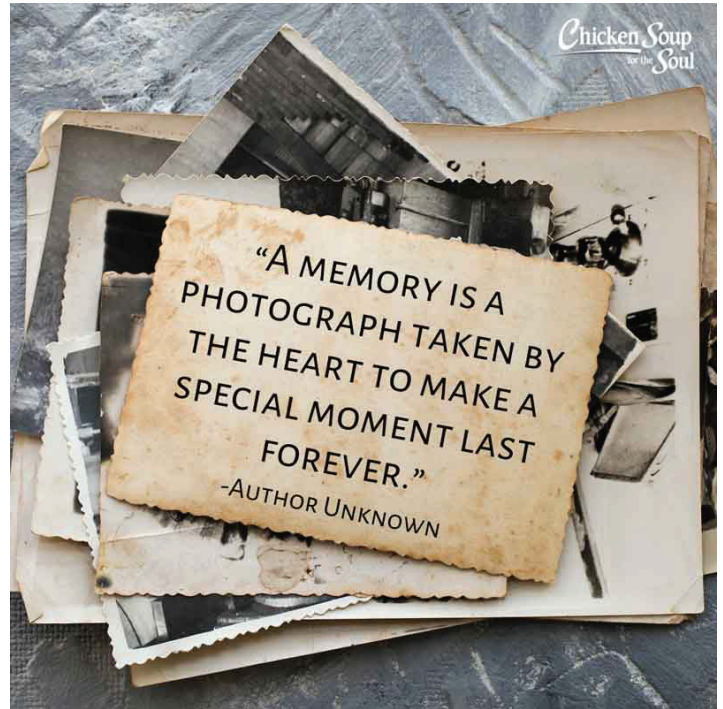


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- [2- Groton Area Football Preview](#)
- [3- Spotlight on Groton Area Staff: Supt. Joe Schwan](#)
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Water Superintendent Terry Heron along with Dwight Zerr were presented with a 20-year certificate from the S.D. Dept. of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The certificate is pictured on the left.



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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Groton Area Football Preview

Sport: Varsity Football

Head Coach: Shaun Wanner 35th Season 21st Year In Groton

Assistant Coaches: Travis Kurth, Seth Erickson, Dalton Locke

Seniors: 7 Starters 8 Letterwinners
Kaden Kurtz QB/LB *Starter *Letterwinner
Pierce Kettering RB/LB *Starter *Letterwinner
Jordan Bjerke WR/LB *Starter *Letterwinner
Favian Sanchez WR/DB *Starter *Letterwinner
Jackson Cogley WR/Safety *Starter *Letterwinner
Seth Johnson OL/DL *Starter *Letterwinner
Evin Nehls OL/DL *Starter *Letterwinner
Marcos Garcia TE/LB *Letterwinner

Juniors: 1 Starter 6 Letterwinners
Andrew Marzahn RB/DB *Starter *Letterwinner
Jacob Lewandowski WR/DB *Letterwinner
Ethan Gengerke TE/DE *Letterwinner
Caleb Hanten OL/DL *Letterwinner
Kaleb Antonsen OL/DL *Letterwinner
Cole Bisbee OL/LB *Letterwinner

Sophomores: 2 Starters 3 Letterwinners
Logan Ringgenberg OL/DL *Starter *Letterwinner
Colby Dunker RB/LB *Starter *Letterwinner
Holden Sippel OL/DL *Letterwinner
Jackson Garstecki WR/DB

Freshmen:
Teylor Diegel
Christian Ehresmann
Kaden Kampa
Kellen Antonsen
Karsten Jeschke
Payton Mitchell
Korbin Kucker
Drew Thurston
Caden McInerney
Aiden Heathcote
Easten Ekern
Carson Herrick
Nick Morris

Team Strengths:

We return several skill positions from last season and also our starting Quarterback/Linebacker Kaden Kurtz who returns from a knee injury suffered during game two of last season. Team speed and experience is also a strength. Good group of young men that worked hard during the off season to become better.

Plans for Improvement:

We must develop our offensive and defensive line. We lost four Senior linemen to graduation. We also must become more physical as a team and need leadership from our upperclassmen and focus on becoming better every game.

Season Outlook:

If we stay healthy I like our post season chances. Every team we play this season will present some challenges. I like this group they play hard and have fun playing football.

Football

Fri., Aug. 20 Clark/Willow Lake 7:00
Fri., Aug. 27 Redfield 7:00
Fri., Sept. 3 at Webster 7:00
Fri., Sept. 10 at Deuel 7:00
Fri., Sept. 17 Mobridge-Pollock (HC) 7:00
Fri., Sept. 24 Aberdeen Roncalli 7:00
Fri., Oct. 1 Dakota Hills @ Wilmot 7:00
Fri., Oct. 15 at Sisseton 7:00
Thurs., Oct. 21 First Round Playoffs
Thurs., Oct. 28 Second Round Playoffs
Fri., Nov. 5 Quarterfinals
Nov. 12 State at Dakota Dome

Spotlight on Groton Area Staff



Name: Joe Schwan

Position: Superintendent

Length of Employment: 2013-Present

The role of the school superintendent is to manage and supervise the operations of the school district they are employed by. They oversee and participate in the operations of multiple departments from Human Resources to Policy Development. Their job requires the superintendent to pay attention to every department involved with their school, be involved in the development of policies and the school's curriculum, and be aware of the state of affairs in regards to each teacher and their classes. In

the Groton Area School District, the intensive position of Superintendent is held by Joe Schwan, who has worked in this position for a total of eight years.

Before he began his work in the field of education, Mr. Schwan attended Northern State University and obtained a bachelor's degree in Mathematics Education in 2005. He would go on to obtain his master's degree in Leadership & Administration two years later, and obtain yet another degree in the form of an Education Specialist degree in 2014 from the University of South Dakota.

Before he became the superintendent of the Groton Area School District, Mr. Schwan worked as the Middle School and High School Principal for two years. He also worked as the middle school principal and athletic director at Hamlin for two years and the math teacher in Arlington for four years.

Although his duties as the superintendent have become more intensive in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly presented challenges and obstacles have only pushed Mr. Schwan to do better in the face of these new difficulties. As a man driven by the prospect of allowing his students to succeed in school and whatever they want to do after they graduate, he has taken the challenges presented by the consequences of COVID-19 in stride.

When he is not supervising the operations of the school district and its employees, Joe enjoys watching a variety of sports at both the varsity and professional levels and supporting his kids with their extracurricular activities.

Editor's Note: This is a continuing series compiled by Benjamin Higgins. Higgins who is working for the Groton Independent through the Project Skills program.

Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 Vaccines for Immunocompromised Individuals Now Available

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health announced that a third shot of both Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are available for immunocompromised individuals following approval by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) emergency use authorization amendment.

“We are inviting all immunocompromised residents to further protect themselves from COVID-19 and obtain a third COVID-19 shot after speaking with their doctors,” said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. “Residents can access vaccines the same way they did their first shots, and there is no cost to them.”

Immunocompromised individuals are especially vulnerable to COVID-19, given they are more at risk of serious and/or prolonged illness. Currently, the CDC recommends that moderately to severely immunocompromised individuals receive an additional dose, especially those who:

- Have been receiving active cancer treatment for tumors or cancers of the blood;
- Transplant patients, including those who received a stem cell transplant within the last 2 years;
- Have moderate or severe primary immunodeficiency (DiGeorge syndrome, Wiskott-Aldrich syndrome);
- Have HIV and/or are on active treatments with high-dose corticosteroids; and
- Are taking drugs that suppress their immune system/response.

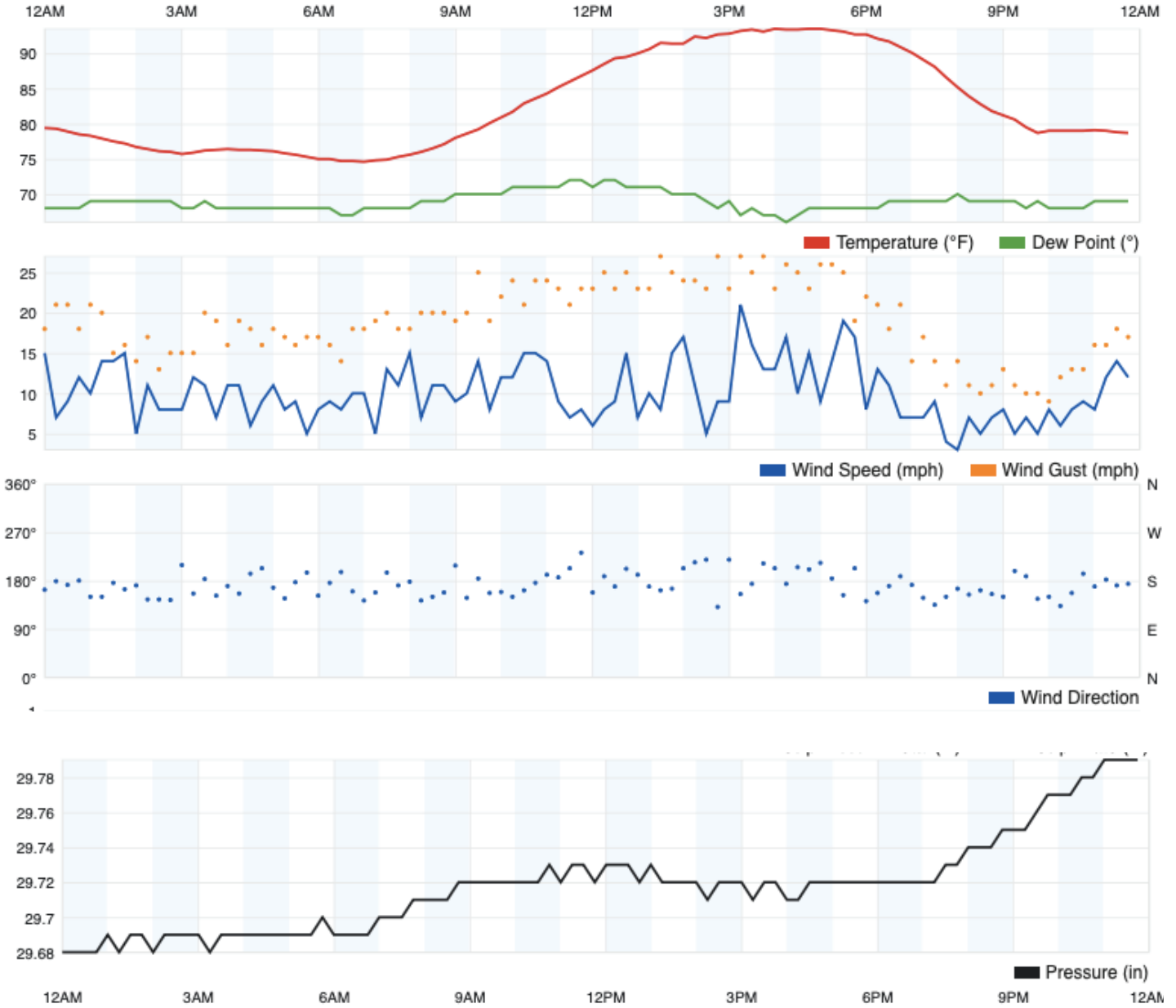
Patients should always talk to their healthcare providers about their medical conditions and whether getting an additional dose is appropriate for them. To find vaccine providers across South Dakota, [click here](#).

For latest news and COVID-19 available resources in South Dakota, visit DOH.SD.GOV.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny then
Sunny and
Breezy

High: 94 °F

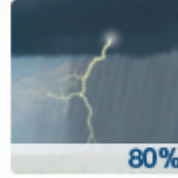
Tonight



Partly Cloudy
then Chance
T-storms

Low: 68 °F

Friday



T-storms

High: 77 °F

Friday
Night



T-storms

Low: 55 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 73 °F



ISSUED: 4:42 AM -
Thursday, August 19, 2021

Thunderstorm Timing

Probability of Thunder Forecast

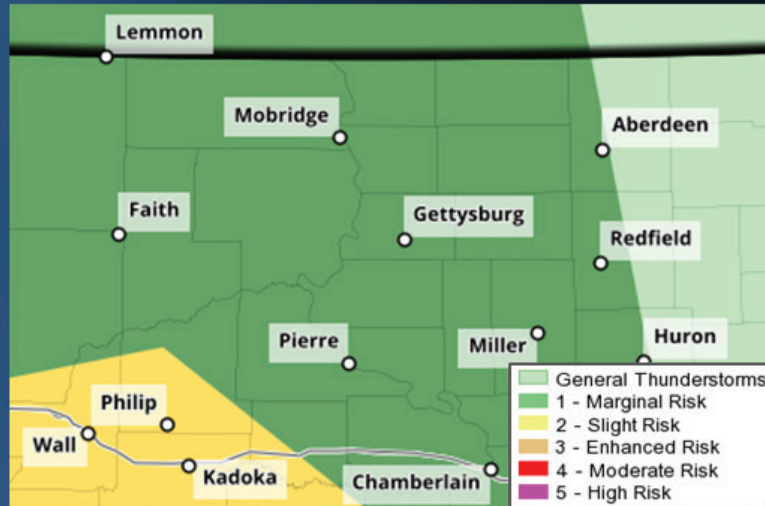
	8/19 Thu											8/20 Fri											8/21 Sat																				
	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am
Aberdeen	1	1	1	4	7	5	4	10	17	22	28	28	49	49	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	74	74	74	72	72	63	63	63	55	55	55	40	40	40	39	39	39	12	12	12	12	
Britton	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	5	8	11	11	33	33	33	51	51	51	62	62	62	75	75	75	84	84	70	70	70	68	68	68	50	50	50	50	50	50	17	17	17	17	
Eagle Butte	12	13	23	42	60	60	60	72	83	61	61	59	48	48	48	51	51	51	51	51	69	69	69	69	69	69	50	50	50	50	50	50	19	19	19	19	19	0	0	0	0		
Eureka	5	4	6	10	13	15	17	29	41	45	49	49	52	52	52	54	54	54	56	56	56	68	68	68	65	65	65	64	64	64	62	62	62	38	38	38	37	37	37	10	10	10	10
Gettysburg	4	4	6	13	20	29	39	45	51	54	57	57	52	52	52	58	58	58	49	49	49	45	45	45	50	50	50	55	55	55	49	49	49	28	28	28	28	28	28	0	0	0	0
Kennebec	3	4	5	21	36	38	41	47	53	57	61	61	77	77	77	62	62	62	56	56	56	37	37	37	45	45	45	41	41	41	37	37	37	19	19	19	19	19	0	0	0	0	
McIntosh	10	11	10	25	40	52	64	70	77	57	57	53	26	26	26	35	35	35	35	35	35	77	77	77	74	74	74	56	56	56	56	56	56	22	22	22	22	22	0	0	0	0	
Milbank	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	3	5	5	12	12	12	28	28	28	43	43	43	62	62	62	92	92	92	72	72	72	45	45	45	40	40	40	30	30	30	18	18	18	18
Miller	3	4	3	8	14	15	16	24	33	41	50	50	66	66	66	67	67	67	68	68	68	59	59	59	45	45	45	48	48	48	29	29	29	28	28	28	28	28	28	0	0	0	0
Mobridge	6	7	7	16	24	34	44	53	62	61	63	63	50	50	50	46	46	46	48	48	48	49	49	49	72	72	72	59	59	59	57	57	57	28	28	28	28	28	28	0	0	0	0
Murdo	10	10	17	32	47	54	60	67	73	63	64	64	64	64	64	58	58	58	59	59	59	50	50	50	51	51	51	40	40	40	39	39	39	17	17	17	17	17	0	0	0	0	
Pierre	6	6	7	24	41	47	52	57	63	59	62	62	64	64	64	48	48	48	45	45	45	40	40	40	50	50	50	47	47	47	42	42	42	21	21	21	21	21	0	0	0	0	
Redfield	1	1	1	5	10	9	7	17	27	33	39	39	59	59	59	67	67	67	65	65	65	72	72	72	59	59	59	55	55	55	34	34	34	32	32	32	31	31	31	12	12	12	12
Sisseton	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	1	2	3	5	5	20	20	20	36	36	36	52	52	52	75	75	75	86	86	86	71	71	71	63	63	63	44	44	44	42	42	42	18	18	18	18
Watertown	1	1	0	1	2	1	0	2	4	8	11	11	21	21	21	40	40	40	49	49	49	79	79	79	84	84	84	63	63	63	38	38	38	38	34	34	34	32	32	16	16	16	16
Wheaton				1	2	1	0	1	2	3	5	5	12	12	12	30	30	30	49	49	49	65	65	65	91	91	91	77	77	77	70	70	70	46	46	46	43	43	43	21	21	21	21



National Weather Service
Aberdeen South Dakota

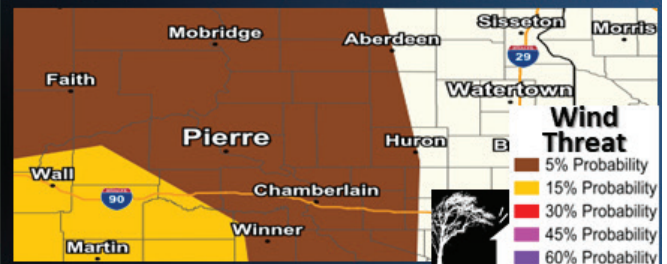
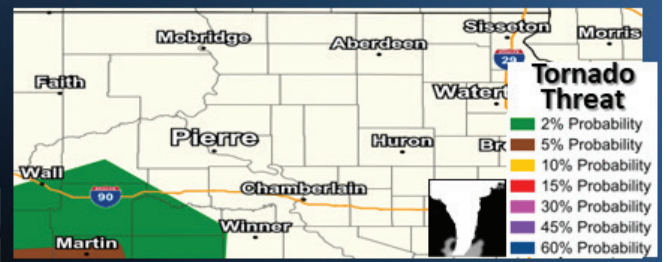
This graph should give you some idea of when you can expect storms for most communities across the area through the end of the work week.

Severe Threat Late This Afternoon/Evening



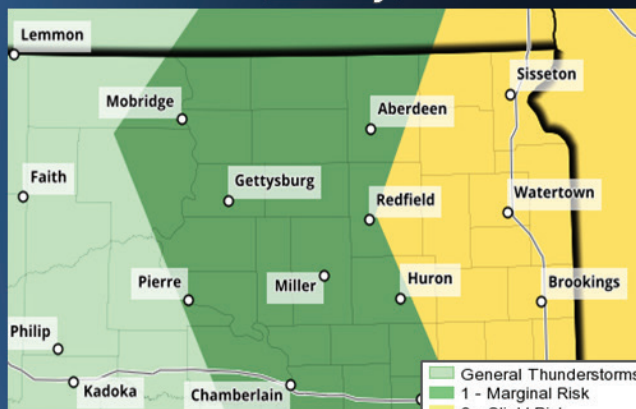
National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Issued: 4:20 AM - Thursday, August 19, 2021



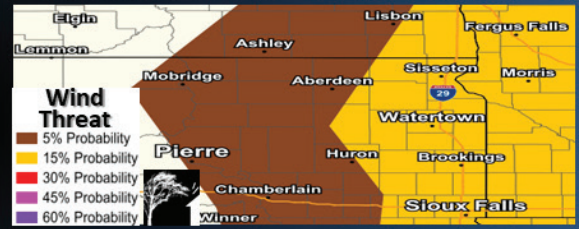
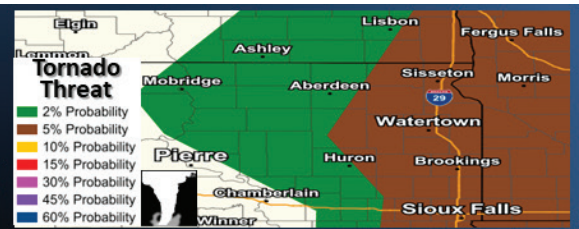
Storms will develop west river this afternoon and evening. The main threats include wind and hail, and we can't rule out an isolated tornado or two. The severe weather threat diminishes as storms move into the Missouri valley in the evening and early overnight hours.

Severe Threat Friday



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Issued: 4:31 AM - Thursday, August 19, 2021



The storm threat migrates east for Friday with storms developing in the afternoon. The threats includes hail, strong winds, heavy rain and tornadoes.

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Today in Weather History

August 19, 1899: An estimated F3 tornado passed 3 miles north of Clear Lake. The tornado killed a man by flying debris as five homes, and many barns were destroyed.

August 19, 1983: Between 0155 and 0330 CST, thunderstorm winds blow through Brown County. At 0155, an estimated 64 mph wind gust was observed on the southeast corner of Warner. A 60 mph wind gust was measured at the Aberdeen Airport at 0218. By 0330 an estimated wind gust of 75 mph was observed in Ordway.

August 19, 1991: A thunderstorm produced about five inches of rain, strong winds, and hail in Ridgeview, Dewey County. Three-grain bins were blown over. One of the bins hit a house causing considerable damage. Wind gusts were estimated to be 60 mph. High winds continued into Sully and Hughes Counties.

1890: An estimated F3 tornado hit South Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. About 400 buildings were destroyed in the industrial and more impoverished residential section of town. The death toll was 16 and damage was estimated at \$400,000.

1896: The famous Cottage City (Oak Bluffs) waterspout occurred off Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The vortex was 3,600 feet high, formed three times, and was well photographed.

