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“Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings.”

-William Arthur Ward



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
Tuesday, Aug. 10: 60,626 entering. Up 15.0% from Tuesday last year. Down 28.5% from the 75th Rally

Five Day Total:

2021: 313,363 Vehicles

2020: 270,488 Vehicles

2015 (75th Rally): 417,528 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. Wednesday August 11, 2021

Item	Sturgis	Rapid City District	District Total	Last Year to Date
DUI Arrests	64	10	74	82
Misd Drug Arrests	77	16	93	128
Felony Drug Arrests	44	17	61	71
Total Citations	588	277	865	734
Total Warnings	1620	720	2340	1774
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	11	14	25	31
Injury Accidents	17	19	36	33
Fatal Accidents	0	1	1	1
# of Fatalities	0	1	1	2

Fatal Crashes:

UPDATE: A Rapid City, S.D. woman has been identified as the person who died Saturday in a motorcycle crash on Interstate 90, mile marker 110, one mile west of Wall: A 2011 Harley-Davidson FLSTF motorcycle was westbound when the driver lost control. The vehicle hit a guard rail. Trisha Michael, 36, who was not wearing a helmet, was thrown from the motorcycle. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Injury Crashes:

At 7:41 a.m., Tuesday, U.S. Highway 385, mile marker 30, within the city of Deadwood: A 2015 Indian Roadmaster was southbound on U.S. Highway 385 when it hit a Big Horn Sheep. The 65-year-old male driver received minor injuries, but was not transported. He was wearing a helmet.

At 10 a.m., Tuesday, Interstate 90, mile marker 53, one mile east of Black Hawk: A 2008 Harley-Davidson Low Rider motorcycle was westbound on Interstate 90 when the driver lost control as he tried to slow down. The 71-year-old male driver sustained minor injuries, but was not transported. He was not wearing a helmet.

At 11:58 a.m., Tuesday, 161st Avenue (New Underwood Road) north of Englehart Lane, three miles north of New Underwood: A 2016 Harley-Davidson FLST motorcycle was northbound when the driver failed to negotiate a curve. The motorcycle went into the ditch and through a fence. The 47-year-old male driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries and was taken to a Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet. Charges are pending.

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At 2:55 p.m., Tuesday, Interstate 79, mile marker 118, 10 miles northeast of Sturgis: A 2021 Harley-Davidson Road Glide motorcycle was southbound when it was rear-ended by a 2016 Harley-Davidson FLHXSE motorcycles. Both drivers were thrown from their motorcycles. The 48-year-old female driver of the FLHXSE motorcycle sustained minor injuries and was taken to the Sturgis hospital. Charges are pending against her. The 56-year-old female driver of the Road Glide suffered minor injuries and was taken to the Sturgis hospital. Neither rider was wearing a helmet.

At 4:21 p.m., U.S. Highway 16A, mile marker 47, eight miles west of Keystone: A 2006 Harley-Davidson FLTRI motorcycle was eastbound when the driver failed to negotiate a curve. The 75-year-old male driver received minor injuries and was transported to a Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet.

At 4:24 p.m., U.S. Highway 16A, mile marker 47, one mile north of Playhouse Road: A 2012 Harley-Davidson FLTRX motorcycle was southbound on U.S. Highway 16A when the driver lost control when he failed to negotiate a curve. Both occupants were thrown off the motorcycle as the motorcycle crossed the center line and struck a northbound 1991 Harley-Davidson XTC motorcycle, knocking the passenger off the motorcycle. The 56-year-old male of the FLTRX motorcycle sustained serious non-life threatening injuries and was taken to a Rapid City hospital. Charges are pending against him. The 51-year-old female passenger sustained minor injuries and was transported to a Rapid City hospital. The 59-year-old male passenger of the XTC motorcycle was not injured. The 52-year-old female passenger suffered minor injuries and was taken to a Rapid City hospital. None of the four occupants were wearing helmets.

At 4:28 p.m., Tuesday, the intersection of South Dakota Highway 34 and Short Track Road, within the city limits of Sturgis: A 2004 Harley-Davidson motorcycle was eastbound on South Dakota Highway 34 and stopped at the intersection of SD Highway 34 and Short Track Road. After stopping, the motorcycle proceeded into the intersection. A 2021 Harley-Davidson motorcycle, which was westbound on South Dakota Highway 34, stopped at the same intersection and then proceeded into the intersection to turn left onto Short Track Road. The 2004 motorcycle struck the 2021 motorcycle. The 65-year-old male driver of the 2004 motorcycle was thrown from the motorcycle and sustained minor injuries. The 25-year-old male driver of the 2021 motorcycle was not injured. Neither driver wore a helmet.

At 5:19 p.m., Tuesday, South Dakota Highway 34, mile marker 25, two miles northwest of Whitewood: A 2002 Harley-Davidson motorcycle was westbound on South Dakota Highway 34 when the driver lost control. The 49-year-old male driver sustained minor injuries. The 51-year-old female passenger suffered serious non-life threatening injuries. Both were transported to the Spearfish hospital. Neither person was wearing a helmet. Charges are pending against the driver.

At 5:25 p.m., Tuesday, South Dakota Highway 87, mile marker 62, 10 miles northeast of Custer: Two motorcycles were eastbound on South Dakota Highway 87 entering a curve when they were struck by a westbound truck and trailer that did not stop. The 57-year-old male driver of a 2012 Harley-Davidson FLHTK motorcycle was not injured. The 45-year-old male driver of a 2019 Harley-Davidson FLHXSE motorcycle was not injured, but the 45-year-old female passenger sustained minor injuries and was transported to a local hospital. All three motorcycle occupants were wearing helmets.

At 7:57 p.m., Tuesday, South Rockerville Road in Rockerville: A 1996 Boss Hoss motorcycle was traveling on South Rockerville Road when the driver lost control. The 59-year-old male driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries. He was transported to a Rapid City hospital. Charges are pending. The 60-year-old female passenger was not injured. Neither person was wearing a helmet.

At 11:19 p.m., Tuesday, South Dakota Highway 34, mile marker 38, within the city limits of Spearfish: A 2008 Harley-Davidson FLSTB motorcycle was westbound on South Dakota Highway 34 when it collided with a deer. The 60-year-old male driver was not injured. The 52-year-old female passenger suffered minor injuries and was transported to the Sturgis hospital. Neither person was wearing a helmet.

Activities board hears policy for home-school student participation

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — On Wednesday South Dakota High School Activities Association board members got a lesson in how home-schooled students will be included in extracurricular activities.

During the 2021 legislative session, lawmakers passed SB177, which streamlines the notification process for parents who want to home-school their children, removes some testing requirements, strengthens truancy accountability and allows home-schooled students entry into the extracurricular activities of public schools.

At its annual strategic planning session, the SDHSAA board of directors heard about how the new law inspired changes to the association's eligibility requirements. Prior to the new law, the ability of home-school students to participate in extracurricular activities was left up to the individual school districts. Some allowed participation and others did not.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos told board members that in order to participate in extracurricular activities, parents of home-schooled students must provide proof of age as well as a transcript of grades to the school district in which they reside. Those students are also held to the same training and eligibility standards as regularly enrolled students.

Swartos explained that home-schooled students are allowed to try out for sports but there are no guarantees about making the team.

"They're not guaranteed playing time, starting time," Swartos said.

Swartos said he is concerned about a rule that allows a regularly enrolled student to switch to home-schooling during a sports season. According to the rule, the student would be ineligible to play that sport for the remainder of the season. In the past, that ineligibility would have lasted a calendar year.

Swartos said a student who's flunking may opt for home-schooling to maintain athletic eligibility. "That's the one loophole I see in there," Swartos said. "We're going to track that data this year."

Home-schooled students who want to participate in chorus, orchestra, band and the arts must be enrolled in those classes, Swartos said, explaining that those students need to be tied to a director just as a football player is tied to a coach.

Parents who represent the state's home-schooling organizations want to see the rules followed, Swartos said. "They don't want to see people abusing this."

After this first year of statewide eligibility for home-schooled students, there may be a need to make tweaks in the law. According to Swartos, legislators will be open to making those changes.

Asked about other legislative issues in the coming year, Swartos said he was sure there would be legislation designed to supplant the association's eligibility rules for transgender students.

"I expect there will be more transgender legislation coming," Swartos said, explaining that a Connecticut lawsuit that he had hoped would provide some direction has been thrown out of court.

"The policy we have is as legally sound as possible," Swartos said.

SDHSAA seeks partners to help recruit officials

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — Recruiting and retaining officials is always a priority for the South Dakota High School Activities Association. In the coming school year, one of the association's goals will be to create partnerships that will help in that recruiting effort.

The SDHSAA board of directors decided to make the formation of those partnerships one of its goals at its annual strategic planning meeting on Wednesday. The topic came up a couple of times during the meeting.

During a portion of the meeting given over to the discussion of board member priorities, Mike Talley of Rapid City said the recruitment of officials was a concern for schools across the state.

SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Jo Auch said there have been strides made in recruitment. Auch blamed pandemic issues for volleyball being down by 45 officials last year. This year, volleyball is down by just 10 officials. Recruitment efforts in cheer and dance have led to 17 new officials this year.

"I think it's working," Auch said of recruitment efforts.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said coaches should take time to recruit athletes that are graduating. Swartos said they should seek out "the kids that just love sports and would make great officials."

Board member Eric Denning of Mount Vernon said new officiating recruits could get experience by working junior high games. Those games are easier, Denning said, because "generally you don't have a coach screaming at you."

Swartos noted that it's important to have a school official at the game controlling the crowd. He said young officials may ask, "Why do I want to be yelled at for two hours by some random dad?"

Board member Tom Culver of Avon said schools need to pay attention to how they're treating officials. At Avon, he said, officials are getting a meal since they probably didn't have time to eat between the time they left their regular jobs and when they arrived at the school for the early basketball game.

During the goal-setting portion of the meeting, the board decided to set a goal of forming partnerships with professional organizations, schools, universities and others to find the best practices for recruiting officials.

"We're really going to go at it this year," Swartos said. "Get those numbers up."

SD Needs More Than Broadband Expansion – We Need Digital Literacy!

For too many in our state, the high-speed internet needed to access opportunity and succeed in today's economy is not available where they live—and this holds them back. This is especially true in our rural communities where according to the Governor Office, 88,000 South Dakotans lack access to high speed internet.

Recently, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem signed legislation that will invest in high-speed internet infrastructure across our state. This support for high-speed internet access aligns with AARP South Dakota members views. In a survey conducted approximately two years ago, eight in ten (80%) strongly or somewhat agree that elected officials in South Dakota should work to ensure that high speed internet service is available to underserved areas.

AARP South Dakota supported several high-speed internet bills because increasing high-speed access not only makes it easier to stay connected to friends and family, but it's also how many older South Dakotans find jobs, continue education, and utilize telehealth.

Telehealth services available through high-speed internet make connecting with health care providers and specialists easier for families, with the patients being able to receive state-of-the-art health services in their own homes. This increased opportunity for quality care narrows the health care disparities that disproportionately affects our low-income and most vulnerable households.

AARP South Dakota applauds both the Governor and the South Dakota Legislature for pushing high-speed internet expansion through the process, but there is an additional step that needs to take place.

Unlike simply turning on a faucet to get water or turning on a switch to light a room, using high-speed internet requires one to have digital "literacy." Finding ways to help people learn how to use the applications that access to the internet offers will be crucial to increasing service adoption. Organizations that are accepting state funds to expand our broadband infrastructure also have a responsibility to our communities. They must ensure digital literacy throughout our state. Plus, our state leaders should encourage partnerships with community organizations to support training for South Dakota's most vulnerable residents.

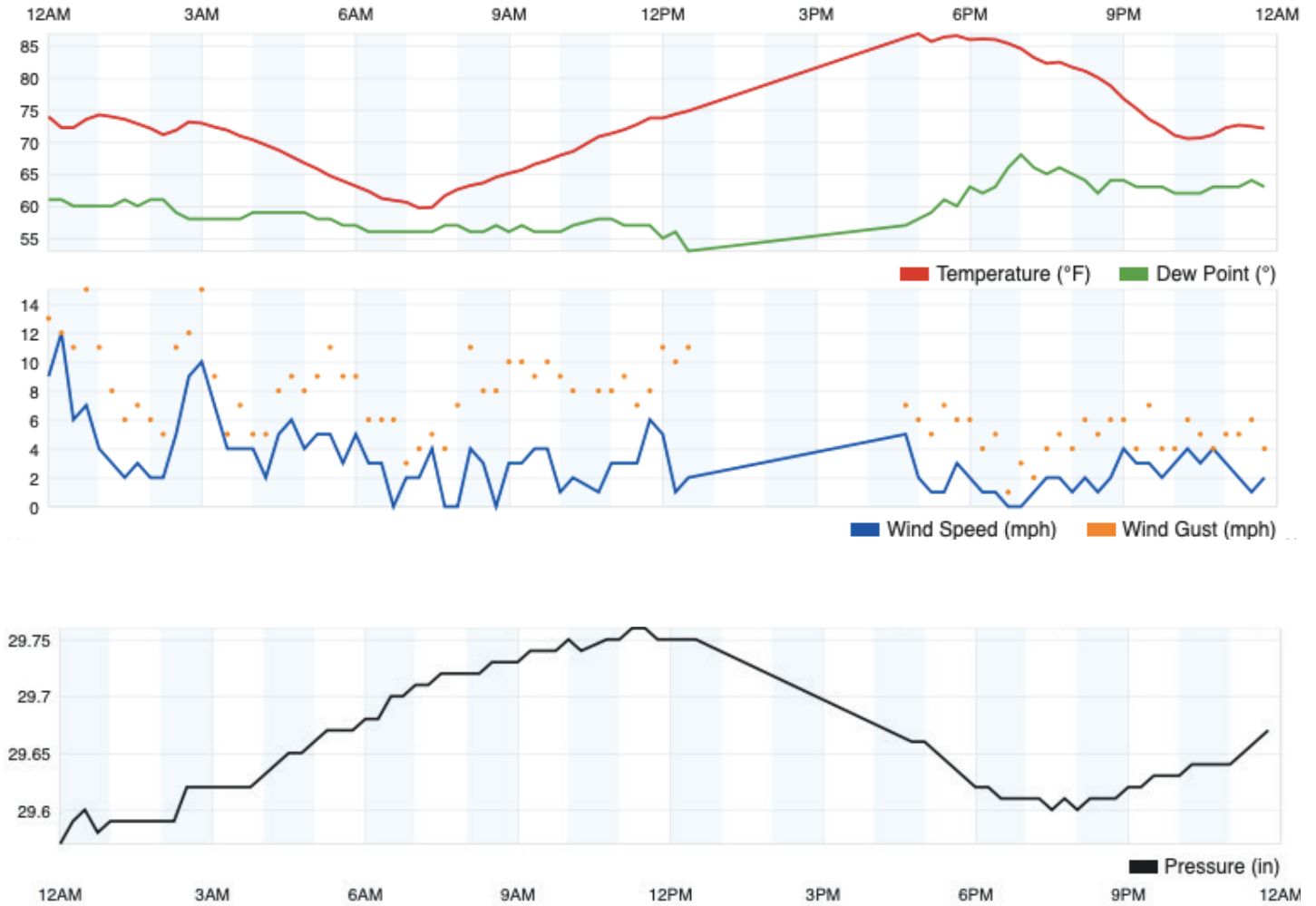
Improving access to high-speed internet was necessary before this pandemic, and as we move forward in connecting more parts of our state, we will see more communities and their residents thrive assuming they have the tools and skills necessary to utilize this invaluable utility.

