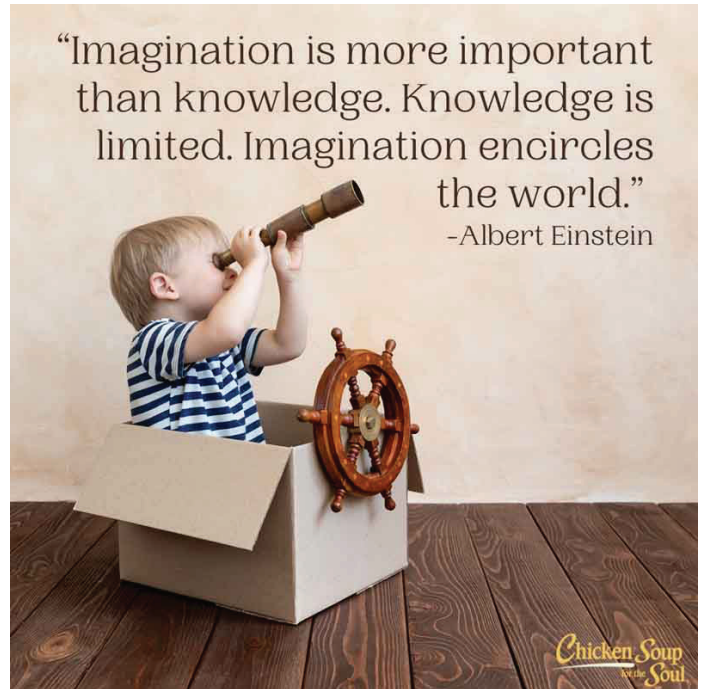


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**No outside watering today or tomorrow as the city makes the switch from the old tower to the new tower.**



## Flihs places eighth at Sioux Valley Golf Meet

The Groton Area boys golf team placed third at the Sioux Valley golf meet held in Volga. Sioux Valley placed first with 320 points followed by Roncalli with 333, Groton Area 384, Milbank 388, Flandreau 405, Sisseton 429 and Redfield 434.

Brevin Flihs was a medalist at the meet, placing eighth in a field of 44 golfers. He shot a 43 in the first nine and a 42 in the back nine for a total score of 85.

Jackson Cogley shot a 50 and a 49 for a score of 99. Carter Simon shot a 53 and a 47 for a score of 100. Logan Pearson shot a 48 and a 52 for a score of 100. Jayden Schwan shot a 60 and a 52 for a score of 112. Cole Simon shot a 61 and a 55 for score of 116.



## **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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## Higher water rates on the horizon

The Groton City Council is in the process of increasing the water rates. The city received notification that WEB Water is increasing its rate and it will affect the city by the tune of \$13,000 a year. One of the things the council agreed on was to eliminate the third rate tier where anyone using over 18,000 gallons a month would no longer receive a discounted rate. Three options were presented and the council tabled any decision so they could take the proposals home for further study.

The city's mitigation plan was also reviewed. This plan has to be approved by the council before it can qualify for FEMA funding. They include a storm shelter with bathrooms at both the park and the baseball complex, generators at most of the sanitary sewer lift stations and city hall, bury power lines through town, rebuild streets and modify part of the pool building so it can be used as a storm shelter.

Below is the city's July financial report.

July 2021

Dacotah Bank Checking Acct	\$ 2,851,200.96
General Cash	\$ 300.00
SD FIT Acct	\$ 1,452,264.47
Dacotah Bank Water CD	\$ 84,912.52
SD FIT CD	\$ 102,514.21
Cemetery Perp Care CD	\$ 32,876.69
Total	\$ 4,524,068.85

Invested In		
Cash	\$ 300.00	0.01%
Dacotah Bank	\$ 2,968,990.17	65.63%
SD Fit	\$ 1,554,778.68	34.37%
Total	\$ 4,524,068.85	100.00%

	Beginning Cash Balance	Receipts	Expenditures	Transfers	Ending Cash Balance
General	\$ 749,861.09	\$ 95,827.32	\$ 99,879.19		\$ 745,809.22
Bed, Board, Booze Tax	\$ 96,827.12	\$ 2,708.50			\$ 99,535.62
Baseball Uniforms	\$ 1,710.20				\$ 1,710.20
Airport	\$ 1,625.24				\$ 1,625.24
**Debt Service	\$ 106,550.02	\$ -			\$ 106,550.02
Cemetery Perpetual Care	\$ 34,756.69	\$ -			\$ 34,756.69
Water Tower	\$ 180,000.00				\$ 180,000.00
Water	\$ 280,584.32	\$ 271,463.82	\$ 256,371.43		\$ 295,676.71
Electric	\$ 2,379,165.45	\$ 142,431.65	\$ 94,368.26		\$ 2,427,228.84
Wastewater	\$ 394,994.35	\$ 17,548.41	\$ 3,146.02		\$ 409,396.74
Solid Waste	\$ 38,735.35	\$ 8,920.58	\$ 8,221.38		\$ 39,434.55
Family Crisis	\$ 8,443.90	\$ -	\$ 82.78		\$ 8,361.12
Sales Tax	\$ 20,066.76	\$ 11,067.74	\$ 11,367.35		\$ 19,767.15
Employment	\$ (8,734.85)	\$ -	\$ 42.70		\$ (8,777.55)
Utility Prepayments	\$ 79,817.97	\$ (881.29)	\$ -		\$ 78,936.68
Utility Deposits	\$ 82,853.01	\$ 1,000.00	\$ -		\$ 83,853.01
Other	\$ 204.61	\$ -			\$ 204.61
Totals	\$ 4,447,461.23	\$ 550,086.73	\$ 473,479.11	\$ -	\$ 4,524,068.85

**Debt to be Paid		
**2015 Refinance	\$ 2,377,849.99	by 12/1/2035
**West Sewer	\$ 58,581.35	by 10/15/2022
**RR Sewer Crossing	\$ 32,042.81	by 7/15/22
Total Debt	\$ 2,468,474.15	

## August Goose Management Take Opens August 21

PIERRE, S.D. - The 2021 Canada goose August Management Take (AMT) season dates are August 21-31 and is open for resident hunters only in those portions of Meade County south of SD Hwy 34, and Pennington County west of the Cheyenne River and the counties of Aurora, Beadle, Bon Homme, Brookings, Brown, Clark, Clay, Codington, Davison, Day, Deuel, Edmunds, Faulk, Hamlin, Hanson, Hutchinson, Grant, Jerauld, Kingsbury, Lake, Lincoln, Marshall, McCook, McPherson, Miner, Minnehaha, Moody, Roberts, Sanborn, Spink, Turner, Union and Yankton. The daily limit is 15 geese.

The August Management Take is a management tool found within the Canada goose action plan that can be implemented when the resident Canada goose population is above a designated objective.

New for this year, a public hunting option has been created to help hunters target geese during AMT and September goose seasons. Goose hunters will have an additional 5,926 acres of private lands open for public hunting from August 21-September 24 as part of the new Canada Goose Seasonal Access Program. This program connects hunters with landowners who are experiencing Canada goose damage and those that want to assist in reducing the resident Canada goose population. Hunters can find the complete list of these properties only through an online map.

Hunters can drive into the harvested hay and crop fields to both place and remove decoys after the hunt. Please be respectful and avoid driving on unharvested fields, parking on tall vegetation that could pose a fire hazard and/or causing ruts from spinning tires on wet roads.

This is a seasonal access program and there will not be signage marking these fields. All hunting access on these properties after September 24 will be by landowner permission only.

All other public hunting lands including Game Production Areas, Waterfowl Production Areas and Walk-In Areas are also open for the August Goose Management Take.

Following the August Goose Management Take, the Unit 1 Canada goose season will open on September 1. Complete information on goose hunting can be found at <https://gfp.sd.gov/goose/>.

## Schools Embracing New Innovations to Protect Students and Staff from COVID

Pinkston News Service

WASHINGTON, DC-(Pinkston News Service)- In the spring of 2020, school leaders wrestled with how to keep students learning effectively while sheltering at home. Now with students returning to the classroom, the mission has changed: keep them safe.

School districts across the country, backed by state and federal money, are investing millions of dollars to bring new procedures, equipment and technology to their buildings.

The solutions being employed range from old to new, from high-tech to basic.

Many schools have invested funds toward HVAC improvements, including updating older ventilation systems without adequate air circulation and ventilation, which experts say is critical to keeping indoor spaces safe — especially given that the primary mode of SARS-CoV-2 transmission is through microscopic, lingering airborne particles.

At the start of the pandemic, the Government Accountability Office estimated that one-third of schools nationwide needed HVAC system updates. Digital Pioneers Academy, a public charter school in Washington, D.C., spent more than half a million dollars on HVAC upgrades, air purifying systems and other improvements to make their building safe for a maximum number of returning students.

While renovating or replacing HVAC systems to ensure adequate air flow is a strong start, some companies are offering schools the option to go further.

Citadel Sciences ([citadelsciences.com](http://citadelsciences.com)), a Virginia-based health technology consultant, connects schools with next-generation air purifying ionizers which eliminate airborne pathogens while cutting school's energy consumption. They also offer technology that monitors the air quality of indoor environments in real time to ensure that HVAC systems are properly working to reduce the risk of airborne transmission, or to warn occupants if there is a threat.

"Schools need a paradigm shift to return to the classroom," said Citadel Sciences Chairman Jim Traficant. "The key is indoor air quality. Schools can now implement layers of air scrubbing protection to mitigate transmission risk while we're together, lower energy costs and use sensors to see indoor air quality on phones and computer displays — and schools can access these air-cleaning layers for free with federal ESSER funds."

Other providers are helping schools launch procedures to protect students beyond the standard physical precautions of masking and social distancing. AM LLC ([amllc.co](http://amllc.co)) offers local public health officials and school administrators the logistics and operational expertise they need to manage extra vaccine distribution, regular testing programs and robust contact tracing.

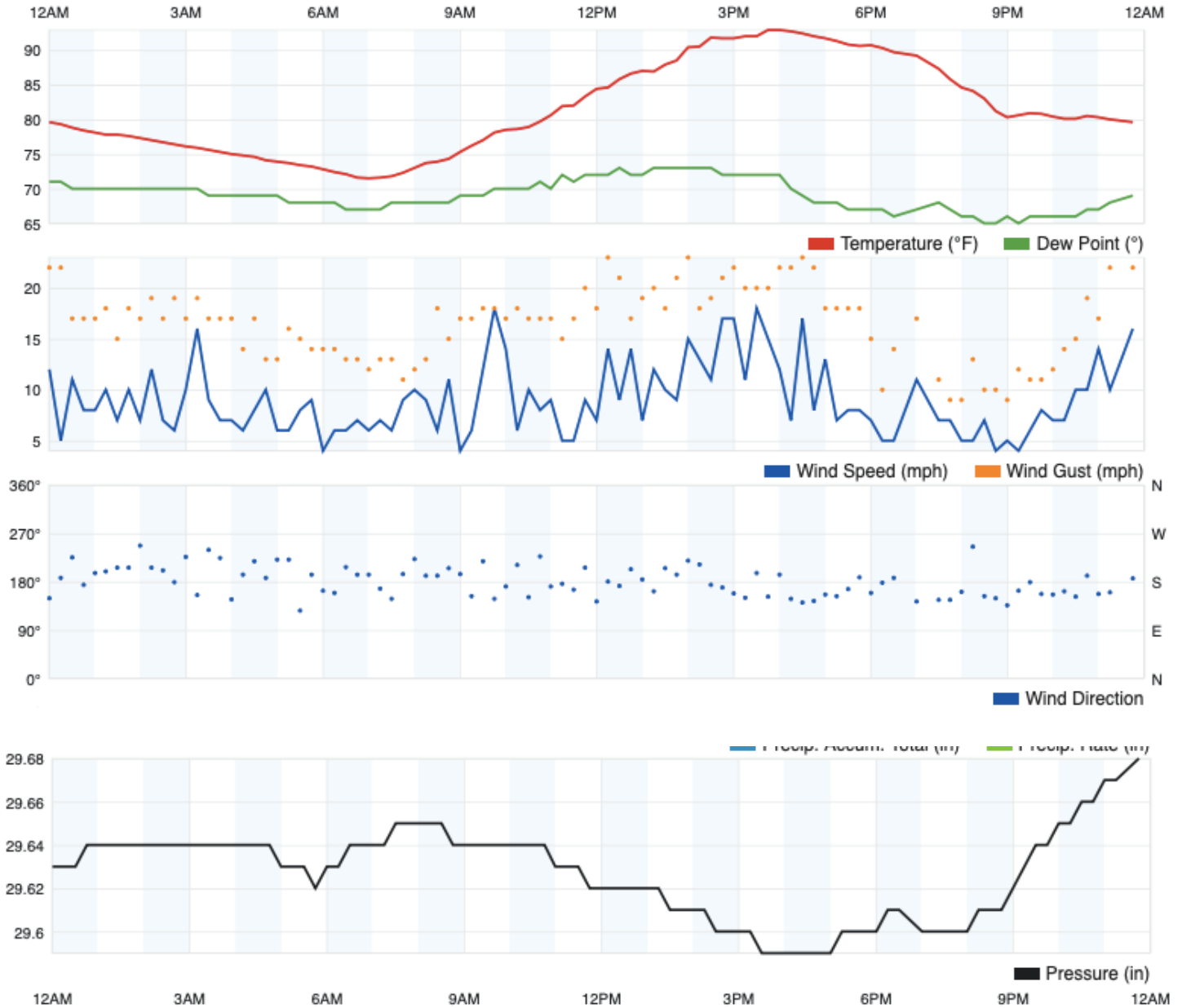
"Most local leaders know what they need to do to protect students, but in many cases don't have the operational support to make it happen," said AM LLC Chief Government Affairs Officer Steven Crim. "We strive to bridge the gap between the paper guidelines and functional protection."



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
Hot and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Hot	Slight Chance T-storms then Chance T-storms	T-storms
High: 96 °F	Low: 72 °F	High: 94 °F	Low: 67 °F	High: 80 °F

**Timing Out The Precipitation Chances Through Next Tuesday**  
**Note: The Highest Probabilities Line Up From Thursday Evening Through Friday Night**

## Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	8/18		8/19				8/20				8/21				8/22				8/23				8/24			
	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	0	0	0	1	7	20	54	67	77	77	53	38	27	14	14	20	25	40	40	31	20	23	23	23	22	22
Britton	0	0	0	1	5	17	47	74	82	82	59	44	32	17	14	23	27	43	46	46	25	25	28	28	28	28
Eagle Butte	6	19	9	8	38	85	85	63	60	60	41	30	16	13	22	29	32	32	28	13	12	16	16	14	11	9
Eureka	0	5	6	5	15	43	66	66	72	72	50	35	23	13	19	24	30	36	36	20	17	21	22	22	19	19
Gettysburg	0	4	6	6	18	51	64	64	66	66	45	32	18	10	19	25	28	33	33	18	15	18	18	17	13	12
Kennebec	0	3	5	2	18	67	77	77	63	63	45	30	14	9	14	24	25	32	32	19	15	17	17	14	11	10
McIntosh	7	20	8	9	34	83	83	76	63	63	43	29	20	15	26	35	37	37	31	13	16	21	21	21	17	15
Milbank	0	0	0	0	3	7	25	59	77	77	62	48	32	18	13	18	19	34	44	44	26	28	28	27	26	31
Miller	0	0	0	1	8	30	65	65	70	70	49	35	19	9	13	20	23	34	34	27	17	20	20	19	14	14
Mobridge	3	10	7	6	23	77	77	66	66	66	44	31	19	12	21	29	32	32	32	14	15	19	19	18	16	16
Murdo	2	9	11	4	35	84	84	71	59	59	43	30	13	10	16	24	27	30	30	15	12	14	14	13	9	10
Pierre		5	7	4	26	80	80	64	62	62	44	31	15	10	17	27	27	30	30	16	13	15	15	13	10	10
Redfield	0	0	0	1	6	22	58	66	74	74	51	35	23	11	13	17	22	36	36	27	19	22	22	19	17	19
Sisseton	0	0	0	0	3	10	32	64	78	78	59	45	31	18	12	18	21	39	44	44	26	29	29	26	27	29
Watertown	0	0	0	0	3	9	32	61	74	74	58	43	27	15	12	15	18	36	40	40	23	26	26	23	22	26
Wheaton					3	8	24	59	78	78	64	48	35	20	13	19	20	38	46	46	29	30	30	28	30	33

\* Table values in %  
 \*\*Created: 4 am CDT Wed 8/18/2021  
 \*\*\*Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

The heat and humidity will continue today and Thursday. Once a cold front moves through the region, conditions will become notably cooler with less humidity for the weekend. The best chances for widespread rainfall are currently aligning with Thursday night through Friday night.

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## Today in Weather History

August 18, 1936: A tornado moved east, ending southeast of Gettysburg. A farmhouse and four barns were destroyed near Gorman, in Potter County. Property damage was estimated at \$20,000.

August 18, 1938: A tornado destroyed a barn, unroofed a gym, and damaged other buildings near Stephen, in Hyde County. The funnel moved northeast then curved to the northwest. There were two other tornadoes on this day. One moved northeast from near Worley and Broadland in Beadle County producing estimated F3 damage. The other was an estimated F2 and also started off in Beadle County and moved northeast into Kingsbury County. This storm injured three people.

August 18, 1983: High winds up to 80 mph caused extensive damage to trees, structures, and cars, in Lyman, Hyde, Faulk, and Brown Counties. In Presho, several homes lost their roofs. Hay bales were scattered, metal siding was ripped from outbuildings, and a ballpark lost three large fence sections. Gusty winds up to 75 mph were recorded at Ordway, in Brown County, causing damage to a mobile home. Two hangers at the Aberdeen airport received extensive damage, with roofs and doors torn off.

August 18, 2009: Numerous thunderstorms developed along a stationary front and trained over the same locations producing very heavy rains along with large hail. Nickel size hail falling for several minutes piled up to 6 to 8 inches deep near Harrold in Hughes County. Massive rains of 2 to nearly 5 inches resulted in the flash flooding of numerous roads. Several of the streets were washed out. Some rainfall amounts included 3.05 inches at Warner, 3.15 inches southwest of Bristol, 4.40 inches in Webster, and 4.50 inches east of Warner.

1925 - During the late morning hours a severe hailstorm struck southeastern Iowa completely destroying crops along a path six to ten miles wide and 75 miles long. The hail also injured and killed poultry and livestock, and caused a total of 2.5 million dollars damage. The hailstorm flattened fields of corn to such an extent that many had to leave their farms in search of other work. It was one of the worst hailstorms of record for the nation. (The Weather Channel)

1931: The Yangtze River in China peaks during a horrible flood that kills 3.7 million people directly and indirectly over the next several months. This flood was perhaps the worst natural disaster of the 20th century.

