

# Groton Daily Independent

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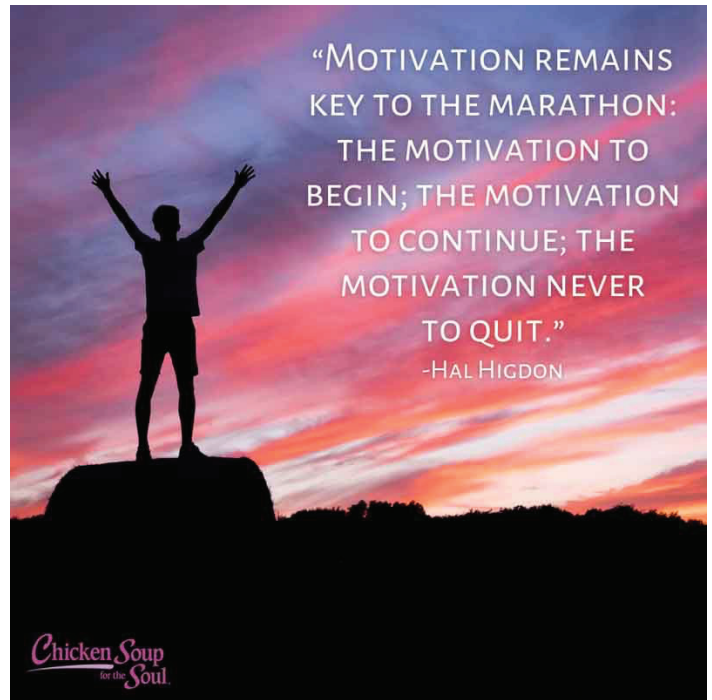
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## Service Notice: Rosemary Belden

Funeral services for Rosemary Belden, 80, of Groton will be 11:00 a.m., Wednesday, August 18th at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church for one hour prior to services.

Rosemary passed away Saturday, August 14, 2021 at Avantara Groton.



## **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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## Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Dominique Clare

The Minnesota Vikings' first preseason game has concluded. Before we dive into the game, I would like to remind you not to overreact to a preseason game regardless of how good or bad it may be. Too often do I see this happen when what you are seeing at this point is rarely indicative of what the team will play like during the regular season.

With that being said, the Vikings' first preseason game against the Denver Broncos was bad. They lost the game 33-6 in a long boring game that was difficult to watch. They lacked energy as a team and made a lot of mistakes.

It is important to note that the Vikings rested almost all of their projected starters for this game, which is one big reason why this game should not have you worried.

Let's take a look at some of the headlines from the game.

**Jake Browning back to reality**

After becoming a fan favorite for being available during training camp, Browning came back down to reality. He completed 5 of 10 passes for 31 yards and 1 interception. It is starting to look like availability may be his best attribute and with the way the NFL set the COVID-19 protocols, that might still be enough to keep him as the backup going forward.

**Kellen Mond makes his debut**

The second-round draft selection of the Minnesota Vikings hit the field for the first time. He did so with limited practice after having to sit out for a portion of training camp for COVID-19 protocols. In his 1st preseason game, his stats were not great as he completed 6 of 16 passes for 53 yards but played much better than the stats indicated. Several nice throws were dropped and he showed some signs of progression in things like footwork and making NFL reads. He was also the 3rd leading rusher on the team with 25 yards on 5 carries.

**No receivers to be found**

The anticipated race for receiver depth was nonexistent in this game. The leading receiver was a running back who had 1 reception for 18 yards. KJ Osborn was the second leading receiver with 15 yards on 2 catches. The Vikings are covered at receiver with Adam Thielen and Justin Jefferson, but this group needs someone else to step up to the plate.

**The Defense was really bad**

With the starters resting, the Vikings' second-team defense was clearly outmatched at every level. On nearly every play, they were out of position and not aggressive. If that sounds like the Vikings' defense from last year, that is because it essentially was. This backup unit was very similar to the defense the Vikings put out on the field last season. Luckily for the Vikings, this won't be the case unless the team gets an extreme injury bug.

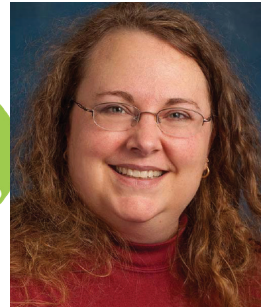
**Kicker was actually a bright spot**

It's not often that you can say that the Vikings kicker was a bright spot. Greg Joseph made both his field-goal attempts scoring the Vikings only 6 points of the game. Kicker was my biggest question mark for the Vikings heading into the season, so this is a great start for Joseph and his career with the Vikings.

The Vikings next preseason game is Saturday against the Indianapolis Colts. Carson Wentz is now in Indy after being traded this offseason, but he won't be on the field in this game because of an injury he sustained in training camp. Mike Zimmer will likely play his starters this game, which will hopefully lead to a much better performance when compared to the preseason opener.

## First Day of School

"First day of school! Wake up! Come on. First day of school," the little fish shouts at his dad in the opening scene of Finding Nemo. The first day of school is an important transition for students of all ages, and it is often a challenging one. That is particularly true this fall as we start yet another academic year marked by the pandemic.



By Debra Johnston, M.D ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

Parents have an important role in preparing their children for a successful school year. First, start adjusting the schedule. Many families relax the rules during the summer and may be in the habit of staying up late and sleeping in. Make sure your child has time to adjust to their school year routine before that first day. Second, develop good habits by acting ahead. Having the backpack ready and clothing laid out the night before saves scrambling in the morning and reduces the risk of forgotten items. Invite your children to help decide if they want school lunch or a sack lunch and let them help pack their lunch boxes.

Back to school checkups for your children provide a valuable opportunity to talk to the doctor about physical, developmental, and social changes. Additionally, children may need immunizations: boosters for tetanus and pertussis, or shots to protect them from HPV, meningitis, and Covid.

The Covid vaccine is available to those age 12 and over, and I urge parents to schedule those shots if your child is eligible! Although in general children are less likely than adults to end up in the hospital with Covid, we do see previously healthy children become seriously ill and suffer complications. The jury is still out on whether the Delta variant is more dangerous to children than previous variants, but we do know this variant is more contagious, which means more people fall ill. Infected children can spread the virus to other people who may be more likely to develop serious illness. There are still many people who are not eligible for the vaccine, who have chosen not to get the vaccine, or whose vaccine may not be as effective as hoped due to underlying health conditions.

Many children feel nervous about the start of school and those jitters may be worse this year due to the pandemic. Talk to your children about their concerns. Help them work through "what ifs": What if I forget to wash my hands? What if I start coughing during school? What if I forget my homework? Most adults have had practice dealing with these experiences in the moment, but we, too, can benefit from mental rehearsals. Become familiar with your school district's plan for controlling and responding to the pandemic so you can help your child with changing conditions.

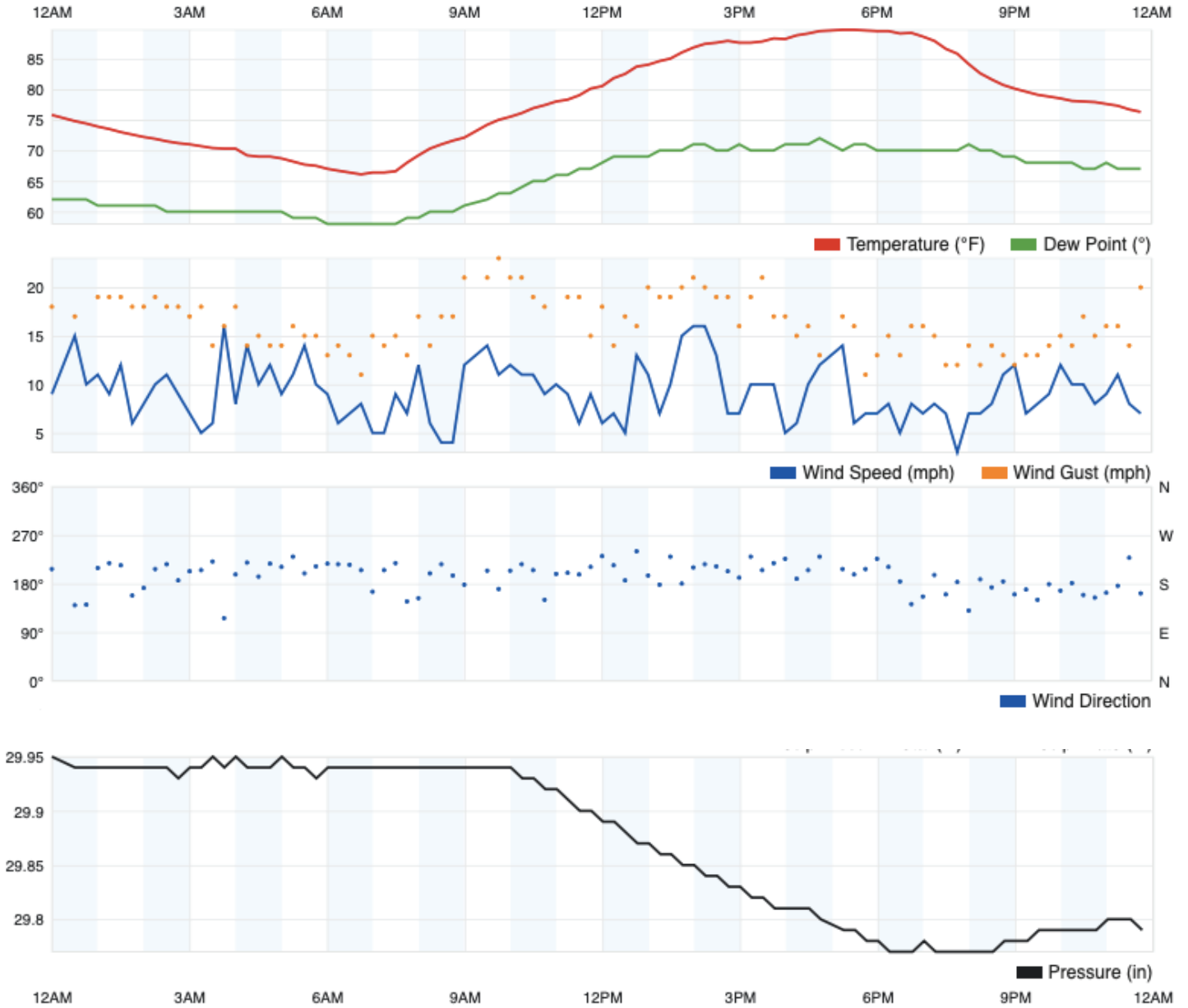
With a little preparation, we can reduce stress, set our kids up for a successful year and help them be as excited as Nemo to start school!

Debra Johnston, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org) and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Tuesday	Tuesday Night	Wednesday
				
Hot	Slight Chance T-storms then Partly Cloudy	Hot	Partly Cloudy	Hot and Breezy
<b>High: 96 °F</b>	<b>Low: 70 °F</b>	<b>High: 96 °F</b>	<b>Low: 71 °F</b>	<b>High: 96 °F</b>

**Hot Mon-Wed**  
**Cooler Thurs/Fri**

Highs-Around 90 Sisseton Hills to  
Upper 90s/Lower 100s along and  
west of the river Mon-Wed

Highs-Mid 70s to Mid 80s Thurs/Fri  
with chance of thunderstorms

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  

8/15/2021 3:34 PM  
[www.weather.gov/abr](http://www.weather.gov/abr)

Hot conditions will remain into Wednesday across the region. A front will bring cooler air along with scattered thunderstorms for Thursday and Friday.

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## Today in Weather History

August 16, 1986: Thunderstorm winds gusted to 60 mph in Forestburg, in Sanborn County. Thunderstorm winds gusting to 100 mph uprooted trees and damaged buildings in the northern part of Hanson County. On several farms, barns, garages, silos, and small buildings were destroyed. The worst affected area was south of Epiphany where large steel sheds were damaged, and a roof was blown in.

1777: The Battle of Bennington, delayed a day by rain, was fought. The rain-delayed British reinforcements and allowed the Vermont Militia to arrive in time, enabling the Americans to win a victory by defeating two enemy forces, one at a time.

1909 - A dry spell began in San Bernardino County of southern California that lasted until the 6th of May in 1912, a stretch of 994 days! Another dry spell, lasting 767 days, then began in October of 1912. (The Weather Channel)

1916 - Altapass, NC, was deluged with 22.22 inches of rain in 24 hours to establish a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather from Oklahoma to Wisconsin and Lower Michigan. Thunderstorms in central Illinois produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Springfield which toppled two large beer tents at the state fair injuring 58 persons. Thunderstorms also drenched Chicago IL with 2.90 inches of rain, making August 1987 their wettest month of record. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a slow moving cold front produced severe weather from North Dakota to Lower Michigan during the day. Nine tornadoes were sighted in North Dakota, and thunderstorms also produced hail three inches in diameter at Lakota ND, and wind gusts to 83 mph at Marais MI. Thirty-seven cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Rockford IL with a reading of 104 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Late afternoon and evening thunderstorms in the Central High Plains Region produced golf ball size hail at La Junta CO, Intercanyon CO, and Custer SD. Afternoon thunderstorms over South Texas drenched Brownsville with 2.60 inches of rain. Fair skies allowed viewing of the late evening full lunar eclipse from the Great Lakes Region to the Northern and Central Plains Region, and across much of the western third of the country. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1992: One of the most destructive United States hurricanes of record started modestly as a tropical wave that emerged from the west coast of Africa on August 14. The wave spawned a tropical depression on August 16, which became Tropical Storm Andrew the next day.

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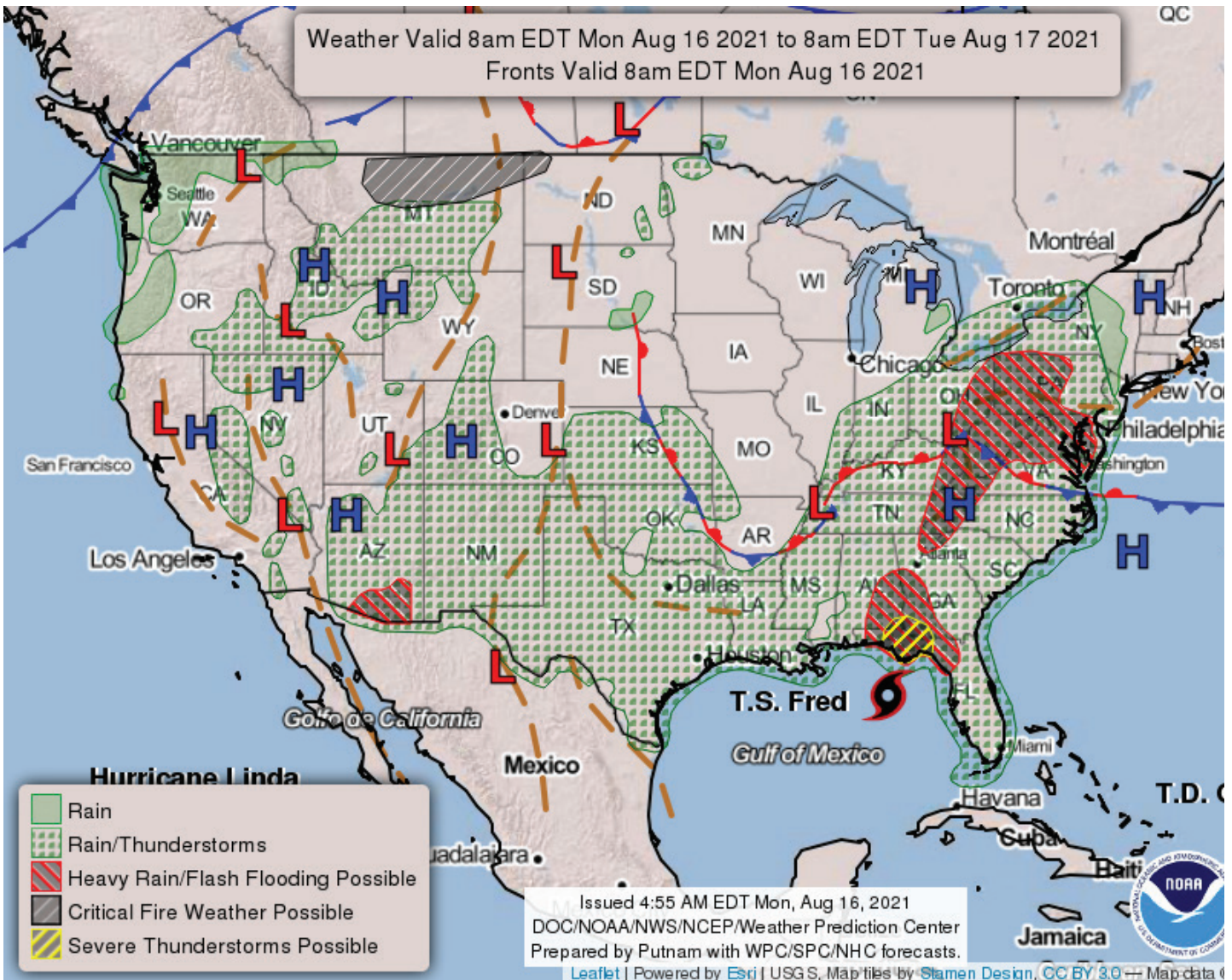
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 89.7 °F at 5:15 PM**  
**Low Temp: 66.1 °F at 6:45 AM**  
**Wind: 23 mph at 9:45 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 105° in 1988**  
**Record Low: 42° in 1897**  
**Average High: 83°F**  
**Average Low: 57°F**  
**Average Precip in Aug.: 1.08**  
**Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12**  
**Average Precip to date: 15.18**  
**Precip Year to Date: 8.39**  
**Sunset Tonight: 8:39 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:37 a.m.**



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## THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

Years ago it was a heart-warming experience for me to take my wife and sons to visit my childhood home. With some hesitation I knocked on the door. The owners, who purchased the home shortly after my parents went to be with the Lord, remembered me and invited us in.

We began our tour in the living room, then went into the dining room and eventually the kitchen. We walked upstairs and paused in my childhood bedroom before visiting the attic. Then we went to the basement. Though there had been some changes, many things remained the same. Walking through my "original home" brought back many memories that flooded my heart. There were tears of joy mixed with tears of sadness as I thought of my parents. They went to heaven before my thirteenth birthday.

As we returned to the car, I began to think of the many different "homes" I'd lived in since my parents died. The final number was rather staggering but not unusual for most people. In 2011 a census study revealed that the average American will live in 11.7 different "homes."

Psalm 90 begins with the word "Lord," referring to our God as a sovereign God who is our eternal shelter - our dwelling place. Moses used the same words in Deuteronomy when he wrote, "the eternal God is your dwelling place." He told the Israelites that God was then and would always be their "home" - their refuge no matter where they were - whether in the wilderness or in the promised land. Home, in Scripture, is not a place but a Person.

This same Lord is the eternal God who will become the eternal shelter and refuge for all who accept His Son. What a home we have awaiting us through Jesus.

Prayer: We pray, Lord, that those who have not accepted Your salvation will come to You now and accept Your Son, and have an eternal refuge. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.



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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  
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)  
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)  
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)  
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes  
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

## News from the Associated Press

### **Broadband boxes come as surprise to Sioux Falls residents**

By TREVOR J. MITCHELL Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — At first, Will Bushee assumed the green box in his front yard was temporary. There'd been road construction near his home in southern Sioux Falls, but when a hole was bored into his front yard and filled with a green pedestal, he started to have concerns and contacted the city.

They told Bushee it wasn't a city project, though. Vast Broadband, an internet service provider in Sioux Falls and Vermillion, is expanding their fiber optic network throughout the city.

And once Vast receives a private utility permit from the city, they're allowed to place "telecommunication pedestals" within a utility easement on private property, which can include a home's front yard.

But Bushee and other residents say no one informed them about the plans.

Mike Heiberger, a principal engineer with the city, said when Vast representatives applied for their permits, they'd assured the city they would be sending out mailers about the construction, followed by doorhangers.

"We are hearing from residents that in some instances that didn't happen," Heiberger said.

Ron Gaspar, who lives in the same neighborhood as Bushee, said he hadn't seen any notice, pointing at a pile of dirt he said had been left behind as the pedestal was added, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

"It's just a shame they wouldn't let you know," Gaspar said.

"Do I care if you bury a cable in my yard? No," another resident Kim Euker said. "Do I care if you position something in a way that will not deter value? No. Do I care that you've installed this God-forsaken ugly green box in my yard that now I have to mow around? Hell yes."

Vast's website has a FAQ section that explains they are permitted to do the work on private property, and also asks residents to mark underground items including sprinkler systems or sump pump lines.

Vast currently has applied for and received 16 of the permits since June 18, Heiberger said, which each cover about a quarter-mile of space.

He said the city has asked Vast to finish the work they're doing and "re-evaluate their communication plans" before continuing to install the pedestals — of which there will likely be many more.

Heiberger said Vast's expansion plan "includes a better portion of the city," and the city hadn't seen something like it in years.

Representatives from Vast did not respond to requests for comment.

After the Argus Leader published the original story, Sioux Falls Mayor Paul Tenhaken issued a statement on social media about the situation. He called it "unacceptable" and said the city had stopped all permitting issuances for the company until a plan to correct the issue was presented.

"We have escalated this all the way to their executives and are expecting rapid resolutions given the many complaints," Tenhaken tweeted. "Thanks for your patience."

### **Authorities record 4 fatalities during Sturgis rally**

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — Authorities have recorded four fatalities during this year's Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. The rally began Aug. 6 and concludes Sunday. The state Department of Safety said two deaths occurred on Saturday, the Rapid City Journal reported on Sunday.

A 66-year-old man was killed Saturday morning when he lost control of his motorcycle in Sturgis, hit a curb and fell off the motorcycle. He was not wearing a helmet and was pronounced dead at the scene.

Hours later a 51-year-old motorcycle driver failed to negotiate a curve on U.S. Highway 14A just east of Sturgis. He and his 46-year-old female passenger were both thrown from the motorcycle. She was pronounced dead at the scene. The driver sustained non-life-threatening injuries. Neither were wearing helmets.

Saturday also saw five crashes involving serious injuries, bringing the total number of injury crashes

during the rally to 60.

one when a 66-year-old man lost control of his motorcycle in Sturgis and hit a curb, the other when a driver failed to negotiate a curve on U.S. Highway 14A just east of Sturgis. A 46-year-old female passenger was pronounced dead at the scene. Saturday also saw five crashes involving serious injuries, bringing the total number of injury crashes during the rally to 60.