Erik Gaikowski
State Director, AARP South Dakota

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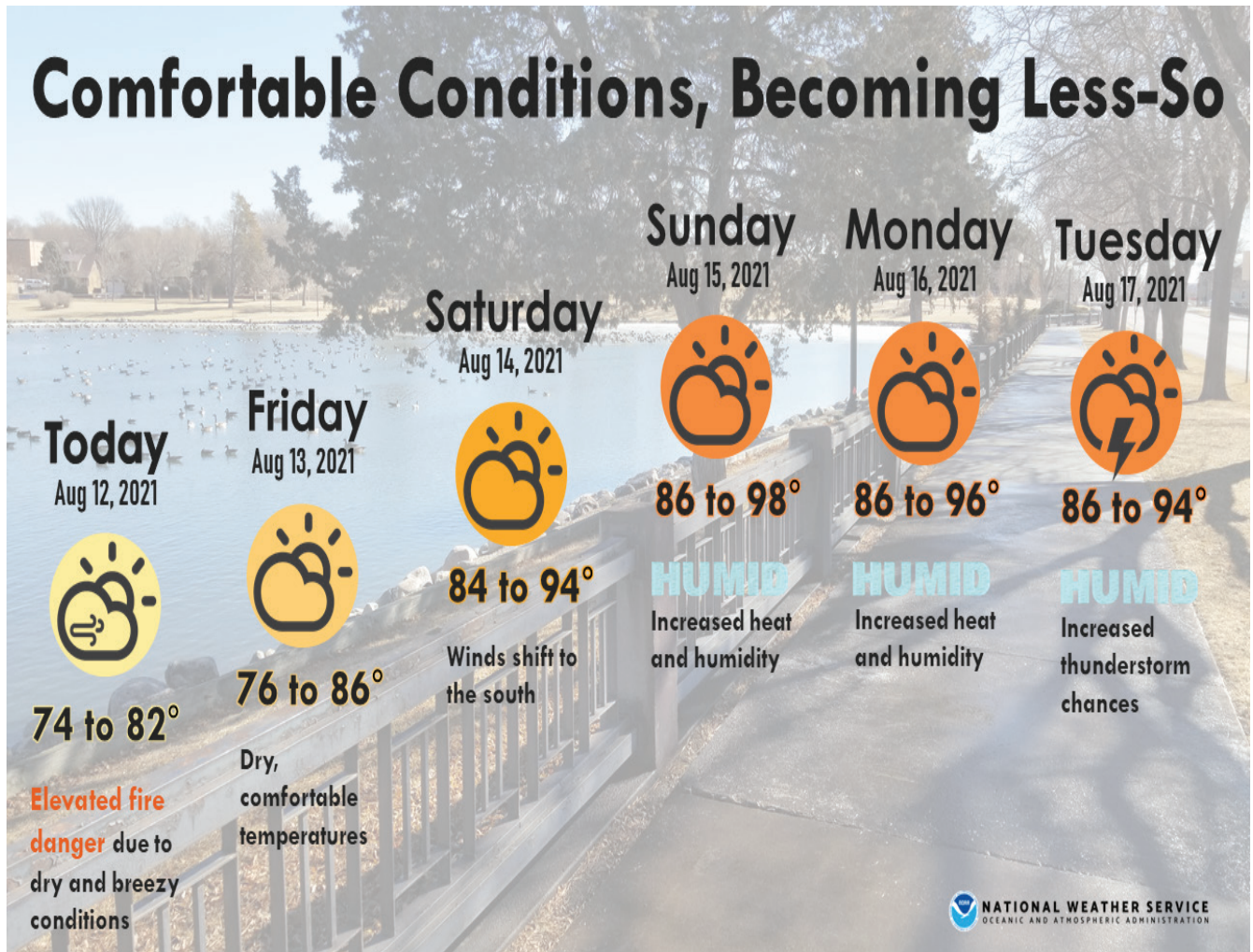
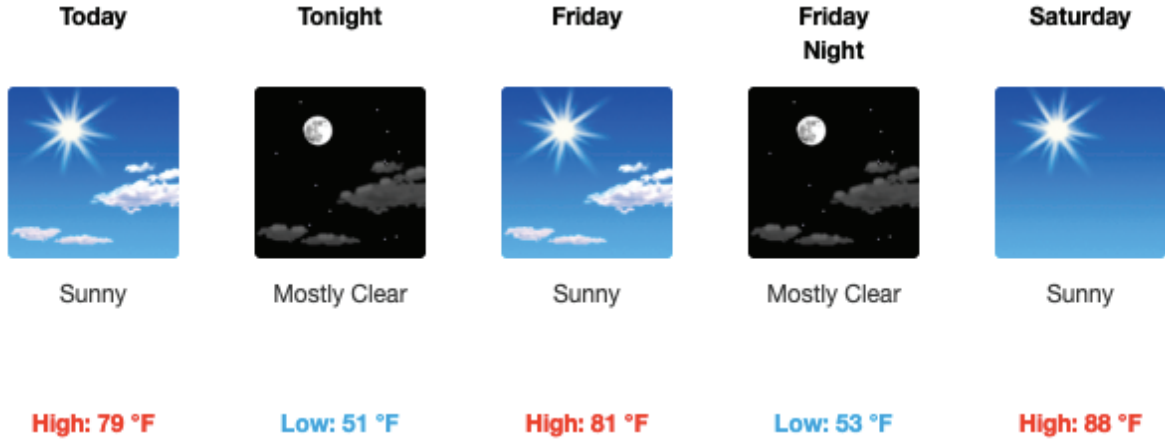
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Below average temperatures and low humidity will make for comfortable conditions today (low temperatures may even dip into the upper 40s for some tonight into Friday morning), though breezy northwesterly winds will lead to elevated grassland fire danger. Heat and humidity will be on the rise through the weekend, but most will remain precipitation-free through early next week.

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Today in Weather History

August 12, 1986: Thunderstorms produced 2.53 inches of rain in twenty minutes in downtown Rapid City. The heavy rain caused street and basement flooding. Golf ball size hail fell in Zeona, in Perkins County, which covered the ground.

1752: The following is from the Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith, and the Rev. Samuel Deane, published in 1849. "In the evening there was dismal thunder and lightning, and abundance of rain, and such a hurricane as was never the like in these parts of the world." This hurricane struck Portland, Maine.

2004: Hurricane Charley was the third named storm and the second hurricane of the 2004 Atlantic hurricane season. Charley lasted from August 9 to August 15, and at its peak intensity, it attained 150 mph winds, making it a strong Category 4 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale. It made landfall in southwestern Florida at maximum strength, making it the most powerful hurricane to hit the United States since Hurricane Andrew struck Florida in 1992.

2005: A tornado strikes Wright, Wyoming, a coal-mining community, killing two and destroying 91 homes and damaging about 30 more in around the town.

1778 - A Rhode Island hurricane prevented an impending British-French sea battle, and caused extensive damage over southeast New England. (David Ludlum)

1933 - The temperature at Greenland Ranch in Death Valley, CA, hit 127 degrees to establish a U.S. record for the month of August. (The Weather Channel)

1936 - The temperature at Seymour, TX, hit 120 degrees to establish a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1955 - During the second week of August hurricanes Connie and Diane produced as much as 19 inches of rain in the northeastern U.S. forcing rivers from Virginia to Massachusetts into a high flood. Westfield MA was deluged with 18.15 inches of rain in 24 hours, and at Woonsocket RI the Blackstone River swelled from seventy feet in width to a mile and a half. Connecticut and the Delaware Valley were hardest hit. Total damage in New England was 800 million dollars, and flooding claimed 187 lives. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Early afternoon thunderstorms in Arizona produced 3.90 inches of rain in ninety minutes at Walnut National Monument (located east of Flagstaff), along with three inches of pea size hail, which had to be plowed off the roads. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Fifteen cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Youngstown OH reported twenty-six days of 90 degree weather for the year, a total equal to that for the entire decade of the 1970s. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms were scattered across nearly every state in the Union by late in the day. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Fergus Falls MN, and golf ball size hail and wind gusts to 60 mph at Black Creek WI. In the Chicago area, seven persons at a forest preserve in North Riverside were injured by lightning. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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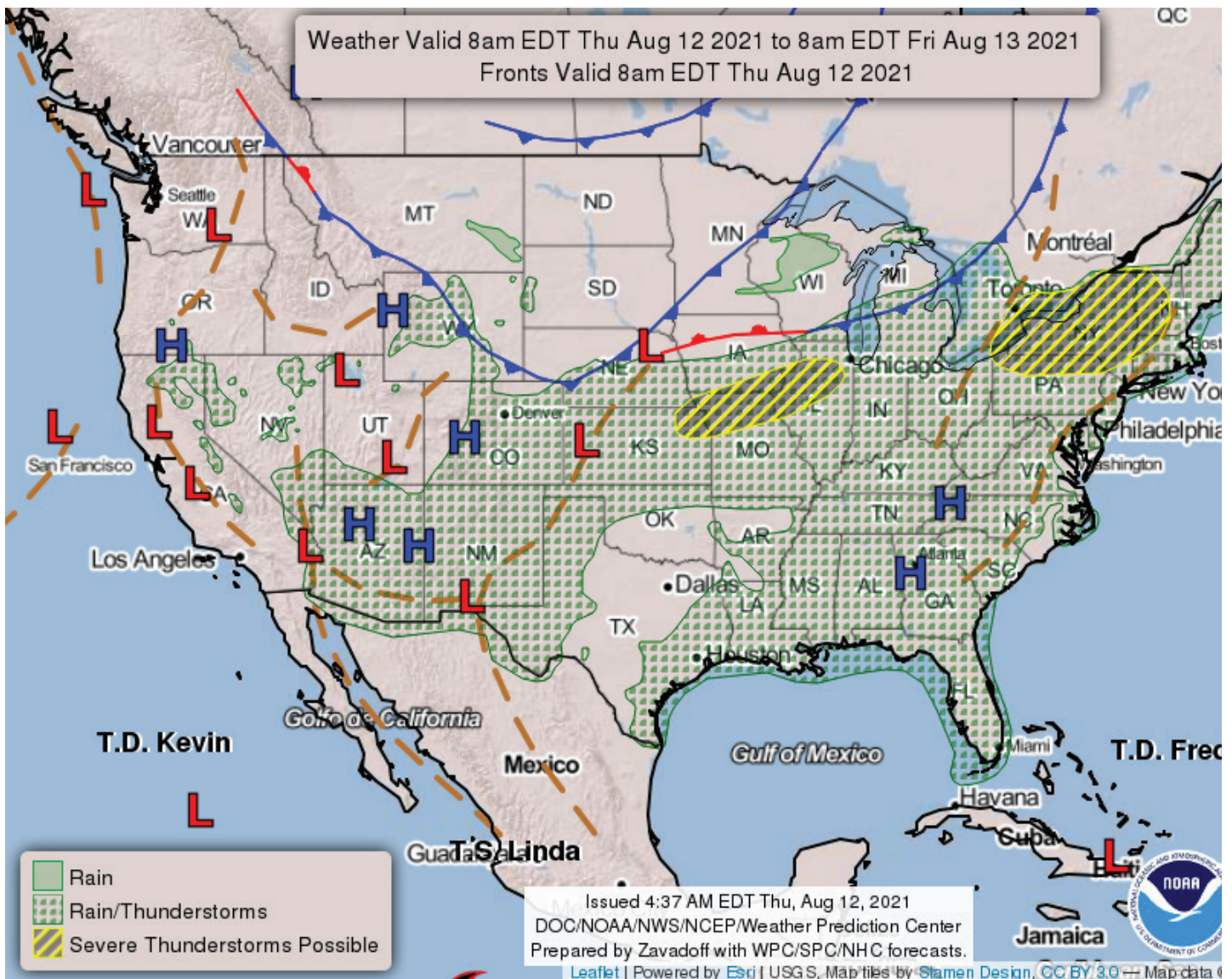
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 86.8°F at 5:00 PM
Low Temp: 59.7 °F at 7:15 AM
Wind: 15 mph at 3:00 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 102° in 1933
Record Low: 40° in 1898
Average High: 84°F
Average Low: 58°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 0.80
Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12
Average Precip to date: 14.90
Precip Year to Date: 8.39
Sunset Tonight: 8:45 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:32 a.m.





WHEN GOD DOES NOT ANSWER

We pray and we persevere. We watch and we wonder. We wait and we become weary. We know that God is there - somewhere. He has responded to our requests before. But where is He now? We stand before Him with great expectations and outstretched hands yet nothing is happening. We cannot help but ask why. He promised us that He would never leave us nor forsake us. Where is He when we need Him?

So, what happens when we pray and there is no answer? Listen to our Psalmist: "Why, O Lord, do You reject me and hide Your face from me?" He seems to have turned from confidence to confusion. This God whom he called upon constantly with outstretched arms and unflinching faith is nowhere to be found. He felt abandoned!

Remember, this also happened to Jesus. In the Garden He cried, "If there is any other way than my death on the cross to save mankind, please make it known. Why, Father, can't You come up right now with plan 'B'?" But, God was silent. Absent. Gone!

On the cross He said, "My God, my God, where are You? Why have You abandoned me? I am alone, suffering for something I didn't do and You left me to be humiliated and suffer and die." And God was silent. Absent. Gone!

The prayer of the Psalmist, much like the prayer of Jesus on the cross, does not end in immediate resolution - like many of our prayers. But that does not mean that God does not hear or does not care and will never answer our requests.

Often when we pray and do not get the results we ask for when we ask for them, God is saying: "You may not get what you asked for when you asked for it. Just trust in me and do not waiver. What I have planned for you is far better."

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to know that You are present and at work in our lives completing the plan You have designed for us. Give us patience and trust! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 88:14 Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

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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

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

03-06-15-18-28

(three, six, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-eight)

Estimated jackpot: \$41,000

Lotto America

08-21-22-32-34, Star Ball: 5, ASB: 2

(eight, twenty-one, twenty-two, thirty-two, thirty-four; Star Ball: five; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.35 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$225 million

Powerball

12-18-20-29-30, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 3

(twelve, eighteen, twenty, twenty-nine, thirty; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$241 million

South Dakota virus cases double, hospitalizations jump

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Coronavirus cases in South Dakota more than doubled in the last week, health authorities reported Wednesday, as hospitalizations also saw a large jump in people with COVID-19.

The Department of Health reported 862 coronavirus infections in its weekly report, the Argus Leader reported, jumping from 429 cases reported the previous week. South Dakota has seen a resurgence of cases in recent weeks after the pandemic waned dramatically during the spring and early summer.

Hospitals reported 75 patients with COVID-19 — almost doubling the number from last week when there were 39 hospitalizations. Health officials also reported one more death, bringing the total death toll from COVID-19 to 2,051.

Minnesota man arrested on suspicion of South Dakota homicide

MOORHEAD, Minn. (AP) — Authorities say an 18-year-old Minnesota man was arrested Tuesday in connection with a 2019 homicide in eastern South Dakota.

Clay County, Minnesota, Sheriff Mark Empting says the Moorhead man is being held on a first degree murder charge out of Watertown, South Dakota.

Moorhead Police Capt. Deric Swenson says police apprehended the suspect after they were notified that an arrest warrant had been issued in South Dakota, KVRR-TV reported.

Watertown police reported in 2019 that a 16-year-old Moorhead boy was suspected of causing the death of 43-year-old Dawn Meyer as he attempted suicide. Police said the boy was driving a car when he slammed into an SUV on U.S. Highway 212 as Meyer was on her way to work.

Police said the boy was going at least 100 mph in a 35 mph zone. He was hospitalized with serious injuries. Empting said the suspect will be held in Moorhead until he's extradited to South Dakota.

Widow of man killed by South Dakota AG wants records private

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The widow of a man struck and killed on a South Dakota highway by the state's attorney general is attempting to block the release of her husband's mental health records.

A judge recently ordered several hospitals and clinics to provide records about Joe Boever's psychiatric

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state. The order from retired Circuit Court Judge John Brown came after a lawyer for Attorney General Jason Ravensborg alleged in court documents that Boever's Sept. 12 death may have been a suicide.

Brown was to review the records before deciding whether any of the information is relevant to Ravensborg's upcoming trial.

Jenny Boever argues that she has a substantial right to privacy under the South Dakota Constitution.

"The records sought by the Attorney General have a high likelihood of disclosing sensitive details about Jenny," her attorney, Scott Heidepriem of Sioux Falls, wrote in a letter to the judge that was publicly filed Tuesday.

Heidepriem's letter asks that the records receive "the utmost protection" against disclosure, KELO-TV reported.

Ravnsborg's trial on three misdemeanor driving offenses begins in Stanley County on Aug. 26. He is charged with operating a motor vehicle while using a mobile electronic device, illegal lane change and careless driving. His guilt or innocence will be up to Brown. Neither side requested a jury trial.

Investigators say Ravensborg was distracted and swerved out of his lane when he was driving on Highway 14 near Highmore when he struck and killed Boever, 55, who was walking along the highway with a flashlight. Ravensborg told a dispatcher he thought he hit a deer. Boever's body was discovered the following day.

Taliban take 10th Afghan provincial capital, squeezing Kabul

By TAMEEM AKHGAR, RAHIM FAIEZ and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban captured a strategic provincial capital near Kabul on Thursday, the 10th the insurgents have taken in a weeklong sweep across Afghanistan just weeks before the end of the American military mission there.

Seizing Ghazni cuts off a crucial highway linking the Afghan capital with the country's southern provinces, which similarly find themselves under assault as part of an insurgent push some 20 years after U.S. and NATO troops invaded and ousted the Taliban government.

While Kabul itself isn't directly under threat, the loss of Ghazni tightens the grip of a resurgent Taliban estimated to now hold some two-thirds of the nation, and thousands of people have fled their homes.

The latest U.S. military intelligence assessment suggests Kabul could come under insurgent pressure within 30 days and that, if current trends hold, the Taliban could gain full control of the country within a few months. The Afghan government may eventually be forced to pull back to defend the capital and just a few other cities.

The onslaught represented a stunning collapse of Afghan forces and renews questions about where the over \$830 billion spent by the U.S. Defense Department on fighting, training those troops, and reconstruction efforts went — especially as Taliban fighters ride on American-made Humvees and pickup trucks with M-16s slung across their shoulders.

It also raised fears that the Taliban would turn back the clock on the country and reimpose a brutal regime. Already there are reports of repressive restrictions on women and revenge killings.

Afghan security forces and the government have not responded to repeated requests for comment over the days of fighting.

On Thursday, the militants raised their white flags imprinted with an Islamic proclamation of faith over the city of Ghazni, just 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Kabul. Mohammad Arif Rahmani, a lawmaker from Ghazni, said the city had fallen to the insurgents. Ghazni provincial council member Amanullah Kamrani also told The Associated Press that but added that the two bases outside of the city remain held by government forces.

Militants crowded onto one seized Humvee and drove down one main road in Ghazni, with the golden dome of a mosque near the governor's office visible behind them, yelling: "God is great!" The insurgents, cradling their rifles, later gathered at one roundabout for an impromptu speech by a commander. One militant carried a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Kamrani alleged that Ghazni's provincial governor and police chief made a deal with the Taliban to flee

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after their surrender. Taliban video and photos purported to show the governor's convoy passing by Taliban fighters unstopped as part of the deal.

Later Thursday, Afghanistan's Interior Ministry said the governor and his deputies had been arrested over that alleged deal. The officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

The loss of Ghazni — which sits along the Kabul-Kandahar Highway that connects the Afghan capital to the southern provinces — could complicate resupply and movement for government forces, as well as squeeze the capital from the south.

Already, the Taliban's weeklong blitz has seen the militants seize nine other provincial capitals around the country. Many are in the country's northeast corner, pressuring Kabul from that direction as well.