1788 - A small but powerful hurricane inflicted great havoc upon forests along a narrow track from New Jersey to Maine. A similar storm track today would cause extreme disaster in the now populated area. (David Ludlum)

1969 - 'Never say die' Camille let loose a cloudburst in Virginia resulting in flash floods and landslides which killed 151 persons and cause 140 million dollars damage. Massies Hill VA received 27 inches of rain. (David Ludlum)

1986 - The temperature at San Antonio, TX, soared to an all-time record high of 108 degrees. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - Thunderstorms moving out of southeastern Nebraska spread severe weather into eastern Kansas and western Missouri during the day. Thunderstorms in Nebraska produced hail three inches in diameter at Albion, and high winds which downed a large tent at Waterloo injuring a dozen persons. Thunderstorms in Kansas produced baseball size hail northwest of Topeka, and wind gusts to 80 mph at Fulton. Ten persons were injured in a thunderstorm at Princeton KS, and damage to crops in southern Franklin County KS was estimated at 3.5 million dollars. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Raleigh, NC, reported a record hot temperature reading of 103 degrees. Afternoon thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced wind gusts to 75 mph in southern Pittsburgh County. Thunderstorms in Indiana produced 4.50 inches of rain at Morgantown. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Early morning thunderstorms deluged southeastern Delaware with six to ten inches of rain in four to six hours, with local reports of 13 to 20 inches of rain. Twenty-six major roads were closed or damaged, and fourteen bridges were washed out. Flooding caused nearly four million dollars damage to local businesses. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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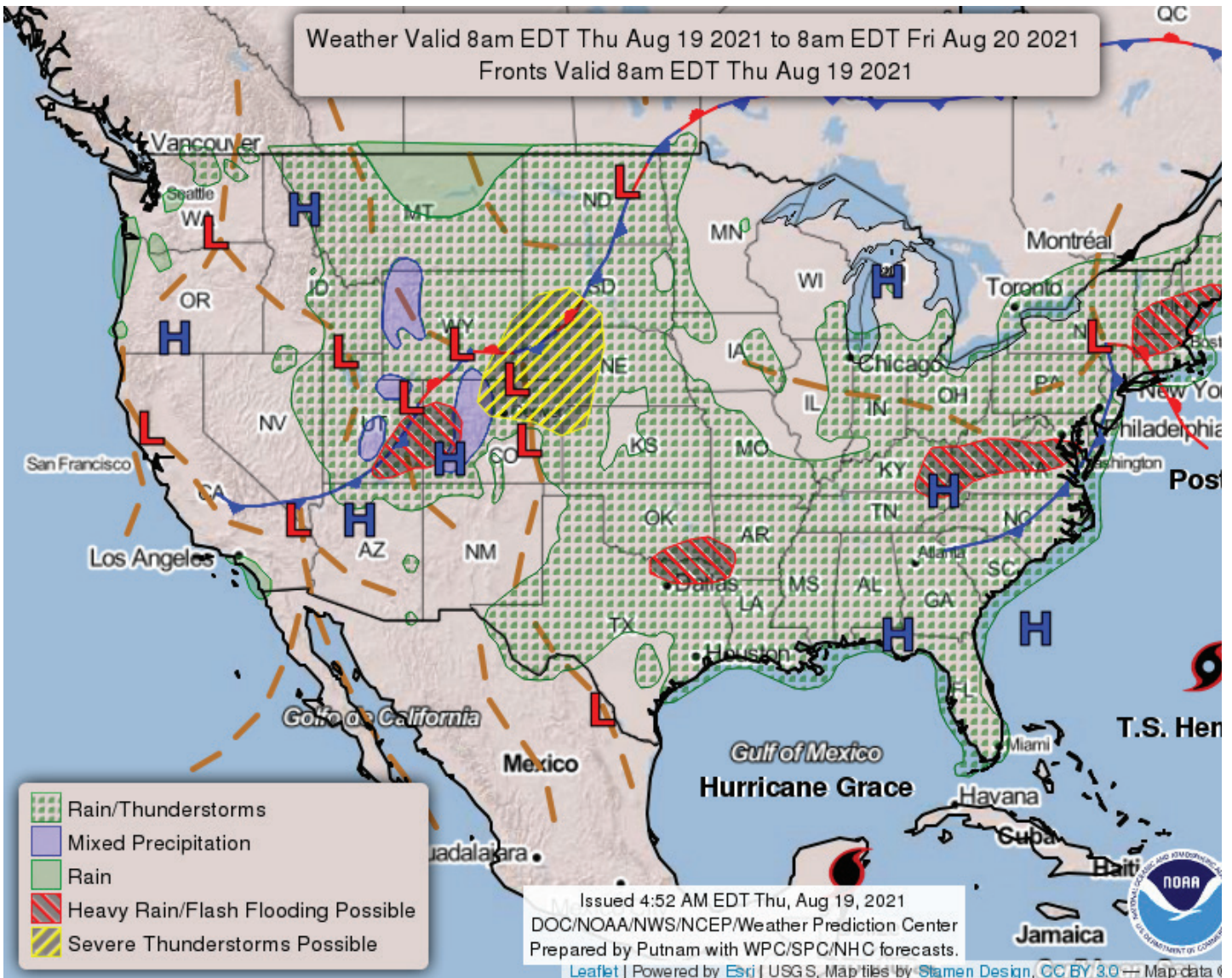
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 94 °F at 3:36 PM
Low Temp: 75 °F at 6:32 AM
Wind: 33 mph at 3:06 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 103° in 1976
Record Low: 34° in 2004
Average High: 83°F
Average Low: 56°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 1.30
Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12
Average Precip to date: 15.40
Precip Year to Date: 8.39
Sunset Tonight: 8:34 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:41 a.m.



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"NOT HERE FOR VERY LONG"

A soldier wrote his dad from a combat zone in a war-torn country. In the upper left hand corner under his name he wrote, "Not Here for Very Long."

True of the soldier - true of each of us. Life at its longest is very short in light of eternity. Wisely Moses advised us to go to God and ask Him to: "Teach us the brevity of life, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Time has no favorites. We are each given twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and fifty-two weeks a year. It does not matter who we are or what God has called us to do, none of us can add one second of time to our lives once God calls us home. We must guard our time and use it wisely to honor and glorify Him.

Time can be used to influence others - one way or another. It would be interesting to keep a record of our time as an accountant does money - what we spent and how we invested it. We could see what we did with our time and discover whether or not we helped or hindered others, led them closer to God or drove them from Him.

Time gives us opportunities to serve the Lord. Jesus said, "All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned by the One who sent Me. There is little time left before night falls and all our works come to an end."

Time ends with an interview. Each of us will stand before God one day and have an opportunity to review our "time-sheet" with Him. What will matter most on that day is whether or not there was a day when we accepted Christ as our Savior. Do it today!

Prayer: Father if any reading this Seed has not received You as Savior, may they do so today. Then, together, may we use the gift time to do Your work. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 90:12 Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

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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 Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

01-07-16-25-30

(one, seven, sixteen, twenty-five, thirty)

Estimated jackpot: \$49,000

Lotto America

27-30-38-45-50, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 5

(twenty-seven, thirty, thirty-eight, forty-five, fifty; Star Ball: three; ASB: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.45 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$256 million

Powerball

35-36-51-55-61, Powerball: 26, Power Play: 2

(thirty-five, thirty-six, fifty-one, fifty-five, sixty-one; Powerball: twenty-six; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$274 million

SD Guard chief says donation didn't affect deployment plans

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The head of the South Dakota National Guard said Wednesday that Gov. Kristi Noem didn't tell him she would use a private donation for the deployment to the U.S. border with Mexico until after the mission was already planned.

Noem's decision to accept a \$1 million donation from a Tennessee billionaire last month was met with hefty criticism from those who said it allowed a private donor to commandeer a military force. But Maj. Gen. Jeffery Marlette told a legislative budgeting committee Wednesday that the donation was not a factor in planning the deployment.

"Our National Guard is not for hire," he told lawmakers. "Nowhere in this planning process was there a discussion of, 'I'll go send the Guard if I can find somebody to pay for it.'"

The Republican governor last month described the \$1 million donation offer from billionaire Republican donor Willis Johnson as a "surprise" that came as she was deciding whether to send police officers or National Guard troops, as well as how to fund the deployment. The state was responding to a request from Texas and Arizona to send law enforcement officers under an agreement between states to assist during emergencies

The costs for the two-month deployment will likely run over Johnson's \$1 million. Marlette said the Guard expects to spend over \$1.3 million by the middle of September. That will be paid from the state emergency and disaster fund, which is overseen by an agency tasked with preparing the state for natural disasters or other emergencies. Johnson's donation will flow through the fund, but lawmakers questioned how much money the fund already has and whether they will be asked to fund it during next year's legislative session.

Marlette defended the deployment of 48 soldiers as helping halt the flow of drugs, calling the border a "doorway" for meth and other dangerous drugs in South Dakota. He said Guard members have seen evidence of Mexican cartels fighting over control of the border crossings.

"Our governor said this is a national security, this is a drug issue, this is important to South Dakota," Marlette told the lawmakers.

National Guard members have also assisted families who are crossing to claim asylum, including at one point helping deliver a baby and performing CPR on a dying 2-year-old child, Marlette said.

The governor said she was considering extending the National Guard's deployment after visiting the National Guard members last month, but Marlette said he did not have any updates on whether the deployment would last beyond another month. Guard members are paid a daily rate ranging from \$200 to \$248, plus a daily food allowance of \$55. Those salaries, plus the costs of transporting equipment, paying for hotels and transportation, make up the bulk of the expense for the deployment, according to Marlette.

Several lawmakers questioned how the deployment would be funded if the governor decides to extend it. Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba said the state funding issue was "complicated" by the private donation.

The governor's spokesman Ian Fury said her office has requested reimbursement from Texas, but does not anticipate them paying anything. He added that she plans to continue using the emergency and disaster fund for the deployment.

"Gov. Noem has extended the deployment for an additional 30 days. They will continue to deliver on the mission objectives of protecting the border, intercepting illegal immigrants, and providing drug interdiction against the cartels," Fury said.

South Dakota is also expected to send 125 soldiers for a yearlong deployment as part of a separate federal mission later this year. That deployment will be funded by the federal government.

Box Elder man sentenced to life on child sex abuse charges

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A former VFW leader has been sentenced in federal court to life in prison after pleading guilty to sexually exploiting a minor and attempted enticement of a minor using the internet.

The Rapid City Journal reports Adam R. Swift, 31, of Box Elder, was sentenced on Tuesday. He is the former commander of VFW Post 1273 in downtown Rapid City and the former judge advocate for the South Dakota VFW, though his membership was revoked following an investigation of the allegations against him.

The sexual exploitation charge was for making a 4-year-old engage in sexual conduct in order to take and distribute photos or videos of the act between 2017 and 2018 in Box Elder, authorities said.

The second charge relates to him trying to meet up with a 5-year-old girl for sex. In February 2020, authorities said a federal agent posed as a mother of the girl online, where he arranged a meeting with Swift to "swap" the girl for a boy Swift offered to bring.

The agent set up a March 2020 meeting with Swift in Rapid City. He was arrested by undercover agents upon arrival. A search of Swift's phone and computer found photos of him sexually abusing a child.

18-year-old held in Sioux Falls fatal shooting

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — An 18-year-old man is being held on bond of about \$1 million in connection with a fatal shooting in Sioux Falls.

The man was arrested Tuesday afternoon in the death of 19-year-old Dillion Montileaux-Trevino who police say was shot multiple times at an apartment he shared with his mother.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens said the suspect and victim had some type of argument. According to a court affidavit, the suspect was staying at the apartment after the victim's mother was told that he was homeless.

Montileaux-Trevino's mother told police the suspect pointed the gun at her after he shot her son and told her "Don't call the cops or I'll shoot you, too. Don't follow me," according to court documents.

The man asked for the victim's car keys, but ended up fleeing on foot, the Argus Leader reported. Parks faces several charges including first-degree murder, second-degree murder, first-degree manslaughter, aggravated assault and attempted robbery.

According to the Minnehaha County Jail website, bond is set at \$1,000,025.

Afghans protest Taliban in emerging challenge to their rule

By AHMAD SEIR, RAHIM FAIEZ, KATHY GANNON AND JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghan protesters defied the Taliban for a second day Thursday, waving their national flag in scattered demonstrations that were met with renewed violence by the militants who are facing growing challenges to their rule.

A U.N. official warned of dire food shortages in this nation of 38 million people reliant on imports and experts said the country was severely short on cash, highlighting that the Taliban face the same problems as the civilian government they dethroned without the level of international aid it enjoyed.

In light of these challenges, the militants have moved quickly to suppress any dissent, despite their promises that they have become more moderate since they last imposed draconian rule on Afghanistan. Many fear the Taliban will succeed in erasing two decades of efforts to expand women's and human rights and remake the country.

On Thursday, a procession of cars and people near Kabul's airport carried long black, red and green banners in honor of the Afghan flag — a banner that is becoming a symbol of defiance since the militants have their own flag. At another protest in Nangarhar province, video posted online showed one demonstrator with a gunshot wound bleeding, as onlookers tried to carry him away.

In Khost province, Taliban authorities instituted a 24-hour curfew Thursday after violently breaking up another protest, according to information obtained by journalists monitoring from abroad. The militants did not immediately acknowledge the demonstration or the curfew.

Protesters also took the streets in Kunar province, according to witnesses and social media videos that lined up with reporting by The Associated Press.

The demonstrations — which come as Afghans mark the Independence Day holiday that commemorates the 1919 treaty that ended British rule — were a remarkable show of defiance after the insurgents violently dispersed a protest Wednesday. At that rally, in the eastern city of Jalalabad, demonstrators lowered the Taliban's flag and replace it with Afghanistan's tricolor. At least one person was killed.

Meanwhile, opposition figures gathering in the last area of the country not under Taliban rule talked of launching an armed resistance under the banner of the Northern Alliance, which allied with the U.S. during the 2001 invasion.

It was not clear how serious a threat they posed given that the militants overran nearly the entire country in a matter of days with little resistance from Afghan forces.

The Taliban so far have offered no specifics on how they will lead, other than to say they will be guided by Shariah, or Islamic, law. They are in talks with senior officials of previous Afghan governments. But they face an increasingly precarious situation.

"A humanitarian crisis of incredible proportions is unfolding before our eyes," warned Mary Ellen McGroarty, the head of the U.N.'s World Food Program in Afghanistan. Beyond the difficulties of importing food, she said that drought has seen over 40% of the country's crop lost. Many who fled the Taliban advance now live in parks and open spaces in Kabul.

"This is really Afghanistan's hour of greatest need, and we urge the international community to stand by the Afghan people at this time," she said.

Hafiz Ahmad, a shopkeeper in Kabul, said some food has flowed into the capital, but prices have gone up. He hesitated to pass those costs onto his customers but said he had to.

"It is better to have it," he said. "If there were nothing, then that would be even worse."

Two of Afghanistan's key border crossings with Pakistan, Torkham near Jalalabad and Chaman near Spin Boldak, are now open for trade. Hundreds of trucks have passed through, Pakistani Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed has said. However, traders still fear insecurity on the roads and confusion over customs duties that could push them to price their goods higher.

Amid that uncertainty and concerns that the Taliban will reimpose their brutal rule, which included largely confining women to their homes and holding public executions, many Afghans are trying to flee the country.

At Kabul's international airport, military evacuation flights continued, according to flight-tracking data.

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However, access to the airport remained difficult. On Thursday, Taliban militants fired into the air to try to control the crowds gathered at the airport's blast walls. Men, women and children fled. Fighter jets later roared overhead, but no airstrike accompanied their pass.

Overnight, President Joe Biden said that he was committed to keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan until every American is evacuated, even if that means maintaining a military presence there beyond his Aug. 31 deadline for withdrawal.

Indirectly acknowledging the resistance they face, the Taliban on Thursday asked preachers to urge congregants to remain in the country and counter "negative propaganda" against them.

The Taliban have also urged people to return to work, but most government officials remain in hiding or are themselves attempting to flee. Questions remain over Afghanistan's \$9 billion in foreign reserves, the vast majority now apparently frozen in the U.S. The International Monetary Fund, meanwhile, said the militants for now would not be allowed to access loans or other resources.

The head of the country's Central Bank warned that the supply of physical U.S. dollars is "close to zero," which will batter the currency, the afghani, and raise the prices of much-needed food.

"The afghani has been defended by literally planeloads of U.S. dollars landing in Kabul on a very regular basis, sometimes weekly," said Graeme Smith, a consultant researcher with the Overseas Development Institute. "If the Taliban don't get cash infusions soon to defend the afghani, I think there's a real risk of a currency devaluation that makes it hard to buy bread on the streets of Kabul for ordinary people."

Still, Smith, who has written a book on Afghanistan, said the Taliban likely won't ask for the same billions in international aid sought by the country's fallen civilian government — large portions of which were funneled off by corruption.

"You're much more likely to see the Taliban positioning themselves as sort of gatekeepers to the international community as opposed to coming begging for billions of dollars," he said.

That could limit the power of the international community's threat of sanctions.

There has been no armed opposition to the Taliban. But videos from the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul, a stronghold of the Northern Alliance militias that allied with the U.S. during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, appear to show potential opposition figures gathering there. That area is in the only province that has not fallen to the Taliban.

Those figures include members of the deposed government — Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who asserted on Twitter that he is the country's rightful president, and Defense Minister Gen. Bismillah Mohammadi — as well as Ahmad Massoud, the son of the slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

In an opinion piece published by The Washington Post, Massoud asked for weapons and aid to fight the Taliban.

"I write from the Panjshir Valley today, ready to follow in my father's footsteps, with mujahideen fighters who are prepared to once again take on the Taliban," he wrote.

Persephone, the robot guide, leads visitors in a Greek cave

By COSTAS KANTOURIS Associated Press

ALISTRATI, Greece (AP) — Persephone is a tour guide in Greece, but perhaps not the type people are used to.

Billed as the world's first robot tour guide inside a cave, Persephone has been welcoming visitors since mid-July to the Aistrati Cave in northern Greece, 135 kilometers (84 miles) northeast of the city of Thessaloniki.

The multilingual robot covers the first 150 meters (roughly 500 feet) of the part of the cave that is open to the public. In the remaining 750 meters (2,400 feet), a human guide takes over.

The robot was named Persephone because, according to one version of the ancient Greek myth, it was in a nearby plain that Pluto — the god of the underworld who was also known as Hades — abducted Persephone, with the consent of her father Zeus, to take her as his wife.

The robot can give its part of the tour in 33 languages and interact at a basic level with visitors in three

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languages. It can also answer 33 questions, but only in Greek.

Nikos Kartalis, the scientific director for the Alistrati site, had the idea of creating the robot when he saw one on TV guiding visitors at an art gallery. Seventeen years later, "we got our funds and the robot guide became a reality," Kartalis told The Associated Press.

The robot was built by the National Technology and Research Foundation and cost 118,000 euros (\$139,000).

"We already have a 70% increase in visitors compared to last year since we started using" the robot, says Kartalis. "People are enthusiastic, especially the children, and people who had visited in the past are coming back to see the robot guide."

"It is something unprecedented for them, to have the ability to interact with their robot by asking it questions and the robot answering them," he said. "Many foreign visitors couldn't believe Greece had the capacity to build a robot and use it as a guide in the cave."

The robot moves along a walkway, passing through an ornate landscape of stalactites and stalagmites. These varied formations can reach 15 meters (50 feet) tall and are seen throughout the cave's nearly 1 kilometer (1.6-mile) walkway, which is accessible to people with limited mobility.

"This cave is one of the most beautiful, not only in Greece but in Europe, as well," says Kartalis. "It has stalactites and stalagmites in many shapes and colors, even red."

He said the cave was 3 million years old and was first explored in 1974 by the Hellenic Speleological Society and a team of Austrian speleologists. It opened to visitors in 1998.

Persephone, with a white body, black head and two luminous eyes, moves on wheels, guiding visitors to the first three of eight stops along the walkway. She can do two more stops, but her low speed slows down the tour, which is conducted in three languages simultaneously. Persephone's creators are considering ways to speed her up.

The robot's begins by saying: "My name is Persephone, I am the daughter of the goddess Demeter and the wife of Pluto, the god of the underworld. I welcome you to my under Earth kingdom, the Alistrati Cave."

Many visitors are intrigued by the robot guide.

"It was surprising for me. I've never experienced such a thing. Actually, honestly, I prefer a live guide, but it's interesting doing it this way. And I like the pace of the robot. It goes slower, so I can look around," said Patrick Markes, a Czech visitor.

Markes listened to the first three stops from the robot in his native language and the rest in English from a human tour guide.

"I should thank Persephone, our robot, she said very fine things," said Christos Tennis, a Greek visitor. "I'm impressed by the cave. Of course, we had a flawless (human) guide, she explained many things. I'm very impressed."

Persephone is not the only technology used inside the cave. There's a cellphone app in which a visitor, scanning a QR code, can see the Alistrati Beroia. That's a microorganism that is only found in this cave, in the huge mounds of bat droppings left behind when the cave was opened and the bats migrated elsewhere.

Evdokia Karafera is one of the tour guides who partners with the robot.

"It is helpful, because it speaks many languages. There's just a little delay in the touring," she said. "Most find it fascinating, especially the children, and find it interesting that it speaks many languages."

Karafera insisted, however, that human tour guides cannot be completely replaced.

"Robots, at some point in the future, will take over many jobs. But I believe they cannot replace humans everywhere," she said. "(Visitors say) 'the robot is interesting, original, but can't substitute for the human contact with the guide and the conversation we can have on the way back.'"

Russia was ready for Taliban's win due to longtime contacts

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — When the Taliban swept over Afghanistan, Russia was ready for the rapid developments after working methodically for years to lay the groundwork for relations with the group that it still officially considers a terrorist organization.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized this week that Moscow was “in no rush” to recognize the Taliban as the new rulers of Afghanistan, but he added there were “encouraging signals” of their readiness to let other political forces join the government and allow girls into schools.

The Taliban was added to the Russian list of terrorist organizations in 2003, and Moscow has not yet moved to remove the group from the list. Any contact with such groups is punishable under Russian law, but the Foreign Ministry has responded to questions about the seeming contradiction by saying that its exchanges with the Taliban are essential for international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

Unlike many other countries, Russia said it wouldn't evacuate its embassy in Kabul, and its ambassador quickly met with the Taliban for what he described as “constructive” talks after they took over the capital.

The Soviet Union fought a 10-year war in Afghanistan that ended with its troops withdrawing in 1989. Since then, Moscow has made a comeback as an influential power broker in international talks on Afghanistan. It has worked continuously to cultivate ties with the Taliban, hosting their representatives for a series of bilateral and multilateral meetings.

“We have maintained contacts with the Taliban for the last seven years, discussing many issues,” Kremlin envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov said earlier this week. “We saw them as a force that will play a leading role in Afghanistan in the future even if it doesn't take all power. All those factors, along with guarantees given to us by the Taliban's top leaders, give us reason for a calm view of the latest developments, although we remain vigilant.”

A month before Taliban militants unleashed their offensive that ended with the seizure of Kabul, their delegation visited Moscow to offer assurances that they wouldn't threaten the interests of Russia and its ex-Soviet allies in Central Asia — a sign that they consider ties with Russia a priority.

Taliban spokesman Mohammad Sohail Shaheen said during a visit last month to the Russian capital that “we won't allow anyone to use the Afghan territory to attack Russia or neighboring countries,” noting that “we have very good relations with Russia.”

Russian diplomats say they trust the group's assurances, noting the Taliban's focus on fighting the Islamic State group, which Moscow sees as the main threat from Afghanistan. Moscow also has hailed the Taliban's pledge to combat drug trafficking and stem the flow of drugs from Afghanistan via Central Asia.

Russian ambassador to Kabul, Dmitry Zhirnov, praised the Taliban as “reasonable guys” following a “positive and constructive meeting” this week. He added that the Taliban guaranteed the embassy's security.

“Russian diplomats are doing all they can to consolidate the contacts they have established with the Taliban,” Moscow-based analyst Alexei Makarkin said in a commentary. “Russian representatives cast the Taliban as moderate and responsible, acting as their advocates in the public sphere.”

He argued that the Taliban might not try to project their influence to the ex-Soviet Central Asian nations for now, but that could change later after securing a hold on Afghanistan.

“The Taliban's leaders will be unlikely to launch an expansion now, but that doesn't mean that they won't take such steps in the future,” Makarkin observed, noting that multiple factions inside the Taliban may have varying goals.