1983 - Hurricane Alicia ravaged southeastern Texas. The hurricane caused more than three billion dollars property damage, making it one of the costliest hurricanes in the history of the U.S. Just thirteen persons were killed, but 1800 others were injured. The hurricane packed winds to 130 mph as it crossed Galveston Island, and spawned twenty-two tornadoes in less than 24 hours as it made landfall. (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1987 - Thirteen cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Orlando FL with a reading of 98 degrees, and Portland ME with a high of 94 degrees. Newark NJ reached 90 degrees for the thirty-sixth time of the year, their second highest total of record. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Twenty-two cities, from the Carolinas to the Upper Ohio Valley, reported record high temperatures for the date, pushing the total number of daily record highs since the first of June above the 1100 mark. Afternoon highs of 102 degrees at Greensboro NC and 105 degrees at Raleigh NC equalled all-time records. Evening thunderstorms in Montana produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Scobey. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms over the Middle Atlantic Coast Region and the Upper Ohio Valley produced torrential rains in eastern Virginia during the late morning and afternoon hours. Totals ranged up to twelve inches at Yorktown. Williamsburg VA was deluged with 10.78 inches of rain between 6 AM and 10 AM, with 6.72 inches reported in just two hours. Flash flooding caused nearly twelve million dollars damage in Accomack County VA. Early evening thunderstorms in the Central High Plains Region produced walnut size hail and wind gusts to 80 mph around Casper WY. Thunderstorms produced locally heavy rains in the Yellowstone Park area, causing fifteen mudslides. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



# Groton Daily Independent

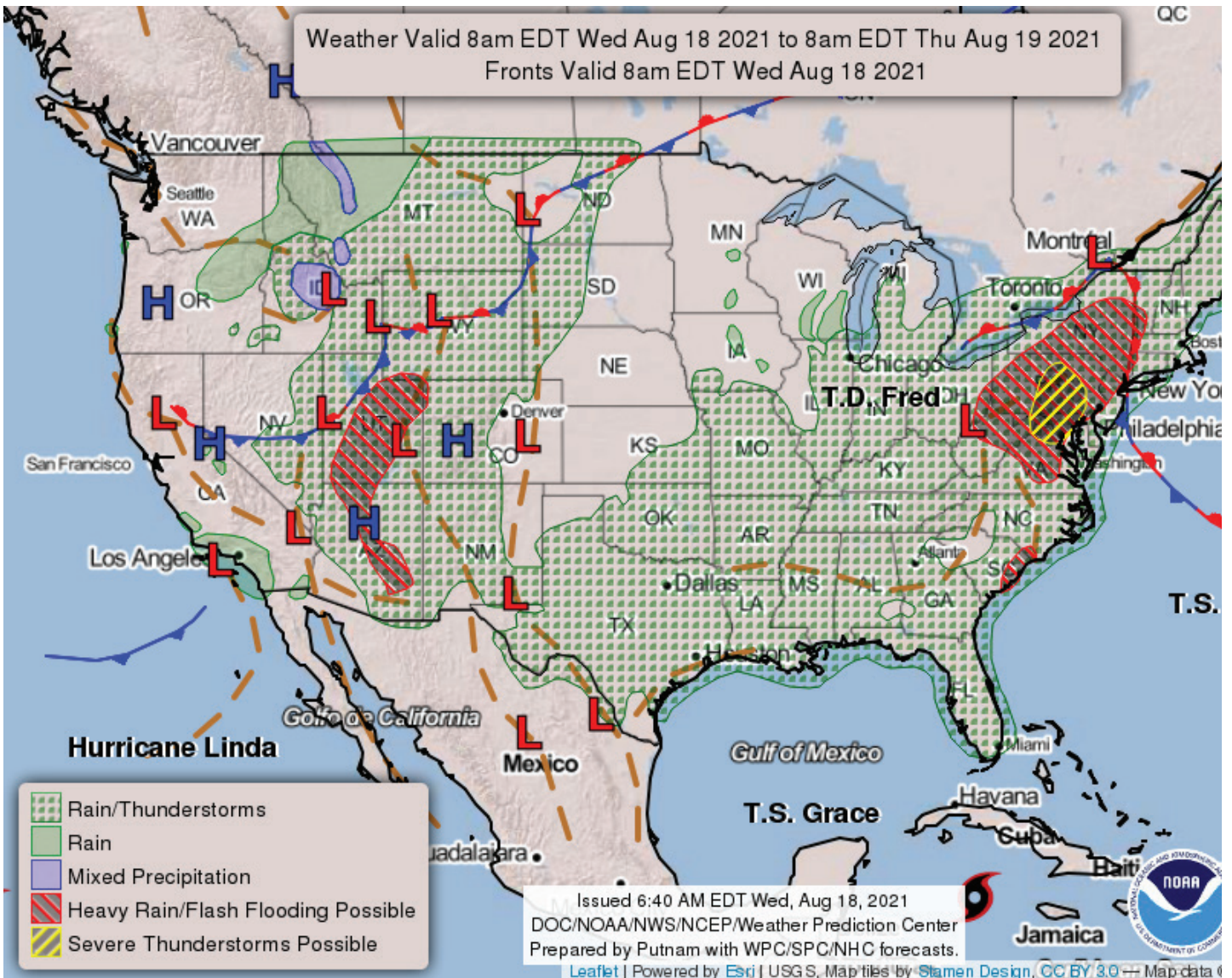
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 93 °F at 3:53 PM**  
**Low Temp: 72 °F at 6:48 AM**  
**Wind: 24 mph at 4:49 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 109° in 1959**  
**Record Low: 38° in 2002**  
**Average High: 83°F**  
**Average Low: 56°F**  
**Average Precip in Aug.: 1.22**  
**Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12**  
**Average Precip to date: 15.32**  
**Precip Year to Date: 8.39**  
**Sunset Tonight: 8:36 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:40 a.m.**





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## NO PLACE TO HIDE

It looked old and worn and held together with many stitches. It didn't look like much of a doll but Missy loved it more than anything in her world. It was stuffed with dry beans. Each day she would play with it and every night she would sleep with it. It brought her peace and pleasure, companionship and comfort.

One day while her brother was building a model airplane, she accidentally bumped into it and knocked it to the floor. Looking at the bits and pieces that were scattered before him, he shouted angrily, "Look what you did! You just wait Missy - I'll get even with you!"

The next day Missy and her Mom went shopping. As soon as they left, he found her doll, took it outside and buried in his mother's rose garden. Smiling to himself, he said, "She'll never find that old doll now!"

When Missy returned home and could not find her doll she burst into tears and ran to her room. When asked, Darren denied knowing anything about the doll, claiming, "She just left it some place. It'll turn up." And it did.

Mom was cutting some roses for the dinner table that evening and discovered an arm from the doll sticking out of the dirt. She asked her son, "Did you do this?" Looking at the doll he said, "Yes, Mom, but I should have known better."

It's that way with our sins. We try to cover them - but along comes God and uncovers them. "You spread out our sins before You - our secret sins - and You see them all." Try as we may, nothing can be hidden from God. How grateful we are, that He not only will forgive us, but watching and wanting and waiting patiently for us to do so.

Prayer: We only fool ourselves, Father, if we think we can fool You. Forgive us of our foolishness as we call on You for forgiveness and salvation. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 90:8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

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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

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

03-06-16-38-56, Mega Ball: 24, Megaplier: 3

(three, six, sixteen, thirty-eight, fifty-six; Mega Ball: twenty-four; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$242 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$274 million

### Nine arrested in sex trafficking investigation at Sturgis

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — Nine men have been arrested as the result of a sex trafficking sting operation during the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

The South Dakota U.S. Attorney's Office said several law enforcement agencies were involved in the operation that began Aug. 6 and ended Aug. 12.

The men range in age from 22 to 54. Eight of the men are from South Dakota and are charged with attempted enticement of a minor using the internet. The charge carries a minimum sentence of 10 years in prison upon conviction.

One man from New York is charged with attempted commercial sex trafficking of a minor. That charge carries a minimum sentence of 15 years in prison upon conviction.

### Man shot, killed in central Sioux Falls; suspect arrested

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A 19-year-old man was shot and killed after an argument with another man in central Sioux Falls early Tuesday, police said.

Police were dispatched to the 200 block of N. French Avenue at 12:30 a.m. for a report of shots fired.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens said an 18-year-old man fired several shots at the victim after "some type of argument."

The victim's mother was in the home at the time of the shooting, KELO-TV reported.

The suspect fled the scene and was arrested about two hours later. Charges were pending early Tuesday.

### Witness to MyPillow CEO incident says it was no 'attack'

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A witness to an incident last week involving MyPillow chief executive Mike Lindell says he saw no reason for Lindell to claim he was attacked at a South Dakota hotel.

Lindell, who was in Sioux Falls hosting an election fraud symposium, told The Associated Press on Tuesday his encounter with a man seeking a photo late Wednesday left him doubled over in pain. Lindell said he has filed a report of an assault with the Sioux Falls Police Department and is conducting his own investigation into how the photo-seeker could have shoved an object between his ribs, leaving him unable to move his right arm.

However, the conference attendee who was taking the photo, Jeff Buongiorno, said, "There was no attack."

Buongiorno, a Republican congressional candidate in Florida, said he and two other conference attendees were "shooting the breeze" at the hotel bar late Wednesday when they spotted Lindell making his way through the lobby. They approached him and asked if they could take a photo with Lindell, a businessman who has become an ally of former President Donald Trump.



As Buongiorno finished taking the photos, another man Buongiorno did not know approached the group and asked if he too could have a photo with Lindell. Buongiorno offered to snap the photos with the man's phone.

Lindell's recounting of the incident last week matched much of Buongiorno's description, except that Lindell said the second man wrapped his arm around him and shoved an object into his side. He pointed to a photo that showed the man had a yellow object in his hands.

"It happened pretty fast, but the guy knew what he was doing," Lindell said, adding that it was "one of the worst attacks on me I've ever had."

However, it appeared Lindell waited until Thursday to file a police report after the Sioux Falls Police Department sent an officer to meet with Lindell. He told the conservative talk show FlashPoint last week that he believed the man used his finger. But this week he also said he was checked by medics for puncture wounds.

Buongiorno said nothing he saw could be described as an attack that would leave Lindell in pain. He added Lindell showed no indication anything was amiss as he walked to the glass elevator and rode it to the 6th floor.

Lindell defended his account, saying Buongiorno would not have seen the assault from where he was standing to take the photo. Lindell added that he was scared that saying anything would have escalated the situation and that he doubled over in pain as soon as the elevator doors closed.

Buongiorno, who said he supported "law and order," was concerned Lindell's claim would take up police time and resources. He was also worried that the photo-seeker was falsely accused.

The Sioux Falls police said last week it was investigating the assault report. Police spokesman Sam Clemens has declined to identify the victim, citing Marsy's Law, a state constitutional amendment that protects crime victims.

Lindell announced the symposium in July, saying he hoped hundreds of "cyber-forensics experts" would attend and back up his claims that voting machines were hacked to flip votes for Trump to President Joe Biden in 2020.

Almost all of the legal challenges casting doubt on the outcome of the election have been dismissed or withdrawn and many claims of fraud debunked. State and federal election officials have said there's no evidence of widespread fraud.

But Lindell said he has not given up on trying to prove the election was fraudulent, casting his effort as a patriotic quest to prove the election was the victim of a cyber attack.

"When you attack an election, you never get your country back again ever," he said.

## Attorney general blocks prosecution in concealed carry case

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — The office of Attorney General Austin Knudsen asked a county attorney to dismiss two concealed-carry charges filed against a Helena man accused of assaulting employees who asked him to wear a face covering while entering a restaurant last year during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Montana State News Bureau reported.

The county attorney refused, saying there was probable cause to move forward. Knudsen's office is now handling the case and has started settlement negotiations, court records said. A trial had been set for Aug. 30.

In November 2020, Rodney Robert Smith, 45, was charged with felony assault with a weapon and misdemeanor assault after he allegedly showed a holstered firearm to employees at a Helena restaurant who asked him to comply with the statewide mask requirement or leave.

Smith was also charged with two misdemeanors on suspicion of carrying a concealed weapon and doing so in a prohibited place, in this case a place where alcoholic beverages are consumed. Smith did not have a concealed weapons permit, court records said.

Witnesses told Helena police that Smith knocked over several glasses of water, shoved one employee and pinned another one against a wall.

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"The defendant then exposed a concealed handgun on his belt, patted the firearm, and made a statement to the effect of, 'I'm going to get you,'" court documents state.

Smith's attorney, Palmer Hoovestall, said Tuesday they have witnesses who would testify that the restaurant's manager initiated the altercation and put Smith in a headlock.

Hoovestall also said allegations that Smith exposed a handgun "didn't happen" and that the confrontation wasn't a disagreement over the mask mandate.

Documents obtained by the Montana State News Bureau show Lewis and Clark County Attorney Leo Gallagher received a letter from the Attorney General's Office on July 26 asking Gallagher to deliver them all the files in Smith's case, noting the office can "exercise supervisory authority over county attorneys in all matters pertaining to the duties of their offices."

After reviewing the case, general counsel Derek Oestreicher said the Attorney General's Office would not prosecute the case, and directed Gallagher to dismiss the concealed-carry charges no later than Aug. 12. Gallagher responded stating there was probable cause to move forward.

"I can not in good conscience move to dismiss those counts and comply with my oath of office," Gallagher wrote in an email obtained via a public records request. Gallagher then asked the attorney general's office to take over the case.

When the Montana State News Bureau asked spokespeople with the Attorney General's Office why they were handling the case, they said Gallagher had requested it, omitting Gallagher's opposition to dismissing the charges.

Gallagher told the Montana State News Bureau last week that the process "doesn't feel good."

"I've been practicing since 1978, and I've never seen it," he said.

Last week, Hoovestall filed an unopposed motion to delay the trial due to the settlement negotiations that were expected to be successful.

Department of Justice spokesperson Kyler Nerison said Monday the office was unable to comment further on the ongoing negotiations.

Earlier this year, Montana's Republican-controlled Legislature passed a law making it legal for people to carry concealed firearms for self defense without permits in the same places where people can openly carry guns. Knudsen, a Republican, testified in favor of the bill.

Hoovestall said Tuesday the change in the law could be the basis for a motion to acquit Smith of the concealed carry charges. If the charges aren't dismissed, Hoovestall said he would take the case to trial, stating Smith is "not going to plead guilty to a felony assault when it didn't happen."

Hoovestall said he did not know how the Attorney General's Office got involved in the case.

While awaiting trial, Smith was not allowed to possess firearms or travel without the court's permission.

He was granted court permission to travel to South Dakota in June for training with his Montana Army National Guard unit, where he is a military policeman. Smith was also allowed to travel to Washington for up to two weeks in January to provide security for President Joe Biden's inauguration.

## Police seek woman for questioning in fatal shooting

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Police in Rapid City are working to identify a person of interests in a homicide investigation.

Authorities have already made one arrest in the fatal shooting of 20-year-old Austin Freeman last Friday. A 31-year-old man is being held on probable murder and drug charges.

Investigators said they are also looking for woman in connection with the case.

Police Capt. James Johns said it appears Freeman was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was an innocent victim of violence associated with drugs.

## The Latest: Afghanistan's Karzai meets senior faction leader

The Associated Press undefined

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan's former president has met with a senior leader of a powerful Taliban faction who was once jailed and whose group has been listed by the U.S. as a terrorist network.

Former President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, a senior official in the ousted government met with Anas Haqqani as part of preliminary meetings that a spokesman for Karzai said would facilitate eventual negotiations with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the top Taliban political leader.

The U.S. branded the Haqqani network a terrorist group in 2012, and its involvement in a future government could trigger international sanctions.

The Taliban have pledged to form an "inclusive, Islamic government," although skeptics point to its past record of intolerance for those not adhering to its extreme interpretations of Islam.

### MORE ON THE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN:

- Taliban announce 'amnesty,' urge women to join government
- Taliban encounter Afghan cities remade in their absence
- US agencies scrub websites to protect Afghans left behind
- Taliban take over Afghanistan: What we know and what's next
- Biden: Afghan chaos 'gut-wrenching' but stands by withdrawal
- Billions spent on Afghan army ultimately benefited Taliban
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/afghanistan>

### HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

BEIJING — China says it is waiting for the establishment of an "open, inclusive, and widely representative" government in Afghanistan before it decides on the issue of recognition.

"If we are going to recognize a government, we will have to wait till the government is formed," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on Wednesday.

"Only after that, will we come to the question of diplomatic recognition," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

Zhao reiterated Beijing's hopes for a "a smooth transition" following the Taliban's sweep to power to avoid further violence or a humanitarian disaster.

"China will continue to support the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan and provide assistance to Afghanistan's economic and social development within its capacity," Zhao said.

The Taliban must make good on its commitment not to give shelter to terrorists or allow foreign elements to operate within its territory, singling out the East Turkestan Islamic Movement that Beijing blames for attacks in its northwestern region of Xinjiang, which shares a narrow, remote border with Afghanistan.

Beijing long called for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan, but has condemned what it calls the "hasty" retreat of American forces for the current instability.

China has sought good relations with both the former Afghan government and the Taliban, hosting the group's top political leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, for talks with Foreign Minister Wang Yi late last month.

MADRID — The European Union's top diplomat says that it is necessary to talk with the Taliban to secure the evacuation of foreign nationals and those Afghans who have worked with NATO forces.

"I said that we must speak with them and some people found that scandalous," Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, told Spanish National Radio on Wednesday. "But how are we supposed to open a safe passage to the airport if we are not speaking with those who have taken control of Kabul?"

Borrell said his main concern is the immediate situation of those needing help to immediately leave the country for fear of reprisals.



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"We have seen images of crowds on the landing strips that make the operation of the airport difficult. We hope that the situation can be controlled and that our planes can land and take off, but to be frank, I don't know," Borrell said. "Where we need to act is not so much in the airport itself, which the American army has under its control, but in how to get those who need to leave to the airport."

"My responsibility is to identify and help move those who have worked with us," Borrell said. "(But) that does not exclude the EU from opening its arms to other people."

"What has happened in Afghanistan is a defeat for the entire western world and we all must have the courage to accept that," he said.

**ISLAMABAD** -- Pakistan is issuing visas upon arrival to all diplomats, foreigners and journalists who want to leave Kabul over security concerns.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said on Wednesday that since Sunday, 900 foreigners including diplomats and staff working for international organizations have arrived in Pakistan from Kabul via air travel.

He said transit visas were also being issued to foreigners upon arrival from Afghanistan at airports and land crossings so that they could travel on to their home countries.

Ahmed said hundreds of Pakistanis and Afghans crossed into Pakistan from two key land border crossings in recent days.

He said all Pakistanis who want to leave Afghanistan will be brought back over the coming two days.

**BERLIN** — Germany will send up to 600 army personnel to Kabul to help evacuate German citizens and former Afghan local embassy staff.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's Cabinet on Wednesday okayed the mission which started Monday. Germany's Bundestag Parliament will have to vote on the military mission as well which is likely going to happen next week.

Every armed foreign deployment of the German army has to be approved by parliament in Germany.

Normally this has to happen before the start of the deployment but in this case, because of the imminent danger German citizens were exposed to in Afghanistan, Cabinet and parliament were also allowed to approve the mission in retrospect, German news agency dpa reported.

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — Afghanistan's central bank governor says that the country has some \$9 billion in reserves abroad and not in physical cash inside the country.

Ajmal Ahmady, the head of Afghanistan's Central Bank, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday that the majority of that — some \$7 billion — is being held in U.S. Federal Reserve bonds, assets and gold.

Ahmady says Afghanistan's holding of physical U.S. dollars "is close to zero" as the country did not receive a planned cash shipment amid the Taliban offensive that swept the country last week.

"The next shipment never arrived," he wrote. "Seems like our partners had good intelligence as to what was going to happen."

He noted the lack of U.S. dollars likely will see the afghani depreciate and inflation rise, hurting the poor in the country. Getting access to those reserves likely will be complicated by the U.S. government considering the Taliban a sanctioned terror group.

The "Taliban won militarily - but now have to govern," he wrote. "It is not easy."

**LONDON** — The British government says it will welcome up to 5,000 Afghan refugees this year, and a total of 20,000 Afghans will be offered a way to settle in the U.K. in the coming years.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said late Tuesday: "We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have worked with us to make Afghanistan a better place over the last 20 years."

The new Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme will focus on women, children, and others who have been forced to flee their home or face threats of persecution from the Taliban.

Opposition parties have criticized the plan for not going far enough to make a real difference. Nick

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Thomas-Symonds, of the Labour Party, said the proposal did not meet the scale of the challenge.

British lawmakers are returning to Parliament Wednesday for an emergency session to discuss Afghanistan. Johnson is set to tell lawmakers there must be an immediate increase in aid to Afghanistan to avert a humanitarian crisis erupting in the country following the Taliban's seizure of power.

**ANKARA, Turkey** — Turkey has denied reports claiming that it has given up on plans to continue running Kabul's airport, saying it was awaiting the results of ongoing talks between the Taliban and several Afghan politicians.

"We hope that they reach an agreement through peaceful means," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told Hurriyet newspaper in comments that were printed on Wednesday. "After these (talks) take place, we can talk about these things."

Turkey, a NATO member whose some 600 troops provided security at the international airport in Kabul, has proposed to continue running and protecting the airport following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. The Taliban has said it wants all NATO troops to leave Afghanistan.

Cavusoglu meanwhile, defended the government's decision to engage in talks with the Taliban, following criticism from opposition parties.

"This does not mean that we espouse their ideology. Everyone is being pragmatic," he said.

The minister also came under criticism for saying the government welcomes "positive messages" from the Taliban.

"We said, 'We welcome their messages,' but we said that we are cautious, that is, we should see these (messages) applied in practice," Cavusoglu said.

**ISLAMABAD** — The British prime minister and German chancellor have called their Pakistani counterpart about the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan, the foreign ministry said in an overnight statement.

It was their first contact with Imran Khan since the Taliban took control of the country Sunday.

According to Pakistan's foreign ministry, Khan told Germany's Angela Merkel that "an inclusive political settlement was the best way forward" for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan.

In a separate statement, the ministry said Khan also received a call from the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Khan passed along a similar message.

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — The Taliban have blown up the statue of a Shiite militia leader who had fought against them during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s.

The statue depicted a militia leader killed by the Taliban in 1996, when the Islamic militants seized power from rival warlords.

Abdul Ali Mazari was a champion of Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara minority, Shiites who were persecuted under the Sunni Taliban's earlier rule.

The statue stood in the central Bamyan province, where the Taliban infamously blew up two massive 1,500-year-old statues of Buddha carved into a mountain in 2001. The Taliban claimed the Buddhas violated Islam's prohibition on idolatry.

**CANBERRA, Australia** — Australia has evacuated the first 26 people, including Australian and Afghan citizens, from Kabul since the Taliban overran the Afghan capital, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday.

An Air Force C-130 Hercules transport aircraft landed at an Australian military base in the United Arab Emirates with the 26 who included a foreign official working for an international agency, Morrison said. The remainder were Australians and Afghans.

