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GDILIVE.COM Update

We will be livestreaming the girls soccer game today as well as the football game. Realize that there is only about a 20-minute window after the soccer game and the start of the football game so if there are any delays in soccer, we may be late in starting the football game. The links to the games will be posted at GDILIVE.COM later today.



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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#460 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

If you've been wondering, I really was coming back, and here I am. Took me a couple of days to catch up enough to put an Update together. There may be some bits of news I'm still missing—I have a lot of things banked—but I think I have the high points for you. Fair warning: This is going to be fairly long.

I imagine those of you who haven't been living under a rock are aware we're not exactly in good shape at the moment. We managed in just the short time I was away to pass two milestones—36 million and 37 million cases in the US. Here's the history, and please note how short our intervals are getting again—looking a lot like we did last winter, which is not a great sign:

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days	December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days	December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days	January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days	January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days	January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days	January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days	January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days	January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days	February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days	February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days	March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days	March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days	April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days	April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days	May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days	July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days	July 31 – 35 million – 15 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days	August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
	August 17 – 37 million – 6 days

So we currently have a total of 37,296,298 reported cases and 24,365 reported deaths so far in the US during this pandemic. Our seven-day new-case average is running almost 141,000, almost double our worst day last summer. Thirty-six states are experiencing unchecked transmission. We have close to 90,000 people currently hospitalized, and our seven-day average is over 85,000. Deaths are averaging 809 per day, still well off last summer's peaks, but with an increase of 97 percent in just two weeks, we could go there yet this summer. .

In the last week, we've been averaging 47 percent more new cases per day than two weeks ago. Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, told CNN we are now at a "screaming level of virus transmission." He also mentioned that neither masks nor vaccinations alone are going to solve this; we're going to need to use both or fail. I'm not sure what Dr. Hotez thinks failure looks like; to me, it looks a lot like now. Deaths are up 97 percent. We have increases in all but 4 states and increases of more than 50 percent in 36 of them. Cases in children have been increasing since the beginning of last month, and now that schools are opening, everyone expects that to get worse. Pediatric hospitalizations are rising in most states, all while parents across the country are fighting to prevent mask-wearing in their schools. I know; I can't explain it either.

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The 10 states with the highest vaccination rates (more than 58 percent) are Washington, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Maryland; the 10 lowest vaccination (less than 41 percent) states are Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, and Georgia. The high-vaccination states have an average of 10 people hospitalized per 100,000 residents and six deaths per million; the low-vaccination states have an average of 39 people hospitalized per 100,000 (almost four times as many) and 34 deaths per million (getting on to six times as many). Not one high-transmission state is above the national average for vaccination rate. Draw your own conclusions from that.

The case rates in children and people under 50, especially those under 40, have been soaring as well. More than 14 times the number of children as we saw less than a month ago are infected today. That's a really large number. Schools opening will be an accelerant—the way gas on a fire is an accelerant. I do not see this ending well. Hope I'm wrong.

Brevard County Public Schools in Florida opened on August 10; by August 13, they had over 385 cases among students and another 88 among staff, as well as 1060 people in quarantine. Hillsborough County, home to Tampa, has over 6000 people in isolation or quarantine already as of Monday with 804 students and 437 employees testing positive. In accordance with Florida law, the systems give parents the ability to opt their children out of wearing masks in school. That's working well, isn't it? An ICU nurse told the board in its public meeting Tuesday, "We are running out of rooms, we are running out of beds. We are flooded with patients that are critically ill. They are dying young." County officials are encouraging residents to avoid calling 911 because emergency rooms are full and ambulances are experiencing delays in dropping patients off and going back out on new calls. All the hospitals are over capacity, and over a third of patients are in with Covid-19. Florida has set new case records two weeks in a row; they're beating anything they saw in the last year.

A few states have laws in place forbidding schools from imposing mask mandates for students or staff. These happen to be states with rapidly increasing case numbers. Several school districts have chosen to defy these laws in Florida, Texas, and Arizona, all places where case numbers are soaring at the same time as schools are getting underway. There are court challenges pending.

Mississippi's still burning up, and hospitalizations are setting records. They're going back to setting up field hospitals in parking garages, and there are only a handful of ICU beds available. Things are worse than they've ever been and still getting worse. Close to 90 percent of hospitalizations and deaths are unvaccinated in this state with the second-worst vaccination rate in the country at 36 percent. Infection and quarantine rates in children and school staff are soaring too with almost one in 20 students quarantined at the moment, over 20,000 in all. Concern ramped up on Saturday after an eighth-grader died in the state from Covid-19. Of course, there is also a resident hospitalized after self-treating for Covid-19 by ingesting a veterinary drug intended for livestock—probably someone who wasn't about to get a vaccine when there's no telling what's in those things, right?

In Texas, the Department of State Health Services said in a statement, "Hospital capacity continues worsening. Fatalities are increasing faster." Pediatric hospitalizations in Texas, which has 239 children currently hospitalized, are the highest in the country. Patients are needing transfers to out-of-state hospitals; there's simply no room in closer in-state hospitals. People are dying waiting for ICU beds. So the state is running out of ICU beds, and they're bringing back the mortuary trailers—nowhere to put the deceased again. Numbers are still rising too with no sign of abating yet.

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Over 3000 students and school staff, almost six percent, are quarantining in New Orleans since school opened less than a week ago. Kentucky hospitals expect by the end of this week to have more people with Covid-19 in the hospital than at any time in the pandemic. There are no ICU beds available at all in Alabama; in fact, they currently have 11 more patients needing ICU care than are receiving it. The number of children hospitalized with Covid-19 has soared; however more than half of states do not report pediatric hospitalizations separately from adult ones, so the issue is certainly worse than we know.

During all of this, hospitalizations in children are rising after declines early in the summer. In the past week, over 121,000 child cases have been reported—well over 17,000 per day. That's more new child cases than we were seeing total cases per day as recently as just about a month ago. While Delta appears (from admittedly sparse data) to be no more likely to infect or cause severe disease in children than earlier variants, the sheer numbers of total cases has driven child cases upward. We don't think children are getting sicker than they were from previous variants, but we can't be sure because fewer than half of states report hospitalization rates for children. That makes it tough to draw firm conclusions about the severity of disease in this age group. What we do know is that it increasingly looks like everyone who is not vaccinated is going to be infected with this virus at some point, and so even if a tiny percentage of infected kids becomes dangerously ill, with 73 million children in the US, that's still going to be an enormous number of very sick kids.

Across the country, the number of hospitalized has doubled over three weeks and is approaching or has reached the worst-yet peaks we saw last winter. Seven states are there: Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. More of these people are younger—under 40, including children. There are zero ICU beds available in Alabama, the worse-vaccinated state in the nation; patients sometimes have to just wait for a bed to open—which frequently happens only when someone else dies in one of them. That would make it tough to feel relieved when a bed becomes available for your patient, wouldn't it? Kentucky is limiting non-covid hospital admissions. There are all sorts of stories surfacing of patients having their cancer surgeries and such postponed because hospitals simply can't do them right now. We need to remember that the overwhelming majority of these very sick patients crowding hospitals are unvaccinated, that is, suffering a preventable disease. Dr. David De La Zerda at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Florida, told the New York Times, "Every single patient regrets not getting the vaccine. I don't have one that doesn't. They look really sick, and they look really young. You can see somebody now talking to you, and the next time you see them, they're dead."

The number of critically ill who require intensive care is also increasing. Nearly 20 percent of ICUs are at 95 percent or more occupancy. At those levels, care is inevitably going to suffer because staff will be stretched to their limits. We're back to tent hospitals in many places. And because these patients are unvaccinated, health care workers are facing the recognition that nearly everyone they're caring for didn't have to be there at all. National average ICU occupancy is two-thirds of beds. That's shocking.

We have a really interesting data analysis from a team at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. Their preliminary analysis is published online. I haven't had time to do anything meaningful with it myself yet and it's still in peer review; but this appears to be solid work, at least at first look. These folks kept track of the dates every restriction was imposed and lifted, state-by-state, for a year (March, 2020, to March, 2021) along with data on case and deaths numbers so they could study the real-world effect of the kinds of restrictions that have been used with an eye to establishing a foundation in the evidence for making decisions about interventions and their timing.

They divided interventions into categories: stay-at-home orders, nonessential business restrictions, indoor gathering limits, restaurant or bar restrictions, and mask mandates. They also evaluated how stringent

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these were, building graphs of the data with dates when interventions were applied or relaxed marked in. Rebecca Nugent, head of the Department of Statistics and Data Science at Carnegie Mellon, said they noted that “these types of restrictions work—that they have an impact, that they are contributing to the control of the spread, and that we should be holding them on probably a little bit longer than we think.” They found timing is important with early intervention—before a surge really cranks up—being better. It takes three to four weeks for the case and deaths numbers to respond. This means waiting too long blunts the effect, sometimes proving fairly useless if measures are applied too late.

According to Seema Lakdawala, assistant professor and flu researcher in the department of microbiology and molecular genetics at the University of Pittsburgh, the most critical interventions appear to be “some level of masking, some level of restaurant and bar restrictions and some level of gathering-size bans.”

Nugent added, “Once that happened and it was held on long enough, that’s when we saw an impact on the number of cases [and] the number of deaths.” We’ve known for a long time that no one intervention is going to perfectly block transmission, so applying them in layers multiplies the effect of each one. This work provides good support for just this sort of approach.

The team also found that neighboring states had effects on one another. The example that stands out was South Dakota and Minnesota, where South Dakota scored a zero on a five-point scale for interventions and Minnesota scored 2.5, and yet they had more similar outcomes than two non-bordering states with equivalently different approaches. There were similar results from state to bordering state from Montana to Wisconsin, from Texas to Virginia, and from West Virginia to New Hampshire. Apparently, for the difference in interventions to have maximum impact, states need to be geographically separated as well. Makes sense when you think about similarity of weather patterns and how porous state borders really are. I’m going to say that, if I live in Minnesota, I’m pretty unhappy with those South Dakotans living it up and spreading their disease to my community while we’re being careful here in Minnesota.

I will add that the team has not yet extended its analysis to the county level, although that is in the works. This should be instructive because, within many states, there were pretty stark differences across counties or communities in the restrictions imposed throughout the pandemic. The researchers also pointed out that cultural context is going to have an effect too. In places where interventions are not given much credibility, you’re going to see different degrees of compliance or even voluntary implementation; for example, if most people in an area don’t think masking works, you’re going to see different responsiveness to conditions from those in a place where masking is viewed as important.

The B.1.617.2 or Delta variant, first identified in India, has now reached 99 percent of cases in the US and has changed the calculus for all of us, vaccinated and unvaccinated. It has turned the landscape into a highly treacherous place for the unvaccinated, but it has also increased the degree of risk for the vaccinated who were virtually 100 percent protected against earlier variants. While vaccination remains powerfully protective for most, there are indications of a rising number of breakthrough infections with Delta in the vaccinated as well. We are still seeing a very small proportion of those breakthroughs resulting in severe disease or death, making that outcome rare by all accounts; but a small proportion of a growing number is still a growing number.

The public health experts at the CDC had been telling us all summer that they did not have any data indicating whether or when booster doses of vaccine would be required. They also said they’d let us know if that changed. Well, it’s changed, and US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy and director of the CDC, Dr. Rochelle Walensky are letting us know plans are being made to begin a round of booster vaccine doses for fully vaccinated people whose protective immunity might be slowing down.

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We have the benefit of data from Israel which was highly successful in vaccinating a high percentage of its population early, and those data appear to show a waning of immunity against this new variant. Similar data are emerging from seven states that tracked closely through July. Looks like the overall effectiveness against infection is 55 percent, against symptoms is 80 percent, and against hospitalization is 90 percent. I'll mention here that a recent study by the New York State Department of Health has them at 80 percent in reducing cases and 92 to 95 percent effectiveness in preventing hospitalizations. Whichever set of numbers you're looking at, that's really, really good, by the way. We'd have settled for a whole lot less when we went into this whole vaccine thing back in November or December—and that was before this new variant was even dreamed of. Nonetheless, this leaves the door open for bad outcomes for some tiny subset of the vaccinated and we have strong evidence a third dose offers excellent protection against new variants as well as older ones—increases by several fold over the response to the initial vaccine series; so the CDC is now giving lots of signals that boosters are imminent for those who are eight months past their final dose of either of the mRNA vaccines. If this gets through the FDA and the CDC's experts and advisory committees—something I'll take care to note has not happened yet, then the expectation is that boosters will roll out starting about a month from now—September 20 is the projected date. I would expect similar guidance to come for the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine; but since it's been employed for a shorter time and fewer doses have been given, there aren't enough data yet to support such a move. A two-dose trial is currently underway, and we expect results from that yet this month; this may provide the sort of support needed to make a call about boosters. This is not an urgent thing because there's also several additional weeks before we hit the eight-month mark from the first doses of this vaccine. So if you received that one, there's time. It probably comes as no surprise to you that the CDC's estimate is that as many as a million Americans have already obtained booster doses by lying about their vaccination status. It really is the Wild West these days.

We should note that there are issues here. Not all experts read the data this way; many think that, while additional doses to the immunosuppressed, something we've already discussed and which the FDA authorized on Friday, are warranted, there isn't strong evidence yet that these boosters to people with competent immune systems should go forward. No one really thinks there's a safety issue here; third doses have been going out to folks in Israel and some European countries without incident; but if they're not necessarily helping, then they might simply be doses wasted. It could be that masking and distancing will have as much beneficial effect. There is also some question whether we'd be smarter to wait for Delta-specific boosters; both companies have these in the works. And there are the ethical questions about the US sucking up a few million more doses while much of the world is going seriously short of vaccines. This same issue raises practical questions as well since stopping transmission across the world is how we're going to prevent the emergence of the next more dangerous variant; and that's not going to happen by boosting the already-immunized in the US population. I'm not sure what the right answer is here.

We should probably also note at this point that, if boosters are authorized, that doesn't really represent a departure from common vaccination practice. Multi-dose vaccines and boosters aren't particularly unusual: Polio vaccine uses four doses in its initial series, and hepatitis vaccine uses three while the tetanus-diphtheria vaccine requires a booster every 10 years for life and influenza vaccine is needed annually. We're not sure where Covid-19 vaccines are going to fall along this spectrum, but we do know they've been falling along the high end of the effectiveness spectrum, making it substantially less likely you're going to get sick or end up in the hospital than folks who are unvaccinated. They are also making it far less likely you're going to transmit the virus to others, even while transmission remains something of a possibility. And they remain extraordinarily safe.

Also on the vaccine front, we're finally up to 200 million Americans who have received at least one dose

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of vaccine. High time. It should not have taken this long. Looks like this latest surge is finally penetrating Refusenik-World as hospitals and mortuaries overflow with unvaccinated people. Seven million people received a first dose in the last two weeks—highest number all summer. There's a big increase in 12 to 15-year olds coming in before school starts. This is a very good thing.

A question I'm getting a lot as school opens for the new academic year is about vaccine for school children under 12—how soon it will be available. Short answer: soon. Pfizer/BioNTech's studies in the age group indicate a dose one-third the adult dose is optimal for them, giving an immune response that is protective with minimal side effects. The final phase of the clinical trials will not require waiting for a specified number of kids to get sick the way we did in trials for adults; it instead involves studying the blood of the vaccinated kids to see whether they are making protective antibodies. That's the correlate of immunity we've talked about in the past—the thing we can measure that tells us the person is protected from severe disease. We discussed these at more length in my Update #286 posted December 5 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4234321956584178>. So data should be coming in rather quickly from these trials—end of next month is likely. After that, it just depends how quickly the FDA might act to extend the vaccine's emergency use authorization (EUA) to the younger age group. I suspect, with the pressure they're getting from pediatricians and public health experts to move on this, that they'll act with alacrity. Data for children under five are expected not too long after the older group's data are ready.

Moderna's trials are slightly behind Pfizer/BioNTech's; they're still working out dosages. They expect to have data by year's end. Both companies' trials recently expanded at the request of the FDA to improve the probability that any rare side effects are going to turn up sooner rather than later; but all of these kids will be followed for two years, just in case.

And that's quite enough for one day. We'll go back to our usual twice-a-week or so Updates in the hope that I'm not going to need another break before we don't need Updates anymore. Not super hopeful about that, but we will see. In the meanwhile, keep yourself safe. We'll talk again.

Chronic Wasting Disease Detected in New Area

PIERRE, S.D. —Chronic wasting disease (CWD) was recently confirmed in a new area in western South Dakota. Confirmation of the disease was obtained from sick surveillance efforts coming from an adult male mule deer in Perkins County.

Perkins County is now considered in the CWD endemic area. South Dakota has now confirmed CWD in 17 counties of western and central South Dakota.

The GFP Commission recently modified carcass transportation and disposal regulations for the entire state that are effective beginning with the 2021 hunting seasons. The goal of the new CWD regulations is to help reduce the spread of CWD into new areas of South Dakota.

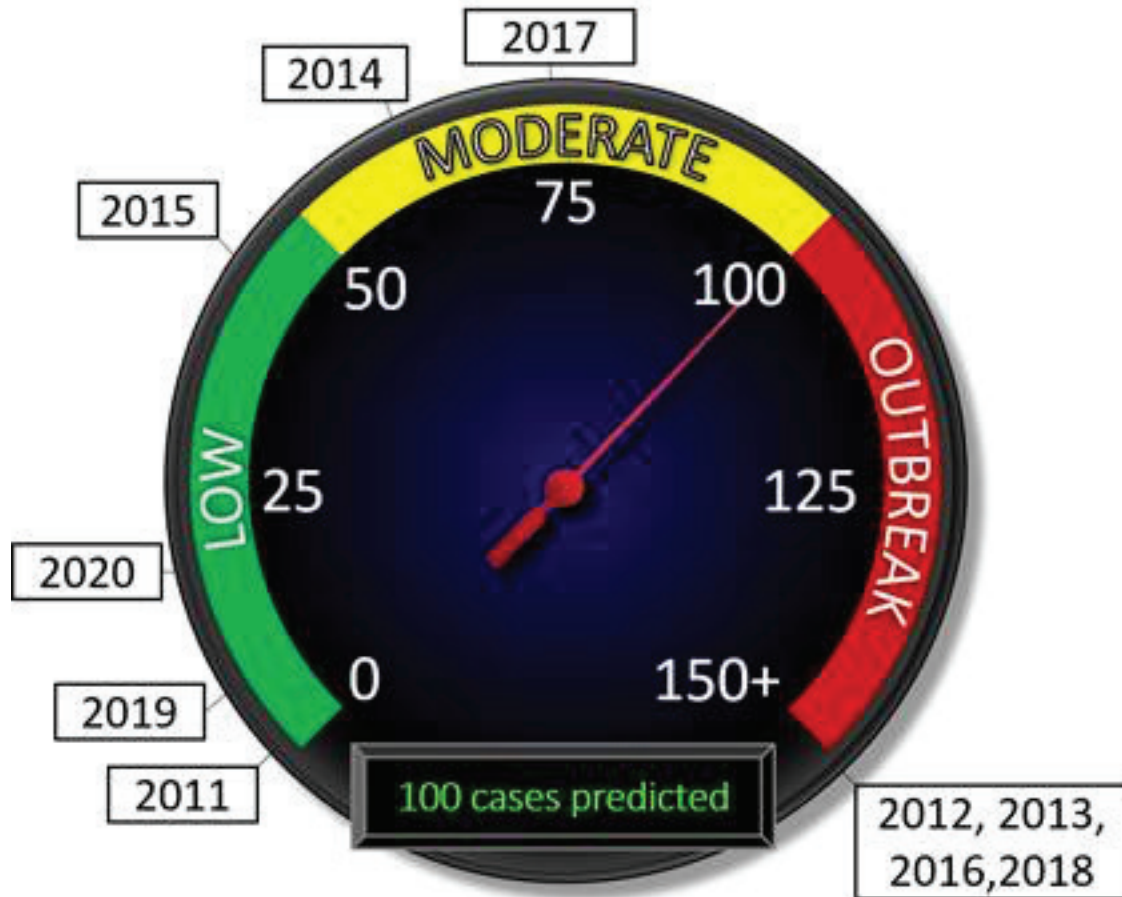
CWD is a fatal brain disease of deer, elk, and moose caused by an abnormal protein called a prion. Most harvested individuals with CWD will appear healthy and display no clinical signs. Animals in the later stages of infection with CWD may show progressive loss of weight and body condition, behavioral changes, excessive salivation, loss of muscle control and eventual death. CWD is always fatal for the afflicted animal. CWD poses serious problems for wildlife managers, and the implications of long-term management for free-ranging deer and elk is unknown.

For more information on CWD, visit gfp.sd.gov/chronic-wasting-disease or contact your local GFP office.