## Homicide trial set to begin two years after arrest

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A man accused of opening fire on a group of people, killing one, is set go on trial this week after spending the last two years in jail.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported 37-year-old Ramon Deron Smith's trial will begin Monday. He faces multiple counts, including murder, manslaughter, attempted murder, aggravated assault and reckless discharge of a firearm. He's been held in the Minnehaha County Jail since he was arrested in June 2019.

According to court documents, the shootings took place on June 8, 2019, when eight men came to an apartment to settle a dispute. Smith opened fire on the group. He hit three people, including 44-year-old Larry Carr, killing him. Smith fled the state and was arrested about two weeks later in Minneapolis.

Smith was initially scheduled to stand trial in January 2020 but the start date has changed four times. His attorneys have made numerous motions, including a request that Smith be allowed to wear "civilian clothing" during the trial, according to court documents.

## Noem won't support vaccine mandate for interstate travel

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem says she won't support a federal COVID-19 vaccinate mandate for interstate travel.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported that Noem on Saturday tweeted a screenshot from an Associated Press story on Friday about steps the Biden administration is considering on stricter vaccine mandates. The story mentions the administration has discussed mandating vaccines for interstate travel but feels the move would be too polarizing.

Noem tweeted that if the administration tries a vaccine mandate for interstate travel "we will stand up" and governors are the last line of defense to protect freedoms.

South Dakota is experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases. State health officials reported 1,270 active cases on Friday. Case numbers haven't risen above 1,000 since May.

## The Latest: EU foreign ministers to hold emergency talks

By The Associated Press undefined

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The latest on Afghanistan:

BRUSSELS — European Union foreign ministers will hold emergency talks Tuesday to discuss the crisis in Afghanistan, after the president fled and the Taliban seized control of the capital, Kabul, over the weekend.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a tweet Monday that he decided to convene the extraordinary videoconference so the ministers can make "a first assessment" of developments.

Borrell says that "Afghanistan stands at a crossroad. Security and wellbeing of its citizens, as well as international security are at play."

European nations have been caught by surprise at the speed of the takeover. They've been evacuating embassies and leaving the strife-torn country in recent days. The EU has small diplomatic mission in Kabul. It's one of Afghanistan's biggest aid donors.

GENEVA — The U.N. humanitarian aid coordination agency says it and partners "are staying and delivering to people in need" despite a complex security situation in Afghanistan following a sweep by Taliban forces across the country.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid, or OCHA, says in a note: "The humanitarian com-

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munity — both the U.N. and nongovernmental organizations — remains committed to helping people in the country.”

OCHA said thousands of internally displaced people who have been identified in recent weeks have received assistance including food, cash, health care, water, and sanitation support.

“While the security environment is highly complex, humanitarian agencies are staying and delivering to people in need,” OCHA said.

Even before the upheaval, some 18.4 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, OCHA said, and its \$1.3 billion humanitarian response plan for the country is only 38% funded.

BERLIN — The German government has called on the Taliban to show restraint, protect the lives of the Afghan people and make sure needed humanitarian aid can reach them.

A spokesman for German Chancellor Angela Merkel also said Monday that Germany “is concerned about the fates of individual Afghans as well as the development of the entire country.”

Steffen Seibert said Monday that “these are bitter developments, when looking at them against the background of the years-long missions of the western community of states.”

The government also said it is personally contacting all embassy staff, including local hires, whom they are trying to evacuate out of Kabul. A spokesman for the country’s foreign ministry warned people not to independently try to reach the airport because of the volatile and dynamic situation there.

Christopher Burger told reporters Monday that the embassy is calling and emailing everyone who is on evacuation lists and giving them personal instructions.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark - The staff with the Finnish Embassy in Kabul have fled to a neighboring country. The Finland daily Helsingin Sanomat reported Monday that the country’s armed forces took part in the evacuation and according to the newspaper’s sources, the staff flew out on an American plane.

In Denmark, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said that Danes “are working round the clock. We are in the process of evacuating,” adding the work was done “in extremely difficult conditions.”

MOSCOW -- Moscow will decide whether to recognize the new Taliban government based on its conduct, the Kremlin envoy on Afghanistan said in an interview Monday.

Zamir Kabulov told the Ekho Moskvyy radio station that “no one is going to rush” the decision. “Recognition or non-recognition will depend on the conduct of the new authorities,” Kabulov said.

Russia labeled the Taliban a terrorist organization in 2003, but has since hosted several rounds of talks in Afghanistan, most recently in March, that involved the group. Moscow, which fought a 10-year war in Afghanistan that ended with Soviet troops’ withdrawal in 1989, has made a diplomatic comeback as a mediator, reaching out to feuding Afghan factions as it has jockeyed with the U.S. for influence in the country.

Kabulov said Monday the Taliban was “deservedly” declared a terrorist group in Russia two decades ago. “The Taliban have learned this lesson well. If they haven’t learned it in full, they will have to face great difficulties in relations not only with Russia, but with the entire global community,” Kabulov said.

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia - Slovakia’s Prime Minister Eduard Heger says his country will give asylum to 10 Afghan nationals who have intensively cooperated with European Union member states in recent years.

Heger says his country is providing a military plane to transport them to Slovakia together with several Slovak nationals who have asked for it.

BEIJING — China says its embassy remains open in Kabul and expressed a willingness to support its reconstruction.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying did not answer explicitly when asked whether Beijing would recognize the Taliban as the new government but said that China would respect the choice of the

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Afghan people.

She noted the Taliban pledges to negotiate the establishment of an inclusive Islamic government and to ensure the safety of both Afghans and foreign missions. China, she added, hopes that would "ensure a smooth transition of the situation in Afghanistan."

LONDON -- A leading British lawmaker from Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party is calling the mayhem at Kabul airport "Saigon 2.0," comparing it to U.S. evacuation of South Vietnam's capital in 1975.

Tobias Ellwood, a former defense minister and British Army captain, said the images of the mayhem Monday at Kabul airport echoed the evacuation of the South Vietnam capital after North Vietnamese troops entered the city.

The advance of the North Vietnamese prompted the U.S. to evacuate thousands of its nationals and troops as well as South Vietnamese civilians who had helped during the war. The most dramatic images involved the evacuation of people from the roof of the U.S. Embassy.

"If this is not Saigon 2.0, I don't know what is," Ellwood said. "Is this how we thought we'd depart Afghanistan? I repeat my call for a U.K. inquiry."

U.S. President Joe Biden's decision earlier this year to announce the timeline for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan led the other nations in the NATO coalition, including the U.K., to announce their own departures, two decades after they first arrived in Afghanistan.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Monday called for national reconciliation in neighboring Afghanistan.

The official IRNA news agency quoted Raisi as saying Iran will support efforts to restore stability in Afghanistan as a first priority. He called Iran "a brother and neighboring nation" to Afghanistan. He also described the Americans' rapid pullout as a "military failure" that should "turn to an opportunity for restoring life, security and stable peace."

Iran shares nearly 600 miles of borders with Afghanistan and is home to about 800,000 registered Afghan refugees and more than two million undocumented Afghans. The influx began after Soviet forces entered Afghanistan in 1979.

MOSCOW — Russia will evacuate some of its embassy staff in Kabul "in order not to create too big a presence," the Kremlin envoy on Afghanistan said Monday.

Zamir Kabulov told the Ekho Moskvyy radio station that some of roughly 100 Russian embassy staff "will be placed on leave or evacuated in some other fashion just in order not to create too big a presence." Kabulov said that the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov will meet a Taliban representative on Tuesday to discuss security for the diplomatic mission, adding that the outside perimeter of the embassy is already being guarded by the Taliban.

Kabulov also said that the Taliban's swift takeover of the Afghan capital was "somewhat unexpected." He said Russia was "too optimistic in our assessment of the quality of the armed forces trained by the Americans and NATO."

Kabulov said of those forces, "They dropped everything at the first shot."

MOSCOW -- The Uzbek Defense Ministry has confirmed that an Afghan military plane crashed in Uzbekistan on Sunday, but wouldn't reveal the details of the accident.

Ministry's spokesman Bakhrom Zulfikarov told Russia's state news agency Tass on Monday that the plane crashed in the Surkhandarya region in southeastern Uzbekistan and that "the details of the accident are currently being studied, information about it will be revealed later."

Uzbek media reported that the plane went down Sunday evening in the southeast of the country not far from the border with Afghanistan. At least one person was reported injured.

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CANBERRA, Australia — Australia is sending three transport and air-to-air refueling jets with 250 military personnel to repatriate more than 130 Australians and their families from Afghanistan, officials said on Monday.

Australia is also working to evacuate an undisclosed number of refugees, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said in a statement.

The support comes as the U.S. and other nations scramble to evacuate diplomats and Afghan employees and their families from Kabul. The Taliban a day earlier toppled the Western-backed government.

An Airbus A330 airliner modified for aerial refueling would support U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan later this week, Australia's Defense Department said in a statement. Two C-17A Globemaster heavy transport aircraft would also be sent to the Middle East, the statement said.

Australia shut its Kabul embassy in May and withdrew the last of its troops from Afghanistan in June.

More than 39,000 Australian military personnel have served in Afghanistan since 2001, and 41 died there.

LISBON, Portugal - Portugal's defense minister says his country is prepared to take in 243 Afghans, and their families who worked with Portuguese forces stationed in the country.

Defense Minister João Gomes Cravinho said NATO is coordinating the evacuation of the Afghans because Portugal doesn't have the military capacity to do so.

He told public broadcaster RTP late Sunday he is not aware of any Portuguese citizens living in Afghanistan.

Portugal had a small detachment of fewer than 200 troops stationed at Kabul airport, as part of the NATO mission in the country. The last ones pulled out at the end of May.

STOCKHOLM — Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde said Monday that 19 embassy employees had been evacuated from Kabul to Doha, Qatar and they'll eventually flown to Sweden.

Earlier Monday, Norway and Denmark said that the bulk of the embassy staff were out of Afghanistan.

Norway Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soereide said for the sake of the Norwegians it was done overnight.

Denmark's Defense Minister Trine Bramsen told Danish broadcaster DR that while most Danish diplomats had been evacuated, "there are still Danes," and others in the country still to be flown out.

Challenges include being able to land at Kabul's chaotic airport, he said. But there's a struggle, too, to get people to the airport, "a very difficult operation," Bramsen was quoted as saying.

LONDON -- British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace says the government is planning to fly out 1,500 more people from Afghanistan over the next two days.

The first flight carrying British nationals has landed in the U.K., he said Monday, as countries scrambled to evacuate their diplomats, Afghan employees and their families from the chaotic airport in Kabul.

Wallace expressed hope that the government will be able to evacuate around 1,000 people a day, including Afghan nationals who have helped British citizens.

He told the BBC that work is under way to "remove any bureaucratic barriers" to make sure people who pass screenings are able to be flown to the U.K.

He said the British government sent more than 600 troops over the weekend to Kabul to help secure the airport and "to effectively process, manage and escort people onto our flights to get them out of Afghanistan."

Wallace said one of the "biggest regrets" with the speed of the collapse of the Afghan government is that the timetable to remove Afghans and British people from the nation by Aug. 31 has had to be shortened.

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's state-run airline says it has halted all flights to Afghanistan's capital of Kabul because of the "uncertain security situation" there.

Spokesman Abdullah Hafeez said Monday that Pakistan International Airlines decided to protect passengers, the crew and the planes after consulting the Afghan civil aviation authorities.

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He spoke as embassies scrambled to evacuate personnel and Afghan employees through the airport. On Sunday, Taliban militants ended two decades of Western-backed government after a blitz through Afghanistan.

Videos on social media showed chaos at Kabul International Airport overnight, with the crack of occasional gunfire and hundreds of panicked Afghans running across the tarmac. By morning, advisories sent by civil aviation authorities announced the "civilian side" of the airport had been "closed until further notice."

Early Monday morning, flight-tracking data showed no immediate commercial flights over the country.

MILAN - Italy's has evacuated 70 embassy staff and Afghan employees from the capital city of Kabul. The plane was scheduled to arrive in Rome on Monday. Video taken at Kabul's international airport and released by the Italian Defense Ministry shows people walking up a mobile staircase to board the plane in darkness.

The evacuation is part of Italy's Operation Aquila Omnia (Eagle Ready for Anything) to quickly evacuate Italian diplomatic staff, citizens and Afghan employees and family members.

Italy had one of the largest contingents in Afghanistan before the pullout.

Italian journalist Francesca Mannocchi, who was on the plane, said that it was carrying 20 Afghan embassy employees and their families, including women and children. Prior to the Taliban advance, 228 Afghans and their families had been transferred to Italy.

Officials declined to give number of how many remained, but Italian media reported over the weekend that some 390 Afghan citizens and their family members were awaiting evacuation.

The first Czech evacuation flight has taken off from Kabul's international airport and landed in Prague. Prime Minister Andrej Babis said 46 people were on board Monday's flight.

They included Czech nationals, the Afghan staffers at the Czech embassy and Afghan interpreters who helped the Czech armed forces during NATO missions together with their families.

Babis didn't immediately provide more details. It's not clear how many such flights will follow.

Czech Interior Minister Jan Hamacek tweeted that given the deteriorating situation at Kabul's airport, it was "a miracle" that the Czech flight managed to take off.

Local media reported that thousands of people were gathered at the Kabul airport to leave the country.

In an earlier joint statement, the U.S. Pentagon and State Department said the American military would take over air-traffic control at the airport.

## California fire threatens homes as blazes burn across West

By EUGENE GARCIA and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

QUINCY, Calif. (AP) — Thousands of homes in Northern California remain threatened by the nation's largest wildfire as unstable weather creates a high danger of new blazes erupting across the West.

Weekend thunderstorms across the northern Sierra didn't produce much rain, instead whipping up winds and unleashing lightning strikes that that bedeviled the more than 6,000 firefighters trying to contain the month-old Dixie Fire amid temperatures forecast to top 100 degrees (38 Celsius).

"We're definitely still dealing with the possibility of lightning. Winds are all over the place. Things are going to be pretty unstable for the next couple days," said fire spokesman Edwin Zuniga.

Gusts of up to 50 mph (80 kph) on Saturday pushed flames closer to Janesville, a town of about 1,500 people just east of Greenville, the small gold rush-era community decimated by the fire 10 days ago.

James Reichle evacuated from Greenville and has been sleeping with his dog in a trailer outside a church. His home survived the flames but he's been unable to return because the roads are closed. He said he feels for his neighbors at the evacuation center who lost everything.

"These are all people who either don't have a home or don't have access to a home. I still have a house standing, no damage. But I can't get into it," he said Saturday.

The Dixie Fire was the largest among more than 100 big blazes burning in more than a dozen states in

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the West, a region seared by drought and hot, bone-dry weather that turned forests, brushlands, meadows and pastures into tinder.

The U.S. Forest Service said it is operating in crisis mode, fully deploying firefighters and maxing out its support system.

The roughly 21,000 federal firefighters working on the ground is more than double the number of firefighters sent to contain forest fires at this time a year ago, said Anthony Scardina, a deputy forester for the agency's Pacific Southwest region.

The Dixie fire has ravaged nearly 867 square miles (2,246 square kilometers) — an area the size of Tokyo, or more than twice the size of Indianapolis. It was 31% contained on Sunday.

Near Taylorsville, California, some firefighters on Sunday were monitoring a bear cub who was possibly orphaned in the fire. The emaciated cub was awaiting extraction from the burn-scarred area by a wildlife rescue team.

"Generally if you see them with a sow or a mother bear, they'll stay with the mother bear and run off," said firefighter Johnnie Macy, who was deployed from Golden, Colorado to battle the Dixie Fire. "This bear hasn't done that, so because of that we think that the bear's orphaned as a result of the fire."

More than 1,000 homes and businesses have been destroyed and nearly 15,000 structures were still under threat from the Dixie fire, whose cause has not been determined. Pacific Gas and Electric has said it may have been sparked when a tree fell on its power line.

A few hundred miles to the south, evacuations were ordered Sunday after a blaze that broke out the night before churned through California forestland near the remote community of Omo Ranch. There was no containment of the Caldor Fire burning in El Dorado County, about 60 miles (73 kilometers) east of Sacramento.

Meanwhile, a small wildfire that blew up Saturday east of Salt Lake City, temporarily shutting down Interstate 80 and leading to evacuation orders for some 8,000 residences, was caused by a vehicle with a malfunctioning catalytic converter, Utah Fire Info said. The Parleys Canyon Fire then calmed significantly, and homes were no longer threatened, officials said Sunday.

In southeastern Montana, firefighters gained ground on a pair of blazes that chewed through vast rangelands and at one point threatened the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. Those fires were caused by heat from coal seams, the deposits of coal found in the ground in the area, said Peggy Miller, a spokeswoman for the fires.

Mandatory evacuations for the tribal headquarters town of Lame Deer were lifted Sunday, but remained in place for those with medical conditions, and heavy smoke made air quality unhealthy across much of Montana, according to the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Smoke also drove air pollution levels to unhealthy or very unhealthy levels in parts of Northern California, Oregon and Idaho.

Climate change has made the U.S. West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

## Chaos as thousands flee Afghanistan after Taliban takeover

By AHMAD SEIR, RAHIM FAIEZ, KATHY GANNON AND JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Thousands of people packed into the Afghan capital's airport on Monday, rushing the tarmac and pushing onto planes in desperate attempts to flee the country after the Taliban overthrew the Western-backed government. U.S. troops fired warning shots as they struggled to manage the chaotic evacuation.

The Taliban swept into Kabul on Sunday after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, bringing a stunning end to a two-decade campaign in which the U.S. and its allies had tried to transform Afghanistan. The country's Western-trained security forces collapsed or fled in the face of an insurgent offensive that tore through the country in just over a week, ahead of the planned withdrawal of the last American troops at the end of the month.



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In the capital, a tense calm set in, with most people hiding in their homes as the Taliban deployed fighters at major intersections. There were scattered reports of looting and armed men knocking on doors and gates, and there was less traffic than usual on eerily quiet streets. Fighters could be seen searching vehicles at one of the city's main squares.

Many fear chaos, after the Taliban freed thousands of prisoners and the police simply melted away, or a return to the kind of brutal rule the Taliban imposed when it was last in power. They raced to Kabul's international airport, where the "civilian side" was closed until further notice, according to Afghanistan's Civil Aviation Authority. The military was put in control of the airspace.

Videos circulating on social media showed hundreds of people running across the tarmac as U.S. soldiers fired warning shots in the air. One showed a crowd pushing and shoving its way up a staircase, trying to board a plane, with some people hanging off the railings.

In another video, hundreds of people could be seen running alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it moved down a runway. Some climbed onto the side of the jet just before takeoff. That raised questions about how much longer aircraft would be able to safely take off and land.

Massouma Tajik, a 22-year-old data analyst, described scenes of panic at the airport, where she was hoping to board an evacuation flight.

After waiting six hours, she heard shots from outside, where a crowd of men and women were trying to climb aboard a plane. She said U.S. troops sprayed gas and fired into the air to disperse the crowds after people scaled the walls and swarmed onto the tarmac. Gunfire could be heard in the voice messages she sent to The Associated Press.

Shafi Arifi, who had a ticket to travel to Uzbekistan on Sunday, was unable to board her plane because it was packed with people who had raced across the tarmac and climbed aboard, with no police or airport staff in sight.

"There was no room for us to stand," said the 24-year-old. "Children were crying, women were shouting, young and old men were so angry and upset, no one could hear each other. There was no oxygen to breathe."

After another woman fainted and was carried off the plane, Arifi gave up and went back home.

The U.S. Embassy has been evacuated and the American flag lowered, with diplomats relocating to the airport to aid with the evacuation. Other Western countries have also closed their missions and are flying out staff and nationals.

Afghans are also trying to leave through land border crossings, all of which are now controlled by the Taliban. Rakhmatula Kuyash, 30, was one of the few people with a visa allowing him to cross into Uzbekistan on Sunday. He said his children and relatives had to stay behind.

"I'm lost and I don't know what to do. I left everything behind," he said.

The speed of the Taliban offensive through the country appears to have stunned American officials. Just days before the insurgents entered Kabul with little if any resistance, a U.S. military assessment predicted it could take months for the capital to fall.

The rout threatened to erase 20 years of Western efforts to remake Afghanistan that saw more than 3,500 U.S. and allied troops killed as well as tens of thousands of Afghans. The initial invasion drove the Taliban from power and scattered al-Qaida, which had planned the 9/11 attacks while being sheltered in Afghanistan. Many had hoped the Western-backed Afghan government would usher in a new era of peace and respect for human rights.

As the U.S. lost focus on Afghanistan during the Iraq war, the Taliban eventually regrouped. The militants captured much of the Afghan countryside in recent years and then swept into cities as U.S. forces prepared to withdraw ahead of an Aug. 31 deadline.

Under the Taliban, which ruled in accordance with a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, women were largely confined to their homes and suspected criminals faced amputation or public execution. The insurgents have sought to project greater moderation in recent years, but many Afghans remain skeptical.

Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban spokesman, tweeted that fighters had been instructed not to enter any home without permission and to protect "life, property and honor." The Taliban have also said they will stay out

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of the upscale diplomatic quarter housing the U.S. Embassy complex and the posh villas of U.S.-allied former warlords who have fled the country or gone into hiding.

Those assurances are part of an effort by the Taliban to “shape the narrative that their accession to power is legitimate — a message for both inside Afghanistan and beyond its borders,” the Texas-based private intelligence firm Stratfor wrote.

“The speed of the Taliban’s final advance suggests less military dominance than effective political insurgency coupled with an incohesive Afghan political system and security force struggling with flagging morale.”

When the Taliban last seized Kabul in 1996, it had been heavily damaged in the civil war that broke out among rival warlords after the Soviet withdrawal seven years earlier. The city was then home to around a million people, most traveling on dusty roads by bicycle or aging taxi.

Today Kabul is a built-up city home to 5 million people where luxury vehicles and SUVs struggle to push through endemic traffic jams.

Wahidullah Qadiri, a resident of the city, said he hoped for peace after decades of war that have claimed the lives of two of his brothers and a cousin.

“We haven’t seen anything but catastrophes and fighting,” he said, “so we always live with hope for a long-lasting peace.”

## **Biden team surprised by rapid Taliban gains in Afghanistan**

By ZEKE MILLER, JONATHAN LEMIRE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and other top U.S. officials have been stunned by the pace of the Taliban’s nearly complete takeover of Afghanistan, as the planned withdrawal of American forces urgently became a mission to ensure a safe evacuation.

The speed of the Afghan government’s collapse and the ensuing chaos posed the most serious test of Biden as commander in chief, and he was the subject of withering criticism from Republicans who said that he had failed.