Despite the Taliban's assurances, Russia has held a series of joint war games with its allies in Central Asia in recent weeks to underline its pledge to help them fend off any possible security threats from Afghanistan. The latest of those drills began in Tajikistan this week.

While cultivating contacts with Taliban officials, Russia will be unlikely to move quickly to formally recognize their government, at least not until the group is removed from the United Nations list of terrorist organizations.

“It's premature to say that we would make any unilateral political steps,” Lavrov said this week.

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Kabulov, the Kremlin envoy, emphasized that Moscow's recognition of the Taliban will hinge on "whether they will govern the country in a responsible way in the near future, and proceeding from that, the Russian leadership will make the necessary conclusions." He added that Russia would only take the Taliban off its list of terrorist organizations after the U.N. Security Council decides to remove it from its terror list.

Russian diplomats argued that the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan helped change Afghan perceptions of the Soviet invasion and made many local leaders willing to accept Moscow's mediation.

When Washington went to war with the Taliban after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks for harboring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida, Moscow offered a helping hand, welcoming U.S. bases in the Central Asian nations of the former Soviet Union to support operations in Afghanistan. But as U.S.-Russia relations have grown increasingly strained, Russia grew more critical.

Still, Moscow and Washington have continued to coordinate their diplomatic moves on Afghanistan, and Russian officials have angrily rejected the allegations last year that Moscow paid the Taliban to kill U.S. soldiers.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, driven by fears that the U.S. was trying to establish a foothold there after losing Iran to the Islamic Revolution. The Soviet plans for a quick campaign bogged down in fierce resistance by the U.S.-backed guerrillas, known as mujahedeen, or holy warriors. The Soviet Union lost more than 15,000 troops, according to official count, while estimates of civilian casualties in that period have varied widely, from more than 500,000 up to 2 million.

Many in Russia gloated over the quick collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, pointing out that President Mohammad Najibullah's communist government held on for three years after the Soviet withdrawal until Moscow's aid completely halted following the 1991 collapse of the USSR.

"The regime created by the Americans tumbled down even before they left, that's a principal difference," Kabulov said, adding that he and others in Russia didn't expect such a fast meltdown.

Franz Klintsevich, the first deputy head of the defense and security committee in the lower house of Russian parliament, told The Associated Press that the U.S. has left behind huge arsenals of weapons that fell into the Taliban's hands.

"Who would make such gifts to terrorists after fighting them for 20 years?" said Klintsevich, a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Ex-Nissan exec Kelly wants boardroom, not criminal, trial

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Nearly three years later, former Nissan executive Greg Kelly is still wondering why the questions that led to his arrest and trial in Japan weren't simply taken up in the automaker's corporate boardroom.

Kelly, an American lawyer who worked for three decades for Nissan Motor Co., is awaiting a verdict in his trial on charges of financial misconduct in the case of Carlos Ghosn. The embattled former chairman of the Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi alliance jumped bail and fled to Lebanon in late 2019, leaving Kelly in Japan alone to face charges of Ghosn's under-reported Nissan compensation. Kelly has denied the allegations.

"I don't think any of us were involved in a crime, or a criminal activity," Kelly told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday in his Tokyo apartment, where he is out on bail.

"We were involved in trying to solve a business problem, which was: What actions do you take that are lawful to retain a very valuable executive who was underpaid?" Kelly added, referring to Ghosn.

"It should have been resolved at the corporate level at Nissan. It's not a criminal matter," said Kelly, who faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted and is forbidden from leaving Japan as he awaits his fate. A verdict is not expected until March. More than 99% of Japanese criminal trials result in convictions.

Behind him, the walls of the apartment Kelly shares with his wife, Dee, were plastered with photos of his two grandsons, including a 20-month-old baby he has never held. Family is most important, the 64-year-old Kelly said, especially this late in life.

"When you get into your 60s, you're not looking at a long horizon," Kelly said.

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"Every day that you miss with your family, you know, that to me is the stress. To spend 33 months without my family. For a corporate matter, it just doesn't make a lot of sense."

HOW IT HAPPENED

Kelly was working for Nissan but living in the Nashville area of Tennessee when he was asked to come to Japan for a meeting in November 2018. Since he was scheduled for neck fusion surgery to address a painful spinal condition he suggested a video conference. But Nissan booked a corporate jet for him, promising he would be back within the week.

After landing in Japan, he got in a van. The driver asked if he could pull over and make a call. Suddenly the van door opened, and several men rushed in, identifying themselves as prosecutors and a translator.

Kelly was taken to a detention center, handcuffed and searched, then led to an interrogation room, and questioned by prosecutors, initially without a lawyer present.

"It was a shock," he said.

He was kept in solitary confinement for 35 days and interrogated daily. He was confused. He could not call his wife. He pleaded to be allowed to get help from Nissan. Little did he know, he said, that Nissan was behind the arrest.

LIFE ON BAIL

To pass the time as he awaits a verdict, Kelly takes long walks with his wife, who moved to Japan in January 2019 on a student visa, taking Japanese language courses to be near her husband.

Kelly says he is lucky to have Dee, his college sweetheart from their days at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

She was at his trial, giving her husband a thumbs-up as he walked into the courtroom with his lawyers. Sitting in the front row, she took copious notes since court transcripts are only in Japanese.

Dee Kelly said she was taking a walk near the couple's home in November 2018, when she heard a radio report about the arrest of Ghosn and "an American executive."

"You feel like you can't breathe," she said, not knowing what could have happened to her husband while on a business trip. At home, Japanese reporters were already showing up at her door.

"You work all your life so you can have time during retirement to spend with your kids, and we really wanted to play a big part in our grandkids' lives, and that was taken," she said of the events that have unfolded since. "What was done to him is beyond terrible."

Kelly dedicated his life to Nissan, she said. "To have him treated like this, especially by people that were your friends. That's really hard."

THE CASE

Unknown except to several top Nissan officials, Ghosn's salary was slashed from about 2 billion yen (\$20 million) to 1 billion yen (\$10 million) in fiscal 2009, when the disclosure of individual executive pay became required in Japan.

Prosecutors contend there was an elaborate plan to make up for the pay cut, which should have been documented in Nissan's annual securities report.

At trial, they presented as evidence tables on Ghosn's unpaid salary, kept meticulously by another Nissan official. Kelly says he didn't know about the tables.

From Ghosn's native Lebanon, the auto magnate-turned-international fugitive has denied accusations of underreporting his compensation and misusing company funds, contending he was the victim of a corporate coup linked to a decline in Nissan's financial performance as the Japanese automaker resisted losing autonomy to French partner Renault.

In an AP interview in May, Ghosn mounted a robust defense of Kelly, saying: "Obviously he is innocent."

"Some observers think that Kelly may be a bit of a pawn in the (Japanese) government's effort to salvage its reputation after Ghosn escaped," said Carl Tobias, Williams Chair in Law at the University of Richmond. "In the end, there may be no winners in this sordid story."

THE ALLIANCE BACKDROP

Yoichi Kitamura, Kelly's chief attorney, says that in his 43 years as a defense lawyer, he has never encountered a case like the one against Kelly.

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"There is absolutely no evidence," Kitamura said, adding there was no motive either. "Nissan and the prosecutors got together and concocted this into a criminal case."

Kelly was just trying to do what he thought was best for Nissan, Kitamura added.

Hari Nada, who worked with Kelly in Nissan human resources, went to prosecutors about Ghosn's unpaid compensation, according to Nada's testimony in Kelly's trial. Nada is one of two Nissan officials who got a plea bargain to avoid prosecution.

Kelly says he may have been singled out because he, like Ghosn, supported a merger for Nissan and Renault, to strengthen the alliance in a way he thought would make the companies more equal yet remain competitive.

Nada, former Nissan Chief Executive Hiroto Saikawa and several other Japanese executives opposed the merger, according to court testimony.

"It was a small group that put together this scenario," Kelly said of his and Ghosn's arrests.

KELLY'S BROTHERS

John and Dave Kelly, Greg Kelly's brothers, were at the Chicago Auto Show last month, with cousins, spouses and friends all wearing "Free Greg Kelly" hats and T-shirts, to picket and hand out leaflets.

"To commit a crime, you have to have a motive. Greg didn't get anything. He was trying to help Nissan," Dave Kelly, a petroleum engineer who lives in Lafayette, Louisiana, said in a telephone interview.

"He was just doing his job."

The brothers grew up playing baseball and football in their backyard together.

"He was always an honest guy. He was always someone you could trust and talk to," said John Kelly, a general surgeon in Oneida, New York.

"I know my brother. I know he will never be involved in anything dishonest."

Gulf Coast's beloved 'Redneck Riviera' now a virus hotspot

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

GULF SHORES, Ala. (AP) — Tourists and servers alike dance atop tables and in the aisles at one restaurant on the "Redneck Riviera," a beloved stretch of towns along the northern Gulf Coast where beaches, bars and stores are packed. Yet just a few miles away, a hospital is running out of critical care beds, its rooms full of unvaccinated people fighting for their lives.

On maps that show virus "hot spots" in red, this part of the U.S. coast is glowing like a bad sunburn. And a summer of booming tourism that followed the lockdowns and travel restrictions of 2020 is making the turn toward fall with only a few signs of slowing down.

Health officials believe the spike is due to a combination of some of the nation's lowest vaccination rates, unabated tourism, a disregard for basic health precautions and the region's carefree lifestyle, all combining at a time when the mutated virus is more contagious than ever and conservative states are balking at new health restrictions.

On a recent afternoon, one shopper after another walked through the mouth of a giant, fake shark into a Gulf Shores souvenir shop. Mini-golf courses, bars, go-kart tracks, hotels and condominium towers were full. The National Shrimp Festival, which draws as many as 250,000 people to the Alabama coast, is set for October despite the COVID-19 explosion.

Inside The Hangout restaurant, where dancing on tables is encouraged, "Cotton Eye Joe" received a raucous reception from the largely unmasked customers.

"Where did you come from, where did you go? / Where did you come from, Cotton Eye Joe?" the speakers blared.

The revelry came as just 12 miles (19 kilometers) to the north, South Baldwin Regional Medical Center was treating more than three dozen COVID-19 patients, nearly 90% of whom weren't vaccinated, said spokesperson Taylor Lewis.

"After Memorial Day it was, 'Everything is back to normal, go to the beach, take off your mask,'" said

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Dr. Bert Eichold, the chief public health official of Mobile County, just west of Gulf Shores. Mobile County's COVID-19 positivity rate has skyrocketed to nearly 30%, and the county has the most new cases in the state.

Lisa Hastings, a Louisiana native and nurse visiting the Alabama coast with her two sisters, looked at the situation in two ways. She was a little unsettled by the wide-open scene from a professional standpoint, but she also doesn't hold it against anyone who wants to get out and have fun, vaccinated or not.

"I think people are kind of over being afraid and so they've got to live their lives," said Hastings, who is vaccinated. Nearby, a tourist from Illinois railed that the pandemic is fake and vaccinations are just another method of government control.

Some have decided against both getting vaccinated and wearing face masks, choosing instead to party without precautions at places like the Flora-Bama, a massive beachfront bar on the Alabama-Florida line. There, bands play to big crowds fueled by alcoholic drinks including the sugary Bushwacker, a coastal favorite.

Lulu's, a popular Gulf Shores restaurant owned by Lucy Buffett, the sister of singer Jimmy Buffett, is among those that recently had to shut down for a week because the virus was racing through workers.

At The Dock, a beachfront restaurant that serves cold beer and seafood beside the public beach in Pensacola, Florida, manager Justin Smith said the tourist season has been busy and his staff has managed to stay healthy, at least so far. While more vaccinations could help, Smith said he'd never require his staff to get inoculated.

"I've been here 18 years. It ain't gonna happen," he said.

Outbreaks caused by the coronavirus are threatening to overwhelm the region's health care system and traditions. Panama City Beach, Florida, cited the pandemic in canceling an annual country music festival set for early September, and New Orleans has clamped down on mask-wearing and called off multiple events.

While urging people to get vaccinated, state leaders including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey have resisted imposing new restrictions, even as hospital beds fill up. On Monday, officials said 1,560 patients needed intensive care treatment in Alabama, where hospitals have just 1,562 ICU beds.

Hospital executives joined together in Pensacola last week to plead for more vaccinations while also knocking down false rumors about vaccines and masks. In an area dominated by Christian conservatives, Mayor Grover C. Robinson IV made a direct appeal for churchgoers to get shots.

"Two of our hospitals are Christian affiliated," he said. "One of the first things it says all throughout the Bible is, 'Do not be afraid.'"

More people are getting initial vaccine doses than a few weeks ago, but it hasn't been enough so far to stop the spread of COVID-19. Of 11 coastal counties in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, Okaloosa County in Florida has the region's highest share of fully vaccinated residents at 41.3%, statistics show. Many are around one-third, and all are below the national average of nearly 51%.

Natalie Fox, a nursing executive with USA Health in Mobile, said medical workers are tired after more than a year of fighting the pandemic. Still, people sick with COVID-19 — the vast majority of them unvaccinated — keep arriving.

"We're kind of getting patients from all over because everybody's dealing with this increased strain," she said.

It didn't take a mandate for Rhonda Landrum, a 50-year-old health care worker from near Mobile, to get a shot recently after watching all three of her unvaccinated daughters contract COVID-19. People aren't taking the pandemic seriously, she said, and it's just not safe to be out in public without the vaccine.

"I won't travel nowhere," she said. "I stay home."

How AI-powered Tech Landed Man In Jail With Scant Evidence

By GARANCE BURKE, MARTHA MENDOZA, JULIET LINDERMAN and MICHAEL TARM Associated Press CHICAGO (AP) — Michael Williams' wife pleaded with him to remember their fishing trips with the grandchildren, how he used to braid her hair, anything to jar him back to his world outside the concrete walls of Cook County Jail.

His three daily calls to her had become a lifeline, but when they dwindled to two, then one, then only a few a week, the 65-year-old Williams felt he couldn't go on. He made plans to take his life with a stash of pills he had stockpiled in his dormitory.

Williams was jailed last August, accused of murdering a young man from the neighborhood who asked him for a ride during a night of unrest over police brutality in May. But the key evidence against Williams didn't come from an eyewitness or an informant; it came from a clip of noiseless security video showing a car driving through an intersection, and a loud bang picked up by a network of surveillance microphones. Prosecutors said technology powered by a secret algorithm that analyzed noises detected by the sensors indicated Williams shot and killed the man.

"I kept trying to figure out, how can they get away with using the technology like that against me?" said Williams, speaking publicly for the first time about his ordeal. "That's not fair."

Williams sat behind bars for nearly a year before a judge dismissed the case against him last month at the request of prosecutors, who said they had insufficient evidence.

Williams' experience highlights the real-world impacts of society's growing reliance on algorithms to help make consequential decisions about many aspects of public life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in law enforcement, which has turned to technology companies like gunshot detection firm ShotSpotter to battle crime. ShotSpotter evidence has increasingly been admitted in court cases around the country, now totaling some 200. ShotSpotter's website says it's "a leader in precision policing technology solutions" that helps stop gun violence by using "sensors, algorithms and artificial intelligence" to classify 14 million sounds in its proprietary database as gunshots or something else.

But an Associated Press investigation, based on a review of thousands of internal documents, emails, presentations and confidential contracts, along with interviews with dozens of public defenders in communities where ShotSpotter has been deployed, has identified a number of serious flaws in using ShotSpotter as evidentiary support for prosecutors.

AP's investigation found the system can miss live gunfire right under its microphones, or misclassify the sounds of fireworks or cars backfiring as gunshots. Forensic reports prepared by ShotSpotter's employees have been used in court to improperly claim that a defendant shot at police, or provide questionable counts of the number of shots allegedly fired by defendants. Judges in a number of cases have thrown out the evidence.

ShotSpotter's proprietary algorithms are the company's primary selling point, and it frequently touts the technology in marketing materials as virtually foolproof. But the private company guards how its closed system works as a trade secret, a black box largely inscrutable to the public, jurors and police oversight boards.

The company's methods for identifying gunshots aren't always guided solely by the technology. ShotSpotter employees can, and often do, change the source of sounds picked up by its sensors after listening to audio recordings, introducing the possibility of human bias into the gunshot detection algorithm. Employees can and do and modify the location or number of shots fired at the request of police, according to court records. And in the past, city dispatchers or police themselves could also make some of these changes.

Amid a nationwide debate over racial bias in policing, privacy and civil rights advocates say ShotSpotter's system and other algorithm-based technologies used to set everything from prison sentences to probation rules lack transparency and oversight and show why the criminal justice system shouldn't outsource some of society's weightiest decisions to computer code.

When pressed about potential errors from the company's algorithm, ShotSpotter CEO Ralph Clark declined to discuss specifics about their use of artificial intelligence, saying it's "not really relevant."

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"The point is anything that ultimately gets produced as a gunshot has to have eyes and ears on it," said Clark in an interview. "Human eyes and ears, OK?"

This story, supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, is part of an ongoing Associated Press series, "Tracked," that investigates the power and consequences of decisions driven by algorithms on people's everyday lives.

A GAME CHANGER

Police chiefs call ShotSpotter a game-changer. The technology, which has been installed in about 110 American cities, large and small, can cost up to \$95,000 per square mile per year. The system is usually placed at the request of local officials in neighborhoods deemed to be the highest risk for gun violence, which are often disproportionately Black and Latino communities. Law enforcement officials say it helps get officers to crime scenes quicker and helps cash-strapped public safety agencies better deploy their resources.

"ShotSpotter has turned into one of the most important cogs in our wheel of addressing gun violence," said Toledo, Ohio Police Chief George Kral during a 2019 International Association of Chiefs of Police conference in Chicago.

Researchers who took a look at ShotSpotter's impacts in communities where it is used came to a different conclusion. One study published in April in the peer-reviewed Journal of Urban Health examined ShotSpotter in 68 large, metropolitan counties from 1999 to 2016, the largest review to date. It found that the technology didn't reduce gun violence or increase community safety.

"The evidence that we've produced suggests that the technology does not reduce firearm violence in the long-term, and the implementation of the technology does not lead to increased murder or weapons related arrests," said lead author Mitch Doucette.

ShotSpotter installs its acoustic sensors on buildings, telephone poles and street lights. Employees in a dark, restricted-access room study hundreds of thousands of gunfire alerts on multiple computer screens at the company's headquarters about 35 miles south of San Francisco or a newer office in Washington.

Forensic tools like DNA and ballistics evidence used by prosecutors have had their methodologies examined in painstaking detail for decades, but ShotSpotter claims its software is proprietary, and won't release its algorithm. The company's privacy policy says sensor locations aren't divulged to police departments, although community members can see them on their street lamps. The company has shielded internal data and records revealing the system's inner workings, leaving defense attorneys no way of interrogating the technology to understand the specifics of how it works.

"We have a constitutional right to confront all witnesses and evidence against us, but in this case the ShotSpotter system is the accuser, and there is no way to determine if it's accurate, monitored, calibrated or if someone's added something," said Katie Higgins, a defense attorney who has successfully fought ShotSpotter evidence. "The most serious consequence is being convicted of a crime you didn't commit using this as evidence."

The Silicon Valley startup launched 25 years ago backed by venture capitalist Gary Lauder, heir to Estée Lauder's makeup fortune. Today, the billionaire remains the company's largest investor.

ShotSpotter's profile has grown in recent years.

The U.S. government has spent more than \$6.9 million on gunshot detection systems, including ShotSpotter, in discretionary grants and earmarked funds, the Justice Department said in response to questions from AP. States and local governments have spent millions more, from a separate pool of federal tax dollars, to purchase the system.

The company's share price has more than doubled since it went public in 2017 and it posted revenue of nearly \$30 million in the first half of 2021. It's hardly ubiquitous, however. ShotSpotter's website lists 119 communities in the U.S., the Caribbean and South Africa where it operates. The company says it has deployed 18,000 sensors covering 810 square miles.

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In 2018, it acquired a predictive policing company called HunchLab, which integrates its AI models with ShotSpotter's gunshot detection data to purportedly predict crime before it happens.

That system can "forecast when and where crimes are likely to emerge and recommends specific patrols and tactics that can deter these events," according to the company's 2020 annual report filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The company said it plans to expand in Latin America and other regions of the world. It recently appointed Roberta Jacobson, the former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, to its board.

Late last year, a Trump administration commission on law enforcement urged increased funding for systems like ShotSpotter to "combat firearm crime and violence."

And amid rising homicides, this spring, the Biden administration nominated David Chipman, a former ShotSpotter executive, to head the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

In June, President Joe Biden encouraged mayors to use American Rescue Plan funds — aimed at speeding up the U.S. pandemic recovery — to buy gunshot detection systems, "to better see and stop gun violence in their communities."

'SOMETHING IN ME HAD JUST DIED'

On a balmy Sunday evening in May 2020, Williams and his wife Jacqueline Anderson settled in at their apartment building on Chicago's South Side. They fed their Rottweiler Lily and German shepherd Shibey. Anderson fell asleep. Williams said he left the house to buy cigarettes at a local gas station.

Looters had beaten him to it. Six days before in Minneapolis, George Floyd had been killed by police officer Derek Chauvin. Four hundred miles away, in Williams' neighborhood, outrage boiled over. Shops were torn up, store windows broken, fires burned.

Williams found the gas station destroyed, so he said he made a U-turn to head home on South Stony Island Avenue. Before he reached East 63rd Street, Williams said Safarian Herring, a 25-year-old he said he had seen around the neighborhood, waved him down for a ride.

"I didn't feel threatened or anything because I've seen him before, around. So, I said yes. And he got in the front seat, and we took off," Williams said.

According to documents AP obtained through an open records request, Williams told police that as he approached an intersection another vehicle pulled up beside his car. A man in the front passenger seat fired a shot. The bullet missed Williams, but hit his passenger.

"It shocked me so badly, the only thing I can do was slump down in my car," he said. As Herring bled all over the seat from wounds to the side of his head, Williams ran a red light to escape.

"I was hollering to my passenger 'Are you ok?'" said Williams. "He didn't respond."

Williams drove his passenger to St. Bernard Hospital, where medical workers rushed Herring into the emergency room and doctors fought to save his life.

Two weeks before being picked up by Williams, Samona Nicholson, Herring's mother, said the aspiring chef had survived a shooting at a bus stop. Nicholson, who called her son 'Pook,' arranged for him to stay with a relative where she thought he'd be safe.

Doctors pronounced Herring dead on June 2, 2020 at 2:53 p.m.

For days after the shooting Williams' wife said he curled up on his bed, having flashbacks and praying for his passenger.

Three months after Herring's death, the police showed up. Williams recalls officers told him they wanted to take him to the station to talk and assured him he did nothing wrong.

He had a criminal history and spent three different stints behind bars, for attempted murder, robbery and discharging a firearm, records show.