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Weekly West Nile Update



SD WNV (as of August 18): 9 human cases reported (Davison, Dewey, Douglas, Kingsbury, Lake, Minnehaha, Roberts, Union, Walworth)

7 counties with positive mosquito pools (Beadle, Brookings, Brown, Codington, Hughes, Lincoln, Minnehaha)

US WNV (as of August 10): 40 cases (AL, AZ, AR, CA, GA, ID, IL, IA, MD, NE, NY, ND, TX) and 3 deaths

WNV Prediction Model – Total Number of Cases Projected for 2021, South Dakota (as of August 16)

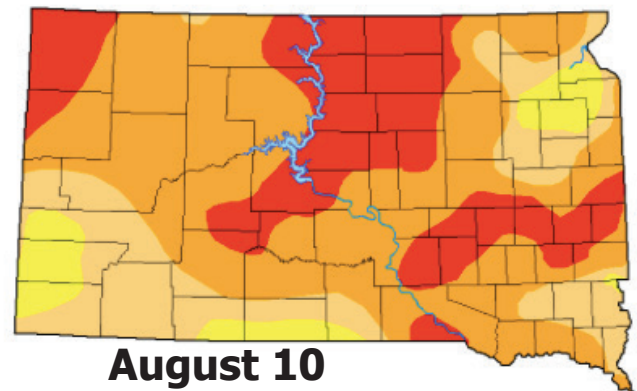
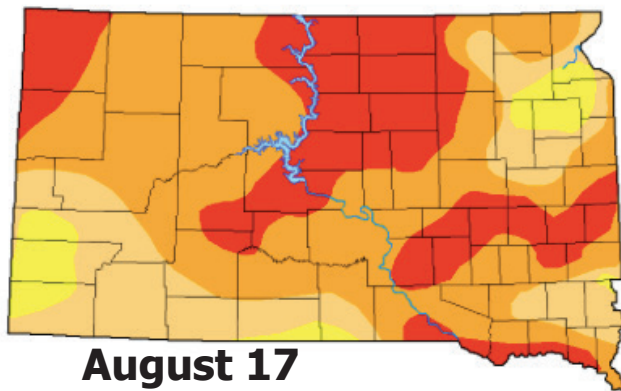
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



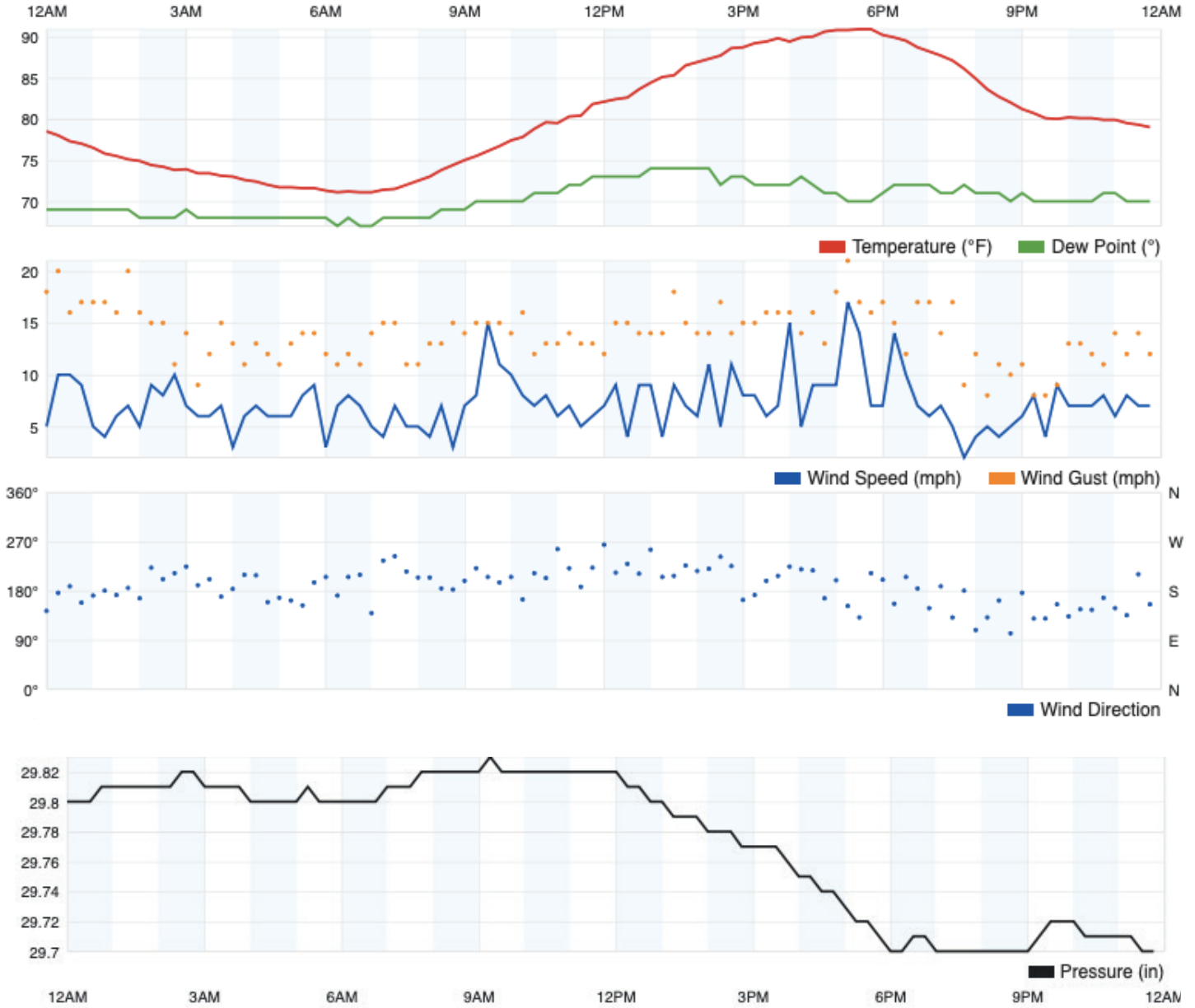
High Plains

Aside from a few pockets of heavier rain in parts of Kansas and in eastern and central Colorado, most of the region was dry this week. Warm temperatures held sway in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, and North Dakota, where temperatures generally ranged from 3 to 6 degrees above normal. Moderate drought developed in northeast Colorado in areas which did not receive significant rainfall this week. Severe and extreme drought grew in coverage along the Missouri River in northeast Nebraska and adjacent South Dakota. Drought coverage also increased in northeast South Dakota and across parts of North Dakota. In North Dakota, some farmers have harvested corn to use as livestock feed as drought continues to adversely affect agriculture. A few parts of south-central Wyoming saw localized improvement in drought conditions due to recent rainfall, while others in the southeast and northwest corners of the state experienced worsening conditions.

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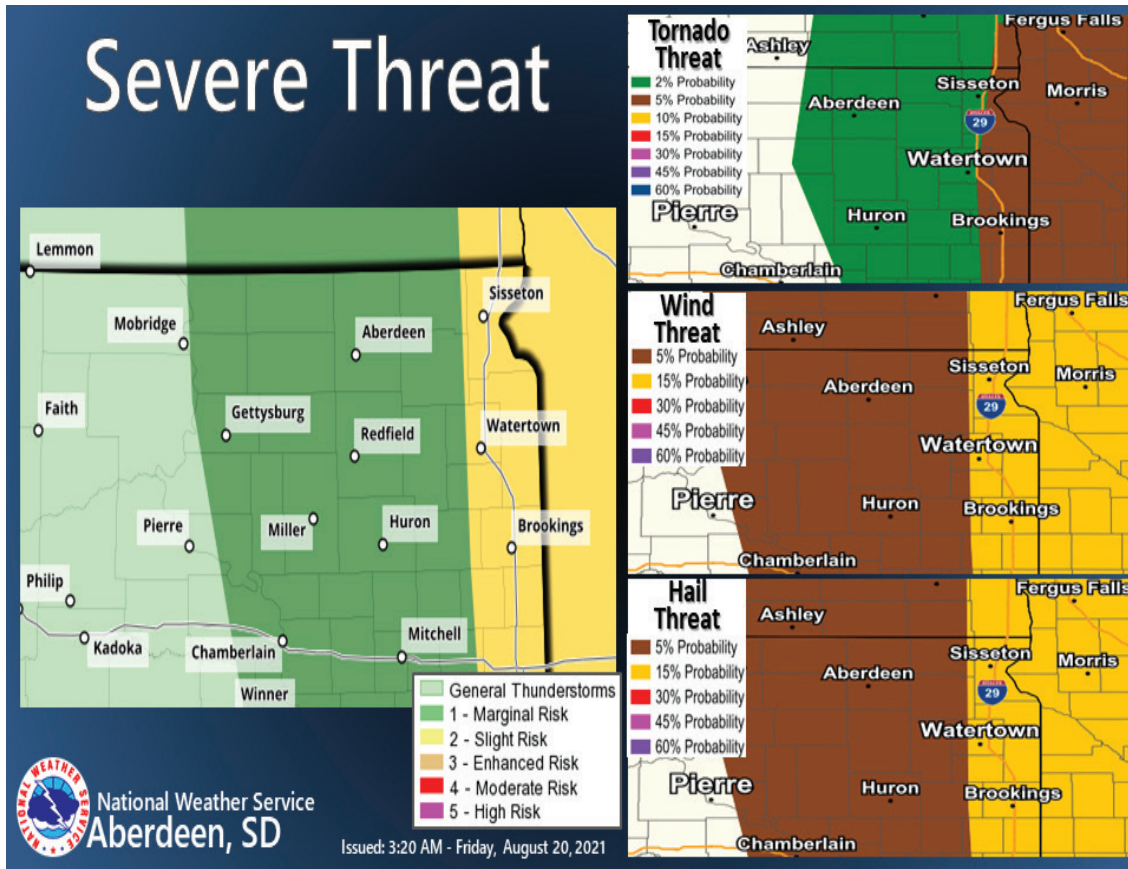
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
50% → 80%	30%			50%
Chance T-storms then T-storms	Chance T-storms then Mostly Cloudy	Decreasing Clouds	Mostly Clear	Chance T-storms and Breezy
High: 77 °F	Low: 55 °F	High: 76 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 76 °F



Storms across the Missouri valley will continue to drift eastwards and as we get into the daytime hours, we will begin to see a heightened risk that some storms will become severe. The threats include hail, strong winds and the risk for tornadoes. Through the afternoon, the strongest storms will migrate eastwards into western Minnesota, and while some storms may still linger east river there will be less of a threat for severe weather.

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**See a Flash,
Dash Inside!**

STOP all activities

Seek shelter in a building or hard-topped vehicle

Wait 30 minutes after the storm to resume activities

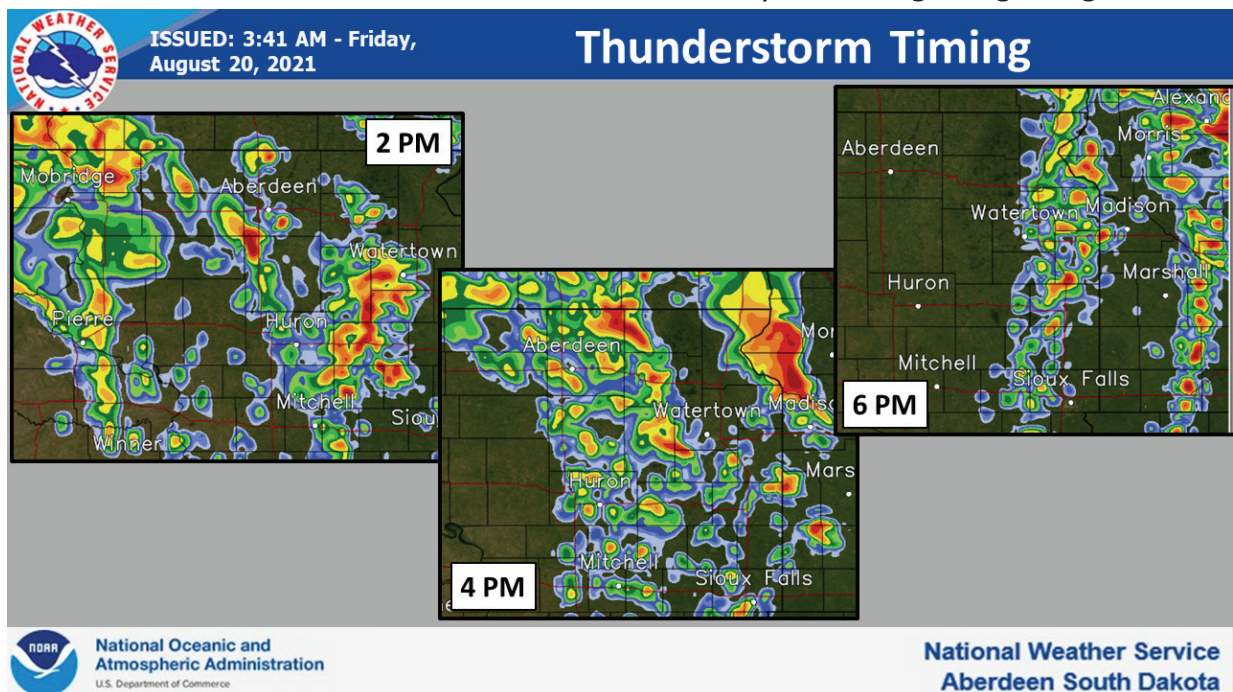
Lightning is **hotter** than the surface of the Sun and can reach temperatures around **50,000°F**

When Thunder Roars Go Indoors
weather.gov/lightning

NWS

The infographic features a dark background with a lightning bolt striking a yellow triangle on the left. A thermometer in the center shows a red liquid level reaching 50,000°F. The NOAA logo is in the bottom right corner.

When Thunder Roars, Go Indoors! Or See a Flash, Dash Inside! Both are important to remember as we have thunderstorms in the forecast Friday into Saturday morning. Lightning is very dangerous, and could even be deadly. Lightning is hotter than the surface of the sun. When thunderstorms near, stop all activities and seek shelter in a sturdy enclosed building or hard-topped vehicle, and wait 30 minutes after the storm to resume activities. Plan ahead and think about where you would go if lightning strikes!



Models suggest thunderstorm threat timing starts around the early afternoon and quickly spreads east with most of the severe weather threat into Minnesota by the late afternoon/early evening.

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Today in Weather History

August 20, 1904: A destructive, estimated F4 tornado moved ESE from 7 miles WNW of Willow Lake, through the town, and on into Bryant in Hamlin County, South Dakota. Most of the damaged occurred in those two towns. All buildings on at least three farms were blown away. One woman died in Bryant as the tornado swept across the residential west side of town. Another man was killed just west of Willow Lake, as his farm house was scattered for miles.

1886: The 1886 Indianola Hurricane destroyed the town of Indianola, Texas and as such had a significant impact on the history and economic development of Texas. The storm ended the rivalry between Galveston and Indianola as the chief port of Texas. With the abandonment of Indianola and the unwillingness of the former residents to rebuild close to shore, Galveston became the essential Texan port until the 1900 Galveston Hurricane led to the rise of Houston as a major port. It was the fifth hurricane of the 1886 Atlantic hurricane season and one of the most intense hurricanes ever to hit the United States.

1910: The Great Fire of 1910 finally came to an end in Idaho. A record dry August fueled 1736 fires that burned three million acres destroying six billion board feet of timber. The fires claimed the lives of 85 persons, 78 of which were firefighters, and consumed the entire town of Wallace. The smoke spread a third of the way around the world producing some dark days in the U.S. and Canada. The forest fires prompted federal fire protection laws.

1928: A tornado estimated at F4 intensity initially touched down in Winnebago County, Iowa, moved to Freeborn County, Minnesota, and hit the south side of Austin, MN. Five of the six deaths were in Austin with 60 injuries.

1987 - Half a dozen cities in the Central Plains Region reported record high temperatures for the date, including Pueblo CO with a reading of 102 degrees, and Goodland KS with a high of 104 degrees. Hill City KS reached 106 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Sheridan, WY, reported a record hot temperature reading of 100 degrees. Evening thunderstorms produced golf ball size hail near Fortuna ND, and wind gusts to 70 mph near Webster SD. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Early morning thunderstorms produced heavy rain in southeast Kansas and northeastern Oklahoma, with up to six inches reported around Tulsa OK. Some roads in the Tulsa area were closed by water 10 to 12 feet deep. Evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in northern Oklahoma and southern Kansas. Thunderstorms produced winds gusts to 75 mph in Major County OK, and hail two inches in diameter at Jennings KS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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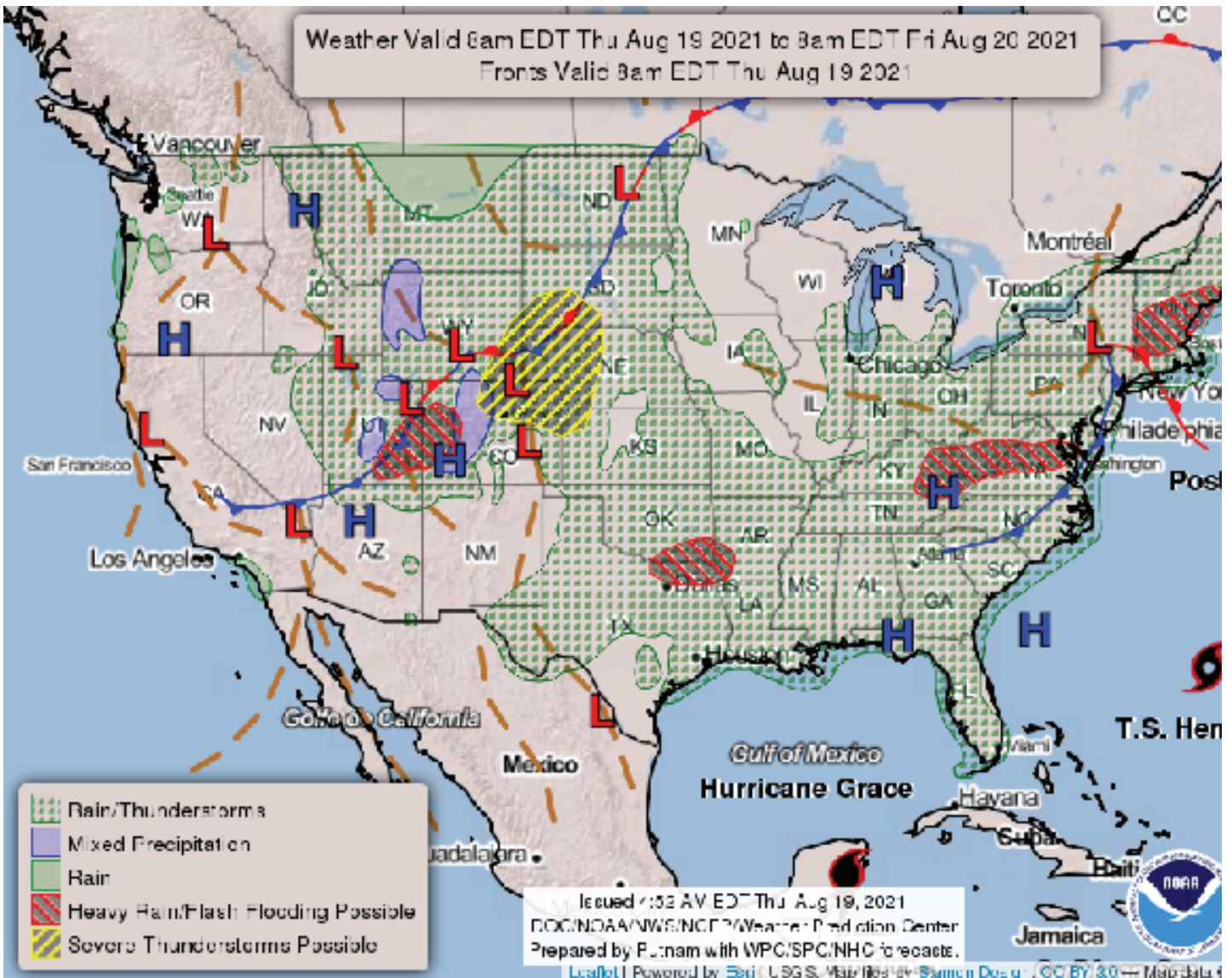
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 90.9 °F at 5:45 PM
Low Temp: 71.1 °F at 7:00 AM
Wind: 21 mph at 5:15 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 103° in 1976
Record Low: 33° in 1950
Average High: 82°F
Average Low: 56°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 1.37
Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12
Average Precip to date: 15.47
Precip Year to Date: 8.39
Sunset Tonight: 8:32 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:42 a.m.



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UNFAILING LOVE - SONGS OF JOY

What is joy? Is it a feeling? An attitude? An emotion? Is it something we "get" or "discover," perhaps "find" or "inherit" from another or "locate" traveling on the road of life? Is it temporary or permanent? Can it be passed from one person to another? Is it internal or external? Is it possible it could be all of the above?

Things were not going well for Moses. He knew that something was missing in the lives of the people following his leadership and he knew what it was: joy. They had been through difficult days and trying times. They grumbled and groaned and griped. They were critical of their conditions and angry with God. Why, they wondered, did they leave what they had for something they had been promised but could not find. They were disenchanted and discouraged.

So, Moses, the man of God, knew what to do: He went to God in prayer. "Relent, O Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on Your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with Your unfailing love that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days."

Moses reminded God that He was a God filled with unfailing love. In earnestness he begged God to "show-up" and prove His compassion by relenting. So, he prayed: "fill our empty hearts with a renewed awareness of Your unfailing love." Moses knew that only God could restore the "joy of His salvation" and the blessings that repentance and restoration could.

Often we become like the Israelites - wanting God's blessings without being faithful to Him. Hearts once filled with joy become empty because of disobedience!

Prayer: Lord, if we lose the joy of Your salvation may we understand that it is because of our sins. Forgive and restore us and keep us faithful! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 90:13: Relent, Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
08/28/2021 Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP FOOTBALL=

Harding County 46, Dupree 0

Kadoka Area 48, Faith 18

Some high school football scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. August 17, 2021.

Editorial: Census Numbers And Rural Struggles

The new U.S. Census statistics for South Dakota don't offer any real surprises, for better and for worse.

South Dakota (as well as Nebraska) showed population growth, but more detailed reporting indicates that most of that growth occurred in the urban areas. (Actually, census figures released last week showed that half of the counties in South Dakota gained population and half lost people, but a few of those on the positive side made significant gains.)

And no, that's not really a good trend. Such growth disparity in population is generally followed by political alignments reflecting the same thing, as well as an economic fallout as people look to urban centers to do more of their shopping instead of keeping their money closer to home. It represents a sapping of power, vitality and economic opportunity from our rural areas.

A large percentage of the population growth in South Dakota occurred in Minnehaha and Lincoln counties (metro Sioux Falls) in the east and Pennington County (Rapid City) in the west. These three counties account for more than a third of the state's 896,581 residents. (A reflection of sorts of the consequences of that concentrated growth could be seen Monday when the Yankton High School club softball team hosted the team from brand-new Sioux Falls Jefferson High School.)

Yankton County saw growth during the 2010s, but it was quite modest, with the population climbing from 22,438 to 23,310. Meanwhile, the city of Yankton's population ticked up only slightly from 14,467 in 2010 to 14,687 a decade later. (It's likely that most of the growth the county did see was in the city and the lake area.) While small city/county increases are better than subtraction, the incremental gains point in part to issues in housing and economic expansion.

Overall, the census picture again tells us that rural areas continue to have problems attracting and keeping people. Also, as farming operations become larger, fewer people are living on fewer individual farms. Thus, small towns dependent on rural business are hurting, too.

One possible, albeit limited, answer for some predominantly rural counties and towns is their proximity to larger communities. For instance, there are increasingly more people who, say, work in Sioux Falls but commute in from outside the city where more housing is available, the cost of living may be a little more reasonable and it is generally quieter. It's not an ideal fix for smaller communities, but it's a plus in terms of the local tax base.

Nevertheless, the problems in rural areas continue to be a concern. It's fine that the state overall saw population growth and a few counties enjoyed some big increases. But unless South Dakota's small communities can find ways to remain viable, the growing disparity in the state is only going to produce more headaches and numerous fronts.

END

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South Dakota Democrats pay fine to settle financial probe

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Democratic Party will pay a \$7,200 penalty to the Federal Election Commission to settle a probe into its bookkeeping.

The FEC found this month the party engaged in “excessive, prohibited and other impermissible contributions or transfers, mathematical discrepancies” and a series of other violations during the 2017-2018 election cycle, the Argus Leader reported. A federal audit also found the party under-reported disbursements to the Democratic National Committee by \$2.5 million during the 2015-16 election cycle.

The infractions resulted in a shake-up of leadership after they were discovered in 2019. The party has struggled to gain political power in the state. Republicans hold all statewide offices, and Democrats in the Legislature have reached their lowest number in 60 years.

“We’ve hired a new compliance lawyer and we have a whole new compliance process, so really everything has changed with how we do things at the South Dakota Democratic Party,” said Berk Ehrmantraut, the party’s executive director. “We’re in a lot better spot when this infraction occurred several years ago.”

The party will be required to pay the fine by the end of the month, as well as receive certification in FEC compliance standards by next year.

With short turnaround, FCS programs adjust practice regimens

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

K.C. Keeler didn’t ask his Sam Houston players to stick around long after they won the school’s first national championship last May, capping a long and draining season — physically and emotionally — because of the pandemic.

He’s also not asking them to stick around as long at practice this year.

Throughout the Championship Subdivision, coaches are making concessions this fall to acknowledge that the quick turnaround from last spring is hard.

Practices that typically had 24 sessions in the Huntsville, Texas heat?

“We’re down to 19 periods,” Keeler said. “I give them a halftime after like the 11th or 12th period every day where they literally just go over and hydrate.”

Keeler sent his team home after the championship win and didn’t have them return until June 28, when the community finally honored them with a parade.