Biden campaigned as a seasoned expert in international relations and has spent months downplaying the prospect of an ascendant Taliban while arguing that Americans of all political persuasions have tired of a 20-year war, a conflict that demonstrated the limits of money and military might to force a Western-style democracy on a society not ready or willing to embrace it.

By Sunday, though, leading figures in the administration acknowledged they were caught off guard with the utter speed of the collapse of Afghan security forces. The challenge of that effort became clear after reports of sporadic gunfire at the Kabul airport prompted Americans to shelter as they awaited flights to safety after the U.S. Embassy was completely evacuated.

“We’ve seen that that force has been unable to defend the country, and that has happened more quickly than we anticipated,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN, referring to the Afghan military.

The turmoil in Afghanistan resets the focus in an unwelcome way for a president who has largely focused on a domestic agenda that includes emerging from the pandemic, winning congressional approval for trillions of dollars in infrastructure spending and protecting voting rights.

Biden remained at Camp David on Sunday, receiving regular briefings on Afghanistan and holding secure video conference calls with members of his national security team, according to senior White House officials. His administration released a single photo of the president alone in a conference room meeting virtually with military, diplomatic and intelligence experts. The next several days would be critical in determining whether the U.S. is able to regain some level of control over the situation.

The Pentagon and State Department said in a joint statement Sunday that “we are completing a series of steps to secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport to enable the safe departure of U.S. and allied personnel from Afghanistan via civilian and military flights.” Biden ordered another 1,000 troops into Kabul to secure the evacuation.

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Discussions were underway for Biden to speak publicly, according to two senior administration officials who requested anonymity to discuss internal conversations. Biden, who is scheduled to remain at the presidential retreat through Wednesday, is expected to return to the White House if he decides to deliver an address.

Biden is the fourth U.S. president to confront challenges in Afghanistan and has insisted he wouldn't hand America's longest war to his successor. But the president will likely have to explain how security in Afghanistan unraveled so quickly, especially since he and others in the administration have insisted it wouldn't happen.

"The jury is still out, but the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely," Biden said on July 8.

As recently as last week, Biden publicly expressed hope that Afghan forces could develop the will to defend their country. But privately, administration officials warned that the military was crumbling, prompting Biden on Thursday to order thousands of American troops into the region to speed up evacuation plans.

One official said Biden was more sanguine on projections for the Afghan fighters to hold off the Taliban in part to prevent a further erosion in morale among their force. It was ultimately for naught.

Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump also yearned to leave Afghanistan, but ultimately stood down in the face of resistance from military leaders and other political concerns. Biden, on the other hand, has been steadfast in his refusal to change the Aug. 31 deadline, in part because of his belief that the American public is on his side.

A late July ABC News/Ipsos poll, for instance, showed 55% of Americans approving of Biden's handling of the troop withdrawal.

Most Republicans have not pushed Biden to keep troops in Afghanistan over the long term and they also supported Trump's own push to exit the country. Still, some in the GOP are stepping up their critique of Biden's withdrawal strategy and said images from Sunday of American helicopters circling the U.S. Embassy in Kabul evoked the humiliating departure of U.S. personnel from Vietnam.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell deemed the scenes of withdrawal as "the embarrassment of a superpower laid low."

Meanwhile, U.S. officials are increasingly concerned about the potential for the rise in terrorist threats against the U.S. as the situation in Afghanistan devolves, according to a person familiar with the matter who requested anonymity to discuss a sensitive security matter.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators on a briefing call Sunday that U.S. officials are expected to alter their earlier assessments about the pace of terrorist groups reconstituting in Afghanistan, the person said. Based on the evolving situation, officials believe terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected.

The officials on the call told senators that the U.S. intelligence community is currently working on forming a new timeline based on the evolving threats.

Still, there were no additional steps planned beyond the troop deployment Biden ordered to assist in the evacuations. Senior administration officials believe the U.S. will be able to maintain security at the Kabul airport long enough to extricate Americans and their allies, but the fate of those unable to get to the airport was far from certain.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who has backed the Biden administration's strategy, said in an interview that "the speed is a surprise" but would not characterize the situation as an intelligence failure. He said it has long been known that Afghanistan would fall to the Taliban if the United States pulled out.

"Given how much we have invested in the Afghan army, it's not ridiculous for analysts to believe that they'd be able to put up a fight for more than a few days," Murphy said. "You want to believe that trillions of dollars and 20 years of investment adds up to something, even if it doesn't add up for the ability to defend the country in the long run."

In the upper ranks of Biden's staff, the rapid collapse in Afghanistan only confirmed the decision to leave: If the meltdown of the Afghan forces would come so quickly after nearly two decades of American

presence, another six months or a year or two or more would not have changed anything.

Biden has argued for more than a decade that Afghanistan was a kind of purgatory for the United States. He found it to be corrupt, addicted to America's largesse and an unreliable partner that should be made to fend for itself. His goal was to protect Americans from terrorist attacks, not building a country.

As vice president, he argued privately against Obama's surge of 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in a bid to stabilize the country so that the United States and its allies could then pull back their forces.

As president, Biden said in July that he made the decision to withdraw with "clear eyes" after receiving daily battlefield updates. His judgment was that Afghanistan would be divided in a peace agreement with the Taliban, rather than falling all at once.

"There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy in the — of the United States from Afghanistan," he said in July. "The likelihood there's going to be one unified government in Afghanistan controlling the whole country is highly unlikely."

## Concerns over US terror threats rising as Taliban hold grows

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, NOMAAN MERCHANT and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's top general said the United States could now face a rise in terrorist threats from a Taliban-run Afghanistan. That warning comes as intelligence agencies charged with anticipating those threats face new questions after the U.S.-backed Afghan military collapsed with shocking speed.

Less than a week after a military assessment predicted Kabul could be surrounded by insurgents in 30 days, the world on Sunday watched stunning scenes of Taliban fighters standing in the Afghan president's office and crowds of Afghans and foreigners frantically trying to board planes to escape the country.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators on a briefing call Sunday that U.S. officials are expected to alter their earlier assessments about the pace of terrorist groups reconstituting in Afghanistan, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

In June, the Pentagon's top leaders said an extremist group like al-Qaida may be able to regenerate in Afghanistan and pose a threat to the U.S. homeland within two years of the American military's withdrawal from the country. Two decades after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan because the Taliban harbored al-Qaida leaders, experts say the Taliban and al-Qaida remain aligned, and other violent groups could also find safe haven under the new regime.

Based on the evolving situation, officials now believe terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected, according to the person, who had direct knowledge of the briefing but was not authorized to discuss the details of the call publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration officials on the call with senators — among them were Milley, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin — said U.S. intelligence agencies are working on forming a new timeline based on the evolving threats, the person familiar with the matter said.

Current and former intelligence officials on Sunday pushed back against criticism of what was widely seen as a failure by the agencies to anticipate how fast Kabul could fall. One senior intelligence official said that "a rapid Taliban takeover was always a possibility," adding: "As the Taliban advanced, they ultimately met with little resistance. We have always been clear-eyed that this was possible, and tactical conditions on the ground can often evolve quickly." The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

But President Joe Biden didn't suggest such an outcome at a July 8 news conference, when he said "the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely."

The reduced U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan — down to 2,500 troops at the end of President Donald Trump's term — may have hindered intelligence efforts in Afghanistan. Retired Lt. Gen. Robert Ashley, who led the Defense Intelligence Agency until October, said having fewer Americans embedded with Afghan forces meant there was less insight into how those forces would perform.

"It's very, very difficult to gauge the morale down at the unit level because you're just not there any-

more," Ashley said. "And I wouldn't be surprised if Afghan leaders would tell us only what we want to hear anyway."

Monitoring terrorism threats in Afghanistan will be even more difficult with U.S. troops withdrawing and the Taliban in control. Intelligence agencies in Afghanistan work side by side with troops. Without the same military presence, spies are severely limited in what they can collect about the morale of Afghan troops or support for the Taliban.

"If they leave, which they did, that means we leave as well," said Marc Polymeropoulos, who held several roles related to Afghanistan during a 26-year career in the CIA. "And that certainly affects our intelligence gathering footprint."

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democratic member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that once evacuations are settled that "our focus is going to shift" toward intelligence and counterterrorism activities. The U.S. will have to ensure it has the ability to track whether Al Qaeda is reconstituting there, he said in an interview.

"The Taliban has lots of reasons to honor their agreement with the United States and keep al-Qaida at bay. And our mission now is to put ourselves in a position where we can monitor and verify that that commitment," he said.

U.S. national security officials also briefed House members and tensions ran high. Republican leader Kevin McCarthy became furious after the administration officials would not confirm that President Ashraf Ghani had left the country, according to a person who participated in the meeting.

"Why are we doing this now?" McCarthy asked.

Ghani fled out of the country as the Taliban insurgents closed in on Sunday and posted on Facebook that he had chosen to leave the country to avert bloodshed in the capital. He did not say where he had gone.

Rep. Michael Waltz, a Florida Republican and Green Beret who served in Afghanistan, sharply criticized the briefing as "a regurgitation of the president's statement" from Saturday.

Waltz said Austin blamed the Afghan forces' lack of will to fight, while Blinken cited the deadline set by former President Donald Trump's administration for an American withdrawal.

"There was no discussion of a path forward except some vague reassurances that they'll protect the homeland," Waltz said.

## **Detainee says China has secret jail in Dubai, holds Uyghurs**

By The Associated Press undefined

A young Chinese woman says she was held for eight days at a Chinese-run secret detention facility in Dubai along with at least two Uyghurs, in what may be the first evidence that China is operating a so-called "black site" beyond its borders.

The woman, 26-year-old Wu Huan, was on the run to avoid extradition back to China because her fiancé was considered a Chinese dissident. Wu told The Associated Press she was abducted from a hotel in Dubai and detained by Chinese officials at a villa converted into a jail, where she saw or heard two other prisoners, both Uyghurs.

She was questioned and threatened in Chinese and forced to sign legal documents incriminating her fiancé for harassing her, she said. She was finally released on June 8 and is now seeking asylum in the Netherlands.

While "black sites" are common in China, Wu's account is the only testimony known to experts that Beijing has set one up in another country. Such a site would reflect how China is increasingly using its international clout to detain or bring back citizens it wants from overseas, whether they are dissidents, corruption suspects or ethnic minorities like the Uyghurs.

The AP was unable to confirm or disprove Wu's account independently, and she could not pinpoint the exact location of the black site. However, reporters have seen and heard corroborating evidence including stamps in her passport, a phone recording of a Chinese official asking her questions and text messages that she sent from jail to a pastor helping the couple.

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China's Foreign Ministry denied her story. "What I can tell you is that the situation the person talked about is not true," ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said Monday. The Chinese Consulate in Dubai did not respond to several requests for comment.

Dubai also did not respond to multiple phone calls and requests for comment to the Dubai police, the Dubai Media Office and the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Black sites are clandestine jails where prisoners generally are not charged with a crime and have no legal recourse, with no bail or court order. Many in China are used to stop petitioners with grievances against local governments, and they often take the form of rooms in hotels or guesthouses.

Yu-Jie Chen, an assistant professor at Taiwan's Academia Sinica, said she had not heard of a Chinese secret jail in Dubai, and such a facility in another country would be unusual. However, she also noted that it would be in keeping with China's attempts to do all it can to bring select citizens back, both through official means such as signing extradition treaties and unofficial means such as revoking visas or putting pressure on family back home.

"(China) really wasn't interested in reaching out until recent years," said Chen, who has tracked China's international legal actions. "This trend is increasingly robust."

Chen said Uyghurs in particular were being extradited or returned to China, which has been detaining the mostly Muslim minority on suspicion of terrorism even for relatively harmless acts like praying. The Uyghur Human Rights Project tracked 89 Uyghurs detained or deported from nine countries from 1997 to 2007 through public reports. That number steadily increased to reach 1,327 from 20 countries from 2014 until now, the group found.

Wu and her fiancé, 19-year-old Wang Jingyu, are not Uyghur but rather Han Chinese, the majority ethnicity in China. Wang is wanted by China because he posted messages questioning Chinese media coverage of the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and China's actions in a border clash with India.

Along with Uyghurs, China has been cracking down on perceived dissidents and human rights activists, and has launched a massive effort to get back suspect officials as part of a national anti-corruption campaign. Under President Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader in decades, Beijing brought back 1,421 people in 2020 alone for alleged corruption and financial crime under Operation Skynet. However, the AP could not find comprehensive numbers for how many Chinese citizens overall have been detained or deported from overseas in recent years.

Dubai also has a history as a place where Uyghurs are interrogated and deported back to China. And activists say Dubai itself has been linked to secret interrogations involving other countries. Radha Stirling, a legal advocate who founded the advocacy group Detained in Dubai, said she has worked with about a dozen people who have reported being held in villas in the UAE, including citizens of Canada, India and Jordan but not China.

"There is no doubt that the UAE has detained people on behalf of foreign governments with whom they are allied," Stirling said. "I don't think they would at all shrug their shoulders to a request from such a powerful ally."

However, Patrick Theros, a former U.S. ambassador to Qatar who is now strategic advisor to the Gulf International Forum, called the allegations "totally out of character" for the Emiratis.

"They don't allow allies freedom of movement," he said. "The idea that the Chinese would have a clandestine center, it makes no sense."

The U.S. State Department had no comment on Wu's specific case or on whether there is a Chinese-run black site in Dubai.

"We will continue to coordinate with allies and partners to stand against transnational repression everywhere," it said in a statement to the AP.

## HELD IN A VILLA

Wu, a Chinese millennial with cropped hair dyed blonde, never cared about politics before. But after her fiancé was arrested in Dubai on April 5 on unclear charges, she started giving interviews to media

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and getting in touch with overseas-based Chinese dissidents for help.

On May 27, Wu said, she was questioned by Chinese officials at her hotel, the Element al-Jaddaf, and then taken by Dubai police to the Bur Dubai police station. Staff for the hotel declined in a phone interview to confirm her stay or her departure, saying it was against company policy to disclose information about guests.

She was held for three days at the police station, she said, with her phone and personal belongings confiscated. On the third day, she said, a Chinese man who introduced himself as Li Xuhang came to visit her. He told her he was working for the Chinese consulate in Dubai, and asked her whether she had taken money from foreign groups to act against China.

"I said no, I love China so much. My passport is Chinese. I'm a Chinese person. I speak Chinese," she said. "I said, how could I do that?"

Li Xuhang is listed as consul general on the website of the Chinese consulate in Dubai. The consulate did not return multiple calls asking for comment and to speak with Li directly.

Wu said Li took her out of the police station along with another Chinese man who handcuffed her, and they put her in a black Toyota. There were multiple Chinese people in the car, but Wu was too scared to get a clear look at their faces.

Her heart thumping, they drove past an area where many Chinese lived and owned businesses in Dubai called International City, which Wu recognized from an earlier trip to Dubai.

After driving for half an hour, they stopped on a deserted street with rows of identical compounds. She was brought inside a white-colored villa with three stories, where a series of rooms had been converted into individual cells, she said.

The house was quiet and cold in contrast with the desert heat. Wu was taken to her own cell, a room which had been renovated to have a heavy metal door.

There was a bed in her room, a chair and a white fluorescent light that was on all day and night. The metal door remained closed except when they fed her.

"Firstly, there's no sense of time," Wu said. "And second, there's no window, and I couldn't see if it was day or night."

Wu said a guard took her to a room several times where they questioned her in Chinese and threatened that she would never be allowed to leave. The guards wore face masks all the time.

She saw another prisoner, a Uyghur woman, while waiting to use the bathroom once, she said. A second time, she heard a Uyghur woman shouting in Chinese, "I don't want to go back to China, I want to go back to Turkey." Wu identified the women as Uyghurs based on what she said was their distinctive appearance and accent.

Wu said she was fed twice a day, with the second meal a stack of plain flatbread. She had to ask the guards for permission to drink water or go to the bathroom. She was supposed to be allowed to go the bathroom a maximum of five times a day, Wu said, but that depended on the mood of the guards.

The guards also gave her a phone and a SIM card and instructed her to call her fiancé and pastor Bob Fu, the head of ChinaAid, a Christian non-profit, who was helping the couple.

Wang confirmed to the AP that Wu called and asked him for his location. Fu said he received at least four or five calls from her during this time, a few on an unknown Dubai phone number, including one where she was crying and almost incoherent. She again blamed Wang and said Fu should not help him.

The AP also reviewed text messages Wu sent to Fu at the time, which are disjointed and erratic.

"I could tell she was hiding from telling me her whereabouts," said Fu. "At that point we concluded that something has happened to her that prevented her from even talking."

Wu said towards the end of her stay, she refused meals, screamed and cried in an effort to be released. The last thing her captors demanded of her, she said, was to sign documents in Arabic and English testifying that Wang was harassing her.

"I was really scared and was forced to sign the documents," she told the AP. "I didn't want to sign them."

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Reports have emerged in recent years of Emiratis and foreigners being taken to villas, sometimes indefinitely.

Perhaps the best-known case involves Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the daughter of the ruler of Dubai. Sheikha Latifa tried to flee in 2018 by boat, but was intercepted by the Indian coast guard in the Arabian Sea and handed back to the UAE.

In videos published by the BBC in February, she claims she was held against her will in a villa in Dubai. "I'm a hostage," she says in one of the videos. "This villa has been converted into jail." A statement since issued on behalf of Sheikha Latifa said she is now free to travel.

China and the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula, have deep economic and political ties and also work together on counterintelligence. China ratified an extradition treaty with the UAE in 2002 and a judicial cooperation treaty in 2008. The UAE was an experimental site for China's COVID vaccines and cooperated with China on making tests.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the UAE, has said he was willing to work with China to "jointly strike against terrorist extremist forces", including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a militant group Beijing has accused of fostering Uyghur separatism. In late 2017 and early 2018, local authorities arrested and deported at least five Uyghurs to China, according to four friends and relatives who spoke by phone with the AP.

In one case, a long-time UAE resident, Ahmad Talip, was called in for questioning at a local police station and detained, according to his wife, Amannisa Abdullah, who is now in Turkey. In another case, eight plainclothes officers broke into a hotel room and arrested a 17-year-old boy who had just fled a police raid in Egypt.

The detentions were carried out by Arabs who appeared to be UAE police, not Chinese agents, the Uyghurs said. However, one of the detainees, Huseyin Imintohti, was sought by three Chinese agents at a Uyghur restaurant in Dubai before his deportation, according to his wife, Nigare Yusup.

Another Uyghur detainee, Yasinjan Memtimin, was interrogated twice by people in the UAE who appeared to be Chinese police, said his wife, who declined to be named out of fear of retribution. She said she had heard from a Uyghur who fled overseas of a detention facility in the UAE where Uyghurs were detained and interrogated, but she could not offer more details.

The UAE appears to be a hub for Chinese intelligence on Uyghurs in the Middle East, former Uyghur residents told The AP. A Uyghur linguist, Abduweli Ayup, said he had spoken with three Uyghurs coerced into working as spies in Turkey who passed through Dubai to pick up SIM cards and cash and meet Chinese agents.

Jasur Abibula, a former Xinjiang government worker, also told the AP that Chinese state security lured him from the Netherlands to the UAE in 2019 after his ex-wife, Asiye Abdulaheb, obtained confidential documents on internment camps in Xinjiang. He was greeted by a dozen or so people working for the Chinese government in Dubai, he said, including at least two who introduced themselves as working for China's Ministry of State Security.

One, a Uyghur man in his fifties who gave his name as Dolet, said he was stationed in Dubai. The other, a Han Chinese man who spoke fluent Uyghur, said he was on a mission to uncover the source of the leaks, according to Abibula.

The agents presented Abibula with a USB and asked him to insert it in his ex-wife's computer. They offered him money, put him up in a Hilton resort and bought toys for his kids. They also threatened him, showing him a video of his mother back in China. On a drive through dunes of sand, one said it reminded him of the deserts back in Xinjiang.

"If we kill and bury you here, nobody will be able to find your body," he recalled them telling him. Abibula is now back in the Netherlands, where the AP spoke to him by phone, and he sent photos of some of the agents, his hotel and his plane ticket to support his claims.

Besides the UAE, many other countries have cooperated with China in sending Uyghurs back. In 2015, Thailand repatriated over 100 Uyghurs to China. In 2017, Egyptian police detained hundreds of Uyghur



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students and residents and sent them back as well.

Rodney Dixon, a London-based rights lawyer representing Uyghur groups, said his team has filed a case against Tajikistan in the International Criminal Court, accusing local authorities of aiding China in deporting Uyghurs.

## "I'M AFRAID TO CALL YOU"

After Wu was released, she was taken back to the same hotel she had stayed at and given her personal belongings. She immediately reached out to Fu, apologized for her past calls and asked for help, in text messages seen by the AP.

"I'm afraid to call you," she told Fu in one message. "I'm afraid I will be overheard."

On June 11, she flew out of Dubai to Ukraine, where she was reunited with Wang.

After threats from Chinese police that Wang could face extradition from Ukraine, the couple fled again to the Netherlands. Wu said she misses her homeland.

"I've discovered that the people deceiving us are Chinese, that it's our countrymen hurting our own countrymen," she said. "That is the situation."

Staff writers Nomaan Merchant and Matthew Lee contributed to this report from Washington, D.C.

## 3 tropical systems impacting US, Caribbean and Bermuda

By TERRY SPENCER and ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Three tropical systems were churning early Monday in the Atlantic basin and threatening to impact the U.S. Gulf Coast, some Caribbean islands including earthquake-damaged Haiti, and the island territory of Bermuda.

Tropical Storm Fred was located in the Gulf of Mexico and could make landfall by Monday evening along the Florida Panhandle, the U.S. National Hurricane Center said. A tropical storm warning and a storm surge warning were in effect for coastal areas.

Fred had maximum sustained winds of 50 mph (85 kph) and was located 160 miles (255 kilometers) south of Panama City, Florida. It was traveling north at 9 mph (15 kph). Forecasters said the system could slightly strengthen before landfall.

The main threats from Fred were rainfall — anywhere from 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 centimeters) for Florida's Big Bend and Panhandle — and storm surge. High water between 3 to 5 feet (1 to 1.5 meters) could enter the area between Indian Pass and the Steinhatchee River, depending on the tide at the time of Fred's arrival.

Tropical depression Grace was dropping rain over Puerto Rico early Monday and forecast to move over Hispaniola later in the day. The hurricane center said forecasted rainfall between 5 inches and 10 inches (13 and 25 centimeters) could cause flooding and possible mudslides for Haiti and the Dominican Republic through Tuesday.

Haiti was already dealing with the effects of a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, which struck Saturday and was blamed for nearly 1,300 deaths.