Angry at pan-Arab satellite news network Al-Jazeera for reporting on troops earlier surrendering in Kunduz, military spokesman Gen. Ajmal Omar Shinwari said the channel would be investigated by authorities. Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar where the Taliban has a diplomatic office, said since it didn't "have a correspondent currently in Kunduz, we rely on reputed international news agencies" and used that material in its reports on the surrenders.

Fighting meanwhile raged in Lashkar Gah, one of Afghanistan's largest cities in the Taliban heartland of Helmand province, where surrounded government forces hoped to hold onto that provincial capital.

On Wednesday, a suicide car bombing marked the latest wave of violence to target the capital's regional police headquarters. By Thursday, the Taliban had taken the building, with some police officers surrendering to the militants and others retreating to the nearby governor's office that's still held by government forces, said Nasima Niazi, a lawmaker from Helmand.

Another suicide car bombing targeted the provincial prison, but the government still held it, she said.

Niazi criticized ongoing airstrikes targeting the area, saying civilians likely had been wounded and killed. "The Taliban used civilian houses to protect themselves, and the government, without paying any attention to civilians, carried out airstrikes," she said.

With the Afghan air power limited and in disarray, the U.S. Air Force is believed to be carrying out strikes to support Afghan forces. Aviation tracking data suggested U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers, F-15 fighter jets, drones and other aircraft were involved in the fighting overnight across the country, according to Australia-based security firm The Cavell Group.

The U.S. Air Force's Central Command, based in Qatar, did not respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Afghan forces and the insurgents are also battling for control of the western city of Herat, capital of a province with the same name. They have entered the city, but government forces are also still there, according to witnesses. Highways, including those leading to the airport, are closed and flights were suspended.

The success of the Taliban offensive also calls into question whether they would ever rejoin long-stalled peace talks in Doha, Qatar, aimed at moving Afghanistan toward an inclusive interim administration as the West hoped. Instead, the Taliban could come to power by force — or the country could splinter into factional fighting like it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The government's High Council for National Reconciliation called for peace talks to resume, saying it had submitted a plan to Qatar, without elaborating.

Ross Wilson, the charge d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, criticized the Taliban in a tweet Thursday.

"The Taliban's statements in Doha do not resemble their actions in Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand & Kandahar," the diplomat wrote, mentioning provinces seeing heavy fighting. "Attempts to monopolize power through violence, fear, & war will only lead to international isolation."

US keeping distance as Afghan forces face Taliban rout

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Afghan government forces are collapsing even faster than U.S. military leaders thought possible just a few months ago when President Joe Biden ordered a full withdrawal. But there's little appetite at the White House, the Pentagon or among the American public for trying to stop the rout and it probably is too late to do so.

Biden has made clear he has no intention of reversing the decision he made last spring, even as the

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outcome seems to point toward a Taliban takeover. With most U.S. troops now gone and the Taliban accelerating their battlefield gains, American military leaders are not pressing him to change his mind. They know that the only significant option would be for the president to restart the war he already decided to end.

The Taliban, who ruled the country from 1996 until U.S. forces invaded after the 9/11 attacks, captured three more provincial capitals Wednesday and another on Thursday, the 10th the insurgents have taken in a weeklong sweep that has given them effective control of about two-thirds of the country. The insurgents have no air force and are outnumbered by U.S.-trained Afghan defense forces, but they have captured territory with stunning speed.

John Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, said the Afghans still have time to save themselves from final defeat.

"No potential outcome has to be inevitable, including the fall of Kabul," Kirby told reporters. "It doesn't have to be that way. It really depends on what kind of political and military leadership the Afghans can muster to turn this around."

Biden made a similar point a day earlier, telling reporters that U.S. troops had done all they could over the past 20 years to assist the Afghans.

"They've got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation," he said.

The United States continues to support the Afghan military with limited airstrikes, but those have not made a strategic difference thus far and are scheduled to end when the U.S. formally ends its role in the war on Aug. 31. Biden could continue airstrikes beyond that date, but given his firm stance on ending the war, that seems unlikely.

"My suspicion, my strong suspicion, is that the 31st of August timeline's going to hold," said Carter Malkasian, who advised U.S. military leaders in Afghanistan and Washington.

Senior U.S. military officials had cautioned Biden that a full U.S. withdrawal could lead to a Taliban takeover, but the president decided in April that continuing the war was a waste. He said Tuesday that his decision holds, even amid talk that the Taliban could soon be within reach of Kabul, threatening the security of U.S. and other foreign diplomats.

The most recent American military assessment, taking into account the Taliban's latest gains, says Kabul could be under insurgent pressure by September and that the country could fall entirely to Taliban control within a couple of months, according to a defense official who discussed the internal analysis Wednesday on condition of anonymity.

Officials said that there has been no decision or order for an evacuation of American diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan. But one official said it is now time for serious conversations about whether the U.S. military should begin to move assets into the region to be ready in case the State Department calls for a sudden evacuation.

Kirby declined to discuss any evacuation planning, but one congressional official said a recent National Security Council meeting had discussed preliminary planning for a potential evacuation of the U.S. Embassy but came to no conclusions.

Any such plan would involve identifying U.S. troops, aircraft and other assets that may have to operate from within Afghanistan or nearby areas. The U.S. already has warships in the region, including the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier and the USS Iwo Jima amphibious ready group with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard.

Military officials watching the deteriorating situation said that so far the Taliban hasn't taken steps to threaten Kabul. But it isn't clear if the Taliban will wait until it has gained control of the bulk of the country before attempting to seize the capital.

Military commanders have long warned that it would be a significant challenge for the Afghan military to hold off the Taliban through the end of the year. In early May, shortly after Biden announced his withdrawal decision, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he foresaw "some really dramatic, bad possible outcomes" in a worst-case scenario. He held out hope that the government would unify and

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hold off the Taliban, and said the outcome could clarify by the end of the summer.

The security of the U.S. diplomatic corps has been talked about for months, even before the Taliban's battlefield blitz. The military has long had various planning options for evacuating personnel from Afghanistan. Those options would largely be determined by the White House and the State Department.

A key component of the options would be whether the U.S. military would have unfettered access to the Kabul international airport, allowing personnel to be flown systematically out of the capital. In a grimmer environment, American forces might have to fight their way in and out if the Taliban have infiltrated the city.

The U.S. also would have to determine who would be evacuated: just American embassy personnel and the U.S. military, or also other embassies, American citizens, and Afghans who worked with the U.S. In that last category are former interpreters and those who face retaliation from the Taliban. The U.S. has already started pulling out hundreds of those Afghans who assisted troops during the war.

Senior defense leaders have been talking and meeting daily, laying out their grim assessments of the security situation in Afghanistan. Officials pointed to the fall of Baghlan Province as a worrisome bellwether, because it provides the Taliban with a base and route to Kabul from the north.

Some Afghans blame neighboring Pakistan for Taliban gains

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — When Wahab disappeared from his home in Afghanistan to sign on for jihad, it was in neighboring Pakistan that he got his training.

The 20-year-old was recruited by childhood friends and was taken to a militant outpost in Parachinar, on Pakistan's rugged mountainous border with Afghanistan. There, he underwent training, preparing to fight alongside the Afghan Taliban, a relative told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because of fear of reprisals from militants and government security agents.

As the Taliban swiftly capture territory in Afghanistan, many Afghans blame Pakistan for the insurgents' success, pointing to their use of Pakistani territory in multiple ways. Pressure is mounting on Islamabad, which initially brought the Taliban to the negotiating table, to get them to stop the onslaught and go back to talks.

While analysts say Pakistan's leverage is often overstated, it does permit the Taliban leadership on its territory and its wounded warriors receive treatment in Pakistani hospitals. Their children are in school in Pakistan and some among them own property. Some among Pakistan's politicians have rebranded the insurgents as "the new, civilized Taliban."

Ismail Khan, a powerful U.S.-allied warlord, who is trying to defend his territory of Herat in western Afghanistan from a Taliban onslaught, told local media recently the war raging in his homeland was the fault of Pakistan.

"I can say openly to Afghans that this war, it isn't between Taliban and the Afghan Government. It is Pakistan's war against the Afghan nation," he said. "The Taliban are their resource and are working as a servant."

Pakistan has tried unsuccessfully to convince Afghans they don't want a Taliban government back in Afghanistan. They say the days of Pakistan seeing Afghanistan as a client state, to provide so-called "strategic depth" against its hostile neighbor India, is a thing of the past.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has told every public and private forum that Pakistan wants peace in Afghanistan, has no favorites in the battle and is deeply opposed to a military takeover by the Taliban.

The country's powerful army chief has twice walked out of meetings with the Taliban, frustrated at their intransigence and infuriated by what he sees as the Taliban's determination to return to full power in Afghanistan, according to senior security officials familiar with the meetings. The officials spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they had no authority to discuss the meetings.

Still, Afghans are unconvinced. Even the international community is skeptical. The United Nations last week rebuffed Pakistan's request to address a special meeting on Afghanistan to again give its side.

The criticism is fueled by images of slain Taliban fighters being buried in Pakistan at funerals attended

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by hundreds, waving the group's flags. Last year, Prime Minister Khan called Osama bin Laden a martyr in a speech to Parliament, seen as a nod to militants.

When the Taliban were battling Afghan security forces in an assault on the Afghan border town Spin Boldak, wounded insurgents were treated at Pakistani hospitals in Chaman. The Taliban took the town and still hold it.

A doctor in Chaman told the AP he treated dozens of wounded Taliban. Several were transferred to hospitals in the Pakistani city of Quetta for further treatment, he said. Quetta is also where several in the Taliban leadership reportedly live, as well as in the Arabian Sea port city of Karachi. The doctor spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

In thousands of madrassas, or religious schools, around Pakistan, some students are inspired to jihad in Afghanistan, according to analysts as well as Pakistani and international rights groups.

Their recruitment largely goes on unhindered, interrupted occasionally when a local news story reports bodies of fighters returning from Afghanistan. Last month, Pakistani authorities sealed the Darul-Aloom-Ahya-ul Islam madrassa outside Peshawar after the body of the cleric's nephew returned home to a hero's burial. The madrassa had operated freely for decades, even as the cleric admitted he sent his students to fight in Afghanistan.

One of Wahab's cousins, Salman, went from a madrassa in Pakistan to join the Pakistani Taliban several years ago. Wahab was inspired to join the militants by propaganda videos purporting to show atrocities against Muslims by foreign troops. He ran away from his home in Afghanistan's border regions earlier this year, but his family was able to track him down in Pakistan and bring him home before he became a fighter, his relative said.

In mosques and on the streets in Pakistan's northwest Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province, militants preach jihad and raise money, the relative said, though they are less aggressive in recruiting because of Pakistani military operations in the area in recent years.

Still, Amir Rana, executive director of the independent Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, said that unless Pakistani authorities adopt a "zero tolerance" for jihadis, the country will forever face international criticism and suspicion. "Justifying it has to stop," he said.

In response to AP's request for comment, a senior security official acknowledged that sympathies for extremists exist in conservative Pakistan. He said it began with a U.S.-backed program to motivate Afghans to fight the Soviets in the 1980s, which glorified jihad and portrayed the occupying troops as "godless communists." He said Pakistan is firm it doesn't want a Taliban-only government in Kabul, saying it would fan extremism.

Two security officials denied that jihadi groups in the border region receive any official help. They said a nearly completed fence being built by Pakistan along the long border with Afghanistan will stop the smuggling of fighters across. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment.

Pakistan has its own concerns, accusing Afghanistan of harboring militants opposed to the Islamabad government. Pakistani security officials say their country's rival India is allowed by Kabul's intelligence agency to stage covert attacks against Pakistan using militants in Afghanistan. In the last six months, they say more than 200 Pakistani military personnel have been killed by insurgents crossing the border,

The border, known as the Durand Line, speaks to the deeply troubled relationship between the two neighbors. To this day, Afghan leaders do not recognize the Durand Line and claim some Pakistani areas dominated by ethnic Pashtuns as Afghan territory, Pashtuns on both sides of the border share tribal links, and Afghan Pashtuns form the backbone of the Taliban.

Analysts say Islamabad has fueled extremist sentiment and worked with militants when it was in its interests. It was during the long fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency developed deep ties with many of the most radical of Afghans, including the notorious Haqqani group, arguably the strongest faction among the Afghan Taliban.

"Islamabad does wield extensive leverage over the Taliban," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center. "But the Taliban, which is fighting a war it

believes it's winning, has the luxury of resisting Pakistani entreaties to ease violence and commit to talks."
"For the Taliban, the calculus is simple: Why quit when you're ahead?"

First water cuts in US West supply to hammer Arizona farmers

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

CASA GRANDE, Ariz. (AP) — A harvester rumbles through the fields in the early morning light, mowing down rows of corn and chopping up ears, husks and stalks into mulch for feed at a local dairy.

The cows won't get their salad next year, at least not from this farm. There won't be enough water to plant the corn crop.

Climate change, drought and high demand are expected to force the first-ever mandatory cuts to a water supply that 40 million people across the American West depend on — the Colorado River. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's projection next week will spare cities and tribes but hit Arizona farmers hard.

They knew this was coming. They have left fields unplanted, laser leveled the land, lined canals, installed drip irrigation, experimented with drought-resistant crops and found other ways to use water more efficiently.

Still, the cutbacks in Colorado River supply next year will be a blow for agriculture in Pinal County, Arizona's top producer of cotton, barley and livestock. Dairies largely rely on local farms for feed and will have to search farther out for supply, and the local economy will take a hit.

The cuts are coming earlier than expected as a drought has intensified and reservoirs dipped to historic lows across the West. Scientists blame climate change for the warmer, more arid conditions over the past 30 years.

Standing next to a dry field, his boots kicking up dust, farmer Will Thelander said "more and more of the farm is going to look like this next year because we won't have the water to keep things growing everywhere we want."

His father, Dan, tried to steer his kids away from farming, not because water would be scarce but because development was expected to swallow farms between Phoenix and Tucson where their family grows alfalfa, corn for cows, and cotton, some destined for overseas markets.

"It was fun just keeping the family business going, working with my dad," said Thelander, a 34-year-old, fourth-generation farmer whose office is a dusty pickup truck.

Thelander manages almost half of the 6,000 acres his family farms under Tempe Farming Co., much of it devoted to corn for cows. He's not planning on growing that crop next year, opting for others that will be more profitable on less land.

He didn't plant anything on 400 acres this year to cut down on water use. Farmers' Colorado River water comes by way of Lake Mead, which sits on the Arizona-Nevada border and serves as a barometer for water deliveries to Arizona, Nevada, California and Mexico, in the river's lower basin.

The nation's largest reservoir already has hit the level that triggers mandatory shortages — 1,075 feet (328 meters) above sea level. The Bureau of Reclamation will issue the official projection for 2022 water deliveries Monday, giving users time to plan for what's to come.

Arizona is expected to lose 512,000 acre-feet of water, about one-fifth of the state's Colorado River supply but less than 8% of its total water. Nevada will lose 21,000 acre-feet, and Mexico will lose 80,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is enough water to supply one to two households a year.

The cuts will be most deeply felt in Arizona, which entered into an agreement in 1968 for junior rights to Colorado River water in exchange for U.S. funding to build a 336-mile (540-kilometer) canal to send the water through the desert to major cities.

Agriculture won't end in Pinal County, but the cuts to farmers will force more of them to rely on groundwater that's already overpumped.

Hardly anyone expects a more than 20-year megadrought to improve. Models show the Colorado River will shrink even more in coming years because of climate change, leading to additional cuts that could ultimately affect home taps.

The river carries melted snow from the Rocky Mountains and other tributaries through seven Western

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states, providing drinking water, nourishment for crops and habitat for plants and animals. Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the river's two largest reservoirs, are popular for recreation and their dams produce hydropower for the region.

"It's such a significant river," said Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University. "It used to be called the Nile of the West, which is almost impossible to believe these days."

Arizona has positioned itself to weather the cuts by storing water underground and in Lake Mead and through conservation. It's also trying to secure other water sources. Among the options are importing groundwater to metropolitan Phoenix and Tucson from other parts of the state, leasing more water from tribes, creating a more robust supply of recycled water and desalinating water from the Sea of Cortez in Mexico.

"They all work together," said Ted Cooke, general manager of the Central Arizona Project, which manages the canal system that carries river water. "Some of them are more near term, some of them are farther away, some of them are more costly than others, but all of those things need to be done."

Under a drought contingency plan that Western states signed in 2019, some of the water that farmers will lose will be replaced by other sources next year. Arizona, the Central Arizona Project, environmental groups and others have kicked in millions of dollars to soften the blow to farmers and improve ground-water infrastructure.

The Maricopa-Stanfield Irrigation and Drainage District, where Thelander farms, plans to have nine wells complete by year's end.

District President Bryan Hartman said it won't pump anywhere near what it used to and will be looking for other sources, likely turning to cities and tribes with higher priority water rights.

The next few months will be critical to planning for a future with less water.

"Growers will be asking, 'How much water are we going to get, how many acre-feet, what are the flows going to be,' and that will determine the cropping pattern," said Hartman, himself a farmer.

Paul "Paco" Ollerton, 66, who largely grows feed for animals, will plant 25% to 35% less land next year.

He thought he was done with farming back in 2005 when he sold his land, partly because he knew water would be hard to get.

"I just finally woke up one day and thought, the secretary of the Interior one day is going to say, 'It's more important for you to flush your toilet and have water to brush your teeth with than farm,'" Ollerton said.

Too young to retire, he leased back the land and has farmed across Pinal County.