"This was the first of what will be many flights, subject to clearance and weather and we do note that over the back end of this week, there is some not too favorable weather forecast," Morrison said.

Two Hercules and two larger C-17A Globemaster transport aircraft will make further evacuation flights.

Australia plans to evacuate 130 Australians and their families plus an undisclosed number Afghans who

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have worked for Australian soldiers and diplomats in roles such as interpreters.

Australia's goal is to evacuate 600 people, according to media reports. Morrison did not provide a number. "Our goal is as many as we can, as safely and as quickly as we can," he said.

## Taliban destroy statue of foe, stoking fear over their rule

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

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban have blown up the statue of a Shiite militia leader who fought against them during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, according to photos circulating on Wednesday, sowing further doubt about their claims to have become more moderate.

The insurgents' every action in their sudden sweep to power is being watched closely. They insist they have changed and won't impose the same draconian restrictions they did when they last ruled Afghanistan, all but eliminating women's rights, carrying out public executions and banning television and music.

They also promised not to seek revenge against those who have opposed them.

But many Afghans remain deeply skeptical, and thousands are racing to the airport and borders to flee the country. Many others are hiding inside their homes, fearful after prisons and armories were emptied during the insurgents' blitz across the country.

On Wednesday, groups of fighters carrying long guns patrolled a well-to-do neighborhood of the capital, Kabul, that is home to many embassies as well as mansions of the Afghan elite. The Taliban have promised to maintain security, but many Afghans are as afraid of them as they are of potential chaos.

In a rare, early show of dissent, dozens of people gathered in the eastern city of Jalalabad and raised the Afghan national flag in an anti-Taliban demonstration, according to Salim Ahmad, a local resident. He said the Taliban fired in the air to disperse the crowd. There were no immediate reports of any casualties.

The insurgents have raised their own flag — a white banner with Islamic inscriptions — in the territories they have seized.

As Afghans and the international community look to see if the Taliban will make good on their promises, photos circulated on social media of the destroyed statue. It depicted Abdul Ali Mazari, a militia leader killed by the Taliban in 1996, when the Islamic militants seized power from rival warlords. Mazari was a champion of Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara minority, Shiites who were persecuted under the Sunni Taliban's earlier rule.

The statue stood in the central Bamyan province, where the Taliban infamously blew up two massive 1,500-year-old statues of Buddha carved into a mountain in 2001, shortly before the U.S.-led invasion that drove them from power. The Taliban claimed the Buddhas violated Islam's prohibition on idolatry.

Another Taliban promise being closely watched is their vow to prevent Afghanistan from again being used as a base for planning terrorist attacks. That was enshrined in a 2020 peace deal with the Trump administration that paved the way for the drawdown of American troops, the last of whom are supposed to leave at the end of the month.

When the Taliban were last in power they sheltered Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida while they planned the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. U.S. officials fear al-Qaida and other groups could reconstitute themselves in Afghanistan now that the Taliban are back in power.

The Taliban have pledged to form an "inclusive, Islamic government" and have been holding talks with former President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, a senior official in the ousted government. Mohammad Yusuf Saha, a spokesman for Karzai, said preliminary meetings with Taliban officials would facilitate eventual negotiations with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the top Taliban political leader.

Photos circulating online Wednesday showed Karzai and Abdullah meeting with Anas Haqqani, a senior leader in a powerful Taliban faction. The U.S. branded the Haqqani network a terrorist group in 2012, and its involvement in a future government could trigger international sanctions.

Amid the uncertainty, thousands of Afghans have tried to flee the country in recent days, and the U.S. and its allies have struggled to manage a chaotic withdrawal from the country. The Taliban took over the civilian side of the Kabul international airport on Tuesday and have used force to try to control the crowds.



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Hundreds of people were outside the airport early Wednesday. The Taliban demanded to see documents before allowing the rare passenger inside. Many of the people outside did not appear to have passports, and each time the gate opened even an inch, dozens tried to push through. The Taliban fired occasional warning shots to disperse them.

The U.S. Embassy has meanwhile relocated to the military side of the airport, where it is coordinating the airlift of diplomats, foreigners and Afghans who worked with the Americans and now fear reprisal.

The British government said it will welcome up to 5,000 Afghan refugees this year, and a total of 20,000 Afghans will be offered a way to settle in the U.K. in the coming years.

"We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have worked with us to make Afghanistan a better place over the last 20 years," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said late Tuesday.

The head of Afghanistan's Central Bank meanwhile said the country's supply of physical U.S. dollars is "close to zero." Afghanistan has some \$9 billion in reserves, Ajmal Ahmady tweeted, but most is held outside the country, with some \$7 billion held in U.S. Federal Reserve bonds, assets and gold.

Ahmady said the country did not receive a planned cash shipment amid the Taliban offensive.

"The next shipment never arrived," he wrote. "Seems like our partners had good intelligence as to what was going to happen."

He said the lack of U.S. dollars will likely lead to a depreciation of the local currency, the afghani, hurting the country's poor. Afghans have been lining up outside ATM machines for days, with many pulling out their life savings.

Ahmady said the Taliban will struggle to access the country's reserves because of international sanctions. The "Taliban won militarily — but now have to govern," he wrote. "It is not easy."

## Hong Kong police arrest 4 from university student union

HONG KONG (AP) — Four members of a Hong Kong university student union were arrested Wednesday for allegedly advocating terrorism by paying tribute to a person who stabbed a police officer and then killed himself, police said.

Police arrested four men between 18 and 20 years old who were committee members and members of the student council at the University of Hong Kong, said Li Kwai-wah, senior superintendent of the police national security division. He said the arrests were in relation to a council meeting that "promoted terrorism."

Those arrested included the president and council chairman, who were among more than 30 students who attended a meeting last month at which they passed a motion to mourn the "sacrifice" of the attacker, local media reported.

The arrests are the latest use of a strict national security law that Beijing imposed on semi-autonomous Hong Kong last year after months of anti-government protests in 2019. The demonstrations often led to clashes between demonstrators and police.

Authorities have said the man who stabbed the police officer in the shoulder on July 1 before killing himself had material in his home decrying the national security law as well as notes in which he declared his hatred for the police.

Police previously cautioned people against mourning the attacker, saying it was "no different from supporting terrorism."

The student union withdrew its motion mourning the attacker after facing criticism from the government and the university and some union members quit. The university responded by severing ties with the union.

Li said the four arrested Wednesday were still in custody.

More than 100 pro-democracy activists have been arrested under the national security law, which outlaws subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion to interfere in the city's affairs.

Critics say the law has been used to stifle dissent and restrict freedoms Hong Kong was promised it could maintain for 50 years following its 1997 handover to China.

## 'Heartbroken' Florida town has ties to Haiti's quake zone

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

BOYNTON BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Not long after a powerful earthquake struck his Haitian hometown, Osambert Jean started receiving calls from dozens of friends who also emigrated from southwestern Haiti to settle in this South Florida suburb nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades.

"Each one of them has bad news: My family is injured or my house collapsed," said Jean, a Haitian-born insurance agent in Boynton Beach whose brother lives in Les Cayes, Haiti. "People lost everything — everything."

The suburb south of West Palm Beach holds deep ties to Les Cayes, a town in southwest Haiti hard hit by Saturday's 7.2 magnitude earthquake, which has killed 1,941 people and injured 9,900 others.

Many residents here have been worried about their loved ones. Some are already mourning cousins and uncles who died while officials are trying to assess the needs, rallying the coastal town in the relief effort.

In the past decade, Boynton Beach has grown its Haitian population far from Miami's Little Haiti and established a partnership with Les Cayes by welcoming officials, including a former mayor who was found dead under the rubble of a hotel that collapsed in the earthquake.

"This is something that is personal. We know some of these people. We have interacted with them. For me, this is my family," said Christina Romelus, a city commissioner of Haitian descent, whose husband lost three relatives in the earthquake. "You are seeing that feeling of 'there's no where to go now. Home is destroyed. Home is gone.'"

The city has set up a donation center at the downtown fire station, where people have been dropping off medical supplies, personal protective equipment and tents.

Boynton Beach resident Cosy Joseph is flying to Les Cayes on Thursday to take some supplies to a rural clinic overseen by the nonprofit she runs, the Gaskov Clerge Foundation. But she says she is also checking on her 88-year-old father and inspecting her childhood home.

Joseph said she could not sleep Monday night after seeing images of children and elderly people standing outside in the rain as Tropical Storm Grace battered the region the quake struck.

"It was painful to watch," Joseph said. "We are devastated and heartbroken. I had zero sleep. I just couldn't."

Joseph has been instrumental in keeping the sister city partnership between the Florida and Haitian coastal towns. Mayors and officials have traveled to Les Cayes at least four times since 2012. Boynton Beach Mayor Steven Grant said the latest trip in 2018 involved possibly partnering with another diplomatic mission to work on an energy creation project. Joseph has joined two of the four trips.

More than half of the 1.08 million Haitians in the U.S. live in Florida. Palm Beach, home to Boynton Beach, has a sizable 100,000 people of Haitian origin, compared with Miami-Dade's 140,000, according to the American Community Survey. Haitian churches and restaurants are spotted among the palm tree-lined boulevards.

One of these churches is headed by pastor Jean Bilbalo Joint, who is also originally from Les Cayes. Joint said about 400 members of his church attend services in Haitian Creole and the majority are from southwest Haiti.

"It's very sad this time," he said. "People need a lot of help."

Organizations in Miami's Little Haiti are also raising funds and asking for donations of camping gear. Some have also seen personal losses in the most recent earthquake.

Reginald Jean-Mary, a pastor of Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church, said his cousin, who is also a pastor, was officiating a baptism in the Church of the Immaculate Conception in the town of Les Anglais when the earthquake hit and helped pull people from the rubble of the church. Since then, he has learned of other members of his church who have lost loved ones.

Jean-Mary said his homeland had not been able to fully recover from the 2010 earthquake and 2016's Hurricane Matthew. This earthquake struck just after a month after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

"It has been brutal blows. This is very difficult for the people, for the country," he said. "We are people of faith. We are people of hope. But I have to ask myself this question: Why?"

## Taliban allowing 'safe passage' from Kabul in US airlift

By **ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and ZEKE MILLER** Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Taliban have agreed to allow "safe passage" from Afghanistan for civilians struggling to join a U.S.-directed airlift from the capital, President Joe Biden's national security adviser said, although a timetable for completing the evacuation of Americans, Afghan allies and others has yet to be worked out with the country's new rulers.

Jake Sullivan on Tuesday acknowledged reports that some civilians were encountering resistance — "being turned away or pushed back or even beaten" — as they tried to reach the Kabul international airport. But he said "very large numbers" were reaching the airport and the problem of the others was being taken up with the Taliban, whose stunningly swift takeover of the country on Sunday plunged the U.S. evacuation effort into chaos, confusion and violence.

Pentagon officials said that after interruptions on Monday, the airlift was back on track and being accelerated despite weather problems, amid regular communication with Taliban leaders. Additional U.S. troops arrived and more were on the way, with a total of more than 6,000 expected to be involved in securing the airport in coming days.

The White House said 13 flights Tuesday airlifted 1,100 U.S. citizens, permanent residents and their families from the Kabul airport, adding that the pace was expected to pick up Wednesday and through the week.

The State Department said it was sending John Bass, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, to manage the evacuation operation in Kabul, and the Pentagon said it will send Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Donohue, a special operations officer and current commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, to take command of airport security operations.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby disclosed that U.S. officers were speaking with Taliban commanders "multiple times a day" about avoiding conflict at the airport. This suggested that the new rulers of Afghanistan, who swept to power after 20 years of war against the U.S.-supported Kabul government, plan not to disrupt the evacuation. Kirby would not discuss details of the Taliban arrangement, and Sullivan said the question of how much time the Taliban will give the evacuation was still being negotiated.

Biden has said he wants the evacuation completed by Aug. 31. Sullivan declined to say whether that deadline would hold.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command and overall commander of U.S. troops in Kabul, made an unannounced visit to the Afghan capital Tuesday. In a written statement, he said he found that military air traffic controllers and ground handlers were "rapidly scaling up" airlift operations.

McKenzie on Sunday negotiated the safe passage agreement with Taliban leaders in talks held in Doha, Qatar.

"I cautioned them against interference in our evacuation, and made it clear to them that any attack would be met with overwhelming force in the defense of our forces," McKenzie said. "The protection of U.S. civilians and our partners is my highest priority and we will take all necessary action to ensure a safe and efficient withdrawal."

At the White House, Sullivan said U.S. officials were engaged in an "hour by hour" process of holding the Taliban to their commitment to allow safe passage for civilians wishing to leave the country. Asked whether the Biden administration recognizes the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan, Sullivan said it was too soon to say and that the Taliban's record of adhering to international human rights standards "has not been good."

Overnight at the airport, nine Air Force C-17 transport planes arrived with equipment and about 1,000 troops, and seven C-17s took off with 700-800 civilian evacuees, including 165 Americans, Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor told a Pentagon news conference. The total included Afghans who have applied for Special Immigrant Visas and third-country nationals, he said.



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The goal is to ramp up to one evacuation flight per hour by Wednesday, with 5,000 to 9,000 evacuees leaving per day, Taylor and Kirby said. Taylor said that more than 4,000 U.S. troops are now at the airport. That number is expected to top 6,000 in coming days — more than twice as many as in all of Afghanistan when Biden announced in April he would be ending the U.S. war and pulling out all troops.

On Monday the airlift had been temporarily suspended when Afghans desperate to escape the country breached security and rushed onto the tarmac. Seven people died in several incidents. The Air Force said Tuesday that its Office of Special Investigations is investigating an incident Monday in which a C-17 transport plane taking off from Kabul airport was swarmed by desperate Afghan civilians, some of whom died. The Air Force said human remains were found in the plane's wheel well when it landed in Qatar.

Kirby said U.S. commanders at the airport are in direct communication with Taliban commanders outside to avoid security incidents.

He said there have been no hostile actions by the Taliban, and that several hundred members of the now-defeated Afghan army were at the airport assisting in the evacuation.

Kirby said during television interviews that plans were being made to house up to 22,000 evacuated Afghans and their families at three U.S. Army installations in the continental United States. Those locations are Camp McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas, and Fort Lee, Virginia.

Biden returned to the White House Tuesday night from the Camp David presidential retreat. On Monday, he had rejected blame for chaotic scenes of Afghans clinging to U.S. military planes in Kabul in a desperate bid to flee their home country after the Taliban's easy victory over an Afghan military that America and NATO allies had spent two decades trying to build.

Biden called the anguish of trapped Afghan civilians "gut-wrenching" and conceded the Taliban had achieved a much faster takeover of the country than his administration had expected. The U.S. rushed in troops to protect its own evacuating diplomats and others at the Kabul airport.

But the president expressed no second thoughts about his decision to stick by the U.S. commitment, formulated during the Trump administration, to end America's longest war, no matter what.

"I stand squarely behind my decision" to finally withdraw U.S. combat forces, Biden said.

## In Taliban's 7-day march to power, a stunning string of wins

By **MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer**

In just seven days, any lingering dreams of a free Afghanistan died.

As last week dawned, many clung to hope that the Taliban could be held back, though key trade routes had been seized, border crossings overtaken and swaths of remote areas clutched. But then, in just a week, militants won city after city, toppled the government and grabbed the grand prize of Kabul.

On its streets, ads with women in Western clothes were covered in white paint, while men in jeans and T-shirts rushed to change into traditional tunics. At the U.S. embassy, staff raced to destroy documents as helicopters shuttled away diplomats.

Fingers once splashed with purple ink — residue of voting, a badge of democracy — now clenched tickets seeking exit, and frantically punched ATMs to withdraw life savings.

All in seven days.

"The only thing people are thinking about is how to survive here or how to escape," said Aisha Khurram, a 22-year-old headed to class Sunday at Kabul University before being turned back, unsure whether she would ever be able to return, or if females will once again be barred from school. "The only thing we have is our God."

Even for a country scarred by generations of warfare, it was an astonishing week.

MONDAY

The week dawns with news that insurgents claimed the northern cities of Aybak and Sar-e Pul.

In some districts, pro-government forces surrender without a fight. In others, where firefights sprout, desperate residents are forced from their homes, trudging hundreds of kilometers on foot in exodus.

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"We walked with slippers, didn't have the chance to wear our shoes," says Bibi Ruqia, who left northern Takhar province for Kabul after a bomb hit her house. "We had to escape."

The fall of Aybak and Sar-e Pul pleases the Taliban fighters; afterward, they are seen on video relishing their victory outside one of the government buildings they now controlled.

But Americans and the Afghan troops they spent years training had reasons to take heart: The cities were just the fourth and fifth provincial capitals to crumble. Twenty-nine more remained.

TUESDAY

In the sparkling Qatari capital of Doha, American envoy Zalmay Khalilzad arrives with a warning to the Taliban: Any gains made by force would be met with international condemnation and assure their status as global pariahs.

The effectiveness of the diplomacy is diminished, though, by Taliban forces' push into the western city of Farah. They are seen in front of the provincial governor's office.

As the United States' self-imposed Aug. 31 deadline to withdraw its troops nears, the Taliban steadily gains ground while hundreds of thousands are displaced. Kabul's parks swell with the newly homeless, while the United Nations releases tallies of civilian deaths and injuries they know would only grow.

"The real figures," says U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, "will be much higher."

WEDNESDAY

Three more provincial capitals fall in Badakhshan, Baghlan and Farah, giving the Taliban control over two-thirds of the country. With those regions lost, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani rushes to Balkh province, already surrounded by Taliban-controlled land, to secure help from warlords linked to allegations of atrocities and corruption. But he is desperate to push back the insurgents.

At the White House, President Joe Biden signs off on a plan to mount a full-scale evacuation of Afghans seeking to flee their country after a new intelligence analysis makes clear the country's government and military are unwilling or unable to mount any significant resistance. Afghan special forces, left to pick up much of the burden of defending multiple fronts, are stretched increasingly thin.

As the Taliban's drive widens, they emerge in more and parts of the country carrying M-16 rifles and driving Humvees and Ford pickup trucks, equipment paid for by American taxpayers.

THURSDAY

Any hope that the Taliban's successes might be limited to Afghanistan's more remote reaches vanish, as the country's second- and third-largest cities are captured.

With Kandahar and Herat, a dozen provincial capitals are now in the group's grasp. And with security rapidly deteriorating, the U.S. reverses course, announcing 3,000 troops will be sent to help evacuate the embassy.

Zahra, a 26-year-old resident of Herat, is on her way to dinner with her mother and three sisters when she sees people running and heard gunshots blast. "The Taliban are here!" people scream.

She spent most of her life in an Afghanistan where girls got an education and women dared to dream of careers and she had spent the past five years working with nonprofit organizations to press for gender equality. Now, her last name is shrouded to avoid making her a target, and she hunkers down indoors with her family.

"How can it be possible for me as a woman who has worked so hard and tried to learn and advance, to now have to hide myself and stay at home?" she asks.

Taliban fighters finally break through at Herat after two weeks of attacks. As they move in, witnesses tell of Taliban members once detained in the city's prison are spotted moving freely in its streets.

FRIDAY

As the Taliban push ever further into the country they once again seek to rule, reports of revenge killings trickle out: A comedian. A government media chief. Others.

Signs of a new day in Afghanistan proliferate.

In Herat, two alleged looters are paraded through the streets with black makeup smeared on their faces, reminders of the unsparing version of Islamic law the Taliban has imposed. In Kandahar, militants com-

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mandeer a radio station that had beamed Pashto and Indian songs into residents' homes, music banned by the Taliban. The tunes stop, abruptly. And the station is renamed Voice of Sharia.

Militants complete their sweep of the country's south, taking four more provincial capitals. Among them is Helmand province, where American, British and other allied NATO forces fought some of their bloodiest battles. Hundreds of Western troops died there during the war. Now, many of their families ask why.

SATURDAY

Ghani delivers a televised speech in which he vows not to give up achievements of the 20 years since the Taliban were toppled. But the group pushes forward, notching more victories.

Along the Pakistani border, the provinces of Paktika and Kunar fall. In the north, Faryab province is taken. And in the country's center, Daykundi is captured. Biggest of all, Mazar-e-Sharif — the country's fourth-largest city, a heavily defended swath that government forces had pledged to defend — is now under Taliban control.

The unfolding disaster prompts a statement from President Joe Biden, standing firm in his decision to finish the withdrawal of U.S. forces that began under Donald Trump.

"I was the fourth president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan — two Republicans, two Democrats," he said. "I would not, and will not, pass this war onto a fifth."

In Kabul, long lines form outside the international airport. Afghans seeking to flee push carts loaded with carpets, televisions and mementos as they waited hours to enter the terminal.

On normal days, Afghans in business suits and traditional dress mingle beside tattooed military contractors in wraparound sunglasses and aid workers from across the globe. Now, the panicked masses fill the airport, scrambling to leave.

Farid Ahmad Younusi abandoned his Kandahar contracting firm for a chance to escape. Everything he built, he says, now appeared to be lost, and militants were searching for him.