That was all when he was a younger man. Williams said he had moved on with life, avoiding legal trouble since his last release more than 15 years ago and working numerous jobs.

At the police station, detectives interrogated him about the night Herring was shot, then took him to a holding cell.

"They just said that they were charging me with first-degree murder," Williams said. "When he told me

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that, it was just like something in me had just died.”

“IT’S NOT PERFECT”

On the night Williams stepped out for cigarettes, ShotSpotter sensors identified a loud noise the system initially assigned to 5700 S. Lake Shore Dr. near Chicago’s historic Museum of Science and Industry alongside Lake Michigan, according to an alert the company sent to police.

That material anchored the prosecutor’s theory that Williams shot Herring inside his car, even though the case supplementary report from police did not cite a motive nor did it mention any eyewitnesses. There was no gun found at the scene of the crime.

Prosecutors also leaned on a surveillance video showing that Williams’ car ran a red light, as did another car that appeared to have its windows up, ruling out the possibility that the shot came from the other car’s passenger window, they said.

Chicago police did not respond to AP’s request for comment. The Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office said in a statement that after careful review prosecutors “concluded that the totality of the evidence was insufficient to meet our burden of proof,” but did not answer specific questions about the case.

As ShotSpotter’s gunshot detection systems expand around the country, so has its use as forensic evidence in the courtroom — some 200 times in 20 states since 2010, with 91 of those cases in the past three years, the company said.

“Our data compiled with our expert analysis help prosecutors make convictions,” said a recent ShotSpotter press release. Even during the pandemic, ShotSpotter participated in 18 court cases, some over Zoom, according to a recent company presentation to investors.

But even as its use has expanded in court, ShotSpotter’s technology has drawn scrutiny.

For one, the algorithm that analyzes sounds to distinguish gunshots from other noises has never been peer reviewed by outside academics or experts.

“The concern about ShotSpotter being used as direct evidence is that there are simply no studies out there to establish the validity or the reliability of the technology. Nothing,” said Tania Brief, a staff attorney at The Innocence Project, a nonprofit which seeks to reverse wrongful convictions.

A 2011 study commissioned by the company found that dumpsters, trucks, motorcycles, helicopters, fireworks, construction, trash pick-up and church bells have all triggered false positive alerts, mistaking these sounds for gunshots. Clark said the company is constantly improving its audio classifications, but the system still logs a small percentage of false positives.

In the past, these false alerts — and lack of alerts — have prompted cities from Charlotte, North Carolina to San Antonio, Texas, to end their ShotSpotter contracts, the AP found.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, police said ShotSpotter worked less than 50% of the time and missed all seven shots in a downtown murder in 2018. The results didn’t improve over time, and later that year ShotSpotter turned off its system.

The public school district in Fresno, California ended its ShotSpotter contract last year, after paying \$1.25 million over four years and finding it too costly. Also, parents and board members were concerned that district funds meant to help high-needs students were used to pay for ShotSpotter, said school board trustee Genoveva Islas.

“We were at the point where George Floyd had been murdered and there was a lot of push around racism and discrimination in the district. There was this mounting questioning about that investment in particular,” Islas said.

Some courts, too, have been less than impressed with the ShotSpotter system. In 2014, a judge in Richmond, California didn’t allow ShotSpotter evidence to be used during a gang murder conspiracy case, although the accused man, Todd Gillard, was still convicted of being involved in a drive-by shooting.

“The expert testimony that a gun was fired at a particular location at a given time, based on the ShotSpotter technology, is not presently admissible in court, because it has not, at this point, reached general acceptance in the relevant scientific community,” ruled Contra Costa Superior Court Judge John Kennedy.

In a Chicago case, prosecutors had surveillance videos of gang member Ernesto Godinez in a neighborhood where an ATF agent was shot after dark — but none showing him actually shooting a gun. At a 2019

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trial, they entered ShotSpotter data to show gunshots originated from the location where video evidence indicated Godinez was when shots rang out. This month, a federal appeals court ruled that a trial judge erred by not vetting the reliability of ShotSpotter data before letting jurors hear it. Nonetheless, the split three-judge panel concluded that other evidence prosecutors presented was enough to uphold Godinez's conviction.

ShotSpotter says it's constantly fine-tuning its machine learning model to recognize what is and isn't a gunshot sound by getting detectives and investigators to add crime scene observations to its system. As a part of that process, which they call "ground truth," ShotSpotter asks patrol officers to add and notate shell casings, bullet holes, gather witness testimony and other "evidence of gunfire" using its software.

"We have the opportunity to make the machine classification better and better and better because we get real-world feedback loops from humans," Clark said.

Several experts warned that training an algorithm based on a set of observations submitted by police risks contaminating the model if harried officers — perhaps inadvertently — feed it incomplete or incorrect data.

"I'm kind of aghast," said Clare Garvie, a senior associate with the Center on Privacy & Technology at Georgetown Law. "You are building an inherent uncertainty into that system, and you are telling that system it's fine. You are contaminating the reliability of your system."

ShotSpotter said the more data it receives from police, the more accurate its model becomes. The company says their system is accurate 97% of the time.

"In the small number of cases where ShotSpotter is incorrect, providing feedback to the algorithm can improve accuracy," the company said.

Beyond the ShotSpotter algorithm, other questions have been raised about how the company operates.

Court records show that in some cases, employees have changed sounds detected by the system to say that they are gunshots.

During 2016 testimony in a Rochester, New York officer-involved shooting trial, ShotSpotter's engineer Paul Greene was pressed to explain why one of its employees reclassified sounds from a helicopter to a bullet. The reason? He said its customer, in this case the Rochester Police Department, told them to.

The defense attorney in that case was dumbfounded: "Is that something that occurs in the regular course of business at ShotSpotter?" he asked.

"Yes, it is. It happens all the time," said Greene. "Typically, you know, we trust our law enforcement customers to be really upfront and honest with us."

Testifying in a 2017 San Francisco murder trial, Greene gave similar testimony that an analyst had moved the location of its initial alert a block away, suddenly matching the scene of the crime.

"It's not perfect. The dot on the map is simply a starting point," he said.

In the Williams case, evidence in pre-trial hearings shows that ShotSpotter initially said the noise the sensor picked up was a firecracker, a classification the company's algorithm made with 98% confidence. But a ShotSpotter employee relabeled the noise as a gunshot.

Later, ShotSpotter senior technical support engineer Walter Collier changed the reported Chicago address of the sound to the street where Williams was driving, about 1 mile away, according to court documents. ShotSpotter said Collier corrected the report to match the actual location that the sensors had identified.

Collier worked for the Chicago Police Department for more than two decades before joining ShotSpotter, according to his LinkedIn profile. After Williams was sent to jail, his attorney requested more information about Collier's training. The attorney, Brendan Max, said he was shocked by the company's response.

In court filings, ShotSpotter acknowledged: "Our experts are trained using a variety of 'on the job' training sessions, and transfer of knowledge from our scientists and other experienced employees. As such no official or formal training materials exist for our forensic experts."

Law enforcement officials in Chicago continue to stand by their use of ShotSpotter. Chicago's three-year, \$33 million contract, signed in 2018, makes the city ShotSpotter's largest customer. ShotSpotter has been at the heart of the police department's "intelligence-action cycle" for predictive policing that uses gunshot

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alerts to "identify areas of risk," according to a presentation obtained by AP.

Late last month, on July 22, Attorney General Merrick Garland flew to Chicago to announce a new initiative to combat gun violence and toured a police precinct, looking on as officials showed him how they use ShotSpotter.

INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE

The next day, Williams hobbled into Courtroom 500 leaning on his wooden cane, dressed in tan jail garb and sandals, as a sheriff's deputy towered over him. He had been locked up for 11 months.

Williams lifted his head to the famously irascible Judge Vincent Gaughan. The 79-year-old Vietnam veteran looked back from high on his bench and told Williams his case was dismissed. The reason: insufficient evidence.

ShotSpotter maintains it had warned prosecutors not to rely on its technology to detect gunshots fired inside vehicles or buildings. The company said the disclaimer can be found in the small print embedded in its contract with Chicago police.

But the company declined to say at what point during Williams' nearly year-long incarceration it got in touch with prosecutors, or why it prepared a forensic report for a gunshot that allegedly was fired in Williams' vehicle, given the fact that the system had trouble identifying gunshots in enclosed spaces. The report itself contained contradictory information suggesting the technology did, in fact, work inside cars. Clark, the company's CEO, declined to comment on the case, but in a follow-up statement, the company equivocated, telling AP that under "certain conditions," the system can actually pick up gunshots inside vehicles.

Max, Williams' attorney, said prosecutors never disclosed any of this information to him, and instead dropped charges two months after he subpoenaed ShotSpotter for the company's correspondence with state's attorneys.

The judge agreed to schedule a hearing in the coming weeks about whether to release ShotSpotter's operating protocol and other documents the company wants to keep secret. Max, who requested it, said such material could be used to cast doubt on the validity and reliability of ShotSpotter evidence in cases nationwide.

At 9 p.m. on July 22, Williams walked out of Cook County Jail into the hot Chicago night. He had no cellphone, no wallet, no ID. Williams said authorities hadn't let him make a phone call or returned anything to him. He was picked up by his attorney.

Anderson, his wife of 20 years, was waiting at home. When her husband stepped out of his attorney's car, she took him in her arms and cried.

That first night at home, Anderson made ribs and chicken, cornbread and macaroni and cheese.

But Williams couldn't eat on his own. He'd beat COVID-19 twice while in jail, but had developed an uncontrollable tremor in his hand that kept him from holding a spoon. So Anderson fed him. And as they sat together on the couch, she held onto his arm to try and stop the shaking.

For her part, Herring's mother believes police had the right suspect in Williams. She blames ShotSpotter for botching the case by passing on, then withdrawing what she called flimsy data.

Williams remains shaken by his ordeal. He said he doesn't feel safe in his hometown anymore. When he walks through the neighborhood he scans for the little microphones that almost sent him to prison for life.

"The only places these devices are installed are in poor Black communities, nowhere else," he said. "How many of us will end up in this same situation?"

Afghans plead for faster US evacuation from Taliban rule

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Educated young women, former U.S. military translators and other Afghans most at-risk from the Taliban appealed to the Biden administration to get them on evacuation flights as the United States struggled to bring order to the continuing chaos at the Kabul airport.

President Joe Biden and his top officials said the U.S. was working to speed up the evacuation, but made

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no promises how long it would last or how many desperate people it would fly to safety "We don't have the capability to go out and collect large numbers of people," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters Wednesday, adding that evacuations would continue "until the clock runs out or we run out of capability."

Afghans in danger because of their work with the U.S. military or U.S. organizations, and Americans scrambling to get them out, also pleaded with Washington to cut the red tape that they say could strand thousands of vulnerable Afghans if U.S. forces withdraw as planned in the coming days.

"If we don't sort this out, we'll literally be condemning people to death," said Marina Kielpinski LeGree, the American head of a nonprofit, Ascend. The organization's young Afghan female colleagues were in the mass of people waiting for flights at the airport in the wake of days of mayhem, tear gas and gunshots.

The U.S. has rushed in troops, transport planes and commanders to secure the airport, seek Taliban guarantees of safe passage, and ramp up an airlift capable of ferrying between 5,000 and 9,000 people a day.

Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman described an all-out effort by U.S. officials to get Afghans and allies to safety. "This is an all-hands-on-deck effort and we're aren't going to let up," Sherman said at a State Department news conference.

Taliban fighters and checkpoints ringed the airport — barriers for Afghans who fear that their past work with Westerners makes them prime targets of the insurgents. Afghans who made it past the Taliban reached Americans guarding the airport complex, and thrust documents at some of the 4,500 U.S. troops in temporary control.

One of the last windows of escape from Taliban threatens to close when Biden's planned pullout by Aug. 31 is complete.

"People are going to die," said Air Force veteran Sam Lerman. He said he was working to help a former Afghan military contractor who received an email from the State Department telling him to go to the airport. But U.S. troops at the entry to the airport turned back the Afghan man Wednesday, telling him he lacked the right document, Lerman said.

Hundreds of Afghans who lacked any papers or promises of flights also congregated at the airport, adding to the chaos. It didn't help that many of the Taliban fighters were illiterate, and cannot read the documents.

Nearly 6,000 people had been evacuated by the U.S. military since Saturday, a White House official said Wednesday night. The turmoil has seen Afghans rush the tarmac. In one instance, some apparently fell to their death while clinging to a departing American C-17 transport plane.

Hoping to secure seats on an airlift are American citizens and other foreigners, Afghan allies of the Western forces, and women, journalists, activists and others most at risk from the fundamentalist Taliban.

The U.S. has declined to give estimates of how many U.S. citizens remain in Afghanistan and are in need of escape.

About 100,000 Afghans were seeking evacuation through a U.S. visa program meant to provide refuge to Afghans who had worked with Americans, as well as family members, said Rebecca Heller, head of the U.S.-based International Refugee Assistance Program. Her organization was among those pressing the United States to urgently step up visa processing.

Heller said an Afghan client told her of five Afghan translators killed by the Taliban in the past two days for their past work with Americans.

Heller played an appeal that she said a female Afghan client had recorded. The woman, whose name The Associated Press is withholding for her safety, has been waiting for three years for U.S. action on her visa application.

"The only hope in this moment I have is the U.S. government," the Afghan woman said. "Please, U.S. government ... please stop promising. Please, start taking action. As immediately as you can."

The Pentagon said senior U.S. military officers, including Navy Rear Adm. Peter Vasely, are talking to Taliban commanders about Taliban checkpoints and curfews that have limited the number of Americans and Afghans able to enter the airport.

The U.S. government sent emails in recent days telling some American citizens, green card holders and their families, and others to come to the airport, and to be prepared to wait.

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Biden has defended his decision to end the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan that began after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and has rejected blame for the chaos that has ensued. Biden this laid responsibility on Afghans themselves for the Taliban takeover and for the frantic scrambles to flee the country.

But refugee groups note yearslong backlog of visa applications.

An operation to fly to the United States former Afghan translators and others whose visa processes were closest to completion had managed to bring in only about half of the 4,000 Afghans predicted before the Taliban takeover.

A separate visa program meant to fly out civil society members most at risk from the Taliban was handicapped from the start, partly by a U.S. requirement that Afghans travel outside Afghanistan to apply — a trip that the Taliban sweep made impossible for most.

Tensions over aid grow in Haiti as quake's deaths pass 2K

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Tensions have been growing over the slow pace of aid reaching victims of a powerful weekend earthquake that killed more than 2,100 people in Haiti and was trailed by a drenching tropical depression.

At the small airport in the southwestern community of Les Cayes, throngs of people gathered outside the fence on Wednesday when an aid flight arrived and crews began loading boxes into waiting trucks. One of a small squad of Haitian national police, outfitted in military-style uniforms and posted at the airport to guard the aid shipments, fired two warnings shots to disperse a group of young men.

Angry crowds also massed at collapsed buildings in the city, demanding tarps to create temporary shelters after Tropical Storm Grace brought heavy rain at the beginning of the week.

Haiti's Civil Protection Agency late Wednesday raised the number of deaths from the earthquake to 2,189 from an earlier count of 1,941 and said 12,268 people were injured. Dozens of people are still missing.

The magnitude 7.2 earthquake destroyed more than 7,000 homes and damaged more than 12,000, leaving about 30,000 families homeless, according to official estimates. Schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged. The Caribbean nation's southwest region was the hardest hit.

One of the first food deliveries by local authorities — a couple dozen boxes of rice and pre-measured, bagged meal kits — reached a tent encampment set up in one of the poorest areas of Les Cayes, where most of the one-story, cinderblock, tin-roofed homes were damaged or destroyed by Saturday's quake.

But the shipment was clearly insufficient for the hundreds who have lived under tents and tarps for five days.

"It's not enough, but we'll do everything we can to make sure everybody gets at least something," said Vladimir Martino, a resident of the camp who took charge of the distribution.

Gerda Francoise, 24, was one of dozens who lined up in the wilting heat in hopes of receiving food. "I don't know what I'm going to get, but I need something to take back to my tent," said Francoise. "I have a child."

International aid workers on the ground said hospitals in the worst-hit areas are mostly incapacitated and that there is a desperate need for medical equipment. But the government told at least one foreign organization that has been operating in the country for nearly three decades that it did not need assistance from hundreds of its medical volunteers.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry said Wednesday that his administration will work to not "repeat history on the mismanagement and coordination of aid," a reference to the chaos that followed the country's devastating 2010 earthquake, when the government was accused of not getting all of the money raised by donors to the people who needed it.

Meanwhile, the Core Group, a coalition of key international diplomats from the United States and other nations that monitors Haiti, said in a statement that its members are "resolutely committed to working alongside national and local authorities to ensure that impacted people and areas receive adequate assistance as soon as possible."

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Aid has slowly trickled in to help the thousands who were left homeless. But distributing it under current conditions will be challenging.

"We are planning a meeting to start clearing all of the sites that were destroyed, because that will give the owner of that site at least the chance to build something temporary, out of wood, to live on that site," said Serge Chery, head of civil defense for the Southern Province, which covers Les Cayes. "It will be easier to distribute aid if people are living at their addresses, rather than in a tent."

Chery said that an estimated 300 people are still missing in the area.

The U.S. Geological Survey said a preliminary analysis of satellite imagery after the earthquake revealed hundreds of landslides.

While some officials have suggested that the search phase has to end and heavy machinery should be called in to clear rubble, Henry appeared unwilling to move to that stage.

"Some of our citizens are still under the debris. We have teams of foreigners and Haitians working on it," he said.

He also appealed for unity: "We have to put our heads together to rebuild Haiti."

"The country is physically and mentally destroyed," Henry said.

Dr. Barth Green, president and co-founder of Project Medishare, an organization that has worked in Haiti since 1994 to improve health services, said he was hopeful the U.S. military would establish a field hospital in the affected area.

"The hospitals are all broken and collapsed, the operating rooms aren't functional, and then if you bring tents, it's hurricane season, they can blow right away," Green said.

Green noted that his organization has "hundreds of medical volunteers, but the Haitian government tells us they don't need them." Nonetheless, the organization was deploying along with others.

Dozens of homes burn as California wildfire siege continues

By BRIAN MELLEY and TERENCE CHEA Associated Press

GRIZZLY FLATS, Calif. (AP) — A small wildfire swept through a mobile home park, leaving dozens of homes in ashes, the latest in a series of explosive blazes propelled by gusts that have torn through Northern California mountains and forests.

The drought-parched region was expected to see red flag warnings for dangerously high winds and hot, dry weather through Thursday.

Those conditions have fed a dozen uncontrolled wildfires, including the month-old Dixie Fire and the nearby Caldor Fire in the northern Sierra Nevada that incinerated much of the small rural towns of Greenville and Grizzly Flats.

No deaths have been reported despite the speed and damage of the blazes.

On Wednesday, a grass fire driven by winds up to 30 mph (48 kilometers per hour) destroyed dozens of mobile homes in Lake County and injured at least one resident before firefighters stopped its progress, fire officials said at an evening briefing.

Rows of homes were destroyed on at least two blocks and television footage showed crews dousing burning homes with water. Children were rushed out of an elementary school as a field across the street burned.

Some 1,600 people were ordered to flee, with Lake County Sheriff Brian Martin warning of "immediate threat to life and property."

Lake County has experienced repeated wildfires in the past decade that have destroyed hundreds of homes.

At least 16,000 other homes remain threatened by California wildfires, which are among some 100 burning throughout a dozen Western states, fire officials said.

Tens of thousands of people remain under evacuation orders.

No deaths have been reported, despite the speed and ferocity of the blazes, which have at times created their own erratic winds from heated air swirling into smoke clouds. Flames also have leapfrogged miles

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ahead of the front lines as winds scattered embers, hot ash and chunks of wood into dry vegetation, said Thom Porter, chief of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"This is not going to end anytime soon," he said of the Dixie Fire. "Everybody's going to be sucking smoke for a long time."

Fire crews were able to make some progress on the Dixie Fire Wednesday, increasing containment to 35%, and some evacuation orders were lifted in Plumas and Tehama counties, where some people hadn't seen their homes for a month.

But the Dixie and Caldor fires still menaced many small clusters of homes within and around national forests along with larger communities, including Pollock Pines, with a population of 7,000 and Susanville, population 18,000, which is the county seat of Lassen County.

Eldorado National Forest and Lassen Volcanic National Park were closed.

The Dixie Fire is the first to have burned from east to west across the spine of California, where the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountains meet. It had burned more than 1000 square miles (2,590 square kilometers) and was only a third contained.

On Wednesday, dozens of fire engines and crews were transferred from that battle to fight the Caldor Fire, which exploded through heavy timber in steep terrain since erupting over the weekend southwest of Lake Tahoe.

The fire has blackened nearly 220 square miles (570 square kilometers) and on Tuesday ravaged Grizzly Flats, a community of about 1,200.

Dozens of homes burned, according to officials, but tallies were incomplete. Those who viewed the aftermath saw few homes standing. Lone chimneys rose from the ashes, little more than rows of chairs remained of a church and the burned out husks of cars littered the landscape.

Chris Sheean said the dream home he bought six weeks ago near the elementary school went up in smoke. He felt lucky he and his wife, cats and dog got out safely hours before the flames arrived.

"It's devastation. You know, there's really no way to explain the feeling, the loss," Sheean said. "Maybe next to losing a child, a baby, maybe. ... Everything that we owned, everything that we've built is gone."

California's wildfires are on pace to exceed the amount of land burned last year — the most in modern history. The blazes also have destroyed areas of the timber belt that serve as a centerpiece of the state's climate reduction plan because trees can store carbon dioxide.

"We are seeing generational destruction of forests because of what these fires are doing," Porter said. "This is going to take a long time to come back from."

Most of the fires this year have hit the northern part of the state, largely sparing Southern California, which was expected to see clouds and even a chance of drizzle in some areas Thursday. Fire conditions in the region are expected to get worse in the fall.

Afghans plead for faster US evacuation from Taliban rule

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Educated young women, former U.S. military translators and other Afghans most at-risk from the Taliban appealed to the Biden administration to get them on evacuation flights as the United States struggled on Wednesday to bring order to the continuing chaos at the Kabul airport.

President Joe Biden and his top officials said the U.S. was working to speed up the evacuation, but made no promises how long it would last or how many desperate people it would fly to safety. "We don't have the capability to go out and collect large numbers of people," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters, adding that evacuations would continue "until the clock runs out or we run out of capability."

Afghans in danger because of their work with the U.S. military or U.S. organizations, and Americans scrambling to get them out, also pleaded with Washington to cut the red tape that they say could strand thousands of vulnerable Afghans if U.S. forces withdraw as planned in the coming days.

"If we don't sort this out, we'll literally be condemning people to death," said Marina Kielpinski LeGree, the American head of a nonprofit, Ascend. The organization's young Afghan female colleagues were in the

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mass of people waiting for flights at the airport in the wake of days of mayhem, tear gas and gunshots. The U.S. has rushed in troops, transport planes and commanders to secure the airport, seek Taliban guarantees of safe passage, and ramp up an airlift capable of ferrying between 5,000 and 9,000 people a day.

Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman described an all-out effort by U.S. officials to get Afghans and allies to safety. "This is an all-hands-on-deck effort and we're aren't going to let up," Sherman said at a State Department news conference.

Taliban fighters and checkpoints ringed the airport — barriers for Afghans who fear that their past work with Westerners makes them prime targets of the insurgents. Afghans who made it past the Taliban reached Americans guarding the airport complex, and thrust documents at some of the 4,500 U.S. troops in temporary control.

One of the last windows of escape from Taliban threatens to close when Biden's planned pullout by Aug. 31 is complete.

"People are going to die," said Air Force veteran Sam Lerman. He said he was working to help a former Afghan military contractor who received an email from the State Department telling him to go to the airport. But U.S. troops at the entry to the airport turned back the Afghan man Wednesday, telling him he lacked the right document, Lerman said.

Hundreds of Afghans who lacked any papers or promises of flights also congregated at the airport, adding to the chaos. It didn't help that many of the Taliban fighters were illiterate, and cannot read the documents.

Nearly 6,000 people had been evacuated by the U.S. military since Saturday, a White House official said Wednesday night. The turmoil has seen Afghans rush the tarmac. In one instance, some apparently fell to their death while clinging to a departing American C-17 transport plane.

Hoping to secure seats on an airlift are American citizens and other foreigners, Afghan allies of the Western forces, and women, journalists, activists and others most at risk from the fundamentalist Taliban.

The U.S. has declined to give estimates of how many U.S. citizens remain in Afghanistan and are in need of escape.

About 100,000 Afghans were seeking evacuation through a U.S. visa program meant to provide refuge to Afghans who had worked with Americans, as well as family members, said Rebecca Heller, head of the U.S.-based International Refugee Assistance Program. Her organization was among those pressing the United States to urgently step up visa processing.

Heller said an Afghan client told her of five Afghan translators killed by the Taliban in the past two days for their past work with Americans.

Heller played an appeal that she said a female Afghan client had recorded. The woman, whose name The Associated Press is withholding for her safety, has been waiting for three years for U.S. action on her visa application.

"The only hope in this moment I have is the U.S. government," the Afghan woman said. "Please, U.S. government ... please stop promising. Please, start taking action. As immediately as you can."

The Pentagon said senior U.S. military officers, including Navy Rear Adm. Peter Vasely, are talking to Taliban commanders about Taliban checkpoints and curfews that have limited the number of Americans and Afghans able to enter the airport.

The U.S. government sent emails in recent days telling some American citizens, green card holders and their families, and others to come to the airport, and to be prepared to wait.

Biden has defended his decision to end the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan that began after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and has rejected blame for the chaos that has ensued. Biden this laid responsibility on Afghans themselves for the Taliban takeover and for the frantic scrambles to flee the country.

But refugee groups note yearslong backlog of visa applications.

An operation to fly to the United States former Afghan translators and others whose visa processes were closest to completion had managed to bring in only about half of the 4,000 Afghans predicted before the Taliban takeover.

A separate visa program meant to fly out civil society members most at risk from the Taliban was handi-

capped from the start, partly by a U.S. requirement that Afghans travel outside Afghanistan to apply — a trip that the Taliban sweep made impossible for most.

Chief in charge of intel before Capitol riot returns to post

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Yogananda Pittman, the Capitol Police official who led intelligence operations for the agency when thousands of Donald Trump loyalists descended on the building last January, is back in charge of intelligence as officials prepare for what's expected to be a massive rally at the Capitol to support those who took part in the insurrection.

Pittman — elevated to acting chief after then-Chief Steven Sund was forced to resign in the aftermath of the deadly insurrection — was passed over last month for the role of permanent chief. The Capitol Police Board, which oversees the force, instead picked J. Thomas Manger, the former chief of the police departments in Fairfax County, Virginia and Montgomery County, Maryland.

Pittman's tenure as assistant chief was marred by a vote of no-confidence from rank-and-file officers on the force and questions about intelligence and leadership failures — specifically, why the agency wasn't prepared to fend off a mob of insurrectionists, even though officials had compiled intelligence showing white supremacists and other extremists were likely to assemble in Washington on Jan. 6 and that violent disruptions were possible.

"Supporters of the current president see Jan. 6, 2021, as the last opportunity to overturn the results of the presidential election," said a Jan. 3 Capitol Police intelligence assessment. "This sense of desperation and disappointment may lead to more of an incentive to become violent."

Unlike past events, when pro-Trump supporters clashed violently with counterdemonstrators, "Congress itself is the target on the 6th," the assessment added.

The deadly riot at the Capitol quickly overwhelmed the police force and has resulted in hundreds of federal criminal prosecutions and internal reviews about why law enforcement agencies weren't better prepared.

Now, months later, Pittman has been put back in charge as assistant chief of the agency's intelligence operations and will be supervising officers who protect top congressional leaders.

Police officials in Washington are increasingly concerned about a rally planned for Sept. 18 on federal land next to the Capitol that organizers have said is meant to demand "justice" for the hundreds of people already charged in connection with January's insurrection.

Organizers of the event, known as "Justice for J6," have said it will be peaceful but law enforcement officials fear such a gathering with thousands of people could devolve quickly into violence.

That Pittman remains in a position overseeing intelligence is notable given the internal leadership upheaval that followed the riot — Sund, the House and Senate sergeants at arms and the only other assistant police chief all resigned after January's attack. On the other hand, removing her from the job could also represent a concession by the department that there was an intelligence failure on its part.

Capitol Police officials say Pittman was "given the additional responsibility" of being the acting police chief on a temporary basis and never left her old job, though an organization chart obtained by The Associated Press shows that the position of assistant chief overseeing intelligence was held by a different official, Sean Gallagher. He is now temporarily in charge of the department's uniformed officers.

"In that temporary position, Chief Pittman led the Department through numerous reviews. She also directed and led improvements to pivot the USCP towards an intelligence based protective agency," the agency said of Pittman's time as police chief.

As the temporary public face of the department, Pittman conceded to Congress at a February hearing that multiple levels of failures allowed rioters to storm the building. But she disputed the notion that law enforcement had failed to take the threat seriously, noting how Capitol Police several days before the riot had distributed an internal document warning that extremists were poised for violence.

The police department had compiled numerous intelligence documents suggesting the crowd could turn violent and even target Congress.

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The Associated Press has obtained full versions of four separate Capitol Police intelligence assessments in December and January that warned crowds could number in the tens of thousands and include members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys.

A Jan. 3 memo, for instance, warned of a "significantly dangerous situation for law enforcement and the general public alike."

But none of the assessments envisioned the deadly violence that actually happened when huge crowds of Trump loyalists overran the building as Congress was gathered to certify the results of the presidential election. Police officials have repeatedly said they had no intelligence to suggest that would happen.

Arguably the most detailed Capitol Police document was a Dec. 21 intelligence assessment that showed how people had been researching and discussing the tunnels under the Capitol — typically used by members of Congress and staff — on public websites. A Jan. 5 FBI memo from its Norfolk field office contained a similarly ominous warning.

Pittman told congressional officials that she had distributed that Dec. 21 assessment to her command staff, including the chief, the other assistant chief and deputy chiefs, but one recently retired deputy chief, Jeffrey Pickett, told AP that he had not received the document and was unaware of other senior officials who had.

In a statement, Capitol Police officials said the department had "enhanced its security posture" because of the intelligence "indicating increased interest in the tunnels." A law enforcement official told the AP that Pittman had emailed Sund and the other assistant chief, Chad Thomas, about the tunnel information. The department did not say whether Pittman sent the actual intelligence assessment to other chiefs, as she testified.

"What the intelligence didn't reveal was the large-scale demonstration would become a large-scale attack on the Capitol Building as there was no specific, credible intelligence about such an attack," the department said in a statement.

Desperation, pressure for aid increase in Haiti after quake

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Pressure for a coordinated response to Haiti's deadly weekend earthquake mounted Wednesday as more bodies were pulled from the rubble and the injured continued to arrive from remote areas in search of medical care. Aid was slowly trickling in to help the thousands who were left homeless.

International aid workers on the ground said hospitals in the areas worst hit by Saturday's quake are mostly incapacitated and that there is a desperate need for medical equipment. But the government told at least one foreign organization that has been operating in the country for nearly three decades that it did not need assistance from hundreds of its medical volunteers.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ariel Henry said Wednesday that his administration will work to not "repeat history on the mismanagement and coordination of aid," a reference to the chaos that followed the country's devastating 2010 earthquake, when the government was accused of not getting all of the money raised by donors to the people who needed it.

In a message on his Twitter account, Henry said that he "personally" will ensure that the aid gets to the victims this time around.

The Core Group, a coalition of key international diplomats from the United States and other nations that monitors Haiti, said in a statement Wednesday that its members are "resolutely committed to working alongside national and local authorities to ensure that impacted people and areas receive adequate assistance as soon as possible."

Haiti's Civil Protection Agency raised the number of deaths from the quake to 2,189 from an earlier count of 1,941 and said more than 12,000 people were injured. The magnitude 7.2 earthquake destroyed more than 7,000 homes and damaged more than 12,000, leaving about 30,000 families homeless, officials said. Schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged.

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While some officials have suggested that the search phase has to end and heavy machinery should be called in to clear rubble, Henry appeared unwilling to move to that stage.

"Some of our citizens are still under the debris. We have teams of foreigners and Haitians working on it," he said.

He also appealed for unity: "We have to put our heads together to rebuild Haiti."

"The country is physically and mentally destroyed," Henry said.

The U.S. Geological Survey said a preliminary analysis of satellite imagery after the earthquake revealed hundreds of landslides.

Tensions were growing Wednesday over the slow pace of aid efforts. At the airport in the southwest city of Les Cayes, one of the hardest-hit areas, throngs of people gathered outside the fence at the terminal after an aid flight arrived and crews began loading boxes into waiting trucks. One of the members of a Haitian national police squad on hand to guard the shipments fired two warning shots to disperse a group of young men.

Angry crowds also massed at collapsed buildings in the city, demanding tarps to create temporary shelters that were needed more than ever after Tropical Storm Grace brought heavy rain on Monday and Tuesday.

One of the first food deliveries by local authorities — a couple dozen boxes of rice and pre-measured, bagged meal kits — reached a tent encampment set up in one of the poorest areas of Les Cayes, where most of the warren's one-story, cinderblock, tin-roofed homes were damaged or destroyed by Saturday's quake.

But the shipment was clearly insufficient for the hundreds who have lived under tents and tarps for five days.

"It's not enough, but we'll do everything we can to make sure everybody gets at least something," said Vladimir Martino, a resident of the camp who took charge of the precious cargo for distribution.

Gerda Francoise, 24, was one of dozens who lined up in the wilting heat in hopes of receiving food. "I don't know what I'm going to get, but I need something to take back to my tent," said Francoise. "I have a child."

The quake wiped out many of the sources of food and income that the poor depend on for survival in Haiti, which is already struggling with the coronavirus, gang violence and the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

"We don't have anything. Even the (farm) animals are gone. They were killed by the rockslides," said Elize Civil, 30, a farmer in the village of Fleurant, near the quake's epicenter.

Civil's village and many of those in the Nippes province depend on livestock such as goats, cows and chickens for much of their income, said Christy Delafield, who works with the U.S.-based relief organization Mercy Corps. The group is considering cash distributions to allow residents to continue buying local products from small local businesses that are vital to their communities.

Large-scale aid has not yet reached many areas, and one dilemma for donors is that pouring huge amounts of staple foods purchased abroad could, in the long run, hurt local producers.

"We don't want to flood the area with a lot of products coming in from off the island," Delafield said. She said aid efforts must also take a longer view for areas like Nippes, which has been hit in recent years by ever-stronger cyclical droughts and soil erosion. Support for adapting farming practices to the new climate reality — with less reliable rainfall and more tropical storms — is vital, she said.

Etzer Emile, a Haitian economist and professor at Quisqueya University, a private institution in the capital of Port-au-Prince, said the disaster will increase Haitians' dependence on remittances from abroad and assistance from international nongovernmental groups.

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

One of the country's most immediate needs now is medical equipment.

"The hospitals are all broken and collapsed, the operating rooms aren't functional, and then if you bring tents, it's hurricane season, they can blow right away," said Dr. Barth Green, president and co-founder of Project Medishare, an organization that has worked in Haiti since 1994 to improve health services.

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Green was hopeful the U.S. military would establish a field hospital in the affected area.

U.S. Coast Guard helicopter crews concentrated on the most urgent task, ferrying the injured to less-stressed medical facilities. A U.S. Navy amphibious warship, the USS Arlington, was expected to head for Haiti on Wednesday with a surgical team and landing craft.

Green noted that his organization has "hundreds of medical volunteers, but the Haitian government tells us they don't need them."

He said Project Medishare was deploying nonetheless, along with other organizations. He said he sensed caution on the part of the government after bad experiences with outside aid following previous disasters.

At the public hospital in L'Asile, deep in a remote stretch of countryside in the southwest, the obstetrics, pediatric and operating wing collapsed, though everyone made it out. Despite the damage, the hospital was able to treat about 170 severely injured quake victims in improvised tents set up on the grounds of the facility.

People were arriving from isolated villages with broken arms and legs.

Hospital director Sonel Fevry said five such patients showed up Tuesday.

"We do what we can," Fevry said.

Mercy Corps said about half of L'Asile's homes were destroyed and 90% were affected in some way. Most public buildings where people would normally shelter also were destroyed. The nearby countryside was devastated: In one 10-mile (16-kilometer) stretch, not a single house, church, store or school was left standing.

Fires harming California's efforts to curb climate change

By BRIAN MELLEY and TERENCE CHEA Associated Press

POLLOCK PINES, Calif. (AP) — Record-setting blazes raging across Northern California are wiping out forests central to plans to reduce carbon emissions and testing projects designed to protect communities, the state's top fire official said Wednesday, hours before a fast-moving new blaze erupted.

Fires that are "exceedingly resistant to control" in drought-sapped vegetation are on pace to exceed the amount of land burned last year — the most in modern history — and having broader effects, said Thom Porter, chief of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Hours after Porter spoke, a grass fire spurred by winds up to 30 mph (48 kilometers per hour) swiftly burned dozens of homes, forced the evacuation of schools and threatened the city of Clearlake about 80 miles north of San Francisco.

Rows of homes were destroyed on at least two blocks and television footage showed crews dousing burning homes with water. Children were rushed out of an elementary school as a field across the street burned.

Lake County Sheriff Brian Martin issued a warning of "immediate threat to life and property."

"This isn't the fire to mess around with," he told KGO-TV.

Fires burning mostly in the northern part of the state threatened thousands of homes and led to extended evacuation orders and warnings, as well as power outages to prevent utility equipment from sparking fires amid strong winds.

The largest current fire in the West, known as the Dixie Fire, is the first to have burned from east to west across the spine of California, where the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountains meet, the state's fire chief said.

It was also one of several massive fires that have destroyed areas of the timber belt that serve as a centerpiece of the state's climate reduction plan because trees can store carbon dioxide.

"We are seeing generational destruction of forests because of what these fires are doing," Porter said. "This is going to take a long time to come back from."

Although the Dixie Fire is only a third contained and remains a threat, dozens of fire engines and crews were transferred Wednesday to fight the Caldor Fire, which exploded in size southwest of Lake Tahoe and ravaged Grizzly Flats, a community of about 1,200. It covered 84 square miles (217 square kilometers).

Dozens of homes burned, according to officials, but tallies were incomplete. Those who viewed the

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aftermath saw few homes standing. Lone chimneys rose from the ashes, little more than rows of chairs remained of a church and the burned out husks of cars littered the landscape.

Chris Sheean said the dream home he bought six weeks ago near the elementary school went up in smoke. He felt lucky he and his wife, cats and dog got out safely hours before the flames arrived.

"It's devastation. You know, there's really no way to explain the feeling, the loss," Sheean said. "Maybe next to losing a child, a baby, maybe. ... Everything that we owned, everything that we've built is gone."

All 7,000 residents in nearby Pollock Pines were ordered to evacuate Tuesday. A large fire menaced the town in 2014.

Time lapse video from a U.S. Forest Service webcam captured the fire's extreme behavior as it grew beneath a massive gray cloud. A ceiling of dark smoke spread out from the main plume that began to glow and was then illuminated by flames shooting hundreds of feet in the sky.

John Battles, a professor of forest ecology at the University of California, Berkeley, said the fires are behaving in ways not seen in the past as flames churn through trees and brush desiccated by a mega-drought in the West and exacerbated by climate change.

"These are reburning areas that have burned what we thought were big fires 10 years ago," Battles said. "They're reburning that landscape."

The wildfires, in large part, have been fueled by high temperatures, strong winds and dry weather. 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.

Battles said the fires have created a vicious cycle. Burning increases carbon emissions while also destroying trees and other ground cover that can absorb the greenhouse gas. Dead trees will continue to release carbon they once stored.

The fire is burning along the U.S. Route 50 corridor, one of two highways between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe. The highway through the canyon along the South Fork of the American River has been the focus of a decades-long effort to protect homes by preventing the spread of fires through a combination of fuel breaks, prescribed burns and logging.

"All of that is being tested as we speak," Porter said. "When fire is jumping outside of its perimeter, sometimes miles ... those fuel projects won't stop a fire. Sometimes they're just used to slow it enough to get people out of the way."

In the Sierra-Cascades region about 100 miles (161 kilometers) to the north, the month-old Dixie Fire expanded by thousands of acres to 993 square miles (2,572 square kilometers) — two weeks after the blaze gutted the Gold Rush-era town of Greenville. About 16,000 homes and buildings were threatened by the Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history.

"It's a pretty good size monster," Mark Brunton, a firefighting operations section chief, said in a briefing. "It's going to be a work in progress — eating the elephant one bite at a time kind of thing."

The Caldor and Dixie fires are among a dozen large wildfires in the northern half of California.

More than 40,000 Pacific Gas & Electric customers had no power, though the utility began restoring electricity to customers as forecasts for low humidity and gusts were expected to improve Thursday.

Most of the fires this year have hit the northern part of the state, largely sparing Southern California, which experienced rare drizzle and light rain Wednesday. Fire conditions in the region are expected to get worse in the fall.

Biden to require COVID vaccines for nursing home staff

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday announced that his administration will require that nursing home staff be vaccinated against COVID-19 as a condition for those facilities to continue receiving federal Medicare and Medicaid funding.

Biden unveiled the new policy Wednesday afternoon in a White House address as the administration continues to look for ways to use mandates to encourage vaccine holdouts to get shots.

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"If you visit, live or work in a nursing home, you should not be at a high risk for contracting COVID from unvaccinated employees," Biden said.

The new mandate, in the form of a forthcoming regulation to be issued by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, could take effect as soon as next month.

Hundreds of thousands of nursing home workers are not vaccinated, according to federal data, despite those facilities bearing the brunt of the early COVID-19 outbreak and their workers being among the first in the country to be eligible for shots.

It comes as the Biden administration seeks to raise the costs for those who have yet to get vaccinated, after months of incentives and giveaways proved to be insufficient to drive tens of millions of Americans to roll up their sleeves.

In just the past three weeks, Biden has forced millions of federal workers to attest to their vaccination status or face onerous new requirements, with even stricter requirements for federal workers in frontline health roles, and his administration has moved toward mandating vaccines for the military as soon as next month.

Biden has also celebrated businesses that have mandated vaccines for their own workforces and encouraged others to follow, and highlighted local vaccine mandates as a condition for daily activities, like indoor dining.

The new effort seems to be paying off, as the nation's rate of new vaccinations has nearly doubled over the past month. More than 200 million Americans have now received at least one dose of the vaccines, according to the White House, but about 80 million Americans are eligible but haven't yet been vaccinated.

Mark Parkinson, the president and CEO of the American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living, praised the Biden decision, but called on him to go further.

"Vaccination mandates for health care personnel should be applied to all health care settings," he said. "Without this, nursing homes face a disastrous workforce challenge."

Last year CMS used similar regulatory authority to prohibit most visitors from nursing homes in an effort to protect residents.

Years in the making, R. Kelly sex abuse trial gets underway

By TOM HAYS and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — R&B star R. Kelly is a predator who lured girls, boys and young women with his fame and dominated them physically, sexually and psychologically, a prosecutor said Wednesday, while a defense lawyer warned jurors they'll have to sift through lies from accusers with agendas to find the truth.

The differing perspectives came as the long-anticipated trial began unfolding in a Brooklyn courtroom where several accusers were scheduled to testify in the next month about the Grammy-winning, multiplatinum-selling singer whose career has been derailed by charges that have left him jailed as he goes broke.

Jerhonda Pace, the first government witness, told jurors Wednesday that she was a 16-year-old virgin and a member of Kelly's fan club when he invited her to his mansion in 2010. He immediately told her to take off her clothing, Pace said.

"He asked me to continue to tell everyone I was 19 and act like I was 21," she said. Kelly responded "that's good" when she revealed her virginity, said that he wanted to "train her" sexually and ordered her to call him "Daddy," she said.

They continued to see each other for another six months, with Kelly growing more and more controlling and erupting in violence when she broke what she called "Rob's rules." One time he grew so angry, "He slapped me and choked me until I passed out," she said with no hint of emotion.

Afterward, he spit in her face and forced her to have oral sex, she said. She kept a blue T-shirt from the episode that has provided DNA evidence of the misconduct, prosecutors said.

The Associated Press doesn't name alleged victims of sexual abuse without their consent unless they have spoken publicly extensively. Pace has appeared in a documentary and participated in media interviews.

Prior to Pace's testimony, lawyers gave jurors an outline of the trial in their opening statements.

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"This case is not about a celebrity who likes to party a lot," Assistant U.S. Attorney Maria Cruz Melendez told the jury as she explained the evidence to be revealed at his federal trial. "This case is about a predator."

She said he distributed backstage passes to entice children and women to join him, sometimes at his home or studio, where he then "dominated and controlled them physically, sexually and psychologically."

The prosecutor said Kelly would often record sex acts with minors as he controlled a racketeering enterprise of individuals who were loyal and devoted to him, eager to "fulfill each and everyone one of the defendant's wishes and demands."

"What his success and popularity brought him was access, access to girls, boys and young women," she said.

But Kelly's attorney, Nicole Blank Becker, portrayed her client as a victim of women, some of whom enjoyed the "notoriety of being able to tell their friends that they were with a superstar."

"He didn't recruit them. They were fans. They came to Mr. Kelly," she said, urging jurors to closely scrutinize the testimony. "They knew exactly what they were getting into. It was no secret Mr. Kelly had multiple girlfriends. He was quite transparent."

It would be a stretch to believe he orchestrated an elaborate criminal enterprise, like a mob boss, the lawyer said.

Becker warned jurors they'll have to sort through "a mess of lies" from women with an agenda.