When the Bearkats resumed practice Aug. 4, just 80 days had passed since they beat South Dakota State 23-21 for the title on a pass with 16 seconds to play. With the season opener set for Sept. 2, that is 108 days between games for the Bearkats. Between the 2018 and 2019 seasons, the last time things were normal, Sam Houston had 286 days between games.

By the time this regular season ends, assuming it goes on as scheduled, Sam Houston will have played 20 games in 2021 — with the potential for postseason games a very real possibility.

Sam Houston is one of many programs that have banned, or severely limited, tackling in practice, but not every highly regarded program follows suit.

“Football is a collision sport,” James Madison coach Curt Cignetti said, “... and you still have to develop the toughness, the mindset of your team in camp. So, we’ve had a physical camp. Everybody wanted a physical camp.”

The Dukes, who played eight games in the spring, make concessions elsewhere, beating the heat by practicing in the morning, and gradually dialing things back in practice as the season wears on, Cignetti said.

Down the road at VMI, the Keydets are coming off their first winning season in 40 years. Coach Scott Wachenheim wants to keep the momentum going, but not at the risk of wearing his players out.

“We’re well under the NCAA minimums for the amount of times that we’re going to have contact on the field and the amount of time we’re on the field,” he said. “We just feel we’ve got to keep our team healthy.”

His players, though, have been eager to get back to work, hoping to build off what they accomplished in going 6-2 last season before losing in the playoffs at James Madison. The playoff berth was the first in school history.

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"Everything's fresh in your mind. You're just still in kind of game shape because a lot of the guys were here in the summer," said linebacker Stone Snyder, the Southern Conference defensive player of the year.

Jakob Herres, the Keydets' All-American wide receiver, agreed. He played on a team that went 1-10 when he was a freshman and 5-7 as a sophomore.

"I think once we all got that little taste of what winning was like, we didn't want to let it go back to what it was," Herres said this week.

"The spring spring season was definitely tough on the body, you know, starting in the cold and everything like that, practicing outside," he said, "... but I really only took about a week's break and kind of just got right back to it."

The FCS season begins on Aug. 28. Sam Houston is the preseason No. 1, followed by James Madison, South Dakota State, North Dakota State and Delaware in the top five.

Regents look to state colleges to retool diversity centers

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Board of Regents says nothing but mandating curriculum is off the table when it comes to retooling diversity centers at state colleges.

The regents' general counsel, Nathan Lukkes, addressed questions from the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee.

The main goal of the Regents' initiative is to rethink how the system addresses student success, Lukkes told committee members Wednesday.

"I want to be very clear in saying that we're not talking about ignoring student success or doing a disservice to the needs of various students that we have coming in, but rather that we're going to approach things more holistically, look at every student as an individual, and address the individual needs or challenges of the student and not make assumptions or categorize based on generalities or membership in a particular class or group," Lukkes said.

Schools have until the board's October meeting to figure out a plan to implement the 'Opportunity for All' initiative.

The Board of Regents will have significant oversight over the so-called Opportunity Centers, and regular reporting measures will be stripped so Opportunity Center leaders can communicate directly with their college president and the Regents themselves, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"I promise, the members of the Board of Regents are very interested in how this evolves. My biggest point is we've taken some reporting levels out as to how this all gets unfolded going forward. I think that will make the biggest difference," Regents' Executive Director Brian Maher said.

Some rural bankers worried drought will threaten operations

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy continues to grow in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states, according to a new monthly survey of bankers in the region, but some bankers in the region are worried that worsening drought could threaten their operations.

The overall Rural Mainstreet economic index dropped slightly in August to 65.3 from July's 65.6. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

The survey showed nearly 16% of bankers believe that continuing drought conditions are the greatest threat to their banking operations over the next year. More than 40% of bank CEOs see low farm loan demand — due to strong farm finances, according to the report — as their bank's greatest challenge over the next year.

Bankers were less optimistic about the economy over the next six months than the previous month, with August's confidence index dropping to 59.7 from July's 65.6.

"Rising COVID-19 infections, the turmoil in Afghanistan and negative views of current infrastructure bills before Congress damaged the economic outlook of bank CEOs," said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey. "Only 9.4% of bankers support passage of the \$3.5 trillion infrastructure bill currently winding through Congress."

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

Do I need a booster if I got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine?

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Do I need a booster if I got the Johnson & Johnson vaccine?

Probably at some point, but health officials still are collecting the data needed to decide.

With boosters being planned in the U.S. as early as the fall for those who got the two-shot Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, recipients of the single-dose J&J jab might be wondering just how well their protection is holding up.

All the vaccines used in the U.S. — including the J&J vaccine — still are doing their job of preventing hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19.

“I don’t think there’s any signal that the J&J vaccine is failing at its primary task,” said Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Despite continued protection against severe disease, U.S. officials are planning to offer Pfizer and Moderna boosters eight months after the second shot based on evidence that effectiveness against infection wanes over time. Adding to the decision, the vaccines don’t appear quite as strong against the highly contagious delta variant as they were against earlier versions of the virus.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said boosters “will likely be needed” for the J&J vaccine. Authorities expect more data to decide in the coming weeks.

That’s in part because the J&J rollout didn’t start until March, several months after Pfizer and Moderna vaccinations began. The J&J shot is made differently. And there’s more data about how the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines fare against delta because they’re more widely used in countries where the variant struck before its U.S. surge.

There is some real-world data showing J&J’s shot holds up against the delta variant. A huge study of health workers in South Africa showed the vaccine remains highly effective against hospitalizations and death from the variant. And the vast majority of so-called “breakthrough” infections in vaccinated people were mild.

J&J has also presented lab data on virus-fighting antibodies that indicates its vaccine protects against the delta variant for eight months and counting. Another small lab study has raised questions about whether a two-dose approach would work better, an option J&J is studying.

A separate issue is whether people with severely weakened immune systems should get extra shots as part of their original vaccinations, since they don’t respond as well to any vaccines. The government now recommends a third shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines for organ transplant recipients and others in this group. But it’s still collecting data before making a similar recommendation for another dose of the J&J vaccine.

‘Bracing for the worst’ in Florida’s COVID-19 hot zone

By KELLI KENNEDY and CODY JACKSON Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — As quickly as one COVID patient is discharged, another waits for a bed in northeast Florida, the hot zone of the state’s latest surge. But the patients at Baptist Health’s five hospitals across Jacksonville are younger and getting sick from the virus faster than people did last summer.

Baptist has over 500 COVID patients, more than twice the number they had at the peak of Florida’s July 2020 surge, and the onslaught isn’t letting up. Hospital officials are anxiously monitoring 10 forecast models, converting empty spaces, adding over 100 beds and “bracing for the worst,” said Dr. Timothy Groover, the hospitals’ interim chief medical officer.

“Jacksonville is kind of the epicenter of this. They had one of the lowest vaccination rates going into July and that has probably really come back to bite them,” said Justin Senior, CEO of the Florida Safety Net Hospital Alliance, which represents some of the largest hospitals in the state.

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Duval County, which consists almost entirely of Jacksonville, is a racially diverse Democratic bastion, won by Joe Biden. The overwhelmingly white rural counties that surround it went firmly for Donald Trump.

But all had lower than average vaccination rates before the highly contagious delta variant swept through this corner of Florida, driving caseloads in a state that now accounts for one in five COVID patients hospitalized nationwide.

Nearly one-third of Jacksonville's population is African American, and racial tensions here date back to the Civil Rights era, when 40 young Black people sat down at a whites-only department store lunch counter and were attacked with axes and baseball bats by 150 white men. That 1960 conflict was a turning point for equal rights in the city, but mistrust of government officials still lingers.

The city is just a five hour drive from the home of the infamous "Tuskegee syphilis study," in which the government used unsuspecting Black men as guinea pigs in a study of a sexually transmitted disease. Groover, who is Black, understands why people are wary, even though his hospital system promises the highest quality of care to its community, using the most advanced technologies.

The system is working overtime to get a pro-vaccine message out, but it's competing against rumors that filter through social media feeds to local BBQs and church congregations. Black leaders in the community told The Associated Press they've heard everything, including that the government is using the vaccine to implant tracking devices.

"A whole lot of rumors," said Dr. Rogers Cain, a Black primary care doctor with a predominantly Black practice, who said his elderly patients are easier to persuade to get the vaccine than his younger ones. "We've done a massive effort at educating. But it hasn't really come through."

"The people that actually were closer to the Tuskegee incident are the ones who got the vaccine the quickest," he said.

While Duval's vaccination rate of 56% is in the middle among Florida counties, it has jumped 17% since early July, one of the largest increases in the state.

Vaccine skepticism also is high among the Hispanics who represent 10% of Duval's population, said Dr. Leonardo Alfonso. He rotates between emergency rooms at two other Jacksonville hospitals, working on his days off because they are so desperate for staff. One typically has around 50 patients, but some days it treats 100 or more.

"The ICUs are brimming. They're running out of ventilators," Alfonso said with frustration. "People are dying. It's so preventable."

Gov. Ron DeSantis recently ordered a rapid response unit to help deliver monoclonal antibody therapy to a wider range of higher-risk patients who become infected, in hopes of relieving "some of the pressure" on local hospitals.

Alfonso says vaccinations could have blunted this surge, but when he asks patients if they got their shots, "I get this deer in the headlights look, kind of just a blank stare, like they didn't give it importance or they just blew it off or they thought they were young and healthy."

Persuading the hesitant to protect themselves and the people around them is a ground game, experts say. "We're getting out in front of every audience we possibly can," said Dr. Groover.

His father pastors one of the area's large predominantly Black churches, where Groover says some of the parishioners told him they don't need a vaccine because God would protect them. The doctor spoke to the congregation at a recent Sunday service, trying to dispel myths and describing how he's seen families devastated by infection and deaths that vaccines could have prevented.

"I got about 10 texts later that day from people who went out to Publix that same day and got the shot," he said. "A large majority of the membership now is vaccinated."

Across town at Impact Church, Pastor George Davis buried six church members under the age of 35 in just 10 days. All had been healthy, all unvaccinated. Friends he's lost include a 24-year-old man Davis had known since he was a toddler, a young woman on the worship team who celebrated her first wedding anniversary just weeks before her death, and another man in his early 30s that Davis had mentored for years.

The predominantly young, Black megachurch of 6,000 has a hipster vibe, with contemporary music,

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and jeans and sneakers welcome. Davis has partnered with community health officials to work through misconceptions about the delta variant's impact after officials said for months that the disease couldn't hurt them much.

Now, his church members can simply walk across the hall each Sunday and talk with a medical expert about their vaccine concerns. Davis also hosted two vaccination drives, where more than 1,000 got shots.

"As a pastor, honestly we really don't have much time to lick our wounds," he said. "Like a police officer, if somebody they know has been shot, they still have to reach for their weapon to protect those that are left."

New Chinese law tightens control over company data on users

BEIJING (AP) — China is tightening control over information gathered by companies about the public under a law approved Friday by its ceremonial legislature, expanding the ruling Communist Party's crack-down on internet industries.

The law would impose some of the world's strictest controls on private sector handling of information about individuals but appears not to affect the ruling party's pervasive surveillance or access to those corporate data.

Its passage follows anti-monopoly and other enforcement actions against companies including e-commerce giant Alibaba and games and social media operator Tencent that caused their share prices to plunge.

The law, which takes effect Nov. 1, follows complaints that companies misused or sold customers' data without their knowledge or permission, leading to fraud or unfair practices such as charging higher prices to some users.

The law curbs what information companies can gather and sets standards for how it must be stored. The full text wasn't immediately released, but earlier drafts would require customer permission to sell data to another company.

Alibaba shares lost 2.6% in Hong Kong after news of the law's passage. Tencent sank after the announcement but ended up 1%. Pinduoduo, an online grocer, was down 1.2% in pre-market trading on the U.S.-based Nasdaq.

The law is similar to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, which limits collection and handling of customer data. But unlike laws in Western countries, earlier drafts of the Chinese legislation say nothing about limiting ruling party or government access to personal information.

The ruling party has been accused of using data gathered about Uyghurs and other members of predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in the northwestern region of Xinjiang to carry out a widespread campaign of repression.

Chinese authorities are "concerned at the volume of data big tech has in respect of the population and the power they can provide," said Paul Haswell of law firm Pinsent Masons. He called the measure China's version of the GDPR.

Most organizations, however, should be prepared after Chinese authorities imposed other restrictions on data oversight, Haswell said.

In April, Alibaba was fined a record \$2.8 billion for anticompetitive practices.

This month, the government said online education companies are no longer allowed to receive foreign investment or operate as for-profit businesses.

Harris' Asia trip carries new urgency after Afghan collapse

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has given new urgency to Vice President Kamala Harris' tour of southeast Asia, where she will attempt to reassure allies of American resolve following the chaotic end of a two-decade war.

The trip, which begins Friday and includes stops in Singapore and Vietnam, will provide a forum for Harris to assert herself more directly in foreign affairs. She will have opportunities to affirm what she and

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President Joe Biden view as core American values, including human rights. That's especially important given concerns about the future for women and girls in Afghanistan with the Taliban back in power.

But there are also substantial risks. A longtime district attorney and former senator, Harris is largely untested in international diplomacy and foreign policy. Her swing through Vietnam could draw unwanted comparisons between the humiliating withdrawal of U.S. troops there in 1975 and the tumultuous effort this week to evacuate Americans and allies from Afghanistan. And it's all happening in the shadow of China, whose growing influence worries some U.S. policymakers.

"She's walking into a hornet's nest, both with what's taking place in Afghanistan, but also the challenge of China that looms particularly large in Vietnam," said Brett Bruin, who served as global engagement director during the Obama administration and was a longtime diplomat. "On a good day, it's walking a tightrope. On a not so good day, it's walking a tightrope while leading an elephant across. There's just an enormous set of issues that she will run into from the moment that Air Force Two touches down."

Harris struggled at points in June when her first major trip abroad took her to Guatemala and Mexico. Her unequivocal warning to migrants not to come to the U.S. angered some progressive Democrats while doing little to mollify Republican critics who said the administration wasn't doing enough to address a growth of crossings at the southern border.

She'll have a fresh chance to make a global impression when she arrives in Singapore, the anchor of the U.S. naval presence in southeast Asia.

On Monday, Harris will speak with Singapore President Halimah Yacob over the phone, participate in a bilateral meeting with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and deliver remarks on a U.S. combat ship visiting Singapore.

On Tuesday, she plans to deliver a speech outlining the U.S. vision for engagement in the region, and participate in an event with business leaders focused on supply chain issues.

Harris then heads to Vietnam, a country that holds both strategic and symbolic significance for the U.S. Leaders there have echoed U.S. concerns about the rise of neighboring China and the potential threat that could pose to global security. But it's also a nation etched into American history as the site of another bloody, costly war with an ignominious end.

The vice president will almost certainly address that parallel when she takes questions from the press in Singapore during a joint press conference with the prime minister Monday. It's a potentially awkward position for Harris because Biden expressly rejected comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam in July, insisting there would be "no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy" in Afghanistan, a reference to historic images of a helicopter evacuating a U.S. embassy in Saigon in 1975.

But the harried effort to get Americans to the airport in Kabul this week defied that prediction.

While the disorderly conclusion of the Afghan war dominated Washington in recent days, China may be a bigger priority for Harris' trip. Biden has made countering Chinese influence globally a central focus of his foreign policy. Relations between the U.S. and China deteriorated sharply under Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, and the two sides remain at odds over a host of issues including technology, cybersecurity and human rights.

And with Beijing's incursions in the disputed South China Sea, engagement with Vietnam and Singapore is key to the Biden administration's diplomatic and military goals in the region.

Former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam David Shear said Harris must be careful to offer a "positive" message to the nations, and avoid focusing entirely on China during her trip.

"Our relationships with these countries are important in themselves, and they don't want to be thought of solely as a pawn in a U.S.-China chess game. They want to be thought of on their own terms, and they want their interests to be considered on their own terms," he said.

Instead, analysts say they hope Harris will focus in particular on trade issues during her trip. The White House has been considering a new digital trade deal with countries in the region, which would allow for the free flow of data and open up opportunities for U.S. companies for greater cooperation on emerging technologies in a fast-growing region of the world.

And COVID-19 is certain to be top of mind in two countries facing starkly divergent virus trends. Singapore has experienced just a few dozen pandemic-related deaths and has a relatively high vaccination rate, and the country is getting ready to ease travel and economic restrictions this fall. Vietnam, meanwhile, is facing record-high coronavirus infections driven by the delta variant and low vaccination rates.

The U.S. has provided more than 23 million vaccine doses to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and tens of millions of dollars in personal protective equipment, laboratory equipment and other supplies to fight the virus.

During her visit to Vietnam, Harris is planning to hold a virtual meeting with ASEAN health ministers and tout the launch of a regional office of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Gregory Poling, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said showing a commitment to the region on the coronavirus pandemic is key for Harris' trip.

"I think on COVID, the administration realizes that this is the singular issue. If they're not seen as leading vaccine distribution in the region, then nothing else they do in Asia matters, or at least nothing else they do is going to find a willing audience," he said.

Report: Taliban killed minorities, fueling Afghans' fears

By AHMAD SEIR, TAMEEM AKHGAR and DAVID RISING Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Taliban fighters tortured and killed members of an ethnic minority in Afghanistan after recently overrunning their village, Amnesty International said, fueling fears that they will again impose a brutal rule, even as they urged imams to push a message of unity at the first gathering for Friday prayers since the capital was seized.

Terrified that the new de facto rulers would commit such abuses, thousands have raced to Kabul's airport desperate to flee following the Taliban's stunning blitz through the country. Others have taken to the streets to protest the takeover — acts of defiance that Taliban fighters have violently suppressed.

The Taliban have sought to project moderation and have pledged to restore security and forgive those who fought them in the 20 years since a U.S.-led invasion. Ahead of Friday prayers, leaders urged to imams to use sermons to appeal for unity, urge people not to flee the country, and to counter "negative propaganda" about them.

But many Afghans are skeptical, and the Amnesty report provided more evidence that undercut the Taliban's claims they have changed.

The rights group said that its researchers spoke to eyewitnesses in Ghazni province who recounted how the Taliban killed nine Hazara men in the village of Mundarakht on July 4-6. It said six of the men were shot, and three were tortured to death.

The brutality of the killings was "a reminder of the Taliban's past record, and a horrifying indicator of what Taliban rule may bring," said Agnes Callamard, the head of Amnesty International.

The group warned that many more killings may gone unreported because the Taliban have cut cellphone services in many areas they've captured to prevent images from there from being published.

Separately, Reporters without Borders expressed alarm at the news that Taliban fighters killed the family member of an Afghan journalist working for German broadcaster Deutsche Welle on Wednesday.

"Sadly, this confirms our worst fears," said Katja Gloger of the press freedom group's German section. "The brutal action of the Taliban show that the lives of independent media workers in Afghanistan are in acute danger."

Many Afghans fear a return to the Taliban's harsh rule in the late 1990s, when the group largely confined women to their homes, banned television and music, chopped off the hands of suspected thieves and held public executions.

Thousands continue to flock to Kabul's airport, braving checkpoints manned by Taliban fighters as they seek desperately to get on evacuation flights out.

Mohammad Naim, who has been among the crowd at the airport for four days trying to escape the country, said he had to put his children on the roof of a car on the first day to save them from being

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crushed by the mass of people. He saw other children killed after they were unable to get out of the way. Naim, who said he had been an interpreter for U.S. forces, said he had urged others not to come to the airport.

"It is a very, very crazy situation right now and I hope the situation gets better because I saw kids dying, it is very terrible," he said.

The Pentagon said Thursday that about 2,000 people were brought out on American flights on each of the previous two days, and the State Department said 6,000 more were expected to leave that day. But thousands of Americans and their Afghan allies may be in need of escape.

Dozens of other flights have already brought hundreds more Western nationals and Afghan workers to Europe and elsewhere.

Chaos at the airport itself has sometimes hindered flights, but getting to the facility is the major challenge. Germany was sending two helicopters to Kabul to help bring small numbers of people from elsewhere in the city to the airport, officials said.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison noted that Australian citizens have not been able to be evacuated from outside Kabul, and even in the capital the situation is difficult.

"The situation in Kabul does remain chaotic," he said.

In recent days, some Afghans have protested the Taliban in several cities — a remarkable show of defiance that fighters often met with violence. At least one person was killed Wednesday at a rally in the eastern city of Jalalabad, after demonstrators lowered the Taliban's flag and replaced it with the Afghan tricolor. Another person was seriously wounded at a protest a day later in Nangarhar province.

The demonstrations have come to the capital as well. 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.

Meanwhile, opposition figures gathering in the last area of the country not under Taliban rule talked of launching an armed resistance. It was not clear how serious a threat they posed given that Taliban fighters overran nearly the entire country in a matter of days with little resistance from Afghan forces.

In addition to concerns about Taliban abuses, officials have warned that Afghanistan's already weakened economy could crumble further without the massive international aid that sustained the toppled Western-backed government. The U.N. says there are dire food shortages and experts said the country was severely in need of cash with much of the government's funds abroad frozen.

After the Taliban overran Kabul the market used by many in the capital to exchange money was closed down.

Underscoring the difficulties the Taliban will face in returning the country to normal life, trader Aminullah Amin said Friday that it would stay closed for the time being. There was just too much uncertainty surrounding exchange rates, how the Taliban might regulate the market, and the possibility of looting.

"We have not decided to reopen the markets yet," he said.

US struggles to speed Kabul airlift despite Taliban, chaos

By ROBERT BURNS, MATTHEW LEE, and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States is struggling to pick up the pace of American and Afghan evacuations at Kabul airport, constrained by obstacles ranging from armed Taliban checkpoints to paperwork problems. With an Aug. 31 deadline looming, tens of thousands remained to be airlifted from the chaotic country.

Taliban fighters and their checkpoints ringed the airport — major barriers for Afghans who fear that their past work with Westerners makes them prime targets for retribution. Hundreds of Afghans who lacked any papers or clearance for evacuation also congregated outside the airport, adding to the chaos that has prevented even some Afghans who do have papers and promises of flights from getting through.

It didn't help that many of the Taliban fighters could not read the documents.

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In a hopeful sign, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in Washington that 6,000 people were cleared for evacuation Thursday and were expected to board military flights in coming hours. That would mark a major increase from recent days. About 2,000 passengers were flown out on each of the past two days, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

Kirby said the military has aircraft available to evacuate 5,000 to 9,000 people per day, but until Thursday far fewer designated evacuees had been able to reach, and then enter, the airport.

Kirby told reporters the limiting factor has been available evacuees, not aircraft. He said efforts were underway to speed processing, including adding State Department consular officers to verify paperwork of Americans and Afghans who managed to get to the airport. Additional entry gates had been opened, he said.

And yet, at the current rate it would be difficult for the U.S. to evacuate all of the Americans and Afghans who are qualified for and seeking evacuation by Aug. 31. President Joe Biden said Wednesday he would ensure no American was left behind, even if that meant staying beyond August, an arbitrary deadline that he set weeks before the Taliban climaxed a stunning military victory by taking Kabul last weekend. It was not clear if Biden might consider extending the deadline for evacuees who aren't American citizens. The president will deliver remarks on the evacuation Friday afternoon at the White House.

At the Kabul airport, military evacuation flights continued, but access remained difficult for many. 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. U.S. Navy fighter jets flew overhead, a standard military precaution but also a reminder to the Taliban that the U.S. has firepower to respond to a combat crisis.