"Taliban have everything that I worked for over the past 20 years," he says.

In sight of the airport, the mountains ringing the capital rise in the distance as the walls seem to close in. As Saturday wears on, news arrives of new Taliban wins.

Just south of the capital, Logar province falls. To the north, insurgents take Mihterlam, reportedly without a fight. Members of the Taliban are reported in the Char Asyab district, just 11 kilometers (7 miles) from Kabul.

The city's fate seems all but sealed.

SUNDAY

The Taliban seize Jalalabad, the last major city besides the capital, and a string of victories follows. The capitals of Maidan Wardak, Khost, Kapisa and Parwan provinces, as well as the country's last government-held border post falls to militants, and Afghan forces at Bagram Air Base, home to a prison housing 5,000 inmates, surrender.

Insurgents had no air force and just days earlier had no major city. They were far outnumbered by Afghan troops, who were trained by the American military, the most well-funded and strongest on the planet. And yet, the impossible is now true: The capital of Kabul and its 5 million residents is theirs.

Helicopters whirr. Smoke rises. The American flag is lowered at the embassy.

Ghani, who hours earlier urged his people not to give up, has now fled himself, his abandoned palace occupied by heavily armed fighters, his name cursed by his own countrymen.

"They tied our hands from behind and sold the country," says Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi.

In the U.S., Biden's CIA director cuts short a foreign trip to return to Washington. Others in the administration reject comparisons to the fall of Saigon even as many find the resemblance impossible to ignore. With preparations underway to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks that drove the U.S. to war, the top American general warns of a rise in terrorist threats to come.

Whiplash over the sheer speed of Afghanistan's fall jars those in seats of power.

"You want to believe that trillions of dollars and 20 years of investment adds up to something," says Sen. Chris Murphy, a Biden ally and member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Night falls with Taliban fighters deployed across the capital. Abandoned police posts are claimed. And on nearly empty streets, men carry the black-and-white flag of the Taliban. Their victory is complete.

## Mustang roundups fuel deepening debate as drought grips West

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

TOOELE, Utah (AP) — The sound of the helicopter propeller thundered across the horizon as it dipped down toward mustangs dotting the golden brown plain. The horses burst into a gallop at the machine's approach, their high-pitched whinnies rising into the dry air.

That helicopter roundup in the mountains of western Utah removed hundreds of free-roaming wild horses, shortly before the Biden administration announced it would sharply increase the number of mustangs removed across the region. It's an emergency step land managers say is essential to preserving the ecosystem and the horses as a megadrought worsened by climate change grips the region.

"What were seeing here in the West gives some insight into a new norm," Terry Messmer, a professor at Utah State University who studies wild horse management.

The removals are adding fuel to longstanding conflicts with activists

for the animals whose beauty and power make them an enduring emblem of the American West. They say the U.S. government is using the drought as an excuse to take out horses in favor of cattle grazing.

Horses that are captured are held in government corrals and pastures mostly in the West and Midwest before they are made available for public adoption. Some also end up being used by law enforcement entities such as the U.S. Border Patrol, or go to prison inmate programs where they are tamed for future use.

Advocates tried unsuccessfully to stop the roundup of Utah's Onaqui herd, one that's captured the imagination of Hollywood celebrities and Girl Scout troops alike. Horses in the picturesque and accessible herd are so well known that many have names, like the patriarch "Old Man." He was left behind in the July roundup, but about 300 other horses were taken to be adopted or kept in captivity for the rest of their lives.

"It's really unfortunate the Biden administration continues to scapegoat the horses while giving a pass to livestock that have a greater impact on public lands," said Suzanne Roy, executive director of the American Wild Horse Campaign.

The Bureau of Land Management oversees almost a quarter-billion acres of public land, primarily in the West, and is tasked with managing the wild horse population. It's planning to remove some 6,000 horses, mostly from Nevada, Oregon, Wyoming and Colorado, by October — a 50% increase from last year. Eventually land managers say they need to cut the number of wild horses by two-thirds to keep things in balance.

"In many places where wild horses and burros roam, virtually no vegetation was produced in the spring



**A helicopter pushes wild horses during a roundup on July 16, 2021, near U.S. Army Dugway Proving Ground, Utah. Federal land managers are increasing the number of horses removed from the range this year during an historic drought. They say it's necessary to protect the parched land and the animals themselves, but wild-horse advocates accuse them of using the conditions as an excuse to move out more of the iconic animals to preserve cattle grazing.**

(AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



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and early summer growing seasons," said Jason Lutterman, spokesman for the National Wild Horse and Burro Program in Reno, Nevada. The Biden administration has announced reforms aimed at ensuring that captured horses put up for adoption do not eventually end up in slaughterhouses, but advocates worry problems could persist as long as the government offers a \$1,000 adoption incentive.

Wild-horse advocates acknowledge that lack of forage and water can be an issue in some areas, but they argue removals from the herds like the Onaqui are unnecessary.

"The BLM has a drought trump card, and they use it sometimes when they want to take additional horses off the range," Greg Hendricks, director of field operations.

Advocates want to leave the horses on the range and instead administer fertility treatments to limit the size of the herd without roundups that can be costly and tough on the animals. One horse died during the Onaqui roundup. Fertility treatments are used, but require new doses at least annually and can be difficult to administer because they require horses to be tracked down and darted one at a time, Messmer said.

Cattle ranchers, meanwhile, say they've made voluntary changes to reduce grazing on federal lands. By hauling water to drought-stricken areas for their livestock, they've even helped the horses who drink it too, said Hunter Ihrman, a spokesman for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

The number of sheep and cattle that graze on leased public land is far larger than the number of wild horses, Messmer said. A key difference, though, is that livestock are part of the U.S. economy.

"Americans like their McDonald's burgers. They like their Big Macs. They like all of those things, and all of those things have beef as part of it," he said.

Eventually, land managers want to double the number of removals, a step they say is essential across 10 Western states in the coming years. Wild horses are federally protected, so the plan, if approved by Congress, would increase costs to an annual high of about \$360 million.

Without those changes, horses could die of thirst or starvation, they say. Dozens of horses were found dead near a dried-up watering hole in northern Arizona in 2018.

The wild horses now on the plains are largely descended from those brought by Europeans hundreds of years ago. Herds can double in size every four to five years, and when populations grow too high they destroy topsoil, disturb water supplies and eat grass essential to native species like the increasingly rare sage grouse, Messmer said.

In recent weeks, federal land managers have conducted the largest helicopter roundup in Colorado in years, near the border with Utah. Meanwhile, volunteers trying to protect another herd nearby are working with the agency to get water to the horses using tanks, wells and water trucks, said Kathy DeGonia, president of Piceance Mustangs.

The rugged range of the Piceance-East Douglas herd is dotted with oil and gas production, so packed dirt roads make it easier to make water deliveries during the drought. Deliveries could run into November.

DeGonia's group also collaborates with federal officials on programs like sterilization and horse auctions.

"In a perfect world we'd let all of these mustangs stay out there until they die," she said. "But there's just not enough food and water to maintain all the horses on the range."

## Injured in Haiti's quake continue to show up at hospitals

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

L'ASILE, Haiti (AP) — The problems in Haiti may be summed up by the public hospital in L'Asile, deep in a remote stretch of countryside in the nation's southwest area. Here, a full four days after a powerful earthquake hit this region the hardest, people are still showing up from isolated villages with broken arms and legs.

Hospital director Sonel Fevry said five such patients showed up Tuesday, the same day officials raised the disaster's death toll by more than 500. Grinding poverty, poor roads and faith in natural medicine all conspire to make the problems worse.

"We do what we can, remove the necrotized tissue and give them antibiotics and try to get them a splint," Fevry said, adding that road access to the facility in the department of Nippes is difficult and not

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everyone can make it.

Haiti's Civil Protection Agency increased the number of fatalities from Saturday's earthquake to 1,941. It also raised the number of injured to 9,900, many of whom have had to wait for medical help lying outside in wilting heat and riding out a storm Monday night that brought heavy rains and wind gusts.

The countryside was worse hit by the quake, perhaps, than the cities, but news is only slowly trickling out. The whole obstetrics, pediatric and operating wing at the L'Asile hospital collapsed, though everyone made it out. Despite the collapse, the hospital was able to treat about 170 severely injured quake victims in improvised tents in the facility's yard.

The nearby countryside was devastated: In one 10-mile (16-kilometer) stretch not a single house, church, store or school was left standing.

Surprisingly, some of the traditional, old style wood-and-pressed-mud homes offered their inhabitants a better chance of survival as their tin roofs remained standing, even after their relatively light walls crumbled. But traditional knowledge was not serving Haiti well in a medical sense.

"We know that many of us Haitians prefer to remain at home and treat themselves with leaves and natural remedies," Fevry said, further delaying their arrival at hospitals.

Officials said the magnitude 7.2 earthquake destroyed more than 7,000 homes and damaged nearly 5,000, leaving about 30,000 families homeless. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged.

Rain and wind from Tropical Storm Grace raised the threat of mudslides and flash flooding as the system slowly passed over southwestern Haiti's Tiburon Peninsula before heading toward Jamaica and southeastern Cuba. The storm forced a temporary halt to search and rescue efforts, feeding growing anger and frustration among thousands who were left homeless.

Bodies continued to be pulled from the rubble in southwestern Haiti. In the community of Les Cayes, the smell of death hung heavily over a pancaked, three-story apartment building. A simple bed sheet covered the body of a 3-year-old girl that firefighters had found an hour earlier.

Neighbor Joseph Boyer said he knew the girl's family.

"The mother and father are in the hospital, but all three kids died," he said. The bodies of the other two siblings were found earlier.

Illustrating the lack of government presence, volunteer firefighters from the nearby city of Cap-Haitien left the girl's body out in the rain because there were no police officers, who had to be present for a body to be taken away.

A throng of angry, shouting men gathered in front of the collapsed building, a sign that patience was running out for people who have waited days for help from the government.

The head of the Civil Protection Agency, Jerry Chandler, acknowledged the situation. Earthquake assessments had to be paused because of the heavy rain, "and people are getting aggressive," Chandler said.

Haiti is the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. Residents already were struggling with the coronavirus pandemic, gang violence, worsening poverty and the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moise when the quake hit.

Etzer Emile, a Haitian economist and professor at Quisqueya University, a private institution in the capital of Port-au-Prince, said the earthquake's impacts will almost certainly result in even more long-term poverty for the country's struggling southwest region. Political instability and gang criminality along the southern roads into the region have particularly hobbled economic activity in recent years.

"The earthquake has just given a fatal blow to a regional economy already on its knees for about two-and-a-half years" Emile said in an email.

Dependence on remittances from abroad and assistance from international non-governmental groups will only accelerate, he said, likely making Haiti even weaker.

"Foreign aid unfortunately never helps in the long term. The southwest needs instead activities that can boost economic capacity for jobs and better social conditions," he said.

Foreign aid has already begun to arrive.

Sarah Charles, assistant administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, said its disaster response teams were forced to suspend operations as the storm arrived Monday, but members were back Tuesday to assess its impact and continue helping.

"We do not anticipate that the death toll related to this earthquake will be anywhere near the 2010 earthquake, where more than 200,000 people were killed," Charles told reporters.

The U.S. military's Southern Command said it was moving eight helicopters from Honduras to Haiti. Three U.S. Coast Guard helicopters had already assisted in life-saving transports and moved 17,350 pounds of cargo. A U.S. Navy amphibious warfare ship, the USS Arlington, was expected to head for Haiti on Wednesday with a surgical team and landing craft.

## DeSantis top donor invests in COVID drug governor promotes

By **BRENDAN FARRINGTON** The Associated Press

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis — who has been criticized for opposing mask mandates and vaccine passports — is now touting a COVID-19 antibody treatment in which a top donor's company has invested millions of dollars.

DeSantis has been flying around the state promoting Regeneron, a monoclonal antibody treatment that was used on then-President Donald Trump after he tested positive for COVID-19. The governor first began talking about it as a treatment last year.

Citadel, a Chicago-based hedge fund, has \$15.9 million in shares of Regeneron Pharmaceutical, according to filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Citadel CEO Ken Griffin has donated \$10.75 million to a political committee that supports DeSantis — \$5.75 million in 2018 and \$5 million last April.

It's not unusual for hedge funds to have a wide range of investments. And BlackRock, which has primarily donated to Democratic candidates, though has also donated substantially to Republicans, has a large holding in the company - more so than Citadel.

DeSantis ramped up the call for Floridians to seek out monoclonal antibody treatments in August as coronavirus cases spiked. He's held news conferences at treatment sites and a Tampa hospital touting the effectiveness of the drug if people receive treatment soon after testing positive.

"Early treatment with these monoclonal antibodies — Regeneron and others — have proven to radically reduce the chances that somebody ends up being hospitalized," DeSantis said Monday at a treatment site in Orlando. "Reducing hospital admissions has got to be a top priority."

Experts agree with him. The drugs, when given within 10 days of initial symptoms, have been shown to cut rates of hospitalization and death by roughly 70%.

"We definitely need treatments like monoclonal antibodies that can prevent mild disease from progressing to severe disease. Ultimately, it's still best to prevent someone from contracting COVID-19 in the first place," said Dr. Leana Wen, public health professor at George Washington University and former Baltimore Health Commissioner. "Monoclonal antibodies are not prevention."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday and is receiving Regeneron treatments. Like DeSantis, he has been opposed to mask mandates in public schools. He was vaccinated in December.

DeSantis has threatened to punish school districts that require masks. He's also opposed to vaccine passports and has had an ongoing legal battle with Norwegian Cruise Lines, which wants to require passengers to show proof of vaccination.

Citadel's investment in Regeneron is a tiny fraction of its overall \$39 billion in investments, but if the stock price were to go up, Citadel would benefit. DeSantis spokeswoman Christina Pushaw points out that Citadel has far greater investments in Moderna and Pfizer, which manufacture COVID-19 vaccines.

But the relationship has generated a buzz on social media, as Democrats question the relationship.

"Claiming that there is somehow 'corruption' by promoting the baseless political narrative that Governor DeSantis supports Regeneron over COVID vaccines (completely false, but that is another topic) is not even logically consistent when you examine the SEC filing," Pushaw said in an email. "Citadel holds far more shares of Pfizer and Moderna than Regeneron."

And while DeSantis has had a very public war of words with Democratic President Joe Biden about requiring masks in schools and other virus precautions, they both encourage monoclonal antibody treatments. A Regeneron treatment costs more than \$1,000, while a vaccine costs about \$25.

"Vaccines prevent serious illness from COVID-19. But if someone who is unvaccinated gets COVID, or a vaccinated person gets a breakthrough infection, those in risk categories with comorbidities should consider getting early treatment with Regeneron. It is safe, effective, and free of charge to all patients in Florida. This should not be a political issue — it's about saving lives," Pushaw said.

The federal government is paying for the monoclonal antibody treatments and patients aren't being charged for the antibody cocktail. Florida has set up treatment sites in Jacksonville, Orlando and Brevard County. The state plans to add more sites.

Griffin, a billionaire, has donated tens of millions of dollars to other conservative candidates and political committees across the country. He was raised in Florida and is building an oceanfront mansion near Trump's Palm Beach Mar-a-Lago resort.

Citadel declined to comment.

## Taliban allowing 'safe passage' from Kabul in US airlift

By **ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and ZEKE MILLER** Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Taliban have agreed to allow "safe passage" from Afghanistan for civilians struggling to join a U.S.-directed airlift from the capital, President Joe Biden's national security adviser said Tuesday, although a timetable for completing the evacuation of Americans, Afghan allies and others has yet to be worked out with the country's new rulers.

Jake Sullivan acknowledged reports that some civilians were encountering resistance — "being turned away or pushed back or even beaten" — as they tried to reach the Kabul international airport. But he said "very large numbers" were reaching the airport and the problem of the others was being taken up with the Taliban, whose stunningly swift takeover of the country on Sunday plunged the U.S. evacuation effort into chaos, confusion and violence.

Pentagon officials said that after interruptions on Monday, the airlift was back on track and being accelerated despite weather problems, amid regular communication with Taliban leaders. Additional U.S. troops arrived and more were on the way, with a total of more than 6,000 expected to be involved in securing the airport in coming days.

The White House said 13 flights Tuesday airlifted 1,100 U.S. citizens, permanent residents and their families from the Kabul airport, adding that the pace was expected to pick up Wednesday and through the week.

The State Department said it was sending John Bass, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, to manage the evacuation operation in Kabul, and the Pentagon said it will send Army Maj. Gen. Christopher Donohue, a special operations officer and current commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, to take command of airport security operations.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby disclosed that U.S. officers were speaking with Taliban commanders "multiple times a day" about avoiding conflict at the airport. This suggested that the new rulers of Afghanistan, who swept to power after 20 years of war against the U.S.-supported Kabul government, plan not to disrupt the evacuation. Kirby would not discuss details of the Taliban arrangement, and Sullivan said the question of how much time the Taliban will give the evacuation was still being negotiated.

Biden has said he wants the evacuation completed by Aug. 31. Sullivan declined to say whether that deadline would hold.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command and overall commander of U.S. troops in Kabul, made an unannounced visit to the Afghan capital Tuesday. In a written statement, he said he found that military air traffic controllers and ground handlers were "rapidly scaling up" airlift operations.

McKenzie on Sunday negotiated the safe passage agreement with Taliban leaders in talks held in Doha, Qatar.

"I cautioned them against interference in our evacuation, and made it clear to them that any attack



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would be met with overwhelming force in the defense of our forces," McKenzie said. "The protection of U.S. civilians and our partners is my highest priority and we will take all necessary action to ensure a safe and efficient withdrawal."

At the White House, Sullivan said U.S. officials were engaged in an "hour by hour" process of holding the Taliban to their commitment to allow safe passage for civilians wishing to leave the country. Asked whether the Biden administration recognizes the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan, Sullivan said it was too soon to say and that the Taliban's record of adhering to international human rights standards "has not been good."

Overnight at the airport, nine Air Force C-17 transport planes arrived with equipment and about 1,000 troops, and seven C-17s took off with 700-800 civilian evacuees, including 165 Americans, Army Maj. Gen. William Taylor told a Pentagon news conference. The total included Afghans who have applied for Special Immigrant Visas and third-country nationals, he said.

The goal is to ramp up to one evacuation flight per hour by Wednesday, with 5,000 to 9,000 evacuees leaving per day, Taylor and Kirby said. Taylor said that more than 4,000 U.S. troops are now at the airport. That number is expected to top 6,000 in coming days — more than twice as many as in all of Afghanistan when Biden announced in April he would be ending the U.S. war and pulling out all troops.

On Monday the airlift had been temporarily suspended when Afghans desperate to escape the country breached security and rushed onto the tarmac. Seven people died in several incidents. The Air Force said Tuesday that its Office of Special Investigations is investigating an incident Monday in which a C-17 transport plane taking off from Kabul airport was swarmed by desperate Afghan civilians, some of whom died. The Air Force said human remains were found in the plane's wheel well when it landed in Qatar.

Kirby said U.S. commanders at the airport are in direct communication with Taliban commanders outside to avoid security incidents.

He said there have been no hostile actions by the Taliban, and that several hundred members of the now-defeated Afghan army were at the airport assisting in the evacuation.

Kirby said during television interviews that plans were being made to house up to 22,000 evacuated Afghans and their families at three U.S. Army installations in the continental United States. Those locations are Camp McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas, and Fort Lee, Virginia.

Biden returned to the White House Tuesday night from the Camp David presidential retreat. On Monday, he had rejected blame for chaotic scenes of Afghans clinging to U.S. military planes in Kabul in a desperate bid to flee their home country after the Taliban's easy victory over an Afghan military that America and NATO allies had spent two decades trying to build.

Biden called the anguish of trapped Afghan civilians "gut-wrenching" and conceded the Taliban had achieved a much faster takeover of the country than his administration had expected. The U.S. rushed in troops to protect its own evacuating diplomats and others at the Kabul airport.

But the president expressed no second thoughts about his decision to stick by the U.S. commitment, formulated during the Trump administration, to end America's longest war, no matter what.

"I stand squarely behind my decision" to finally withdraw U.S. combat forces, Biden said.

## Fueled by winds, largest wildfire moves near California city

By **TERENCE CHEA, ETHAN SWOPE and JOHN ANTCZAK** Associated Press

GRIZZLY FLATS, Calif. (AP) — A wildfire raged through a small Northern California forest town Tuesday, burning dozens of homes as dangerously dry and windy weather also continued to fuel other massive blazes and prompted the nation's largest utility to begin shutting off power to 51,000 customers.

The Caldor fire in the northern Sierra Nevada had burned an estimated 50 homes in and around Grizzly Flats, a town of about 1,200 people, fire officials said at a community meeting.

Gov. Gavin Newsom proclaimed a state of emergency for El Dorado County because of the blaze, which tripled in size between Monday and Tuesday afternoon to nearly 50 square miles (129 square kilometers),

To the north the Dixie Fire — the largest of some 100 active wildfires in more than a dozen Western

states — was advancing toward Susanville, population about 18,000.