One of his farms along a stretch of interstate leading to San Diego uses drip irrigation that makes water use more efficient and crops more productive, he said. Making the rounds in his cotton fields, he flushes the system's valves with Aggie, a yellow lab who rides in the backseat of his pickup truck.

His two children talk about being farmers, but he doesn't promote the long hours or uncertainty. Three generations of farming likely ends with him.

For Thelander, he's considered getting out of farming and starting a trucking business. But he also sees hope in guayule, a drought-resistant shrub that could be used in the production of rubber. His family's farm is participating in research for a tire manufacturer to see if it can be used on a large scale.

"This is my Hail Mary, trying to save farming for myself," Thelander said.

#MeToo Take 2? Movement's strength hailed amid Cuomo fallout

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Anita Hill educated a nation about workplace sexual harassment back in 1991 with calm, deliberate testimony against Clarence Thomas. And today, 30 years later, she speaks in the same measured tones, eschewing dramatic declarations — especially of victory — and sounding more like the soft-spoken academic she is than an activist.

But Hill was certain enough, after Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced his resignation this week, to make this pronouncement: "We've made progress. The conversation has changed. And #MeToo did that."

Hill was joined by a number of leading figures connected with #MeToo in her feeling that the movement,

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launched in 2017 with revelations about Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, had reached a significant milestone this week, regardless of fits and starts along the way.

"When you've got millions of people talking about their experiences ... and understanding they are not alone, I think that sent a message to the American public that we needed to stop being in denial about these problems," Hill said in an interview after the governor said Tuesday he was resigning in two weeks, amid a slew of harassment allegations.

"Because there were just too many voices and too many experiences for us to say collectively that this doesn't happen. So I think that was the role that #MeToo had to play, in order for us to get where we are today."

To attorney Debra Katz, who's represented women accusing powerful men of sexual misconduct for four decades — including Christine Blasey Ford, accuser of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and Charlotte Bennett, one of the earliest Cuomo accusers — the resignation marks "a really important moment of reckoning" for a movement that has shifted in and out of the spotlight in the last year or two. Just last month, many worried that the sight of comedian Bill Cosby freed from prison — after the reversal of his conviction on a technicality — would have a chilling effect on the movement.

Katz said the Cuomo result would simply never have happened before #MeToo. She noted specifically the domino effect of one accuser coming out — Lindsey Boylan, first — and then others like Bennett emerging, inspired by the courage of fellow accusers and enraged by attempts to discredit them.

"What you had was women supporting one another, because in this post #MeToo moment, and maybe because of the (young) age of these complainants ... they were just not going to give him a pass," Katz said.

Most crucial, said Katz and others, was what they called the exhaustive and thorough investigation into Cuomo's behavior conducted by New York Attorney General Letitia James — a huge contrast, they said, to that conducted into Kavanaugh's behavior by the FBI.

Hill said that the breadth and transparency of the New York investigation, which detailed the harassment accusations of 11 women, was "something we've never seen before."

"It was a model, I think, for how we can move forward and address these issues, whether in government or in corporations or in the legal system," she said. Like Katz, she decried the Kavanaugh investigation; Kavanaugh was eventually confirmed despite Ford's accusations, as was Thomas, in 1991, despite Hill's testimony.

Cuomo and his lawyers have attacked the attorney general's report, saying it glossed over gaps in the evidence, left out facts in his favor and accepted unsupported allegations against him as true without proof. While he's acknowledged that some of the incidents with women did occur, he's said he didn't realize he was making anyone uncomfortable, and denied the most serious allegation he faced — that he groped an aide's breast — as fabricated.

Tarana Burke, the activist who gave the #MeToo movement its name, noted that many had been disturbed by the fact that Cuomo, who presented himself as a strong ally of the #MeToo movement, is accused of engaging in harassing behavior at the very same time. But she stressed that it's important thing to focus not on the accused but on the accusers, and their increasing bravery in coming forward — an encouraging sign for the future.

"The fact that he would do this lets me know that power is just insidious," she said of Cuomo. "I don't know how much headway we're making in that area. But we're making headway in the other area where women are coming forward. And I think that's a big victory."

"I think it's a big thing to look at these young people," she added of the youth of Cuomo's accusers (Bennett, for example, is 25.) "This is a movement that has to stay young and fresh. When people think of #MeToo, I want them to think of 22-year-old college students ... (people) thinking bigger and brighter and braver and bolder than I am."

Burke has long said it's dangerous to view each case as a win or a loss, because satisfaction with one can easily turn to disappointment with the next, as when Cosby was freed. But she said she'd be lying if she didn't feel intense satisfaction when she heard, from her mother on the phone, that the governor

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was stepping down.

"I actually cursed, which I try not to do in front of my mom, but I was excited," she said. "And my excitement was about, can you imagine how amazing that must feel to these 11 women who, conversely, their lives could have been completely destroyed? These women could have been ... silenced, blackballed and worse. So I feel really good for them, that they have some sense of relief and accountability."

Like Burke, Hill has always said no one case should serve as a referendum on the movement.

One point, though, seems likely to her: Five years ago, the results in the Cuomo case would not have been the same. "I don't know that the public would have pushed back so strongly," she said. "I don't know if people in the party would have called for a resignation."

Still, work remains, especially in the area of accountability, said Hill, who along with her teaching at Brandeis University chairs the Hollywood Commission, which works toward eliminating sexual harassment in the entertainment industry.

Hill noted that a recent commission survey found a strong belief in the industry that sexual harassers will not be held accountable.

"This is (just) one example," she said of the Cuomo case. "There are probably people who will still not believe that a person who is in power will be called to reckon for violations in the workplace. And the question we have to ask ourselves is: Is this an aberration, or is this something that can be the beginning of a trend, if we do it right?"

Northwest sizzles as heat wave hits many parts of US

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Volunteers and county employees set up cots and stacked hundreds of bottles of water in an air-conditioned cooling center in a vacant building in Portland, Oregon, one of many such places being set up as the Northwest sees another stretch of sizzling temperatures.

Scorching weather also hit other parts of the country this week. The weather service said heat advisories and warnings would be in effect from the Midwest to the Northeast and mid-Atlantic through at least Friday.

In Portland, temperatures neared 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 Celsius) on Wednesday and the mercury could soar past the century mark Thursday and Friday. Authorities trying to provide relief to vulnerable people are mindful of a record-shattering heat wave earlier this summer that killed hundreds in the Pacific Northwest.

The high temperatures in Portland, part of a usually temperate region, would break all-time records this week if the late June heat wave had not done so already. 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.

People began coming into a 24-hour cooling center in north Portland before it opened Wednesday.

The first few people in were experiencing homelessness, a population vulnerable to extreme heat. Among them was December Snedecor, who slept two nights in the same center in June when temperatures reached 116 F (47 C).

She said she planned to sleep there again this week because the heat in her tent was unbearable.

"I poured water over myself a lot. It was up in the teens, hundred-and-something heat. It made me dizzy. It was not good," Snedecor said of the June heat. "I've just got to stay cool. I don't want to die."

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a state of emergency and activated an emergency operations center, citing the potential for disruptions to the power grid and transportation. Besides opening cooling centers, city and county governments are extending public library hours and waiving bus fare for those headed to cooling centers. A 24-hour statewide help line will direct callers to the nearest cooling shelter and offer safety tips.

Emergency officials have sent alerts to phones, said Dan Douthit, spokesman for the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management.

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. Intense heat waves and a historic drought in the American West reflect climate change that is making weather more extreme.

The June heat in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia killed hundreds of people and served as a wake-up call for what's ahead in a warming world. It was virtually impossible without human-caused climate change, a detailed scientific analysis found.

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'll have to walk to work Thursday, the day when temperatures could again soar.

"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.

Do the COVID-19 vaccines affect my chances of pregnancy?

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

Do the COVID-19 vaccines affect my chances of pregnancy?

No, there's no evidence that any vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines, influence your chances of getting pregnant despite a myth suggesting otherwise.

Medical experts say there's no biological reason the shots would affect fertility. And real-world evidence offers more assurance for anyone worried about their chances of conceiving: In Pfizer's study, a similar number of women became pregnant in the group given the vaccine as in the group given dummy shots.

Researchers are starting to study anecdotal reports of short-term changes to periods after the vaccine, but there's no indication so far that the shots put fertility at risk, said Dr. Mary Jane Minkin, a gynecologist and professor at the Yale University School of Medicine.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and obstetrician groups also recommend COVID-19 vaccines for pregnant individuals, who have a higher risk of severe illness if infected with the coronavirus. Research shows pregnant people who get the virus are more likely to be admitted to intensive care, receive invasive ventilation and die than their nonpregnant peers.

The CDC also followed tens of thousands of pregnant women who got the vaccines and found they had comparable pregnancy outcomes to pregnant women before the pandemic.

So whether you are thinking about having a baby, trying to conceive or undergoing fertility treatments, you should not delay vaccination, says Dr. Denise Jamieson, chair of the department of gynecology and obstetrics at Emory University School of Medicine.

Republicans take to mask wars as virus surges in red states

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Republicans are battling school districts in their own states' urban, heavily Democratic areas over whether students should be required to mask up as they head back to school — reigniting ideological divides over mandates even as the latest coronavirus surge ravages the reddest, most unvaccinated parts of the nation.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida has issued an executive order threatening to cut funding from school districts that defy a statewide ban on classroom mask mandates. He's now suggesting his office could direct officials to withhold pay from superintendents who impose such rules anyway.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster is threatening to withhold funding to schools in his state's capital of Columbia over masking rules, while Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has vowed to enforce a similar order against mask mandates — despite large school districts around the state, including Dallas and Austin, promising to go ahead with classroom face covering requirements.

Even the Republican gubernatorial candidate in the purple state of Virginia has decried school mask mandates in the name of parental rights.

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The posture comes with some clear political incentives for Republicans. The party's base has opposed mask rules for more than a year and long recoiled at the word "mandate." Still, some within the GOP's own ranks have begun to warn of the safety and political risks involved in making schools — and children's health — the chief battleground for an ideological fight.

"It's very visceral," said Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican strategist in Texas. "We're approaching this very tribalistically, very angrily, very politically," he said, adding that both sides are digging in "instead of trying to get together, I believe, at the most local level possible, and saying, 'Hey, let's try and work out what's best.'"

The issue has packed local school meetings and sparked heated exchanges. Video of a meeting in Tennessee's Williamson County showed angry parents chanting "No more masks" and following mask supporters to the parking lot to shout obscenities. First-term U.S. Rep. Madison Cawthorn, R-N.C., recently showed up to denounce masking rules approved by county school board members in his district, calling them "nothing short of psychological child abuse."

It all comes as some Democrat-run states are moving in the opposite direction, reimposing masking rules for classrooms and other public spaces after easing them in recent months, when it seemed the pandemic might be waning.

That's consistent with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations that children mask up in school. A recent report by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association found that nearly 4.3 million U.S. COVID-19 cases have affected children. That's about 14% of all cases nationwide, though the report said hospitalization and death among children is "uncommon."

In Florida, which has seen cases and hospitalizations rise sharply, some school districts are suing to oppose DeSantis' order. Others, like Leon County, which includes the state capital of Tallahassee, plan to require students to wear masks regardless. Superintendent Rocky Hanna said in a letter to the governor that his district sought "the flexibility and the autonomy to make the decisions for our schools."

"Unfortunately, it has become well-politicized," Hanna said in announcing his decision, adding that if "things went sideways" as school begins anew "and heaven forbid we lost a child to this virus, I can't just simply blame the governor of the state of Florida."

Jasmine Burney-Clark, founder of Equal Ground Education Fund, which has spent months helping facilitate vaccinations for Floridians, said "school boards across the state are saying, 'We're going to call your bluff, and we're going to require mask mandates for our students.'"

"You're not taking the lead so, if you want schools to open, here's what you need to do," Burney-Clark said districts are telling DeSantis.

Some have noted the push for bans against mask mandates runs counter to the traditional Republican political ethos of limited government and "local control," or leaving decision-making on things like community ordinances and schools up to officials in the area.

U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., said he opposes DeSantis' orders against school mask mandates, saying on CNN Sunday, "The local official should have control here."

One Republican governor has backtracked. Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson called the state's lawmakers into special session to consider loosening a ban on mask mandates he now says he regrets having signed in April. A judge has already temporarily blocked the ban.

But not all school districts are pushing mask mandates, either. After Kentucky Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear ordered masking rules in his state's schools, some superintendents applauded. One offered a voicemail call to parents that blasted the governor as a "liberal lunatic" and added that "the professional opinion of your superintendent doesn't matter. The opinion of your school board doesn't matter."

In Virginia, Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat, argues that the CDC's latest recommendations serve as a de facto mask mandate for schools since a state law passed in March requires following federal guidance. Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin has vowed not to mandate masks in schools if elected, saying, "This should be a decision that parents can make."

Unlike DeSantis, Abbott and many other leading Republicans, Youngkin has prioritized his business

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experience as a former private equity manager more than his loyalty to former President Donald Trump — little surprise in a state President Joe Biden carried by 10 percentage points. Still, his comments show that mask opposition has grown beyond ardent pro-Trumpers.

Monmouth University polling released last week found that 73% of Republicans oppose bringing back masking and social distancing guidelines, while 85% of Democrats support doing so. Independents were more deeply divided, with 42% in support and 55% opposed.

"It's expanded beyond the people you initially see at the Trump rallies," Patrick Murray, Monmouth's polling director, said of Republican mask opposition. But he also noted that so much of the party has now absorbed the former president's message that "all of those people who were considered moderate Republicans in the past have become, on almost every issue now, nearly lockstep with whatever the Donald Trump position is."

Support for masks in classrooms may be higher. A Gallup survey in late July found that 57% of parents with school-age children favor mask mandates for unvaccinated students — whose ranks dominate elementary schools because vaccines are only available for people age 12 and over.

A May poll by the RAND Corporation found that such attitudes break sharply along racial lines. Some 86% of Black parents, 78% of Hispanic parents and 89% of Asian parents said mask mandates for adults and children needed to be in place for them to feel safe in sending their children to school, compared with 53% of white parents who felt that way.

RAND senior policy researcher Heather Schwartz, the study's lead author, said one possible reason for the differences could be that parents in rural areas, which tend to be whiter, are more likely to oppose anti-COVID measures. Another may be the virus having killed minority Americans at higher rates than whites, she said.

The same survey found that 26% of white parents and 29% of rural parents felt schools should fully return to normal this fall. Schwartz said some of those respondents wrote things like "the government doesn't need to tell us what to do" in their responses.

"There's a sort of general masking attitude that's spilling over into schools," Schwartz said, "rather than the reverse."

Census data kicks off effort to reshape US House districts

By DAVID A. LIEB and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

Redistricting season officially kicks off with the release of detailed population data from the U.S. Census Bureau that will be used to redraw voting districts nationwide — potentially helping determine control of the U.S. House in the 2022 elections and providing an electoral edge for the next decade.

The new data being released Thursday will show which counties, cities and neighborhoods gained or lost the most people in the 2020 census. That will serve as the building block to redraw 429 U.S. House districts in 44 states and 7,383 state legislative districts across the U.S. The official goal is to ensure each district has roughly the same number of people.

But many Republicans and Democrats will be operating with another goal — to ensure the new lines divide and combine voters in ways that make it more likely for their party's candidates to win future elections, a process called gerrymandering. The parties' successes in that effort could determine whether taxes and spending grow, climate-change policies are approved or access to abortion is expanded or curtailed.

Republicans need to gain just five seats to take control of the U.S. House in the 2022 elections — a margin that could potentially be covered through artful redistricting.

"Redistricting really is the ballgame this cycle in the House," said David Wasserman, an analyst for congressional races at The Cook Political Report. "Even tiny changes to district lines could have huge implications that tip the balance of power in the House."

As they did after the 2010 census, Republicans will hold greater sway in the redistricting process.

The GOP will control redistricting in 20 states accounting for 187 U.S. House seats, including the growing states of Texas, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina. By contrast, Democrats will control redistricting in

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just eight states accounting for 75 seats, including New York and Illinois, where the loss of a seat in each gives them a chance to squeeze out Republican incumbents.

In 16 other states accounting for 167 U.S. House seats, districts will be drawn either by independent commissions or by politically split politicians with legislative chambers led by one party and governors of another. Six states have just one U.S. House seat, so there are no district lines to be drawn.

States with significant population shifts provide some of the best opportunities for parties to gain an advantage through redistricting. They can add a favorable district, eliminate one held by their opponent or redraw a competitive district to contain a more comfortable majority of supporters.

In Texas, where Republicans hold 23 of the 36 U.S. House seats, fast growth in suburban Houston, Dallas and Austin helped the state gain two seats in the new round of redistricting. That growth has been driven by the migration of young, Latino, Black and college-educated residents — all core Democratic constituencies, said Kelly Ward Burton, president of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.

"If you look at how the population has shifted over the decade and you draw a map that is consistent with that, Democrats gain seats," Burton said.

But Republicans in charge of redistricting could draw maps that split up those Democratic-leaning voters, adding some to predominantly Republican districts to give the GOP a shot at winning even more seats in Texas.

In Florida, which also is gaining a U.S. House seat, Republicans could use redistricting as an opportunity to redraw lines in rapidly growing central Florida to try to ensure Democratic-held seats have more GOP voters. Democratic Reps. Charlie Crist in St. Petersburg and Val Demings in Orlando are pursuing gubernatorial and U.S. Senate bids, respectively, leaving those districts without incumbents and making them obvious targets for reshaping.

After the 2010 census, Republicans who controlled redistricting in far more states than Democrats drew maps that gave them a greater political advantage in more states than either party had in the past 50 years, according to a new Associated Press analysis.