There is no accurate figure of the number of people — Americans, Afghans or others — who are in need of evacuation as the process is almost entirely self-selecting. For example, the State Department says that when it ordered its nonessential embassy staff to leave Kabul in April after Biden's withdrawal announcement, fewer than 4,000 Americans had registered for security updates. The actual number, including dual U.S.-Afghan citizens along with family members, is likely much higher, with estimates ranging from 11,000 to 15,000. Tens of thousands of Afghans may also be in need of escape.

Compounding the uncertainty, the U.S. government has no way to track how many registered Americans may have left Afghanistan already. Some may have returned to the United States but others may have gone to third countries.

At the Pentagon, Kirby declined to say whether Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had recommended to Biden that he extend the Aug. 31 deadline. Given the Taliban's takeover of the country, staying beyond that date would require at least the Taliban's acquiescence, he said. He said he knew of no such talks yet between U.S. and Taliban commanders, who have been in regular touch for days to limit conflict at the airport as part of what the White House has termed a "safe passage" agreement worked out on Sunday.

"I think it is just a fundamental fact of the reality of where we are, that communications and a certain measure of agreement with the Taliban on what we're trying to accomplish has to occur," Kirby said.

Of the approximately 2,000 people airlifted from the airport in the 24 hours ended Wednesday morning, nearly 300 were Americans, Kirby said. U.S. lawmakers were briefed Thursday morning that 6,741 people had been evacuated since Aug. 14, including 1,762 American citizens and Green Card holders, according to two congressional aides.

Although Afghanistan had been a hotspot for the coronavirus pandemic, the State Department said Thursday that evacuees are not required to get negative COVID-19 results.

"A blanket humanitarian waiver has been implemented for COVID-19 testing for all persons the U.S. government is relocating from Afghanistan," the department said. Medical exams, including COVID-19 tests, had been required for evacuees prior to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, which added extra urgency to efforts to get at-risk Afghans out.

Additional American troops continued to arrive at the airport. As of Thursday there were about 5,200, including Marines who specialize in evacuation coordination and an Air Force unit that specializes in emergency airport operations. Biden has authorized a total deployment of about 6,000.

Hoping to secure evacuation seats are American citizens and other foreigners, Afghan allies of the

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Western forces, and women, journalists, activists and others most at risk from the fundamentalist Taliban.

In June, more than 20 diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul registered their concerns that the evacuation of Afghans who had worked for America was not proceeding quickly enough.

In a cable sent through the State Department's dissent channel, a time-honored method for foreign service officers to register opposition to administration policies, the diplomats said the situation on the ground was dire, that the Taliban would likely seize control of the capital within months of the Aug. 31 pullout, and urged the administration to immediately begin a concerted evacuation effort, according to officials familiar with the document.

Will U.S. troops go beyond the airport perimeter to collect and escort people? Austin suggested on Wednesday that this was not currently feasible. "We don't have the capability to go out and collect large numbers of people," he told reporters.

Austin added 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 has complicated matters.

"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.

GOP governors, school districts battle over mask mandates

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Millions of students in Florida, Texas and Arizona are now required to wear masks in class as school boards in mostly Democratic areas have defied their Republican governors and made face coverings mandatory.

The three states are all hot spots in the nation's recent COVID-19 surge, and defiant boards in Miami, Dallas, Houston, Phoenix and other urban areas argue that requiring masks protects students, teachers and staff from contracting and spreading the virus as many pediatric hospitals fill.

The districts often cite the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which recommends teachers, staff and students all wear masks regardless of whether they've been vaccinated.

"This thing (the virus) is not playing with us," Marcia Andrews, a member of the Palm Beach County, Florida, school board, said this week as it passed a mask mandate, according to the Palm Beach Post. "I don't want to see a kid die."

The governors argue that wearing masks stifles learning and does little to stop the virus's spread but children rarely get seriously ill from the disease. They say mandates violate parents' rights to determine how best to protect their children.

"Texans, not government, should decide their best health practices, which is why masks will not be mandated by public school districts or government entities," Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said when he banned local mask mandates.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, in a July executive order barring masks, cited a Brown University study that examined schools in New York, Florida and Massachusetts. He said it showed masks at schools made little difference, but it had a caveat he doesn't cite: It analyzed cases associated with schools and not cases spread in schools.

One of the study's authors, Brown economist Emily Oster, said recently that she was not consulted by the governor and the study relied on data from before the emergence of the more contagious delta variant. She supports masks in schools.

Dr. Jessica Snowden, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Arkansas Children's Hospital, said masks are proven to cut the virus's spread among children if worn consistently. She said the delta variant infects children more often and makes them sicker than last year's variants, adding that masks do not impede learning.

"There is lots of evidence that supports masking and there is no evidence that it causes any harm," she

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said. "Children are much more adaptable than adults are."

Florida and Texas combined make up 15% of the U.S. population but 28% of its recent COVID-19 cases, according to the CDC, and both states have seen their hospitalization numbers skyrocket over the past two months. Arizona's COVID-19 cases have jumped sixfold since June.

Mask rules in U.S. public schools vary widely. Eleven states require masks, including California, Illinois, Louisiana and Kentucky, while Florida, Texas and five other states prohibit mandates: Utah, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Iowa and South Carolina. Arizona's ban takes effect Sept. 29. The other states leave the decision to local officials.

In Arizona, Gov. Doug Ducey this week barred districts that mandate masks from accessing a \$163 million virus relief pool and said parents could receive \$7,000 per student for private schools if their district mandates masks or goes into quarantine. More than two dozen districts, accounting for a third of the state's 930,000 public school students, require masks.

"Safety recommendations are welcomed and encouraged — mandates that place more stress on students and families aren't," Ducey said in a statement.

Save Our Schools, an Arizona group that successfully repealed a statewide voucher program, said Ducey is trying to use COVID-19 to restore public funding of private schools.

"We are ready to fight the abhorrent policies," the group said in a statement.

In Texas, the state's biggest districts, including Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin, are all defying Abbott and requiring masks. Abbott, who recently tested positive for the virus, is fighting the districts in court, but they aren't budging. The Texas Supreme Court ruled Thursday that the districts can require masks until the legal battle is decided.

"We're going to continue our mask mandate to keep students safe, to keep parents safe, to keep families safe and most importantly our teachers," Dallas school superintendent Michael Hinojosa said.

In Florida, where the battle is particularly heated, DeSantis and the state Board of Education, which he appoints, have threatened to cut funds from districts that impose mandates that don't provide an easy opt out for parents. The state is also allowing students who feel bullied into wearing a mask to apply for a private school voucher.

"Forcing young kids to wear masks all day, these kindergartners, having the government to force them, that's not defying me; that is defying the State of Florida's laws," DeSantis said this week. "This is not something we are making up."

But four of Florida's five largest school districts — Miami-Dade, Broward, Hillsborough and Palm Beach counties — along with mid-size Alachua, the home of the University of Florida, have adopted mask mandates with exemptions only with a doctor's approval. They represent more than a third of the state's 2.8 million public school students.

Miami-Dade, the nation's fourth-largest district with 341,000 students, adopted its mask mandate Wednesday, hours after Superintendent Albert Carvalho told the state board the district would not back down.

"For the consequences associated with doing the right thing, whatever that right thing is, I will wear proudly as a badge of honor," Carvalho said, according to The Miami Herald.

DeSantis has accused the defiant boards of playing politics.

The five Florida districts that have imposed strong mask mandates are all Democratic strongholds that supported President Joe Biden in November's election even as former President Donald Trump carried the state. Biden recently told districts that the federal government would replace any funds the state cuts because of mandates.

Malaysian king picks ex-deputy PM as nation's new leader

By EILEEN NG Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysia's longest-governing political party reclaimed the premiership it lost in a shock 2018 election defeat, after the king on Friday named its candidate, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, as the country's new leader.

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Ismail was the deputy prime minister under the government of Muhyiddin Yassin, who resigned Monday after less than 18 months in office as infighting in his coalition cost him majority support.

Ismail's appointment essentially restores Muhyiddin's alliance. It also brings back the rule of the United Malays National Organization, which had led Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957 but was ousted in 2018 elections over a multibillion-dollar financial scandal.

King Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah said Ismail had secured the backing of 114 lawmakers for a slender majority. He said Ismail, 61, will be sworn in as Malaysia's ninth prime minister on Saturday.

The announcement came after the monarch met state Malay rulers who advised him on the appointment. The king's role is largely ceremonial in Malaysia, but he appoints the person he believes has majority support in Parliament as prime minister.

Sultan Abdullah said in a statement that he hopes Ismail's appointment will bring an end to the country's political turmoil. He urged lawmakers to set aside their political differences and unite to tackle the country's worsening pandemic.

"Ismail's appointment was not unexpected. With this, UMNO is now back in the driver's seat," said James Chin, an Asian expert at Australia's University of Tasmania.

Ismail's 114 votes exceed the 111 needed for a simple majority but is close to the backing Muhyiddin had and was unable to keep. Ismail is from UMNO, the larger party in the alliance, leaving him on firmer ground, but he still needs Muhyiddin's party for enough support to lead.

Angry Malaysians had launched an online petition to protest Ismail's candidacy, with more than 340,000 signatures collected so far. Many believe Ismail's choice will restore the status quo, with its perceived failed response to a worsening pandemic.

Malaysia has one of the world's highest infection rates and deaths per capita, despite a seven-month state of emergency and a lockdown since June. Daily new infections have more than doubled since June to hit a new record of 23,564 on Friday, bringing the country's total to over 1.5 million cases. Deaths have surged to above 13,000.

A lawyer before he joined politics, Ismail held several ministerial posts in previous UMNO governments. In 2015 as trade minister, Ismail courted controversy when he urged ethnic Malay consumers to boycott profiteering Chinese businesses. He was also slammed for supporting the vaping industry, which is dominated by Malays, despite health warnings from the health ministry.

In 2018 polls, Ismail waved the racial card, warning that every vote for the opposition was akin to eliminating special privileges given to Malays under a decades-old affirmative action program.

Ismail was named defense minister when Muhyiddin took power in March 2020, and became the government's public face through daily briefings on security issues related to the pandemic. He was promoted to deputy prime minister in July as Muhyiddin sought to woo support from UMNO, which was unhappy at playing second fiddle to Muhyiddin's smaller party.

Ismail defeated opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, whose three-party alliance is the biggest opposition bloc with 88 votes. Even if all opposition parties support him, he still falls short with 105 votes.

Western groups desperate to save Afghan workers left behind

By COLLEEN BARRY and KERSTIN SOPKE Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — The Italian charity Pangea helped tens of thousands of Afghan women become self-supporting in the last 20 years. Now, dozens of its staff in Afghanistan are in hiding with their families amid reports that Taliban are going door-to-door in search of citizens who worked with Westerners.

Pangea founder Luca Lo Presti has asked that 30 Afghan charity workers and their families be included on Italian flights that have carried 500 people to safety this week, but the requests were flatly refused. On Thursday, the military coordinator told him: "Not today."

Dozens of flights already have brought hundreds of Western nationals and Afghan workers to safety in Europe since the Taliban captured the capital of Kabul. Those lucky enough to be rescued from feared reprisals have mostly been Afghans who worked directly with foreign missions, along with their families.

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European countries also have pledged to evacuate people at special risk from the Taliban — feminists, political activists and journalists — but it is unclear exactly where the line is being drawn and how many Afghan nationals Western nations will be able to evacuate.

Pangea's staff in Afghanistan is getting increasingly agitated. Lo Presti says they are specifically at risk for their role creating the kind of independence for women that is at odds with the Taliban's tenets.

"Pangea is an enemy because whoever creates awareness and rights is the enemy. We now have to hide," Lo Presti said from his base in Milan. Pangea gave loans to help 70,000 women open their own businesses — hair and beauty salons and bakeries — and many of them support families with at least eight to 10 children.

The Italian Foreign Ministry touted the arrival of activist Zahra Ahmadi and female researchers from the Veronesi Foundation on a Thursday flight carrying 202 Afghan citizens, noting "the special attention to those who worked for Italy and who is under threat, such as women and young people."

Yet still unprotected are untold numbers who worked with aid groups and other nongovernmental organizations in the fledgling democracy. Also included are those who assisted U.S. and NATO forces and are now stranded and being hunted by the Taliban. Many are deleting contacts with the West from their phones, or memorizing key numbers to maintain contact.

An Italian-Afghan doctor who worked for Italy's development agency broke down after arriving on an evacuation flight and offered a harsh assessment of the West's decision to leave the country.

"We need to save those people in Kabul. We left them in Kabul with nothing," Dr. Arif Oryakhail told reporters, his voice breaking. "They cooperated with us, we trained them as obstetricians, nurses, doctors. They were working and now they are abandoned, our hospitals are abandoned."

A German network has closed its safehouses for Afghan nationals who worked with coalition forces, calling them "death traps."

"The Taliban are going door-to-door looking for local forces," said Marcus Grotian, an active German soldier who runs the network. "This was foreseeable, and there has already been a visit to one of the safehouses by the Taliban. Thank God it was empty."

He is fielding 400-500 calls a day for help from stranded former workers and feels helpless. Afghans who were key to aiding the NATO deployment now "are throwing away their documents, and trying to get by," he said. "We don't know how to help them anymore."

French President Emmanuel Macron has pledged not to abandon Afghans who worked for the country, from translators to kitchen staff, as well as activists. More than 300 have been evacuated, and Macron's office says charities want more added to the list.

Over 130 Czech nationals and Afghans were evacuated Monday and Tuesday, and Hungary has begun an evacuation mission for its citizens as well as some Afghans who helped its military.

Lo Presti is calling for a humanitarian corridor to evacuate Afghans who worked with the West. He has been blocked so far from going to Kabul to help identify Pangea workers and their families amid the chaos. One family who ignored his advice and went to the airport lost sight of their children in the confusion and are unable to locate them, he said.

He acknowledged concerns in the West over "jihadist factions who are brought to the West and pass themselves off for refugees," making it more urgent that members of his organization get to Kabul to vouch for those who have worked with him.

But he also is cognizant of the risks for those left behind.

"Every night brings trepidation, because roundups like those of the Nazi regime are real, and the fear of being taken and arrested without the possibility of a defense and not knowing the future and imagining that it could be death," Lo Presti added. "This is terrifying us, and we are here. Imagine the women who are living it."

A former British Marine, Paul Farthing, is campaigning to help 25 Afghans who work for the Nowzad animal sanctuary in Kabul and their families to settle in Britain. They include female surgeons in their 20s who fear forced marriages with Taliban fighters and an end to their careers.

"We gave them hopes, aspirations, dreams for the future," Farthing said. "Thousands of people now

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have had their lives ripped from them.”

The concern is not only for individuals, but for the credibility of Western democratic values promoted over the last two decades as well as that of humanitarian organizations which recruit and rely on local staff in other danger zones.

Grotian says the Afghanistan withdrawal has exposed “that there is no concept of how to stand by people when things go bad.”

The YAAR association for the Afghan diaspora in Germany is being barraged by calls from Afghans desperate to get out. Others, despondent, are deleting cellphone contacts altogether, so they don’t leave a digital trail.

Any failure to evacuate Afghans will have long-term consequences, said YAAR head Kava Spartak.

“It is a sort of an endgame for the morale and for the European ethics. If they leave Afghans behind now, particularly those Afghans who worked with NATO troops and with international organizations fighting for democracy 20 years long, I think there wouldn’t be much left for European values anymore,” Spartak said.

Grace heads for a second hurricane hit on Mexican coast

By FABIOLA SÁNCHEZ Associated Press

TULUM, Mexico (AP) — Hurricane Grace — temporarily knocked back to tropical storm force — headed Friday for a second landfall in Mexico, this time taking aim at the mainland’s Gulf coast after crashing through the country’s main tourist strip.

The storm lost punch as it zipped across the Yucatan Peninsula, but it emerged late Thursday over the relatively warm Gulf of Mexico and was gaining energy.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Grace’s winds were back up to 70 mph (110 kph) early Friday and were expected to soon regain hurricane force. It was centered about 265 miles (425 kilometers) east of Tuxpan and was heading west at 16 mph (26 kph).

The forecast track would take it toward a coastal region of small fishing towns and beach resorts between Tuxpan and Veracruz, likely Friday night or early Saturday, then over a mountain range toward the heart of the country and the greater Mexico City region.

Forecasters said it could drop 6 to 12 inches (15 to 30 centimeters) of rain, with more in a few isolated areas — bringing the threat of flash floods, mudslide and urban flooding.

The hurricane hit early Thursday near Tulum, a resort town famed for its Mayan ruins. Some families passed harrowing hours sheltering from cracking trees and flying debris.

As the storm approached, Carlos González grabbed his 1 1/2-year-old son and ran from his home with his wife to a school-turned-shelter, using his cellphone light to find his way through darkened streets.

“The only thing I have left is what I’m wearing,” the 35-year-old construction worker said. “I knew my house wasn’t going to stand it because it’s made of cardboard. When the wind came I was really scared and decided to leave.”

There were no reports of deaths, but many streets were blocked by fallen limbs and trees that pulled down power lines, leaving thousands in the dark Thursday.

Most businesses remained closed, but the few that opened saw long lines of people waiting to buy tortillas and other food.

Quintana Roo Gov. Carlos Joaquín said the storm had knocked out power to some 84,000 customers in Cancun and 65,000 in Playa del Carmen, Cozumel, Puerto Aventura and Tulum. But he said there were no reported deaths.

One lane of the highway between Playa del Carmen and Tulum was blocked by a fallen road sign. A gas station was destroyed when a large pavilion blew down, smashing two cars.

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Merkel and Putin to discuss Afghanistan, other 'big' issues

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin are set to hold talks in Moscow on Friday amid the crisis unfolding in Afghanistan and as Russia's treatment of opposition politician Alexei Navalny and Ukraine remain a source of ongoing tension between the two leaders' countries.

Other challenging issues that are certain to play a role in the meeting are a gas pipeline between Russia and Germany opposed by the United States, the repression of dissent in Belarus, and allegations that the Belarusian government has channeled migrants into Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with the aim of destabilizing the European Union.

Merkel's visit to Moscow comes as the chancellor is nearing the end of her almost 16-year-long leadership of Germany. She and Putin, who has served as Russia's president or prime minister since 2000, managed to maintain a line of communication over the years despite their many political differences.

However, the personal relationship between the two has deteriorated since 2014, when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, and as a result of other authoritarian actions by Moscow.

Friday's talks in Moscow will "surely be about the big outstanding international questions," Merkel spokesman Steffen Seibert told reporters in Berlin earlier this week. "Obviously Afghanistan. Furthermore, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, for the solution and settlement of which Russia could do much more."

"Belarus, a country, a dictator, who goes against his own people in the worst kind of way and on whom the Russian leadership has influence as we believe," Seibert added as he listed possible talking points.

Merkel is heading to Russia on the anniversary of Navalny falling gravely ill while on a plane flying over Siberia on Aug. 20, 2020. At his wife's insistence, the opposition leader was transferred for medical treatment to Germany, where officials said tests revealed he had been poisoned with a Soviet-developed nerve agent.

Navalny, who is Putin's most outspoken critic, spent five months in Germany recovering and blamed the poisoning on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusation.

Upon his return to Russia in January, Navalny was immediately arrested and jailed. A month later, he was ordered to serve 2½ years in prison for violating the terms of a suspended sentence from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that he dismissed as politically motivated.

"This still unsolved case is putting a very severe burden on the relationship to Russia," Seibert said. "Mr. Navalny is wrongfully imprisoned."

Russia's Foreign Ministry released a lengthy statement Wednesday about "the Navalny case," charging that actions by "Germany and its allies" over the past 12 months indicated "a planned provocation aimed at discrediting Russia in the eyes of the global community and at damaging its national interests."

The ministry accused Berlin of failing to provide evidence that would support their "brazen allegations" that Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent. It said Germany left legal requests from Russian law enforcement without any "meaningful answers" and instead played "bureaucratic ping-pong" with Moscow.

Merkel, 67, who grew up in communist East Germany and is fluent in Russian, has always stressed that relations with Russia can only improve through dialogue. Her visit to Moscow will be one of her last trips abroad as chancellor since she is not running in Germany's national election next month.

Putin, 68, who has been in power for more than 20 years, is Russia's longest-serving leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Under communism in the 1980s, he worked for the Soviet's intelligence service KGB in East Germany.

Despite his and Merkel's years of experience as leaders and with each other, experts are skeptical Friday's meeting will improve the ties between Germany and Russia.

"Russia has become an authoritarian regime," Stefan Meister, a political analyst with the German Council on Foreign Relations told The Associated Press. "It is no longer interested in improving relations with the west."

The deterioration of relations between the two countries is mirrored in the worsening of the personal

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relationship of their longtime leaders, Meister said.

"Mrs. Merkel, as an East German and with her background, right from the start understood better than her predecessors how Russia works and how Putin operates. There always was a matter-of-fact relationship...based on respect," Meister said, adding that all changed with the beginning of armed hostilities in eastern Ukraine.

"The big break was the Russia-Ukraine conflict," Meister added.

Fighting between Russia-backed separatists and government forces in eastern Ukraine erupted after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea and has left more than 14,000 dead.

Efforts to negotiate a political settlement under the 2015 Minsk agreements brokered by France and Germany have stalled, and the EU has imposed sanctions against Russia for failing to live up to its peace commitments in Ukraine.

Merkel plans to travel back to Berlin on Friday night and to head to Kyiv on Sunday to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Another topic of discussion with Putin will likely be the nearly finished Nord Stream 2 pipeline that will carry natural gas from Russia to Germany. The project has angered the United States and some European countries, but the U.S. and Germany announced a deal last month to allow its completion.

Critics say the pipeline threatens European energy security, heightens Russia's influence and poses risks to Ukraine and Poland in bypassing both countries.

Regarding Belarus, Merkel earlier this week accused President Alexander Lukashenko of a "hybrid attack" against the EU by encouraging migrants to cross the borders into Lithuania, Latvia and Poland in retaliation to the EU's sanctions against Belarus.

Merkel said she would raise the topic with Putin.

Belarus depends heavily on Russian energy supplies and Moscow has authorized loans to prop up the country's beleaguered economy.

At 60, Peace Corps plots return to world after virus hiatus

By WILSON RING and ROY NKOSI Associated Press

DEDZA, Malawi (AP) — More than a year after COVID-19 began sweeping the world, abruptly cutting short her Peace Corps stint, Cameron Beach is once again living in rural Malawi — this time on her own dime.

The Peace Corps, a U.S. government program marking its 60th anniversary this year, boasted 7,000 volunteers in 62 countries in March 2020. They were given little time to pack before being put on a plane and sent back to the United States that month.

"It was especially painful for me because I was given 24 hours to leave a place that I'd called home for almost two years," Beach said during a recent video call from her home in Malawi, a landlocked country in southern Africa.

Beach was trained to speak Chichewa and had been teaching English at the Mkomera Community Day Secondary School in Dedza, located in a compound about 25 miles (40 kilometers) southeast of the capital, Lilongwe. The 25-year-old Greenville, South Carolina, native paid her own way back to her post nine months after evacuation and is living on savings, but says she would "absolutely" rejoin the Peace Corps if it became possible.

It might be: The organization hopes to begin returning volunteers to the field late this year or early next year.