Grace was centered 160 miles (260 kilometers) east-southeast of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and moving west at 15 mph (24 kph). Top winds were around 35 mph (55 kph), with little change in strength forecast during the next few days.

Tropical depression eight formed late Sunday near Bermuda, and the hurricane center predicted it would become a tropical storm sometime Monday. A tropical storm watch is in effect for the island.

The system had maximum sustained winds around 35 mph (55 kph). It was located about 110 miles (180 kilometers) east of Bermuda and expected to make a "slow clockwise turn toward the west" over the next few days, forecasters said in an advisory. The center of the depression was forecast to move southeast and south of the island territory.

## **EXPLAINER: Western states face first federal water cuts**

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. officials on Monday are expected to declare the first-ever water shortage from a river that serves 40 million people in the West, triggering cuts to some Arizona farmers next year amid a gripping drought.

Water levels at the largest reservoir on the Colorado River — Lake Mead — have fallen to record lows. Along its perimeter, a white “bathtub ring” of minerals outlines where the high water line once stood, underscoring the acute water challenges for a region facing a growing population and a drought that is being worsened by hotter, drier weather brought on by climate change.

States, cities, farmers and others have diversified their water sources over the years, helping soften the blow of the upcoming cuts. But if current conditions persist — or intensify — additional cuts in coming years will be more deeply felt.

Lake Mead was formed by building Hoover Dam in the 1930s. It is one of several man-made reservoirs that store water from the Colorado River, which supplies drinking water, irrigation for farms and hydro-power to Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming and parts of Mexico.

But water levels at Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the river’s two largest reservoirs, have been falling for years and faster than experts predicted. Scorching temperatures and less melting snow in the spring have reduced the amount of water flowing from the Rocky Mountains, where the river originates before it snakes 1,450 miles (2,334 kilometers) southwest and into the Gulf of California.

“We’re at a moment where we’re reckoning with how we continue to flourish with less water, and it’s very painful,” said Sarah Porter, director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University.

### **HOW IS THE RIVER WATER SHARED?**

Water stored in Lake Mead and Lake Powell is divvied up through legal agreements among the seven Colorado River basin states, the federal government, Mexico and others. The agreements determine how much water each gets, when cuts are triggered and the order in which the parties have to sacrifice some of their supply.

Under a 2019 drought contingency plan, Arizona, Nevada, California and Mexico agreed to give up shares of their water to maintain water levels at Lake Mead. The voluntary measures weren’t enough to prevent the shortage declaration.

### **WHO DOES LAKE MEAD SERVE?**

Lake Mead supplies water to millions of people in Arizona, California, Nevada and Mexico.

Cuts for 2022 are triggered when predicted water levels fall below a certain threshold — 1,075 feet (328 meters) above sea level, or 40% capacity. Earlier this summer, Lake Mead’s elevation hit its lowest point since being filled in the 1930s at 1,068 feet (326 meters).

Further rounds of cuts are triggered when projected levels sink to 1,050, 1,045 and 1,025 feet (320, 318 and 312 meters).

Eventually, some city and industrial water users could be affected.

Lake Powell’s levels also are falling, threatening the roughly 5 billion kilowatt hours of electricity generated each year at the Glen Canyon Dam.

Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming get water from tributaries and other reservoirs that feed into Lake Powell. Water from three reservoirs in those states has been drained to maintain water levels at Lake Powell and protect the electric grid powered by the Glen Canyon Dam.

### **WHICH STATES WILL BE AFFECTED BY THE CUTS?**

In the U.S., Arizona will be hardest hit and lose 18% of its share from the river, or 512,000 acre-feet of water. That’s around 8% of the state’s total water use.

An acre-foot is enough water to supply one to two households a year.

Nevada will lose about 7% of its allocation, or 21,000 acre-feet of water. But it will not feel the shortage because of conservation efforts and alternative sources of water.

California is spared from immediate cuts because it has more senior water rights than Arizona and Nevada.

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Mexico will see a reduction of roughly 5%, or 80,000 acre-feet.  
WHO IN THOSE STATES WILL SEE THEIR WATER SUPPLY CUT?

Farmers in central Arizona, who are among the state's largest producers of livestock, dairy, alfalfa, wheat and barley, will bear the brunt of the cuts. Their allocation comes from water deemed "extra" by the agency that supplies water to much of the region, making them the first to lose it during a shortage.

As a result, the farmers will likely need to fallow land — as many already have in recent years because of persisting drought — and rely even more on groundwater, switch to water-efficient crops and find other ways to use less water.

Water suppliers have planned for the shortage declaration by diversifying and conserving their water supply, such as by storing water in underground basins. Still, water cuts make it harder to plan for the future.

The Central Arizona Project, which supplies water to Arizona's major cities, will no longer bank river water or replenish some groundwater systems next year because of the cuts.

"It's a historic moment where drought and climate change are at our door," said Chuck Cullom of the Central Arizona Project.

Cities like Las Vegas, Phoenix and Tucson, and Native American tribes are shielded from the first round of cuts.

CAN THE DECLINE OF LAKE MEAD BE REVERSED?

Water levels at the reservoir have been falling since 1999 due to the dry spell enveloping the West and increased water demand. With weather patterns expected to worsen, experts say the reservoir may never be full again.

Though Lake Mead and Lake Powell could theoretically be refilled, planning for a hotter, drier future with less river water would be more prudent, said Porter of Arizona State University.

## 'Game over': Westerners rush to leave Kabul, rescue Afghans

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

The chop of U.S. military helicopters whisking American diplomats to Kabul's airport punctuated a frantic rush by thousands of other foreigners and Afghans to flee to safety as well, as a stunningly swift Taliban takeover entered the heart of Afghanistan's capital.

The U.S. was pouring thousands of fresh troops into the country temporarily to safeguard what was gearing up to be a large-scale airlift. It announced late Sunday it was taking charge of air-traffic control at the airport, even as it lowered the flag at the U.S. Embassy.

Sporadic gunfire at Kabul international airport Sunday frightened Afghan families fearful of Taliban rule and desperate for flights out, in an ever-more chaotic and compressed evacuation. NATO allies that had pulled out their forces ahead of the Biden administration's intended Aug. 31 withdrawal deadline were rushing troops back in as well this weekend, to airlift their citizens.

Some complained the U.S. was failing to move fast enough to bring to safety Afghans at risk of reprisal from the Taliban for past work with the Americans and other NATO forces.

"This is murder by incompetence," said U.S. Air Force veteran Sam Lerman, struggling Sunday from his home in Woodbridge, Virginia, to find a way out for an Afghan contractor who had guarded Americans and other NATO forces at Afghanistan's Bagram air base for a decade.

Massouma Tajik, a 22-year-old data analyst, was among hundreds of Afghans waiting anxiously in the Kabul airport to board an evacuation flight.

"I see people crying, they are not sure whether their flight will happen or not. Neither am I," she said by phone, with panic in her voice.

Educated Afghan women have some of the most to lose under the fundamentalist Taliban, whose past government, overthrown by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, sought to largely confine women to the home.

Taliban forces moved early Sunday into a capital beset by fear and declared they were awaiting a peaceful surrender, capping a stunning sweep of Afghanistan in just the past week.

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That arrival of the first waves of Taliban insurgents into Kabul prompted the U.S. to evacuate the embassy building in full, leaving only acting ambassador Ross Wilson and a core of other diplomats operating at the airport. Even as CH-47 helicopters shuttled American diplomats to the airport, and facing criticism at home over the administration's handling of the withdrawal, Secretary of State Antony Blinken rejected comparisons to the 1975 fall of Saigon.

"This is being done in a very deliberate way, it's being done in an orderly way," Blinken insisted on ABC's "This Week."

A joint statement from the U.S. State and Defense departments pledged late Sunday to fly thousands of Americans, local embassy staff and other "particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals" out of the country. It gave no details, but high-profile Afghan women, journalists, and Afghans who've worked with Western governments and nonprofits are among those who fear Taliban targeting for alleged Western ways or ties.

The statement promised to speed up visa processing for Afghans who used to work with American troops and officials in particular. Underscoring the difficulty the U.S. has had getting those Afghans out ahead of the Taliban, the statement could only assure "we will find" other countries to host some of those Afghans.

To many, however, the evacuations, and last-ditch rescue attempts by Americans and other foreigners trying to save Afghan allies, appeared far from orderly.

An Italian journalist, Francesca Mannocchi, posted a video of an Italian helicopter carrying her to the airport, an armed soldier standing guard at a window. Mannochi described watching columns of smoke rising from Kabul as she flew. Some were from fires that workers at the U.S. Embassy and others were using to keep sensitive material from falling in Taliban hands.

She said Afghans stoned an Italian convoy. She captioned her brief video: "Kabul airport. Evacuation. Game Over."

Hundreds or more Afghans crowded in a part of the airport away from many of the evacuating Westerners. Some of them, including a man with a broken leg sitting on the ground, lined up for what was expected to be a last flight out by the country's Ariana Airlines.

U.S. officials reported gunfire near the airport Sunday evening and urged civilians to stop coming. U.S. military officials later announced closing the airport to commercial flights, shutting one of the last avenues of escape for ordinary Afghans.

U.S. C-17 transport planes were due to bring thousands of fresh American troops to the airport, then fly out again with evacuating U.S. Embassy staffers. The Pentagon was now sending an additional 1,000 troops, bringing the total number to about 6,000, a U.S. defense official said Sunday, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a deployment decision not yet announced by the Pentagon.

The Pentagon intends to have enough aircraft to fly out as many as 5,000 civilians a day, both Americans and the Afghan translators and others who worked with the U.S. during the war.

But tens of thousands of Afghans who have worked with U.S. and other NATO forces are seeking to flee with family members. And it was by no means clear how long Kabul's deteriorating security would allow any evacuations to continue.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, whose government had been one of many expressing surprise at the speed of the U.S. withdrawal, told reporters in Berlin on Sunday that it was "difficult to endure" watching how quickly the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and how little government troops were able to do to stop them.

At a North Carolina-based adoption agency, Mary Beth Lee King sought a way to extricate two Afghan boys, ages 11 and 2, due for adoption by families in America.

"I am terrified and heartbroken. I can only imagine what they themselves are feeling," King said of the children's adoptive parents and Afghan families.

"Even if the U.S. won't admit them to the U.S., get them somewhere, so that ... we know that they are alive and safe," she said of the two Afghan children.

In Virginia, Lerman, the Air Force veteran, stayed up overnight Saturday to Sunday to finish an application for a special U.S. visa program meant to rescue Afghans who had worked with Americans.

When Lerman hit "send," he got a message saying the State Department email box for the rescue program was full, he said, sharing screenshots.

The Afghan security contractor he was working to get out was sitting frightened inside his home with the blinds drawn and Taliban fighters outside, he said.

The State Department said late Sunday afternoon it believed it had fixed the problem.

"Never in my life have I been ashamed to be an American before," Lerman said. "And I am, deeply."

## **EXPLAINER: Why Haiti is prone to devastating earthquakes**

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

Earthquakes have been wreaking havoc in Haiti since at least the 18th century, when the city of Port-au-Prince was destroyed twice in 19 years. The 21st century has been no less kind. Saturday's powerful quake killed hundreds and injured thousands more. Eleven years earlier a temblor killed tens of thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands.

Haiti sits near the intersection of two tectonic plates that make up the Earth's crust. Earthquakes can occur when those plates move against each other and create friction. Haiti is also densely populated. Plus, many of its buildings are designed to withstand hurricanes — not earthquakes. Those buildings can survive strong winds but are vulnerable to collapse when the ground shakes.

### **WHAT MAKES HAITI PRONE TO EARTHQUAKES?**

The Earth's crust is made up of tectonic plates that move. And Haiti sits near the intersection of two of them — the North American plate and the Caribbean plate.

Multiple fault lines between those plates cut through or near the island of Hispaniola, which Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic. What's worse, not all of those fault lines behave the same way.

"Hispaniola sits in a place where plates transition from smashing together to sliding past one another," said Rich Briggs, a research geologist at the U.S. Geological Survey's Geologic Hazards Science Center.

"It's like a rock stuck in the track of a sliding glass door," he said. "It just does not want to move smoothly because it's got so many different forces on it."

### **WHAT CAUSED THE MOST RECENT QUAKE?**

Saturday's magnitude 7.2 earthquake likely occurred along the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden fault zone, which cuts across Haiti's southwestern Tiburon Peninsula, according to the USGS.

It's the same fault zone along which the devastating 2010 earthquake occurred. And it's likely the source of three other big earthquakes in Haiti between 1751 and 1860, two of which destroyed Port-au-Prince.

Earthquakes are the result of the tectonic plates slowly moving against each other and creating friction over time, said Gavin Hayes, senior science adviser for earthquake and geologic hazards at USGS.

"That friction builds up and builds up and eventually the strain that's stored there overcomes the friction," Hayes said. "And that's when the fault moves suddenly. That's what an earthquake is."

### **WHY CAN EARTHQUAKES IN HAITI BE SO DEVASTATING?**

It's a combination of factors that include a seismically active area, a high population density of 11 million people and buildings that are often designed to withstand hurricanes — not earthquakes.

Typical concrete and cinder block buildings can survive strong winds but are vulnerable to damage or collapse when the ground shakes. Poor building practices can also play a role.

The 2010 quake hit closer to densely populated Port-au-Prince and caused widespread destruction. Haiti's government put the death toll at more than 300,000, while a report commissioned by the U.S. government placed it between 46,000 and 85,000.

"I think it's important to recognize that there's no such thing as a natural disaster," said Wendy Bohon, a geologist with Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology. "What you have is a natural hazard that overlaps with a vulnerable system."

## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Geologists say they cannot predict the next earthquake.

"But we do know that earthquakes like this can cause similar-sized earthquakes on the next portion of the fault," said Hayes of USGS. "And it's quite a significant hazard in places that don't have the construction practices to withstand the shaking."

Construction of more earthquake-resistant buildings remains a challenge in Haiti, which is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Before Saturday's quake, Haiti was still recovering from the 2010 earthquake as well as Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Its president was assassinated last month, sending the country into political chaos.

And while there have been some success stories of Haitians building more earthquake-resistant structures, the country has lacked a centralized effort to do so, said Mark Schuller, a professor of anthropology and nonprofit and NGO studies at Northern Illinois University.

Haiti's government has become increasingly weak, while non-governmental organizations focus on their own compartmentalized projects.

"There is technical knowledge in Haiti. There are trained architects. There are city planners. That's not the problem," Schuller said. "The problem is a lack of funding for coordination, and lack of political will from donors (to organizations providing aid)."

## Quake injured wait for help as new disaster overwhelms Haiti

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Under Haiti's burning heat, Jennie Auguste lies with a lost, thousand-yard stare on a flimsy foam mattress placed on an airport's tarmac. A resident of the southwestern part of the Caribbean nation, Auguste has wounds in the chest, abdomen and arm after the roof of the store she worked at collapsed during a powerful earthquake over the weekend.

She flashes the occasional grimace of pain while her sister or other helpful bystanders fan her. In the badly damaged coastal town of Les Cayes, health care is at capacity, so Auguste can now only wait — for space at a local hospital, or a spot on one of the small planes that are ferrying injured people to Haiti's capital.

"There has been nothing. No help, nothing from the government," Auguste's sister, Bertrande, said Sunday as Haitians were still trying to take stock of everything around them as the death toll from disaster soared.

The country's Civil Protection Agency said 1,297 dead from the magnitude 7.2 earthquake had been counted by Sunday, a day after the temblor turned thousands of structures into rubble and set off frantic rescue efforts ahead of a potential deluge from an approaching storm.

Saturday's earthquake also left at least 5,700 people injured, with thousands more displaced from destroyed or damaged homes. After sundown Sunday, Les Cayes was darkened by intermittent blackouts, and many people slept outside again, clutching small transistor radios tuned to news, terrified of the continuing aftershocks.

The devastation could soon worsen with the coming of Tropical Depression Grace, which is predicted to reach Haiti on Monday night. The civil protection agency said Haitians must expect strong winds, heavy rain, rough seas, landslides and flooding.

Officials said more than 7,000 homes were destroyed and nearly 5,000 damaged. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches were also affected.

The quake centered about 125 kilometers (78 miles) west of the capital of Port-au-Prince nearly razed some towns and triggered landslides that hampered rescue efforts in a country that is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. It already was struggling with the worsening poverty, the coronavirus pandemic, the political uncertainty following the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse and a wave of gang violence.

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In a scene widely repeated across the quake zone, families salvaged their few belongings in Les Cayes and spent the night on a soccer field. People lined up to buy what little was available: bananas, avocados and water at a street market.

Workers tore through rubble of collapsed buildings with heavy machinery, shovels and picks.

Underlining the dire conditions, local officials had to negotiate with gangs in the seaside district of Martissant to allow two humanitarian convoys a day to pass through the area, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported. The agency called Haiti's southern peninsula a "hotspot for gang-related violence," where humanitarian workers have been repeatedly attacked.

The agency said the area has been "virtually unreachable" over the past two months because of road blocks and security concerns. Agency spokeswoman Anna Jefferys said the first convoy passed through Sunday with government and U.N. personnel. She added that the U.N.'s World Food Program plans to send in food supplies via trucks Tuesday.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry has declared a one-month state of emergency for the whole country and said that first aid convoys organized by the government had started moving help to areas where towns were destroyed and hospitals were overwhelmed.

"We salute the dignity, the resilience effort of the victims and their ability to start over," Henry told reporters. "From my observations, I deduce that Haitians want to live and progress. Let us unite to offer these people a living environment conducive to development."

UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said humanitarian needs are acute, with many Haitians urgently needing health care, clean water and shelter. Children who have been separated from parents need protection, she said.

Alluding to the 2010 earthquake that ravaged Haiti's capital, killing tens of thousands, Fore said: "Little more than a decade on, Haiti is reeling once again. And this disaster coincides with political instability, rising gang violence, alarmingly high rates of malnutrition among children, and the COVID-19 pandemic — for which Haiti has received just 500,000 vaccine doses, despite requiring far more."

The country of 11 million people received its first batch of U.S.-donated coronavirus vaccines only last month via a United Nations program for low-income countries.

Medical workers from across the region were scrambling to help as hospitals in Les Cayes started running out of space to perform surgeries.

"Basically, they need everything," said Dr. Inobert Pierre, a pediatrician with the nonprofit Health Equity International, which oversees St. Boniface Hospital, about two hours from Les Cayes.

"Many of the patients have open wounds and they have been exposed to not-so-clean elements," added Pierre, who visited two hospitals in Les Cayes — one with some 200 patients, the other with around 90. "We anticipate a lot of infections."

Pierre's medical team was taking some patients to St. Boniface to undergo surgery, but with just two ambulances, they could transport only four at a time.

Small planes from a private firm and the Florida-based missionary service Agape Flights landed at the Port-Au-Prince airport Sunday carrying about a half dozen injured from the Les Cayes area. Young men with bandages and a woman were hoisted on stretchers to waiting Haitian Red Cross ambulances.

Silvestre Plaza Rico, who was supervising one of the volunteer flights, said rescue planes had made several airlifts of about a half dozen injured victims each on Saturday. "There were many, many, many, from different towns," Plaza Rico said.

USAID Administrator Samantha Power, who is overseeing the U.S effort to help Haiti, said Sunday that USAID was sending a search and rescue team from Virginia at the request of Haiti's government. The 65-person team will bring specialized tools and medical supplies, she said on Twitter.

Working with USAID, the U.S. Coast Guard said a helicopter was transporting medical personnel from the Haitian capital to the quake zone and evacuating injured back to Port-au-Prince. Lt. Commander Jason Nieman, a spokesman, said other aircraft and ships were being sent.

Several members of Cuba's 253-member health care mission to Haiti were on the scene. The socialist nation's state media showed photos of them giving first aid to victims injured by the quake.

## Misinformation at public forums vexes local boards, big tech

By DAVID KLEPPER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — There are plenty of places to turn for accurate information about COVID-19. Your physician. Local health departments. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

But not, perhaps, your local government's public comment session.

During a meeting of the St. Louis County Council earlier this month, opponents of a possible mask mandate made so many misleading comments about masks, vaccines and COVID-19 that YouTube removed the video for violating its policies against false claims about the virus.

"I hope no one is making any medical decisions based on what they hear at our public forums," said County Councilwoman Lisa Clancy, who supports mask wearing and said she believes most of her constituents do too. The video was restored, but Clancy's worries about the impact of that misinformation remain.

Videos of local government meetings have emerged as the latest vector of COVID-19 misinformation, broadcasting misleading claims about masks and vaccines to millions and creating new challenges for internet platforms trying to balance the potential harm against the need for government openness.

The latest video to go viral features a local physician who made several misleading claims about COVID-19 while addressing the Mount Vernon Community School Corporation in Fortville, Indiana, on Aug. 6. In his 6-minute remarks, Dr. Dan Stock tells the board that masks don't work, vaccines don't prevent infection, and state and federal health officials don't follow the science.

The video has amassed tens of millions of online views, and prompted the Indiana State Department of Health to push back. Stock did not return multiple messages seeking comment.

"Here comes a doctor in suspenders who goes in front of the school board and basically says what some people are thinking: the masks are B.S., vaccines don't work and the CDC is lying — it can be very compelling to laypeople," said Dr. Zubin Damania, a California physician who received so many messages about the Indiana clip that he created his own video debunking Stock's claims.

Damania hosts a popular online medical show under the name ZDoggMD. His video debunking Stock's comments has been viewed more than 400,000 times so far. He said that while there are legitimate questions about the effectiveness of mask requirements for children, Stock's broad criticism of masks and vaccines went too far.

YouTube removed several similar videos of local government meetings in North Carolina, Missouri, Kansas and Washington state. In Bellingham, Washington, officials responded by temporarily suspending public comment sessions.

The false claims in those videos were made during the portion of the meeting devoted to public comment. Local officials have no control over what is said at these forums, and say that's part of the point.

In Kansas, YouTube pulled video of the May school board meeting in the 27,000-student Shawnee Mission district in which parents and a state lawmaker called for the district to remove its mask mandate, citing "medical misinformation."

The district, where a mask mandate remains in effect, responded by ending livestreaming of the public comment period. District spokesman David Smith acknowledged that it has been challenging to balance making the board meetings accessible and not spreading fallacies.

"It was hard for me to hear things in the board meeting that weren't true and to know that those were going out without contradiction," Smith said. "I am all about free speech, but when that free speech endangers people's lives, it is hard to sit through that."

After hearing from local officials, YouTube reversed its decision and put the videos back up. Earlier this month the company, which is owned by Google, announced a change to its COVID misinformation policy to allow exceptions for local government meetings — though YouTube may still remove content that uses remarks from public forums in an attempt to mislead.