But Republicans won't hold as much power as they did last time in some key states. Republican-led legislatures will be paired with Democratic governors in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, which both had full GOP control after the 2010 census. In Michigan, a voter-approved citizens commission will handle redistricting instead of lawmakers and the governor. And in Ohio, voter-approved redistricting reforms will require majority Republicans to gain the support of minority Democrats for the new districts to last a full decade.

Ultimately, no matter how lines are drawn, elections are won based on the quality of candidates and their stance on issues, said Adam Kincaid, executive director of the National Republican Redistricting Trust, the GOP's redistricting hub.

"Republicans will take back the House next year because of Congressional Democrats' outdated policies and President Biden's failed leadership," Kincaid said.

The redistricting process will be conducted on a compressed timeline. States are getting the data more than four months later than originally scheduled because of difficulties in conducting the 2020 census during the coronavirus pandemic.

That means map-drawers will have to work quickly to meet constitutional deadlines in some states or seek judicial approval to take longer. Ohio's constitution, for example, sets a Sept. 15 deadline for a board to approve new state legislative maps.

"We're in a bit of a fix over how quickly we can get this done," said Ohio Senate President Matt Huffman, a Republican who is a member of the redistricting board.

In many states, the new districts are likely to face lawsuits as political parties continue jockeying for the best possible maps. After the 2010 census, redistricting lawsuits lasted for much of the following decade and led to significant changes in some states. Democrats gained a total of 11 seats in the U.S. House after courts struck down Republican-drawn districts in four states and ordered new ones between the 2016 and 2020 elections.

"If it hadn't been for Democratic lawsuits that overturned Republican-drawn maps in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida and Virginia, Democrats would not be sitting in the majority in the House right now,"

Wasserman said.

Biden's complicated new task: keeping Democrats together

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden overcame skepticism, deep political polarization and legislative gamesmanship to win bipartisan approval in the Senate this week of his \$1 trillion infrastructure bill.

But as the bill moves to consideration in the House alongside a \$3.5 trillion budget that achieves the rest of Biden's agenda, the president is facing an even more complicated task. He must keep a diverse, sometimes fractious Democratic Party in line behind the fragile compromises that underpin both measures.

If Biden and Democratic leaders in Congress hope to succeed with what they've called a two-track legislative strategy, the months ahead will almost certainly be dominated by a tedious balancing act. With exceedingly slim majorities in Congress, Biden can't afford many defections in a party whose members include moderates and progressives.

"Is it going to be easy?" Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Wednesday. "Absolutely not. But if past is prologue, we got a chance — a decent chance."

The intra-party jockeying began even as the Senate was putting the finishing touches on its overnight voting marathon that didn't end until nearly dawn Wednesday. In a letter to leadership, Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, one of two high-profile moderate senators, expressed misgivings about the size of the \$3.5 trillion package.

At the same time, progressives in the House, fresh off forcing the administration's hand on reviving a moratorium on evictions, have made clear they see a moment to wield power.

With no votes to spare in the evenly split 50-50 Senate and a slim margin in the House, any single senator or a few representatives could deny Biden the majority he needs for passage. Knowing that they must appease all in their party, Biden and the Democratic congressional leadership have pushed to simultaneously pursue the infrastructure and budget bills.

But Kyrsten Sinema, the enigmatic Arizona senator who stands as one of the moderates in the caucus, already announced her position, declaring she cannot vote for a \$3.5 trillion package. And on Wednesday, Manchin made it clear that he, too, believes the current price tag is too much.

"It is simply irresponsible to continue spending at levels more suited to respond to a Great Depression or Great Recession — not an economy that is on the verge of overheating," Manchin said in a statement. He urged colleagues "to seriously consider this reality as this budget process unfolds."

Biden on Wednesday seemed to take aim at the moderates' concerns that his plan would pump too much money into the economy, declaring that his agenda was "a long-term investment" and "fiscally responsible."

The president portrayed the package not as economic stimulus, but as a more substantial reworking of the support provided for child care, elder care and other aspects of American life.

"If your primary concern right now is the cost of living, you should support this plan, not oppose it," the president said.

In the House, a similar dynamic is at play, as nine centrist Democratic lawmakers sent Speaker Nancy Pelosi a letter this week warning against big spending in the budget bill. House Democrats are expected to take up the budget resolution for a vote later this month, but the holdouts suggested they would resist a package of that size amid the backdrop of potentially rising inflation and debt, and the new expenditures that could be needed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

Some moderates feared that a vote in favor of the bigger bill could cost them their seats next fall; one moderate Democrat, veteran Rep. Ron Kind of Wisconsin, announced Tuesday that he was retiring.

But House progressives argued the opposite approach, saying they could not consent to passing the bipartisan bill without the bigger package.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, the chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said voters gave Democrats control of Congress and the White House to "not only to improve roads and bridges, but to improve their daily lives, too. We can do that by using this governing moment to ensure that President Biden's

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complete agenda is realized.”

On a call with the House Democratic caucus Wednesday, Pelosi reiterated her position that both the bipartisan bill and the broader package will move in tandem, according to a person granted anonymity to discuss the private call.

“The President has said he’s all for the bipartisan approach: Bravo!” Pelosi told the lawmakers, the person said. While that’s progress, she said, “It ain’t the whole vision.”

Pelosi told the lawmakers she was not “freelancing” in her approach but relying on what she called the “consensus” position of the caucus. The Senate began its recess Wednesday but the House will return in less than two weeks.

From Biden’s blueprint, the package will essentially rewire the social safety net and expand the role of government across industries and livelihoods, on par with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal or Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society. White House aides are encouraged that, so far, both the liberals and moderates have engaged in mere saber rattling with no red lines drawn.

Much as they did during the Senate infrastructure negotiations, Biden and senior staffers will relentlessly work the phones to assuage wary members while understanding that both sides need to publicly defend their positions. And the president is expected to travel in support of the bills later this month.

“I think we will get enough Democrats to vote for it,” Biden said Tuesday. “For the Republicans who supported this bill, you showed a lot of courage. To the Democrats who supported this bill, we can be proud.”

Schumer convened a private meeting this week of the Senate committee chairmen who will be drafting what is certain to be an enormous bill, giving them a Sept. 15 deadline to produce the legislation. House chairs have been similarly at work.

The majority leader acknowledged the tough road ahead, noting the diversity of views among senators — from Vermont’s Bernie Sanders, who initially proposed a more sweeping, nearly \$6 trillion plan, to Manchin and those in the center. But he said Democrats are united in their desire to get it done.

“We have a diverse caucus, from Bernie Sanders, we have Joe Manchin, and everybody in between,” Schumer said. “There are some in my caucus who might believe it’s too much. There are some in my caucus we believe it’s too little. We are going to all come together to get something done.”

An array of progressive and pro-White House groups will aim to keep Democrats in line by spending nearly \$100 million to promote Biden’s agenda while lawmakers are on recess. An outside coalition of progressive organizations launched a war room and is planning to host over 1,000 events and actions to bombard the home districts of members of Congress with ads — both televised and digital — to keep the pressure on to follow through on their votes as well as to underscore much of the agenda’s popularity with the public.

New Zealand plans to start reopening borders early next year

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand, which has completely stamped out the coronavirus, plans to cautiously reopen its borders to international travelers early next year, the government said Thursday.

Officials also said they would delay second shots of the Pfizer vaccine in order to speed up first shots to protect more people as the threat of the delta variant grows.

New Zealand’s success in erasing the coronavirus has allowed life to return almost to normal. The South Pacific nation of 5 million people has reported just 26 deaths since the pandemic began.

That’s been achieved in part by closing borders to those who aren’t residents or citizens.

But many question whether its feasible for New Zealand to maintain a zero-tolerance approach to the virus once international travel resumes.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the government planned to follow the advice of experts and maintain the elimination strategy.

“While the pandemic continues to rage overseas, and the virus continues to change and mutate, the best thing we can do is lock in the gains achieved to date while keeping our options open,” she said.

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Ardern said the borders would not reopen until after New Zealand's vaccine rollout was completed at the end of the year. The rollout has been much slower than in most developed nations, although is beginning to accelerate.

Ardern said that from the first quarter of next year, the country would begin allowing travelers to arrive on a carefully managed basis.

Fully vaccinated travelers from low-risk countries would not be required to quarantine, she said. Those arriving from medium-risk countries would need to complete some form of quarantine. And those arriving from high-risk countries, or who were unvaccinated, would need to stay 14 days in a quarantine hotel run by the military, Ardern said.

The government did not provide a ranking of countries by risk, saying it could change quickly.

Ardern said a new trial would begin in October that would allow some business travelers to quarantine at home rather than in military-run hotels as a test of the new system it planned to introduce for medium-risk countries next year.

Ardern also announced it was increasing the standard time scheduled between Pfizer vaccine doses from three weeks to six weeks. She said the initial groups targeted for the vaccine — border workers and older people — had already been fully vaccinated.

"From a population basis, it makes sense to get as many New Zealanders at least partially vaccinated quickly," Ardern said.

The changes were generally welcomed by business owners, including those in the struggling tourism industry. Before the pandemic, more than 3 million overseas travelers visited New Zealand each year and tourism was among the country's largest industries.

"It's important to have a roadmap so all businesses, including tourism operators, can plan ahead and make informed decisions," said Chris Roberts, the chief executive of Tourism Industry Aotearoa.

Opposition Leader Judith Collins said Ardern's announcements were a step in the right direction but the government needed to speed up its vaccination program.

About 29% of New Zealanders have received one dose of the vaccine and 17% are fully vaccinated.

Tokyo's Olympic fears give way to acceptance, to a point

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — When the Tokyo Olympics began during a worsening pandemic in Japan, the majority of the host nation was in opposition, with Emperor Naruhito dropping the word "celebrating" from his opening declaration of welcome.

But once the Games got underway and local media switched to covering Japanese athletes' "medal rush," many Japanese were won over. They watched TV to cheer on Japanese athletes in an Olympics that ended Sunday with a record 58 medals for the home nation, including 27 gold.

There are still worries that Japan will pay a price for hosting these Games; recent days have seen record numbers of virus cases. But for now, among many, a sense of pride and goodwill is lingering.

"Having the games in the middle of the pandemic didn't seem like a good idea, and I did wonder if they should be canceled," said Keisuke Uchisawa, 27, an office worker. But the medal haul, he said, was "very exciting and stimulating. Once the Games started, we naturally cheered the athletes and simply enjoyed watching them."

His wife Yuki, a medical worker, worried especially about the pandemic. But she began cheering when she noticed patients at her hospital beaming as they watched the Games. "I saw the power of sports, and I thought it was wonderful," she said. "Athletes made outstanding performances, and we wanted to cheer for them."

The couple were recently picking out matching Olympics shirts and pandemic masks from an official goods store in downtown Tokyo. The store, almost empty before the Games, was crowded on a recent weekday toward the end of the Olympics. Many customers appeared to be workers from the neighborhood dropping by during lunch breaks.

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Beforehand, a lot of Japanese expressed reluctance or opposition to holding the Olympics during a pandemic that, for them, was worsening. A series of resignations of Olympic-linked officials over sexism, past bullying and Holocaust jokes also hurt the Games' image ahead of the July 23 opening. There were protests on Tokyo streets and on social media.

After the opening ceremony, however, many opponents started to cheer.

More than half of Japan's population watched the event, according to rating company Video Research — the highest rating for an Olympic opening ceremony in Japan since 61% for the 1964 Tokyo games, a time when far fewer people had televisions.

Outside the National Stadium, where dozens of demonstrators regularly held anti-Olympic rallies, many fans stood in a line next to the Olympic rings waiting to take selfies. It was the closest they could get to locked-down, spectator-free stadiums.

Opposition to the Olympics has steadily dropped in recent weeks. One poll taken by the Asahi newspaper just ahead of the Olympics showed opponents fell to 55% from around 70% earlier this year, and 56% of the respondents said they wanted to watch the Games on TV. And separate surveys taken by the Yomiuri newspaper and TBS Television at the end of the Games showed more than 60% of their respective respondents said it had been good to hold the Games.

Those who felt intimidated by the unwelcome mood in the beginning began to feel relieved.

"It was a bit scary to get on a train wearing an Olympic volunteer uniform" early on, when people were still more strongly opposing the Games, said Asuka Takahashi, a 21-year-old student who helped at the beach volleyball venue. She felt less tension after the Games started, and thought more people were interested in them than she had initially believed.

And when Takahashi recently visited Olympics stores, she also saw that lots of merchandise was sold out. "Many Japanese," she said, "are enjoying the Olympics in the end."

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, criticized for insisting on hosting the Olympics despite the virus, was likely hoping for this evolution in sentiment. He has been trying to reverse nosediving support ratings for his government ahead of general elections expected in the autumn.

"Japanese Olympians' outstanding achievements will give us strength, too," said Tateo Kawamura, a veteran lawmaker of Suga's governing party. Suga called and congratulated judoka Naohisa Takato, who won the first gold for Japan, and has since publicly congratulated medal winners on Twitter.

Suga has repeatedly said there is no evidence linking the upsurge in cases to the Games — and, in fact, barely more than 400 positive cases were reported inside the Olympic "bubble" from early July until the closing ceremony.

But whether the Games lift public sentiment in a lasting way could hinge on how the virus plays out.

"The government has forced the holding of the Olympics and Paralympics in order to regain popularity ... but it's a risky gamble," Seigo Hirowatari, a University of Tokyo law professor emeritus, said during a recent online event.

While some have tried to see the positive side of the Olympics, others remain opposed. There's a new word floating around to describe what some see as a growing pressure to support or even to talk about the Games: "Oly-hara" or Olympic harassment.

Medical experts have raised alarms as virus infections accelerate in Tokyo; daily cases surged to new highs during the Olympics. On Aug. 5, Tokyo logged 5,042 cases, an all-time high since the pandemic began early last year. Experts say the ongoing infections propelled by the more contagious delta variant could send the daily case load above 10,000 within two weeks. Nationwide, total cases exceeded 1 million, with more than 15,300 deaths.

Last week, Japan's government introduced a contentious new policy in which coronavirus patients with moderate symptoms will isolate at home as the surge of cases strain hospitals. That policy was needed, the government said, in spite of an expansion of the state of emergency from Tokyo to wider areas that will last until the end of August.

"If you turn on the TV, there is nothing else but the Olympic Games, and people are not sharing in a sense of crisis" about the exploding infections amid the festivity, said Dr. Jin Kuramochi, a respiratory

medicine expert. "People will see the reality after the closing ceremony."

Those who opposed the Games say the money should have been spent on health care and economic support for pandemic-hit people and businesses. The \$15.4 billion cost of the Games — largely shouldered by Japanese citizens' tax money — has caused concerns.

That leads to sentiments like the one from Yoko Kudo, a preschool teacher.

"I hope" she said, "at least the rest of the world will thank Japan for achieving the Games despite the difficulties."

Higher but still slim odds of asteroid Bennu slamming Earth

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The good news is that scientists have a better handle on asteroid Bennu's whereabouts for the next 200 years. The bad news is that the space rock has a slightly greater chance of clobbering Earth than previously thought.

But don't be alarmed: Scientists reported Wednesday that the odds are still quite low that Bennu will hit us in the next century.

"We shouldn't be worried about it too much," said Davide Farnocchia, a scientist with NASA's Center for Near Earth Object Studies at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, who served as the study's lead author.

While the odds of a strike have risen from 1-in-2,700 to 1-in-1,750 over the next century or two, scientists now have a much better idea of Bennu's path thanks to NASA's Osiris-Rex spacecraft, according to Farnocchia.

"So I think that overall, the situation has improved," he told reporters.

The spacecraft is headed back to Earth on a long, roundabout loop after collecting samples from the large, spinning rubble pile of an asteroid, considered one of the two most hazardous known asteroids in our solar system. The samples are due here in 2023.

Before Osiris-Rex arrived at Bennu in 2018, telescopes provided solid insight into the asteroid, about one-third of a mile (one-half kilometer) in diameter. The spacecraft collected enough data over 2 1/2 years to help scientists better predict the asteroid's orbital path well into the future.

Their findings — published in the journal *Icarus* — should also help in charting the course of other asteroids and give Earth a better fighting chance if and when another hazardous space rock heads our way.

Before Osiris-Rex arrived on the scene, scientists put the odds of Bennu hitting Earth through the year 2200 at 1-in-2,700. Now it's 1-in-1,750 through the year 2300. The single most menacing day is Sept. 24, 2182.

Bennu will have a close encounter with Earth in 2135 when it passes within half the distance of the moon. Earth's gravity could tweak its future path and put it on a collision course with Earth in the 2200s — less likely now based on Osiris-Rex observations.

If Bennu did slam into Earth, it wouldn't wipe out life, dinosaur-style, but rather create a crater roughly 10 to 20 times the size of the asteroid, said Lindley Johnson, NASA's planetary defense officer. The area of devastation would be much bigger: as much as 100 times the size of the crater.

If an object Bennu's size hit the Eastern Seaboard, it "would pretty much devastate things up and down the coast," he told reporters.

Scientists already are ahead of the curve with Bennu, which was discovered in 1999. Finding threatening asteroids in advance increases the chances and options for pushing them out of our way, Johnson said.

"One-hundred years from now, who knows what the technology is going to be?" he said.

In November, NASA plans to launch a mission to knock an asteroid off-course by hitting it. The experimental target will be the moonlet of a bigger space rock.

California requires vaccines, tests for teachers and staff

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By JOCELYN GECKER and KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — California will become the first state in the nation to require all teachers and school staff to get vaccinated or undergo weekly COVID-19 testing, as schools return from summer break amid growing concerns about the highly contagious delta variant, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Wednesday.