While Peace Corps volunteers would be required to be vaccinated, sending them back will depend on the situation in individual countries. Initially, about 2,400 evacuated volunteers expressed interest in going back and there are about 10,000 applications on file, Acting Peace Corps Director Carol Spahn told The Associated Press.

"Immediately after the evacuation we had tremendous interest from volunteers who were evacuated in returning to their country of service," Spahn said. "Clearly, as time goes on, you know, people do move on with their lives, but I will say we have a robust pipeline of both people who were evacuated as well as

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those who were invited, but were unable to go and those who are expressing new interest.”

How soon they can be sent overseas depends on the worldwide fight against the virus, complicated by the recent emergence of the more transmissible delta variant and the slow rollout of vaccines in developing countries — many of which host Peace Corps programs.

Spahn estimates it will be several years before the Peace Corps is back to its full strength. After all, while volunteers in select countries had been evacuated before, March 2020 marked the first time since the organization was founded by President John F. Kennedy that it had to evacuate all its volunteers at the same time.

Since its creation in 1961, more than 240,000 Americans have served as Peace Corps volunteers in scores of countries. The goal is to help the countries meet their development needs with a wide variety of programs — from education to health and agriculture programs — while helping promote a better understanding of Americans.

Typical service lasts two years after a training period, the length of which depends on the country and the program. During the pandemic most Peace Corps staff, both U.S. citizens and local hires, remained in place and, in some cases, kept up some programs. Some former volunteers even worked remotely on development projects from the United States, receiving a small stipend for their work.

Heading back overseas is nonetheless a daunting undertaking between the required training and rebuilding of programs. Areas that have few returning volunteers will also lose the institutional, cross-cultural and local knowledge typically passed on by departing volunteers to their successors.

It's not just the Peace Corps that has had to recall thousands from remote reaches of the globe and navigate the aftermath.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had to send home about 26,000 missionaries tasked with recruiting new members to the faith known widely as the Mormon church. Many pivoted to doing missions in their home countries with a focus on online work.

In November, the church began sending missionaries back into the field and, in June of this year, the church reopened its missionary training centers in Utah, the Philippines and Mexico.

All missionaries from the United States who serve overseas are required to be vaccinated, said church spokesperson Sam Penrod. Missionaries who do not want to be vaccinated will be assigned to missions in their home countries.

“The church is taking a careful approach when assigning missionaries outside of their home country, based upon local conditions and following the guidance of government and health officials,” he said in an email.

As time goes by, potential recruits and returnees are moving on.

Cullen O'Donnell, 25, originally from Mentor, Ohio, served two years with the Peace Corps in Ecuador teaching English and then extended for a third year. He was planning another year, working on the Galapagos Islands, when COVID-19 hit.

He'd still like to go back — “then again with Peace Corps it's very vague: ‘Yeah we're hoping to get back to the field,’ but it keeps getting pushed back.”

So he's getting on with his life. He now has a fulfilling job at a school for at-risk students in Pennsylvania and was just accepted to graduate school.

The Peace Corps has been accepting new applications throughout the pandemic, but in June the agency began planning for a return to Belize after the government there asked for volunteers who could help local schools recover from the pandemic's disruptions. But there is no indication when the first trainees would be sent to the tiny country tucked between Mexico and Guatemala.

A few volunteers refused to be evacuated but their Peace Corps service was ended, Spahn said. Despite their truncated service, volunteers are eligible for the variety of benefits typically afforded those who complete the two years — including resettlement payments, preferred hiring status for federal jobs and special scholarships.

But those former volunteers — like Beach — could help seed the revived Peace Corps, Spahn said.

Beach hadn't been able to say goodbye. Her students had missed her.

“The time when Madam Beach left Malawi, lots of things went wrong especially in our class,” said Aness

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Leman Filimoni, who is in her last year of high school. "Madam Beach was teaching us English but when she left, the school could not find a suitable replacement."

Beach is now teaching her usual two classes a day, five days a week. She's also helping finish up a girls' dormitory built in part with a Peace Corps grant.

Just before the pandemic, there were 108 volunteers in Malawi. Peace Corps Malawi Director Amber Lucero-Dwyer, who stayed, has seen a handful of former volunteers return on their own — although she thought most were visiting, not staying indefinitely as Beach is.

"We have tried to be as creative as possible to determine what can we do, what core Peace Corps work can we do in the absence of volunteers," Lucero-Dwyer said.

Beach was originally sent to Malawi just weeks after her college graduation, and was scheduled to complete her service in August 2020; if she's able to return to service, she doesn't know how long the stint would last.

Regardless, she's found her niche.

"It's what I feel I'm meant to do," Beach said of what she sees as the calling that drew her to the Peace Corps and ultimately Malawi. "It wasn't a very windy road."

In Haiti, close relation between the living and the dead

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Haiti's unusually close relationship between the living and the dead has helped hide, in part, the huge toll of Saturday's earthquake: People in Haiti want to be close to their deceased relatives, to the point of sometimes burying them in their front yards.

Haiti's Civil Protection Agency puts the number of dead from the quake at almost 2,200. Questions had arisen about how such a large number of dead could have been handled or buried so quickly, but amateur burials and overflowing private funeral parlors may explain where all the bodies went.

The magnitude 7.2 earthquake injured more than 12,000 people, destroyed or damaged more than 100,000 homes and left about 30,000 families homeless, officials said. Schools, offices and churches — and even funeral homes and cemeteries — were demolished or badly damaged.

The quake also brought the living and the dead even closer in a nation which, like Mexico, celebrates a Day of the Dead holiday: In the countryside outside the city of Les Cayes, some of the frontyard burial crypts were broken open by the force of the quake, exposing coffins inside.

And some of the living came closer to the grave than anyone should: Serge Chery, the head of civil defense for the Southern Province, which covers Les Cayes, said that his officers had found two women buried in the rubble of a two-story apartment building because they had been able to communicate with the outside world via cellphones.

Such stories are common rumors in disaster zones. Chery said his department received innumerable false reports of such calls. "We dialed one number that people said was sending messages from a collapsed house, and a living person answered it in Jeremie," a nearby city.

But Chery refused to call the real cellphone rescue a miracle.

"The only miracle was that they had their phones charged and in their hands at the time of the quake, and they had sufficient room to dial afterward," Chery said.

Government hospital morgues, like the one at the Les Cayes' general hospital, are almost empty. That's because, as the hospital's director admits, they haven't had working refrigeration at the morgue for at least three months due to problems with the electrical equipment.

Instead, local residents know they have to take deceased to one of the dozens of small, modest private funeral homes in the area.

There, at least air-conditioned rooms mean the bodies won't decompose while relatives struggle to come up with enough money to meet burial costs that can run around \$500, a fortune for people in the hemisphere's poorest country.

Jean Eddy Montezima runs one such parlor, the St. Jaques funeral home in Les Cayes, on a shoestring,

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and he is overworked and fed up. As he spoke with journalists, another rickety, informal “ambulance” — actually just an SUV with a folding stretcher in the back — pulled up with another body, a woman who died of natural causes at a local hospital.

That’s good, because Montezima says he is no longer accepting the bodies of quake victims. He has 15 corpses crowding his small, air-conditioned rooms. The woman’s body was carried into the parlor and relatives promised to come back later to make arrangements.

Montezima says he has taken in the bodies of at least 50 quake victims since Saturday at his small building, where a noisy generator growls 24 hours a day to keep air conditioners running so the bodies won’t decompose.

“A lot of people may not have the money to bury them,” Montezima said. “If the families don’t come back, I will probably have to do a mass grave with them.” Such a solution is little short of a sacrilege in Haiti, but the beleaguered funeral home director has little choice.

“I was already working eight hours a day, and now I have to work 24,” he said. “I am burning \$50 in gas every day. We need an institution or a charity to donate to help with the costs.”

“In some cases, the bodies were in such bad condition, we had to bury them immediately,” he said, adding he can’t hand that task off to the government. “If the body is badly decomposed, they won’t accept them at the morgue.”

Eventually, though, the dead and the living have to part ways.

Chery has the painful task of deciding, along with other authorities, when to send in heavy machinery to clear the rubble, though he acknowledges it will “inevitably” result in churning up more bodies. Chery said that in the Las Cayes area alone, 300 people are still missing; many are probably still under tons of broken concrete and brick.

“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,” Chery said, noting that “it will be easier to distribute aid if people are living at their addresses, rather than in a tent.”

He stressed the need to start engineering inspections of buildings to find out which are safe. “If we want the schools and banks and hotels to start working, we have to give people confidence, because they don’t want to go back into those buildings now,” Chery said.

“In Haiti, it is something cultural; families are attached to their dead,” Chery said. “Culturally, even with cholera or COVID-19, people want their relatives to be buried in a nice grave.” But due to the mangled condition of many quake victims, many were buried immediately.

That attitude is on display at the Marc Dor Lebrun funeral home, which he touts as the city’s cleanest and best equipped. Here grieving families can rent a 30-foot-long stretch Humvee limousine to carry the funeral cortege.

Stainless steel refrigerated body cabinets line one room and an air-conditioned preparation room lies nearby. But with the bodies of 17 earthquake victims, and 22 others, already filling his facilities, Lebrun says he cannot take any more.

“It’s because we’re honest. We’re telling people we are not receiving any more bodies,” Lebrun said. “I don’t know about the rest of them,” he said, referring to less well-equipped homes.

“We got three bodies that were so badly destroyed that we put them in zippered body bags and gave them to relatives and they buried them on their own,” Lebrun said.

For the rest — families who can’t meet the costs of burials — Lebrun said he won’t turn them away or set a fixed price. “This is the situation,” he said, referring to Haiti’s grinding poverty. “If a family can’t pay, we’ll help them out.”

Oxygen plant among earthquake-damaged buildings in Haiti

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — As if Haiti's 7.2 magnitude earthquake, a tropical storm and the coronavirus pandemic weren't enough, the temblor damaged the only medical oxygen plant in the southern part of the country.

The building that housed the oxygen concentrator machines that the region depended on partially collapsed, and the machines were upended. The Etheuss company is run by the a family famous for their vetiver perfume oils plant in the city of Les Cayes, one of the areas hardest hit by Saturday's earthquake.

"We are trying to get the oxygen production started again. That is our responsibility, because many people depend on it," said Kurtch Jeune, one of the brothers who run the plant, as he showed reporters through the damaged, rubble-strewn plants on Thursday.

The quake left concrete pillars and roofs at the facility leaning, and cement block rubble battered the tanks, electrical system and the delicate web of copper tubing that fills vital oxygen plants. "The oxygen generators are upside down," Jeune said. "We did get a promise of help from the public works department to get the rubble out with excavators."

Jeune said that, apart from two medical oxygen plants in the capital, Port-au-Prince, his factory was the only one serving local hospitals. As the COVID-19 pandemic grinds on, Jeune says demand for oxygen has gone up 200% in the last month.

"We have the capacity to supply 40 oxygen cylinders per day," Jeune said. "We supply several hospitals."

The powerful earthquake that struck Haiti's southwestern peninsula killed at least 2,189 and injured 12,268 people, according to official figures. More than 300 people are estimated to still be missing, said Serge Chery, head of civil defense for the Southern Province, which includes the small port city of Les Cayes.

More than 100,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, leaving about 30,000 families homeless, according to official estimates. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged.

The earthquake was trailed by a tropical storm that brought heavy rain and strong winds at the beginning of the week.

Private relief supplies and shipments from the U.S. government and others began flowing more quickly into Haiti on Thursday, but the Caribbean nation's entrenched poverty, insecurity and lack of basic infrastructure still presented huge challenges to getting food and urgent medical care to all those who need it.

Adding to the problems, a major hospital in the capital of Port-au-Prince, where many of the injured were being sent, closed for two days beginning Thursday to protest the kidnapping of two doctors, including one of the country's few orthopedic surgeons.

The abductions dealt a blow to attempts to control criminal violence that has threatened disaster response efforts in the capital.

Further, a group of 18 Colombian volunteer search-and-rescue workers had to be escorted out of the quake-hit city of Jeremie under police protection after a false rumor circulated that they had been involved in the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moise. The workers took shelter Wednesday night at a civil defense office, and police escorted them to the airport on Thursday.

Moise's killing, still unsolved, is suspected of being carried out by a group of Colombian mercenaries. Despite what happened to the Colombian rescue workers, Haiti is welcoming "everyone who is coming to bring assistance," said Jerry Chandler, the head of the national Civil Protection Agency.

Health care facilities in the Western Hemisphere poorest nation were already at a critical point before the earthquake because of the pandemic. The country of 11 million people has reported 20,556 cases and 576 deaths of COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University.

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

The rest of Jeune's factory, which produces an essential oil used in fine perfumes, was also badly damaged.

The family's business processes bales of beige, stringy roots culled from the vetiver plant to produce more than half the world's vetiver oil.

Vetiver oil is also used for cosmetics, soaps and aromatherapy. It generates an estimated \$12 million in revenue a year and employs anywhere from 15,000 to 60,000 farmers.

The damage to the factory threatens Haiti's already perilous rural economy, plagued by drought, soil erosion and tropical storms.

Haiti produces more than 70 tons of vetiver oil a year, surpassing Indonesia, China, India, Brazil and the neighboring Dominican Republic. It is one of the country's top exports, with up to 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) harvested annually. But more than 60% of the crop still comes from individual producers, many of whom are struggling financially, according to Gabriel Gelin, a spokesman for the United Nations Environment Program in Haiti.

Man surrenders after claiming to have bomb near US Capitol

By ERIC TUCKER, MICHAEL BALSAMO, COLLEEN LONG and MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — A North Carolina man who claimed to have a bomb in a pickup truck near the U.S. Capitol surrendered to law enforcement after an hourslong standoff Thursday that prompted a massive police response and the evacuations of government buildings in the area.

Authorities were investigating what led the suspect, identified as 49-year-old Floyd Ray Roseberry, to drive onto the sidewalk outside the Library of Congress, make bomb threats to officers and profess a litany of antigovernment grievances as part of a bizarre episode that he live-streamed for a Facebook audience. Police later searched the vehicle and said they did not find a bomb but did collect possible bomb-making materials.

The standoff was resolved peacefully after roughly five hours of negotiations, ending when Roseberry crawled out of the truck and was taken into police custody. But even in a city with a long history of dramatic law enforcement encounters outside federal landmarks, this episode was notable for its timing — Washington remains on edge eight months after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol — and for the way the suspect harnessed social media to draw attention to his actions in the hours before his arrest.

Authorities who spent hours negotiating with Roseberry — he held up handwritten signs through his driver-side window — were continuing to dig into his background Thursday evening. They did not reveal any details about a motive, and no charges were immediately announced.

Investigators had been speaking with members of Roseberry's family and learned that his mother had recently died, Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said. "There were other issues he was dealing with," the chief said, without providing specific details.

But social media appeared to offer its own clues.

As police continued negotiations, video surfaced of Roseberry on Facebook Live inside the truck, which was stuffed with coins and boxes. He threatened explosions, expressed hostility toward President Joe Biden, profanely warned of a "revolution" and laid bare a series of grievances related to U.S. positions on Afghanistan, health care and the military.

Roseberry's ex-wife, Crystal Roseberry, said she had seen images of the man in the standoff at the Capitol and confirmed to The Associated Press that it was her ex-husband. She said she had never known him to have explosives, but he was an avid collector of firearms.

Videos posted to Facebook before the page was taken down appear to show Roseberry at a Nov. 14 Washington rally attended by thousands of Trump supporters to protest what they claimed was a stolen election. One video appears to be filmed by Roseberry as he's marching with a crowd of hundreds of people carrying American flags and Trump flags and shouting "stop the steal."

Thursday's incident began around 9:15 a.m. when a truck drove up the sidewalk outside the library. The driver told the responding officer he had a bomb, and he was holding what the officer believed to be a detonator. The truck had no license plates.

Kelsey Campbell, a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison visiting Washington as part of a class trip, said she and another student encountered Roseberry around 9:20 a.m. outside the nearby Supreme Court building. Campbell said he was with his truck, which was parked next to the sidewalk, and was

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holding a large stack of dollar bills.

"He said, 'Hey, call the police, tell them to evacuate this street, and I'll give you all this money,'" Campbell recounted to The AP. "I said, 'No!' and he threw the money at us and we started running."

Campbell said she and the other student saw some police officers standing nearby. They told the officers what happened, and the officers then went to confront Roseberry.

The standoff brought the area surrounding the Capitol to a virtual standstill as police emptied buildings and cordoned off streets as a precaution. Congress is in recess this week, but staffers were seen calmly walking out of the area at the direction of authorities.

By Thursday evening, authorities had finished searching the vehicle and determined the area to be safe after not finding an explosive.

The nation's capital has been tense since the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, when thousands of supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the building as Congress was gathered to certify the results of the presidential election.

A day before the riot at the Capitol, pipe bombs were left at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee in Washington. No one has been arrested yet for placing the bombs.

The RNC, not far from where the truck was parked Thursday, was also evacuated over the threat. A spokesman for the DNC said its headquarters, which is located farther away from the truck's location, was put under lockdown, but that lockdown has been lifted.

Thursday's incident marked the third time in as many weeks that federal and military law enforcement authorities had to respond to attacks or possible threats in the Washington area. Officials are also jittery over a planned rally in September.

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 killing 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,

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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 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 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."

"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 (56 kilometers) south of San Francisco or a newer office in Washington.

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Forensic tools such as 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 (2,100 square kilometers).

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 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 (640 kilometers), 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

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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 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 triangulated 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 viewed by AP showing that Williams' car ran a red light, as did another car that appeared to have its windows up. This detail ruled 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 that seeks to reverse wrongful convictions.

A 2011 study commissioned by the company found that dumpsters, trucks, motorcycles, helicopters, fireworks, construction, trash pickup and church bells have all triggered false positive alerts, mistaking

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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 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

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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 pretrial 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 miles (1.6 kilometers) 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 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 yearlong 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.

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"My client did not deserve to have his liberty taken away based on unscientific, unproven evidence," Max said. "Given the history of flawed forensic evidence in our courts, we can't let ShotSpotter be the next thing that racks up wrongful convictions."

On the evening of July 23, Williams walked out of Cook County Jail into the hot Chicago night. He was picked up by his attorney, and 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?"

Texas Democrats return, end 38-day holdout over voting bill

By PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A standoff in Texas over new voting restrictions that gridlocked the state Capitol for 38 consecutive days ended Thursday when some Democrats who fled to Washington, D.C., dropped their holdout, paving the way for Republicans to resume pushing an elections overhaul.

It abruptly and messily drew to a close one of the few — and lengthiest — quorum breaks in modern Texas history. Instead of a unified and celebratory return by Democrats, some members lashed out at their colleagues over what they criticized as breaking ranks. Many of the proposed changes to Texas voting that Democrats have railed against for months remain in a bill that already passed the state Senate, and Republican Gov. Greg Abbott could now sign the legislation in a matter of weeks, if not sooner.

Only three new Democrats showed up Thursday, and the vast majority of the more than 50 Democrats who bolted for the nation's capital in July continue to stay away from the Texas Capitol. Still, Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan said enough were there to achieve a quorum, which in the House is normally 100 present legislators. Growing impatience among Republicans had led to escalating threats that missing lawmakers could face arrest, but officers never appeared to do more than leave warrants at Democrats' homes.

"It's been a very long summer. Been through a lot. I appreciate you all being here," Phelan said. "It's time to get back to the business of the people of Texas."

Not all Democrats joined in the holdout, and the newest to come back to the Texas House defended their decision, saying they had successfully pushed Congress on voting rights legislation while pointing to the growing urgency of surging COVID-19 caseloads in Texas. One of them, Democrat Garnet Coleman of Houston, did not go to Washington because he was recovering from having a leg amputation brought on by an infection.

"One of the things in life is that we have to know what our responsibilities are and we have to work to move something in the direction we want it to be," Coleman said from a wheelchair while delivering the prayer on the House floor.

But other Democrats who remained absent did not hide their frustration.

"This is how Texas Democrats lose elections," state Rep. Michelle Beckley tweeted.

Abbott now has an opening to divert attention back to the Capitol and away from criticism and defiance by Texas' largest cities and school districts over his handling of worsening COVID-19 numbers. Abbott, who is up for reelection in 2022, had also jammed the agenda of this latest 30-day special session — which is nearly half over — with other hot-button conservative issues including border security and how race is

taught in public schools.

Abbott this week tested positive for COVID-19, although his office had said the 63-year-old governor did not have symptoms.

It leaves Democrats much in the same position as when the holdout started: unable to permanently stop the GOP-controlled Legislature from putting new limits and rules over how more than 16 million registered voters can cast a ballot. And federal voting rights protections that Texas Democrats lobbied for while in Washington still face long odds of getting around GOP opposition in Congress.

For months, Texas Republicans have tried to pass measures that would prohibit 24-hour polling sites, ban drive-through voting and give partisan poll watchers more access. One version of the bill that was just hours from reaching Abbott's desk in May also would have banned Sunday morning early voting — when many Black churchgoers go to the polls — and made it easier for a judge to overturn an election. Democrats' first walkout wound up permanently scuttled those two provisions, but Republicans have kept intact other contested measures.

Abbott vetoed paychecks for about 2,100 legislative staffers after Democrats walked out the first time in a move that was aimed at pressuring Democrats to return in order to restore that funding.

The full House quickly adjourned Thursday, but Republicans worked fast to schedule a hearing on the elections bill for Saturday.

"People want to get to work. They're relieved that after all this time that we've been held hostage in Austin that we can finally get down to business," said state Rep. Jim Murphy, chairman of the House Republican Caucus.

Months of protests had put Texas Democrats at the center of a new national battle over voting. Republicans around the U.S. have rushed to enact new voting restrictions in response to former President Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 election was stolen.

Republicans are now back on a path to pass new elections laws in Texas before the current special session ends on Sept. 5.

Toxic algae bloom considered in death of California family

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Investigators are considering whether toxic algae blooms or other hazards may have contributed to the deaths of a Northern California couple, their baby and the family dog on a remote hiking trail, authorities said.

The area in the Sierra National Forest where the bodies were found on Tuesday had been treated as a hazmat site after concerns were raised about the deaths being linked to potentially toxic gases from old mines nearby.

But the hazmat declaration was lifted Wednesday, and Mariposa County Sheriff Jeremy Briese said he didn't believe the mines were a factor, the Fresno Bee reported Thursday.

"This is a very unusual, unique situation," said Kristie Mitchell, a spokesperson for the sheriff's office. "There were no signs of trauma, no obvious cause of death. There was no suicide note."

John Gerrish, his wife, Ellen Chung, their 1-year-old daughter, Miju, and their dog were all found dead on a hiking trail near Hite's Cove in the Sierra National Forest. A family friend had reported them missing Monday evening.

The area around Hite's Cove was the site of a hard rock gold mining operation in the mid-19th century.

The bodies were transported to the coroner's office in Mariposa for autopsies and toxicology exams, Mitchell said.

The State Water Resources Control Board said Thursday it was testing waterways in the area for any toxic algae blooms.

The couple were known to be avid hikers. Their friend, Mariposa real estate agent Sidney Radanovich, said Gerrish was a San Francisco-based software designer who, with his wife, "fell in love with the Mariposa area" and bought several homes there, a residence for themselves and rental investments.

"They were such a loving couple. They loved each other quite a bit," Radanovich told the San Francisco

Chronicle. "He loved showing the baby all sorts of things and explaining them to her."

The sheriff's office was investigating the deaths along with the California Department of Justice. Sheriff Jeremy Briese said chaplains and staff were counseling family members.

