation. It also led a top hospital group purchasing organization, Premier Inc., to launch a program that has contractors making more than 60 products for about 850 member hospitals, said its chief pharmacy officer, Jessica Daley. The two groups say they've gotten numerous drugs off national shortage lists.

Phlow Corp., a public benefit drug manufacturer largely funded by government grants, partnered in March with 11 top children's hospitals to address shortages by making generic medicines in child-size doses for cancer and other life-threatening conditions. Phlow and Civica are building neighboring factories in Petersburg, Virginia.

Such efforts have been helping hospitals stock crucial drugs — sedatives, painkillers, antibiotics and respiratory medicines — needed for COVID-19 patients.

The alternative drugmakers are hiring U.S. contract manufacturers whenever possible and getting drug ingredients here or in Europe, to diversify supply chains heavily reliant on China and India, which limited exports of drugs and ingredients early in the pandemic. The Biden administration also is working to increase domestic production of essential generic drugs.

Harvard's Kesselheim foresees the new generic manufacturers helping to boost supply and lower prices, but he thinks developing new brand-name drugs — as EQRx is trying to do — is tougher.

EQRx is currently testing 10 novel drugs that it licensed the rights to, for cancers and immunologic disorders like rheumatoid arthritis. One already in final-stage testing could launch within three years.

The company expects to start work on another 10 patented drugs in ultra-expensive categories in the next year and is collaborating with Exscientia, a firm that uses artificial intelligence to design drugs and

speed up testing.

Insurers are among EQRx's early investors, said the company's president, Melanie Nallicheri. They expect the company to turn a profit, but they also support plans to price medicines at up to two-thirds off rival brand-name drugs, she said.

High trust in doctors, nurses in US, AP-NORC poll finds

By EMILY SWANSON and TOM MURPHY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most Americans have high trust in doctors, nurses and pharmacists, a new poll finds.

Researchers say that trust could become important in the push to increase COVID-19 vaccinations, as long as unvaccinated people have care providers they know and are open to hearing new information about the vaccines.

At least 7 in 10 Americans trust doctors, nurses and pharmacists to do what's right for them and their families either most or all of the time, according to the poll from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The poll shows high levels of trust among both Democrats and Republicans; men and women; and white, Black and Hispanic Americans.

When people get treatment or a service from a doctor or a nurse, they start building trust and then tend to return to those providers when they need more help or have questions about a health issue, said Michelle Stollo, a senior vice president in NORC's Health Research Group.

"Public health officials should really look to doctors, nurses and pharmacists to be the megaphone to deliver the message of the importance of getting vaccinated," she said.

Polling from the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation in June also showed people trusted doctors for information about the vaccine more than other sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert.

COVID-19 case levels are soaring across the country, driven by a highly contagious virus variant that mostly infects unvaccinated people, according to public health experts. President Joe Biden and others have pleaded with Americans to get the shots.

The COVID-19 vaccines have been widely available since spring, and the CDC reports that 71% of U.S. adults have received at least one dose.

Recently retired cardiologist Paul Vaitkus said he encouraged many of his patients, some of whom have been seeing him for years, to get the vaccine due to their health conditions. He thinks they listened to him.

"As a doctor, my patient knows me and they sized me up eye to eye," the 62-year-old Gurnee, Illinois, resident said. "They know that I'm honest."

Care providers could help encourage people to get vaccines, but the country's fragmented health care system presents an obstacle.

Vaccination rates are low among the uninsured, noted Liz Hamel, director of public opinion and survey research for Kaiser.

"Those are the same people who are less likely to be in regular health care, to have those interactions with doctors and providers," she said.

The same holds true for younger adults, who also have low vaccination rates. They are less likely to see a doctor regularly or get preventive care like annual checkups.

Plus, just getting someone into a doctor's office or drugstore offers no guarantee that the patient will become vaccinated.

Hamel noted that attitudes toward the shots have become so politicized that people who trust a doctor to give them advice about other issues may not be open to hearing more about the vaccines.

"I think some people, based on politics, have completely closed off," she said.

Doctors earn broad trust from the American public, and a slim majority are in favor of federal funding for increasing the number of doctors, according to the AP-NORC poll. But only about 2 in 10 support govern-

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ment funds for increasing doctors' pay. Half of Americans say doctors are paid about right.

However, most Americans, including majorities of both Democrats and Republicans, think nurses and health care aides are underpaid.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to plague the U.S., the poll finds no significant shifts in opinions about health care policies, including the Affordable Care Act, a single payer health system or a public option.

Christina Applegate reveals she has multiple sclerosis

The Associated Press undefined

Emmy Award-winner Christina Applegate has announced that she has multiple sclerosis, describing her diagnosis as a "tough road."

The 49-year-old actor known for her roles in "Married... with Children" and "Dead to Me," said in a tweet late Monday that she was diagnosed "a few months ago."

"It's been a strange journey. But I have been so supported by people that I know who also have this condition," wrote Applegate. "It's been a tough road. But as we all know, the road keeps going." She added in a later post: "Now I ask for privacy. As I go through this thing."

Multiple sclerosis — also known as MS — affects the nervous system and often results in progressive physical and cognitive decline.