Meanwhile, Pacific Gas & Electric announced it had begun shutting off power to some 51,000 customers in small portions of 18 northern counties to prevent winds from knocking down or fouling power lines and sparking new blazes.

The utility said the precautionary shutoffs were focused in the Sierra Nevada foothills, the North Coast, the North Valley and the North Bay mountains and could last into Wednesday afternoon.

Very few homes were left standing in Grizzly Flats, where streets were littered with downed power lines and poles. Houses were reduced to smoldering ash and twisted metal with only chimneys rising above the ruins. A post office and elementary school were also destroyed.

Two people with serious or severe injuries were airlifted to hospitals from the Grizzly Flats area, fire officials said.

Derek Shaves and Tracy Jackson were helping their friend salvage food and other supplies from the Grizzly Pub & Grub, a business in the evacuation zone that wasn't touched by the blaze.

Shaves said he visited Grizzly Flats Tuesday and saw his home and most of the houses in his neighborhood had been destroyed by the fire.

"It's a pile of ash," he said. "Everybody on my block is a pile of ash and every block that I visited — but for five separate homes that were safe — was totally devastated."

At the Dixie Fire, numerous resources were put into the Susanville area, where residents were warned to be ready to evacuate, said Mark Brunton, an operations section chief.

"It's not out of play, and the next 24 hours are going to be crucial to watch as to what the fire is going to do there," he told an online briefing.

To the east, spot fires became established south of the small community of Janesville, which had been ordered evacuated. Some structures were lost there — images captured by The Associated Press showed a home consumed by flames — but a surge of firefighters was able to herd the fire around the majority of the town, Brunton said.

The Dixie Fire, which had burned some 600 homes, is the largest of the major wildfires burning in Western U.S. states that have seen historic drought and weeks of high temperatures and dry weather that have left trees, brush and grasslands as flammable as tinder. 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.

Susanville is the seat of Lassen County and the largest city that the Dixie Fire, named for the road where



**A driveway leads down to property destroyed by the Caldor Fire in Grizzly Flats, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021.** (AP Photo/Ethan Swope)

it started, has approached since it broke out last month. The former Sierra Nevada logging and mining town has two state prisons, a nearby federal lockup and a casino.

Ash fell from the advancing fire, and a police statement urged residents "to be alert and be ready to evacuate" if the fire threatens the city.

The Dixie Fire has scorched more than 940 square miles (2,434 square kilometers) in the northern Sierra Nevada and southern Cascades since it ignited on July 13 and eventually merged with a smaller blaze. It's less than a third contained.

Investigations are continuing, but PG&E has notified utility regulators that the Dixie and Fly fires may have been caused by trees falling into its power lines. The Dixie Fire began near the town of Paradise, which was devastated by a 2018 wildfire ignited by PG&E equipment during strong winds. Eighty-five people died.

Ongoing damage surveys have counted more than 1,100 buildings destroyed, including 630 homes, and more than 16,000 structures remained threatened. Numerous evacuation orders were in effect.

Near the Caldor Fire, people were offering assistance to evacuees, including the four-footed kind. Susan Collins of Placerville used her horse trailer to help move two horses Tuesday after offering help on an El Dorado County Facebook page.

"I know not everybody is prepared when something like this happens, and my purpose in life is to be there to help people," she said.

Across the state line in Nevada, school administrators delayed start times in the Reno-Sparks because of a cloak of wildfire smoke from the Dixie Fire blanketing the region. Smoke plumes from the Caldor Fire were also visible from northern Nevada.

Two dozen fires were burning in Montana and nearly 50 more in Idaho, Washington and Oregon, according to the National Fire Interagency Center.

In Montana, authorities ordered evacuations on Tuesday for several remote communities in north-central Montana as strong winds propelled a large wildfire toward inhabited areas.

The mandatory evacuation covered Lodge Pole, a town of about 300 people on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and the former mining town of Zortman, which has about two dozen people, KOJM reported.

## Texas governor tests positive for COVID-19, in 'good health'

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas Gov. Greg Abbott tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday, according to his office, who said the Republican is in good health and experiencing no symptoms.

Abbott, who was vaccinated in December and has refused calls to reinstate mask mandates as the highly contagious delta variant surges in Texas, was isolating in the governor's mansion in Austin and receiving monoclonal antibody treatment, spokesman Mark Miner said in a statement. He is at least the 11th governor to test positive for the virus since the pandemic began, according to a tally by The Associated Press.

"Governor Abbott is fully vaccinated against COVID-19, in good health, and currently experiencing no symptoms. Everyone that the Governor has been in close contact with today has been notified," Miner said.

In a video posted on social media, Abbott said the fact that he had been fully vaccinated "may be one reason I'm really not feeling any symptoms right now. I have no fever, no aches and pains, no other types of symptoms."

The positive test comes a day after Abbott, who has seldom been seen wearing a mask in public recently, did not wear one while speaking indoors near Dallas to a crowded room of GOP supporters, most of whom were older and unmasked. Video posted by his campaign shows the 63-year-old governor — who is up for reelection in 2022 and has drawn two GOP challengers who have attacked the virus restrictions he put in place last year — mingling with attendees as they gathered around him taking pictures.

"Another standing room only event in Collin County tonight," Abbott tweeted.

The event was held by a group called the Republican Club at Heritage Ranch. Reached by phone Tuesday after Abbott announced he had tested positive, Jack DeSimone, president of the club, said he did not like "to have conversations like this" and declined to comment further on Abbott's appearance.



Abbott had also posted a picture of himself with the guitarist Jimmie Vaughan earlier Tuesday before news of his positive test. Vaughan and his family have tested negative, according to a statement from the musician.

Abbott has rebuffed calls to reimpose pandemic restrictions, including mask mandates, as cases in Texas are again soaring, hospitals are stretched thin, and a growing number of school districts defy his orders that prohibit face-covering requirements in classrooms. Abbott and Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton are now in court fighting what amounts to many of Texas' largest school districts, which began classes this week.

More than 12,200 patients in Texas were hospitalized with the virus as of Tuesday, the highest levels since January, and state health officials said this week they had requested five morgue trailers from the federal government as a precaution. But as cases have sharply climbed, Abbott has stuck to a message that the path forward "relies on personal responsibility."

By Tuesday, at least four Texas school districts had already temporarily closed because of virus outbreaks just days into students returning to class. And in a sign of tensions as schools defy Abbott's orders, the superintendent of the Eanes school district near Austin said one parent "physically assaulted" one teacher by ripping a mask off her face.

Democrat Rafael Anchia, a state representative from Dallas, said he wished the governor a speedy recovery and was "praying this sign will cause him to rescind the order stopping schools from requiring masks."

Miner said the governor's address to the group was his only public event this week. He said Abbott tested negative Monday and that no one else on staff has tested positive.

Abbott's wife, Cecilia Abbott, tested negative. The governor had been getting tested daily and Miner said "everyone that the Governor has been in close contact with today has been notified."

## Robert Durst testifies he would lie to get out of trouble

By **BRIAN MELLEY** Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A prosecutor attempted to ensnare Robert Durst in a web of deceit Tuesday after he admitted at his murder trial that he lied under oath in the past and would lie to get out of trouble.

The New York real estate heir said he hadn't lied during five days of testimony, but a series of inconsistencies during cross-examination in Los Angeles County Superior Court threw his credibility into question and exposed the risk of putting a defendant on the witness stand.

Deputy District Attorney John Lewin, who relished the prospect of grilling Durst and prepared a 200-page outline for questioning, got him to acknowledge there are some acts he would never be honest about.

Lewin asked how jurors were supposed to believe Durst.

"If you've said you've taken an oath to tell the truth but you've also just told us that you would lie if you needed to," Lewin asked, "can you tell me how that would not destroy your credibility?"

"Because what I'm saying is mostly the truth," Durst said. "There are certain things I would lie about, certain very important things."

Durst said he would never admit killing Susan Berman — even if he had done so.

"Did you kill Susan Berman?" is strictly a hypothetical," Durst said. "I did not kill Susan Berman. But if I had, I would lie about it."

Durst, 78, has pleaded not guilty to murder in the point-blank shooting of Berman, his longtime confidante, in her Los Angeles home. Durst said he found a lifeless Berman lying on a bedroom floor when he showed up for a planned visit just before Christmas 2000.

Durst said he had prepared for Lewin's interrogation but was anxious.

"I feel relieved that I'm close to getting this over, and I'm nervous, of course," Durst told Lewin. "What I want today is to be acquitted."

Playing clips of interviews Durst gave filmmakers, an interrogation conducted after Durst's arrest in New Orleans in 2015, and clips from his testimony, Lewin got Durst to admit several lies he told over the years.

Prosecutors say Durst silenced Berman as she prepared to speak with New York authorities about the



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disappearance of his wife, Kathie, in 1982 and how she provided a false alibi for him.

Durst acknowledged he wouldn't admit killing Kathie Durst if he had. And he wouldn't admit murdering his neighbor Morris Black in Galveston, Texas, in 2001 if he had done so.

He has never been charged with a crime in his wife's disappearance and has denied killing her. Her body has never been found, but she has been declared dead.

Durst was acquitted of murder in Black's death after he testified he fatally shot the man during a struggle for a gun. He was convicted of destroying evidence for chopping up the man's body and tossing it out to sea.

Testifying at trial is incredibly risky for a defendant, and most lawyers won't put their clients on the stand. Durst's testimony Tuesday showed he was particularly vulnerable because of a trail of lies.

"You don't just make up lies for the sake of lying," Lewin said. "You lie in particular when there is a reason for you to lie. And, generally speaking in this context, when it relates to incriminating evidence, correct?"

Durst agreed.

In questions from his own lawyer Monday, Durst admitted for the first time publicly that he sent a note directing police to Berman's "cadaver." He said he had always denied doing so because it made him look culpable.

Durst testified earlier Tuesday that he had not confessed to any killings when he was captured speaking to himself on a live microphone after filming a documentary about his life and the deaths of people close to him.

In the climactic scene of "The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst," he could be heard in a bathroom muttering: "What the hell did I do? Killed them all, of course."

Durst, who had just been caught on video in a lie about the "cadaver" note, explained that he either didn't say everything he was thinking or didn't speak loudly enough for the mic to catch it.

"What I did not say out loud or, perhaps I said very softly, is: 'They'll all think I killed them all, of course,'" he testified.

Many viewers have interpreted the two sentences, which were edited together by the filmmakers for a dramatic conclusion to the six-part HBO series, as an admission.

Authorities arrested Durst the night before the finale aired in March 2015 because they expected him to flee after the gotcha moment and the unexpected dialogue that followed.

Durst testified that he had been planning to kill himself with a gun when FBI agents apprehended him in the lobby of a New Orleans hotel, where he was registered under an alias.

He told filmmakers that only the killer could have written the cadaver note. His comments off camera came after he was confronted during his final interview for "The Jinx" with a note he had once sent Berman with nearly identical handwriting and Beverly Hills misspelled "Beverley."

"I wrote this one, but I did not write the cadaver one," Durst insisted in the film. But moments later, he couldn't tell the two apart. After an awkward moment blinking and burping, he put his head in his hands. He denied being the killer.

When he stepped off camera — unwittingly still wired for sound — he said: "There it is. You're caught."

Durst testified that he reached out to the filmmakers to restore his reputation after becoming a pariah following the Texas case.

Despite being a multimillionaire, he was rejected by condominium associations in New York, Houston and California, he said. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art wanted him to make a donation anonymously.

Despite advice from his lawyers and "everybody" not to give a series of interviews for the film project, Durst ignored them all.

"That was very, very, very big mistake," Durst testified.

## Taliban vow to respect women, despite history of oppression

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

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban vowed Tuesday to respect women's rights, forgive those who fought them and ensure Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorists as part of a publicity blitz aimed at reassuring world powers and a fearful population.

Following a lightning offensive across Afghanistan that saw many cities fall to the insurgents without a fight, the Taliban have sought to portray themselves as more moderate than when they imposed a strict form of Islamic rule in the late 1990s. But many Afghans remain skeptical — and thousands have raced to the airport, desperate to flee the country.

Older generations remember the Taliban's previous rule, when they largely confined women to their homes, banned television and music, and held public executions. A U.S.-led invasion drove them from power months after the 9/11 attacks, which al-Qaida had orchestrated from Afghanistan while being sheltered by the Taliban.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's longtime spokesman, emerged from the shadows Tuesday in his first-ever public appearance to address those concerns at a news conference.

He promised the Taliban would honor women's rights within the norms of Islamic law, without elaborating. The Taliban have encouraged women to return to work and have allowed girls to return to school, handing out Islamic headscarves at the door. A female news anchor interviewed a Taliban official Monday in a TV studio.

The treatment of women varies widely across the Muslim world and sometimes even within the same country, with rural areas tending to be far more conservative. Some Muslim countries, including neighboring Pakistan, have had female prime ministers, while ultraconservative Saudi Arabia only recently allowed women to drive.

Mujahid also said the Taliban would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for attacking other countries, as it was in the years before 9/11. That assurance was part of a 2020 peace deal reached between the Taliban and the Trump administration that paved the way for the American withdrawal.

The Pentagon said U.S. commanders are communicating with the Taliban as they work to evacuate thousands of people through Kabul's international airport. It said the Taliban have taken no hostile actions there.

Mujahid reiterated that the Taliban have offered full amnesty to Afghans who worked for the U.S. and the Western-backed government, saying "nobody will go to their doors to ask why they helped." He said private media should "remain independent" but that journalists "should not work against national values."

Kabul, the capital, has remained calm as the Taliban patrol its streets. But many remain fearful after prisons and armories emptied out during the insurgents' sweep across the country.

Kabul residents say groups of armed men have been going door-to-door seeking out individuals who worked with the ousted government and security forces, but it was unclear if the gunmen were Taliban or criminals posing as militants. Mujahid blamed the security breakdown on the former government, saying the Taliban only entered Kabul in order to restore law and order after the police melted away.

A broadcaster in Afghanistan said she was hiding at a relative's house, too frightened to return home much less go to work. She said she and other women do not believe the Taliban have changed their ways. She spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared for her safety.

A group of women wearing Islamic headscarves demonstrated briefly in Kabul, holding signs demanding the Taliban not "eliminate women" from public life.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the U.S. and other governments will not simply take the Taliban at their word when it comes to women's rights.

"Like I've said all along, this is not about trust. This is about verify," Sullivan said at a White House briefing. "And we'll see what the Taliban end up doing in the days and weeks ahead, and when I say we, I mean the entire international community."

Whatever their true intentions, the Taliban have an interest in projecting moderation to prevent the international community from isolating their government, as it did in the 1990s.

The European Union said it was suspending development assistance to Afghanistan until the political

situation is more clear but that it would consider boosting humanitarian aid.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the Taliban must respect U.N. Security Council resolutions and human rights to earn access to some 1.2 billion euros (\$1.4 billion) in development funds earmarked through 2024.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Britain might provide up to 10% more humanitarian aid, but the Taliban would not get any money previously earmarked for security.

Evacuation flights resumed after being suspended on Monday, when thousands of people rushed the airport. In shocking scenes captured on video, some clung to a plane as it took off and then fell to their deaths. At least seven people died in the airport chaos, U.S. officials said.

On Tuesday, the Taliban entered the civilian half of the airport, firing into the air to drive out around 500 people there, said an Afghan official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to brief journalists.

The Taliban appeared to be trying to control the crowd rather than prevent people from leaving. A video circulating online showed the Taliban supervising the orderly departure of dozens of foreigners.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul, now operating from the military side of the airport, urged Americans to register online for evacuation but not to come to the airport before being contacted.

The German Foreign Ministry said a first German military transport plane landed in Kabul but took off with only seven people on board due to the chaos. Another left later with 125 people.

U.S. President Joe Biden has defended his decision to end America's longest war, blaming the rapid Taliban takeover on Afghanistan's Western-backed government and security forces. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg echoed that assessment, while saying the alliance must investigate the flaws in its efforts to train the Afghan military.

Talks continued Tuesday between the Taliban and several Afghan politicians, including former President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, who once headed the country's negotiating council. The Taliban have said they want to form an "inclusive, Islamic government."

The talks focused on how a Taliban-dominated government would operate given the changes in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, rather than just dividing up ministries, officials with knowledge of the negotiations said on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks.

A top Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, arrived in Kandahar on Tuesday night from Qatar, potentially signaling a deal is close at hand.

The vice president of the ousted government, meanwhile, tweeted that he was the country's "legitimate" caretaker president. Amrullah Saleh said that under the constitution, he should be in charge because President Ashraf Ghani has fled the country.

## Taliban encounter Afghan cities remade in their absence

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

Ezanullah, one of thousands of young Taliban fighters from the countryside who rode into Afghanistan's capital over the weekend, had never seen anything like it.

The paved streets of Kabul were lined with towering apartment blocks, glass office buildings and shopping malls. The plush furniture inside the Interior Ministry was like "something I thought of in a dream," said the 22-year-old fighter from the country's mountainous east.

He said he plans to ask his commander if he can stay. "I don't want to leave," he said.

The encounter highlights how much Kabul and other Afghan cities have changed in the 20 years since the Taliban, who mainly hail from rugged rural areas, last ruled the country. An entire generation of Afghans has come of age under a modernizing, Western-backed government flush with development aid.

Many fear those gains will be reversed now that the Taliban are back in power and the last U.S. troops are on their way out.

Thousands have flocked to the airport trying to flee, most of them men unaccompanied by families. Younger Afghans have no memory of Taliban rule but fear its return will mean the loss of freedoms. The

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militants imposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law from 1996 until 2001, when a U.S.-led invasion drove them from power.

The Taliban, who largely hail from Afghanistan's conservative countryside, have signaled moderation in recent days — offering amnesty to those who fought them, inviting women to return to work and pledging to restore normal life after decades of war. But many Afghans, particularly women, remain deeply skeptical of the group's intentions.

Ezanullah was surprised when two women said hello to him on the street.

"They said we were afraid of you and thought you were horrible," he said. "But I told them you are like my sisters, and we will let you go to school and continue your education and give you security."

"Just look after your hijab," he added, referring to the Islamic headscarf that covers the hair but not the face.

Whether or not the Taliban have truly changed, the country they now rule is light years ahead of the one they captured in 1996 after four years of civil war following the Soviet withdrawal and the 1992 collapse of a pro-communist government.

Then the city was in ruins, ravaged by warlords who would later ally with the U.S. Most Afghans traveled Kabul's rutted roads by bicycle or in beat-up yellow taxis. There was only one computer in the entire country, and it belonged to Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's reclusive leader, who did not know how to turn it on.

Under Taliban rule, television and music were forbidden. Women were barred from attending school or working outside the home, and had to wear the all-encompassing burqa whenever they appeared in public.

Today the country is home to four mobile companies and several satellite TV stations with female anchors, one of whom interviewed a Taliban official on Monday. The Taliban fighters themselves carry smartphones and could be seen taking selfies as they marveled at the capital they had rolled into virtually unopposed after 20 years of war.

Videos circulating online appear to show bearded Taliban fighters laughing and horsing around on amusement park rides and in an indoor gym.

Some things have gotten worse since the Taliban were last in power.

The city has been in the grip of a crime wave for years, one many fear will get even worse after prisons and government armories were emptied during the Taliban's advance. One of the few successes of their harsh Islamic rule was the virtual elimination of crime — suspected thieves had their hands chopped off; other criminals were executed in public.

The Taliban have pledged to restore law and order, but that could take time and might lead them to resort to brutal measures. The city's population has quintupled to 5 million over the last two decades. The Taliban, who have had no major presence in Kabul since 2001, have been going door-to-door registering names and collecting weapons in recent days.

In the meantime, many Afghans fear looters posing as the Taliban more than the militants themselves, said Saad Mohseni, owner of the popular Tolo TV network, who elected to stay in the capital after the Taliban takeover.

"These pretend Taliban could be very dangerous, because they are just hoodlums," he said.

## 'Do not give up': Americans help Afghans in new homeland

By JAMIE STENGLE and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Pleas for help from Afghans have been filling up Caroline Clarin's phone for days as she works from her rural Minnesota home and tries to provide hope to those who ping heart-wrenching messages of desperation from a world away.

Since 2017, Clarin, who ran a U.S. Department of Agriculture program in Afghanistan, and her wife, Sheril Raymond, have helped get five Afghans and their families from her program into the U.S. Now they are trying to help more than a half dozen other Afghans and their families leave Afghanistan.

"I've been getting messages about hopelessness, and waiting to be killed by the Taliban, and I said it's



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not over 'til it's over," Raymond said. "And as best as I can from sitting in my comfy chair in Minnesota where I'm safe, I am trying to say 'please do not give up hope, think of your children, and hold on.'"

Across the U.S., Americans are scrambling to help Afghans fleeing their country after the Taliban's speedy takeover. Driven by compassion, those pitching in include everyone from volunteers at refugee resettlement agencies to people like Clarin and Raymond, who are helping on their own.