"My heart breaks for their family," he said.

The remote area where the bodies were found had no cellphone service, Mitchell said. The hiking trail ran through an area of forest known particularly in springtime to have spectacular wildflower displays.

Three senators test positive for COVID in breakthrough cases

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three senators said Thursday they have tested positive for COVID-19 despite being vaccinated, a high-profile collection of breakthrough cases that comes as the highly infectious delta variant spreads rapidly across the United States.

Sens. Angus King, I-Maine, Roger Wicker, R-Miss., and John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., all said they have tested positive for the virus. Almost every member of the Senate spent long hours together on the chamber's floor last week in an all-night session of budget votes before leaving town for August recess.

King said he began feeling feverish Wednesday and took a COVID test at his doctor's suggestion. "While I am not feeling great, I'm definitely feeling much better than I would have without the vaccine," King said.

Wicker's office said he tested positive for the virus Thursday morning.

"Senator Wicker is fully vaccinated against COVID-19, is in good health, and is being treated by his Tupelo-based physician," a statement from his staff read. "He is isolating, and everyone with whom Senator Wicker has come in close contact recently has been notified."

Hickenlooper announced his positive test a few hours later.

"I feel good but will isolate per docs instructions. I'm grateful for the vaccine (& the scientists behind it!) for limiting my symptoms," Hickenlooper tweeted. "If you haven't gotten your shot—get it today! And a booster when it's available too!"

The breakthrough cases emerged the day after U.S. health officials announced plans to dispense COVID-19 booster shots to Americans. They said the shots are needed to shore up their protection against the delta variant amid signs that the vaccines' effectiveness is waning over time.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. had announced Aug. 2 that he had tested positive for COVID-19 despite being vaccinated. "Sending best wishes for a speedy recovery to my good friends and colleagues," he tweeted Thursday.

"If you have not already done so please #GetVaccinated," Graham added.

Dozens of members of Congress have reported testing positive for COVID-19. Rep. Ron Wright, R-Texas, 67, died from the disease early this year while Rep.-elect Luke Letlow, R-La., 41, died in December before being sworn into office.

Chuck Close, artist of monumental grids, dies at 81

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Chuck Close, a painter, photographer and printmaker best known for his monumental grid portraits and photo-based paintings of family and famous friends, has died. He was 81.

His attorney, John Silberman, said Close died Thursday at a hospital in Oceanside, New York. He did not give a cause of death.

Close, whose professional highlights include a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1973, was known for using a grid structure for the representation of an image in nearly all of his works, which he said helped him break the face down into "incremental units."

Time consuming and labor intensive, he produced a plethora of paintings that dissect the human face of such luminaries as President Bill Clinton, composer Philip Glass and the artist himself.

His works have been displayed in museums, galleries and even the New York City subway.

In 2017, Close faced accusations of sexual harassment from some women who said he made inappro-

appropriate sexual comments when they had gone to his studio to potentially be models for him in prior years. He told The New York Times that he had spoken to the women about their bodies as part of evaluating them as models, and apologized for causing any discomfort.

Close, who had been diagnosed with dementia-related conditions in 2013, also had serious mobility issues after suffering a spinal artery collapse in 1988, requiring him to use a wheelchair.

In Close's work, the "pixilated" images "are filled with tiny abstract colored shapes, individual brushstrokes or even the artist's fingerprints. When viewed from a distance, the individual marks miraculously resolve into a surprisingly realistic face," the Akron Art Museum in Ohio said in describing Close's paintings and prints for an exhibition titled "Familiar Faces: Chuck Close in Ohio Collections."

Born in Monroe, Wisconsin, Close graduated from the University of Washington, Seattle, and received a MFA from Yale University.

He was married twice, both of which ended in divorce, and is survived by two daughters.

US struggles to speed Kabul airlift despite Taliban, chaos

By ROBERT BURNS, MATTHEW LEE, and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States struggled Thursday to pick up the pace of American and Afghan evacuations at Kabul airport, constrained by obstacles ranging from armed Taliban checkpoints to paperwork problems. With an Aug. 31 deadline looming, tens of thousands remained to be airlifted from the chaotic country.

Taliban fighters and their checkpoints ringed the airport — major barriers for Afghans who fear that their past work with Westerners makes them prime targets for retribution. Hundreds of Afghans who lacked any papers or clearance for evacuation also congregated outside the airport, adding to the chaos that has prevented even some Afghans who do have papers and promises of flights from getting through.

It didn't help that many of the Taliban fighters could not read the documents.

In a hopeful sign, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in Washington that 6,000 people were cleared for evacuation Thursday and were expected to board military flights in coming hours. That would mark a major increase from recent days. About 2,000 passengers were flown out on each of the past two days, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

Kirby said the military has aircraft available to evacuate 5,000 to 9,000 people per day, but until Thursday far fewer designated evacuees had been able to reach, and then enter, the airport.

Kirby told reporters the limiting factor has been available evacuees, not aircraft. He said efforts were underway to speed processing, including adding State Department consular officers to verify paperwork of Americans and Afghans who managed to get to the airport. Additional entry gates had been opened, he said.

And yet, at the current rate it would be difficult for the U.S. to evacuate all of the Americans and Afghans who are qualified for and seeking evacuation by Aug. 31. President Joe Biden said Wednesday he would ensure no American was left behind, even if that meant staying beyond August, an arbitrary deadline that he set weeks before the Taliban climaxed a stunning military victory by taking Kabul last weekend. It was not clear if Biden might consider extending the deadline for evacuees who aren't American citizens.

At the airport, military evacuation flights continued, but access remained difficult for many. 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. U.S. Navy fighter jets flew overhead, a standard military precaution but also a reminder to the Taliban that the U.S. has firepower to respond to a combat crisis.

There is no accurate figure of the number of people — Americans, Afghans or others — who are in need of evacuation as the process is almost entirely self-selecting. For example, the State Department says that when it ordered its nonessential embassy staff to leave Kabul in April after Biden's withdrawal announcement, fewer than 4,000 Americans had registered for security updates. The actual number, including dual U.S.-Afghan citizens along with family members, is likely much higher, with estimates ranging from 11,000 to 15,000. Tens of thousands of Afghans may also be in need of escape.

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Compounding the uncertainty, the U.S. government has no way to track how many registered Americans may have left Afghanistan already. Some may have returned to the United States but others may have gone to third countries.

At the Pentagon, Kirby declined to say whether Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had recommended to Biden that he extend the Aug. 31 deadline. Given the Taliban's takeover of the country, staying beyond that date would require at least the Taliban's acquiescence, he said. He said he knew of no such talks yet between U.S. and Taliban commanders, who have been in regular touch for days to limit conflict at the airport as part of what the White House has termed a "safe passage" agreement worked out on Sunday.

"I think it is just a fundamental fact of the reality of where we are, that communications and a certain measure of agreement with the Taliban on what we're trying to accomplish has to occur," Kirby said.

Of the approximately 2,000 people airlifted from the airport in the 24 hours ended Wednesday morning, nearly 300 were Americans, Kirby said. U.S. lawmakers were briefed Thursday morning that 6,741 people had been evacuated since Aug. 14, including 1,762 American citizens and Green Card holders, according to two congressional aides.

Although Afghanistan had been a hotspot for the coronavirus pandemic, the State Department said Thursday that evacuees are not required to get negative COVID-19 results.

"A blanket humanitarian waiver has been implemented for COVID-19 testing for all persons the U.S. government is relocating from Afghanistan," the department said. Medical exams, including COVID-19 tests, had been required for evacuees prior to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, which added extra urgency to efforts to get at-risk Afghans out.

Additional American troops continued to arrive at the airport. As of Thursday there were about 5,200, including Marines who specialize in evacuation coordination and an Air Force unit that specializes in emergency airport operations. Biden has authorized a total deployment of about 6,000.

Hoping to secure evacuation seats 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.

Will U.S. troops go beyond the airport perimeter to collect and escort people? Austin suggested on Wednesday that this was not currently feasible. "We don't have the capability to go out and collect large numbers of people," he told reporters.

Austin added 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 has complicated matters.

"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.

Boy Scouts get conditional approval of \$850M bankruptcy deal

By RANDALL CHASE Associated Press

DOVER, Del. (AP) — A bankruptcy judge on Thursday approved a proposal by the Boy Scouts of America to enter into an agreement that includes an \$850 million fund to compensate tens of thousands of men who say they were sexually abused as youngsters by Scout leaders and others.

But the judge also rejected two key provisions of the deal, potentially jeopardizing the agreement that the organization had been hoping to use as a springboard to emerge from bankruptcy later this year.

Following three days of testimony and arguments, Judge Laura Selber Silverstein granted the BSA's request to enter into an agreement involving the national Boy Scouts organization, roughly 250 local Boy Scout councils, and attorneys representing some 70,000 men who say they were sexually abused as youngsters decades ago while engaged in Boy Scout-related activities.

The agreement was opposed by insurers who issued policies to the Boy Scouts and local councils, attorneys representing thousands of other abuse victims, and various church denominations that have sponsored local Boy Scout troops.

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It was not immediately clear how Thursday's ruling will affect the future of the bankruptcy case, given that she rejected two significant provisions in the restructuring support agreement.

"Basically, everybody's going to have to go back to the drawing board," said Paul Mones, an attorney representing hundreds of abuse claimants. "I think this is going to cause a reset."

While ruling that BSA officials exercised proper business judgment as required under the law in entering into the agreement, the judge refused to grant a request that the Boy Scouts be allowed to pay millions in legal fees and expenses of attorneys hired by law firms that represent tens of thousands of abuse claimants.

Silverstein said she had several concerns about the fee request, including whether the ad hoc group called the Coalition of Abused Scouts for Justice is duplicating efforts by the official victims committee appointed by the U.S. bankruptcy trustee, and whether the coalition is making a substantial contribution to the case.

The judge also noted that coalition attorneys had emphasized last year that their legal fees would be paid by individual law firms they were representing, and that abuse claimants would not be responsible for those costs.

Silverstein said any payment of legal fees by the Boys Scouts, or by the victims fund, which was also contemplated in the agreement, "comes directly or indirectly out of their clients' pockets, and indeed the pockets of all abuse victims."

"Any funds diverted from abuse victims, especially to pay an obligation of their lawyers, needs to be closely examined," she said.

David Molton, an attorney for the coalition, said the group was pleased that Silverstein approved the agreement. He said it enables the coalition and its partners to procure settlements from insurers and sponsoring organizations that will bring in "additional billions of dollars" to compensate survivors.

Molton did not address Silverstein's denial of the fee arrangement with the Boy Scouts, which he described at a hearing earlier this week as "part and parcel" of the agreement.

Silverstein also denied the BSA's request under the agreement for permission to withdraw from an April agreement in which insurance company The Hartford would pay \$650 million into the fund for abuse claimants in exchange for being released from any further liability.

Silverstein said the Hartford settlement was a separate issue from the agreement, and that the BSA's attempt to use the agreement as a vehicle to back out of that deal was improper.

"You can't just roll up any relief you want and put it in a request to approve an (agreement)," she said. "... The request to determine debtor's obligations or, conversely, Hartford's damages, is not appropriate in this context."

A spokesperson for The Hartford said the company declined to comment.

Irwin Zalkin, an attorney for abuse claimants who opposed the agreement, said the judge "gutted" key conditions that supporters were hoping to "box her into."

"In my view the (agreement) has been rendered toothless," Zalkin said.

The Boy Scouts of America issued a statement describing the ruling as "an important development" in the case. The BSA also indicated that it would be submitting a court filing regarding the timing of a hearing that was scheduled to start Wednesday. The hearing is to determine whether the judge approves a disclosure statement that explains the Boy Scouts' reorganization plan to creditors. Approval of the disclosure statement is required before ballots can be sent to abuse claimants to vote on a plan.

The Boy Scouts, based in Irving, Texas, sought bankruptcy protection in February 2020 in an effort to halt hundreds of individual lawsuits and create a huge compensation fund for thousands of men who were molested as youngsters by scoutmasters or other leaders. Although the organization was facing 275 lawsuits at the time of the filing, it is now facing some 82,500 sexual abuse claims in the bankruptcy case.

Under the agreement, the Boy Scouts would contribute up to \$250 million in cash and property to a fund for victims of child sexual abuse. The local councils, which run day-to-day operations for Boy Scout troops, would contribute \$600 million. In addition, the national organization and local councils would transfer their rights to Boy Scout insurance policies to the victims fund. In return, they would be released from future liability for abuse claims.

Opponents of the deal argued that BSA officials failed to fully inform themselves or exercise proper busi-

ness judgment in entering into the agreement. They noted that the Boy Scouts board of directors never adopted a resolution approving the agreement, and that decision-making authority was delegated to an executive committee and a handful of people on a bankruptcy task force.

"Having reviewed the evidence, I conclude that debtors were sufficiently informed to make this decision," Silverstein said. "And while a specific (board) resolution would have been preferable, the evidence is clear that debtors approved the transaction."

"A court is particularly ill-suited to address strategic business decisions such as this one," the judge added. "Debtors may ultimately may be wrong in their assessment, but that is not the test of business judgment."

Afghan officer who fought with US forces rescued from Kabul

By ALEX SANZ and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Time was running out for Mohammad Khalid Wardak, a high-profile Afghan national police officer who spent years working alongside the American military.

Hunted by the Taliban, he was hiding with his family in Kabul, constantly moving from place to place as they tried — and failed — several times to reach a rendezvous point where they could be rescued.

After at least four attempts in as many days, the family finally was whisked away by helicopter Wednesday in a dramatic rescue — called Operation Promise Kept — carried out under cover of darkness by the U.S. military and its allies, 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.

The rescue of Khalid, as he's called by friends, came after frantic efforts by his supporters in the U.S. military, who said he was a brother in arms who helped save countless lives and faced certain death if found by the Taliban. They sought help from members of Congress and the Defense and State departments.

"I don't think people understand the chaos that is reigning right now in the capital, the brutality and the efficient lethality the Taliban are using ... to ensure their rise to power as they eliminate their greatest threat, which are these military and special police," said U.S. Army Special Forces Sgt. Major Chris Green, who worked with Khalid in Afghanistan.

Khalid and his family were unable to get inside the airport where the Taliban controlled the entrances. He was widely known because of his position as police chief in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province and from television appearances, including one in which he challenged the Taliban to a fight, supporters said.

Green said he was "incredibly happy ... elated," when he learned that Khalid and his family were safe, noting that some of his American rescuers had worked alongside Khalid, which he called "serendipitous."

McCreary said multiple allies, including the British, helped, and that Khalid, his wife and their four sons, ages 3 to 12, were "safe in an undisclosed location under the protection of the United States."

Officials said other Afghan partners, including police and military, also deserved to be saved and that more rescue efforts were in progress, but they could not discuss details.

Khalid's friends said he had no intention of leaving Afghanistan, and planned to stand with his countrymen to defend his homeland after U.S. forces were gone. But the government collapsed with stunning speed, and the president fled the country.

"He fought until he had nothing left to fight with," Green said. "He was wounded. He was surrounded. His forces were not being resupplied. And echelons above him in the government had already begun to make their exit plan ... and striking deals. So people like him who were fighting were left stranded, and they were left without support."

McCreary said Khalid originally sought protection only for his family while he kept fighting. Khalid and other fighters were completely surrounded by the Taliban last week and their location overrun, McCreary said.

When the Afghan government fell, that's when "we quickly changed gears to also work on getting him to safety."

At one point, rescuers lost contact with Khalid for several days, "and we all assumed that that he was killed," McCreary said. "Just last week, we thought it was over, and then we were just going to ... keep working harder to protect his family."

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Khalid's supporters said it would have been unthinkable to leave him behind after his years of partnership with Americans.

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's family has applied for refugee status in the U.S. based on fear of persecution, but it's unclear how long that process might take or if they will be approved. 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 said.

His supporters said it was most important to get them out of harm's way and then figure the rest out later. People who are top Taliban targets because of their work with U.S. forces deserve special consideration, McCreary said.

"No one wants to live with the guilt of turning our backs or not ... honoring our promises," McCreary said. That commitment and the collaboration it took to rescue Khalid "makes you proud to be an American."

Aid flows a bit more quickly into Haiti; challenges remain

By MARK STEVENSON and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Relief for the victims of a powerful earthquake and tropical storm began flowing more quickly into Haiti on Thursday, but the Caribbean nation's entrenched poverty, insecurity and lack of basic infrastructure were still presenting huge challenges to getting food and urgent medical care to all those who need it.

Private relief supplies and shipments from the U.S. government and others were arriving in the southwestern peninsula where the weekend quake struck, killing more than 2,100 people. But the need was extreme, made worse by the rain from Tropical Storm Grace, and people were growing frustrated with the slow pace.

Adding to the problems, a major hospital in the capital of Port-au-Prince, where many of the injured were being sent, was closed Thursday for a two-day shutdown to protest the kidnapping of two doctors, including one of the country's few orthopedic surgeons.

The abductions dealt a blow to attempts to control criminal violence that has threatened disaster response efforts in the capital.

Haiti's Civil Protection Agency late Wednesday raised the number of deaths from the earthquake to 2,189 and said 12,268 people were injured. More than 300 people are estimated to still be missing, said Serge Chery, head of civil defense for the Southern Province, which includes the hard-hit small port city of Les Cayes.

The magnitude 7.2 earthquake damaged or destroyed more than 100,000 homes, leaving about 30,000 families homeless, according to official estimates. Hospitals, schools, offices and churches also were demolished or badly damaged.

The U.S. aid effort has been building since the initial hours after the earthquake. On Thursday, 10 U.S. military helicopters ferried in search and rescue teams, medical workers and supplies that had been pre-positioned in Haiti by the U.S. Agency for International Development after the devastating 2010 earthquake.

A Navy ship, the USS Arlington, was expected to arrive this weekend, said Adm. Craig Faller, who over-

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sees the military response as commander of Miami-based U.S. Southern Command.

"We've got the momentum now," Faller said. "We've got the assets in place. We've figured out logistics."

The U.S. government is still working with Haitian authorities and others to determine the extent of the damage and casualties. Faller said a U.S. Geological Survey assessment projected there could be more than 10,000 deaths.

One of the U.S. helicopters landed Thursday in Les Cayes with equipment, medicine and volunteers, including some from the aid group Samaritan's Purse. Monte Oitker, a biomedical technician with the organization, said volunteers were prepared to operate a self-contained hospital unit, capable of handling a variety of orthopedic procedures.

Distributing aid to the thousands left homeless could be more challenging.

Chery said officials are hoping to start clearing sites where homes were destroyed to allow residents to build temporary shelters.

"It will be easier to distribute aid if people are living at their addresses, rather than in a tent," he said.

While some officials have suggested an end to the search for survivors so that heavy machinery can clear all of the rubble, Prime Minister Ariel 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," Henry said. "The country is physically and mentally destroyed."

Tension over the slow distribution of aid has become increasingly evident in the area hit hardest by Saturday's quake. At the small airport in Les Cayes, people thronged a perimeter fence Wednesday as aid was loaded into trucks and police fired warning shots to disperse a crowd of young men.

Angry crowds also massed at collapsed buildings in the city, demanding tarps to create temporary shelters after Grace's heavy rain. Also in Les Cayes, 22 prisoners escaped from the jail after the quake hit, said National Police spokeswoman Marie-Michelle Verrier.

International aid workers said hospitals in the worst-hit areas are mostly incapacitated, which is why many patients need to be moved to the capital for treatment. But reaching Port-au-Prince from the southwest is difficult under normal conditions because of poor roads and gangs along the route.

Even with a supposed gang truce following the earthquake, kidnapping remains a threat — underscored by the seizure of the two doctors working at the private Bernard Mevs Hospital in Port-au-Prince, where about 50 quake victims were being treated.

And another problem emerged in the quake-damaged southern provinces, where national police said villagers put up barricades on the roads to prevent aid from getting through, arguing that they need help too.

"For those people who are blocking roads at their leisure to stop it (aid) from getting through to the people, you need to wait until the aid comes to you," Verrier said. She said special police units would escort aid shipments.

So far, the U.S. military has found the roads it needs to be open and has encountered no security issues from gangs, Faller said in an interview with The Associated Press. The Arlington will come equipped not just with a surgical team to treat victims but a Marine Corps rapid reaction security force that will stay on the ship unless needed.

"They are an insurance policy, frankly," Faller said. "Marines are trained for that and they're trained for the appropriate use of force. And there's a deterrent value to having them in the area, as well. And we intend to be ready."

Jerry Chandler, the head of the national civil defense agency, said the Haiti National Police presence has also been "an important step to help us move the aid."

Chandler said his agency also has boats and helicopters "to bring aid and bring it quickly" to certain areas.

A group of 18 Colombian volunteer search-and-rescue workers had to be escorted out of the quake-hit city of Jeremie under police protection after a rumor circulated that they had been involved in the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moise. The workers took shelter Wednesday night at a civil defense office, and police escorted them to the airport on Thursday.

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Moise's killing, still unsolved, is suspected of being carried out by a group of Colombian mercenaries. Despite what happened to the Colombian rescue workers, Haiti is welcoming "everyone who is coming to bring assistance," Chandler said.

Henry said Wednesday that his administration will try not to "repeat history on the mismanagement and coordination of aid," a reference to the country's devastating 2010 earthquake, when the government and international partners struggled to channel help to the needy amid the widespread destruction and misery.

The Core Group, a coalition of key international diplomats from the U.S. 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."

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 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.

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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 Beach, 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.

Though "redneck" is often seen as a derogatory term referring to poor, white rural residents of the South, many residents of the "Redneck Riviera" have for decades commonly and proudly called their stretch of the Gulf coast by that name.

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."

2 dead, 20 missing in North Carolina county flooded by Fred

By BRYAN ANDERSON Associated Press/Report for America

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Authorities combing areas of North Carolina flooded by the remnants of Tropical Storm Fred said Thursday that two people have been found dead and about 20 were unaccounted for.

Meanwhile, Fred — now a post-tropical cyclone — was pushing through New York and New England with drenching rains, and Tropical Storm Henri was sending dangerous waves onto East Coast beaches. Forecasters said Henri will likely strengthen into a hurricane as it approaches the northeastern U.S. early next week.

In western North Carolina, Haywood County Emergency Services announced Thursday that two people were confirmed dead after the flooding that prompted dozens of water rescues. Their identities were not immediately released. Around 20 people remained missing. The storm that blew through the area Tuesday made roads impassible, washed out bridges and swamped homes and businesses.

Another Fred-related death was reported earlier in the week in Florida, where a driver hydroplaned and flipped his car into a flooded ditch.

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More than 200 people searched flooded areas along the Pigeon River. At least 10 bridges were damaged or destroyed in the Cruso community, where engineering teams worked to construct temporary bridges to allow people in and out of their homes.

"Our search crews are actively working, searching for more victims and more survivors," Travis Donaldson, emergency services director for Haywood County, said at a news conference.

Kevin Sandefur, CEO and founder of BearWaters Brewing Company in Canton, told reporters the flooding wiped out an outdoor seating section the brewery added to make customers feel safer during the pandemic.

"It was very frightening. I was more concerned for everybody's safety," he said. "My partner was the last one out of the building and barely made it out of here in his truck before they closed the bridges and the streets because it was up that high. It's very scary how quickly it came up and overwhelmed us."

An emergency shelter at a nearby high school housed 11 people Thursday.