"Don't assume everybody's telling the truth," she said.

The remarks fit a theme set by the defense in court papers prior to the trial describing Kelly's alleged victims as groupies who turned up at his shows and made it known they "were dying to be with him." The women only started accusing him of abuse years later when public sentiment shifted against him, they said.

Kelly, 54, is perhaps best known for his smash hit "I Believe I Can Fly," a 1996 song that became an inspirational anthem played at school graduations, weddings, advertisements and elsewhere.

The openings and testimony came more than a decade after Kelly was acquitted in a 2008 child pornography case in Chicago. It was a reprieve that allowed his music career to continue until the #MeToo era caught up with him, emboldening alleged victims to come forward.

The women's stories got wide exposure with the Lifetime documentary "Surviving R. Kelly." The series explored how an entourage of supporters protected Kelly and silenced his victims for decades, foreshadowing the federal racketeering conspiracy case that landed Kelly in jail in 2019.

Prosecutors in Brooklyn have lined up multiple female accusers — mostly referred to in court as "Jane Does" — and cooperating former associates who have never spoken publicly before about their experiences with Kelly.

They're expected to offer testimony about how Kelly's managers, bodyguards and other employees helped him recruit women and girls — and sometimes boys — for sexual exploitation. They say the group selected victims at concerts and other venues and arranged for them to travel to see Kelly in the New York City area and elsewhere, in violation of the Mann Act, the 1910 law that made it illegal to "transport any woman or girl" across state lines "for any immoral purpose."

An anonymous jury made up of seven men and five women was sworn in to hear the case. The trial, coming after several delays due mostly to the pandemic, unfolds under coronavirus precautions restricting the press and the public to overflow courtrooms with video feeds.

The New York case is only part of the legal peril facing the singer, born Robert Sylvester Kelly. He also has pleaded not guilty to sex-related charges in Illinois and Minnesota.

Misread warnings helped lead to chaotic Afghan evacuation

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The warnings were clear: The Afghan government would likely fall once U.S. troops pulled out. But intelligence agencies and ultimately President Joe Biden missed how quickly it would happen, losing weeks that could have been used for evacuations and spurring a foreign policy crisis.

Without a sense that the country could collapse so quickly, the administration heard out Afghan President

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Ashraf Ghani when he met face-to-face with Biden in June. Biden says Ghani pressed him to hold off on any urgent evacuation of Americans, arguing that it would be inviting the Taliban to advance more quickly -- as it turned out they did anyway -- and telling the Afghan army to give up.

It was an ask that Biden heeded, despite more than a decade of deep-rooted skepticism of the competence of the Afghan government and military, marred by widespread corruption and mismanagement.

Biden on Wednesday blamed Ghani for fleeing the country and Afghan forces for surrendering so easily to the Taliban. He told ABC News that he believed the problems with the withdrawal were inevitable.

"The idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens," he said.

U.S. officials estimate that as many as 10,000 Americans remain in Afghanistan, and tens of thousands of Afghans who fought alongside or aided the U.S. in the nearly two-decade occupation are struggling to get out.

Biden's assertion on Monday that some Afghans, "still hopeful for their country," didn't want to leave has been widely criticized. The State Department has a backlog of tens of thousands of visa applications from those who have been trying for years to depart the country ahead of the U.S. withdrawal. That is now set for Aug. 31, though Biden said Wednesday Americans would not be left behind.

While analysts have long warned that the Afghan government would be in grave danger without American support, they didn't anticipate the speed at which it would fall to the Taliban.

That miss is sparking instant reviews of what went wrong, current and former U.S. officials said, speaking only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the subject.

As recently as two weeks ago, intelligence agencies in briefings to lawmakers gave no warning that the Afghan government faced imminent collapse, an official familiar with the briefings said.

A defense estimate that Kabul could be surrounded within 30 days — an assessment that was viewed as pessimistic when it was reported last week — turned out instead to be far too optimistic. In just over a week, the Taliban overran the country and entered Kabul without a fight. Ghani and his top aides fled.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insisted Wednesday that he had no indication of the speed of the Afghan collapse.

"There was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this army, and this government, in 11 days," he said.

One senior intelligence official said agencies did identify the risk of a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and grew "more pessimistic" during the last several months of the Afghan fighting season.

"That said, the Afghan government unraveled even more quickly than we anticipated," the official said.

Analysts have for years warned that the American withdrawal would destabilize Afghan forces trained at great U.S. expense and still heavily reliant on U.S. air power and intelligence gathering, current and former officials said. Withdrawal also would risk damaging the morale of Afghan units who had fought alongside U.S. and coalition forces for two decades and would be left to face a resurgent Taliban on their own.

A public threat assessment in April warned that Afghan forces "will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support."

One administration official said the intelligence community had reported to the White House that a rapid military collapse following the withdrawal would be possible as the Taliban took key provincial capitals. In fact, that occurred within a matter of days leading up to the fall of Kabul.

And the anticipated danger was limited to Afghanistan itself. Analysts had also warned that new terrorist threats would likely emerge from the country if the Taliban were to take power. According to a former official, one assessment predicted that a large-scale terrorist attack could be planned in Afghanistan within one to three years of the withdrawal.

Many have blamed an intelligence failure for failing to anticipate the speed with which the Afghan government would collapse. Some current and former intelligence officers have pushed back.

Marc Polymeropoulos, who served in the CIA for nearly three decades, said that the intelligence community had always been clear amid a renewed focus on the mistaken 30-day time frame.

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"Whether it's six days or 30 days, I don't see the IC as ever having made any kind of rosy predictions or cherry-picked at all," he said.

But Chris Miller, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2001 and later was the nation's top counterterrorism official and acting defense secretary under former President Donald Trump, called the missed speed "an intelligence failure of cataclysmic proportions."

"We have something fundamentally wrong with the way we do our intelligence assessments in our country," he said. "It's cultural and technological arrogance. This was so predictable how this was going to go down."

Other elements of the U.S. government were pushing Americans and others to leave months ago, with ever-more-dire warnings, culminating with an urgent Aug. 7 State Department plea for them to leave, offering to provide funding for Americans to get out of Afghanistan.

Some U.S. officials believe they may have bought into the leaked intelligence assessment that the Afghan government could hold onto Kabul for a month or longer. Officials maintain that those assessments were not released publicly, and were only best estimates. For all of the focus on intelligence failures, the officials say the State Department warnings should have pushed most Americans to leave Afghanistan weeks ago.

Now, the U.S. is working with the Taliban to ensure safe passage for Americans and Afghans who helped the 20-year war effort and are frantically trying to reach Kabul's international airport. As the Taliban take hold, the State Department has said it cannot guarantee them safe passage to the airport.

US health officials call for booster shots against COVID-19

By MATTHEW PERRONE and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health officials Wednesday announced plans to dispense COVID-19 booster shots to all Americans to shore up their protection amid the surging delta variant and signs that the vaccines' effectiveness is slipping.

The plan, as outlined by the chief of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other top health authorities, calls for an extra dose eight months after people get their second shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine. The doses could begin the week of Sept. 20.

"Our plan is to protect the American people, to stay ahead of this virus," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said as the agency cited a raft of studies suggesting that the vaccines are losing ground while the highly contagious variant spreads.

People who received the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine will also probably need extra shots, health officials said. But they said they are waiting for more data.

Officials said that before any booster program starts up, the Food and Drug Administration and a CDC advisory panel would need to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of an extra dose.

"We have a responsibility to give the maximum amount of protection," President Joe Biden said at the White House. He added that extra doses are also "the best way to protect ourselves from new variants that could arise."

The announcement came the same day the Biden administration said it would require nursing homes to mandate vaccinations for staffers in order to continue receiving federal funds. Hundreds of thousands of nursing home workers remain unvaccinated, despite the heightened risk of fatal infections among elderly residents.

Officials said it is "very clear" that the vaccines' protection against infections wanes over time, and they noted the worsening picture in Israel, which has seen a rise in severe cases, many of them in people already inoculated.

They said the U.S. needs to get out ahead of the problem before it takes a more lethal turn here and starts leading to increasing hospitalizations and deaths among the vaccinated.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's foremost expert on COVID-19, said one of the key lessons of the coronavirus is that it's better to "stay ahead of it than chasing after it."

The first boosters would go to people in high-priority groups that received the initial U.S. vaccinations:

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nursing home residents, health workers and those with underlying health conditions. Health officials are likely to recommend that the booster be the same brand of vaccine that people received initially.

Dr. Mark Mulligan of NYU's Langone Health center welcomed the announcement, saying: "Part of leadership is being able to see around the corner and make hard decisions without having all the data. It seems to me that's what they're doing here."

Top scientists at the World Health Organization bitterly objected to the U.S. plan, noting that poor countries are not getting enough vaccine for their initial rounds of shots.

"We're planning to hand out extra life jackets to people who already have life jackets, while we're leaving other people to drown without a single life jacket," said Dr. Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies chief.

The organization's top scientist, Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, said the evidence does not show boosters are needed for everyone, and she warned that leaving billions of people in the developing world unvaccinated could foster the emergence of new variants and result in "even more dire situations."

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy rejected the notion that the U.S. must choose between "America and the world," saying: "We clearly see our responsibility to both."

White House officials noted that the U.S. has donated 115 million doses to 80 countries, more than all other nations combined. They said the U.S. has plenty of vaccine to dispense boosters to its own population.

Israel is already offering booster shots to people over 50. And European regulators are looking into the idea.

Last week, U.S. health officials recommended a third shot for some people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients and organ transplant recipients. Offering boosters to all Americans would be a major expansion of what is already the biggest vaccination campaign in U.S. history. Nearly 200 million Americans have received at least one shot.

Some experts have expressed concern that calling for boosters would undermine the public health message — and reinforce opposition to the vaccine — by raising more doubts in the minds of people already skeptical about the shots' effectiveness.

As for why the vaccines appear to be less effective over time at stopping infections, there are indications that the body's immune response to the shots fades, as it does with other inoculations. But also, the vaccines simply may not protect against the delta variant as well as they do against the original virus. Scientists are still trying to answer the question.

Officials said the eight-month timeframe was a judgment call about when vaccine protection against severe illness might fall, based on the direction of the current data. "There's nothing magical about this number," the surgeon general said.

Nearly 20 months into the outbreak, the scourge has killed 620,000 Americans. Just weeks after the president declared the country's "independence" from COVID-19 on July Fourth, emergency rooms in parts of the South and West are overloaded again, and cases are averaging nearly 140,000 per day, quadrupling in just a month.

In making its announcement, the CDC released a number of studies conducted during the delta surge that suggest that the vaccines remain highly effective at keeping Americans out of the hospital but that their ability to prevent infection is dropping markedly.

One of the studies looked at reported COVID-19 infections in residents of nearly 15,000 nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. It found that the effectiveness of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines against infection fell from about 74% in March, April and early May to 53% in June and July.

The study examined all COVID-19 infections, with or without symptoms. The researchers said more work is needed to determine if there was a higher incidence of infections that resulted in severe illness.

Another study was a look at 21 hospitals. It found that the vaccine's effectiveness in preventing COVID-19-associated hospitalizations was 86% at two to 12 weeks after the second dose, and 84% at 13 to 24 weeks after. The difference was not considered significant.

A third study, conducted in New York state, found that protection against hospitalizations stayed steady at about 95% over the nearly three months examined. But vaccine effectiveness against new laboratory-

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confirmed infections declined from about 92% in early May to about 80% in late July.

Also, the CDC released Mayo Clinic patient data from Minnesota that showed that in July, when the delta variant was prevalent, Moderna's vaccine was 76% effective against infection and Pfizer's 42%.

Some scientists had been looking for signs that hospitalizations or deaths are increasing, as a necessary indicator that boosters might be needed.

To some leading scientists, the new studies "would not be sufficient, in and of themselves, to make the case for a booster," said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-diseases expert at Vanderbilt University and liaison to an expert advisory panel that helps the CDC form its vaccination recommendations.

US friends try to rescue brother in arms in Afghanistan

By ALEX SANZ and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Mohammad Khalid Wardak had no intention of leaving Afghanistan. The high-profile national police officer had worked alongside American special forces and even went on television to challenge the Taliban to a fight. He planned to stand with his countrymen to defend his homeland after U.S. forces were gone.

Then with stunning speed, the government collapsed. His president fled the country. And now Khalid, as he's called by his friends, is in hiding and desperately hoping that American officials will repay his loyalty by helping him and his family escape almost certain death.

But time — and U.S. policy — are not on his side. Translators, interpreters and others who worked for the U.S. in Afghanistan are eligible to apply for special immigrant visas, but current Afghan military members or police officers are not, supporters say. The State Department said they might be eligible for refugee status, but Khalid's supporters say his family needs to get out now.

His friends in the U.S. military say he's a brother in arms who helped save countless lives, and they are pleading for help — from members of Congress, the Defense Department and the State Department — to get Khalid and his wife and four children inside the Kabul airport and at least evacuated to another country.

"It is this nation's duty to help those who helped us and were loyal to us and their country for so long and have nothing left," said Army Special Forces Sgt. Major Chris Green, who worked with Khalid and is among several current and former military members pressing his case. "It's our duty to ... just help them survive. That's where we are at this point, just helping them survive."

Khalid and his family have applied for refugee status based on their fear of persecution, Green said.

Those like Khalid who are top Taliban targets because of their work with U.S. forces deserve special consideration, said Robert McCreary, a former congressional chief of staff and White House official under President George W. Bush, who has worked with special forces in Afghanistan.

Those working to save Khalid said they had support from some members of Congress, including Delaware Sen. Chris Coons and Connecticut Rep. Jim Himes, both Democrats. Neither of their offices returned phone and email messages.

"They're shouting his name in the street, looking for him, hunting for him. And the fear is if they get a hold of him and his family, they are going to make an example out of them," McCreary said.

Khalid came to the rescue in March 2013, when a special forces detachment in eastern Afghanistan's Wardak Province suffered an insider attack: Someone dressed in an Afghan National Security Forces uniform opened fire, killing two Americans.

When the outpost was almost simultaneously attacked from the outside, a U.S. commander called on Khalid, who within minutes raced into the valley with a quick-reaction force to defend his American partners.

In 2015, when Khalid lost part of his right leg in a rocket-propelled grenade attack, friends in the U.S. military helped get him medical care and a prosthetic leg outside the country. A month later, he was again leading special police operations in Afghanistan alongside the U.S., Green said.

Along the way, he helped apprehend al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. He went on to serve as police chief in Ghazni Province and then Helmand Province, where he was wounded again last month in a mortar attack and continued to direct the resistance from his hospital bed.

"Khalid was — is — a true patriot to Afghanistan, but also resolute in support to the Americans," said

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Green, who said he saw Khalid's bravery and leadership many times.

That included his willingness to go on television and radio to tell citizens "exactly what our operations were ... how we were protecting the Afghan people and the Americans, and then daring the Taliban to drop their terrorist methods and come fight him face to face," Green said.

"Without a doubt, they know who he is," added Green, who said Khalid and his family are "running from one location to another just to stay hidden."

"It's just unimaginable terror, unimaginable fear."

For now, Khalid, his wife and their four sons, ages 3 to 12, are "literally hiding in a closet," said Ryan Brummond, a special forces commander who worked with Khalid in 2013 to track down high-level insurgents.

"He was so dedicated to the United States special forces and to the cause of a better life for all of us," said Brummond, now in his fourth year of medical school in North Carolina. "Khalid is that person who has fought and stood by us for years and years and years."

Khalid's family almost certainly will not be able to get past the Taliban guarding the entrance to the Kabul airport, especially with documentation that would identify them — both to the Taliban who might kill them and Americans who might be able to help.

McCreary said Khalid and his family should be eligible for special immigrant visas or refugee status because he no longer works for the Afghan government. He pushed back on criticism from President Joe Biden and others that Afghanistan's police and army let the country fall to the Taliban without a fight.

"People in Khalid's situation ... had no plans of leaving Afghanistan," McCreary said. "They were staying there to fight to the end."

Heavy fighting raged in Helmand Province for two months before Khalid and other fighters were completely surrounded by the Taliban last week and their location overrun, McCreary said. Then on Monday, the Afghan government fell.

"There's no more police force or army for them to serve in, and we don't have a way to expedite ... getting them into secure areas in Afghanistan and then getting them evacuated," Green said.

The work of changing that is painfully slow, he said, as the U.S. focuses on processing applications from those who already have applied for visas or refugee status. But the first step, he said, is to get them out of Afghanistan.

"We can figure it out from there," Green said, adding that many in the U.S. military would gladly offer to help.

"Without a doubt, any one of us would take these guys, these police officers, these Afghan soldiers into our homes, with their families, and do anything we could do to help them just continue to live," Green said.

For the moment, though, those who helped the U.S., "are now just absolutely left hanging out in the cold," he said.

McCreary warned that time is running out: "It's just such an urgent, high-profile situation that it is really tearing us up. We know what's going to happen, and it's not good."

Surprise! Scarlett Johansson, Colin Jost welcome baby boy

The Associated Press undefined

Scarlett Johansson is a mom to two now. The "Black Widow" star recently gave birth to a son, Cosmo, with husband Colin Jost, the "Saturday Night Live" star wrote on Instagram Wednesday. This is the first child for the couple, who were married last October.

"Ok, OK, we had a baby. His name is Cosmo. We love him very much," was Jost's brief note.

People magazine first reported the birth of the baby, which came as a shock to many since news of the pregnancy came out only days earlier after Jost reportedly mentioned it in a stand-up set in Connecticut. No other details were provided.

It's the first child for Jost, 39, who is known for hosting "Weekend Update" on "Saturday Night Live." Johansson, 36, also has a 6-year-old daughter, Rose, from a previous marriage to Romain Dauriac.

Jost wrote on his Instagram page that privacy would be greatly appreciated and directed "all inquires"

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to "our publicist @chethinks," tagging his "Weekend Update" co-host, Michael Che.

With no beds, hospitals ship patients to far-off cities

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and JIM SALTER Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Many overwhelmed hospitals, with no beds to offer, are putting critically ill COVID-19 patients on planes, helicopters and ambulances and sending them hundreds of miles to far-flung states for treatment.

The surge in the delta variant of the virus, combined with low vaccination rates, has pushed hospitals to the brink in many states and resulted in a desperate scramble to find beds for patients.

The issue is that large hospitals in urban areas already were running short of space and staff with non-COVID procedures like cancer biopsies and hip replacements when the summer surge started. That means they have very few free beds to offer to patients from small rural hospitals without ICUs or from medical centers in virus hotspots.

"Just imagine not having the support of your family near, to have that kind of anxiety if you have someone grow acutely ill," said Steve Edwards, CEO of CoxHealth, whose hospital in Springfield, Missouri, is treating patients from as far away as Alabama.

Hospitals across the U.S. had more than 75,000 coronavirus patients as of last week, a dramatic increase from a few weeks ago but still well below the winter surge records. However, Florida, Arkansas, Oregon, Hawaii, Louisiana and Mississippi all have set pandemic records for COVID hospitalizations in recent weeks.

Unlike the winter surge, hospitals this summer were already strained because emergency room volumes are back to pre-pandemic levels and patients are catching up on care they put off.

"We are seeing COVID patients and we are seeing car accidents and we are seeing kids come in with normal seasonal viral infections. And we are seeing normal life come into the emergency department along with the extra surge of COVID patients so it is causing that crisis," said Dr. Mark Rosenberg, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

In Arizona, a special COVID-19 hotline is getting desperate calls from hospitals in Wyoming, Arkansas, Texas and California who are in search of bed space.

Often, there are no takers.

"We just can't get them out," lamented Dennis Shelby, CEO of the 15-bed Wilson Medical Center in Neodesha, Kansas. Officials at the small hospital recently called 40 other facilities in multiple states seeking a bed for a COVID-19 patient, before finally finding one more than a day later about 220 miles (354.06 kilometers) away. Six of its seven patients have COVID-19, a pandemic high.

In Kansas, sick COVID-19 patients at small rural hospitals are waiting an average of nearly 10 hours to be flown somewhere else, according to Motient, a company contracting with the state to help manage transfers.

Dr. Richard Watson, founder of Motient, said Kansas patients are being sent as far away as Wisconsin, Illinois, Colorado and Texas. Often, though, the rural hospitals just muddle through.

"That is just the worst day that you can have in the emergency room as a provider to be taking care of a patient that you are totally helpless to give them what you know they need," he said.

He said the delayed transfers can have dire consequences for patients, especially those who urgently need to see specialists, often available only in bigger hospitals, for issues such as strokes or heart attacks.

"Imagine being with your grandma in the ER who is having a heart attack in western Kansas and you are saying, 'Why can't we find a bed for her?' We are watching this happen right in front of us. 'This is America. Why don't we have hospital bed for her.' Well here we are."

In Washington state, the 25-bed Prosser Memorial Hospital doesn't have an intensive care unit, so it often sends critically ill patients elsewhere in the state. Hospital spokeswoman Shannon Hitchcock said Washington state hospitals are full, so Prosser patients are being sent as far away as eastern Idaho — 600 miles (965.61 kilometers) away.

Luke Smith, director of the Arizona Surge Line, which coordinates COVID-19 patient transfers for Arizona

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patients and offers advice to out-of-state hospitals, said people arriving at emergency rooms "are more acutely ill than we have seen historically."

Finding a hospital to take them is made more difficult by staffing shortages, after pandemic-fatigued doctors and nurses walked away.

"Most of them are saying it isn't that they don't have an open bed, it is that they don't have nursing staff to care for them," said Robin Allaman, chief nursing officer at the 25-bed Kearny County Hospital in tiny Lakin, Kansas. Officials there called hospitals in Nebraska, Oklahoma and New Mexico before one in Colorado Springs, Colorado, 200 miles (321.87 kilometers) away, agreed to take a recent patient.

Allaman has no idea how many calls they made. "I think we quit counting," she said.

High vaccination rates among the 65-plus age group group that filled beds early in the pandemic were supposed to protect hospitals from becoming overwhelmed again. But Justin Lessler, a professor of epidemiology at John Hopkins, said there hasn't been the kind of reduction in hospitalizations that officials had hoped for because the delta variant seems to be more severe, particularly in younger age groups, whose vaccination rates are lower.

University of Iowa Healthcare in Iowa City has been getting calls from out-of-state hospitals seeking transfers, said Dr. Theresa Brennan, the hospital's chief medical officer. They turn down most of them "because we have beds full of our Iowans."

Des Moines emergency medicine specialist Dr. Clint Hawthorne, like many doctors in Iowa, is concerned the situation could get worse after the Iowa State Fair, which is expected to draw 1 million people.

"How are we going to be able to handle that?" Hawthorne said. "There's not a good answer to that."

Report: Census hit by cyberattack, US count unaffected

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

U.S. Census Bureau computer servers were exploited last year during a cybersecurity attack, but it didn't involve the 2020 census, and hackers' attempts to keep access to the system were unsuccessful, according to a watchdog report released Wednesday.