"While we have clear policies to remove harmful COVID-19 misinformation, we also recognize the importance of organizations like school districts and city councils using YouTube to share recordings of open



public forums, even when comments at those forums may violate our policies," company spokeswoman Elena Hernandez said.

The deluge of false claims about the virus has challenged other platforms too. Twitter and Facebook each have their own policies on COVID-19 misinformation, and say that like YouTube they attach labels to misleading content and remove the worst of it.

Public comment sessions preceding local government meetings have long been known for sometimes colorful remarks from local residents. But before the internet, if someone were to drone on about fluoride in the drinking water, for instance, their comments weren't likely to become national news.

Now, thanks to the internet and social media, the misleading musings of a local doctor speaking before a school board can compete for attention with the recommendations of the CDC.

It was only a matter of time before misleading comments at these local public forums went viral, according to Jennifer Grygiel, a communications professor at Syracuse University who studies social media platforms.

Grygiel suggested a few possible ways to minimize the impact of misinformation without muzzling local governments. Grygiel said clear labels on government broadcasts would help viewers understand what they're watching. Keeping the video on the government's website, instead of making it shareable on YouTube, could allow local residents to watch without enabling the spread of videos more widely.

"Anytime there is a public arena – a city council hearing, a school board meeting, a public park – the public has the opportunity to potentially spread misinformation," Grygiel said. "What's changed is it used to stay local."

## The Latest: Nations call for safe passage out of Afghanistan

By The Associated Press undefined

WASHINGTON — Dozens of nations from around the world are calling on all involved in events in Afghanistan to respect and facilitate the departure of foreign nationals and Afghans who wish to leave the country.

More than 60 nations released a joint statement Sunday night citing what they call "the deteriorating security situation" in Afghanistan. The statement says that those in power and authority across the country "bear responsibility — and accountability — for the protection of human life and property, and for the immediate restoration of security and civil order."

The nations' statement also says that roads, airports and border crossings must remain open, and that calm must be maintained.

The statement concludes: "The Afghan people deserve to live in safety, security and dignity. We in the international community stand ready to assist them."

The statement was distributed to U.S. media by the State Department.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's Foreign Ministry said it has "temporarily closed" its embassy in Kabul and evacuated most of its staff to an unspecified third country in the Middle East.

The ministry said a few diplomats, including Ambassador Choi Taeho, remain at a safe location in Afghanistan to support the evacuation of a South Korean national in the country and that the Seoul government is closely working with the United States and other countries to ensure their safe evacuation.

Afghanistan has been on South Korea's travel ban list since 2007. There were reportedly around five South Koreans living in Afghanistan before the Seoul government in June called for all of them to leave the country within 10 days as the United States and NATO proceeded with troop pullouts.

WASHINGTON — A State Department official says the American flag is no longer flying at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul amid evacuations from Afghanistan's capital. The official tells The Associated Press that nearly all embassy personnel have been relocated to the city's international airport.

The official says the flag itself is with embassy personnel, who are among thousands of Americans and others waiting for flights. The official was not authorized to discuss the details publicly and spoke on

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condition of anonymity

In a joint statement Sunday night, the State Department and the Pentagon say they are taking steps to secure the airport for safe departures by way of civilian and military flights.

The statement says the U.S. security presence will have expanded to nearly 6,000 troops over the next two days and will take over air traffic control.

Those leaving include American citizens who have been living in Afghanistan, locally employed staff of the U.S. mission in Kabul and their families, and other particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals.

Also part of the departure plan are thousands of Afghans eligible for U.S. special immigrant visas. Nearly 2,000 of those with special visas have arrived in the United States over the past two weeks.

— Matthew Lee.

**WASHINGTON** — President Joe Biden and other top U.S. officials have been stunned by the pace of the Taliban's nearly complete takeover of Afghanistan, as the planned withdrawal of American forces urgently became a mission to ensure a safe evacuation.

The speed of the Afghan government's collapse and the ensuing chaos posed the most serious test of Biden as commander in chief, and he was the subject of withering criticism from Republicans who said that he had failed.

Biden campaigned as a seasoned expert in international relations and has spent months downplaying the prospect of an ascendant Taliban while arguing that Americans of all political persuasions have tired of a 20-year war, a conflict that demonstrated the limits of money and military might to force a Western-style democracy on a society not ready or willing to embrace it.

By Sunday, though, leading figures in the administration acknowledged they were caught off guard with the utter speed of the collapse of Afghan security forces. The challenge of that effort became clear after reports of sporadic gunfire at the Kabul airport prompted Americans to shelter as they awaited flights to safety.

**UNITED NATIONS** — U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is urging the Taliban and all other parties to exercise "utmost restraint" in order to protect the lives of Afghans and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Sunday that "the United Nations remains determined to contribute to a peaceful settlement, promote the human rights of all Afghans, notably women and girls, and provide life-saving humanitarian assistance and critical support to civilians in need."

The U.N. humanitarian office said members of the humanitarian community — both from the U.N. and non-governmental organizations — remain committed to helping the millions of Afghans needing assistance and are staying in the country despite the "highly complex" security environment.

The office, known as OCHA, said in a statement Sunday that more than 18.4 million people were already in need of assistance before more than 550,000 people were displaced by conflict this year, a figure that doubled since May.

This story has been corrected to show that OCHA said more than 18.4 million people were already in need of assistance, not 550,000.

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — A Taliban spokesman and negotiator tells The Associated Press that the militant group is holding talks aimed at forming an "open, inclusive Islamic government" in Afghanistan.

Suhail Shaheen spoke to the AP after the Taliban overran most of the country in a matter of days and pushed into the capital, Kabul, as the United States scrambled to withdraw diplomats and other civilians.

Earlier, a Taliban official said the group would announce a new government from the presidential palace, but those plans appear to be on hold.

**WASHINGTON** — The United States is sending another 1,000 troops to Afghanistan, raising the U.S.

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deployment to roughly 6,000.

A defense official tells The Associated Press on Sunday that 1,000 troops from the 82nd Airborne are going directly to Kabul instead of going to Kuwait as a standby force. The defense official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a deployment decision not yet announced by the Pentagon.

On Saturday, President Joe Biden authorized the U.S. troop deployment to rise to roughly 5,000 by adding about 1,000. Since then, the Taliban have entered the capital of Kabul and Afghanistan's president has fled the country.

Helicopters have been evacuating personnel from the U.S. Embassy, and several other Western missions also are preparing to pull their people out.

— Robert Burns

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — The Al-Jazeera news network is airing footage of a large group of Taliban fighters inside the presidential palace in the capital of Afghanistan.

The Taliban are expected to announce their takeover from the palace, renaming the country as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The militants have taken over most of Afghanistan in a matter of days as the U.S. scrambles to withdraw after 20 years of war.

**LONDON** — Britain's Defense Ministry says U.K. troops have arrived in Kabul to help evacuate remaining Britons there.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said after chairing a Cabinet emergency committee meeting Sunday that the priority is to get out British nationals, as well as Afghans who helped U.K. forces in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, "as fast as we can."

"The ambassador is working round the clock, has been there in the airport to help process the applications," he told Sky News. "We certainly have the means at the moment to get them out ... It's just a question of making sure that they're able to do it over the next few days."

The "vast bulk" of embassy staff and officials have already left Afghanistan, Johnson added.

**NEW YORK** — The Latest developments on Afghanistan, where a Taliban blitz has taken large swaths of territory just weeks before the final pullout of American and NATO troops:

The U.N. Security Council will hold an emergency meeting on Afghanistan Monday morning (10 am EDT) at the request of Estonia and Norway.

Council diplomats said Sunday that U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will brief council members on the latest situation following the Taliban takeover of the capital, Kabul.

The U.N. chief on Friday had urged the Taliban to immediately halt their offensive in Afghanistan and negotiate "in good faith" to avert a prolonged civil war. He also said he is "deeply disturbed by early indications that the Taliban are imposing severe restrictions in the areas under their control, particularly targeting women and journalists.

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — Senior U.S. military officials say Kabul's international airport has been closed to commercial flights as military evacuations continue.

The suspension of commercial flights cuts off one of the last avenues to escape the country for Afghans fearful of Taliban rule. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing operations.

The Taliban captured most of the country in a matter of days and swept into the capital on Sunday.

Scenes of chaos played out at the airport earlier, as Afghans rushed to get on the last flights out of the country.

Videos circulating online showed airport personnel struggling to coral crowds boarding a plane on the tarmac, while a man with an injured leg lay on the ground. In the background, a U.S. Air Force plane was landing.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A Taliban official says the group will soon declare the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from the presidential palace in the capital, Kabul.

That was the name of the country under the Taliban government ousted by U.S.-led forces after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has suspended all operations and told Americans to shelter in place, saying it has received reports of gunfire at the international airport.

The U.S. is racing to airlift diplomats and citizens out of Afghanistan after the Taliban overran most of the country and entered the capital early Sunday.

"The security situation in Kabul is changing quickly and the situation at the airport is deteriorating rapidly," the embassy said in a statement.

"There are reports of the airport taking fire and we are instructing U.S. citizens to shelter in place. The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan has suspended consular operations effective immediately. Do not come to the Embassy or airport at this time."

PARIS — France is relocating its embassy in Kabul to the airport to evacuate all citizens still in Afghanistan, initially transferring them to Abu Dhabi.

Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drain said in a statement Sunday that military reinforcements and aircraft would deploy in the hours ahead to the United Arab Emirates, "so that the first evacuations toward Abu Dhabi can start."

Evacuations have been in progress for weeks and a charter flight put in place by France in mid-July. Since May, France has taken in Afghan employees at French structures under potential threat, with 600 people relocated to France.

France gradually pulled out troops from Afghanistan between 2013 and 2015, and since then former personnel who worked for the French Army and their families, some 1,350 Afghans, were brought to France, the statement said.

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan leaders have created a coordination council to meet with the Taliban and manage the transfer of the power, after the religious militia's lightning offensive swept to the capital, Kabul.

In a statement posted on social media by former president Hamid Karzai, he said the body will be led by the head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, as well as the leader of Hizb-e-Islami, Gulbudin Hekmatyar, and himself.

The statement said the move was "to prevent chaos and reduce the suffering of the people," and to manage peace and a "peaceful transfer."

BERLIN — The United Nations refugee agency says more than 550,000 people in Afghanistan have fled their homes due to the conflict since the start of this year.

A situational update published Sunday by Geneva-based UNHCR shows about 126,000 people were displaced in the previous month to Aug. 9, the most recent date for which figures are available.

A spokeswoman for UNHCR said that while the situation inside Afghanistan is fluid, "for now the displacement is largely internal."

"There is a need to support the humanitarian response in the country," Shabia Mantoo told The Associated Press. "If we do see cross border movement then additional support outside the country will be necessary too."

The agency continues to have international and Afghan staff on the ground, she said.

BERLIN — German media have issued an urgent appeal to Chancellor Angela Merkel and the country's foreign minister for an emergency visa program to help local staff who worked for them to leave Afghani-

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stan.

In an open letter Sunday, major German newspapers, public and commercial broadcasters, and the dpa news agency warned that "the lives of these freelance staff are now in acute danger."

The media outlets stressed that reporting from Afghanistan over the past two decades would have been "unthinkable without the efforts and bravery of the Afghan staff who supported us on the ground: local journalists, stringers and translators."

Citing several recent fatal attacks on journalists, the letter said that due to the advance of the Taliban "it must be feared that such murders will now dramatically increase - and many of our staff are at risk."

"We are convinced: there is no time to lose now," it adds. "Our staff who want to leave the country are at risk of persecution, arrest, torture and deaths. That is why we ask you act quickly."

**KĀBUL, Afghanistan** — Afghan officials say embattled President Ashraf Ghani has fled the country as the Taliban moved further into Kabul.

Two officials speaking on condition of anonymity as they weren't authorized to brief journalists told The Associated Press that Ghani flew out of the country. Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the Afghan National Reconciliation Council, later confirmed Ghani had left in an online video.

"He left Afghanistan in a hard time, God hold him accountable," Abdullah said.

Ghani's whereabouts and destination are currently unknown.

**TORONTO** -- Canada has suspended diplomatic operations in Afghanistan and Canadian personnel are on their way back to Canada.

Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said in a statement the decision to suspend operations is temporary and the embassy will reopen if the security situation allows staff to be safe.

Some 40,000 Canadian troops were deployed in Afghanistan over 13 years as part of the NATO mission before pulling out in 2014. More than 150 Canadian soldiers died during the Afghanistan mission.

**WASHINGTON** — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the U.S. is evacuating remaining staff at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul as the Taliban enter the Afghan capital. But he is playing down America's hasty exit, saying "this is manifestly not Saigon."

Speaking on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday, Blinken said: "The compound itself, our folks are leaving there, and moving to the airport."

Blinken also confirmed that U.S. Embassy workers were destroying documents and other items ahead of fleeing the embassy, but insisted "this is being done in a very deliberate way, it's being done in an orderly way, and it's being done with American forces there to make sure we can do it in a safe way."

The evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul had U.S. military helicopters lifting off from embassy grounds Sunday, and sent puffs of black smoke up into the skies over Kabul as U.S. officials worked to keep sensitive material from falling in Taliban hands.

The scene comes after President Joe Biden earlier this year played down any idea that the Taliban could capture the country, or that the Afghanistan war would end up in scenes reminiscent of the Vietnam one, with military helicopters taking off from embassy rooftops.

Blinken defended Biden's decision to end the nearly 20-year U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, saying Biden's hands were tied by a withdrawal deal President Donald Trump struck with the Taliban in 2020.

If Biden had called off the withdrawal, "we would have been back at the war with the Taliban," and forced to surge tens of thousands of American forces back into Afghanistan, Blinken said.

## Taliban sweep into Afghan capital after government collapses

By AHMAD SEIR, RAHIM FAIEZ, TAMEEM AKHGAR and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

**KABUL, Afghanistan (AP)** — The Taliban swept into Afghanistan's capital Sunday after the government collapsed and the embattled president joined an exodus of his fellow citizens and foreigners, signaling

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the end of a costly two-decade U.S. campaign to remake the country.

Heavily armed Taliban fighters fanned out across the capital, and several entered Kabul's abandoned presidential palace. Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban spokesman and negotiator, told The Associated Press that the militants would hold talks in the coming days aimed at forming an "open, inclusive Islamic government."

Earlier, a Taliban official said the group would announce from the palace the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the formal name of the country under Taliban rule before the militants were ousted by U.S.-led forces in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which were orchestrated by al-Qaida while it was being sheltered by the Taliban. But that plan appeared to be on hold.

Kabul was gripped by panic. Helicopters raced overhead throughout the day to evacuate personnel from the U.S. Embassy. Smoke rose near the compound as staff destroyed important documents, and the American flag was lowered. Several other Western missions also prepared to pull their people out.

Fearful that the Taliban could reimpose the kind of brutal rule that all but eliminated women's rights, Afghans rushed to leave the country, lining up at cash machines to withdraw their life savings. The desperately poor — who had left homes in the countryside for the presumed safety of the capital — remained in parks and open spaces throughout the city.

Though the Taliban had promised a peaceful transition, the U.S. Embassy suspended operations and warned Americans late in the day to shelter in place and not try to get to the airport.

Commercial flights were suspended after sporadic gunfire erupted at the Kabul airport, according to two senior U.S. military officials. Evacuations continued on military flights, but the halt to commercial traffic closed off one of the last routes available for fleeing Afghans.

Dozens of nations called on all parties involved to respect and facilitate the departure of foreigners and Afghans who wish to leave.

More than 60 nations released the joint statement distributed by the U.S. State Department late Sunday night Washington time. The statement says that those in power and authority across Afghanistan "bear responsibility — and accountability — for the protection of human life and property, and for the immediate restoration of security and civil order."

The nations' statement also says that roads, airports and border crossings must remain open, and that calm must be maintained.

Many people watched in disbelief as helicopters landed in the U.S. Embassy compound to take diplomats to a new outpost at the airport. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken rejected comparisons to the U.S. pullout from Vietnam.

"This is manifestly not Saigon," he said on ABC's "This Week."

The American ambassador was among those evacuated, officials said. He was asking to return to the embassy, but it was not clear if he would be allowed to. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing operations.

As the insurgents closed in, President Ashraf Ghani flew out of the country.

"The former president of Afghanistan left Afghanistan, leaving the country in this difficult situation," said Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the Afghan National Reconciliation Council and a longtime rival of Ghani. "God should hold him accountable."

Ghani later posted on Facebook that he left to avert bloodshed in the capital, without saying where he had gone.

As night fell, Taliban fighters deployed across Kabul, taking over abandoned police posts and pledging to maintain law and order during the transition. Residents reported looting in parts of the city, including in the upscale diplomatic district, and messages circulating on social media advised people to stay inside and lock their gates.

In a stunning rout, the Taliban seized nearly all of Afghanistan in just over a week, despite the billions of dollars spent by the U.S. and NATO over nearly 20 years to build up Afghan security forces. Just days earlier, an American military assessment estimated that the capital would not come under insurgent pressure for a month.

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The fall of Kabul marks the final chapter of America's longest war, which began after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. A U.S.-led invasion dislodged the Taliban and beat them back, but America lost focus on the conflict in the chaos of the Iraq war.

For years, the U.S. sought an exit from Afghanistan. Then-President Donald Trump signed a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that limited direct military action against the insurgents. That allowed the fighters to gather strength and move quickly to seize key areas when President Joe Biden announced his plans to withdraw all American forces by the end of this month.

After the insurgents entered Kabul, Taliban negotiators discussed a transfer of power, said an Afghan official. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the closed-door negotiations, described them as "tense."

It remained unclear when that transfer would take place and who among the Taliban was negotiating. The negotiators on the government side included former President Hamid Karzai, leader of Hizb-e-Islami political and paramilitary group Gulbudin Hekmatyar, and Abdullah, who has been a vocal critic of Ghani.

Karzai himself appeared in a video posted online, his three young daughters around him, saying he remained in Kabul.

"We are trying to solve the issue of Afghanistan with the Taliban leadership peacefully," he said.

Afghanistan's acting defense minister, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, did not hold back his criticism of the fleeing president.

"They tied our hands from behind and sold the country," he wrote on Twitter. "Curse Ghani and his gang."

The Taliban earlier insisted that their fighters would not enter people's homes or interfere with businesses and said they would offer "amnesty" to those who worked with the Afghan government or foreign forces.

But there have been reports of revenge killings and other brutal tactics in areas of the country the Taliban have seized in recent days. Reports of gunfire at the airport raised the specter of more violence. One female journalist, weeping, sent voice messages to colleagues after armed men entered her apartment building and banged on her door.

"What should I do? Should I call the police or Taliban?" Getee Azami cried. It wasn't clear what happened to her after that.

An Afghan university student described feeling betrayed as she watched the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy.

"You failed the younger generation of Afghanistan," said Aisha Khurram, 22, who is now unsure of whether she will be able to graduate in two months. She said her generation was "hoping to build the country with their own hands. They put blood, efforts and sweat into whatever we had right now."

Sunday began with the Taliban seizing Jalalabad, the last major city besides the capital not in their hands. Afghan officials said the militants also took the capitals of Maidan Wardak, Khost, Kapisa and Parwan provinces, as well as the country's last government-held border post.

Later, Afghan forces at Bagram Air Base, home to a prison housing 5,000 inmates, surrendered to the Taliban, according to Bagram district chief Darwaish Raufi. The prison at the former U.S. base held both Taliban and Islamic State group fighters.

## Fred strengthens slightly as it heads to US coast

By TERRY SPENCER and ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — The National Hurricane Center said Fred regained its tropical storm status in the Gulf of Mexico early Sunday just hours before Grace was demoted to a tropical depression. A new tropical depression also formed in the Atlantic Ocean on Sunday night.

Fred was forecast to move across the Gulf and reach the coast as early as Monday afternoon, forecasters said. They said people from Alabama to the central Florida Panhandle should monitor the system's progress.

A tropical storm warning is now in effect for the coast of the Florida Panhandle from Navarre to the Wakulla/Jefferson County line, meaning tropical storm conditions are expected somewhere within the

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warning area in the next 24 hours. A storm surge warning has been issued for part of Florida's Big Bend area. That's the spot on the Gulf Coast where the Florida peninsula turns west into the Panhandle.

Fred's maximum sustained winds stood at 50 mph (85 kph) Sunday night.

Anticipating Fred, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis declared a state of emergency for the state's Panhandle region. And Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey issued a statement Saturday saying her administration was monitoring the weather and "will be ready to act from the state level if needed."

Fred was located Sunday night about 200 miles (325 kilometers) south of Panama City, Florida, and moving north-northwest at 9 mph (15 kph).

Fred had been downgraded to a tropical wave on Saturday. Tropical waves can contain winds and heavy rain, but do not circulate around a center point or an "eye" like a tropical storm or hurricane.

Meanwhile, Grace was demoted to a depression as its maximum sustained winds fell to 35 mph (55 kph), below the 39 mph (63 kph) threshold for a tropical storm. It was located about 260 miles (415 kilometers) east-southeast of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Sunday night.

Tropical storm warnings for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands were discontinued. A tropical storm watch was issued for the Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The storm was moving west at 15 mph (24 kph).

Tropical depression eight formed 135 miles (220 kilometers) east-northeast of Bermuda late Sunday. The system had maximum sustained winds of 30 mph (45 kph) and was moving south at 7 mph (11 kph). A tropical storm watch was in effect for the island territory.

Both Grace and Fred posed a heavy rain and flood threat, forecasters said.

Rainfall totals around 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 centimeters) were forecast from Grace for Haiti and the Dominican Republic, through Tuesday. Fred was forecast to bring roughly the same amount of rainfall to the Big Bend of Florida and the Panhandle.

A tropical storm earlier in the week, Fred had weakened to a depression by its spin over Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where it knocked out power to some 400,000 customers and caused flooding that forced officials to shut part of the country's aqueduct system, interrupting water service for hundreds of thousands of people. Local officials reported hundreds of people were evacuated and some buildings were damaged.

## 'Game over': Westerners rush to leave Kabul, rescue Afghans

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

The beating blades of U.S. military helicopters whisking American diplomats to Kabul's airport on Sunday punctuated a frantic rush by thousands of other foreigners and Afghans to flee to safety as well, as a stunningly swift Taliban takeover entered the heart of Afghanistan's capital.

Two weeks from the Biden administration's planned full military withdrawal, the United States was pouring thousands of fresh troops back into the country temporarily to safeguard what was gearing up to be a large-scale airlift. Shortly before dawn Monday Kabul time, State Department spokesman Ned Price announced the U.S. had completed the evacuation of its embassy in Afghanistan, lowering the American flag.