North Carolina Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper surveyed flood damage Thursday afternoon, vowing afterward to help the area rebuild and noting: "'Storms are more ferocious than they were before. Climate change has contributed to that.'" Republican U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis toured the area earlier in the day.

Farther north, about 10 families evacuated their homes in the rural town of Western in central New York as waters rose.

"I've got three roads that are closed and 15 that have flooding," said Western town Supervisor Diane Butler, who noted the town is still recovering from a tornado last month that downed trees and damaged homes.

Butler said there were no injuries.

Officials from the Cayuga County sheriff's office in the Finger Lakes tourist region said they were barricading roads as they warned on social media that flooded roads may be washed out or have heavy currents.

Strong winds brought down trees, utility poles and power lines in northeastern Connecticut. Thompson, Connecticut First Selectman Amy St. Onge, the town's top elected official, said authorities were investigating reports of a possible tornado in the area around 10 a.m. No injuries were reported.

As of late Thursday morning, Fred was blowing through upstate New York with maximum sustained winds of about 25 mph (34 kph), according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center. Forecasters said it was expected to produce between 1 and 3 inches of rain (2.5-7.6 centimeters) across New York and New England, with isolated spots getting more. The flood threat was expected to diminish by Friday. Its center was about 50 miles (75 kilometers) west-northwest of Albany.

Swirling in the Atlantic was Tropical Storm Henri, which is expected to become a hurricane offshore late Friday along a path that will likely take it parallel to the East Coast. Its center was forecast to approach southern New England by Monday.

Democrats face new hurdles in legal fight over redistricting

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

The fight over redrawing political maps is just ramping up in state legislatures and nonpartisan commissions around the country. But both Republicans and Democrats already are planning for major showdowns in the courts.

For months, Democrats and Republicans have been laying the groundwork for a complex, 50-state legal battle over the once-a-decade process of redistricting. Both parties are preparing for a changed legal climate — where federal courts are newly hostile to claims of unconstitutional partisan gerrymandering and state courts could create a patchwork of rulings. And it will all play out in a tightened timeframe, thanks to pandemic-related delays.

Experts say that adds up a challenging landscape for Democrats, who have in the past won major court victories by proving Republicans deliberately used maps to disenfranchise Democratic voters. Some are predicting far fewer dramatic court interventions, despite plans for a more aggressive strategy.

"There will be a lot of litigation, but in a lot of ways the tools will be less sharp than they used to be," said Michael Li of the Brennan Center for Social Justice in New York City.

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Democrats began filing preemptive lawsuits in April, well ahead of last week's release of the Census' detailed population data used to draw the lines for Congress, statehouses and school districts around the country. Still, the most significant lawsuits are yet to come, and probably won't be filed until states begin to produce maps over the next few months.

After the 2010 redistricting cycle, courts eventually tossed out maps drawn by Republicans in four states. The courts found Republicans improperly used voters' race and party affiliations to draw lines that favored their candidates — a practice known as gerrymandering. The judges redrew the maps in Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas to give Democrats a better chance of winning congressional seats. Without that intervention, the GOP would currently control the House of Representatives.

But legal experts are skeptical there will be such dramatic reversals in court this time. They note that the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court has already cut off one avenue for legal challenges, ruling that striking down partisan gerrymanders is no longer the role of federal courts. That makes it less likely that courts intervene, experts said.

The one way the dynamic could change is if Congress passes an ambitious election bill known as the For the People Act, which would, among other provisions, outlaw partisan gerrymandering. But the legislation is stuck in the Senate, where Democrats have been reluctant to change rules to eliminate the 60-vote threshold needed to overcome a Republican filibuster blocking the measure.

The longer odds of litigation are particularly ominous for Democrats, who start the process at a significant disadvantage. They control line-drawing in states with 75 House seats, while the GOP controls the process in states with 187 seats.

Democrats "have a lot more incentive to litigate because they would have a lot more to gain," said Jason Torchinsky, general counsel to the National Republican Redistricting Trust.

Kelly Ward Burton, executive director of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, which coordinates litigation for that party, agreed that Democrats will be aggressive. "We fully anticipate being in court in the states where Republicans control the redistricting process and where they intend to gerrymander," she said.

Burton said she's not too concerned about the Supreme Court's 2019 ruling that federal courts cannot overturn partisan gerrymandering, because racial gerrymandering remains illegal under federal law. In the states Democrats are most worried about where the GOP controls the process — Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas — party affiliation often runs along racial lines, with Black, Latino and Asian American voters more likely to be Democratic and white voters more likely to be Republican.

But Li warned that's a double-edged sword. Democrats can argue Republican gerrymanders are racial, rather than partisan, but GOP lawyers can just tell judges they were following the Supreme Court's direction and looking only at party, not race. "The Supreme Court has created this weird binary — if it's on the racial side, it's bad, but if it's on the partisan side, it's okay," he said.

Republicans in the North Carolina legislature — who have complete control over the process because the state's Democratic governor cannot veto a redistricting bill — have already taken advantage of that dynamic by formally declaring they won't use racial data in drawing lines.

Tom Saenz, president of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, said he still expects there to be plenty of successful racial gerrymandering cases, especially because populations of voters of color swelled so significantly in the recent census data. The Voting Rights Act still requires the creation of majority-minority districts in areas where a compact legislative district could be drawn that way, and due to the continued growth of several racial and ethnic groups there are more of those places than ever before, Saenz said.

That won't always help Democrats — Saenz notes that, in some states like California, his group has fought with white Democrats over the creation of majority Latino districts. And he noted another obstacle — the tight timelines of redistricting this decade. The Census data used to draw the maps was released six months late due to COVID-19 and legal disputes over how the Trump administration ran the survey. That means courts may only have a few weeks to act before the 2022 elections formally kick off with deadlines to file

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to run in state primaries. Often, redistricting cases take months if not years to decide.

"We have to engage in triage," Saenz said. "In some cases we may have to allow an election to go by with bad lines."

Though several lawsuits have already been filed, they're mainly opening salvos trying to gain advantage before line-drawing begins in earnest. Democrats have sued in Louisiana, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, arguing that deadlock is inevitable between those states' GOP-controlled legislatures and Democratic governors, so courts need to get ready to draw lines. Republicans are filing public records requests to see if they can challenge the way the Census calculated people living in college dorms and other large residential areas.

Still, the only significant litigation so far has come in Illinois, where the Democratic-controlled state legislature redrew its own state maps without waiting for the Census data so as not to miss a legal deadline and have redistricting power handed to the courts. Republicans and civil rights group are suing to overturn those maps.

Though federal courts will no longer be able to strike down gerrymanders due to reliance on partisanship, state courts remain free to. The willingness of state judges to do that may depend on their party, legal analysts say. "It depends on who your state judges are," said Edward Foley, a law professor at The Ohio State University.

In the Southern states where redistricting legal battles are likely to run hottest, the state supreme courts are largely controlled by Republicans. Florida's was Democratic in the previous decade and overturned the GOP redistricting plan then, but it is now majority Republican. North Carolina's, once solidly Democratic, is now more evenly divided.

"Absent congressional action it's going to be a decade of extreme gerrymandering," Foley said. "I doubt that you'll get much judicial relief."

Taliban suppress more dissent as economic challenges loom

By AHMAD SEIR, TAMEEM AKHGAR, KATHY GANNON and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press
KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban violently dispersed scattered protests for a second day Thursday amid warnings that Afghanistan's already weakened economy could crumble further without the massive international aid that sustained the toppled Western-backed government.

The Taliban have sought to project moderation and say they want good relations with the international community, but they will face a difficult balancing act in making concessions to the West, satisfying their own hard-line followers and suppressing dissent.

A U.N. official warned of dire food shortages, and experts said the country was severely in need of cash, while noting that the Taliban are unlikely to enjoy the generous international aid that made up most of the ousted government's budget.

The Taliban have pledged to forgive those who fought them and to restore security and normal life to the country after decades of war. But many Afghans fear a return to the Taliban's harsh rule in the late 1990s, when the group largely confined women to their homes, banned television and music, chopped off the hands of suspected thieves and held public executions.

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. Video from another protest in Nangarhar province showed a bleeding demonstrator with a gunshot wound. 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 authorities did not immediately acknowledge the demonstration or the curfew.

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

The demonstrations — which came as people celebrated Afghan Independence Day and some commemorated the Shiite Ashoura festival — were a remarkable show of defiance after Taliban fighters vio-

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lently dispersed a protest Wednesday. At least one person was killed at that rally, in the eastern city of Jalalabad, after demonstrators lowered the Taliban's flag and replaced it with the tricolor.

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 joined with the U.S. during the 2001 invasion.

It was not clear how serious a threat they posed given that Taliban fighters 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 bringing food into the landlocked nation dependent on imports, she said that over 40% of the country's crop has been lost to drought. 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 are now open for trade. However, traders still fear insecurity on the roads and confusion over customs duties that could push them to price their goods higher.

Amid all the uncertainty and fears of Taliban rule, thousands of Afghans are fleeing the country.

At Kabul's international airport, military evacuation flights continued, but access to the airport remained difficult. On Thursday, Taliban fighters fired into the air to try to control the crowds gathered at the airport's blast walls.

After a chaotic start in which people rushed the runway and some clung to a plane taking off, the U.S. military is ramping up evacuations and now has enough aircraft to get 5,000 to 9,000 people out a day, Army Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor said Thursday.

President Joe Biden said 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.

In an interview with ABC's "Good Morning America," Biden said he thought the Taliban were going through an "existential crisis" about whether they wanted to be internationally recognized as a legitimate government. "I'm not sure they do," he said.

The Taliban have urged people to return to work, but most government officials remain in hiding or are themselves attempting to flee. The U.S. has apparently frozen Afghanistan's foreign reserves and shipments of dollars that help sustain the local currency, the afghani. The International Monetary Fund has cut off access to loans or other resources for now.

"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."

Smith, who has written a book on Afghanistan, said the Taliban are unlikely to ask for the same billions in international aid sought by the country's fallen civilian government — large portions of which were siphoned off by corruption.

The Taliban have long profited off the drug trade in Afghanistan, which is the world's top cultivator of the poppy from which opium and heroin are produced. The militants now have access to customs duties from the border crossings, which were the main source of domestic income for the previous government.

But 75% of the previous government's budget was covered by donor countries.

"It costs a lot less to run an insurgency than it does to run a government," said Laurel Miller, director of the Asia program at the Crisis Group, an international think tank. "The opium trade and the border crossings (are) not enough money to run a government, at least as it has been run in recent years."

The Taliban will struggle to make accommodations to the West while satisfying the ultraconservative Muslim fighters that brought them to power after a 20-year insurgency, with the latter likely being the priority, Miller said. Even a significant shift toward moderation might not be enough for Western countries to keep the aid flowing.

"How ready is Congress going to be to vote for development assistance for a Taliban government?" she said.

Allies embraced Biden. Did Kabul lay bare "great illusion"?

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Well before U.S. President Joe Biden took office early this year, the European Union's foreign policy chief sang his praises and hailed a new era in cooperation. So did almost all of Washington's Western allies.

The EU's Josep Borrell was glad to see the end of the Trump era, with its America First, and sometimes America Only policy, enthralled by Biden's assertion that he would "lead, not merely by the example of our power, but by the power of our example."

Sunday's collapse of Kabul, triggered by Biden's decision to get out of Afghanistan and a U.S. military unable to contain the chaos since, certainly put a stop to that. Even some of his biggest fans are now churning out criticism.

Borrell was among them, this time aghast at Biden's contention that "our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building," coming in the wake of Western efforts over much of the past two decades to sow the seeds of the rule of law and assure protection for women and minorities.

"State-building was not the purpose? Well, this is arguable," a dejected Borrell said of Biden's stance, which has come under criticism in much of Europe.

And for many Europeans steeped in soft power diplomacy to export Western democratic values, Biden's assertion that, "our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland," could have come from a Trump speech.

EU Council President Charles Michel underscored the different stances when he said in a tweet Thursday that the "rights of Afghans, notably women & girls, will remain our key concern: all EU instruments to support them should be used."

French Parliamentarian Nathalie Loiseau, a former Europe minister for President Emmanuel Macron, put the unexpected EU-Biden disconnect more bluntly: "We lived a little bit the great illusion," she said. "We thought America was back, while in fact, America withdraws."

It was no better in Germany, where a leading member of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right Union bloc, Bavaria Gov. Markus Soeder, called on Washington to provide funding and shelter to those fleeing Afghanistan, since "the United States of America bear the main responsibility for the current situation."

Even in the United Kingdom, which has always prided itself on its "special relationship" with Washington and now, more than ever, needs U.S. goodwill to overcome the impact of leaving the EU, barbs were coming from all angles.

Former British Army chief Richard Dannatt said, "the manner and timing of the Afghan collapse is the direct result of President Biden's decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11."

"At a stroke, he has undermined the patient and painstaking work of the last five, 10, 15 years to build up governance in Afghanistan, develop its economy, transform its civil society and build up its security forces," Dannatt said Wednesday in Parliament.

"The people had a glimpse of a better life — but that has been torn away."

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Biden has pointed to the Trump administration deal negotiated with the Taliban 18 months earlier in Doha, Qatar, which he says bound him to withdraw U.S. troops, as setting the stage for the chaos now engulfing the country.

Still, Biden putting much of the blame on Afghan forces for not protecting their nation has not gone down well with Western allies, either.

Conservative Parliament member Tom Tugendhat, who fought in Afghanistan, was one of several British lawmakers taking offense.

"To see their commander-in-chief call into question the courage of men I fought with, to claim that they ran, is shameful," Tugendhat said.

Chris Bryant, from the opposition Labour Party, called Biden's remarks about Afghan soldiers, "some of the most shameful comments ever from an American president."

In Prague this week, Czech president Milos Zeman said that, "by withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Americans have lost their status of global leader."

But despite all the criticism, there is no doing without the United States on the global stage. America remains vital to the Western allies in a series of other issues, in particular taking action against global warming.

After climate change disasters across much of the globe this year, the EU will be counting heavily on Biden to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in taking effective measures at the November COP26 global conference in Glasgow, Scotland, to speed up action to counter global warming.

Europe and Washington also have enough trade disagreements to settle to realize that despite the debacle of Afghanistan, there is much more that unites than divides them. A need for American power and help remains, even in Afghanistan.

Before Friday's meeting of NATO foreign ministers, some Alliance nations have acknowledged they will be pleading to Washington to stay even longer in Afghanistan than it will take to bring all U.S. citizens home, wanting to make sure their people get out too.

"We and a number of other countries are going to the Americans to say: 'Stay as long as possible, possibly longer than necessary,'" Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag said.

Afghan president latest leader on the run to turn up in UAE

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Afghanistan's president, driven out by the Taliban, is the latest leader on the run to turn up in the United Arab Emirates. Others who found refuge here include Spain's disgraced former king and two Thai prime ministers.

In nearby Qatar, meanwhile, the Taliban's political leaders have been given refuge for years.

Qatar and the UAE have much in common, despite their sharp political differences. The two Gulf Arab states have close security partnerships with the United States and both have taken in political fugitives and exiled leaders on the run.

The skylines of Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai offer an array of stunning high-rise towers and opulent five-star hotels. Man-made coastlines provide reclusive, palatial waterfront properties — plenty of options for political exiles looking for privacy and a place to park their money.

But most importantly, these cities built by vast underground reserves of oil and gas provide near-guaranteed security to controversial, once powerful figures. Iris-scanning technology at the airport, untold numbers of security cameras, and widespread surveillance helps ensure protection — as does an autocratic grip on power.

It's perhaps why Afghan President Ashraf Ghani surfaced in Abu Dhabi after the Taliban swept into Kabul on Sunday and why the Taliban's political leaders have for years resided in Qatar.

The UAE announced late Wednesday it had accepted hosting Ghani and his family, citing humanitarian grounds — even as members of his own government slammed the Afghan president for his escape from Kabul.

Over the past year, Qatar has hosted talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and before

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that, between the Taliban and the United States as Washington hashed out the terms of its withdrawal from Afghanistan and an end to its 20-year war. Top Taliban political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar returned to Afghanistan this week from his residence in Qatar.

The role the UAE and Qatar have played as hosts to wanted politicians and top figures gives them potential leverage — political chips that can be played or held for a later date.

“Qatar has positioned itself as the go-to mediator with the Taliban. It was a risky bet, especially considering the optics with the wider public, but it paid off,” said Cinzia Bianco, Gulf research fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

“Now, Qatar is well-positioned to be the first contact point for regional and international players who want to explore the possibility of engaging with the Taliban ... without compromising themselves,” she added.

The Taliban’s capture of Kabul was so swift that by nightfall the same day, gun-toting Taliban commanders were seated at Ghani’s desk in the presidential palace. Meanwhile, thousands of Afghan citizens and foreigners are still scrambling to flee the country.

Just this week, a senior U.S. military commander met face-to-face with the Taliban in Doha to negotiate the safe passage of thousands of people wanting to leave Afghanistan, underscoring the crucial role Qatar is playing amid the muddled U.S. exit.

The UAE and Qatar are also staging grounds for key U.S. military operations. Qatar’s al-Udeid Air Base hosts some 10,000 American troops. Americans also fly out of the al-Dhafra Air Base near Abu Dhabi.

“Each country is positioning itself in the best way possible to pursue its interests in this crisis,” said senior Mideast adviser at Crisis Group, Dina Esfandiary.

She says that while Qatar’s bet as “regional mediator” seems to have paid off, it remains to be seen how it will work out in the long term. For its part, the UAE aims to show its ally the United States that it too is a reliable partner, she said.

From his new base in the UAE, Ghani released a video statement Wednesday, for the first time since escaping Kabul. He made a point of mentioning he was forced to leave Afghanistan “with one set of traditional clothes, a vest and the sandals” he was wearing.

To live in the UAE, however, he’ll need a lot more than that. The country’s cost of living is as sky-high as its towers, even if some support is offered.

Afghanistan’s ambassador to Tajikistan accused Ghani on Wednesday of stealing \$169 million from state coffers and said he’d call for his arrest via Interpol. Russia’s embassy in Kabul alleged that Ghani fled Kabul with four cars and a helicopter full of cash. He had so much money he couldn’t fit it all, and left cash lying on the tarmac, Russia’s state news agency RIA Novosti quoted the embassy spokesperson as saying.

The AP could not independently verify the claims. The Western-backed Afghan government he presided over has long been rife with corruption.

Ghani joins a roster of high-profile exiles who’ve sought shelter in the UAE in past years. Some have resided in Abu Dhabi, others in the UAE’s commercial and tourism hub of Dubai.

Siblings and former Thai prime ministers, Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra — the former ousted in a military coup amid charges of corruption, the other fleeing a criminal conviction — are among them.

For years before her return to Pakistan where she was assassinated in 2007, so did ex-Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Another ex-Pakistani prime minister, Pervez Musharraf, maintains his base as Dubai. He was sentenced at home to death for treason, a sentence that a high Pakistani court later annulled.

Others include former Spanish King Juan Carlos, who is facing financial probe; Palestinian figure Mohammed Dahlan, who was banished by his party and sentenced to prison, and Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the eldest son of Yemen’s longtime leader who was also assassinated.

Record delta wave hits kids, raises fear as US schools open

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

The day before he was supposed to start fourth grade, Francisco Rosales was admitted to a Dallas hospital with COVID-19, struggling to breathe, with dangerously low oxygen levels and an uncertain outcome.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, thought his frightened mother, Yessica Gonzalez. Francisco was normally healthy and rambunctious. At 9, he was too young to get vaccinated, but most of the family had their shots. She had heard kids rarely got sick from the coronavirus.

But with the highly contagious delta variant spreading across the U.S., children are filling hospital intensive care beds instead of classrooms in record numbers, more even than at the height of the pandemic. Many are too young to get the vaccine, which is available only to those 12 and over.

The surging virus is spreading anxiety and causing turmoil and infighting among parents, administrators and politicians around the U.S., especially in states like Florida and Texas, where Republican governors have barred schools from making youngsters wear masks.

With millions of children returning to classrooms this month, experts say the stakes are unquestionably high.

Very high infection rates in the community "are really causing our children's hospitals to feel the squeeze," said Dr. Buddy Creech, a Vanderbilt University infectious disease specialist who is a helping lead research on Moderna's vaccine for children under 12. Creech said those shots probably won't be available for several months.

"I'm really worried," said Dr. Sonja Rasmussen, a pediatrician and public health expert at the University of Florida. "It's just so disappointing to see those numbers back up again."

While pediatric COVID-19 hospitalization rates are lower than those for adults, they have surged in recent weeks, reaching 0.41 per 100,000 children ages 0 to 17, compared with 0.31 per 100,000, the previous high set in mid-January, according to an Aug. 13 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, calls the spike in cases among children "very worrisome."

He noted that over 400 U.S. children have died of COVID-19 since the pandemic began. "And right now we have almost 2,000 kids in the hospital, many of them in ICU, some of them under the age of 4," Collins told Fox News on Sunday.

Health experts believe adults who have not gotten their shots are contributing to the surge among grownups and children alike. It has been especially bad in places with lower vaccination rates, such as parts of the South.

While it is clear the delta variant is much more contagious than the original version, scientists are not yet able to say with any certainty whether it makes people more severely ill or whether youngsters are especially vulnerable to it.

As experts work to answer those questions, many hospitals are reeling. Those in Texas are among the hardest hit. On Tuesday, they reported 196 children being treated with confirmed COVID-19. That compares with 163 during the previous peak, in December.

At Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, the nation's largest pediatric hospital, the number of youngsters treated for COVID-19 is at an all-time high, said Dr. Jim Versalovic, interim pediatrician-in-chief. In recent weeks, the vast majority have had delta infections, and most patients 12 and up have not had shots, he said.

"It is spreading like wildfire across our communities," he said.

At times this month, his hospital system has diagnosed 200 children with COVID-19 a day, with about 6% of them needing hospital care. On some days, the number of children in the hospital with COVID-19 has exceeded 45.

Versalovic said he suspects hospitalizations of children are up simply because so many are getting infected, not because the delta variant makes people more seriously ill.

At Children's Medical Center in Dallas, where Francisco is being treated, the number of patients with COVID-19 climbed from 10 during the week of July 4 to 29 during the week of Aug. 8.

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Francisco is improving and expected to recover, but his mother is worried and is considering home-schooling him. The virus "is really dangerous," she said.

The delta surge is yet another test for the nation's schools, which are dealing with students who fell behind academically as a result of remote learning or developed mental health problems from the upheaval.

Outbreaks have already occurred at reopened schools in the South that are facing resistance to mask-wearing.

In Texas, some school administrators are mandating masks in defiance of the governor and state Supreme Court. Among them is Michael Hinojosa of the Dallas school system, one of the state's largest districts.

"This delta variant is different, and the numbers are really significant in the county," he said. "We're going to continue our mask mandate to keep students safe, to keep parents safe, to keep families safe and most importantly our teachers, who are on those front lines."

Although dozens of students and staff have already been sickened by the virus since the Dallas district's 180 schools began reopening on Aug. 5, the numbers are far lower than when in-person learning resumed in the spring, Hinojosa said.

Knowing the toll the pandemic has taken on children, Hinojosa is determined to keep his schools open.

"We know they've been scarred by it," he said. "That's why they need to be back with their friends and teachers."