More than 2.3 million people have a diagnosis of MS worldwide, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Nearly 1 million people over the age of 18 live with a diagnosis of MS in the US, the nonprofit organization adds.

Applegate won her Emmy in 2003 for a guest spot on "Friends" and has a Tony Award nomination for the musical "Sweet Charity." Her films include "The Sweetest Thing," "Anchorman," "Hall Pass" and "Bad Moms."

She has previously discussed her 2008 battle with breast cancer, after which she had a double mastectomy as well as her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Aug. 11, the 223rd day of 2021. There are 142 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 11, 1992, the Mall of America, the nation's largest shopping-entertainment center, opened in Bloomington, Minnesota.

On this date:

In 1949, President Harry S. Truman nominated General Omar N. Bradley to become the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In 1952, Hussein bin Talal was proclaimed King of Jordan, beginning a reign lasting nearly 47 years.

In 1964, the Beatles movie "A Hard Day's Night" had its U.S. premiere in New York.

In 1965, rioting and looting that claimed 34 lives broke out in the predominantly Black Watts section of Los Angeles.

In 1984, at the Los Angeles Olympics, American runner Mary Decker fell after colliding with South African-born British competitor Zola Budd in the 3,000-meter final; Budd finished seventh.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton named Army Gen. John Shalikashvili (shah-lee-kash-VEE'-lee) to be the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, succeeding the retiring Gen. Colin Powell.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton made the first use of the historic line-item veto, rejecting three items in spending and tax bills. (However, the U.S. Supreme Court later struck down the veto as unconstitutional.)

In 2006, TV talk show host Mike Douglas died in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, on his 81st birthday.

In 2009, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of President John F. Kennedy and founder of the Special Olym-

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pics, died in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, at age 88.

In 2012, Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney announced his choice of Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin to be his running mate. Usain Bolt capped his perfect London Olympics by leading Jamaica to victory in a world-record 36.84 seconds in the 4x100 meters.

In 2017, a federal judge ordered Charlottesville, Virginia, to allow a weekend rally of white nationalists and other extremists to take place at its originally planned location downtown. (Violence erupted at the rally, and a woman was killed when a man plowed his car into a group of counterprotesters.)

In 2014, Academy Award-winning actor and comedian Robin Williams, 63, died in Tiburon, California, a suicide.

Ten years ago: Minnesota rivals Tim Pawlenty and Michele Bachmann sparred bitterly during an eight-candidate Republican debate in Ames, Iowa; Mitt Romney sought to stay above the fray as he focused on President Barack Obama, saying, "Our president simply doesn't understand how to lead and how to grow the economy."

Five years ago: The Obama administration said it had decided marijuana would remain on the list of most dangerous drugs, rebuffing growing support across the country for broad legalization, but said it would allow more research into its medical uses. Michael Phelps won his fourth gold medal of the Rio Olympics and 22nd overall with a victory in the 200-meter individual medley. Simone Manuel became the first African-American woman to win a gold medal in swimming with her win in the 100-meter freestyle, upsetting world-record holder Cate Campbell and tying with Penny Oleksiak of Canada. Simone Biles of the U.S. soared to the all-around title in women's gymnastics.

One year ago: Democrat Joe Biden named California Sen. Kamala Harris as his running mate; Harris was the first Black woman on a major party's presidential ticket. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a businesswoman who had expressed support for the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon and had been criticized for racist comments, won the Republican nomination in Georgia's 14th Congressional District. (Greene would win election to Congress in November.) College football's Big Ten and Pac-12 conferences said they would not play football in the fall because of concerns about COVID-19. (Weeks later, both conferences reversed those decisions and scheduled abbreviated seasons.) Russia became the first country to approve a coronavirus vaccine. The newly elected district attorney in Portland, Oregon, said he would not prosecute people arrested on non-violent misdemeanor charges during protests. Singer and guitarist Trini Lopez, known for his versions of "Lemon Tree" and "If I Had a Hammer" in the 1960s, died in California at 83 from complications of COVID-19.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Arlene Dahl is 96. Songwriter-producer Kenny Gamble is 78. Rock musician Jim Kale (Guess Who) is 78. Magazine columnist Marilyn Vos Savant is 75. Country singer John Conlee is 75. Singer Eric Carmen is 72. Computer scientist and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak is 71. Wrestler-actor Hulk Hogan is 68. Singer Joe Jackson is 67. Playwright David Henry Hwang is 64. Actor Miguel A. Nunez Jr. is 62. Actor Viola Davis is 56. Actor Embeth Davidtz is 56. Actor Duane Martin is 56. Actor-host Joe Rogan is 54. R&B musician Chris Dave is 53. Actor Anna Gunn is 53. Actor Ashley Jensen is 53. Actor Sophie Okonedo (oh-koh-NAY'-doh) is 53. Rock guitarist Charlie Sexton is 53. Hip-hop artist Ali Shaheed Muhammad is 51. Actor Nigel Harman is 48. Actor Will Friedle is 45. Rock singer Ben Gibbard is 45. Actor Rob Kerkovich is 42. Actor Merritt Wever is 41. Actor Chris Hemsworth is 38. Rock musician Heath Fog (Alabama Shakes) is 37. Singer J-Boog is 36. Rapper Asher Roth is 36. Actor Alyson Stoner is 28.