At the same time, the administration announced it was taking over air-traffic control at Kabul's international airport, to manage the airlifts. Sporadic gunfire there Sunday frightened Afghan families fearful of Taliban rule and desperate for flights out, one of the last avenues for escape in an evacuation made far more urgent by the Taliban's weeklong sweep across the country.

NATO allies that had pulled out their forces ahead of the Biden administration's intended Aug. 31 withdrawal deadline were sending troops back in as well this weekend to protect evacuations of their own.

Some complained the U.S. was failing to move fast enough to bring to safety Afghans at risk of reprisal from the Taliban for past work with the Americans and other NATO forces.

"This is murder by incompetence," said U.S. Air Force veteran Sam Lerman, struggling Sunday from his home in Woodbridge, Virginia, to find a way out for an Afghan contractor who had guarded Americans and other NATO forces at Afghanistan's Bagram air base for a decade.



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Massouma Tajik, a 22-year-old data analyst, was among hundreds of Afghans waiting anxiously in the Kabul airport to board an evacuation flight.

"I see people crying, they are not sure whether their flight will happen or not. Neither am I," she said by phone, with panic in her voice.

Educated Afghan women have some of the most to lose under the fundamentalist Taliban, whose past government, overthrown by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, sought to largely confine women to the home.

Taliban forces moved early Sunday into a capital beset by fear and declared they were awaiting a peaceful surrender.

That arrival of the first waves of Taliban insurgents into Kabul prompted the U.S. to begin evacuating the embassy building in full, leaving only acting ambassador Ross Wilson and a core of other diplomats operating at the airport. Even as CH-47 helicopters shuttled American diplomats to the airport, and facing criticism at home over the administration's handling of the withdrawal, Secretary of State Antony Blinken rejected comparisons to the 1975 fall of Saigon.

"This is being done in a very deliberate way, it's being done in an orderly way," Blinken insisted on ABC's "This Week."

A joint statement from the U.S. State and Defense departments pledged late Sunday to fly thousands of Americans, local embassy staff and other "particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals" out of the country.

It gave no details, but high-profile Afghan women, journalists, and Afghans who've worked with Western governments and nonprofits are among those who most fear Taliban targeting for perceived Western ways or ties.

The statement promised to speed up visa processing for Afghans who used to work with American troops and officials in particular.

To many, the evacuations, and last-ditch rescue attempts by Americans and other foreigners trying to save Afghan allies, appeared far from orderly.

An Italian journalist, Francesca Mannocchi, posted a video of an Italian helicopter carrying her to the airport, an armed soldier standing guard at a window. Mannochi described watching columns of smoke rising from Kabul as she flew. Some were from fires that workers at the U.S. Embassy and others were using to keep sensitive material from falling in Taliban hands.

She said Afghans stoned an Italian convoy. She captioned her brief video: "Kabul airport. Evacuation. Game Over."

Hundreds or more Afghans crowded in a part of the airport away from many of the evacuating Westerners. Some of them, including a man with a broken leg sitting on the ground, lined up for what was expected to be a last flight out by the country's Ariana Airlines.

U.S. officials reported gunfire near the airport Sunday evening and for a time urged civilians to stop coming. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the airport was open for commercial flights — the only escape left for many ordinary Afghans — but would experience stoppages.

U.S. C-17 transport planes were due to bring thousands of fresh American troops to the airport, then fly out again with evacuating U.S. Embassy staffers. The Pentagon was now sending an additional 1,000 troops, bringing the total number to about 6,000, a U.S. defense official said Sunday, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a deployment decision not yet announced by the Pentagon.

The Pentagon intends to have enough aircraft to fly out as many as 5,000 civilians a day, both Americans and the Afghan translators and others who worked with the U.S. during the war.

It was by no means clear how long Kabul's deteriorating security would allow any evacuations to continue.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, whose government had been one of many expressing surprise at the speed of the U.S. withdrawal, told reporters in Berlin on Sunday that it was "difficult to endure" watching how quickly the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and how little government troops were able to do to stop them.

At a North Carolina-based adoption agency, Mary Beth Lee King sought a way to extricate two Afghan boys, ages 11 and 2, due for adoption by families in America.

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"Even if the U.S. won't admit them to the U.S., get them somewhere, so that ... we know that they are alive and safe," King said of the two Afghan children.

In Virginia, Lerman, the Air Force veteran, stayed up overnight Saturday to Sunday to finish an application for a special U.S. visa program meant to rescue Afghans who had worked with Americans.

When Lerman hit "send," he got a message saying the State Department email box for the rescue program was full, he said, sharing screenshots.

The Afghan security contractor he was working to get out was sitting frightened inside his home with the blinds drawn and Taliban fighters outside, he said.

The State Department said late Sunday afternoon it believed it had fixed the problem.

"Never in my life have I been ashamed to be an American before," Lerman said. "And I am, deeply."

## Biden team surprised by rapid Taliban gains in Afghanistan

By ZEKE MILLER, JONATHAN LEMIRE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and other top U.S. officials were stunned on Sunday by the pace of the Taliban's nearly complete takeover of Afghanistan, as the planned withdrawal of American forces urgently became a mission to ensure a safe evacuation.

The speed of the Afghan government's collapse and the ensuing chaos posed the most serious test of Biden as commander in chief, and he was the subject of withering criticism from Republicans who said that he had failed.

Biden campaigned as a seasoned expert in international relations and has spent months downplaying the prospect of an ascendant Taliban while arguing that Americans of all political persuasions have tired of a 20-year war, a conflict that demonstrated the limits of money and military might to force a Western-style democracy on a society not ready or willing to embrace it.

By Sunday, though, leading figures in the administration acknowledged they were caught off guard with the utter speed of the collapse of Afghan security forces. The challenge of that effort became clear after reports of sporadic gunfire at the Kabul airport prompted Americans to shelter as they awaited flights to safety after the U.S. Embassy was completely evacuated.

"We've seen that that force has been unable to defend the country, and that has happened more quickly than we anticipated," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN, referring to the Afghan military.

The turmoil in Afghanistan resets the focus in an unwelcome way for a president who has largely focused on a domestic agenda that includes emerging from the pandemic, winning congressional approval for trillions of dollars in infrastructure spending and protecting voting rights.

Biden remained at Camp David on Sunday, receiving regular briefings on Afghanistan and holding secure video conference calls with members of his national security team, according to senior White House officials. His administration released a single photo of the president alone in a conference room meeting virtually with military, diplomatic and intelligence experts. The next several days would be critical in determining whether the U.S. is able to regain some level of control over the situation.

The Pentagon and State Department said in a joint statement Sunday that "we are completing a series of steps to secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport to enable the safe departure of U.S. and allied personnel from Afghanistan via civilian and military flights." Biden ordered another 1,000 troops into Kabul to secure the evacuation.

Discussions were underway for Biden to speak publicly, according to two senior administration officials who requested anonymity to discuss internal conversations. Biden, who is scheduled to remain at the presidential retreat through Wednesday, is expected to return to the White House if he decides to deliver an address.

Biden is the fourth U.S. president to confront challenges in Afghanistan and has insisted he wouldn't hand America's longest war to his successor. But the president will likely have to explain how security in Afghanistan unraveled so quickly, especially since he and others in the administration have insisted it wouldn't happen.

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"The jury is still out, but the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely," Biden said on July 8.

As recently as last week, Biden publicly expressed hope that Afghan forces could develop the will to defend their country. But privately, administration officials warned that the military was crumbling, prompting Biden on Thursday to order thousands of American troops into the region to speed up evacuation plans.

One official said Biden was more sanguine on projections for the Afghan fighters to hold off the Taliban in part to prevent a further erosion in morale among their force. It was ultimately for naught.

Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump also yearned to leave Afghanistan, but ultimately stood down in the face of resistance from military leaders and other political concerns. Biden, on the other hand, has been steadfast in his refusal to change the Aug. 31 deadline, in part because of his belief that the American public is on his side.

A late July ABC News/Ipsos poll, for instance, showed 55% of Americans approving of Biden's handling of the troop withdrawal.

Most Republicans have not pushed Biden to keep troops in Afghanistan over the long term and they also supported Trump's own push to exit the country. Still, some in the GOP are stepping up their critique of Biden's withdrawal strategy and said images from Sunday of American helicopters circling the U.S. Embassy in Kabul evoked the humiliating departure of U.S. personnel from Vietnam.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell deemed the scenes of withdrawal as "the embarrassment of a superpower laid low."

Meanwhile, U.S. officials are increasingly concerned about the potential for the rise in terrorist threats against the U.S. as the situation in Afghanistan devolves, according to a person familiar with the matter who requested anonymity to discuss a sensitive security matter.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators on a briefing call Sunday that U.S. officials are expected to alter their earlier assessments about the pace of terrorist groups reconstituting in Afghanistan, the person said. Based on the evolving situation, officials believe terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected.

The officials on the call told senators that the U.S. intelligence community is currently working on forming a new timeline based on the evolving threats.

Still, there were no additional steps planned beyond the troop deployment Biden ordered to assist in the evacuations. Senior administration officials believe the U.S. will be able to maintain security at the Kabul airport long enough to extricate Americans and their allies, but the fate of those unable to get to the airport was far from certain.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who has backed the Biden administration's strategy, said in an interview that "the speed is a surprise" but would not characterize the situation as an intelligence failure. He said it has long been known that Afghanistan would fall to the Taliban if the United States pulled out.

"Given how much we have invested in the Afghan army, it's not ridiculous for analysts to believe that they'd be able to put up a fight for more than a few days," Murphy said. "You want to believe that trillions of dollars and 20 years of investment adds up to something, even if it doesn't add up for the ability to defend the country in the long run."

In the upper ranks of Biden's staff, the rapid collapse in Afghanistan only confirmed the decision to leave: If the meltdown of the Afghan forces would come so quickly after nearly two decades of American presence, another six months or a year or two or more would not have changed anything.

Biden has argued for more than a decade that Afghanistan was a kind of purgatory for the United States. He found it to be corrupt, addicted to America's largesse and an unreliable partner that should be made to fend for itself. His goal was to protect Americans from terrorist attacks, not building a country.

As vice president, he argued privately against Obama's surge of 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in a bid to stabilize the country so that the United States and its allies could then pull back their forces.

As president, Biden said in July that he made the decision to withdraw with "clear eyes" after receiving daily battlefield updates. His judgment was that Afghanistan would be divided in a peace agreement with

the Taliban, rather than falling all at once.

While Biden has prided himself on delivering plain truths to the American public, his bullish assessment of the situation just a month ago could come back to haunt him.

"There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy in the — of the United States from Afghanistan," he said in July. "The likelihood there's going to be one unified government in Afghanistan controlling the whole country is highly unlikely."

## Death toll of powerful earthquake in Haiti soars to 1,297

By EVENS SANON and MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — The death toll from a 7.2-magnitude earthquake in Haiti climbed to 1,297 on Sunday, a day after the powerful temblor turned thousands of structures into rubble and set off frantic rescue efforts ahead of a potential deluge from an approaching storm.

Saturday's earthquake also left at least 5,700 people injured in the Caribbean nation, with thousands more displaced from their destroyed or damaged homes. Survivors in some areas were forced to wait out in the open amid oppressive heat for help from overloaded hospitals.

The devastation could soon worsen with the coming of Tropical Depression Grace, which is predicted to reach Haiti on Monday night. The U.S. National Hurricane Center warned that although Grace had weakened from tropical storm strength Sunday, it still posed a threat to bring heavy rain, flooding and landslides.

The earthquake struck the southwestern part of the hemisphere's poorest nation, almost razing some towns and triggering landslides that hampered rescue efforts in a country already struggling with the coronavirus pandemic, a presidential assassination and a wave of gang violence.

The epicenter was about 125 kilometers (78 miles) west of the capital of Port-au-Prince, the U.S. Geological Survey said, and aftershocks continued to jolt the area Sunday.

In the badly damaged coastal town of Les Cayes, Jennie Auguste lay on a flimsy foam mattress on the tarmac of the community's tiny airport waiting for anything — space at a hospital or a small plane like the ones ferrying the wounded to the capital. She suffered injuries in the chest, abdomen and arm when the roof collapsed at the store where she worked.

"There has been nothing. No help, nothing from the government," Auguste's sister, Bertrande, said.

In scenes widespread across the region hit by the quake, families salvaged their few belongings and spent the night at an open-air football pitch. On Sunday, people lined up to buy what little was available: bananas, avocados and water at a local street market.

Some in the town praised God for surviving the earthquake, and many went to the cathedral, which appeared outwardly undamaged even if the priests' residence was destroyed.

"We only have Jesus now," said Johanne Dorcelly, whose house was destroyed. "If it wasn't for Jesus, I wouldn't be able to be here today."

Workers tore through rubble of collapsed buildings with heavy machinery, shovels and picks. After sundown, Les Cayes was darkened by intermittent blackouts, and many slept outside again, clutching small transistor radios tuned to news, terrified of a possible repetition of Saturday's strong aftershocks.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry has declared a one-month state of emergency for the whole country and said he was rushing aid to areas where towns were destroyed and hospitals were overwhelmed.

"The first convoys started following the coordination efforts of several ministers mobilized at the level of the National Emergency Center," Henry told reporters Sunday. "We salute the dignity, the resilience effort of the victims and their ability to start over. From my observations, I deduce that Haitians want to live and progress. Let us unite to offer these people a living environment conducive to development."

UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said Sunday that humanitarian needs are acute, with many Haitians urgently needing health care, clean water and shelter. Children who have been separated from parents need protection, she said.

"Little more than a decade on, Haiti is reeling once again," Fore said in a statement. "And this disaster

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coincides with political instability, rising gang violence, alarmingly high rates of malnutrition among children, and the COVID-19 pandemic — for which Haiti has received just 500,000 vaccine doses, despite requiring far more.”

The country of 11 million people received its first batch of U.S.-donated coronavirus vaccines only last month via a United Nations program for low-income countries.

Haiti’s Office of Civil Protection said more than 7,000 homes were destroyed and nearly 5,000 damaged. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches were also affected.

Medical workers from across the region were scrambling to help as hospitals in Les Cayes started running out of space to perform surgeries.

“Basically, they need everything,” said Dr. Inobert Pierre, a pediatrician with the nonprofit Health Equity International, which oversees St. Boniface Hospital, about two hours from Les Cayes.

“Many of the patients have open wounds and they have been exposed to not-so-clean elements,” added Pierre, who visited two hospitals in Les Cayes — one with some 200 patients, the other with around 90. “We anticipate a lot of infections.”

Pierre’s medical team was taking some patients to St. Boniface to undergo surgery, but with just two ambulances, they could transport only four at a time.

Small planes from a private firm and the Florida-based missionary service Agape Flights landed at the Port-Au-Prince airport Sunday carrying about a half dozen injured from the Les Cayes area. Young men with bandages and a woman were hoisted on stretchers to waiting Haitian Red Cross ambulances.

Silvestre Plaza Rico, who was supervising one of the volunteer flights, said rescue planes had made several airlifts of about a half dozen injured victims each on Saturday. “There were many, many, many, from different towns,” Plaza Rico said.

The earthquake struck just over a month after President Jovenel Moïse was shot to death in his home, sending the country into political chaos. His widow, Martine Moïse, who was seriously wounded in the attack, posted a message on Twitter calling for unity among Haitians: “Let’s put our shoulders together to bring solidarity.”

Shortly after the earthquake, Henry said he wanted “structured solidarity” to ensure the response was coordinated to avoid the confusion that followed the devastating 2010 earthquake, when aid was slow to reach residents after.

U.S. President Joe Biden named USAID Administrator Samantha Power to oversee the U.S effort to help Haiti. She announced Sunday that USAID was sending a search and rescue team from Virginia at the request of Haiti’s government. The 65-person team will bring specialized tools and medical supplies, she said on Twitter.

Working with USAID, the U.S. Coast Guard said a helicopter was transporting medical personnel from the Haitian capital to the quake zone and evacuating the injured back to Port-au-Prince. Lt. Commander Jason Nieman, a spokesman, said another helicopter was being sent from the Bahamas, along with other aircraft and ships.

Already on the scene were several members of Cuba’s 253-member health care mission to Haiti, and the socialist nation’s state media showed photos of them giving first aid to victims injured by the quake.

The North Carolina-based aid group Samaritan’s Purse announced it would fly 13 disaster response specialists and 31 tons of emergency supplies to Haiti. Those include shelter materials and water filtration units.

Humanitarian workers said gang activity in the seaside district of Martissant, just west of the Haitian capital, was complicating relief efforts.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said Haiti’s southern peninsula is a “hotspot for gang-related violence,” where humanitarian workers have been repeatedly attacked.

The agency said the area has been “virtually unreachable” over the past two months because of road blocks and security concerns. But it said late Sunday that local officials negotiated with gangs in the seaside district of Martissant to allow two humanitarian convoys a day to pass through the area.

Anna Jefferys, spokeswoman for the U.N. agency, said the first convoy passed through Sunday with

government and U.N. personnel. The U.N.'s World Food Program plans to send food supplies via trucks to southern Haiti on Tuesday, she added.

Haiti, where many live in tenuous circumstances, is vulnerable to earthquakes and hurricanes. A magnitude 5.9 earthquake in 2018 killed more than a dozen people.

The magnitude 7.0 quake of 2010 hit closer to densely populated Port-au-Prince and caused widespread destruction. Haiti's government put the death toll at more than 300,000, while a report commissioned by the U.S. government placed it between 46,000 and 85,000.

## Concerns over US terror threats rising as Taliban hold grows

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, NOMAAN MERCHANT and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's top general said Sunday that the United States could now face a rise in terrorist threats from a Taliban-run Afghanistan. That warning comes as intelligence agencies charged with anticipating those threats face new questions after the U.S.-backed Afghan military collapsed with shocking speed.

Less than a week after a military assessment predicted Kabul could be surrounded by insurgents in 30 days, the world on Sunday watched stunning scenes of Taliban fighters standing in the Afghan president's office and crowds of Afghans and foreigners frantically trying to board planes to escape the country.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told senators on a briefing call Sunday that U.S. officials are expected to alter their earlier assessments about the pace of terrorist groups reconstituting in Afghanistan, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

In June, the Pentagon's top leaders said an extremist group like al-Qaida may be able to regenerate in Afghanistan and pose a threat to the U.S. homeland within two years of the American military's withdrawal from the country. Two decades after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan because the Taliban harbored al-Qaida leaders, experts say the Taliban and al-Qaida remain aligned, and other violent groups could also find safe haven under the new regime.

Based on the evolving situation, officials now believe terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected, according to the person, who had direct knowledge of the briefing but was not authorized to discuss the details of the call publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

The Biden administration officials on the call with senators — among them were Milley, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin — said U.S. intelligence agencies are working on forming a new timeline based on the evolving threats, the person familiar with the matter said.

Current and former intelligence officials on Sunday pushed back against criticism of what was widely seen as a failure by the agencies to anticipate how fast Kabul could fall. One senior intelligence official said that "a rapid Taliban takeover was always a possibility," adding: "As the Taliban advanced, they ultimately met with little resistance. We have always been clear-eyed that this was possible, and tactical conditions on the ground can often evolve quickly." The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

But President Joe Biden didn't suggest such an outcome at a July 8 news conference, when he said "the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely."

The reduced U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan — down to 2,500 troops at the end of President Donald Trump's term — may have hindered intelligence efforts in Afghanistan. Retired Lt. Gen. Robert Ashley, who led the Defense Intelligence Agency until October, said having fewer Americans embedded with Afghan forces meant there was less insight into how those forces would perform.

"It's very, very difficult to gauge the morale down at the unit level because you're just not there anymore," Ashley said. "And I wouldn't be surprised if Afghan leaders would tell us only what we want to hear anyway."

Monitoring terrorism threats in Afghanistan will be even more difficult with U.S. troops withdrawing and the Taliban in control. Intelligence agencies in Afghanistan work side by side with troops. Without the same military presence, spies are severely limited in what they can collect about the morale of Afghan

troops or support for the Taliban.

"If they leave, which they did, that means we leave as well," said Marc Polymeropoulos, who held several roles related to Afghanistan during a 26-year career in the CIA. "And that certainly affects our intelligence gathering footprint."

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democratic member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that once evacuations are settled that "our focus is going to shift" toward intelligence and counterterrorism activities. The U.S. will have to ensure it has the ability to track whether Al Qaeda is reconstituting there, he said in an interview.

"The Taliban has lots of reasons to honor their agreement with the United States and keep al-Qaida at bay. And our mission now is to put ourselves in a position where we can monitor and verify that that commitment," he said.

U.S. national security officials also briefed House members and tensions ran high. Republican leader Kevin McCarthy became furious after the administration officials would not confirm that President Ashraf Ghani had left the country, according to a person who participated in the meeting.

"Why are we doing this now?" McCarthy asked.

Ghani fled out of the country as the Taliban insurgents closed in on Sunday and posted on Facebook that he had chosen to leave the country to avert bloodshed in the capital. He did not say where he had gone.

Rep. Michael Waltz, a Florida Republican and Green Beret who served in Afghanistan, sharply criticized the briefing as "a regurgitation of the president's statement" from Saturday.

Waltz said Austin blamed the Afghan forces' lack of will to fight, while Blinken cited the deadline set by former President Donald Trump's administration for an American withdrawal.

"There was no discussion of a path forward except some vague reassurances that they'll protect the homeland," Waltz said.

## **EXPLAINER: Why are earthquakes so devastating in Haiti?**

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

The powerful earthquake that hit Haiti on Saturday killed hundreds and injured thousands more. The destruction comes just 11 years after a temblor killed tens of thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands. Some 100,000 buildings were destroyed in the 2010 quake.

As rescuers search for survivors in the Caribbean nation, here's a look at why Haiti has had so many devastating earthquakes over the centuries and why they are often so devastating.

### **WHAT MAKES HAITI PRONE TO EARTHQUAKES?**

The Earth's crust is made up of tectonic plates that move. And Haiti sits near the intersection of two of them — the North American plate and the Caribbean plate.

Multiple fault lines between those plates cut through or near the island of Hispaniola, which Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic. What's worse, not all of those fault lines behave the same way.

"Hispaniola sits in a place where plates transition from smashing together to sliding past one another," said Rich Briggs, a research geologist at the U.S. Geological Survey's Geologic Hazards Science Center.

"It's like a rock stuck in the track of a sliding glass door," he said. "It just does not want to move smoothly because it's got so many different forces on it."

### **WHAT CAUSED THE MOST RECENT QUAKE?**

Saturday's magnitude 7.2 earthquake likely occurred along the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden fault zone, which cuts across Haiti's southwestern Tiburon Peninsula, according to the USGS.