The attack took place in January 2020 on the bureau's remote access servers.

According to the Office of Inspector General, the Census Bureau missed opportunities to limit its vulnerability to the attack and didn't discover and report the attack in a timely manner. The statistical agency also failed to keep sufficient system logs, which hindered the investigation, and was using operating system no longer supported by the vendor, the watchdog report said.

The bureau's firewalls stopped the attacker's attempts to maintain access to the system through a backdoor, but unauthorized changes were still made, including the creation of user accounts, the report said.

In a written response, acting Census Bureau director Ron Jarmin reiterated that none of the systems used for the 2020 census were compromised, nor was the nation's once-a-decade head count affected in any way.

"Furthermore, no systems or data maintained and managed by the Census Bureau on behalf of the public were compromised, manipulated or lost," Jarmin wrote.

The 2020 head count data was being used to determine how many congressional seats each state gets and for the drawing of congressional and legislative districts. The data also is used for helping distribute \$1.5 trillion in federal spending each year.

The Census Bureau on Wednesday released a set of measurements that reveal how people were counted and whether administrative records or a statistical technique were used to fill in the gaps for households where people didn't respond to the 2020 census questionnaire.

The bureau had previously released state-level data, and the information released Wednesday were summaries of county and tract level data.

They showed that the use of a statistical technique called imputation was highest in counties in Louisiana and New York. Imputation involves using information about neighbors with similar characteristics to fill in head counts or demographic characteristics for households lacking data.

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The count in Louisiana was challenged by a series of hurricanes last year, and some census takers reported difficulties getting access to apartment buildings in major cities due to the pandemic.

In some cases, census takers were only able to get a count of the number of people living in a home without getting information about the race, sex, age or relationships in the household. Counties in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland and New York, on average, were higher than the national average.

The Census Bureau said in a statement that the measurements reflect what was expected in a "normally distributed population."

"Some counties and tracts are higher on some metrics and some are lower on other metrics, but no signs point to anything unexpected in the results," the statement said.

Wildfire raging near French Riviera kills 2, injures 27

By DANIEL COLE and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

BORMES-LES-MIMOSAS, France (AP) — A wildfire near the French Riviera killed two people and was burning out of control Wednesday in the forests of the popular region, fueled by wind and drought. Over 1,100 firefighters were battling the flames and thousands of tourists and locals were evacuated to safer areas.

The fire started Monday evening 40 kilometers (24 miles) inland from the coastal resort of Saint-Tropez. Whipped up by powerful seasonal winds coming off the Mediterranean Sea, the fire had burned 7,000 hectares (17,300 acres) of forest by Wednesday morning, local officials said.

The prefect of the Var region, Evence Richard, told reporters that two people were killed. The local prosecutor said the bodies were found in a home that burned down near the town of Grimaud. An investigation has been opened to formally identify the victims.

At least 27 people, including five firefighters, have suffered smoke inhalation or minor injuries from the blaze, the prefecture of the Var region said. Authorities closed a highway north of the fire area on Wednesday afternoon due to the thick smoke.

In the Gulf of Saint-Tropez, huge water-bombing planes could be seen swooping down to fill their bellies with water to dump across the flaming Riviera backcountry.

The end of the day brought new risks, because the airborne battle against the blaze by nine water-dropping aircraft and two planes spreading fire retardant must stop at night. Reinforcements to give firefighters on the ground periodic rests were coming in from northern France and elsewhere.

The wildfire has forced about 10,000 people to flee homes, campgrounds and hotels, sending them to sleep in temporary shelters, the prefect tweeted. Among them were over 1,000 people who stayed around a gym in the seaside resort of Bormes-Les-Mimosas where authorities supplied food and water.

Vassili Bartoletti and his family, who are from northeastern France, were evacuated early Tuesday from a campground where they had been vacationing.

"Around midnight, someone knocked at our door and told us to take our belongings and leave. At the end of the alley, we could see the red flames," he told The Associated Press. "So we left hastily."

Bartoletti said his 6-year-old son was "very anxious" about the fire.

"I showed him the map. I showed him we were far away, that we've been moved to a safe place" in Bormes-Les-Mimosas, he said.

Last month, while the family was on vacation on the Italian island of Sardinia, a major blaze there for three days threatened the town where they had rented a house. They did not have to evacuate but endured smoke in the air and saw water-dumping planes and helicopters going back and forth repeatedly.

French President Emmanuel Macron, who has been vacationing in a nearby coastal fortress, visited the fire zone on Tuesday and praised the firefighters for their work.

French officials warned that the fire risk would remain very high through Wednesday because of hot, dry weather. Temperatures have reached 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) in recent days.

Wildfires have swept across the Mediterranean region in recent weeks, leaving areas in Greece, Turkey, Italy, Algeria and Spain in smoldering ruins. In Greece on Wednesday, a major wildfire northwest of Athens, the capital, decimated large tracts of pine forest for a third straight day.

In neighboring Albania, hundreds of hectares (thousand of acres) have burned over the last month. Police reported Wednesday that a former deputy minister has been arrested for arson.

In Spain, authorities in the central region of Castilla y León said firefighters had established a perimeter around a blaze that has consumed at least 12,000 hectares (29,650 acres) this week. A fire on the Canary Islands was also brought under control after singeing 300 hectares (740 acres) of farmland.

While the Mediterranean is known for its sunny, hot summers, scientists voice little doubt that climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events such as heat waves, droughts and wildfires. Such hardships are likely to happen more frequently as the Earth continues to warm, they say.

Movement for Black Lives: Feds targeted BLM protesters

By KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

The federal government deliberately targeted Black Lives Matter protesters via heavy-handed criminal prosecutions in an attempt to disrupt and discourage the global movement that swept the nation last summer in the wake of the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, according to a new report released Wednesday by The Movement for Black Lives.

Movement leaders and experts said the prosecution of protesters over the past year continues a century-long practice by the federal government, rooted in structural racism, to suppress Black social movements via the use of surveillance tactics and other mechanisms.

"The empirical data and findings in this report largely corroborate what Black organizers have long known intellectually, intuitively, and from lived experience about the federal government's disparate policing and prosecution of racial justice protests and related activity," the report stated.

The report, which was first shared with The Associated Press, argues that as the uprisings in the summer of 2020 increased, so did police presence, the deployment of federal agents and prosecution of protesters.

Titled "Struggle For Power: The Ongoing Persecution of Black Movement By The U.S. Government," the report details how policing has been used historically as a major tool to deter Black people from engaging in their right to protest and weaken efforts to draw attention to issues impacting Black Americans. It also drew a comparison to how the government used Counterintelligence Program techniques to "disrupt the work of the Black Panther Party and other organizations fighting for Black liberation."

"We want to really show how the U.S. government has continued to persecute the Black movement by surveillance, by criminalizing protests, and by using the criminal legal system to prevent people from protesting and punishing them for being engaged in protests by attempting to curtail their First Amendment rights," said Amara Enyia, The Movement for Black Lives' policy research coordinator.

"It is undeniable that racism plays a role," Enyia said. "It is structurally built into the fabric of this country and its institutions, which is why it's been so difficult to eradicate. It's based on institutions that were designed around racism and around the devaluing of Black people and the devaluing of Black lives."

In the report, published in partnership with the Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility clinic at City University of New York School of Law, The Movement for Black Lives is calling for amnesty for all protesters involved in the nationwide protests.

The group, also known as M4BL, is demanding reparations from the government that includes an acknowledgment and an apology for the long history of targeting movements "in support of Black life and Black liberation." It also is pushing for passage of the BREATHE Act, proposed federal legislation that would radically transform the nation's criminal justice system, and ending the use of Joint Terrorism Task Forces in local communities.

The report also points to the stark difference in how the government handled the COVID-19 protests against local government shutdowns and mask mandates amid the pandemic during the same period. It analyzes 326 criminal cases initiated by U.S. federal prosecutors over alleged conduct related to protests in the wake of Floyd's murder and the police killings of other Black Americans, from May 31, 2020, to Oct. 25, 2020.

A key finding of the report was that the push to use federal charges against protesters came from top-down directives from former President Donald Trump and former Attorney General William Barr. M4BL

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and the Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility clinic, also known as CLEAR, found that in 92.6% of the cases, there were equivalent state level charges that could have been brought against defendants.

Among those cases where comparable state level charges could have been brought, 88% of the federal criminal charges carried more severe potential sentences than the equivalent state criminal charges for the same or similar conduct.

"We saw U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr overnight go from expressing some level of sympathy for racial justice protesters to labeling them as radical and violent agitators with absolutely no basis for that sort of characterization," said Ramzi Kassem, founding director of CLEAR and a law professor at the City University of New York, adding that Barr and Trump used the arrests and prosecutions to justify the "hostile rhetoric" aimed at protesters. "All of this was very transparently aimed at disrupting a Black-led movement for social justice that was happening both spontaneously and in an organized fashion nationwide."

Race data was only available for 27%, or 89 of the defendants. And of that number, 52% were identified as Black. Of the Black defendants, 91% were identified as male.

"The known proportion of Black defendants compared to the proportion of Black people in the United States, per the latest census data, indicates that Black defendants were dramatically overrepresented," the report stated.

Seventy-two cases, or 22.1%, involved charges with mandatory minimum sentences. And 67 cases, or 20.6%, involved offenses where defendants are alleged to "have attempted, conspired, or aided and abetted an underlying crime without having actually committed the underlying criminal conduct."

Portland, Oregon, led in the number of charges brought for protest-related activity, making up 29% of federal charges. Chicago, Las Vegas, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis followed.

Richard Wallace, founder of Equity and Transformation in Chicago, said over the past summer he witnessed overly aggressive policing by law enforcement officers who levied accusations of rioting and looting at protesters who were peacefully protesting. Wallace said he is deeply concerned for those who have been charged.

"Coming from Chicago, where (Black Panther Party leader) Fred Hampton was killed and where, Martin Luther King came and said this is one of the most segregated cities he ever saw, we have a very keen historic lens as it relates to state violence, and Black movement," said Wallace, whose organization, also known as EAT, was founded by and for formerly incarcerated and marginalized Black people and focuses on individuals who operate within the informal economy.

"What we saw in Illinois and across the country was this reverberation of Black power. And so, at all costs, the state is about dismantling that right, dismantling that in every possible way," he said.

The report also raises concerns about the involvement of Joint Terrorism Task Forces and found 20 cases that explicitly referenced task force involvement. The government "greatly exaggerated" the threat of violence from protesters, the report says.

Makia Green, a liberation organizer and co-conductor of the Washington D.C.-based group Harriet's Wildest Dreams, fully supports the report's findings and calls for action. Green believes President Joe Biden needs to fulfill his campaign pledges of supporting Black Americans and addressing the root causes of white supremacy, by pushing for amnesty for protesters. Green said Congress also needs to support legislation to overhaul the criminal justice system.

"Regardless of how we are often painted, activists are people who have the audacity to believe that we can live in a better world, where people are safe, where people are not afraid of being murdered by the police," Green said. "There are attempts to stifle our movement but it is truly a reflection to our supporters, to our allies, and to the folks who showed up in the streets last year, of how beautiful and powerful this movement is."

Taliban militants violently disperse rare Afghan protest

By AHMAD SEIR, TAMEEM AKHGAR, KATHY GANNON and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Taliban militants attacked protesters Wednesday in Afghanistan who dared to take down their banner and replace it with the country's flag, killing at least one person and fueling fears about how the insurgents would govern this fractious nation.

While the Taliban have insisted they will respect human rights, unlike during their previously draconian rule, the attack in Jalalabad came as many Afghans were hiding at home or trying to flee the country, fearful of abuses by the loosely controlled militant organization. Many people have expressed dread that the two-decade Western experiment to remake Afghanistan will not survive the resurgent Taliban, who took control of the country in a blitz that took just days.

Taliban leaders talked Wednesday with senior Afghan officials about a future government. In a potential complication to any effort to stabilize the country, the head of the country's central bank warned that American sanctions over the Taliban's designation as a terrorist organization threatened Afghanistan's economy, which already is dangerously low on hard foreign currency.

One figure who was not at the talks in Kabul: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who fled as the Taliban closed in on the capital. The United Arab Emirates acknowledged Wednesday that the Gulf nation had taken him and his family in on humanitarian grounds.

In an early sign of protest to the Taliban's rule, dozens gathered in the eastern city of Jalalabad and a nearby market town to raise the tricolor national flag, a day before Afghanistan's Independence Day, which commemorates the 1919 treaty that ended British rule. They lowered the Taliban flag — a white banner with an Islamic inscription — that the militants have raised in the areas they captured.

Video footage later showed the Taliban firing into the air and attacking people with batons to disperse the crowd. Babrak Amirzada, a reporter for a local news agency, said the Taliban beat him and a TV cameraman from another agency.

A local health official said the violence killed at least one person and wounded six. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief journalists. The Taliban did not acknowledge the protest or the violence.

It was a rare resistance to their rule. In the days since the Taliban seized Kabul on Sunday, the militants only faced one other protest by a few women in the capital.

There has been no armed opposition to the Taliban. But videos from the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul, a stronghold of the Northern Alliance militias that allied with the U.S. during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, appear to show potential opposition figures gathering there. That area is in the only province that has not fallen to the Taliban.

Those figures include members of the deposed government — Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who asserted on Twitter that he is the country's rightful president, and Defense Minister Gen. Bismillah Mohammadi — as well as Ahmad Massoud, the son of the slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

In an opinion piece published by The Washington Post, Massoud asked for weapons and aid to fight the Taliban.

"I write from the Panjshir Valley today, ready to follow in my father's footsteps, with mujahideen fighters who are prepared to once again take on the Taliban," he wrote. "The Taliban is not a problem for the Afghan people alone. Under Taliban control, Afghanistan will without doubt become ground zero of radical Islamist terrorism; plots against democracies will be hatched here once again."

The Taliban, meanwhile, pressed ahead with their efforts to form an "inclusive, Islamic government." They have been holding talks with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, a senior official in the ousted government. Mohammad Yusof Saha, a spokesman for Karzai, said preliminary meetings with Taliban officials would lead to eventual negotiations with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the top Taliban political leader who just returned to the country from Qatar.

Karzai and Abdullah met Wednesday with Anas Haqqani, a senior leader in a powerful Taliban faction called the Haqqani Network. That network, once allied to the U.S. during the war against the Soviets in

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Afghanistan, was blamed for a series of devastating suicide attacks amid the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network, like the Taliban at large, faces U.S. sanctions.

On Wednesday, hundreds of people remained outside Kabul's airport, already the scene of deadly chaos involving crowds trying to flee the country. 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.

One Afghan who formerly worked with the U.S. military said he was turned away by American troops even after the State Department told him to come for a flight, according to Sam Lerman, an Air Force veteran who is helping former colleagues leave the country. The Afghan was told he needed a green card, Lerman said.

"People are going to die" as a result of that confusion, Lerman said.

The Taliban have promised to maintain security, but residents say groups of armed men have been going door to door inquiring about Afghans who worked with the Americans or the deposed government. It's unclear if the gunmen are Taliban or criminals posing as militants.

In theory, Ghani remains the president of Afghanistan, though many in the country blame him for the collapse of Afghan security forces.

Speaking late Wednesday in a video posted to Facebook, Ghani defended abandoning Kabul as the Taliban advanced, describing it as the only way to prevent bloodshed. He denied rumors that he left with millions of dollars.

"I was forced to leave Afghanistan with one set of traditional clothes, a vest and the sandals I was wearing," Ghani said. He also said he supported the talks Abdullah and Karzai are conducting with the Taliban.

In a sign of the monetary difficulties any future Afghan government will face, the head of Afghanistan's central bank 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."

A U.S. official confirmed that the Treasury Department has frozen the Afghan government's accounts in the United States and halted direct assistance payments to the government. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak about the matter publicly.

Ahmady said the lack of U.S. dollars will likely lead to a depreciation of the local currency, the afghani, hurting the country's poor.

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

Data of 40 million plus exposed in latest T-Mobile breach

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

The names, Social Security numbers and information from driver's licenses or other identification of just over 40 million people who applied for T-Mobile credit were exposed in a recent data breach, the company said Wednesday.

The same data for about 7.8 million current T-Mobile customers who pay monthly for phone service also appears to be compromised. No phone numbers, account numbers, PINs, passwords or financial information from the nearly 50 million records and accounts were compromised, it said.

T-Mobile has been hit before by data theft but in the most recent case, "the sheer numbers far exceed the previous breaches," said Gartner analyst Paul Furtado.

T-Mobile, which is based in Bellevue, Washington, became one of the country's largest cellphone service carriers, along with AT&T and Verizon, after buying rival Sprint last year. It reported having a total of 102.1 million U.S. customers after the merger.

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"Yes, they have a big target on their back but that shouldn't be a surprise to them," Furtado said. "You have to start questioning the organization. How much are they actually addressing these breaches and the level of seriousness?"

T-Mobile also confirmed Wednesday that approximately 850,000 active T-Mobile prepaid customer names, phone numbers and account PINs were exposed. The company said that it proactively reset all of the PINs on those accounts. No Metro by T-Mobile, former Sprint prepaid, or Boost customers had their names or PINs exposed.

There was also some additional information from inactive prepaid accounts accessed through prepaid billing files. T-Mobile said that no customer financial information, credit card information, debit or other payment information or Social Security numbers were in the inactive file.

T-Mobile had said earlier this week that it was investigating a leak of its data after someone took to an online forum offering to sell the personal information of cellphone users.

The company said Monday that it had confirmed there was unauthorized access to "some T-Mobile data" and that it had closed the entry point used to gain access. "If you were affected, you'll hear from us soon," CEO Mike Sievert tweeted in response to a concerned customer Tuesday.

The company now says it will immediately offer two years of free identity protection services and is recommending that all of its postpaid customers — those who pay in monthly installments — change their PIN. Its investigation is ongoing.

T-Mobile has previously disclosed a number of data breaches over the years, most recently in January and before that in Nov. 2019 and Aug. 2018, all of which involved unauthorized access to customer information. It also disclosed a breach affecting its own employees' email accounts in 2020. And in 2015, hackers stole personal information belonging to about 15 million T-Mobile wireless customers and potential customers in the U.S., which they obtained from credit reporting agency Experian.

"It's a real indictment on T-Mobile and whether or not these customers would want to continue working with T-Mobile," said Forrester analyst Allie Mellen. "Ultimately T-Mobile has a lot of really sensitive information on people and it's just a matter of luck that, this time, the information affected was not financial information."

She said the hack didn't appear particularly sophisticated and involved a configuration issue on a server used for testing T-Mobile phones.

"There was a gate left wide open for the attackers and they just had to find the gate and walk through it," Mellen said. "And T-Mobile didn't know about the attack until the attackers posted about it in an online forum. That's really troubling and does not give a good indication that T-Mobile has the appropriate security monitoring in place."

Big bird on water is mystery, but town calls it just ducky

BELFAST, Maine (AP) — The sudden appearance of a giant rubber duck in a Maine harbor is a whimsical whodunit that's defied sleuths so far.

The yellow waterfowl emblazoned with the word "joy" appeared in Belfast Harbor over the weekend, and it's a mystery who put it there.

Harbor Master Katherine Given told the Bangor Daily News that the 25-foot-tall (7 1/2 meter) duck doesn't pose a navigational hazard, so there's no rush to shoo it away.

"Everybody loves it," Given said. "I have no idea who owns it, but it kind of fits Belfast. A lot of people want to keep it here."

Judy Herman, of Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, stopped to snap photos on Tuesday.

"It's wonderful," she told New England Cable News. "Who would expect to see a duck in the middle of the water here?"

UK's Johnson accused of complacency over Afghanistan retreat

By PAN PYLAS and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — In a packed, emotional session of Parliament, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced accusations Wednesday from lawmakers across the political spectrum of needlessly abandoning Afghanistan to the whims of the Taliban and of undermining Britain's position in the world.

The members of Parliament were recalled from their summer break to attend the emergency session in London. Many, including a large number from Johnson's Conservative Party, voiced strong regrets and fears at the chaotic turn of events in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have seized control 20 years after being driven from power by a U.S.-led international force following the 9/11 attacks.

Johnson said he had little choice but to follow the decision of U.S. President Joe Biden to take American troops out of Afghanistan by the end of August.

"The West could not continue this U.S.-led mission, a mission conceived and executed in support of America, without American logistics, without U.S. air power and without American might," he said.

"I really think that it is an illusion to believe that there is appetite amongst any of our partners for a continued military presence or for a military solution imposed by NATO in Afghanistan," he added.

The Taliban used the impending withdrawal of all remaining NATO forces to rapidly sweep through Afghanistan, reaching Kabul on Sunday, a stunning advance that was faster than anticipated, if not unexpected. Thousands of people have fled to Kabul Airport in a desperate attempt to flee as Western nations evacuate citizens and Afghan employees.

"There's been a major miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan forces and a staggering complacency from our government about the Taliban threat," said Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party.

Some of the most pointed interventions during the debate came from Johnson's Conservative ranks, notably his predecessor Theresa May, who asked whether Johnson had hoped "on a wing and a prayer it'd be all right on the night."

"We boast about global Britain, but where is global Britain on the streets of Kabul?" she asked. "A successful foreign policy strategy will be judged by our deeds, not by our words."

With the Taliban now in charge of Afghanistan, the immediate priority of the British government is to evacuate the 4,000 or so U.K. citizens still in Afghanistan and the thousands of Afghans who have helped the U.K. over the past 20 years.

Johnson said a new "generous" refugee settlement program would allow up to 20,000 vulnerable Afghans, primarily women and children, to seek sanctuary in the U.K. in the next few years, including 5,000 this year. The total for this year is in addition to the 5,000 or so Afghan allies that the U.K. is now trying to evacuate from Kabul's international airport.

Johnson said the U.K. would work to unite the international community behind a "clear plan for dealing with the Taliban." The prime minister, who is the current president of the Group of Seven wealthy democracies, said he aimed to convene a meeting of the G-7 leaders in the coming days.

"We are clear, and we have agreed that it'd be a mistake for any country to recognize any new regime in Kabul prematurely or bilaterally," said Johnson, who spoke with Biden and other world leaders on Afghanistan in recent days.

"We will judge this regime on the choices it makes and by its actions, rather than its words," he added.

The refugee plan, which is similar to a refugee package for Syria in 2015, came under immediate attack from lawmakers and activists, who said it fell short of what was required and did not come close to matching Britain's responsibility.

"I have no words for it. This could have been so avoided," Paul Farthing, an ex-Marine who runs an animal sanctuary in Kabul, told the AP. "We have destroyed this country and I don't see anybody regretting what they've done."

Farthing is lobbying for the British government to take in 25 Afghans who work for his charity, including young female veterinarians in their 20s. "What's their future going to be? They are probably going to end up being married to Taliban fighters ... Are you telling me that the West is OK with that? Because that's

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what we've just created."