Russell Smith, CEO of Refugee Services of Texas, said people are calling agencies like his and offering to help as it scrambles to prepare for the arrivals. Normally, he would get at least a week's notice that families are arriving in the cities where they'll be resettled, but that's accelerated.

"It is a little faster than we kind of were ready for, I think, probably than anybody was ready for really," Smith said of the arrivals.

Since late July, more than 2,000 Afghans have been flown to Fort Lee Army base in Virginia and thousands more are still expected. The Afghans who worked for the U.S. government and their families can qualify for special immigrant visas. Tens of thousands of others who also qualified have been left behind because of a backlog of visa applications.

From Fort Lee, the goal is to move them "as quickly as possible" to the communities where they will start their new life, said Jennifer Sime, a senior vice president at the International Rescue Committee.

Refugees receive temporary food and housing assistance, typically for their first 90 days, from nonprofit organizations operating with a combination of government grants and private donations. They can also get some long-term services such as language classes and citizenship classes, but they are expected to become self-sufficient.

"They have to be very resilient. It's not easy," said Stephen Carattini, the CEO of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington, which for more than 15 years has been annually settling hundreds of Afghan refugees in Northern Virginia. "The basics, being employed, paying their rent, that has to happen very, very quickly."

The Afghans who worked for Clarin's program in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2011 are eligible for the special immigrant visa as well since their salaries came from the U.S. military.

The program hired Afghans with college degrees in agriculture and other related fields to become trainers who would help provincial governments and farmers improve their productivity and relieve poverty.

But many of their visa applications had not moved forward for years until Clarin fired off emails to senators pointing out the cases. She diligently tracks cases and solicits letters of recommendation.

Clarin also used her retirement funds to pay for the trip so Ihsanullah Patan, a horticulturist, and his family could get out of Afghanistan. They arrived in Minnesota in May.

"It's the best investment I've ever made," Clarin said, tearing up as she stood next to Patan, who has a wife and four children, ages 4 to 11.

Patan, who had applied in 2016 for the visa, is grateful for the couple he calls family and says "without them, it would have been impossible" to get out.

"Thank God that we are here now," Patan said, adding that his friends were being killed because they had worked for the U.S.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, which provided Patan's apartment after the couple contacted them, said Clarin and Raymond "embody the best of the American spirit and the higher call to love our neighbors."

"We couldn't be more grateful for the outpouring of support from volunteers, advocates, and donors from all walks of life," O'Mara Vignarajah said.

People can help in many ways, from greeting Afghans at airports and help the families navigate their new life, resettlement agencies say.

Megan Carlton, who works at Refugee Services of Texas, also volunteers her time to set up homes for refugees in the Dallas area. She just finished filling an apartment for a family from Afghanistan who moved in Tuesday.

Over the years, she's created her own network of people who donate items to furnish the homes, filling them with necessities like pots and pans in addition to extra items like paintings and vases to make it feel

like home.

"None of us can control what's going on over there, but we can control this," she said. "We can create this home."

## Death toll from Haiti's weekend earthquake rises to 1,941

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Haitian officials raised the death toll from a deadly weekend earthquake by more than 500 on Tuesday after Tropical Storm Grace forced a temporary halt to search and rescue efforts, a delay that fed growing anger and frustration among thousands who were left homeless.

Grace battered southwestern Haiti, which was hit hardest by Saturday's quake, and officials warned some areas could get 15 inches (38 centimeters) of rain before the storm moved on. Intermittent rain fell in the earthquake-damaged city of Les Cayes and in the capital of Port-au-Prince.

Late Tuesday afternoon, the Civil Protection Agency raised the death toll to 1,941 and the number of injured to 9,900, many of whom have had to wait for medical help lying outside in wilting heat.

The devastation is centered in the country's southwestern area, where health care has reached capacity and people have lost homes and loved ones.

Patience was running out in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. Haitians already were struggling with the coronavirus, gang violence, worsening poverty and the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse when the quake hit.

Bodies continued to be pulled from the rubble, and the smell of death hung heavily over a pancaked, three-story apartment building. A simple bed sheet covered the body of a 3-year-old girl that firefighters had found an hour earlier.

Neighbor Joseph Boyer, 53, said he knew the girl's family.

"The mother and father are in the hospital, but all three kids died," he said. The bodies of the other two siblings were found earlier.

Illustrating the lack of government presence, volunteer firefighters from the nearby city of Cap-Haitien had left the body out in the rain because police have to be present before a body can be taken away.

Another neighbor, James Luxama, 24, repeated a popular rumor at many disaster scenes, saying that someone was sending text messages for help from inside the rubble. But Luxama had not personally seen or received such a message.

A throng of angry, shouting men gathered in front of the collapsed building, a sign that patience was running out for people who have waited days for help from the government.

"The photographers come through, the press, but we have no tarps for our roofs," said one man, who refused to give his name.

The head of Haiti's office of civil protection, Jerry Chandler, acknowledged the situation. Earthquake assessments had to be paused because of the heavy rain, "and people are getting aggressive," Chandler said Tuesday.

Some children were orphaned in the quake and some youngsters were starting to go hungry, said Carl-Henry Petit-Frère, a field manager for Save the Children, which said in a statement that it was distributing what it could to people living on the streets without protection from the wind and rain.

"I see children crying on the street, people asking us for food, but we are low on food ourselves as well," Petit-Frère said, adding that children were warned not to go into houses because they could collapse. "The organizations that are here are doing what they can, but we need more supplies. Food, clean water and shelter are needed most, and we need them fast."

About 20 soldiers finally showed up to help rescuers at the collapsed apartment building.

Prior to that, the only help that arrived was from poorly equipped volunteers.

"All we have are sledgehammers and hands. That's the plan," said Canadian volunteer Randy Lodder, director of the Adoration Christian School in Haiti.

Sarah Charles, assistant administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for

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Humanitarian Assistance, said its disaster response teams were forced to suspend operations as the storm arrived Monday, but members were back Tuesday to assess its impact and continue helping.

"We do not anticipate that the death toll related to this earthquake will be anywhere near the 2010 earthquake, where more than 200,000 people were killed," Charles told reporters.

The scale of the damage also was not as severe as that earthquake, she said, adding: "That's not what we're seeing on the ground right now."

In a statement, the U.S. military's Southern Command said it was moving eight helicopters from Honduras to Haiti and that seven U.S. Coast Guard cutters were en route to support the USAID team. Two cutters already are there along with two Coast Guard helicopters and U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon aircraft that are taking aerial images of earthquake devastated areas, the statement said.

The effort was being mounted "to provide the kind of emergency response that is necessary in a human tragedy and catastrophe like this," U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters at the White House.

John Morrison, public information officer for the Fairfax Co. (Virginia) Urban Search and Rescue, said its team was still trying to find survivors. Two U.S. Coast Guard helicopters had ferried searchers to six stricken communities on Monday.

"The team reports that food, health care services, safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation and shelter are all priority needs," Morrison said. He added that rescuers had not seen any signs of people trapped alive in buildings.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Tuesday that the organization had disbursed \$8 million to its agencies so that they could get supplies they need immediately. He said the U.N. is "playing a leading role" supporting Haiti, but added that "the government has the primary responsibilities."

"I think the lesson learned is always for better and improved coordination so as not to see the chaotic scenes that we had" in the aftermath of the country's devastating 2010 earthquake, Dujarric said. "We sometimes see where countries are, with the best of intentions, sending aid that may not be needed. ... So, I think the lesson learned is always better and more improved coordination to avoid waste and to avoid redundancies."

Rain and wind raised the threat of mudslides and flash flooding as Grace slowly passed over southwestern Haiti's Tiburon Peninsula before heading toward Jamaica and southeastern Cuba. Forecasters said it could become a hurricane before hitting Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

Officials said the magnitude 7.2 earthquake destroyed more than 7,000 homes and damaged nearly 5,000, leaving about 30,000 families homeless. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged.

In the village of Bonne Fin, a one-hour drive from from Les Cayes on dirt roads, the mountaintop Hospital Lumiere illustrated the anguish and complexity of Haiti's medical crisis and dire need for outside help.

No one died or was injured at the hospital when the quake hit, but the operating rooms partially collapsed.

Through cracks in a wall, Dr. Frantz Codio could see three glistening anesthesia machines he needed to perform orthopedic operations on broken bones. But he could not get to them because the building's cement roof was leaning at a crazy angle — in some places just 3 or 4 feet (0.9 meters to 1.2 meters) above the floor.

Despite warnings not to go inside the structure, Codio did so on Sunday and pulled one of the machines out.

"People said, 'Don't go in there, it's too dangerous,' but I had God with me," Codio said.

Etzer Emile, a Haitian economist and professor at Quisqueya University, a private institution in Port-au-Prince, said the earthquake will almost certainly result in more long-term poverty for Haiti's struggling southwestern region.

Political instability and gang criminality along the southern roads into the region have particularly hobbled economic activity in recent years.

"The earthquake has just given a fatal blow to a regional economy already on its knees for about 2 1/2

years," Emile said.

## U.S. families mid-adoption trying to get Afghan children out

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

After five frustrating years mired in bureaucratic delays, Bahaudin Mujtaba and wife Lisa had hoped to finally bring the 10-year-old Afghan boy they're adopting to their home in Florida this year for a chance at a different future.

But with the collapse of the Afghan government, the couple is desperately trying to get the boy, Noman, on a flight out of Kabul -- going anywhere -- before the chance to leave disappears.

In the chaos following the Taliban takeover, Noman and another family tried to get to the airport Tuesday through clogged streets, checkpoints and gunfire but were forced to turn back.

Mujtaba, who spoke to the boy and the family early Tuesday, said they hope to try again to get to the airport Wednesday.

"I have tears in my eyes this morning and my wife has tears in her eyes," he said. "I couldn't really say much else other than 'Go for it' and 'Be careful.'"

The Taliban's dramatic takeover of Afghanistan has reverberated worldwide, and for families like the Mujtabas, the fallout has been swift, deeply personal and potentially life-altering. Knowing the militant group is almost certain not to uphold the adoption agreements from the collapsed Afghan government, the American couple's best hope is to get the boy out, fast.

"Once they get to the airport, it's just a matter of waiting time. But it's a matter of waiting a few hours or a few days," Bahaudin Mujtaba said. Noman is currently in the custody of another family trying to leave.

Maybe they can get the boy to a nearby country. Maybe Pakistan. Wherever they go, he's willing to fly there and meet him.

"But the first goal is to get him out of Afghanistan safely," Mujtaba said.

It's unclear how many among the throngs of people trying to flee Afghanistan include potential adoptive children. One other U.S. family, based in Indiana, is working with the same adoption agency as Mujtaba and is trying to get a 2-year-old boy out of the country.

Mary King, executive director of Frank Adoption Center in Wake Forest, North Carolina, is working with the families and said they had full permission from Afghan courts to bring the children to the U.S. and finalize the adoptions. They were awaiting U.S. visas, but everything changed in the past few days.

"This all came about much faster than any of us anticipated, so we don't know," she said. "We have put them on every list. We've filled out every form we've been told about. Their names are everywhere we can get them, as far as with the appropriate U.S. authorities. And so now we are waiting to hear what may happen next."

U.S. adoptions from Afghanistan are relatively rare compared with adoptions from other countries, according to State Department data. From 1999 through 2019, 41 Afghan children were adopted by U.S. families. That's far fewer than other countries in the region, including 148 children from Iran and 667 from Pakistan. Other countries, like China, Ukraine and Colombia, have seen thousands of children adopted by U.S. families over the past two decades.

The process in Afghanistan required working through the Afghan Family Court, which limited the guardianship process to Muslim parents. Families that receive permission from the court can then bring a child to the U.S. to finalize an adoption, according to the State Department.

But under Taliban rule, it's all but certain not to be permitted now, Mujtaba said, especially from a family based in the U.S.

Mujtaba and his adoption agency have reached out to Florida Sen. Marco Rubio's office for help. Mujtaba has even offered to go to Afghanistan with the U.S. military, offering his familiarity with the language and culture in return for a chance to bring the boy home.

Rubio's office confirmed it is working with Mujtaba and the adoption agency but did not offer more details about what options the senator's staff was pursuing.



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Mujtaba and his wife agreed to adopt Noman, a distant relative, after Mujtaba met him during a visit to Kabul five years ago.

"I just basically fell in love with this little boy. And based on hearing everything, then we knew we had the means and the motivation to help him," he said.

The child's mother died of cancer, leaving the boy with his adult brothers and elderly father who is unable to care for him. Mujtaba described Noman as "a little boy who has big dreams." He loves music, gets top grades in school and wants to become an engineer or a doctor -- a profession Mujtaba said the boy may be drawn to because he's had to meet with so many doctors.

Noman appears to have diabetes and other medical issues, possibly stemming from nutrition problems, but Mujtaba said it's not totally clear if the doctors in Afghanistan gave him the right diagnosis or the treatments.

"That's the environment, unfortunately, that you're in, in Afghanistan," he said. "We're not really sure exactly what the problems might be, once we get here. He's fine for a period of time and then, unfortunately, he's not."

Mujtaba is an U.S. citizen who emigrated from Afghanistan 40 years ago. After the Taliban was displaced two decades ago, he returned in 2005 to the country of his birth for the first time in 20 years. He's visited Noman 10 times over the past years, staying three to five weeks at a time.

His wife, who is American, has never been to Afghanistan or met the boy in person because it seemed too dangerous to bring her, Mujtaba said.

King, whose agency primarily handles international adoptions, said her agency processed another adoption from Afghanistan in 2017, but they've never had to deal with a collapsed government. She said her team are working with the families to get the children out, hoping to secure emergency visas amid a situation she described as "very, very scary."

"I'm watching this as their social worker. I cannot fathom what they themselves are feeling and what these little boys are feeling," she said.

Mujtaba, a professor at Nova Southeastern University, said that though the adoption process had felt drawn out, they were hopeful that they were close until about a week ago.

But now, he's not sure when or if they will be able to bring the boy to his new home in Fort Lauderdale. "I think that that's in jeopardy now," he said.

## **EXPLAINER: What do we know about booster shots for COVID-19?**

**By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer**

U.S. health officials may soon recommend COVID-19 booster shots for fully vaccinated Americans. A look at what we know about boosters and how they could help fight the coronavirus:

### **WHY MIGHT WE NEED BOOSTERS?**

It's common for protection from vaccines to decrease over time. A tetanus booster, for example, is recommended every 10 years.

Researchers and health officials have been monitoring the real-world performance of the COVID-19 vaccines to see how long protection lasts among vaccinated people. The vaccines authorized in the U.S. continue to offer very strong protection against severe disease and death.

But laboratory blood tests have suggested that antibodies — one of the immune system's layers of protection — can wane over time. That doesn't mean protection disappears, but it could mean protection is not as strong or that it could take longer for the body to fight back against an infection.

The delta variant has complicated the question of when to give boosters because it is so much more contagious and much of the data gathered about vaccine performance is from before the delta variant was widely circulating. Delta is taking off at the same time that vaccine immunity might also be waning for the first people vaccinated.

Israel is offering a booster to people over 50 who were vaccinated more than five months ago. France and Germany plan to offer boosters to some people in the fall. The European Medicines Agency said it

too is reviewing data to see if booster shots are needed.

**WHEN WOULD THEY BE GIVEN?**

It depends on when you got your initial shots. One possibility is that health officials will recommend people get a booster roughly eight months after getting their second shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

Officials are continuing to collect information about the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which was authorized for use in the U.S. in late February, to determine when to recommend boosters.

**WHO WOULD GET THEM?**

The first people vaccinated in the United States would likely be first in line for boosters too. That means health care workers, nursing home residents and other older Americans, who were the first to be vaccinated once the shots were authorized last December.

**BOOSTER? THIRD SHOT? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?**

Transplant recipients and other people with weakened immune systems may not have gotten enough protection from vaccines to begin with. They can now receive a third dose at least 28 days after their second shot as part of their initial series of shots needed for them to be fully vaccinated. For those with normal immune systems, boosters are given much later after full vaccination — not to establish protection, but to rev it up again.

**WHAT QUESTIONS REMAIN?**

Still unknown is whether people should get the same type of shot they got when first vaccinated. And the nation's top health advisers will be looking for evidence about the safety of boosters and how well they protect against infection and severe disease.

Global access to vaccines is also important to stem the pandemic and prevent the emergence of new variants. Booster shots could crimp already tight global vaccine supplies.

**WHAT ABOUT THE UNVACCINATED?**

Dr. Melanie Swift, who has been leading the vaccination program at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, says getting more shots into people who haven't yet been vaccinated at all is "our best tool, not only to prevent hospitalization and mortality from the delta variant, but to stop transmission." Every infection, she says, "gives the virus more chances to mutate into who knows what the next variant could be."

"People who took the vaccine the first time are likely to line up and get their booster," Swift says. "But it's not going to achieve our goals overall if all their unvaccinated neighbors are not vaccinated."

## Democrats unveil plan to update landmark voting law

By **CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY** Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — House Democrats on Tuesday put forward a new proposal to update the landmark Voting Rights Act, seeking against long odds to revive the civil rights-era legislation that once served as a barrier against discriminatory voting laws.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Terri Sewell of Alabama, seeks to restore a key provision of the federal law that compelled states with a history of discrimination to undergo a federal review of changes to voting and elections. The Supreme Court set aside the formula that decided which jurisdictions were subject to the requirement in a 2013 decision and weakened the law further in a ruling this summer.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., pledged to move quickly and said Democrats plan to pass the bill when the House returns next week.

"With the attack on the franchise escalating and states beginning the process of redistricting, we must act," Pelosi said in a statement.

The push comes at a time when a number of Republican-led states have passed laws tightening rules around voting, particularly mail ballots. Democrats have sounded the alarm about the new hurdles to voting, comparing the impact on minorities to the disenfranchisement of Jim Crow laws, but they have struggled to unite behind a strategy to overcome near-unanimous Republican opposition in the Senate.

The new House bill, known as H.R. 4, is named after Georgia congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis, who died last year.

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Sewell announced the introduction of the bill in front of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, where Lewis was beaten during a civil rights march in 1965. The Voting Rights Act was signed into law a few months later.

"We're not looking to punish or penalize anyone. This is about restoring equal access to the ballot box. It's about ensuring that Americans know their vote counts and their vote will count at the ballot box," Sewell said.

The Lewis bill outlines a new, expanded formula that the Department of Justice can use to identify discriminatory voting patterns in states and local jurisdictions. Those entities would then need to get DOJ approval before making further changes to elections. The bill also includes a provision designed to counter the summer's Supreme Court ruling that made it harder to challenge potentially discriminatory voting changes.

A companion bill pushed by Democrats, known as the For the People Act, has stalled in the Senate amid Republican opposition and disagreement among Democrats about whether to change procedural rules in the evenly divided Senate to get it passed.

Democrats have argued both bills are needed to safeguard access to the ballot. They emphasize that the update to the Voting Rights Act would not apply to many voting changes already made by the states. The For the People Act, on the other hand, would create minimum voting standards in the U.S., such as same-day and automatic voter registration, early voting and no-excuse absentee voting. The bill would also change various campaign finance and ethics laws.

Senate Democrats have pledged to take up that more expansive bill when they return next month as the first order of business, though it is unclear how they can maneuver around GOP opposition.

Republicans signaled they'll try to stop the John Lewis Act much as they have the For the People Act. "This bill is a federal power grab and a gift to partisan, frivolous litigators who will use it to manipulate state laws and throw all federal elections into chaos, further undermining voter confidence in fair and accurate elections," said Jason Snead, executive director of Honest Elections Project Action, a conservative advocacy group.

Voting rights groups have been putting pressure on Democrats to eliminate or change the filibuster rules in the Senate, which requires 60 votes to proceed with most legislation, to get around the broad GOP opposition to the bills. That partisan opposition leaves Democrats well short of the needed support to advance them in the 50-50 Senate.

At least two Democratic senators, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, have said they oppose eliminating the filibuster though discussions are ongoing about potential changes to the rules.

Groups that back the voting measures are planning marches in several cities on Aug. 28 to call on the Senate to remove the filibuster rule.

## More protection: US likely to authorize COVID booster shots

By ZEKE MILLER and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After struggling for months to persuade Americans to get the COVID-19 vaccine, U.S. health officials could soon face a fresh challenge: talking vaccinated people into getting booster shots to gain longer-lasting protection as the delta variant sends infections soaring again.

As early as Wednesday, U.S. health authorities are expected to recommend an extra dose of the vaccine for all Americans eight months after they get their second shot, according to two people who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

That means the biggest vaccination drive in U.S. history is about to get even more extensive.

The move is being driven by both the highly contagious variant and preliminary evidence that the vaccine's protective effect starts dropping within months.

Last week, U.S. health officials recommended boosters for some people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients and organ transplant recipients. If the shots are expanded as expected to other Americans, among the first to receive them could be health care workers, nursing home residents and other older people.