It's the same fault zone along which the devastating 2010 earthquake occurred. And it's likely the source of three other big earthquakes in Haiti between 1751 and 1860, two of which destroyed Port-au-Prince.

Earthquakes are the result of the tectonic plates slowly moving against each other and creating friction over time, said Gavin Hayes, senior science adviser for earthquake and geologic hazards at USGS.

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"That friction builds up and builds up and eventually the strain that's stored there overcomes the friction," Hayes said. "And that's when the fault moves suddenly. That's what an earthquake is."

## WHY CAN EARTHQUAKES IN HAITI BE SO DEVASTATING?

It's a combination of factors that include a seismically active area, a high population density of 11 million people and buildings that are often designed to withstand hurricanes — not earthquakes.

Typical concrete and cinder block buildings can survive strong winds but are vulnerable to damage or collapse when the ground shakes. Poor building practices can also play a role.

The 2010 quake hit closer to densely populated Port-au-Prince and caused widespread destruction. Haiti's government put the death toll at more than 300,000, while a report commissioned by the U.S. government placed it between 46,000 and 85,000.

"I think it's important to recognize that there's no such thing as a natural disaster," said Wendy Bohon, a geologist with Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology. "What you have is a natural hazard that overlaps with a vulnerable system."

## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Geologists say they cannot predict the next earthquake.

"But we do know that earthquakes like this can cause similar-sized earthquakes on the next portion of the fault," said Hayes of USGS. "And it's quite a significant hazard in places that don't have the construction practices to withstand the shaking."

Construction of more earthquake-resistant buildings remains a challenge in Haiti, which is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Before Saturday's quake, Haiti was still recovering from the 2010 earthquake as well as Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Its president was assassinated last month, sending the country into political chaos.

And while there have been some success stories of Haitians building more earthquake-resistant structures, the country has lacked a centralized effort to do so, said Mark Schuller, a professor of anthropology and nonprofit and NGO studies at Northern Illinois University.

Haiti's government has become increasingly weak, while non-governmental organizations focus on their own compartmentalized projects.

"There is technical knowledge in Haiti. There are trained architects. There are city planners. That's not the problem," Schuller said. "The problem is a lack of funding for coordination, and lack of political will from donors (to organizations providing aid)."

## California fire threatens homes as blazes burn across West

By EUGENE GARCIA and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

QUINCY, Calif. (AP) — Thousands of Northern California homes were threatened Sunday by the nation's largest wildfire and officials warned the danger of new blazes erupting across the West was high because of unstable weather.

Thunderstorms that moved in starting Friday didn't produce much rain but whipped up winds and generated lightning strikes across the northern Sierra where crews were battling the month-old Dixie Fire. Extreme heat returned Sunday with temperatures expected to top 100 degrees (38 Celsius).

"We're definitely still dealing with the possibility of lightning. Winds are all over the place. Things are going to be pretty unstable for the next couple days," said fire spokesman Edwin Zuniga.

Gusts of up to 50 mph (80 kph) on Saturday pushed flames closer to Janesville, a town of about 1,500 people just east of Greenville, the small gold rush-era community decimated by the fire 10 days ago.

James Reichle evacuated from Greenville and has been sleeping with his dog in a trailer outside a church. His home survived the flames but he's been unable to return because the roads are closed. He said he feels for his neighbors at the evacuation center who lost everything.

"These are all people who either don't have a home or don't have access to a home. I still have a house



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standing, no damage. But I can't get into it," he said Saturday.

The Dixie Fire was the largest among more than 100 big blazes burning in more than a dozen states in the West, a region seared by drought and hot, bone-dry weather that turned forests, brushlands, meadows and pastures into tinder.

The U.S. Forest Service said Friday it is operating in crisis mode, fully deploying firefighters and maxing out its support system.

The roughly 21,000 federal firefighters working on the ground is more than double the number of firefighters sent to contain forest fires at this time a year ago, said Anthony Scardina, a deputy forester for the agency's Pacific Southwest region.

More than 6,000 firefighters alone were battling the Dixie Fire, which has ravaged nearly 867 square miles (2,246 square kilometers) — an area the size of Tokyo. It was 31% contained on Sunday.

More than 1,000 homes and businesses have been destroyed and nearly 15,000 structures were still under threat.

The cause has not been determined. Pacific Gas and Electric has said the fire may have been sparked when a tree fell on its power line.

A few hundred miles to the south, evacuations were ordered Sunday after a blaze that broke out the night before churned through California forestland near the remote community of Omo Ranch. There was no containment of the Caldor Fire burning in El Dorado County, about 60 miles (73 kilometers) east of Sacramento.

Meanwhile, a small wildfire that blew up Saturday east of Salt Lake City, temporarily shutting down Interstate 80 and leading to evacuation orders for some 8,000 residences, was caused by a vehicle with a malfunctioning catalytic converter, Utah Fire Info said.

The Parleys Canyon Fire, estimated at just under a square mile (2.4 square kilometers), calmed significantly overnight and homes were no longer threatened, officials said Sunday.

In southeastern Montana, firefighters gained ground on a pair of blazes that chewed through vast rangelands and at one point threatened the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation.

The fires were caused by heat from coal seams, the deposits of coal found in the ground in the area, said Peggy Miller, a spokeswoman for the fires.

Mandatory evacuations for the tribal headquarters town of Lame Deer were lifted Sunday, but remained in place for those with medical conditions. Heavy smoke led to unhealthy air quality across much of the state early Sunday afternoon, according to the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Smoke also drove air pollution levels to unhealthy or very unhealthy levels in parts of Northern California, Oregon and Idaho.

In southeastern Oregon, two wildfires started by lightning Thursday spread rapidly through a landscape sucked dry by extreme drought.

Hot weather and bone-dry conditions in Oregon could increase fire risks through the weekend, forecasters said.

Climate change has made the U.S. West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

## US mulls COVID vaccine boosters for elderly as early as fall

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Warning of tough days ahead with surging COVID-19 infections, the director of the National Institutes of Health said Sunday the U.S. could decide in the next couple weeks whether to offer coronavirus booster shots to Americans this fall.

Among the first to receive them could be health care workers, nursing home residents and other older Americans.

Dr. Francis Collins also pleaded anew for unvaccinated people to get their shots, calling them "sitting ducks" for a delta variant that is ravaging the country and showing little sign of letting up.

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"This is going very steeply upward with no signs of having peaked out," he said.

Federal health officials have been actively looking at whether extra shots for the vaccinated may be needed as early as this fall, reviewing case numbers in the U.S. "almost daily" as well as the situation in other countries such as Israel, where preliminary studies suggest the vaccine's protection against serious illness dropped among those vaccinated in January.

Israel has been offering a coronavirus booster to people over 60 who were already vaccinated more than five months ago.

No U.S. decision has been made because cases here so far still indicate that people remain highly protected from COVID-19, including the delta variant, after receiving the two-dose Pfizer or Moderna regimen or the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

But U.S. health officials made clear Sunday they are preparing for the possibility that the time for boosters may come sooner than later.

"There is a concern that the vaccine may start to wane in its effectiveness," Collins said. "And delta is a nasty one for us to try to deal with. The combination of those two means we may need boosters, maybe beginning first with health care providers, as well as people in nursing homes, and then gradually moving forward" with others, such as older Americans who were among the first to get vaccinations after they became available late last year.

He said because the delta variant only started hitting the U.S. hard in July, the "next couple of weeks" of case data will help the U.S. make a decision.

Moderna President Stephen Hoge said seeing some "breakthrough" infections emerge among the vaccinated within six months has been surprising, even if most symptoms so far have not been life-threatening. "I think that suggests we are going to need booster vaccines to get through the winter," he said.

Last week, the Food and Drug Administration said people with weakened immune systems can get an extra dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines to better protect them as the delta variant continues to surge.

"If it turns out as the data come in, we see we do need to give an additional dose to people in nursing homes, actually, or people who are elderly, we will be absolutely prepared to do that very quickly," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, who is President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser.

While the U.S. currently is seeing an average of about 129,000 new infections a day — a 700% increase from the beginning of July — that number could jump in the next couple weeks to 200,000, a level not seen since among the pandemic's worst days in January and February, Collins said.

Both he and Fauci stressed that the best way to stem the virus is for the unvaccinated to get their shots.

Currently, about 60% of the U.S. population has gotten at least one dose and nearly 51% are fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Areas with low vaccination rates have been particularly hit hard with infections, such as Louisiana, Texas, Florida and Mississippi.

The rapidly escalating surge in infections across the U.S. has caused a shortage of intensive care-unit beds, nurses and other front-line staff in virus hot spots that can no longer keep up with the flood of unvaccinated patients. Health officials also warn that more children who are not yet eligible for vaccines could get infected, though it's not clear whether the delta variant leads to more severe illness among them.

"That's heartbreaking considering we never thought we would be back in that space again," Collins said of rising U.S. infections overall. "But here we are with the delta variant, which is so contagious, and this heartbreaking situation where 90 million people are still unvaccinated who are sitting ducks for this virus, and that's the mess we're in. We're in a world of hurt."

Fauci said as more people get their shots, in many places everyone — both the vaccinated and unvaccinated — will have to do their part with "mitigation," such as mask-wearing in schools and other public spaces.

"We've just got to realize that we're dealing with a public health crisis," he said. "The more you get infections, the more spread you get, the greater opportunity the virus has to continue to evolve and mutate."

Collins spoke on "Fox News Sunday," Fauci appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation" and Hoge was on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures."

## Afghan president was isolated before slipping into exile

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani slipped out of his country Sunday in the same way he had led it in recent years — a lonely and isolated figure.

Ghani quietly left the sprawling presidential palace with a small coterie of confidants — and didn't even tell other political leaders who had been negotiating a peaceful transition of power with the Taliban that he was heading for the exit.

Abdullah Abdullah, his long-time rival who had twice buried his animosity to partner with Ghani in government, said that "God will hold him accountable" for abandoning the capital.

Ghani's destination was not immediately known. In a social media post from an unknown location, he wrote that he left to save lives. "If I had stayed, countless of my countrymen would be martyred and Kabul would face destruction and turn into ruins that could result to a human catastrophe for its six million residents" Ghani wrote.

Abdullah, as well as former President Hamid Karzai, who had beaten a path to Ghani's door on numerous occasions to plead with him to put compromise above retaining power, were blindsided by the hasty departure. They said they had still been hoping to negotiate a peaceful transition with the Taliban, said Saad Mohseni, the owner of Afghanistan's popular TOLO TV.

"He left them in them lurch," he said. Earlier Sunday, Karzai had posted a message to the nation on his Facebook page, surrounded by his three daughters, to reassure Kabul residents that the leadership had a plan and was negotiating with the Taliban.

Just hours later, he discovered the presidential palace had been abandoned.

"Ghani's inability to unite the country and his proclivity to surround himself with his cadre of Western-educated intellectuals brought Afghanistan to this point," said Bill Roggio, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a U.S.-based research institute. "As Afghanistan collapsed, he refused to deal with the problems and further isolated himself from the power brokers he needed to deal with the problem, and the Afghan people as well."

Ghani's style of rule was often characterized as cantankerous and arrogant, rarely heeding the advice of his government and often publicly berating those who challenged him.

He was accused by ethnic minorities of championing the ethnic Pashtuns, like himself, seeing himself as a counter to the Taliban, who are mostly from the same ethnic group. He alienated other ethnic minorities and the gap between Afghanistan's ethnic groups grew ever wider.

As he campaigned for the presidency in 2014, Ghani was taking an anger management course. It seemed to have faltered as multiple tribal elders in meetings with the president have spoken of his verbal lashings.

Ghani's critics say his heavy-handed leadership style is to blame, to some degree, for the rapid disintegration of the Afghan army and an anti-Taliban alliance of warlords who fled or surrendered to the insurgents rather than fight for a widely unpopular president.

"His downfall was his insistence on centralizing power at all costs and a stubborn refusal to bring more people under his tent," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center. "Later on, his inability to develop a clear strategy to address the Taliban insurgency and perceptions that he was obstructing the peace process hurt him as well."

Ghani, 72, spent most of his career overseas as a student and academic before returning to Afghanistan in 2002.

He arrived with a powerful set of economic credentials. He was attractive to the West with his World Bank background and was seen as a possible solution to Afghanistan's crumbling and corrupt economy. He was finance minister for two years until 2004. He survived cancer.

In 2014 he fought his first presidential race. It was criticized as deeply flawed and allegations of widespread fraud threatened to destabilize the still fragile nation. Both Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory. In the end, the United States brokered a compromise and divided power between the

two men and even created a new position of chief executive.

The next election in 2019 fared the same. Again, accusations swirled of deep corruption and both Ghani and Abdullah declared themselves president. They eventually ended months of bickering and Abdullah became head of the National Reconciliation Council that was to bring Afghanistan's warlords and political leaders together to put a united face before the Taliban.

But Ghani's belligerent operating style undermined him again.

"He worked with a very small circle of 'yes' men and got filtered news about the country from them," said Torek Farhadi, a former adviser to the Afghan government. "Others didn't dare talk truth to him. He replaced all experienced people in the army and the government with junior people beholden to him. In a traditional country, Ghani was the guy who governed upside down."

As the Trump administration opened negotiations with the Taliban in 2016, Ghani was asked by U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad to cobble together a strong united team \_\_\_ one that could conduct tough negotiations with the Taliban. Efforts quickly faltered.

In April a frustrated U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Ghani to forge a united stand. He warned the president that he had to expand his circle and be inclusive.

"Unity and inclusivity .... I believe is essential for the difficult work ahead," Blinken wrote.

"Even with the continuation of financial assistance to your forces from the United States after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned the security situation will worsen and that the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains," Blinken warned.

Roggio, of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said there are many reasons for the government's collapse, but "Ghani was not the man to lead Afghanistan during its darkest hour."

## Trudeau triggers Canadian election, voting day Sept. 20

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau triggered an election Sunday as he seeks to capitalize on Canada being one of the most fully vaccinated countries in the world.

Trudeau announced the election would be held on Sept. 20 after visiting the governor general, who holds a mostly ceremonial position representing Britain's Queen Elizabeth II as head of state.

"We've had your back, and now it's time to hear your voice," Trudeau said. "Canadians need to choose how we finish the fight against COVID-19."

Trudeau is seeking to win a majority of seats in Parliament. His Liberal Party fell just short of that two years ago and must rely on the opposition to pass legislation.

The election comes as Canada is experiencing a new wave of COVID-19 cases, driven by the delta variant of the coronavirus. Trudeau called it "the fourth wave amongst unvaccinated people."

Trudeau isn't as popular as he once was, but his government's handling of the pandemic has been widely viewed as a success. After a slow start Canada now has enough vaccine for every citizen. More than 71% of eligible Canadians are fully vaccinated and over 82% have received at least one dose. The government has spent billions to prop up the economy amid lockdowns that have now lifted.

But if the result is another minority government, the "knives will start to come out," said Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto.

"Trudeau is not widely liked. He's what the Liberals have so they will fall in behind him, but if he loses he's toast," Bothwell said.

"It's not that he's unpopular but there's no affection there. The Liberals behave as if he is this beloved figure but he's not. The novelty is gone. But there's still enough there and the performance on COVID was pretty solid so I think people will balance these things going into the election and vote for Trudeau."

Trudeau, the son of the late Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, became the second youngest prime minister in Canadian history when he was first elected with a majority of seats in Parliament in 2015. The Liberal's victory ended almost 10 years of Conservative Party government in Canada, but scandals combined with high expectations have damaged Trudeau's standing.

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His father served as prime minister from 1968 to 1984 with a short interruption.

Opposition leftist New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh said it is "selfish" for Trudeau to call an election in a pandemic. Ontario, Canada's largest province, reported more than 500 cases for the fourth straight day.

Opposition Conservative leader Erin O'Toole didn't answer when asked if his candidates will or should be vaccinated. He said he is disappointed Trudeau is trying to divide people about their health.

"The Liberals are going to keep pounding the Conservatives on this and it will be happening as the fourth wave of the pandemic is picking up steam, said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto. "The fourth wave could hurt the Liberals if lockdowns are reimposed."

Wiseman said many Canadians will resent having an election they see as unnecessary, but said the Liberals will win the most seats.

"Trudeau is seen as having delivered on vaccines and there has been widespread support for the government's income-and job-support programs to counter COVID's economic fallout," Wiseman said.

"Canadians compare their situation to the U.S. The current spike in the U.S. contributes to smug complacency among Canadians. This feeling benefits the Liberals at present."

Trudeau began his news conference Sunday talking about the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Canada closed its embassy in Kabul and staff have fled the country. "The current situation poses serious challenges to our ability to ensure that safety and security of our mission," Trudeau said.

Canada has committed to taking in 20,000 refugees from the country and Afghans who have assisted Canada over the years.

## Zambia's opposition leader takes lead in presidential poll

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

LUSAKA, Zambia (AP) — Veteran Zambian opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema appears on the verge of clinching the southern African country's presidency, with a commanding lead in votes.

The 59-year old businessman, contesting the presidency for the sixth time, has more than 2.3 million votes to President Edgar Lungu's 1.4 million votes, according to results announced Sunday by the Electoral Commission of Zambia.

Hichilema narrowly lost two previous elections to Lungu in 2015 and 2016. Lungu won by a margin of just 100,000 votes in 2016.

The winner of the election held Thursday must garner more than 50% of the votes cast to avoid a second round of voting and Hichilema appears close to the 2.5 million estimated to be more than half of those who voted. The electoral commission has announced results for more than 100 of the country's 156 constituencies.

"With victory in sight, I would like to ask for calm from our members and supporters. Let us be the change we voted for," tweeted Hichilema, whose United Party for National Development is in an alliance with more than 10 smaller parties.

Celebrations by his supporters spread across the capital, Lusaka, and other parts of Africa's second-largest producer of copper, ignoring calls by the Electoral Commission for people to wait peacefully for the final official results.

Some of the 16 candidates who ran for president have already conceded defeat and congratulated Hichilema.

But President Edgar Lungu has signaled that he may not accept defeat. Lungu asserted that the elections had not been free and fair in three provinces seen as opposition strongholds, citing violence and the killings of a few of his supporters, allegedly by the opposition. Lungu claimed that ruling party polling agents had been brutalized and chased away from voting stations, leaving his party's votes "unprotected."

Lungu said Saturday that although he notified the electoral commission of his concerns, "they have continued announcing the results." His Patriotic Front party is "consulting on the next decision we have to make," he said in a statement released by his office.

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Lungu's statement indicates that he may challenge the validity of the election in order to stay in power, said analysts.

The overwhelming turnout of voters, particularly of youthful Zambians, was a strong indication that Hichilema was going to do well in the poll, according to analyst Nic Cheeseman, professor of politics at the University of Birmingham, who is in Zambia to watch the crucial election. Youthful voters make up a majority of registered voters. The electoral commission noted that the large turnout was unprecedented.

For some of Lungu's supporters, this is more than just a defeat at the ballot box. In a country where a large number of youths are unemployed, many of Lungu's supporters, from the wealthy to the poorest, have relied on patronage and fear losing access to jobs.

Stanley Lungu, 23, is one of them.

Although not directly related to the president, his association with the ruling Patriotic Front allowed him to run a car park and car wash business.

"I am now an orphan, I have lost a father," he said, anticipating a defeat for Lungu as he sullenly watched Hichilema's supporters dancing to loud music at a popular eatery where he charges 5 kwacha (about 30 cents) for parking spots.

Lungu's grassroots supporters control many of Zambia's parking areas, markets, bus terminals and street stalls.

Hichilema's UPND officials say it is a practice they plan to eradicate, noting the money going into the pockets of the politically well-connected should instead be channeled to government institutions.

Hichilema's supporters seem to have other ideas though. As results came in thick and fast Sunday following the tense, hard and sometimes violently fought election, his backers say they are preparing to take over these small-scale operations.

"It's our time!" said Hichilema supporter Tapiwa Chivandika, 27. "We are taking over the markets and bus stops!"

## North Carolina is child bride destination; bill could end it

By GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Known for its coastlines, mountains and the state that was "first in flight," North Carolina has also developed a more dubious reputation recently: as a regional destination for adults who want to marry children.

State lawmakers are nearing passage of a bill that could dampen the state's appeal as the go-to place to bring child brides — but would still leave it short of a national push to increase the age to 18. The proposed legislation would raise the minimum marriage age from 14 to 16 and limit the age difference between a 16-year-old and their spouse to four years.

"We will have moved the needle and made North Carolina no longer at the very bottom of the barrel of states," said Drew Reisinger, the register of deeds in Buncombe County. But, he said, "we're still going to be putting a lot of children in harm's way."

Reisinger said the county, which includes the popular tourist city of Asheville, is a destination for many adults and child brides from nearby states such as Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina and Tennessee — all of which have raised the minimum marriage age in recent years.

Two-thirds of the marriage applications in Buncombe County last year that involved at least one person under 18 originated from people who lived outside of North Carolina, Reisinger said, noting that a 49-year-old man and 17-year-old girl recently came from Kentucky seeking a license.

"North Carolina is one of the friendliest states in the South to give them safe haven," he remarked.

The state is currently one of 13 that allow children under 16 to wed, according to Unchained at Last, a nonprofit organization that advocates ending child and forced marriages in the U.S. Nine of those states have no set minimum age, the group says, relying instead on case law or a judge's ruling.

Under current North Carolina law, children as young as 14 can get married if they become pregnant and if a judge allows it. Otherwise, children can wed as young as 16 with parental permission. Alaska is the only other state whose law expressly allows marriages as young as 14.

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A study by the International Center for Research on Women, a research institute and rights group for women and children, estimates that nearly 8,800 minors were listed on marriage licenses in North Carolina from 2000-2015 — placing the state among the top five with child marriages during that period. The group said that 93% of the marriage applications it reviewed for the years 2000-2019 involved a marriage between a minor and an adult.

"It disrupts the notion that if child marriage happens, it is the Romeo-and-Juliet scenario of two 17-year-olds who just can't wait to love each other," said Lyric Thompson, one of the study's co-authors.

But change has been slow in North Carolina, where some lawmakers still remain convinced that certain marriages involving a child are still acceptable.

"It's a generational divide," said Sen. Vickie Sawyer, a Davidson County Republican. "It was older members — both Democrat and Republicans — that had those personal stories of family members who had been married and it turned out OK."

Sawyer sponsored a bill that would have raised the age to 18. Instead, a compromise measure that won unanimous support from the Senate in May and the House this week would raise the minimum marriage age to 16 with no exceptions, including pregnancy. And even those 16 or 17 would need parental permission or a judge's decision that the marriage would "serve the best interest of an underage party."