The new policy applies to both public and private schools and will affect more than 800,000 employees, including about 320,000 public school teachers and a host of support staff such as cafeteria workers and cleaners, the state Department of Public Health said. It will also apply to school volunteers.

Newsom announced the new policy at a San Francisco Bay Area school that reopened earlier this week to in-person classes. Many California schools are back in session, with others starting in the coming weeks.

"We think this is the right thing to do, and we think this is a sustainable way to keeping our schools open and to address the number one anxiety that parents like myself have for young children," said Newsom, who is a father of four. "That is knowing that the schools are doing everything in their power to keep our kids safe."

Several large school districts in the state have issued similar requirements in recent days, including San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose and Long Beach Unified.

California, like the rest of the country, has seen a troubling surge in COVID-19 infections because of the delta variant, which represents the vast majority of new cases. It has affected children more than previous strains of the virus, prompting a growing number of teachers unions to ease earlier opposition to vaccine mandates.

California's two largest teachers unions, both powerful political allies to the governor, said Wednesday they fully supported Newsom's policy.

The California Teachers Association and the California Federation of Teachers both cited state and national polling that indicates nearly 90% of educators have been vaccinated but said the rising spread of the delta variant, particularly among children, makes the new policy necessary. Children under 12 are not yet eligible to be vaccinated.

"Educators want to be in classrooms with their students, and the best way to make sure that happens is for everyone who is medically eligible to be vaccinated, with robust testing and multi-tiered safety measures," CTA President E. Toby Boyd said in a statement.

While Hawaii Gov. David Ige announced last week that all Department of Education staffers would be required to disclose their vaccination status or face weekly testing, California's order is far more sweeping, applying to all staff who work in both public and private schools in the country's most populous state.

Over the past few weeks, Newsom has mandated that all health care workers must be fully vaccinated and required that all state employees get vaccinated or choose weekly testing. The weekly testing schedule is based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For schools, Newsom had already issued a mask mandate that applies to teachers and students. But until Wednesday, he had left the decision of whether to require vaccines up to local districts.

Vaccine mandates are perilous for the Democratic governor, who faces a recall election next month fueled in part by anger over his handling of the pandemic.

California was the first state to order a pandemic lockdown in March 2020, which shuttered businesses and schools statewide. While many private schools maintained in-person classes, most public schools kept students in distance learning for up to a year. Newsom faced intense political pressure to reopen schools from Republican opponents and supporters who urged him to override powerful labor unions. Many public schools finally reopened last spring, lagging much of the country.

Newsom pushed for a full return to in-person learning this fall. But his mask mandate for schools has angered some parents and been criticized by Republican candidates vying to replace him.

Several of the GOP candidates criticized the new plan Wednesday. Former San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, who has encouraged everyone to get vaccinated, said state officials "should not be pushing uniform statewide orders on every school district across the state" but should leave it to local districts.

Details of how the new policy will be enforced were not announced. Labor unions say those logistics still need to be worked out.

Matthew Hardy, a spokesman for the California Federation of Teachers, said the union supports the plan that allows an option for testing.

"We do not think people should lose their jobs over this," he said.

Schools are required to be in full compliance with the new policy by Oct. 15, giving schools time to verify vaccination status and have in place weekly testing for unvaccinated staff, said Amelia Matier, a spokeswoman in the governor's office.

Newsom did not rule out expanding the requirement to students after a vaccine is approved for children under 12 years old.

"We'll consider all options in the future," he said, in response to a question. "We believe this is a meaningful first step."

Huge California fire grows; Montana blaze threatens towns

GREENVILLE, Calif. (AP) — California's largest single wildfire in recorded history continued to grow Wednesday after destroying more than 1,000 buildings, nearly half of them homes, while authorities in Montana ordered evacuations as a wind-driven blaze roared toward several remote communities.

The dangerous fires were among some 100 large blazes burning across 15 states, mostly in the West, where historic drought conditions have left lands parched and ripe for ignition.

Burning through bone-dry trees, brush and grass, the Dixie Fire has destroyed at least 1,045 buildings, including 550 homes, in the northern Sierra Nevada. Newly released satellite imagery showed the scale of the destruction in the small community of Greenville that was incinerated last week during an explosive run of flames.

The Dixie Fire, named after the road where it started on July 14, by Wednesday morning covered 783 square miles (2,027 square kilometers) and was 30% contained, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. At least 14,000 remote homes were still threatened.

The Dixie Fire is the largest single fire in California history and the largest currently burning in the U.S. It is about half the size of the August Complex, a series of lightning-caused 2020 fires across seven counties that were fought together and that state officials consider California's largest wildfire overall.

The fire's cause was under investigation. Pacific Gas & Electric has said it may have been sparked when a tree fell on one of its power lines.

California authorities arrested a man last weekend who is suspected in an arson fire in remote forested areas near the Dixie Fire.

The 47-year-old suspect was charged with setting a small blaze in Lassen County, which is among the counties where the larger blaze is burning, around July 20.

In southeastern Montana, the uncontrolled Richard Spring Fire continued to advance Wednesday toward inhabited areas in and around the sparsely-populated Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, after several thousand people were ordered to evacuate the previous night.

Two homes caught fire Tuesday but were saved, authorities said.

The fire began Sunday and powerful gusts caused it to explode across more than 230 square miles (600 square kilometers).

A few miles from the evacuated town of Lame Deer, Krystal Two Bulls and some friends stuck around to clear brush from her yard in hopes of protecting it from the flames. Thick plumes of smoke rose from behind a tree-covered ridgeline just above the house.

"We're packed and we're loaded so if we have to go, we will," Two Bull said. "I'm not fearful; I'm prepared. Here you don't just run from fire or abandon your house."

Some of the people who fled the fire Tuesday initially sought shelter in Lame Deer, only to be displaced again when the fire got within several miles.

The town of about 2,000 people is home to the tribal headquarters and several subdivisions and is sur-

rounded by rugged, forested terrain. By late Wednesday a second fire was closing in on Lame Deer from the west, while the Richard Spring fire raged to the east.

Also ordered to leave were about 600 people in and around Ashland, a small town just outside the reservation with a knot of businesses along its main street and surrounded by grasslands and patchy forest.

The flames were within several miles of town and came right up to a subdivision outside it.

Local, state and federal firefighters were joined by ranchers using their own heavy equipment to carve out fire lines around houses.

Heat waves and historic drought tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight in the American West.

Scientists have said climate change has made the region much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive. The fires across the West come as parts of Europe are also enduring large blazes spurred by tinder-dry conditions.

Overwhelmed by COVID-19: A day inside a Louisiana hospital

By STACEY PLAISANCE Associated Press

JEFFERSON, La. (AP) — Before the latest surge of the coronavirus, Louisiana neurologist Robin Davis focused on her specialty: treating patients with epilepsy. These days, as virus patients flood her hospital in record numbers, she has taken on the additional duties of nurse, janitor and orderly.

"I was giving bed baths on Sunday, emptying trash cans, changing sheets, rolling patients to MRI," said Davis, who has been coming in on her days off to provide some relief to overworked nurses at Ochsner Medical Center in the New Orleans suburb of Jefferson.

The rapidly escalating surge in COVID-19 infections across the U.S. is once again overwhelming hospitals, especially in hot spots such as Louisiana, which hit a record number of coronavirus hospitalizations last week. Nearly 2,900 virus patients are currently hospitalized — and state health officials say the number of cases may not peak for several more weeks. Louisiana has the country's fourth-lowest vaccination rate, with just a little more than 37% of residents fully inoculated.

On a recent day at Ochsner, health care providers rushed up and down halls, throwing on and taking off protective clothing every time they entered a new area of the building. In dozens of ICU rooms, patients lay pallid and motionless, tubes down their throats, as beeping machines pumped drugs into their system and ventilators forced air into their weakened lungs. Health care contractors brought in from other hospitals quickly familiarized themselves with a new environment as they rushed to ease the load of the overtaxed staff.

"We're trying to provide the most consistent care we can, but to do that we need more hands," Davis said. "One of the biggest issues for our nurses is, the volume of patients is such that we're having to create beds that didn't previously exist. We're having to find providers that weren't previously put in place."

AN OVERWHELMING CASELOAD

Ochsner Health is the largest health care provider in Louisiana, with 40 medical facilities across the state. More than 1,000 people — nearly 40% of the state's currently hospitalized coronavirus patients — are being treated at Ochsner's facilities. Roughly 200 of those are at the main campus in Jefferson, where three floors in the hospital's West Tower have been built out as care units for coronavirus patients.

Resources have been strained to the limit across the state with hospitals starting to turn away people with other life-threatening emergencies such as heart attacks or strokes. Elective surgeries and other nonurgent care have been suspended.

Davis said there's no greater need for her help than in Ochsner's thinly stretched nursing department. She noted that her many recent duties have included fetching medication for nurses and pushing patients in wheelchairs.

"If it took pressure off a nurse, if it gave her time to do what she needed to do, that's what we did," she said. "Sunday was supposed to be my day off with my kids, but we need help here, and one day I want to be able to tell those two little boys I did the thing that was needed at the time it was needed."

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NURSES HELPING NURSES

In Ochsner Medical Center's intensive care unit, nurses Joan Blizzard and Arthur Bienvenu try to care for each other along with their coronavirus patients.

They tie each other's gowns, prep medicines and machines together with barely a word, shuffle in and out of patients' rooms, their eyes the only part of their faces visible through their protective gear.

For the past year and a half, Bienvenu said, working 50 to 60 hours a week caring for patients and being surrounded by fellow staff has helped him cope with the loss of his father to the virus last year.

He said he shares his father's story with other grieving families, including how his dad was on a ventilator for more than 20 days in the spring and how his family had to make the difficult decision to take him off it.

"The outcome wouldn't be what he wanted," Bienvenu said. "He wouldn't want to live with the trach and PEG (feeding tube) and the severity of the situation, so we decided to transition to comfort from progressive measures, and the little bit of dignity and respect my dad had left, we preserved that."

Bienvenu said working with other families experiencing loss has helped give him purpose during the most tragic time of his life.

"People would ask me, 'Why are you still coming in?'" he said. "Because these people need us, you know? We have to put a stop to this. Everybody has a different path through this. I'm blessed to be around the people I'm around. That's the only way I'm here."

Critical care nurse Mary Lubrano has watched her colleagues running up and down the intensive care unit hallway at Ochsner Medical Center while she lies in a hospital bed with the virus. She has been hospitalized for two weeks and counting, her breathing labored as she suffers from low oxygen.

"That was me," she said of the other nurses, her voice choking with emotion. "And I wanted to be able to help them."

Lubrano works in the critical care unit at St. Bernard Parish Hospital, an Ochsner-run facility near her home in Chalmette, where she was initially hospitalized before being transferred to the Jefferson campus.

She said she still checks her emails as often as possible to see how her fellow nurses in Chalmette are holding up.

"They are busting their butts there, and they are full of COVID patients, and it's the same nurses on the schedule every day. They just go and go," she said. "As a nurse, it's all about giving back, so I can't wait to get back out there."

IT'S WORSE THIS TIME

The magnitude of this most recent coronavirus surge — largely spurred by the highly contagious delta variant — is profound, Blizzard said.

"People are getting sick so quickly this time," she said. "They will be talking to you, and within hours, we're having multiple people at the bedside" performing emergency procedures. "It is so scary."

If they survive, many will live with years of impairment, she said.

Bienvenu wants people to understand the severity of the current situation.

"It hits all of us different," he said. "Yes, one individual can have coughs or sneezes, but another individual can be on a ventilator."

WISHING THEY HAD BEEN VACCINATED

Jerome Batiste, a 26-year-old New Orleans resident, said he so rarely got sick he didn't think he needed the coronavirus vaccine. He assumed he had a strong immune system, having gone the entire pandemic without getting infected, he said.

As he sat by a window in a recovery room in one of Ochsner's COVID units, taking in some sunshine from the bench near his hospital bed, he said he's not only wishing he'd gotten the vaccine but wants everyone he knows to get it, "and I'll go if they need somebody to go with them."

Batiste isn't sure where he contracted the virus but said he had been on a family trip to Disney World and had also visited friends in the weeks before falling ill.

"It just happened," he said. "It just came out of the blue. I started coughing a lot."

He said he took over-the-counter cough medicine, hoping it would pass, but "it just got worse and worse,

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and I started throwing up a lot, and I couldn't keep anything down."

Since he was admitted to the hospital last week, he's been given vitamins, steroids, breathing treatments and shots to prevent blood clots. He's also developed a rare condition in which his body's muscle tissue has begun to break down, requiring a kidney flush to prevent further illness.

Batiste said he's telling family and friends to not get "comfortable" when it comes to the virus and to protect themselves with the shot.

"I just didn't take it as serious as most young people should," he said, a port with tubes for his medicine sticking out of his right forearm. "You're never too safe to go and get vaccinated."

Mary Lubrano, the critical care nurse now ill with COVID-19, said she had never been hospitalized until this year. She said she had intended to get vaccinated, but a breast cancer diagnosis in February, followed by surgery and radiation to eradicate it, caused her to put off the shot.

She said she was also nervous about jeopardizing her health after a relative suffered a stroke shortly after receiving the vaccine. She knows most people have mild side effects, if any, but she was still hesitant. The vaccines have been proven to be safe in studies and in use in more than half the U.S. population and are far less risky than the virus itself.

"I had my follow-up, getting brave to do my vaccine, and I got COVID instead," said Lubrano, who called it the scariest time in her life. "You take breathing for granted. ... When you sit down and can't get air in your lungs ... that is so fearful, and I don't want anyone to ever have to feel that way."

Lubrano said her husband fell ill first and was hospitalized while she quarantined at home. He has since been released and is recovering at home, still on oxygen, she said.

Since her hospitalization, Lubrano's entire family — her daughters, sisters and their spouses — have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

"I made it my mission to make sure nobody has to suffer this way," she said, an oxygen tube attached to her nose. "Everyone needs to be vaccinated. We'll never beat this any other way."

Davis, the neurologist who has been forced to take on added duties during the most recent coronavirus surge, says she can't stress enough the importance of getting vaccinated. She recalls how a year ago — before vaccines were available — she watched helplessly as friends and neighbors died.

"They were people that didn't have a chance," she said. "There was nothing we could do to stop this for them. You've got a chance now. You have something that gives you the opportunity to have a fate that isn't like theirs. Please don't squander it."

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 and defying calls to resign, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo abruptly did just that Tuesday. With Cuomo on his way out, Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul is ascendant.

We take you through the major players, what's happened this week and what's next for Cuomo, Hochul and the state of New York:

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 that ranged from inappropriate comments to groping. 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."

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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 replace Cuomo.

HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE HOCHUL?

Rhymes with "local."

QUICK: WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT KATHY HOCHUL?

In sum: Buffalo-area native. Age 62. Democratic ex-congresswoman. Once had a good rating from the National Rifle Association and threatened to jail unauthorized immigrants who tried to legally apply for driver's licenses. Now supports gun control and letting unauthorized immigrants drive. Unknown quantity to much of the state, but popular among party leaders. Oh — and the first female governor of New York (well, in two weeks).

WHAT'S CUOMO AND HOCHUL'S RELATIONSHIP LIKE?

As Hochul told it Wednesday, "it's very clear that the governor and I have not been close, physically or otherwise." Hochul spent much of her time crisscrossing New York as part of her duties as lieutenant governor. Cuomo chose her as his running mate while pursuing his second term, in 2014, but she was never part of his inner circle — and isn't mentioned in the report.

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.

OK, WITH HOCHUL REPLACING CUOMO, WHO'S GOING TO BE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR?

Hochul will appoint her replacement. She wouldn't reveal her pick for the job, but nodded to the need for diversity and inclusion and said she would "name someone that I believe the state will be familiar with." Until her pick is in place, Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins would be next in the line of succession if Hochul had to leave office.

HOW POWERFUL IS A LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR?

Not very. Think of the role more as second-in-line rather than second-in-command.

IS HOCHUL GOING TO KEEP CUOMO'S STAFF AND ADVISERS OR WILL SHE CLEAN HOUSE?

This is a key question, as the investigative report alleged that Cuomo's office that created a toxic workplace culture. Without naming names, Hochul said that no one the report identified as doing anything unethical will be sticking around. Some major Cuomoworld figures, like top aide Melissa DeRosa, have already tendered resignation. Hochul said Wednesday she'd meet with Cabinet members in the next day before making any decisions on that front.

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.

ONCE 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

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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 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 this week, 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 sons of the late Gov. Mario Cuomo 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.

Belarus denies entry to US ambassador, cuts US Embassy staff

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Belarus on Wednesday rescinded its permission for the U.S. ambassador’s appointment and told the U.S. to cut its embassy staff in retaliation for Washington’s sanctions.

President Joe Biden’s administration slapped Belarus with new sanctions Monday, the anniversary of last year’s election in Belarus that was denounced by the opposition as rigged. Authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko responded to protests against his re-election to a sixth term with a sweeping crackdown that saw more than 35,000 people arrested and thousands beaten by police.

The new U.S. sanctions target Belarus’ giant potash producer that has been a top revenue earner for the country, the Belarusian National Olympic Committee and 15 private companies with ties to Belarusian authorities.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Anatoly Glaz on Wednesday denounced the U.S. action as “blatant and openly hostile” and announced the decision to rescind an earlier agreement for the appointment of Julie Fisher as the U.S. ambassador to the country.

He said Belarus also told the U.S. to cut its embassy staff in Minsk to five diplomats until Sept. 1.

“In view of Washington’s actions to halt cooperation in all spheres and strangle our country economically we see no reason in the presence of a significant number of diplomats at the U.S. diplomatic mission,” Glaz said in a statement.