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Some experts have expressed concern that a new campaign calling for boosters could muddle the public health message and undercut the continuing drive to win over the tens of millions of Americans who are hesitant to get their first COVID-19 shots.

Calling for third doses could discourage people who had been skeptical of the shot's effectiveness in the first place, Lawrence Gostin, a public health specialist at Georgetown University, warned on Tuesday.

"We have to really make sure that while we're spending a lot of time and effort on third doses that we don't undermine our campaign for first vaccinations," he said. "That's truly the existential crisis in the United States."

The booster campaign could also cause ill will toward the United States: Global health officials, including the World Health Organization, have called on wealthier nations to hold off on booster shots to ensure poor countries have enough vaccine for the initial doses.

Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng, a South African expert advising the United Nations, condemned the move toward booster shots in the U.S., saying it will have the effect of "advancing and deepening the existing inequities" when "there are people who are yet to receive a single shot."

But White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the question of whether to distribute boosters or help other nations "is a false choice. We can do both."

She said the U.S. is "far and away" the biggest contributor to the global fight against COVID-19 and will "continue to be the arsenal for vaccines" to the world.

"We also have enough supply, and we have long planned for enough supply, should a booster be needed for the eligible population," Psaki said.

Booster shots would only begin to be administered widely once the U.S. Food and Drug Administration formally approves the vaccines, which are being dispensed for now under what is known as emergency use authorization. Full approval of the Pfizer shot is expected in the coming weeks.

More than 198 million Americans have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, or 70% of those who are eligible, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Just under 60% of Americans 12 and older are fully vaccinated.

The vaccination drive has been slower than the Biden administration had hoped for. At the same time, the variant is spreading aggressively through unvaccinated communities and also causing an increasing number of "breakthrough infections" of fully inoculated people.

Studies show the vaccine remains highly protective against severe COVID-19, but results from Israel released last month suggest its effect wanes. Its effectiveness against symptomatic infection peaked at 96% two months after study participants got their second dose. By six months, it was down to about 84%.

Israel, which exclusively administered the Pfizer shot, has been offering a booster to people over 50 to control its delta surge. Researchers are still trying to understand to what extent the breakthrough infections are due to waning immunity or vulnerability to the delta variant.

The new urgency from U.S. officials reflects how quickly the variant has knocked the country back on its heels.

On July Fourth, President Joe Biden proclaimed that the nation was declaring its independence from the virus. But since then, infections, hospitalizations and deaths have increased nationwide, overloading emergency rooms across parts of the South and West.

On Monday, Pfizer and its partner BioNTech submitted data to the FDA to support authorizing a booster shot for the general public. Pfizer said a small study showed people who received a third dose had higher levels of antibodies against several versions of the coronavirus, including the delta variant. The company is working on a larger study.

Dr. William Moss of Johns Hopkins University said more data is needed on whether waning antibody levels lead to hospitalizations and deaths. The antibody research alone is "insufficient to call for booster doses for the general population."

And Dr. Carlos del Rio, a professor at Emory University's medical school, said: "Our hospitals are not full of people who were vaccinated six or eight months ago. Our hospitals are full of the unvaccinated."

Americans who received the earliest doses of Pfizer's vaccine — mainly health care workers and nursing



home residents — are approaching the eight-month mark from when they received their second dose.

"There is a concern that the vaccine may start to wane in its effectiveness," the director of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, said over the weekend. "And delta is a nasty one for us to try to deal with. The combination of those two means we may need boosters."

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are administered in two doses. Officials are continuing to collect information as well about the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which was only approved in the U.S. in late February, to determine when to recommend boosters.

## Tim Tebow's comeback story ends with Jaguars cutting him

By **MARK LONG AP Pro Football Writer**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — Tim Tebow's comeback and NFL career are over.

The Jacksonville Jaguars waived Tebow on Tuesday, parting with the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner who switched from quarterback to tight end in hopes of rejuvenating his pro football career.

"We knew that was an uphill battle for Tim," said coach Urban Meyer, who recruited Tebow to nearby Florida. "Players loved him, locker room loved him, but it was the right thing (to do)."

Tebow's blocking ranged from awkward to awful in Jacksonville's preseason opener against Cleveland on his 34th birthday. The polarizing player went viral for two botched attempts on the opening drive of the third quarter Saturday night, the second one more egregious than the first.

"He has a bunch of good plays but can't have a bad play at that position," said Meyer, who spoke to Tebow about the roster decision Monday night and again Tuesday morning.

Tebow also failed to record a catch against the Browns and got no snaps on special teams. Meyer said Tebow's play lacked consistency, especially in tackling. And if Tebow were going to make Jacksonville's 53-man roster, he needed to be a special teams contributor.

Meyer said he expects this to be the end of Tebow's playing career.

"I would guess it is," Meyer said. "We didn't get that deep with it. Obviously he's his own man, elite warrior, elite competitor. But he's also 34 years old."

Tebow was shielded from the media circus that followed him during other NFL stops and never publicly addressed his return after nearly six years away from the game. The Jacksonville native responded on Twitter and thanked his hometown team for a chance.

"Thankful for the highs and even the lows, the opportunities, and the setbacks," Tebow wrote. "I've never wanted to make decisions out of fear of failure and I'm grateful for the chance to have pursued a dream."

Tebow opened training camp as Jacksonville's fourth- or fifth-string tight end after switching positions this year. He was trying to return to the NFL after spending the previous five years in the New York Mets' organization. He hit .223 with 18 home runs and 107 RBIs while never making it to the big leagues.

He asked Meyer for a tryout after retiring from baseball in January. Meyer obliged and ended up giving him a one-year contract worth \$920,000, the minimum for a player with three accrued NFL seasons. The low-risk deal included no guaranteed money, so Tebow had to make the team to earn a dime.

And that was always the uncertain part. Jacksonville entered camp with three tight ends essentially locked into roster spots: run-blocking specialist Chris Manhertz, fellow veteran James O'Shaughnessy and fifth-round draft pick Luke Farrell.

Former and current NFL players criticized Meyer for giving Tebow a roster spot and pointed out a number of more deserving tight ends on the street. But many of Tebow's teammates welcomed him with open arms.

"It's still so cool," said quarterback Gardner Minshew, who wears No. 15 because he grew up idolizing Tebow. "I mean, every time I throw to him, I just smile. That's like my favorite thing. But it's like, it's unbelievable. You hear bigger-than-life stories about the dude and it's all real. It's unbelievable. Truly bigger-than-life-type person, so it's been really awesome to be around him."

Tebow flashed early during organized team activities and rarely dropped balls thrown his way. But once camp began and players donned full pads, Tebow faded. It quickly became clear that Tebow was less of a pass-catching option than Tyler Davis, a sixth-round selection in 2020, and second-year pro Ben Ellefson.

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His blocking woes and lack of experience on special teams made Meyer's decision a relatively easy one. "It's special teams," Meyer said. "This whole roster management is really critical as we journey here through the next two weeks. Two of the special teams phases are tackling, and he's never tackled. ... We expect to be very good on special teams. Tight end and tailback, if you can't contribute on special teams, that's a tough go."

Tebow helped Meyer and the Gators win two national championships while becoming one of the most recognizable athletes in college sports.

Denver selected Tebow with the 25th overall pick in the first round in 2010. He led the Broncos to a playoff victory in his second season, but his long windup and inaccuracy led to a short NFL career. He spent time with the Broncos, the New York Jets, New England and Philadelphia.

His last meaningful game came with the Jets in 2012. The Eagles cut him following training camp in 2015, with then-coach Chip Kelly saying Tebow wasn't good enough to be Philly's No. 3 QB.

NOTES: Veteran C Brandon Linder has strained patella tendinitis and Meyer said "we're going to sit him for a little bit, but he's fine." ... CB Tre Herndon has a sprained knee ligament and is considered "week to week." ... The Jaguars also waived CB DJ Daniel, placed DT Daniel Ross on injured reserve and waived/injured WR Josh Imatorbhebhe and Tim Jones.

## At Midwest state fairs no masks required, vaccines are free

By DAVID PITT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Nestled between corn dog stands, animal barns and booths touting hot tubs and John Deere tractors, a Hy-Vee pharmacist and several nurses have been administering COVID-19 vaccines at the Iowa State Fair to anyone eligible that wants one.

Their booth didn't have the long lines of more popular attractions, but by Monday more than 150 people had received a shot since the 11-day fair started on Thursday. More than 400,000 people attended the fair in its first four days.

Still, in a state where only half of the population is fully vaccinated, pharmacist Tiffany Aljets was encouraged that people were changing their minds.

"I think the (delta) variant has swayed a lot of people that weren't sure if they wanted it or not, and a lot of people with kids want to get their kids back in school," Aljets said Monday.

State fairs in Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota and Wisconsin also are offering COVID-19 vaccinations as the delta variant spreads nationwide and relaxed masking leaves public health officials concerned about another surge in infections.

At the Iowa State Fair on Monday, three people got vaccinated in the first two hours. Elsewhere on the fairgrounds, people stood close together in lines for rides, cheese on a stick and funnel cakes. Others pushed baby strollers through crowded barns housing sheep, pigs, cows and horses with electric fans pushing air around on a sunny 82-degree day.

Masks were rare, although some wore them inside buildings.

Fair officials canceled the 2020 event due to COVID-19 but are following Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds' policy of personal responsibility by allowing fairgoers this year to decide whether to be vaccinated or wear a mask. Public health officials recommend wearing a mask where there are crowds.

The positivity rate in Polk County, where the fairgrounds are located, has increased to nearly 11%, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. Cases have accelerated rapidly in August, increasing by nearly 42% in the past week to a seven-day average of 758.

All but three of Iowa's 99 counties are experiencing a substantial or high rate of spread, and the state's vaccination rate has stalled at about 50% fully vaccinated.

Meanwhile, the fair is on track to attract an estimated 1 million visitors.

Doctors were concerned that a surge in delta variant infections could come at an already challenging time for hospitals.

"It's not a matter of will we see increased cases, it's just a matter of how many," said Dr. Clint Hawthorne,

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an emergency medicine specialist in Des Moines. "If we were to experience a surge of COVID patients, we're going to be in some big trouble because of our capacity issues that are at hand currently which are not COVID related."

Des Moines has an acute shortage of nurses, so even if beds are available there aren't nurses to tend to them and patients can't be placed. Even now, patients coming into the emergency department can wait 10 hours for a regular hospital bed, he said.

Several Iowa fairgoers got vaccinated because of fears about the delta variant, or because family members have been sick and they understand how serious COVID-19 can be. Others have jobs that require vaccinations, Aljets said.

Jesse James, 13, of Pleasantville, rolled up his sleeve for a Pfizer shot on Monday. His mother, Angela Collins, said he's going on a class trip to Washington, D.C., in October and she wants him vaccinated before he flies.

Both acknowledged a driving force behind the decision was his grandmother.

"I'm going back to school this year and my grandma kind of nudged me into getting a vaccine," he said. "I mostly agreed with her."

Jonila Shehu, 18, saw the Hy-Vee display was offering the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and decided to get her shot.

Shehu is an American Cultural Exchange Service foreign exchange student from Kosovo was attending the fair with her host mother Tammy Beeson, of Bettendorf. She had been in the U.S. for four days and is preparing to go to college.

"I know that I'm going to be with people and it's important to me to keep myself and others safe," she said.

In Wisconsin, 608 people were vaccinated during the state fair's 11-day run, perhaps enticed by the promise of a free cream puff pastry. The push to vaccinate at the fair came as COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin hit their highest seven-day average since February.

At the Indiana State Fair, which opened July 30, Indiana University Health is offering Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson vaccinations daily. Spokeswoman Sophie Maccagnone said 304 vaccines were administered as of Monday. The fair will last more than three weeks, to spread out crowds and allow for fairground cleaning. The fair typically draws nearly 1 million people, and masks are not required.

Vaccines also will be offered by the Minnesota Department of Health, Ramsey County and Homeland Health at the Minnesota State Fair, which begins Aug. 26 and lasts for 12 days. Two million visitors typically attend.

At the 11-day Illinois State Fair, which began last Thursday, 156 shots were given through Monday, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health. Nearly 78% of them were given the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

## Transportation Sec. Buttigieg says he, husband are parents

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has announced that he and husband Chasten have become parents.

Buttigieg, the first openly gay Cabinet secretary confirmed by the Senate, posted the news Tuesday on his personal Twitter account.

"For some time, Chasten and I have wanted to grow our family," he said. "We're overjoyed to share that we've become parents! The process isn't done yet and we're thankful for the love, support, and respect for our privacy that has been offered to us.

"We can't wait to share more soon," he added.

Buttigieg, 39, has talked publicly about his desire to become a father since his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020.

Earlier this year, he told The Associated Press "we're still working at that," before adding with a smile, "Stay tuned."

Buttigieg and Chasten, 32, got married in June 2018, and Buttigieg's own father died six months later.

## EU eyes talks with Taliban but no plans to recognize them

By LORNE COOK and KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union has no immediate plans to recognize the Taliban after their sweeping victory in Afghanistan but will talk with the militants to ensure that European citizens and Afghans who have worked with the EU can leave safely, the bloc's top diplomat said Tuesday.

Speaking after leading emergency talks among the EU's foreign ministers, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell also underlined the importance of opening talks with the Taliban to help prevent a new exodus of refugees as a humanitarian crisis unfolds in the conflict-ravaged country.

"We have to get in touch with the authorities in Kabul, whatever they are. The Taliban have won the war, so we will have to talk with them," Borrell told reporters. "This dialogue will also have to focus on the means to prevent the return of foreign terrorists."

"It's not a matter of official recognition, it's a matter of dealing with" the Taliban, Borrell said.

The EU has decided to suspend development assistance to the Afghan government now that the Taliban has seized power, but the 27-nation bloc is weighing whether to boost humanitarian aid.

Borrell said there can be "no payments of development assistance until we clarify the situation." He said the Taliban must respect U.N. Security Council resolutions and human rights to earn access to the funds.

But he said "humanitarian help will continue, and maybe we will have an increase," given the number of displaced Afghans, the country's ongoing drought, and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The EU has pledged about 1.2 billion euros (\$1.4 billion) in development assistance for Afghanistan for 2021-2024.

The EU ministers agreed that the first priority should be to extract Europeans and Afghans who have helped them over the years. Spain has agreed to welcome up to 400 Afghans and to distribute them among other EU countries that are willing to provide visas.

"We cannot abandon them," Borrell said.

Many countries in Europe are concerned about an influx of refugees like the mass exodus from Syria in 2015. Afghans are already among the biggest group seeking sanctuary in Europe, after Syrians. Some EU estimates suggest about 570,000 Afghans have applied for asylum over the last six years.

"We have to ensure that the new political situation created in Afghanistan by the return of the Taliban does not lead to a large-scale migratory movement towards Europe," Borrell said, adding that will involve talks with transit countries.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the world is watching the Taliban and that "those who are now executing power in Afghanistan will be judged by their action." He said the EU is concerned about "the stability of the region. The neighboring countries will certainly be confronted with further refugee movements."

Austria, meanwhile, plans to suggest at Wednesday's meeting of EU interior ministers that deportation centers be set up in countries that neighbor Afghanistan.

The arrival in the EU of well over 1 million migrants in 2015, mostly from Syria and Iraq, sparked one of the bloc's biggest crises as nations bickered over how best to manage the influx.

Asylum applications by Afghan citizens have already climbed by a third since February as it became clear that the United States would pull its troops out of Afghanistan. More than 4,648 applications were lodged in May, according to the EU's asylum office. About half of the applications tend to be successful.

Most Afghans are likely to flee to Iran, Pakistan or other northern neighbors like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

In the meantime, the U.N.'s refugee agency is calling for a moratorium on the forced returns of Afghan citizens. The UNHCR also noted that "countries such as Iran and Pakistan have for decades generously hosted the vast majority" of Afghan refugees.



## Thousands evacuated in French Riviera due to forest fire

By DANIEL COLE and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

LA GARDE-FREINET, France (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron said firefighters have been able to “stabilize” the blaze that raced Tuesday through forests near the French Riviera, forcing thousands of people to flee homes, campgrounds and hotels in a picturesque area beloved by residents and tourists alike.

It was the latest blaze in a summer of wildfires that have swept across the Mediterranean region, leaving areas in Greece, Turkey, Italy, Algeria and Spain in smoldering ruins.

The wildfire started Monday evening, in the height of France’s summer vacation season, about 40 kilometers (24 miles) inland from the coastal resort of Saint-Tropez. Fueled by powerful seasonal winds coming off the Mediterranean, the fire had spread across 5,000 hectares (12,000 acres) of forest by Tuesday morning, according to the Var regional administration.

Some 6,000 people were evacuated from homes and a dozen campgrounds while others were locked down in a holiday center for Air France employees. At least 22 people suffered from smoke inhalation or minor fire-related injuries and two firefighters were among the injured, officials said.

Macron, who has been vacationing in a nearby coastal fortress, visited the fire zone on Tuesday.

“The worst has been avoided,” Macron said, praising the efforts of over 900 firefighters and the deployment of 11 water-dumping planes.

The destroyed landscape is “absolutely terrible in terms of biodiversity and of natural heritage ... but lives have been protected,” he said.

Water-dumping planes and emergency helicopters zipped back and forth Tuesday over hills lined with chestnut, pine and oak trees. Images shared online by firefighters showed black plumes of smoke leaping across thickets of trees as the flames darted across dry brush.

Carlo Zaglia, spokesman for the region’s firefighters, described “a violent fire” raging in the low mountain range of the Maures, making it “very difficult for firefighters to reach the trees and battle the fire.”

One evacuee told France-Bleu that smoke enveloped his car as he returned to his campsite and he barely had time to grab his baby daughter’s milk and basic belongings before fleeing. Another told BFM television about escaping as his hotel caught fire.

Local authorities closed roads, blocked access to forests and urged caution. Officials warned that the fire risk would remain very high through Wednesday because of hot, dry weather. Temperatures have reached 40 degrees C (104 F) in recent days.

Such extreme weather is expected happen more frequently as the planet is warming. Climate scientists say there’s little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events, such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods and storms.

Intense heat and wildfires have also struck other Mediterranean countries in recent weeks, with fires killing at least 75 people in Algeria and 16 in Turkey.

In Greece on Tuesday, hundreds of firefighters backed by water-dropping planes were battling a large forest fire that forced the evacuation of a nursing home and several villages northwest of Athens. Hundreds of wildfires have burned across Greece this month, fueled by the country’s longest and most severe heat wave in decades.

Also Tuesday, Israeli firefighters worked for a third consecutive day to contain a wildfire that has consumed a large swath of forest west of Jerusalem.

Worsening drought and heat — linked to climate change — have also fueled wildfires this summer in the western United States and in Russia’s northern Siberia region.

## California drought takes toll on world’s top almond producer

By TERENCE CHEA Associated Press

FIREBAUGH, Calif. (AP) — As temperatures recently reached triple digits, farmer Joe Del Bosque inspected the almonds in his parched orchard in California’s agriculture-rich San Joaquin Valley, where a deepening

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drought threatens one of the state's most profitable crops.

Del Bosque doesn't have enough water to properly irrigate his almond orchards, so he's practicing "deficit irrigation" — providing less water than the trees need. He left a third of his farmland unplanted to save water for the nuts. And he may pull out 100 of his 600 acres (243 hectares) of almond trees after the late summer harvest — years earlier than planned.

"We may have to sacrifice one of them at the end of the year if we feel that we don't have enough water next year," said Del Bosque, who also grows melons, cherries and asparagus. "That means that our huge investment that we put in these trees is gone."

A historic drought across the U.S. West is taking a heavy toll on California's \$6 billion almond industry, which produces roughly 80% of the world's almonds. More growers are expected to abandon their orchards as water becomes scarce and expensive.

It's a sharp reversal for the almond's relentless expansion in California's agricultural Central Valley, where dry Mediterranean-like climate and reliable irrigation system made it the perfect location to grow the increasingly popular nut.

Almond orchards are thirsty permanent crops that need water year-round, clashing with a worsening drought and intensifying heat waves tied to climate change. Scientists say climate change has made the American West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will keep making weather more extreme.

California almond production grew from 370 million pounds (nearly 168 million kilograms) in 1995 to a record 3.1 billion pounds (1.4 billion kilograms) in 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. During that period, land planted with almond trees grew from 756 square miles (1,958 square kilometers) to 2,500 square miles (6,475 square kilometers).

In May, the USDA projected that California's almond crop would hit a record 3.2 billion pounds (1.5 billion kilograms) this year, but in July, it scaled back that estimate to 2.8 billion pounds (1.3 billion kilograms), citing low water availability and record heat.

"A lot of growers are having to go through a stressful time to make the water they have last to keep their trees alive," said Richard Waycott, president and CEO of the Almond Board of California, which represents more than 7,600 growers and processors.

Almonds are California's top agricultural export. The industry ships about 70% of its almonds overseas, fueled by strong demand in India, East Asia and Europe, according to the board.