Rep. Kristin Baker of Cabarrus County, who helped shepherd the bill through the House, explained that "as a conservative Christian, I am a strong supporter of the sacrament of marriage."

"As a child psychiatrist, I am determined to protect our vulnerable youth, enhancing their chances for healthy, happy futures," she said. "I believe this bill works to achieve those ends."

The bill's proposed maximum age gap of four years partially mimics statutory rape laws that make it a serious felony for a minor to have sexual intercourse with someone who is significantly older. The legislation needs one more Senate vote before heading to Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's desk, probably this week, where it's likely to be signed into law.

Unchained at Last and the International Center for Research on Women are among groups pushing states to raise the marriage age to 18, with no exceptions. Six states have reached that standard — most recently New York last month.

The groups have enlisted the help of former child brides including Judy Wiegand of Kentucky, who appeared before a North Carolina House committee in June to encourage legislators to change the law.

"It is the responsibility of the government to protect all of the children," Wiegand told lawmakers. Wiegand was 13 when she and an older teenage boy — the father of her baby — married in the 1970s. She said that until she became an adult, the law left her largely unprotected against an abusive spouse.

Lobbyists working on changing the law say former child brides in North Carolina whom they have contacted remain too traumatized by their experiences to speak before legislators publicly. Women like Wiegand have filled in instead: "I'm speaking in favor of the bill because I feel nobody did it for me," she said.

Another woman willing to speak out is Jean Fields, who in 1965, at age 15, married a man in his 20s. Fields had three children by the time she was 21. She eventually got divorced after what she said was years of her husband's verbal abuse and belittlement.

Fields, now 72, goes by another married name but doesn't want to disclose it to spare her extended family any anguish. In a phone interview, she said that after leaving her marriage, she raised her children, returned to school and has since owned two businesses. Despite her ultimate success, however, she discourages others from marrying young.

"I regret I never had the opportunity to be a teenager," she said. \_\_\_\_

## After UN climate report, individuals seek to do their part

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

HOBOKEN, Belgium (AP) — Young urban shepherd Lukas Janssens guides his flock among the graves in Schoonselhof, one of Belgium's iconic cemeteries, knowing sheep are kinder to nature than lawnmowers.

Limiting emissions of carbon dioxide, a key contributor to climate change, and promoting biodiversity

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are two key goals of De Antwerpse Stadsherder — The Antwerp City Shepherd, Janssens' company of one human and 270 sheep.

"We won't stave it off with a flock of sheep," Janssens said of global warming. "But it is another step to build an more ecological society."

Only days after the alarming U.N. report on climate change, the message of U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres was still stuck in his head — "code red for humanity," with global warming threatening to choke the planet.

Even if Guterres's words were aimed primarily at governments, investment managers and asset owners, some citizens have known this day would come for decades.

Janssens is one of many who have taken on a very personal commitment to do something, along with those who refuse to fly, adapt their personal diet or stay off school to protest on Fridays.

"I started as a shepherd because, together with the small sheep, I wanted to commit myself to society, to have a social goal beyond the production of meat, milk or wool. I want them to be useful," he said of his flock as they grazed the steep banks of a ditch running through the massive cemetery.

None of this might matter unless nations show similar commitment when they meet in Glasgow, Scotland, in November for the COP26 UN meeting on climate change.

Participants will seek to agree to measures to try to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above levels in the late 19th century. The figure has already reached 1.1 degrees (2 degrees Fahrenheit).

Which begs the question: Are Janssens and his ilk 21st century Don Quixotes or the vanguard of a global Green revolution, that might help keep the planet from overheating?

At 24, Janssens has already seen his 3-year-old business expand rapidly as his venture has proved ripe for the climate conscious times. "It cannot get bigger any faster than this," he said. "It is more than a full-time profession."

His choice of action might not be the one taken by all, but activists say as long as people do something, they can make a difference.

"Not everyone is going to become a shepherd of course. But it is great that there is such a variety of initiatives," said bio-engineer Benjamin Clarysse of BBL, a confederation of environmental groups in northern Belgium.

And all together, he insisted, individuals might amount to more than the sum of their parts.

The challenges raised in the U.N. report are huge. It gives a guarantee that warming will get worse and insists it is "an established fact" that climate change clearly was human-caused. If that were not enough, a summer of exceptional floods, heatwaves and wildfires from the U.S. west over much of Europe and north Africa to Siberia has added to that sinking feeling. Some of the flooding came as close as 35 miles (60 kilometers) to Janssens' city pastures.

"I can imagine there was a sense of hopelessness among people," said Pim Nusselder of the Dutch Milieu Centraal, a group promoting sustainable choices on anything from energy to waste and shopping. "Yet the longer we wait, the bigger and more expensive the challenge will become."

He insisted small actions, if taken by enough people, could grow well beyond expectations, taking the population of the Netherlands as a cue. "I often get the question: What I do, is that not a tiny drop on a boiling plate? Well we have 17 million drops and if each does 10 sustainable things, you have 170 million drops on a hot plate. That is how you extinguish wildfires."

Underscoring his view, a report this year by the EU's statistical agency showed that people taking some personal action to combat climate change, whether on food or transport, has reached its highest level since 2011.

Greta Thunberg at first was a lonely teenager with her solo protests outside Sweden's parliament in Stockholm. Now, she addresses political and business leaders at U.N. conferences and is feted by world leaders like European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen — even if they stop well short of following much of her advice.

Activists warn, though, that politicians should not shrug off responsibility on the individual. "They cannot



just say that everyone should just do a little bit of the work. Depending on just the good will of people won't get you there," said bio-engineer Clarysse.

## Turkey evacuates some flooding victims; death toll hits 62

ISTANBUL (AP) — Turkey sent ships to help evacuate people and vehicles from a northern town on the Black Sea that was hard hit by flooding, as the death toll in the disaster rose Sunday to at least 62 and more people than that remained missing.

Torrential rains pounded the country's northwestern Black Sea provinces on Wednesday, causing flooding that demolished homes, severed bridges, swept away cars and rendered numerous roads unpassable. The Turkish disaster agency AFAD said 52 people were killed in the province of Kastamonu, nine in Sinop and one in Bartin.

Turkey's interior minister said 77 people were still missing in the flooding. Eight remained hospitalized.

Emergency crews across the region kept up the search for the missing amid the many buildings that have partially collapsed. The Turkish defense ministry sent two ships to evacuate people and vehicles from a town in Sinop. They also sent military vehicles that can serve as temporary bridges to help get access to areas where bridges were wiped out.

Israel's defense ministry said Sunday it had reached out to Turkey with an offer to send a search-and-rescue team.

The heavy flooding came after Turkey endured a searing heat wave and as crews in the south were taming wildfires that raced across the country's Mediterranean coast.

Climate scientists say there's little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving more extreme events — such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods and storms — as the Earth warms.

## An Afghan woman in Kabul's dashed hopes amid Taliban blitz

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Hunkering indoors and watching her country fall to the Taliban, one young woman in Afghanistan's capital of Kabul described on Sunday the anxiety, fears and dashed hopes her generation feels as embassies evacuate staff and the government all but crumbles.

But the day wasn't supposed to be like this. In the morning, Aisha Khurram made her way to Kabul University, where she is just two months shy of graduation. Before she could reach her class, the 22-year-old was turned back and told to head home.

Life in the capital of 6 million people rapidly deteriorated Sunday, just as it had across much of the country over the past several weeks amid a Taliban blitz that saw the group capture one provincial capital after another. Already, Kabul's parks were filling with internally displaced people — families who'd fled their homes as the Taliban seized control of their towns and targeted people.

Khurram, 22, said female students who'd made it to Kabul University early Sunday were told good-bye by their professors, who said they were unsure if the girls would be allowed to return and unsure whether if classes resumed that boys and girls would be allowed to study together.

"The future is at stake. Our lives are at stake," she said, speaking from her home in Kabul. Electricity in her neighborhood had been out all day as she spoke to The Associated Press over her mobile phone.

She'd hoped to serve her country after graduation, having spent the past several years studying international relations, working as a human rights defender, volunteering and even speaking at the United Nations.

"Everything I did was for a vision and the future," she said.

"The fight for our rights, the things we advocated for during the peace process, they are taking the back-seat," Khurram said. "The only thing people are thinking about is how to survive here or how to escape."

But for her and millions of others of Afghans, there is no way out. With land borders closed, visa costs

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out of reach for most and embassies shuttering, there's a feeling that "everybody turned their back on the Afghan people."

"Neither government, nor Taliban— none of them represent us," she said. "The only thing we have is our God."

Although no fighting has yet broken out in Kabul as the Taliban advances, the sound of sporadic gunfire could be heard throughout the day. Men carrying the white and black flag of the Taliban were seen walking through the city's empty streets. Residents clamored indoors following a morning rush on ATMs to withdraw savings. Some rushed to the main airport to catch flights out.

U.S. military helicopters circled overhead, evacuating personnel from the U.S. Embassy as staff destroyed important documents.

Khurram had just one word when asked to describe her feeling as Western embassies emptied: "Betrayal".

She said she believed in the prospects of U.S.-backed peace talks that had been unfolding between the government, Taliban and others in Qatar. She'd advocated strongly for the inclusion of diverse voices in those talks aimed at mapping out Afghanistan's future.

As the Taliban push deeper into Kabul, she said it's clear to her the U.S. used those talks as cover for its withdrawal.

"Right now I feel naive," Khummar said. "I'm very much sorry for my generation and myself for trusting them."

## Rural population losses add to farm and ranch labor shortage

By GRANT SCHULTE and DAVID PITT Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Rural America lost more population in the latest census, highlighting an already severe worker shortage in the nation's farming and ranching regions and drawing calls from those industries for immigration reform to help ease the problem.

The census data released last week showed that population gains in many rural areas were driven by increases in Hispanic and Latino residents, many of whom come as immigrants to work on farms or in meatpacking plants or to start their own businesses.

"We've struggled on this issue for a long time to try to come up with a more reasonable, common-sense approach," said John Hansen, president of the Nebraska Farmers Union, which is part of a group lobbying Congress for new immigration laws. Vilifying immigrants "just makes it harder to get there."

The population trend is clear in Nebraska, where only 24 of the state's 93 counties gained residents. Of those 24, just eight reported an increase in the white population, suggesting that most of the growth was driven by minorities, said David Drozd, a research coordinator for the University of Nebraska Omaha's Center for Public Affairs Research.

Drozd crunched the census data and found that Nebraska counties with the greatest racial diversity are a "who's who of where the meatpacking plants are," even though many plants are in rural areas that are often perceived as mostly white.

"In the rural areas, if you didn't have the Latino growth, employers would be struggling even more just to fill those positions," Drozd said.

In New Mexico, populations declined across 20 rural counties that stretch from the Great Plains at Oklahoma to the U.S. border with Mexico. Desperate for laborers for its annual chile harvest, the state this week pledged up to \$5 million in federal pandemic relief to subsidize wages for pickers and workers at chile-processing plants — boosting available wages as high as \$19.50 an hour.

Some Republican state legislators blamed the labor scarcity on supplemental unemployment benefits, which they say create a disincentive to work because they pay more than some low-wage jobs. Democrats see a persistent labor crisis.

The New Mexico Chile Association trade group says the industry is short about 1,350 seasonal laborers of the 3,000 workers needed.

The problem is just as bad for poultry farmers in North Carolina, where meat processors help power

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the economies of many rural counties. Half of the state's 100 counties have lost residents since 2010, the census data showed.

Bob Ford, executive director of the North Carolina Poultry Federation, predicted that labor shortages at poultry plants will only worsen as people continue to leave rural communities and migrant workers gravitate to other industries, such as building and construction.

He said higher pay for workers and better health care and housing benefits could help alleviate widespread labor shortages, but broader changes to immigration policy are probably the best solution.

The National Pork Producers Council is pushing federal lawmakers to change the H-2A visa program so that migrant workers can remain employed longer.

Bladen County, North Carolina, is home to the world's largest pig slaughterhouse, Smithfield Foods' Tar Heel plant. Between 2010 and 2020, the county's population dropped by 15.9%. Bertie County, which is home to a large Perdue Farms poultry processing facility, saw a population decrease of 15.7%.

In Kansas, some rural Republicans say Congress needs to find a practical solution.

Nancy Weeks, secretary of the Haskell County Republican Party in southwestern Kansas, said if immigrants living in the United States illegally want to move to the area and work, they should be provided a way to gain legal status "so that they pay taxes like I do."

"I don't have a problem with them coming here as long as they get legal," Weeks said. "It's the ones that don't get legal that I have a problem with."

The challenge is exacerbated in Midwestern states that already have many of the nation's lowest unemployment rates, said Al Juhnke, executive director of the Nebraska Pork Producers Association. Juhnke said his group would like to see changes that would allow seasonal immigrant workers to stay in the country longer.

"These folks buy houses. They bring their families. They go to our churches. They earn money and spend it locally," he said. "It's really a win-win-win for these communities."

In Iowa, Latino leaders eagerly awaited the census numbers in hopes that they would show population growth that would translate into more political clout for their communities and better conditions in the food production and construction industries.

Republican politicians often try to tie reforms at the U.S.-Mexican border to pathways to citizenship for workers already here, said Joe Henry, political director for the League of United Latin American Citizens local council in Des Moines. But Henry said the two issues need to be separated, and agricultural companies understand that they cannot survive without immigrants.

"They know they need that labor," he said.

Rachel Gantz, a spokeswoman for the National Pork Producers Council, said her group will continue to press Congress for changes.

"Simply put, pork producers are drawing from a rapidly diminishing pool of applicants," she said. "Our producers fear — and the recent census data suggests — that this trend is unlikely to change anytime soon."

## Mental health clinics angle for a spot in Biden budget bill

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An innovative program to help people with mental health and substance abuse problems is being primed for a major expansion as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens struggles with drug use, depression and anxiety for many Americans.

Community behavioral health clinics offer 24/7 services to catch people falling into crisis and pull them back. One tactic involves deploying peer counselors who have lived and survived their own trauma. Launched in the Obama administration, the clinics actually got scaled up under President Donald Trump. That's not typical for a government health program in politically polarized times.

Now, as Democrats haggle over the details of how to deliver on President Joe Biden's domestic agenda, some backers see that mammoth bill as the best vehicle for a major expansion of the clinics. The esti-

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mated cost is close to \$3 billion, not huge in the context of the \$3.5 trillion budget target just set by the Senate. But with many competing priorities nothing is guaranteed.

"I'm advocating that this be part of any health care package that moves in the Senate," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich. She and Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., are considered legislative godparents of the clinics, a yearslong bipartisan collaboration between a liberal stalwart and an old-school conservative.

This could be their moment. The COVID-19 pandemic is blamed for a nearly 30% rise in overdose deaths last year, and other indicators show marked increases in anxiety and depression. Young adults and adolescents are of particular concern.

"Clearly the impact of the pandemic on people's mental health was significant," said Blunt. "If you had any kind of addiction issue, it was likely to get worse as you're more likely to be isolated and have more anxiety. On every health marker I've seen, things are headed in the wrong direction."

Blunt may be in a political bind if the proposal is part of the Democrats' budget bill, unlikely to get Republican support.

The program's official name is "Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics," or CCBHCs in government-speak. Upward of 400 are already operating in more than 40 states. But the program is not yet that well known, and long-term funding is questionable.

Stabenow and Blunt would give states the option of incorporating the clinics within their Medicaid programs, securing federal matching funds at an enhanced rate.

"We are finally putting in place quality, comprehensive services for mental health and addiction that will be funded the same as physical health services," said Stabenow. In the House, Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Calif., leads the effort.

The lives of people with serious mental health problems and addiction lurch from crisis to crisis and don't align with doctors' office hours. Clinics must offer round-the-clock access to a broad range of services tailored to the client's situation in the moment. Services include medication assisted treatment for addiction but also evaluation of physical health needs.

A peer counselor at the clinics can be someone who's gone through addiction or grappled with the inner shadows that drive people into depression and isolation. They connect to clients and help them hold to a steadier course, even when upsets happen like relationship or job problems.

The clinics are nonprofits or units of local government. They place special emphasis on assisting veterans. And they coordinate with local law enforcement to help keep patients out of jail. Though government-funded, they also serve privately insured people.

The theory is that comprehensive services can help keep people out of crisis, avoiding hospitalization and incarceration, saving taxpayers money in the long run. However, a recent review by the congressional Government Accountability Office found that agency efforts to evaluate the program were hampered by data problems. For their part, state Medicaid directors say they recognize the need and see the value of comprehensive services, but Medicaid can't handle it alone.

The initial starter program in the Obama administration involved a limited Medicaid demonstration. Under Trump, funding increased via grants awarded through another health agency. Central to their financial viability, the clinics get paid up front based on estimates of their expected cost of providing services.

"Before we would only get paid for the therapy and the medication, so we certainly couldn't do anything extra to help with linking up services such as food and housing," said Elizabeth Woike-Ganga, president of BestSelf Behavioral Health in Buffalo, New York, part of the program. "And it's those social factors that often impact people with mental health problems."

BestSelf client Ron Sibley suffers from chronic serious mental illness. Now in his 50s and on disability, Sibley used to enjoy working with his hands. He did woodworking, refinished furniture, and held down an assembly line job. But the effects of his medications have diminished his manual dexterity.

Before he connected with BestSelf, Sibley said he would wind up in cycles of depression that could land him in the psychiatric ward of the hospital for weeks. But working with his peer counselor and using Zoom to join a social club sponsored by the clinic have helped him avoid that.

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"I've learned a lot about staying well," said Sibley.

Last winter, he felt himself being sucked into a downdraft. "Before, once I started to get sick, I would get sicker and sicker until I went in the hospital," Sibley said. "My peer counselor got me through it. She asked, 'Are you depressed? You seem depressed.' She got me to open up more about it."

Mona Lisa McEachin was recruited to work at BestSelf by people who knew her life story. McEachin said she had used drugs for 20 years, but turned her back on that after she was handed responsibility for caring for a young grandson. (Her grandson just graduated high school and is headed for college.)

At the clinic, McEachin said she found her life's calling being a peer mentor to others struggling with addiction.

"For the first time in my life I felt like I could take something in my past and use it to help others," said McEachin, now a trainer. "To help give someone else life is just a feeling that you can't describe.

"We're like the peanut butter to the jelly," she added.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Aug. 16, the 228th day of 2021. There are 137 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 16, 1977, Elvis Presley died at his Graceland estate in Memphis, Tennessee, at age 42.

On this date:

In 1777, American forces won the Battle of Bennington in what was considered a turning point of the Revolutionary War.

In 1812, Detroit fell to British and Native American forces in the War of 1812.

In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln issued Proclamation 86, which prohibited the states of the Union from engaging in commercial trade with states that were in rebellion — i.e., the Confederacy.

In 1954, Sports Illustrated was first published by Time Inc.

In 1962, the Beatles fired their original drummer, Pete Best, replacing him with Ringo Starr.

In 1977, a judge in New York ruled that Renee Richards, a transgender woman, had the right to compete in the U.S. Open without having to pass a sex chromosome test. (In the opening round of the Open, Richards lost to Virginia Wade in straight sets, 6-1, 6-4).

In 1978, James Earl Ray, convicted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., told a Capitol Hill hearing he did not commit the crime, saying he'd been set up by a mysterious man called "Raoul."

In 1987, 156 people were killed when Northwest Airlines Flight 255 crashed while trying to take off from Detroit; the sole survivor was 4-year-old Cecelia Cichan (SHEE'-an).

In 1991, Pope John Paul II began the first-ever papal visit to Hungary.

In 2002, terrorist mastermind Abu Nidal reportedly was found shot to death in Baghdad, Iraq; he was 65.

In 2014, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, where police and protesters repeatedly clashed in the week since a Black teenager was shot to death by a white police officer.

In 2018, Aretha Franklin, the undisputed "Queen of Soul," died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 76.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, on a Midwest bus tour, implored Iowans during a stopover in Peosta to share ideas with him about how leaders could give an economic jolt to the nation's heartland. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, meeting in Paris, called for greater economic discipline and unity among European nations but declined to take immediate financial measures.

Five years ago: Simone Biles captured her fourth gold of the Rio Games with an electric performance in the floor exercise. Political commentator and TV host John McLaughlin, 89, died in Washington, D.C.

One year ago: A riot was declared in Oregon's biggest city as protesters demonstrated again outside a law enforcement building in Portland; officers used crowd control munitions to disperse protesters who

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they said had thrown rocks, glass bottles and other objects at officers. House Democrats demanded that leaders of the U.S. Postal Service testify at an emergency oversight hearing on mail delays, amid concerns that the Trump White House was trying to undermine the agency as states expanded mail-in voting options. California's Death Valley recorded a temperature of 130 degrees amid a blistering heat wave, the third-highest temperature ever measured.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ann Blyth is 93. Actor Gary Clarke is 88. Actor Julie Newmar is 88. Actor-singer Ketty Lester is 87. Actor John Standing is 87. College Football Hall of Famer and NFL player Bill Glass is 86. Actor Anita Gillette is 85. Movie director Bruce Beresford is 81. Actor Bob Balaban is 76. Ballerina Suzanne Farrell is 76. Actor Lesley Ann Warren is 75. Rock singer-musician Joey Spampinato is 73. Actor Marshall Manesh is 71. Actor Reginald VelJohnson is 69. Former TV host Kathie Lee Gifford is 68. R&B singer J.T. Taylor is 68. Movie director James Cameron is 67. Actor Jeff Perry is 66. Rock musician Tim Farriss (INXS) is 64. Actor Laura Innes is 64. Singer Madonna is 63. Actor Angela Bassett is 63. Actor Timothy Hutton is 61. Actor Steve Carell (kuh-REHL') is 59. Former tennis player Jimmy Arias is 57. Actor-singer Donovan Leitch is 54. Actor Andy Milder is 53. Actor Seth Peterson is 51. Country singer Emily Robison (The Chicks) is 49. Actor George Stults is 46. Singer Vanessa Carlton is 41. Actor Cam Gigandet is 39. Actor Agnes Bruckner is 36. Singer-musician Taylor Goldsmith (Dawes) is 36. Actor Cristin Milioti is 36. San Diego Padres pitcher Yu Darvish is 35. Actor Shawn Pyfrom is 35. Country singer Ashton Shepherd is 35. Actor Okieriete Onaodowan is 34. Country singer Dan Smyers (Dan & Shay) is 34. NHL goalie Carey Price is 34. Actor Kevin G. Schmidt is 33. Actor Rumer Willis is 33. Actor Parker Young is 33. Rapper Young Thug is 30. Actor Cameron Monaghan is 28. Singer-pianist Greyson Chance is 24.