While Belarus agreed to Fisher’s appointment in December as the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus since 2008, it never issued her an entry visa. Fisher has remained in neighboring Lithuania where she maintains contacts with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the main opposition challenger in the Aug. 9, 2020, election who

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was forced to leave Belarus under pressure from authorities.

Commenting on Belarus' moves, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said that "Belarusian authorities are responsible for the deterioration in U.S.-Belarus relations through relentless repression against their citizens," noting they have targeted civic groups, media, athletes, students, legal professions and others.

"The United States government, Ambassador Fisher, personnel at our embassy in Minsk will continue to support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus," Price said. "U.S. diplomats will continue to engage with Belarusians, including leaders of the pro-democracy movement, media professionals, students and other elements of civil society wherever they are."

Hochul: NY gov's office won't be toxic workplace on my watch

By MARINA VILLENEUVE and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Suddenly propelled to lead New York, Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul vowed Wednesday to set a better tone in state government after the sexual harassment scandal that spurred Gov. Andrew Cuomo's resignation.

"Nobody will ever describe my administration as a toxic work environment," Hochul said in her first news briefing after the Democratic governor announced his resignation.

She said there would be no place in her administration for any Cuomo aides who were implicated in unethical behavior by the state attorney general's investigation of his behavior toward women.

Hochul, a 62-year-old Democrat from western New York, is set to become the state's first female governor in two weeks, following a remarkable transition period in which Cuomo has said he will work to ease her into a job that he dominated during his three terms in office.

Hochul has had a political career spanning from a town board to Congress, and as lieutenant governor, she has spent much of her time crisscrossing the state for ribbon-cuttings, announcements and other events. Still, she is unfamiliar to many New Yorkers, and she took the opportunity Wednesday to reintroduce herself and assure them: "I'm ready for this."

"I'm more prepared than anyone could possibly be for this position," Hochul said.

While championing such Cuomo-era accomplishments as laws raising the minimum wage and requiring paid family leave for millions of private-sector workers, Hochul strove to put distance between herself and the governor. She said she didn't spend much time with him and hadn't been aware of any of the alleged improprieties later described in state Attorney General Letitia James' report.

Cuomo announced Tuesday that he would step down rather than face a likely impeachment trial after James, a fellow Democrat, released a report concluding he sexually harassed 11 women. One accused him of groping her breast.

Cuomo, 63, denies 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."

Hochul purposely kept a modest profile as lieutenant governor in a state where Cuomo commanded — and demanded — the spotlight.

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. She's well-liked by colleagues, who say voters shouldn't confuse her quiet approach under Cuomo with a lack of confidence or competence.

"People will soon learn that my style is to listen first, then take decisive action," she said.

Before sharing a ticket with Cuomo, she was a county clerk who opposed the idea of allowing unauthorized immigrants to apply for driver's licenses — an idea that would become law during Cuomo's administration. Asked Wednesday about what is known as the Green Light Law, Hochul said her position "has now evolved, and that evolution coincides with the evolution of many people" in New York.

"I'm proud of supporting that law," she said.

It remains to be seen how involved Cuomo will be in state government over the next two weeks, or how

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he'll manage handing over authority — something he has rarely ceded during his time in office.

His circle of advisers has shrunk, but his closest aide and policymaking partner Melissa DeRosa — a familiar face at Cuomo's side during his televised coronavirus briefings — will remain until his departure, after having announced her resignation from the administration Sunday.

For days after James' report came out last week, Cuomo insisted to those close to him that he could weather the storm, but even his closest outside advisers told him it would be impossible.

Cuomo was privately frustrated that few people were willing to defend him publicly and pressed his attorney and remaining advisers to question his accusers' credibility, according to a person with direct knowledge of the governor's final days in office. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity in order to discuss the private, sensitive conversations.

Cuomo decided he would resign after DeRosa quit, the person said.

By late Monday night, Cuomo told a small number of his closest advisers that he was planning to resign, the person said. But Cuomo had kept the announcement very close, opting not even to tell other senior Democrats in New York.

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.

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 Afghan provincial capitals and a local army headquarters Wednesday, completing a blitz across the country's northeast and giving them control of two-thirds of the nation as the U.S. and NATO finalize their withdrawal after decades of war.

The fall of the capitals of Badakhshan, Baghlan and Farah provinces 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 from warlords, many linked to allegations of atrocities and corruption, in pushing back the insurgents. He also replaced his army chief of staff.

While the capital of 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 the control of the slivers of the country it has left. The government may eventually be forced to pull back to defend the capital and just a few other cities.

"I think what I would say to President Ghani is if you remain spread out everywhere, the Taliban will be able to continue to apply their current approach with success," warned Ben Barry, the senior fellow for land warfare at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "You've got to do a bit more than stopping the Taliban. You've got to show you can push them back."

The success of the Taliban offensive also calls into question whether they would ever rejoin long-stalled peace talks in Qatar aimed at moving Afghanistan toward an inclusive interim administration as the West hoped. Instead, the Taliban could come to power by force — or the country could splinter into factional fighting like it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

The multiple battle fronts 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.

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The latest U.S. military intelligence assessment is that Kabul could come under insurgent pressure within 30 days and that if current trends hold, the Taliban could gain full control of the country within a couple of months, according to a U.S. defense official, who discussed the internal assessment on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan — whose country is contemplating running and protecting Kabul airport following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops — told CNN-Turk television that he may meet with the Taliban leadership.

“If we don’t bring them under control at the highest level ... it will not be possible for us to ensure peace in Afghanistan,” Erdogan said.

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.

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.

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

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 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 fled Taliban advances said the insurgents have imposed repressive restrictions on women and burned down schools, and there have been reports of revenge killings.

In the face of the rapid deterioration in Afghanistan, Germany and the Netherlands both announced Wednesday they’d suspend deportations to the country.

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 that year by letting them suffocate in sealed shipping containers.

On Wednesday, Dostum said the Taliban “won’t be able to leave the north and will face the same fate” as the suffocated troops.

Ghani, meanwhile, ordered Gen. Hibatullah Alizai to replace Gen. Wali Ahmadzai as the Afghan army chief of staff, according to an Afghan Defense Ministry official who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the decision had yet to be made public.

Alizai was the commander of the Afghan army's Special Operations Corps — the elite troops that, along with the air force, have been forced to do most of the fighting as regular forces have collapsed.

Schools fight back against GOP governors, defy bans on masks

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — With the highly contagious delta variant fueling a surge in coronavirus cases just as students return to classrooms, major school districts in Arizona, Florida, Texas and beyond are increasingly defying Republican leaders who banned school mask mandates in several states.

The showdowns have drawn in the White House and landed in courtrooms where judges have so far allowed school mask requirements in two states.

Schools across the U.S. have a patchwork of different rules as they try to keep classrooms open during the coronavirus pandemic, but in several states GOP leaders banned districts from requiring all kids to wear masks.

But with infections and hospitalizations on the rise and vaccinations out of reach for young children, districts in blue-leaning urban areas especially are rebelling against the laws and requiring masks in schools — even if it means facing consequences from governors and courts. Districts in Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Antonio and Broward County, Florida, are among those defying the mask laws.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis threatened to withhold the salaries of school leaders who enact mask requirements.

"At no point shall I allow my decision to be influenced by a threat to my paycheck; a small price to pay considering the gravity of this issue and the potential impact to the health and well-being of our students and dedicated employees," said Alberto Carvalho, the superintendent of the state's largest school district who is still deciding on a mandate ahead of the start of school later this month.

Masks are a key coronavirus-prevention tool that doesn't pose health risks for kids older than toddler age and are most effective when worn by a larger number of people, public health experts say. The Centers for Disease Control has again recommended them for schools.

But mask rules have nevertheless drawn fierce protest, including takeovers of school board meetings, from activists who worry about side effects, question the need and say parents should decide.

The DeSantis threat to withhold salaries drew in the White House on Tuesday as press secretary Jen Psaki weighed paying out of federal funds to school officials who "do the right thing to protect students and keep schools safe and open."

Though children are less likely to suffer serious health effects as compared with the elderly, the latest COVID wave hammering Florida is also fueling an "enormous increase" in cases among children, many of whom are sicker than doctors have seen previously, the chief medical officer at one of the state's top children's hospitals said Wednesday. Leaders of other medical systems in virus hotspots like Louisiana say a similar situation is occurring in their pediatric hospitals.

DeSantis, for his part, said the numbers of hospitalized kids are on the rise because total coronavirus cases are up. "There's been no change in the proportion of pediatric patients who are COVID positive," he said.

At least three Florida school districts appear to be defying DeSantis's executive order forbidding masks, including the second-most-populous county in the state and another around the state capital.

In Texas, where COVID-19 hospitalizations have spiked to their highest level in six months, a judge sided with San Antonio and temporarily allowed the city, county and public schools to require masks. Another hearing is set for next week. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott banned mandates in July and is showing no sign of backing down, even as other school districts in major cities like Dallas, Houston and Austin issue mandates in defiance of his ban.

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A state ban on mask mandates isn't faring well in the courts in Arkansas either. It was temporarily blocked last week by a state judge who said the prohibition violated the state's constitution. One plaintiff was an Arkansas school district where more than 1,000 staff and students had to quarantine because of a coronavirus outbreak.

Since the decision, at least three dozen school districts and charter schools have implemented mask requirements for teachers and students.

Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas now says he regrets signing the ban, but lawmakers decided against reversing course during a special session last week.

In Utah, meanwhile, the health director over the state's biggest county is trying to buck a state law with a new mandate for kids under 12. Angela Dunn, who previously became a target for anti-mask ire as the state epidemiologist, has said she's deeply concerned about infections sickening kids and disrupting schools.

"There's far less drama in a school where all kids are wearing masks than a spread of COVID within that school and kids being sent home to address illness, or to be put into quarantine or isolation," said Democratic mayor Jenny Wilson, who's backing the move that may yet be tanked by the Republican-controlled county council.

In South Carolina, a showdown is heating up between the Republican governor and the capital city over a school mask mandate that local leaders approved last week. The attorney general threatened to take Columbia to court if leaders try to enforce the rule aimed at protecting elementary and middle school kids too young to get vaccinated. Republican Gov. Henry McMaster said Monday it should be up to parents whether to mask kids.

Dozens of doctors in Arizona have begged GOP Gov. Doug Ducey to mandate face coverings in public schools, but he's held fast to a prohibition in the state budget. Still, about 10 districts in Phoenix, Tucson and Flagstaff, representing more than 130,000 students and 200 schools, have defied that prohibition and a high school biology teacher has filed a lawsuit challenging it. A hearing is set for Friday.

"There is no mask prohibition in Arizona," gubernatorial spokeswoman C.J. Karamargin said last week. "The legislation passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor is clear: Arizona is anti-mask-mandate."

Top Dem sees tough pathway for \$3.5T social, climate plans

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hours after clinching an initial budget victory, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer conceded Wednesday that Democrats face a tough pathway to delivering a package surging \$3.5 trillion into family, health and environment programs to President Joe Biden's desk.

Schumer, D-N.Y., made the remarks after the Senate approved a budget resolution outlining Democrat's 10-year plan for transforming the government into an engine focused on helping lower- and middle income people and slowing the planet's ominously warming temperatures.

The real test will be when Democrats write and vote on subsequent legislation actually enacting the party's priorities into specific spending and tax policies. To succeed, Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., will have to satisfy competing demands from party moderates worried about a fat price tag and progressives demanding an all-out drive for their priorities, all with virtually no margin for error in the narrowly divided Congress.

"We still have a long road to travel," Schumer told reporters, turning to a football analogy. "It's as if we caught a nice long pass at midfield, but we still have 50 yards to go before we score a touchdown."

Actually, some might compare it more to being halfway up Mount Everest with the steeper climb ahead. That's because it's easier for leaders to coax votes from lawmakers for a budget blueprint than it is when they're writing actual changes in spending and tax laws that will deeply impact voters, interest groups and campaign contributors.

Underscoring the political broadsides that lay ahead, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said in a statement that he has "serious concerns about the grave consequences" of spending an additional \$3.5 trillion that he said could fuel inflation and threaten the economy. The views of Manchin, one of the Senate's most

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conservative Democrats, clash with progressives' hopes for that amount or more.

Much of the cost of Democrats' proposal would be borne by wealthy people and large corporations, another area where some centrist Democrats may be wary.

The Senate on Tuesday approved the other big chunk of Biden's objectives, a compromise \$1 trillion bundle of transportation, water, broadband and other infrastructure projects. That measure, which passed 69-30 with 19 Republicans backing it, still needs House approval.

The Senate approved the budget resolution at about 4 a.m. EDT Wednesday over uniform Republican opposition, 50-49. It seems sure to get final congressional approval from the House later this month.

That fiscal blueprint's passage is pivotal because that will protect a follow-up bill enacting specific Democratic policies into law from a GOP filibuster in the 50-50 Senate, which would otherwise kill that legislation. Democrats have just a three-vote cushion in the House as well.

Schumer predicted that the final legislation — which the party hopes to produce next month — will contain "every part of the Biden plan in a big, bold, robust way."

Pointedly, he did not specify that the bill would provide the full amounts for Biden's priorities that the president wants. To fit Democrats' goals into their budget plans, some Biden policies may need to be made less ambitious or phased in or out over time.

A chief force behind Democrats' drive has been Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. He 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.

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."

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.

CDC urges COVID vaccines during pregnancy as delta surges

By LINDSEY TANNER and MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writers

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urged all pregnant women Wednesday to get the COVID-19 vaccine as hospitals in hot spots around the U.S. see disturbing numbers of unvaccinated mothers-to-be seriously ill with the virus.

Expectant women run a higher risk of severe illness and pregnancy complications from the coronavirus, including perhaps miscarriages and stillbirths. But their vaccination rates are low, with only about 23% having received at least one dose, according to CDC data.

"The vaccines are safe and effective, and it has never been more urgent to increase vaccinations as we face the highly transmissible delta variant and see severe outcomes from COVID-19 among unvaccinated pregnant people," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a statement.

The updated guidance comes after a CDC analysis of new safety data on 2,500 women showed no increased risks of miscarriage for those who received at least one dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine before 20 weeks of pregnancy. The analysis found a miscarriage rate of around 13%, within the normal range.

The CDC's advice echoes recent recommendations from top obstetrician groups. The agency had previously encouraged pregnant women to consider vaccination but had stopped short of a full recommendation. The new advice also applies to nursing mothers and women planning to get pregnant.

Although pregnant women were not included in studies that led to authorization of COVID-19 vaccines, experts say real-world experience in tens of thousands of women shows that the shots are safe for them and that when given during pregnancy may offer some protection to newborns.

The new guidance comes amid a surge in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in the U.S., driven by the highly contagious delta variant.

Some health authorities believe the variant may cause more severe disease — in pregnant women and others as well — than earlier versions of the virus, though that is still under investigation.

National figures show the latest surge in cases among pregnant women is lower than it was during the outbreak's winter peak. But at some hospitals in states with low vaccination rates, the numbers of sick mothers-to-be outpace those during earlier surges, before vaccines were available.

"This is by far the worst we've seen in the pandemic," said Dr. Jane Martin, an obstetrician with Ochsner Baptist Medical Center in New Orleans. She added: "It's disheartening and it's exhausting. It feels like it doesn't have to be like this."

At the beginning of the pandemic and with each surge, Ochsner had a few pregnant patients very sick with the virus, though the numbers had dwindled in recent months.

"A week or two ago that pace changed drastically," Martin said. "We have had multiple critically ill pregnant patients admitted" every day, most requiring intensive care.

Martin said she has taken care of at least 30 pregnant patients hospitalized with COVID-19 over the last two weeks. Most were unvaccinated.

Experts say the lifting of mask rules and other social distancing precautions and the rise of the delta variant have contributed to the worrisome trend. But also, vaccinations weren't made available to women of childbearing age and others under 65 until spring.

Early in her pregnancy, Tennessee kindergarten teacher Sara Brown decided she would wait until the baby was born to get the shots. There wasn't much safety data yet about getting vaccinated during pregnancy, and at 36, she was young, healthy and "figured if I did get it, it would probably just be a bad cold."

But what seemed like a sinus infection in June turned into severe COVID-19, landing her in a Nashville

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intensive care unit for five days, on oxygen and struggling to breathe.

Her daughter Suzie was born healthy on Aug. 2. But it was a harrowing experience.

"Not being able to catch your breath is such a panicky feeling, knowing I had life inside me that could be suffering too," she said.

At Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where Brown was treated, there were no infected pregnant patients early in July. Now the hospital is admitting four to five a week, all unvaccinated, said obstetrician Dr. Jennifer Thompson. About 20% of those patients are being treated in the intensive care unit, compared with 11% during previous surges, she said.

For some pregnant patients critically ill with COVID-19, organs begin to fail and doctors induce labor early or deliver babies by cesarean section as a last resort, said Dr. Jeannie Kelly, an obstetrician at Washington University Medical Center in St. Louis.

About 20% of all patients admitted for labor and delivery last week at the St. Louis hospital are infected, more than double the rate during the COVID-19 surge in Missouri last year, she said. About one-third of these women are critically ill.

Around 105,000 pregnant U.S. women have been infected with COVID-19, and almost 18,000 have been hospitalized, according to the CDC. About one-fourth of those received intensive care and 124 died.

Pregnancy-related changes in body functions may explain why the virus can be dangerous for mothers-to-be. These include reduced lung capacity and adjustments in the disease-fighting immune system that protect and help the fetus grow.

The risks are disproportionately high for Black and Hispanic women, who are more likely to face health care and economic inequalities that increase their chances of getting sick.

Some studies suggest the virus can also increase the risks of preterm birth and stillbirth, and in rare cases, it appears to have passed from mother to fetus.