Johnson said authorities had so far secured the safe return of 306 British citizens and 2,052 Afghans. Britain's ambassador to Kabul, Laurie Bristow, said his team helped 700 people fly out on military flights on Tuesday, and the goal is to help 1,000 people get out each day. He said he's got "days, not weeks" to speed up the evacuation operation.

Bristow said the Taliban is supporting the operation and his team is working with them "where we need to, at a tactical, practical level."

For many U.K. lawmakers, Britain's withdrawal represents a huge failure for the Afghanistan mission, which saw 457 British troops die in the effort to stabilize the nation.

"Let's stop talking about forever wars. Let's recognize that forever peace is bought not cheaply, but hard through determination and the will to endure," said lawmaker Tom Tugendhat, chairman of the influential Foreign Affairs Committee and a former soldier who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While the lawmakers were debating the crisis in Afghanistan, dozens of former translators for the British Army protested outside Parliament, holding banners and signs that included images of people gravely injured in Afghanistan with the caption "Protect our loved ones."

Dozens more people joined the translators, leading to a crowd of around 200. Women and children came bearing posters, red balloons and flags of Afghanistan painted on their cheeks.

Mullah's rise charts Taliban's long road back to power

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

The Taliban's top political leader, who made a triumphal return to Afghanistan this week, battled the U.S. and its allies for decades but then signed a landmark peace agreement with the Trump administration.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar is now expected to play a key role in negotiations between the Taliban and officials from the Afghan government that the militant group deposed in its blitz across the country. The Taliban say they seek an "inclusive, Islamic" government and claim they have become more moderate since they last held power.

But many remain skeptical, and all eyes are now on Baradar, who has said little about how the group will govern but has proven pragmatic in the past.

Baradar's biography charts the arc of the Taliban's journey from an Islamic militia that battled warlords during the civil war in the 1990s, ruled the country in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islamic law and then waged a two-decade insurgency against the U.S. His experience also sheds light on the Taliban's complicated relationship with neighboring Pakistan.

Baradar is the only surviving Taliban leader to have been personally appointed deputy by the late Taliban commander Mullah Mohammed Omar, giving Baradar near-legendary status within the movement. And he is far more visible than the Taliban's current supreme leader, Maulawi Hibatullah Akhunzada, who is believed to be in hiding in Pakistan and only releases occasional statements.

On Tuesday, Baradar landed in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban movement he helped found in the mid-1990s. Ending 20 years of exile, he was thronged by well-wishers as he stepped off a Qatari government aircraft and drove off in a convoy.

Baradar, who is in his early 50s, was born in the southern Uruzgan province. Like others who would eventually become Taliban leaders, he joined the ranks of the CIA- and Pakistan-backed mujahideen to fight against the Soviet Union during its decadelong occupation of the country that ended in 1989.

In the 1990s, the country slid into civil war, with rival mujahideen battling one another and carving out fiefdoms. Warlords set up brutal protection rackets and checkpoints in which their forces shook down travelers to fund their military activities.

In 1994, Mullah Omar, Baradar and others founded the Taliban, which means religious students. The group mainly consisted of clerics and young, pious men, many of whom had been driven from their homes and had known only war. Their unsparing interpretation of Islam unified their ranks and set them apart from the notoriously corrupt warlords.

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Baradar fought alongside Mullah Omar as he led the Taliban through its seizure of power in 1996 and its return to an insurgency following the 2001 U.S.-led invasion.

During the group's 1996-2001 rule, the president and governing council were based in Kabul. But Baradar spent most of his time in Kandahar, the spiritual capital of the Taliban, and did not have an official government role.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, which had been planned and carried out by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida while it was sheltering under Taliban rule. Baradar, Omar and other Taliban leaders fled into neighboring Pakistan.

In the ensuing years, the Taliban were able to organize a potent insurgency based in rugged and semi-autonomous tribal areas along the border. Baradar was arrested in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi in 2010 in a joint raid by the CIA and Pakistan's counterterrorism forces.

At the time, he had been making peace overtures to Afghanistan's then-President Hamid Karzai, but the U.S. was bent on military victory and it appeared that Pakistan wanted to ensure control over any political process. Baradar's removal empowered more radical leaders within the Taliban who were less open to diplomacy.

Karzai later confirmed the overtures to The Associated Press and said he had twice asked the Americans and the Pakistanis to free Baradar from prison but was rebuffed. Baradar himself refused an offer of release in 2013, apparently because the U.S. and Pakistan conditioned it on his cooperation.

Karzai, who is now involved in talks with the Taliban about shaping the next government, could once again find himself negotiating with Baradar.

By 2018, the Taliban had seized effective control over much of Afghanistan's countryside. The Trump administration, looking for a way out of America's longest war, persuaded Pakistan to release Baradar that year and began pursuing peace talks with the Taliban.

Baradar led the Taliban's negotiating team in Qatar through several rounds of those talks, culminating in a February 2020 peace agreement. He also met with then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Under the deal, the Taliban agreed to halt attacks on international forces and prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for terror groups in return for a full U.S. withdrawal, now planned for the end of the month.

Last week, the Taliban pushed into the country's cities, seizing nearly all of the country in matter of days and then rolled virtually unopposed into the capital, Kabul.

In his first comment after the capture of Kabul on Sunday, Baradar acknowledged his surprise, saying that "it was never expected that we will have victory in Afghanistan."

Wearing a black turban and vest over a white robe, the bespectacled Baradar looked straight into the camera.

"Now comes the test," he said. "We must meet the challenge of serving and securing our nation, and giving it a stable life going forward."

Cleared to earn money, college athletes tap creative sides

By JOHN RABY AP Sports Writer

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. (AP) — Will Ulmer doesn't have to hide anymore.

The Marshall offensive lineman, all 6-foot-4 and 300 pounds of him, unleashed a year's worth of energy in his first on-stage performance since the start of the pandemic, playing guitar and belting out songs in his Kentucky baritone for a modest crowd outside a Huntington ice cream store.

His keychain fastened to a belt loop and a can of smokeless tobacco bulging from a back pocket, Ulmer spent an hour singing country favorites along with one he wrote before finishing up with his spin on a West Virginia favorite, John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

This time, he used his real name, too.

The NCAA's decision to allow athletes to be paid for their fame and celebrity has led to scores of deals big and small from coast to coast since July 1. Sponsorships and endorsements are the most common,

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but there has been another welcome wrinkle: Ulmer and other athletes are now able to show off their creative, artistic sides and earn some money while they're at it.

For Ulmer, it means being able to play his music at gigs without masking his identity under the pseudonym "Lucky Bill." For Nebraska volleyball player Lexi Sun, it has meant helping design sports apparel. For SMU defensive back Ra-Sun Kazadi, it means he can sell his art.

"College athletes for the longest time haven't really had a lot of opportunities to make money," Ulmer said. "I think this is a great one for me. But it's not really about the money."

Like Ulmer, Kazadi sees his craft as an extension of himself. His works are a wide-ranging assortment that includes paintings of athletes, civil rights leaders, Egyptian Queen Nefertiti and the late rapper Tupac Shakur. Among his digital works is Emmy-winning actress and singer Zendaya.

A junior, Kazadi, who goes by Ra, has been painting only since high school. Some works are lighthearted and fun. Some were done as stress relief. Others reflect a certain point in his life. He also runs a separate non-profit group to promote social justice and community conflict resolution.

"My art, it is me," Kazadi said. "Hopefully when people see it, they kind of see me. They kind of see what I'm thinking, how I'm feeling. So I feel like a lot of what I don't say is communicated through my art."

Before the NCAA change earlier this summer, Kazadi wasn't allowed to connect his face to his work. A Texas law that debuted last month letting students to profit off their name, image or likeness "has made a huge change in my life," in part through art sales off his website.

He's also showcasing his work at art shows, landed a sponsorship-mentorship deal with a custom art company, is working with real estate companies and interior designers, and there's been greater curiosity from high schools seeking to have him paint murals on their campuses.

The post-NIL interest has been so profound that Kazadi is mulling the possibility of hiring someone to help him out.

"It's definitely helped me navigate the art world and helped me know that it's actually a possibility," he said.

Sun wanted her deal with volleyball apparel company Ren Athletics to allow her personality and style to shine through in the launch of her clothing line — a black sweatshirt with her name and a golden outline of the sun's rays.

"They gave me like an open slate to create whatever I wanted and I was just super excited about that freedom and being able to take advantage of that," Sun said.

It quickly sold out. Company spokeswoman Natalie Hagglund said the Sunny Crew shirt was the biggest promotion in the company's nearly 10 years in business and that additional products with Sun's name are under consideration.

Sun also struck an endorsement deal with Nebraska-based jeweler Borsheims. Sun, who is pursuing a master's degree in advertising and public relations, said she has picked up some business skills.

"I would say that's the biggest thing: Just with NIL in general, I think the experience of being able to have these interactions and business conversations of making a deal and what these meetings look like and all of those things," she said.

Nebraska is among dozens of schools with formal NIL programs and many have arrangements with companies eager to hook up athletes with various brands. Some have put their business schools to work helping athletes take advantage of the new market. Indiana recently posted a NIL directory of all Hoosier athletes. At Duquesne, Jordon Rooney was hired as the first Division I personal brand coach.

Back at Marshall, Ulmer's teammate, defensive lineman Kyron Taylor, started Foreigner Clothing LLC last year. The line that includes T-shirts and sweatshirts features a scorpion, which both is Taylor's astrological sign and represents the "new life" his father was given when he moved to the United States from the Caribbean, he said.

Taylor's promotional work includes using other athletes on social media as brand ambassadors. Everything remains on a small scale, but Taylor is constantly jotting down new ideas. He estimates sales are about a dozen per week. Orders are shipped from his home, which is one positive aspect from living alone — no complaints from roommates about tripping over inventory.

"I live by myself so I can have storage for my brand," he said.

Texas teacher's legacy of kindness lives on after her death

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Searching for a way to honor Texas teacher Zelene Blancas after her death late last year from COVID-19, a fellow educator over 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) away relied on the kindness of others to get a painted, heart-shaped rock to her school.

After almost five months on the road, being transported by a handful of people, the rock arrived as school started this month at El Paso's Dr. Sue A. Shook Elementary, where Blancas taught and was remembered by her principal as someone who "embodied kindness."

"The legacy that she's leaving of being kind to others, making everybody feel special, taking the time to get to know someone and letting them know you're special," principal Cristina Sanchez-Chavira said, "that was her."

It was a fitting tribute to the 35-year-old whose video of her bilingual class of first graders in El Paso charmed Twitter users in 2018. The clip showed students hugging each other as they streamed out of the classroom — a ritual they carried out to start and end each day.

"She wanted them to know that they were loved when they arrived, there was somebody waiting for them," Sanchez-Chavira said. "And then as they left: This is your place, we love you here."

After the video went viral, Pinksocks Life, a nonprofit that works to promote human connections, reached out. Through that initiative she linked up on Twitter with Brian Aikens, a third and fourth grade special education teacher in Royersford, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia.

In early 2020, before the pandemic upended life in the U.S., Blancas and Aikens introduced their students virtually, with Aikens' students reading to hers.

After Blancas' death on Dec. 28, Aikens said he talked with his students about what they could do in her memory.

During the pandemic shutdown, he had begun delivering painted rocks to his students at home to help them still feel connected. Now he thought of a heart-shaped stone, big enough to fill an adult's open hand, that had been gracing his front porch since his young son found it on a hike. On it he had painted the words "love more fear less" — a Pinksocks slogan.

"When Zelene passed I just felt like, you know what, this is the time to pass this rock on, this is where it needs to go," Aikens said.

The rock began its journey in March, when the daughter of Aikens' assistant had a hockey tournament in North Carolina.

Pete Metzgar, who is active with Pinksocks, had also agreed to take it, and a colleague from Raleigh picked it up and got it to him weeks later when they met up for work in Alabama. From there it went back to North Carolina when Metzgar took it to his home in Charlotte.

Metzgar, who travels frequently for his work in telemedicine, started posting online to find someone to take it West, but finally when he traveled to Phoenix in June, he arranged to leave it with a friend.

The stone's journey stalled there, and it looked like it wasn't going to make it out of Arizona in time for the start of school in El Paso. So Monica Aguilera, whose job at Shook Elementary is to help connect students with outside resources, made a weekend road trip to retrieve it. She had dinner in Phoenix with Metzgar's friend and returned with the rock — seeing "rainbows everywhere" on the drive home.

As Aikens' students followed the rock's journey online, they met virtually with Shook Elementary teacher Lindsay Taylor's first grade class and learned about each other's cities.

Taylor said the exchange was a ray of hope in a trying year that inspired her students to come up with their own gestures of kindness.

"It kind of gave them this, 'Oh, we can make the best out of a bad situation,'" Taylor said.

The kindness rock will visit each classroom before being placed in a case alongside a picture of Blancas and a plaque.

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Mario Blancas said part of his sister's drive to help students came from their own struggles with English after moving to El Paso from neighboring Juarez, Mexico, when they were young.

"She enjoyed every single day with her students. She was a teacher, but at the same time, she was advocating for her students," he said.

Zelene Blancas also looked out for her own family and doted on her two dogs. She enjoyed a special bond with her young niece, with the two spending time doing everything from baking cookies to having relaxing spa days.

"For her short life, she left so much behind," great-aunt Martha Contreras said. "Unforgettably beautiful footprints."

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 Khuram, 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.

"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 prov-

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ince, 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 commandeer 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

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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.

Power in seeds: Urban gardening gains momentum in pandemic

By KATHERINE ROTH Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On an assemblage of vacant lots and other pockets of unused land in the Bronx, gardeners from low-income neighborhoods have banded together to create over a dozen "farm hubs," coordinating their community gardens and their harvest.

Several years ago, some discovered that, together, their small gardens could grow enough peppers to mass-produce hot sauce — Bronx Hot Sauce, to be precise, with profits from the sales reinvested in their communities.

During the pandemic, the farm hubs of the Bronx have again proved their might, producing health-boosting crops like garlic, kale and collard greens.

"The trick is, how can we learn from the pandemic so that we become genuinely resilient?" says Raymond Figueroa-Reyes, president of the New York City Community Garden Coalition.

"When the pandemic hit, urban farming went into hyper-productivity mode. People saw that the (food) donations coming in were not adequate in terms of quantity or quality, and there is no dignity in waiting on that type of charity," he says.

The farm hubs are part of an urban gardening movement across the country dedicated to empowering

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residents of poorer neighborhoods by encouraging them to grow fresh food.

Areas (both urban and rural) with little access to healthy, fresh food have been called "food deserts," and tend to have high rates of diabetes and other diseases, such as hypertension and obesity. In cities, where many see the phenomenon as inseparable from deeper issues of race and equity, some community leaders prefer terms like "food prisons" or "food apartheid."

Ron Finley in Los Angeles has been at the forefront of urban gardening for years. He sees gardening as both therapeutic and an act of defiance.

"Growing your own food is like printing your own money," says Finley, who runs the nonprofit Ron Finley Project. "It's not just about food, it's about freedom. It's our revolution, and our eco-lution."

Finley grew up in South Central Los Angeles, where he says he had to drive 45 minutes just to get a fresh tomato. His efforts to rejuvenate communities through gardening have included planting vegetables on neglected parkways and other pieces of unused land, and teaching online classes to global audiences about the power of growing food.

Millions of Americans live in neighborhoods without healthy food options. The same neighborhoods are magnets for fast-food restaurants and the packaged foods available at drug stores and convenience stores.

"The drive-thru is killing more people in our communities than the drive-by," Finley says. "I want people to come back to reality, to touch the soil and take back some of the things that have been taken away. When you plant a seed, it will multiply. It's a currency. It's a valuable resource. That's empowering. It's about more than food."

In the Bronx, Karen Washington, who has spent decades promoting urban farming, said it is about "food justice." (She helped coordinate the pepper-growing that led to Bronx Hot Sauce; the company they worked with, Small Axe Peppers, now makes hot sauce with community-grown peppers from Queens, Detroit, Chicago, Oakland and other cities.)

"Healthy food is a human right, along with clean water," she said.

A board member of the New York Botanical Garden, Washington has worked with neighborhoods to turn empty lots into community gardens, and helped launch City Farms Market, which brings affordable fresh produce grown in community gardens or on upstate farms to a weekly farmers market in the Bronx.

She co-founded Black Urban Growers and helped found the Black Farmer Fund, which aims to provide access to capital for black farmers and entrepreneurs.

COVID had a big impact on people wanting to grow their own food, and Washington said she sees more people growing food on city terraces and in yards across the country.

"It really gained urgency during the early stages of COVID, before the vaccines came out. If we are going to fight viruses, especially in these neighborhoods with a lot of diabetes and obesity, we need to start eating healthy," Washington says.

Figueroa-Reyes concurs.

"Folks said, we gotta get into these unused spaces and we gotta grow food," he says. "There is a collective effort around organizing farm hubs with the idea of growing more immune-boosting food and getting it to where it's needed most."

Through its Bronx Green-Up program, the New York Botanical Garden has long provided technical support to community gardens. It stepped up efforts when the pandemic hit, working directly with community farm hubs; organizing biweekly Zoom meetings to help with problem solving, resource sharing and harvest distribution; and providing more than 10,000 herb and vegetable seedlings.

"We came together with longtime community partners early in the pandemic, realizing that food insecurity has always been a big issue in the Bronx," says Ursula Chanse, the program's director.

"There's definitely a lot of community gardening interest now, and more urban farm spaces," she says.

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Aug. 19, the 231st day of 2021. There are 134 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 19, 1934, a plebiscite in Germany approved the vesting of sole executive power in Adolf Hitler.
On this date:

In 1807, Robert Fulton's North River Steamboat arrived in Albany, two days after leaving New York.

In 1812, the USS Constitution defeated the British frigate HMS Guerriere off Nova Scotia during the War of 1812, earning the nickname "Old Ironsides."

In 1814, during the War of 1812, British forces landed at Benedict, Maryland, with the objective of capturing Washington D.C.

In 1848, the New York Herald reported the discovery of gold in California.

In 1909, the first automobile races were run at the just-opened Indianapolis Motor Speedway; the winner of the first event was auto engineer Louis Schwitzer, who drove a Stoddard-Dayton touring car twice around the 2.5-mile track at an average speed of 57.4 mph.

In 1942, during World War II, about 6,000 Canadian and British soldiers launched a disastrous raid against the Germans at Dieppe, France, suffering more than 50-percent casualties.

In 1955, torrential rains caused by Hurricane Diane resulted in severe flooding in the northeastern U.S., claiming some 200 lives.

In 1960, a tribunal in Moscow convicted American U2 pilot Francis Gary Powers of espionage. (Although sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, Powers was returned to the United States in 1962 as part of a prisoner exchange.)

In 1974, U.S. Ambassador Rodger P. Davies was fatally wounded by a bullet that penetrated the American embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus, during a protest by Greek Cypriots.

In 1980, 301 people aboard a Saudi Arabian L-1011 died as the jetliner made a fiery emergency return to the Riyadh airport.

In 1991, rioting erupted in the Brooklyn, New York, Crown Heights neighborhood after a Black 7-year-old, Gavin Cato, was struck and killed by a Jewish driver from the ultra-Orthodox Lubavitch community; three hours later, a mob of Black youth fatally stabbed Yankel Rosenbaum, a rabbinical student.

In 2010, the last American combat brigade exited Iraq, seven years and five months after the U.S.-led invasion began.

Ten years ago: Three men — Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jesse Misskelley — who'd spent nearly two decades in prison for the nightmarish slayings of three Cub Scouts in Arkansas, went free after they agreed to a legal maneuver allowing them to maintain their innocence while acknowledging prosecutors had enough evidence against them.

Five years ago: The Obama administration defended its decision to make a \$400 million cash delivery to Iran contingent on the release of American prisoners, saying the payment wasn't ransom because the Islamic Republic would have soon recouped the money one way or another. Usain Bolt scored another sweep at the Rio Games, winning three gold medals in his third consecutive Olympics by turning a close 4x100 relay race against Japan and the United States into a runaway, helping Jamaica cross the line in 37.27 seconds. Allyson Felix won an unprecedented fifth gold medal in women's track and field, running the second leg of the 4x100-meter relay team. Actor Jack Riley, 80, died in Los Angeles.

One year ago: Kamala Harris accepted the Democratic nomination for vice president in a speech to the party's virtual convention, cementing her place in history as the first Black woman on a major party ticket. In a speech on the third night of the convention, former President Barack Obama warned that his successor, Donald Trump, was both unfit for office and apathetic to the nation's founding principles. Another night of protests in Portland, Oregon ended in clashes with police; officials said protesters broke out the windows of a county government building, sprayed lighter fluid inside and set a fire. President

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Donald Trump blasted universities that had canceled in-person classes amid coronavirus outbreaks, saying students posed a greater safety threat at home with older family members. Apple became the first U.S. company to boast a market value of \$2 trillion, just two years after becoming the first U.S. company with a \$1 trillion market value.

Today's Birthdays: Actor L.Q. Jones is 94. Actor Debra Paget is 88. USTA Eastern Tennis Hall of Famer Renee Richards is 87. Former MLB All-Star Bobby Richardson is 86. Actor Diana Muldaur is 83. Actor Jill St. John is 81. Singer Billy J. Kramer is 78. Country singer-songwriter Eddy Raven is 77. Rock singer Ian Gillan (Deep Purple) is 76. Former President Bill Clinton is 75. Actor Gerald McRaney is 74. Actor Jim Carter is 73. Pop singer-musician Elliot Lurie (Looking Glass) is 73. Rock musician John Deacon (Queen) is 70. Bluegrass musician Marc Pruett (Balsam Range) is 70. Actor-director Jonathan Frakes is 69. Political consultant Mary Matalin is 68. Actor Peter Gallagher is 66. Actor Adam Arkin is 65. Singer-songwriter Gary Chapman is 64. Actor Martin Donovan is 64. Pro Football Hall-of-Famer Anthony Munoz is 63. R&B singer Ivan Neville is 62. Actor Eric Lutes is 59. Actor John Stamos is 58. Actor Kyra Sedgwick is 56. Actor Kevin Dillon is 56. Country singer Lee Ann Womack is 55. TV reporter Tabitha Soren is 54. Country singer-songwriter Mark McGuinn is 53. Actor Matthew Perry is 52. Country singer Clay Walker is 52. Rapper Fat Joe is 51. Olympic gold medal tennis player Mary Joe Fernandez is 50. Actor Tracie Thoms is 46. Actor Callum Blue is 44. Country singer Rissi (REE'-see) Palmer is 40. Actor Erika Christensen is 39. Actor Melissa Fumero is 39. Pop singer Missy Higgins is 38. Actor Peter Mooney is 38. Actor Tammin Sursok is 38. Olympic silver medal snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis (jay-kuh-BEHL'-ihs) is 36. Actor J. Evan Bonifant is 36. Rapper Romeo is 32. Actor Ethan Cutkosky is 22.