As almond prices rose during a previous drought that California declared from 2012 to 2016, farmers and investors planted hundreds of square miles of new orchards in areas that lack reliable water supplies.

"All of this increase in almonds and this increase in water demand, it's been done at a time when there's virtually no increase in water supply," said David Goldhamer, a water management specialist at the University of California, Davis. "The water embodied in the production of those almonds is being exported out of this country."

The almond boom has run into the second major drought that California has declared in a decade. The U.S. Drought Monitor reported that 88% of the state was in "extreme drought" as of last week, with the Central Valley facing the worst conditions.

The drought has drained reservoirs that supply water to Central Valley farms. In early August, Shasta Lake, the state's largest, was only 30% full, while Lake Oroville, the second largest, was only 24% full, according to the California Department of Water Resources.

State and federal officials have reduced water for agriculture, forcing many farmers to leave fields fallow or switch to higher-value crops that use less water.

Inside the processing facility of Stewart & Jasper Orchards, about a dozen women wearing hair nets and masks inspected almonds by hand as a river of nuts traveled over conveyer belts before they were packed into boxes and shipped to customers around the world.

The Newman, California-based company processes about 60 million pounds (27 million kilograms) of almonds annually from more than 31 square miles (80 square kilometers) of orchards, including some 3 square miles (8 square kilometers) of its own.

"The profitability of growing almonds is not the same as it was in the past," said owner Jim Jasper, whose

father co-founded the company in 1948. "The world is going to start to see less almonds."

Jasper estimates that about a third of California's orchards are planted in areas with unreliable water supplies, and many of them won't survive the drought. Some of his neighbors have stopped irrigating their orchards, and they're letting the trees die.

"As you can see, there's one orchard here that's drying up because they just didn't have the money to buy the water. And we're seeing this all over the valley," Jasper said.

As the drought drains reservoirs and Gov. Gavin Newsom calls on residents to voluntarily reduce water use by 15%, critics say the thirsty crop isn't sustainable at current levels in California.

"If we're conserving in the cities so that they can grow more almonds, it's simply not fair because it's not benefiting the majority of Californians," said Tom Stokely, a board member for the California Water Impact Network, a nonprofit group that advocates for sustainable water use.

Stokely believes the state should ban permanent crops like almond orchards in areas that don't have adequate water supplies.

"With the climate change, the drought, the heat waves we're having, something's going to change very quickly or we're going to literally see our state collapse," Stokely said. "We need to do something about it."

## **NATO chief: Afghan leaders responsible for military collapse**

**By LORNE COOK Associated Press**

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Tuesday blamed a failure of Afghan leadership for the swift collapse of the country's Western-backed armed forces, but he conceded that the alliance must also address flaws in its military training program.

NATO has been leading international security efforts in Afghanistan since 2003 but wound up combat operations in 2014 to focus on training Afghanistan's national security forces. NATO helped build up an army some 300,000 troops, but that force withered in the face of the Taliban offensive in just days.

"What we have seen in the last few weeks was a military and political collapse at a speed which had not been anticipated," Stoltenberg told reporters after chairing a meeting of NATO ambassadors.

He said parts of the Afghan army "fought bravely," but that "ultimately, the Afghan political leadership failed to stand up to the Taliban and to achieve the peaceful solution that Afghans desperately wanted."

"This failure of Afghan leadership led to the tragedy we are witnessing today," said Stoltenberg, who over the years often insisted that the Taliban would only succeed at the negotiating table and never clinch victory on the battlefield.

A year ago, NATO's "Resolute Support Mission" to train Afghan security forces involved around 10,000 personnel from 36 member and partner countries. On Sunday, a NATO official said "there are no troops under NATO command in Afghanistan currently."

Despite the flaws exposed in Afghanistan by corruption and a lack of leadership, the 30-country military alliance believes that training local security forces is the best way to combat extremists like the Islamic State group and to avoid putting Western troops in harm's way.

NATO is currently training troops and helping to build national security institutions in Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia, and has similar arrangements with Georgia and Moldova. It's also agreed to provide security advice to conflict-torn Libya "when conditions permit."

"We need to continue to fight international terrorism," Stoltenberg said, and he insisted that NATO's efforts had helped to weaken the Al Qaeda network. He said that NATO can avoid getting mired in combat operations if it successfully trains local forces.

But, he conceded, "the big question we have to ask in an honest and clear-eyed way is: why didn't the forces we trained and equipped and supported over so many years, why were they not able to stand up against the Taliban in a stronger and better way than they did?"

Stoltenberg said NATO's short-term aim in "extremely serious and unpredictable" circumstances is to ensure that personnel from member and partner countries can get out safely, as well as those Afghans who helped them.

He said about 800 civilian personnel from NATO countries have remained behind in Afghanistan to help, notably in keeping the Kabul airport running, including staff to run air traffic control, aircraft fueling operations and communications.

Stoltenberg also urged the Taliban to respect the wishes of those who want to leave and not to close border crossing points or airports. He appealed to the militants to avoid "revenge or retribution" and ensure a peaceful transfer of power.

## Archaeologists find skeleton, evidence of Greek in Pompeii

ROME (AP) — Archaeologists in the ancient city of Pompeii have discovered a remarkably well-preserved skeleton during excavations of a tomb that also shed light on the cultural life of the city before it was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in AD 79.

A skull bearing tufts of white hair and part of an ear, as well as bones and fabric fragments, were found in the tomb in the necropolis of Porta Sarno, an area not yet open to the public that is located in the east of Pompeii's urban center. The discovery is unusual since most adults were cremated at the time.

An inscription of the tomb suggested that its owner, a freed slave named Marcus Venerius Secundio, helped organize performances in Greek in Pompeii. Experts said it was the first confirmation that Greek, the language of culture in the Mediterranean, was used alongside Latin.

"That performances in Greek were organized is evidence of the lively and open cultural climate which characterized ancient Pompeii," the director of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, Gabriel Zuchtriegel, said in a statement announcing the discovery.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Zuchtriegel said Marcus Venerius clearly had been able to make a living for himself after he was freed as a slave, given the "monumental" size of his burial tomb. "He didn't become super rich, but certainly he reached a considerable level of wealth," Zuchtriegel said.

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD destroyed Pompeii. Excavations over the years have yielded remarkable discoveries of tombs, chariots and brilliantly frescoed homes.

## Amid new virus surge, Florida skeptics reconsider vaccines

By **RUSS BYNUM** Associated Press

CALLAHAN, Fla. (AP) — In a rural stretch of northeastern Florida where barely half the people have gotten a coronavirus shot, Roger West had no problem telling others he was "adamantly anti-vaccination."

The co-owner of the Westside Journal weekly newspaper used his voice as a columnist to widely share his doubts about the vaccine and his mistrust of the health experts in the U.S. who have been urging everyone to get it.

"I do not trust the Federal Government," West wrote recently. "I do not trust Dr. Fauci, I do not trust the medical profession, nor the pharmaceutical giants."

But something happened to change his mind: Two of West's close friends became ill with the virus, and a third died. Rattled and stressed, he prayed for guidance. Then, when his mother and another relative both urged him to get vaccinated, he took it as a sign from God. West drove to the Winn Dixie supermarket and rolled up his sleeve for the first of two injections of the Moderna vaccine.

"All of a sudden, it hit real close to home," he said.

West is not alone. In this inland area of Nassau County, sandwiched between Jacksonville and the Okefenokee Swamp at the Georgia-Florida line, a devastating resurgence of the coronavirus is making even some die-hard vaccine skeptics reconsider the shots.

For the week ending July 29, the county of 89,000 logged 810 new cases of the coronavirus. At that time it was the highest rate in Florida, one of the epicenters of a nationwide spike in infections driven by the highly contagious delta variant.

Some county residents who thought the pandemic had all but ended have seen multiple family members



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suddenly infected during the latest wave. One young woman in Callahan, a town of about 1,000 people, saw her fiancé, her mother and her grandmother all die from COVID-19 within a week.

"I've seen fear grip people like never before," said Dwight Allen, pastor of a 200-member congregation at The Anchor Church of God. When members ask him questions about the shot, Allen tells them he got jabbed with no ill side effects.

Dr. Phillips Cao, a family practitioner who treats patients at a University of Florida Health clinic in Callahan, said many older people in the area got coronavirus shots months ago, while younger adults put them off as infections declined sharply in the spring.

"Everybody thought it was kind of dying out or going away. ... Then you had this new variant come in," he said. "It was just ripe for another bad surge."

Before the Fourth of July, Cao said, he was seeing maybe one coronavirus patient every two weeks. Now, he said, he often tests seven patients each day. Five of them typically come back positive for the virus, and often two are so sick he sends them to a hospital.

The spike in infections could be pushing more people to get shots. State health data shows that nearly 4,400 people got vaccinated in Nassau County in the three-week period ending Aug. 12 — enough to increase the county's total vaccinations by nearly 11%.

Prior to this latest wave of the virus, Callahan Funeral Home had not handled arrangements for any COVID-19 victims since April. That has since changed. Owner Ellis McAninch said he's overseen funerals for five people who died from the virus since July — more than half his total business in the past month.

Despite his age, his proximity to virus deaths, a chronic lung illness, and his own recent bout with COVID-19, the 61-year-old McAninch had still not been vaccinated when he spoke to a reporter recently. He said at first he was wary of how quickly the shots were developed. But then he decided he had spent too long waiting to make up his mind.

"I should have already had this done," he said. "Now it's just time to bite the bullet."

While the development of the vaccines was unusually fast, it was the culmination of many years of research. The vaccines went through clinical trials involving thousands of people and have since been given to tens of millions of people over the past eight months with no serious safety concerns.

Still, there are some who won't be swayed.

In Hilliard, a town of 3,100 in Nassau County, 80-year-old Frances Sims refuses to get vaccinated. Long before COVID-19, Sims said, she feared vaccines required for school children might have harmful side effects and pushed for some of her grandchildren to get exempted based on religious beliefs.

After some members of her large family fell ill with the coronavirus, two of Sims' children persuaded her husband to get vaccinated. But she won't budge.

"Some of them are kind of aggravated with me," she said. "They say, 'Mama, if you get it, you might die,'" Sims said. "I do trust the Lord to take care of me. If I die, it's my time."

Her son Kenny Sims, a Hilliard town councilman, ended up getting jabbed in the spring after his employer announced plans to scale back paid leave for workers exposed to the virus.

He's glad he did. When the summer surge hit, Sims and his wife had to care for their grown son and daughter and a 1-year-old grandson who caught the virus. He believes the vaccine protected him and his wife from getting sick, though he's still not convinced the shots are completely safe.

"I ain't sold that this vaccine is the answer," Kenny Sims said. "But I believe it's the lesser of two evils."

## **GOP hits Biden despite divides over Afghanistan withdrawal**

**By WILL WEISSERT and ALAN FRAM Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — When President Joe Biden announced he would stick to his predecessor's plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Republican reaction was mixed and largely muted. Foreign policy had become so contentious that the party's own leaders had no single position on the end of the nation's longest war.

But the fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban's swift return to power have, at least for now,

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reunited Republicans in criticism of Biden. Longtime opponents of a withdrawal argued Monday that the president should have seen the disaster coming. Even those who cheered his decision to pull out troops turned to slamming him for doing it badly.

"An embarrassing spectacle, a diplomatic humiliation and a national security catastrophe," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

It was a rare moment of cohesion for a party that has been divided between an old guard that long pushed for U.S. military aggression and supporters of former President Donald Trump who prioritized "America First." As Republicans moved Monday to turn the chaos into a political opportunity, it was unclear how long they'd be able to paper over that split.

"If they're smart and say, 'Look, I wanted us out of Afghanistan, but not this way,'" Glen Bolger, a veteran GOP pollster who's worked on numerous congressional campaigns, said of Republicans potentially staying on the political offensive. "Not in a total surrender and not letting the Taliban just waltz in and take over everything, hurting women and taking the clock back to the 1400s."

The Taliban's entering Kabul doesn't change the fact that Republicans have essentially attempted a U-turn on foreign policy — the kind of about-face that likely muddles any case they can make for blaming Biden without drawing some political blowback themselves.

The party has moved sharply away from the hawkish days just after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when President George W. Bush first led the invasion of Afghanistan and spent years pushing nation-building and aggressive military intervention abroad. The Trump administration agreed late in its term to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan this past May, with the then-president saying last year, "Now it's time for somebody else to do that work."

"You know it's been 19 years and even they are tired of fighting," Trump said, though he added, "If bad things happen, we'll go back."

That agreement — it also entailed the Afghan government releasing 5,000 prisoners, some of whom may have joined the latest Taliban offensive — was supported by many Republicans. That endorsement didn't waver, even when Biden delayed sending home the roughly 2,500 U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan until Sept. 11, so their departure would mark the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks.

Cruz was among those who welcomed that decision. He said in April he was "glad" troops were coming home.

"U.S. efforts at nation building actually makes things worse, not better," Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., a close ally of Trump, said on his podcast this week.

Biden returned to the White House from Camp David and tried to refocus the debate on whether the U.S. still belonged in Afghanistan, not how it exited.

"I'm now the fourth American president to preside over war in Afghanistan," he said. "I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth."

Asked, meanwhile, if negotiating with the Taliban lent legitimacy to terrorists, Mike Pompeo, Trump's former secretary of state and a key architect of the Afghanistan peace agreements, insisted on "Fox News Sunday" that "we never trusted the Taliban."

Still, some of Pompeo's fellow Republicans say Trump shares the blame for what is now unfolding.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., who served in the Air Force in Afghanistan, faulted "Donald Trump's terrible deal he negotiated" but also Biden's "terrible execution of a deal he never should have followed through on."

"At this moment, people are super excited about, or super focused on, how can they blame the other side. How can they win this political back and forth," Kinzinger said. "I think Donald Trump bears huge blame and Joe Biden will ultimately bear the ultimate blame."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, told reporters in Anchorage that she was among those who didn't anticipate U.S. troops would be or should be in Afghanistan forever. But, she said, "what we have seen play out, I think, is troubling at such a degree and such a level."

Murkowski added: "I think there's going to be a lot of review about how we came to be at this place at this moment."

Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., whose father helped shape Bush's foreign policy as his vice president and who

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herself is one of Trump's fiercest GOP critics, tweeted that the "calamity" in Afghanistan began "with the Trump administration negotiating with terrorists and pretending they were partners for peace."

Cheney added that it is "ending with American surrender as Biden abandons the country to our terrorist enemies."

Former President Bush, in a statement late Monday, appeared to urge the Biden administration to use its "legal authority to cut the red tape" for refugees. Bush said he and former first lady Laura Bush are deeply saddened by what's happening in Afghanistan.

"Our hearts are heavy for both the Afghan people who have suffered so much and for the Americans and NATO allies who have sacrificed so much," Bush said.

But Bush, who last month criticized the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and voiced concerns for the fate of Afghan women and girls, did not directly criticize Biden. He said he was confident evacuation efforts "will be effective because they are being carried out by the remarkable men and women of the United States Armed Forces, diplomatic corps, and intelligence community."

Other Republicans have been more eager to paint what's unfolded as a Biden problem. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called the events in Afghanistan an "unmitigated disaster" and said that the Biden administration "looks to me like it couldn't organize a two-car funeral."

"Simply the fact that President Trump announced we were going to leave in May didn't mean President Biden had to do that," McConnell said of withdrawing U.S. forces.

The National Republican Congressional Committee launched online attacks against Democrats looking at tough House reelection battles during next year's midterms for their past support of Biden's Afghanistan policy.

Others have gone further. Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, lumped the Afghanistan developments with what he called the president's failure to address rising inflation or secure the U.S.-Mexico border and wondered in a tweet, "Has time come to exercise the provisions of the 25th Amendment?" Those provisions could remove Biden from office.

"Democrats control the House, Senate & @WhiteHouse," tweeted Scott, who was traveling Monday and unavailable for further comment. "What in the world is Joe Biden doing?"

But Kinzinger countered that he thinks "both parties failed the American people."

"They were so eager to go out and just make statements that get applause at a rally like 'bring all the troops home,' without the adequate reality that leaders have got to lead and explain to the American people why the troops are there and why they're important," Kinzinger said. "Instead, we just get focused on the next election. This is the result of that."

## Today in History By The Associated Press

Today is Wednesday, Aug. 18, the 230th day of 2021. There are 135 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 18, 1894, Congress established the Bureau of Immigration.

On this date:

In 1587, Virginia Dare became the first child of English parents to be born in present-day America, on what is now Roanoke Island in North Carolina. (However, the Roanoke colony ended up mysteriously disappearing.)

In 1846, during the Mexican-American War, U.S. forces led by Gen. Stephen W. Kearny occupied Santa Fe in present-day New Mexico.

In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing American women's right to vote, was ratified as Tennessee became the 36th state to approve it.

In 1954, during the Eisenhower administration, Assistant Secretary of Labor James Ernest Wilkins became the first Black official to attend a meeting of the president's Cabinet as he sat in for Labor Secretary James P. Mitchell.

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In 1958, the novel "Lolita" by Vladimir Nabokov was first published in New York by G.P. Putnam's Sons, almost three years after it was originally published in Paris.

In 1963, James Meredith became the first Black student to graduate from the University of Mississippi.

In 1969, the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in Bethel, New York, wound to a close after three nights with a mid-morning set by Jimi Hendrix.

In 1983, Hurricane Alicia slammed into the Texas coast, leaving 21 dead and causing more than a billion dollars' worth of damage.

In 1988, Vice President George H.W. Bush accepted the presidential nomination of the Republican National Convention in New Orleans.

In 1993, a judge in Sarasota, Fla., ruled that Kimberly Mays, the 14-year-old girl who had been switched at birth with another baby, need never again see her biological parents, Ernest and Regina Twigg, in accordance with her stated wishes. (However, Kimberly later moved in with the Twiggs.)

In 2014, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon ordered the National Guard to Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis convulsed by protests over the fatal shooting of a Black teen. Don Pardo, 96, a durable radio and television announcer known for his introductions with a booming baritone on "Saturday Night Live" and other shows, died in Tucson, Arizona.

In 2017, Steve Bannon, President Donald Trump's top White House strategist, was forced out of his post by Trump. (Bannon would step down as Breitbart News chairman in January 2018 after the release of a book in which he criticized Trump and members of his family; he was pardoned by Trump in the final hours of Trump's term after being charged with diverting money from donors who believed the money would be used to build a wall along the southern border.)

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama and European leaders demanded that Syrian President Bashar Assad resign, saying his brutal suppression of his people made him unfit to lead. Vice President Joe Biden met with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Five years ago: For the first time since declaring his presidential run, Republican Donald Trump offered an apology to those who might have been hurt by his caustic comments, saying he regretted some of what he had said "in the heat of debate." Former NFL star Darren Sharper was sentenced by a federal judge in New Orleans to more than 18 years in prison for drugging women in order to rape them — double the sentence recommended by prosecutors. At the Rio Games, Jamaica's Usain Bolt completed an unprecedented third consecutive sweep of the 100- and 200-meter sprints. Retired Army Gen. John W. Vessey, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, died in North Oaks, Minnesota, at age 94.

One year ago: Democrats formally made Joe Biden their 2020 presidential nominee at their all-virtual national convention. The Republican-led Senate intelligence committee concluded that the Kremlin had launched an aggressive effort to interfere in the 2016 presidential contest on behalf of Donald Trump, and that the Trump campaign's interactions with Russian intelligence services had posed a "grave" counter-intelligence threat. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy said he would "suspend" some operational changes to mail delivery until after the November election; critics had blamed the changes for widespread delays and warned that they could disrupt the voting. Wall Street clawed back the last of the losses unleashed by the coronavirus, as the S&P 500 reached a new all-time high.

Today's Birthdays: Former first lady Rosalynn (ROH'-zuh-lihn) Carter is 94. Movie director Roman Polanski is 88. Actor-director Robert Redford is 85. Actor Henry G. Sanders is 79. Actor-comedian Martin Mull is 78. R&B singer Sarah Dash (LaBelle) is 76. Rock musician Dennis Elliott is 71. Comedian Elayne Boosler is 69. Actor Denis Leary is 64. Actor Madeleine Stowe is 63. Former Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner (GYT'-nur) is 60. ABC News reporter Bob Woodruff is 60. The former president of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, is 59. Actor Adam Storke is 59. Actor Craig Bierko (BEER'-koh) is 57. Rock singer-musician Zac Maloy (The Nixons) is 53. Rock singer and hip-hop artist Everlast is 52. Rapper Masta Killa (Wu-Tang Clan) is 52. Actor Christian Slater is 52. Actor Edward Norton is 52. Actor Malcolm-Jamal Warner is 51. Actor Kaitlin Olson is 46. Rock musician Dirk Lance is 45. Actor-comedian Andy Samberg (TV: "Saturday Night Live") is 43. Country musician Brad Tursi (Old Dominion) is 42. Actor Mika Boorem is 34. Actor Maia Mitchell is 28. Actor Madelaine Petsch is 27. Actor Parker McKenna Posey is 26.