Martin, the New Orleans obstetrician, noted that local hospitals are also treating increasing numbers of children and babies sick with COVID-19, some of whom may have been infected after birth by unvaccinated mothers.

Martin was pregnant when she got her own shots last winter. She delivered a healthy baby girl a week after the last shot.

"Vaccinating people is the only way out," she said.

Greek wildfires: Multinational force works to tame flare-ups

By PETROS KARADJIAS and NICHOLAS PAPHITIS Associated Press

PEFKI, Greece (AP) — Hundreds of firefighters from across Europe and the Mideast worked alongside their Greek colleagues in rugged terrain Wednesday, trying to contain flareups of the huge wildfires that have ravaged Greece's forests for a week, destroying homes and forcing thousands to evacuate.

The spread of the blazes has been largely halted, officials said, but fronts still burned on the large island of Evia and in Greece's southern Peloponnese region, where several homes were on fire, according to state ERT TV.

The fires broke out last week after Greece had just experienced its most protracted heatwave since 1987, leaving its forests tinder-dry. Other nearby nations such as Turkey and Italy faced similar searing temperatures and quickly spreading fires, while Spain and Portugal were on alert Wednesday for wildfires amid a heat wave forecast to last through Monday.

At the southern side of the Mediterranean Sea, wildfires in Algeria's mountains have killed 65 people, including 28 soldiers sent in to help, and three days of national mourning begin Thursday.

Worsening drought and heat — both linked to climate change — have also fueled wildfires this summer in the Western U.S. and in Russia's northern Siberia region. Scientists say there is little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving more extreme events.

Greece's fire service said 900 firefighters, including teams from Poland, Romania, Cyprus, Ukraine, Serbia, Slovakia and Moldova, and 27 aircraft were working on Evia, Greece's second-largest island which is

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linked to the mainland by a bridge.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis spoke on the phone Wednesday with top officials from Ukraine, Qatar and Romania to “warmly thank them” for their contributions. The three countries sent 340 firefighters and 24 vehicles in response to Greece’s appeal for help.

Evia’s northern part, which has forests entwined with villages and small seaside resorts, has suffered the greatest damage, with an estimated 50,000 hectares (123,000 acres) lost and dozens of homes burned.

Retiree Maria Roga said although her house in Pefki, a village on Evia, was saved from the flames that burned a neighboring home, she still worries about flare-ups.

“I’m still afraid. I’m afraid,” she told The Associated Press on Wednesday. “(But) I can’t complain. I am very grateful, I am one of the lucky ones.”

Although most of Pefki’s homes are intact, the village — whose name means pine tree — is now surrounded by ranks of blackened trees.

Some 600 firefighters from Greece, the Czech Republic, Britain, France and Germany were also deployed Wednesday near ancient Olympia and in Arcadia in the Peloponnese, assisted by 33 water-dropping aircraft — including two Russian Ilyushin Il-76s that can drop more than 40 tons at one go.

A massive fire that broke out last week north of Athens has been limited to a section of a national park on Mount Parnitha. Firefighters from France, Qatar, Kuwait and Israel were deployed there.

That fire only caused minimal damage to the former royal summer palace of Tatoi under Mount Parnitha, although the surrounding forest was largely destroyed, Greek culture officials said. A tiny number of the estate’s 100,000 artifacts in storage was destroyed — which the culture ministry said had been “of small value and in poor condition.”

Despite the widescale destruction to forests, wildlife and livestock — and homes, although official estimates are not yet available — Greek authorities’ policy of evacuating villages to protect lives has paid off. No residents or tourists were killed in the wildfires. One volunteer firefighter died last week and two have been hospitalized in serious condition with burns.

In contrast, a wildfire in 2018 killed 102 people near Athens.

The health ministry said Wednesday another three firefighters required treatment for respiratory problems and light burns suffered in the Arcadia fire.

Nevertheless, some locals criticized the evacuation policy, saying while it saved lives it sent away villagers who could have helped firefighters battle the flames. Others have complained that water-dropping planes and even ground forces were absent at crucial times.

On the outskirts of Kamatriades on Evia, residents cutting firebreaks through the forest said they had received no help in protecting their village.

“We need some help here, we need some help! We are fighting alone (for) seven days now,” said Dimitris Stefanidakis.

Greek officials say they did everything they could against the fire service’s biggest-ever challenge. In eight days, authorities had to deal with 586 fires across the country, while heavy smoke from the fires often reduced visibility so much that water-dropping aircraft could not be deployed safely.

The causes of the blazes are under investigation, and authorities say that in at least one major blaze arson seems likely. Several people have been arrested.

The government has pledged a large compensation and reforestation program.

Big wildfires were also burning in Italy, which claimed two more lives Wednesday — bringing the overall toll this month to four. Authorities said a 77-year-old shepherd was found dead in the southern Calabria region. Reports said he was in a farmhouse where he had apparently sought refuge with his flock.

And a 30-year-old farmer died near Catania when he was crushed by his tractor while fighting a blaze. Last week in Italy, a woman and her nephew died of smoke inhalation as they tried to save the family olive grove.

In Turkey, firefighters worked Wednesday to extinguish a wildfire in the southwest Mugla province. At least eight people and countless animals have died in Turkey in more than 200 wildfires since July 28.

'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 Merimack River in the town of Canterbury. He initially built the cabin with his wife, from whom he is now estranged, although he said they are still married.

He 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."

Lidstone declined to comment further on his relationship with his family. Two of his three sons had told the AP they hadn't been in touch with their father recently, and his daughter did not respond to a message seeking comment.

On July 15, Lidstone was jailed 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.

In court Wednesday, both sides agreed to arrange for Lidstone to collect his cats and chickens and remaining possessions at the site; some items had been given to police for safekeeping. Lidstone, who still believes he was not on Giles' land, also was given permission to hire a surveyor to give him "peace of mind," Judge Andrew Schulman said.

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 the judge ruled that he would have less incentive to return to "this particular place in the woods," now that the cabin had burned down.

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.

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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?"

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 a routine task — Biden recalled infrastructure 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.

"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 coalition led by West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a Re-

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publican, 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, like previous presidents, had sought to assemble an infrastructure package during his time at the White House, but often sent mixed signals to negotiators and frustrated lawmakers by threatening to withdraw support from items to which he had previously committed. 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 Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and 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."

Justin Bieber leads nominees for 2021 MTV Video Music Awards

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Justin Bieber leads this year's list of nominees at the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards, followed closely by Megan Thee Stallion, Billie Eilish, BTS, Doja Cat, Drake, Giveon, Lil Nas X and first-time nominee Olivia Rodrigo.

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Bieber has seven nods, including video of the year and best direction for "POPSTAR," artist of the year, best cinematography for "Holy" and best pop song, best editing and best collaboration for "Peaches."

Megan Thee Stallion is right behind with six nominations, mostly from her hit song "WAP," triggering nods for video of the year, artist of the year, best collaboration and best hip-hop song. She also was nominated for a second time in the best hip-hop song category for her work on Lil Baby's "On Me (The Remix)."

Eilish, BTS, Doja Cat, Drake, Giveon, Lil Nas X and Rodrigo each have five nominations. Bieber and Megan Thee Stallion will compete with Ariana Grande, Doja Cat, Olivia Rodrigo and Taylor Swift for artist of the year.

The video of the year category is filled by "WAP" by Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion; "POPSTAR" by DJ Khaled featuring Drake and Bieber; "Kiss Me More" by Doja Cat featuring SZA; Ed Sheeran's "Bad Habits"; Lil Nas X's "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)"; and The Weeknd's "Save Your Tears."

"WAP" is also up for song of the year, alongside "Mood" by 24kGoldn featuring iann dior; "Leave The Door Open" by Bruno Mars, Anderson .Paak and Silk Sonic; "Dynamite" by BTS; Dua Lipa's "Levitating" and Rodrigo's "drivers license."

The 2021 VMAs will return to New York City, airing from the Barclays Center in Brooklyn on Sept. 12. The show will simulcast across CMT, Comedy Central, Logo, MTV2, Nickelodeon, Paramount Network, Pop, TV Land, VH1 and The CW Network.

The best new artist nominees are: 24kGoldn, Giveon, The Kid LAROI, Olivia Rodrigo, Polo G and Saweetie. Best rock song nominees are Evanescence's "Use My Voice," Foo Fighters' "Shame Shame," John Mayer's "Last Train Home," The Killers' "My Own Soul's Warning," Kings Of Leon's "The Bandit" and Lenny Kravitz's "Raise Vibration."

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

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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.

In a statement responding to the Amnesty report, Ethiopia's government said it had previously acknowledged that "some members of the armed forces have engaged in conduct that is contrary to the clear rules of engagement and direction they have been given."

Ethiopia's statement also accused the human rights group of "sensationalized attacks and smear campaigns" against the government, while Eritrea's information minister Yemane Gebremeskel in a tweet accused Amnesty of having a "hostile agenda" against his country, which borders the Tigray region to the north.

Earlier this year, Ethiopia's 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.

A spokesman for the attorney general's office did not respond to a request for an update Wednesday on any investigations.

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.

Sweeping conquests test US hopes of more moderate Taliban

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and KATHY GANNON Associated Press

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

Taliban commanders seized three more provincial capitals in Afghanistan and an army headquarters, officials said Wednesday, in a blitz that leaves up to two-thirds of the nation in their control as the U.S. finishes its withdrawal after two decades of war. The day before, President Joe Biden called on Afghans to "fight for themselves, fight for their nation."

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.

Biden administration officials have kept up the hopeful claim that a desire for international approval might influence Taliban actions. U.S. envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad traveled to Qatar this week 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."

Administration officials reject criticism by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who opposes the withdrawal and dismisses what he calls "diplomatic carrots."

Regardless of whether the Taliban heeds that warning, Biden shows 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 Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recognized the old Taliban government. The inward-looking rulers enforced the strictest interpretation of Islamic law, including banning entertainment like singing and watching TV. They 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.

The Taliban today have 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.

The prospect of the world recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government if their blitz succeeds "is a value to them," said Carter Malkasian, an Afghanistan expert who advised then-Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford during the U.S.-Taliban talks.

"However, that's probably not going to cause them to give any kind of large-scale concessions," said Malkasian, author of "The American War in Afghanistan: A History."

What that hope of legitimacy could do is moderate the Taliban's behavior during and after their battlefield campaign, Malkasian said, so they refrain from some of the worst abuses of the past.

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, who rushed Wednesday to Balkh province, already surrounded by Taliban-held territory, to seek help in pushing back the insurgents, told his Cabinet this month.

The Taliban have become "more cruel, more oppressive," Ghani said.

Scenes of black-turbaned Taliban officials signing the U.S. withdrawal deal with Trump officials itself granted the Taliban new legitimacy. 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 are honoring one key 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.

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.”

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.”

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.”

Ethiopia armed group says it has alliance with Tigray forces

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — A militant leader in Ethiopia says his group has struck a military alliance with the Tigray forces now pressing toward the country’s 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.

The alliance is a further sign of the broadening of the Tigray conflict that began in November after a

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political fallout between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray leaders who had dominated Ethiopia's government for nearly three decades. Thousands have been killed in the nine-month war that has been marked by widespread allegations by ethnic Tigrayans of gang-rapes, man-made famine and mass expulsions by Ethiopian and allied forces.

The OLA leader 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," Diriba 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 (Abiy's) regime."

The alliance brings together the Tigray People's Liberation Front, who had been front and center in 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.

Tigray forces spokesman Getachew Reda told the AP last week that "yes, we're working with some people" in pursuit of a political arrangement but didn't give details. "We want to work with anyone not implicated in the genocidal campaign Abiy Ahmed has waged," he said.

There was no comment 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. The Tigray forces spokesman 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."

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.

Diriba acknowledged that agreeing to the Tigray forces' 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 together, 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," its 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."

Heaven can wait, maybe, but not a phone call for the pope

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Maybe heaven can wait, but a phone call for the pope could not.

In a decidedly unusual break from protocol, Pope Francis took a cellphone from an aide while standing at center stage in a Vatican auditorium for his weekly Wednesday audience with the public. Francis, who had blessed the attendees near the event's end, chatted animatedly for a couple of minutes with whom-ever was on the other end.

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The pope gestured with his free hand as if the caller could see him - a common impulse for many people when talking on the phone - while he held the device to his left ear with his other hand. Francis seemed to be explaining something and did most of the talking.

He twice moved his right hand as if he were signing something.

The Vatican declined to comment about the nature of the very public call.

After blessing the members of his audience, the pope typically wades into the crowd to greet many of them affectionately. But in another departure from the routine, Francis on Wednesday abruptly changed direction while chatting with another aide as he was about to descend the stage steps. Instead of greeting the faithful, he headed toward a closed exit door on the stage.

First the aide, then the pope, gestured to the participants that they should wait. The aide opened the door, and the pope walked briskly off the stage. After a few minutes, Francis returned and went down the marble steps to the audience section to mingle with people who wanted to shake his hand or take selfies with him.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Aug. 12, the 224th day of 2021. There are 141 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 12, 1985, the world's worst single-aircraft disaster occurred as a crippled Japan Airlines Boeing 747 on a domestic flight crashed into a mountain, killing 520 people. (Four people survived.)

On this date:

In 1867, President Andrew Johnson sparked a move to impeach him as he defied Congress by suspending Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, with whom he had clashed over Reconstruction policies. (Johnson was acquitted by the Senate.)

In 1902, International Harvester Co. was formed by a merger of McCormick Harvesting Machine Co., Deering Harvester Co. and several other manufacturers.

In 1909, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, home to the Indianapolis 500, first opened.

In 1939, the MGM movie musical "The Wizard of Oz," starring Judy Garland, had its world premiere at the Strand Theater in Oconomowoc (oh-KAH'-noh-moh-wahk), Wisconsin, three days before opening in Hollywood.

In 1953, the Soviet Union conducted a secret test of its first hydrogen bomb.

In 1960, the first balloon communications satellite — the Echo 1 — was launched by the United States from Cape Canaveral.

In 1964, author Ian Fleming, 56, the creator of James Bond, died in Canterbury, Kent, England.

In 1981, IBM introduced its first personal computer, the model 5150, at a press conference in New York.

In 1994, in baseball's eighth work stoppage since 1972, players went on strike rather than allow team owners to limit their salaries. (The strike ended in April 1995.)

In 2000, the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk and its 118-man crew were lost during naval exercises in the Barents Sea.

In 2013, James "Whitey" Bulger, the feared Boston mob boss who became one of the nation's most-wanted fugitives, was convicted in a string of 11 killings and dozens of other gangland crimes, many of them committed while he was said to be an FBI informant. (Bulger was sentenced to life; he was fatally beaten at a West Virginia prison in 2018, hours after being transferred from a facility in Florida.)

In 2017, a car plowed into a crowd of people peacefully protesting a white nationalist rally in the Virginia college town of Charlottesville, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and hurting more than a dozen others. (The attacker, James Alex Fields, was sentenced to life in prison on 29 federal hate crime charges, and life plus 419 years on state charges.) President Donald Trump condemned what he called an "egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides."

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Ten years ago: A divided three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta struck down the centerpiece of President Barack Obama's sweeping health care overhaul, the so-called individual mandate. (The mandate was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2012.) Tiger Woods missed the cut at the PGA Championship at Atlanta Athletic Club with a 3-over 73, finishing out of the top 100 for the first time ever in a major.

Five years ago: The Pentagon said that Hafiz Saeed Khan, a top Islamic State group leader in Afghanistan, had been killed in a U.S. drone strike the previous month. A judge in Milwaukee overturned the conviction of Brendan Dassey, who was found guilty of helping his uncle kill a woman in a case profiled in the Netflix series "Making a Murderer," ruling that investigators coerced a confession using deceptive tactics. (The ruling was later overturned by a federal appeals court; the U.S. Supreme Court would decline to hear the case.) Katie Ledecky won her fourth gold medal of the Rio Olympics, shattering her own mark in the 800-meter freestyle.

One year ago: Appearing together for the first time as running mates, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris put aside their one-time political rivalry to deliver an aggressive attack on the character and performance of President Donald Trump; because of the coronavirus, their appearance came in a mostly empty high school gym in Delaware. Trump again pressed Congress to steer future coronavirus funding away from schools that did not reopen in the fall. Seattle's school board voted unanimously to begin the academic year with remote teaching only. Tribune Publishing said it would be closing the newsrooms at five newspapers, including The Daily News in New York; employees would continue to work from home as they had during the pandemic. Hank Williams Jr., Marty Stuart and songwriter Dean Dillon were named as the new inductees to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Today's Birthdays: Actor George Hamilton is 82. Actor Dana Ivey is 80. Actor Jennifer Warren is 80. Rock singer-musician Mark Knopfler (Dire Straits) is 72. Actor Jim Beaver is 71. Singer Kid Creole is 71. Jazz musician Pat Metheny is 67. Actor Sam J. Jones is 67. Actor Bruce Greenwood is 65. Country singer Danny Shirley is 65. Pop musician Roy Hay (Culture Club) is 60. Rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot is 58. Actor Peter Krause (KROW'-zuh) is 56. Actor Brent Sexton is 54. International Tennis Hall of Famer Pete Sampras is 50. Actor-comedian Michael Ian Black is 50. Actor Yvette Nicole Brown is 50. Actor Rebecca Gayheart is 50. Actor Casey Affleck is 46. Rock musician Bill Uechi is 46. Actor Maggie Lawson is 41. Actor Dominique Swain is 41. Actor Leah Pipes is 33. Actor Lakeith Stanfield is 30. NBA All-Star Khris Middleton is 30. Actor Cara Delevingne (DEHL'-eh-veen) is 29. Actor Imani Hakim is 28.