In DeSoto, a Dallas suburb, schools are also requiring masks, and Superintendent D'Andre Weaver said there has been no pushback from parents, perhaps, he added, because many are Black and know their community was hit hard earlier in the pandemic. Some considered keeping their children home because of the governor's opposition to school mask requirements, Weaver said.

As a parent and an administrator, Weaver said the delta surge "is a major concern, it's a major frustration. It's a big fear."

His own two girls started first and second grade this week, and the first thing he has been asking when he picks them up after school is "How do you feel? Do you have a sore throat?" Weaver said. "I know many parents are in the same boat."

While he knows many children suffered during virtual learning last year, Weaver said, "We have no choice but to prepare that as an option."

Booming Colo. town asks, 'Where will water come from?'

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

GREELEY, Colo. (AP) — "Go West, young man," Horace Greeley famously urged.

The problem for the northern Colorado town that bears the 19th-century newspaper editor's name: Too many people have heeded his advice.

By the tens of thousands newcomers have been streaming into Greeley — so much so that the city and surrounding Weld County grew by more than 30% from 2010 to 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, making it one of the fastest-growing regions in the country.

And it's not just Greeley.

Figures released this month show that population growth continues unabated in the South and West, even as temperatures rise and droughts become more common. That in turn has set off a scramble of growing intensity in places like Greeley to find water for the current population, let alone those expected to arrive in coming years.

"Anything we can do to protect our safe water supply is so important," said Dick Maxfield, who has lived in Greeley for nearly 60 years and watched the population nearly quadruple to nearly 110,000, as new arrivals attracted to relatively low housing prices flock to the city 55 miles (85 kilometers) north of Denver and its mix of jobs in energy, health care and agriculture, including a major meat-packing plant.

The dual challenges of population growth and water scarcity are made worse by climate change, said Lisa Dilling, an environmental studies professor at the University of Colorado and director of the Western Water Assessment research program.

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"Everybody looks at the population growth and says, 'Where is the water going to come from?'" Dilling said. "We can still have growth, but we have to make sure we're thinking ahead. We need to manage the water efficiently and mindfully."

As a climate change-fueled megadrought engulfs the American West, some communities are going to extremes to protect their water supplies.

In Oakley, Utah, about 45 miles (72 kilometers) east of Salt Lake City, officials imposed a construction moratorium on new homes that would connect to the town's overburdened water system.

Thornton, Colorado, meanwhile, is fighting legal challenges as it builds a 72-mile pipeline to bring water from a river near Fort Collins to the suburb north of Denver. Crews have started work in northern Colorado with no assurance it will ever be finished.

"If anything stops that burgeoning growth, it will be the lack of water. It's a limited resource," said Dick Jefferies, leader of a northern Colorado chapter of the conservation group Trout Unlimited.

Water has long been a source of pride for Greeley, which was founded in 1870 at the confluence of two rivers, the Cache la Poudre and South Platte. The New York Tribune, Horace Greeley's newspaper, played a key role in forming what was intended as a utopian, agrarian colony.

The city established its water rights in 1904 and completed its first water treatment facility near the Poudre River three years later, a system still largely in place.

Like other cities in Colorado's highly populated Front Range, Greeley gets its water in part from the Colorado River and other rivers that are drying up amid the prolonged drought. This week, federal officials declared the first-ever water shortage on the Colorado, triggering mandatory cuts from a river that serves 40 million people in the West.

In Greeley, the cost of new taps, or connections, to the city's water supply is rising exponentially. "It's like bitcoin," one official jokes — the city believes it has ensured its water supply for decades to come.

The City Council unanimously approved a deal this spring to acquire an aquifer 40 miles (64 kilometers) to the northwest, providing 1.2 million acre-feet of water. That's enough to meet the city's needs for generations, while offering storage opportunities for dry years. The water from the Terry Ranch aquifer near the Wyoming border will not become the primary source of drinking water, but will be a backup source in dry years.

In exchange for the aquifer — and a \$125 million payment to the city for infrastructure — Greeley will issue the site's former owner, Wingfoot Water Resources, raw water credits that the firm can sell to developers to connect new homes to the city's water supply.

"In essence, Greeley is trading future revenue for water supplies today," Adam Jokerst, deputy director of the city's Water and Sewer Department, said in an interview.

Wingfoot Vice President Kevin Ross called the deal "a great answer for the city of Greeley" to combat drought and ensure long-term water supply.

But opponents call the deal a giveaway to a local investment firm and charge that naturally occurring uranium in the aquifer poses a safety hazard. Save Greeley's Water, a citizens group opposing the purchase, said uranium levels in the aquifer are significantly above federal safety standards.

The city counters that tests show it can remove uranium and other contaminants to levels well below federal drinking water standards. While he understands the concerns, Jokerst said uranium is commonly found — and removed — in water throughout the West.

"Greeley would never deliver unsafe drinking water to its residents, including any water that had detectable uranium," he said.

John Gauthiere, a former city water engineer who leads the citizens' group opposed to the aquifer, is skeptical. "Maybe they're as wrong as Flint, Michigan," he said.

Gauthiere also worries that higher costs will be passed on to residents. "You should never sell water rights that belong to the people," he said.

The citizens' group is petitioning for a ballot initiative that would require a citywide vote before a sale, exchange or use of municipal water resources. The city clerk's office has until Aug. 23 to validate the 4,200 signatures submitted and force an election in November. While the ballot measure would not block the

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Terry Ranch deal, it could limit the city's ability to use the ranch water or other groundwater resources, city officials said.

City residents are split on the project.

Aimee Hutson, owner of Aunt Helen's Coffee House in downtown Greeley, favors the deal.

"Why would anybody on the water board do something that was dangerous for the citizens of Greeley?" she asked. "They live here, too. They're raising their families here, too."

But Greeley resident Sandi Cummings said city officials had not done enough testing. "This is so upsetting that we are even considering this," she said.

The city had little choice but to pursue the aquifer deal after a long-planned expansion of its existing reservoir was abandoned several years ago, Jokerst and other officials said. The expansion would have required a new dam costing up to \$500 million, and federal permits were difficult to obtain, in part because of concerns it would damage the habitat of the Preble's meadow jumping mouse, which lives in the area and is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

After spending \$19 million over more than a decade, "we were basically told we would not be able to get the reservoir (expansion) permitted. It was just not going to be a viable option," said Roy Otto, Greeley's longtime city manager until his retirement this month.

"I believe that providing a secure, safe drinking water source will be the key, not only to Greeley, but to Northern Colorado's future," Otto said.

"We know people are going to be coming to Greeley," Jokerst said. "We have a supply of land. Now we have water. We have all the ingredients for developers to build here."

Jeff Lukas, a water and climate analyst in nearby Boulder County, said municipalities rarely use an underground water source so far from city limits. While confident that officials have "done their homework," Lukas said the project still poses a risk because of the distance from Greeley and possible contaminants in the aquifer, which extends 1,200 feet underground.

"Any aquifer estimate is an inexact science," Lukas said.

River hydrologist Jeff Crane is skeptical the aquifer will be the long-term solution Greeley expects. Having worked on water projects throughout Colorado, a state that has doubled in population since 1980 and tripled since 1960, he sees the prospects for meeting new water needs diminishing rapidly.

"They're trying to figure out how to continue to grow on the Front Range without more water," he said. "Something's gotta give."

Analysis: Twin tragedies, and the strings that pull them

By NIKO PRICE Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Twin tragedies on opposite sides of the world are piling misery on people who have seen far more than their share.

In Afghanistan, a group of gunmen known for sadistic tyranny rocketed back into power after 20 years as Western and Afghan leaders walked away with a sad shrug. In Haiti, yet another earthquake and yet another storm struck a country exceptionally ill-equipped to handle either.

On the face of it, little links the two catastrophes. One can easily be blamed on geopolitics and an unwinnable war, the other on motion in the Earth's crust and troposphere.

And yet these assaults on the usual suspects are deeply connected. They are unfolding in two nations that, as the planet strains with stressors both natural and willful, sit at the fault lines of everything that the 21st-century world struggles to control.

Once more, some of the world's least fortunate people have become even less so. And whether the catalyst is war or weather, the suffering in both places is rooted in two all-too-human syndromes: poverty and corruption.

That's no accident. Both Afghanistan and Haiti have been invaded and occupied by Western powers for great parts of their histories, and both have suffered under corrupt governments propped up by the self-interest of Western nations. The United States, for one, has done both things to both countries.

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As much as the West would like to ignore the fact, both countries are victims of power dynamics and unabashed greed that have stacked the cards against them. The fact that neither has a functioning government able to help them in their time of need is a direct consequence of "Great Games" played by other nations for money and influence.

This predicament should sound a warning siren in a world ravaged by extreme weather, viral infection, religious intolerance and political opportunism. Fundamental inequalities in the availability of food, water, medicine and education mean that people unlucky enough to be born outside of privilege have few opportunities to change their place in the world.

Haiti embodies this. Afghanistan, too. The most vulnerable are usually the first to fall, and falling they are.

In Afghanistan — invaded by everyone from the Greeks and the Mongols to the Soviet Union and a US-led NATO operation — they fell across the past half century. They fell when the Soviets came in 1979, when the Taliban first came in 1996, when the U.S.-led coalition displaced them in 2001 and again when they returned this week.

In Haiti — which endured a two-decade U.S. occupation from 1915 and U.S.-backed dictators for most of its history since — they continue to fall under crushing poverty, political chaos and natural disasters, including a devastating 2010 earthquake.

Can these well-carved paths be altered? Is there a chance that people in places like Afghanistan and Haiti can forge a different way forward? Many on the ground doubt it.

In a lifetime of reporting in some of the world's least favored nations, I have come across hope in the unlikelyst of places: in El Salvador, where three boys took a break from picking through a landfill to wrestle and laugh; in Iraq, where a merchant marine captain dipped in nitric acid for his political opinions dreamed of telling his story in court; in southern Mexico, where a young man sneaking northward hoped to find out why his father had died in a Texas detention center (suicide, he would later learn).

But hope has been especially elusive in these two places, whose new disasters seem to confirm people's lack of faith that somehow, someday, things might get better.

In Afghanistan in 2002, after the 9/11 attacks and the tectonic shifts they brought to a nation already accustomed to a generation of war, 12-year-old Hamida was picking through rotting vegetables by the roadside to feed her 10-member family.

"Under the Taliban, under the new government, it's the same," she whispered, hiding her face behind a mud-caked shawl. "I can't imagine anything will ever change."

In Haiti in 1998, on the heels of a hurricane that had devastated large parts of the country, a young man in a squatter camp saw little reason to dream of anything better.

"Every day I wake up and put water on my face. I look in the mirror, and I see nothing," said Fritzner Midil, then 24.

At the time, I found Hamida's resignation and Midil's despondency hard to bear. Surely, I thought, things can only get better from here.

Two decades later, Haiti has suffered more hurricanes, more earthquakes, and more U.S. intervention. The Taliban have reversed their 2001 defeat, sweeping into Kabul triumphantly this week with a new generation of young militants at their resurgent core and a promise of inclusivity that no one is certain they will keep.

And I wonder what Hamida and Midil think of all this. I wonder whether Hamida went to school, started a family, built a life. And Midil? I wonder what he sees in the mirror today.

Landlords look for an exit amid federal eviction moratorium

By MICHAEL CASEY and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When Ryan David bought three rental properties back in 2017, he expected the \$1,000-a-month he was pocketing after expenses would be regular sources of income well into his retirement years.

He also was counting on the rent money from the properties in Dupont, Pennsylvania, to help with the cash flow of his business buying and selling distressed properties, launched early last year.

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But then the pandemic hit and federal and state authorities imposed moratoriums on evictions. The unpaid rent began to mount. Then, just when he thought the worst was over, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced a new moratorium, lasting until Oct. 3. A federal judge dismissed a legal challenge to the order last week.

David, the father of a 2 1/2-year-old who is expecting another child, fears the \$2,000 he's owed in back rent will quickly climb to thousands more.

The latest moratorium "was the final gut punch," said the 39-year-old, adding that he now plans to sell the apartments. "I have had this internal struggle going back and forth. I have lost sleep at night, and I have now come up with a decision to sell and walk away."

Most evictions for unpaid rent have been halted since the early days of the pandemic and there are now more than 15 million people living in households that owe as much as \$20 billion in back rent, according to the Aspen Institute.

A majority of single-family rental home owners have been impacted, according to a survey from the National Rental Home Council, and 50% say they have tenants who have missed rent during the pandemic.

Smaller landlords with fewer than four units, who often don't have the financing of larger property owners, were hit especially hard, with as many as 58% having tenants behind on rent, according to the National Association of Realtors. More than half of back rent is owed to smaller landlords.

Landlords, big and small, are most angry about the moratoriums, which they consider illegal. Many believe some tenants could have paid rent, if not for the moratorium. And the \$47 billion in federal rental assistance that was supposed to make landlords whole has been slow to materialize. By July, only \$3 billion of the first tranche of \$25 billion had been distributed.

David points to two tenants who received paychecks throughout the pandemic but didn't pay rent or bother to file for rental assistance. Others singled out delinquent tenants who they claimed still managed to drive a luxury car, get food deliveries or go on vacation.

"Without rent, we're out of business," said Gary Zaremba, who sold 40 of his properties in Ohio due to the moratorium and still has a quarter of his tenants in the remaining 100 buildings struggling to pay rent. He has helped some apply for rental assistance, he said.

"It's like a restaurant that doesn't have patrons," he said. "I don't get the rent. I can't pay my maintenance staff. I have to lay them off. I can't fix the buildings and keep them in good repair. So, that means they are going to get even worse off. I can't pay my taxes."

Zaremba, who also owns a handful of properties in New York City, sold some of his single-family homes to home buyers and some multi-family commercial apartment buildings to small investors.

Many landlords are saddled with tens of thousands of dollars in lost rent — money that was meant for retirement, a college fund or for their investors, who themselves had sought a safe investment. They are maxing out credit cards or dipping into savings to pay property taxes, staff salaries, insurance, water bills and maintenance.

"I keep thinking to myself, when does my family get paid?" said Matthew Haines, who owns 253 units with his wife in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and is owed more than \$300,000 in back rent. He has referred \$250,000 of that to collections.

The couple put in \$50,000 of their own money to avoid laying off their seven full-time and three part-time employees. Haines is also doing repairs like fixing an air conditioning unit or changing a pool light himself to save money. Their investors, retirees who typically get an annual return of 7% to 9%, got nothing last year on two multifamily apartments and 3% on a third one because of unpaid rent.

"We jumped through hoops to help our residents who were struggling. We have not evicted a single person trying to work with us, even though we have people who owe us seven, eight, nine months of rent," he said. "We are trying to do the right thing but it's becoming impossible."

In upstate New York, Michael Reid sold three of his houses to stem losses — after paying some delinquent tenants thousands of dollars to leave. Already out more than \$100,000 in back rent on 13 of his 31 units and more than \$20,000 in unpaid water bills, Reid took out a \$90,000 home equity loan on his

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house so he could pay property taxes and other bills. On Tuesday, he finally received \$9,000 in federal rental assistance, a fraction of what he's owed.

"I've lost an incredible amount of money on top of the rent owed," said Reid, who also works as a mortgage loan officer, referring to his delinquent tenants in Binghamton and Endicott, New York. "Thank God, my day job pays pretty well."

Some owners are taking advantage of a red-hot housing market to sell their units to deep-pocketed investors willing to wait out the moratorium or to families who plan to live in them. Buyers are increasingly out-of-town investors or equity funds, whom critics fear will renovate the properties and market them at much higher prices.

"A lot of landlords are disgusted. They are selling at losses. They are getting out period," Reid said of the dozens of investors he talks with.

Even those sticking with the property business say the moratorium has forced them to change their operations.

Some are leaving apartments vacant for months at a time, either because they lack the money to renovate or fear being stuck with nonpaying tenants. Some aren't buying any new properties as long as the moratorium is in place; others will only buy in wealthier neighborhoods.

Still others are bolstering their screening process and giving extra scrutiny to someone who was unemployed for long stretches during the pandemic or saddled their previous landlord with months of back rent.

"If somebody stiffed their previous landlord out of 12, 15 or 18 months rent, I don't want to rent to them," Reid said.

This could result in fewer places to live for low-income tenants facing eviction when the moratorium lifts.

"It makes it worse for everyone. It's worse for tenants, in particular, because we are going to lose affordable housing," said Stacey Johnson-Cosby, who with her husband owns 21 units in the Kansas City, Missouri, area.

"The investors are going to come. They are going to buy the property, put money into it, renovate it and rent it at a higher amount."

Rick Martin anguished over just that before selling two of his five buildings in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. Before that the 62-year-old left most of them vacant due to the moratorium, depriving him of thousands of dollars in rent.

"The minute they enacted the moratorium, that triggered my decision to sell the properties," Martin said. "I did not want someone moving in whom I could never get rid of if they didn't pay rent. That would make the financial situation worse."

Martin said he was torn about the decision to sell to investors. One has turned a building into condos. Another has already doubled the rent on a three-family building.

"Honestly it's a very difficult decision," he said. "I want the small property owners to flourish and grow. But because of this moratorium, we are having everything cut out from beneath us."

Was Biden handcuffed by Trump's Taliban deal in Doha?

By MATTHEW LEE and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As President Donald Trump's administration signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, he optimistically proclaimed that "we think we'll be successful in the end." His secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, asserted that the administration was "seizing the best opportunity for peace in a generation."

Eighteen months later, President Joe Biden is pointing to the agreement signed in Doha, Qatar, as he tries to deflect blame for the Taliban overrunning Afghanistan in a blitz. He says it bound him to withdraw U.S. troops, setting the stage for the chaos engulfing the country.

But Biden can go only so far in claiming the agreement boxed him in. It had an escape clause: The U.S. could have withdrawn from the accord if Afghan peace talks failed. They did, but Biden chose to stay in it, although he delayed the complete pullout from May to September.

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Chris Miller, acting defense secretary in the final months of the Trump administration, chafed at the idea that Biden was handcuffed by the agreement.

"If he thought the deal was bad, he could have renegotiated. He had plenty of opportunity to do that if he so desired," Miller, a top Pentagon counterterrorism official at the time the Doha deal was signed, said in an interview.

Renegotiating, though, would have been difficult. Biden would have had little leverage. He, like Trump, wanted U.S. troops out of Afghanistan. Pulling out of the agreement might have forced him to send thousands more back in.

He made that point Monday, saying in a televised address from the White House that he would not commit to sending more American troops to fight for Afghanistan's future while also harkening back to the Trump deal to suggest that the withdrawal path was predetermined by his predecessor.

"The choice I had to make, as your president, was either to follow through on that agreement or be prepared to go back to fighting the Taliban in the middle of the spring fighting season," Biden said.

The Taliban takeover, far swifter than officials from either administration had envisioned, has prompted questions from even some Trump-era officials about whether the terms and conditions of the deal — and the decisions that followed after — did enough to protect Afghanistan once the U.S. military pulled out.

The historic deal was always high-wire diplomacy, requiring a degree of trust in the Taliban as a potential peace partner and inked despite skepticism from war-weary Afghans who feared losing authority in any power-sharing agreement.

"The Doha agreement was a very weak agreement, and the U.S. should have gained more concessions from the Taliban," said Lisa Curtis, an Afghanistan expert who served during the Trump administration as the National Security Council's senior director for South and Central Asia.

She called it "wishful thinking" to believe that the Taliban might be interested in lasting peace. The resulting agreement, she said, was heavily weighted toward the Taliban, contributed to undermining Afghan President Ashraf Ghani — he fled the country Sunday and is now in the United Arab Emirates — and facilitated the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners without a commensurate concession from the Taliban.

"They wanted U.S. forces out, and they wanted to take over the country militarily, and they believed that they could do that," Curtis said of the Taliban. "That was just crystal clear."

The agreement called for the U.S. to bring down its forces to 8,600 from 13,000 over the following three to four months, with the remaining U.S. forces withdrawing in 14 months, or by May 1.

Biden, in an ABC interview that aired Thursday, said he was confronted with that deadline soon after taking office: "Do I say we're staying? And do you think we would not have to put a hell of a lot more troops?" Even without Trump's deal, Biden said he "would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops" and that "there is no good time to leave Afghanistan."

The agreement stipulated commitments the Taliban were expected to make to prevent terrorism, including obligations to renounce al-Qaida and prevent that group or others from using Afghan soil to plot attacks on the U.S. or its allies. Though the agreement bound the Taliban to halt attacks on U.S. and coalition forces, it did not explicitly require them to expel al-Qaida or to stop attacks on the Afghan military.

The agreement provided significant legitimacy to the Taliban, whose leaders met with Pompeo, the first secretary of state to have such interactions. There were also discussions of them coming to the U.S. to meet with Trump.

Still, Trump spoke cautiously about the deal's prospects for success, warning of military firepower if "bad things happen." Pompeo similarly said the U.S. was "realistic" and "restrained," determined to avoid endless wars.

U.S. officials made clear at the time that the agreement was conditions-based and the failure of intra-Afghan peace talks to reach a negotiated settlement would have nullified the requirement to withdraw.

One day before the Doha deal, a top aide to chief U.S. negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad said the agreement was not irreversible, and "there is no obligation for the United States to withdraw troops if the Afghan parties are unable to reach agreement or if the Taliban show bad faith" during negotiations.

Those negotiations were intended to begin within a month of the deal being signed but were delayed amid disputes between the Taliban and the Afghan government over prisoner releases. Amid fits and starts, the negotiations had not produced any outcome by the time Biden announced his withdrawal decision in April. Nor have they done so since.

Miller said it was the "right approach" and necessary to force Ghani into negotiations. He said the Doha deal was always supposed to be "phase one" of the process, with the next part being the U.S. using its leverage to have Ghani negotiate on a power-sharing deal with the Taliban.

"Obviously, he was not jazzed by that, but he was going to do it — or he was going to be removed," Miller said. "We were going to put some serious pressure on him to make him cut a deal with the Taliban."

In hindsight, though, said Curtis, the U.S. should not have entered the Doha talks "unless we were prepared to represent the Afghan government's interests. It was an unfair negotiation, because nobody was looking out for the interests of the Afghan government."

US jobless claims hit a pandemic low as hiring strengthens

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of people seeking unemployment benefits fell last week for a fourth straight time to a pandemic low, the latest sign that America's job market is rebounding from the pandemic recession as employers boost hiring to meet a surge in consumer demand.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that jobless claims fell by 29,000 to 348,000. The four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week volatility, also fell — by 19,000, to just below 378,000, also a pandemic low.

The weekly pace of applications for unemployment aid has fallen more or less steadily since topping 900,000 in early January. The dwindling number of first-time jobless claims has coincided with the widespread administering of vaccines, which has led businesses to reopen or expand their hours and drawn consumers back to shops, restaurants, airports and entertainment venues.

Still, the number of applications remains high by historic standards: Before the pandemic tore through the economy in March 2020, the weekly pace amounted to around 220,000 a week. And now there is growing concern that the highly contagious delta variant could disrupt the economy's recovery from last year's brief but intense recession. Some economists have already begun to mark down their estimates for growth this quarter as some measures of economic activity, like air travel, have started to weaken.

Filings for unemployment benefits have traditionally been seen as a real-time measure of the job market's health. But their reliability has deteriorated during the pandemic. In many states, the weekly figures have been inflated by fraud and by multiple filings from unemployed Americans as they navigate bureaucratic hurdles to try to obtain benefits. Those complications help explain why the pace of applications remains comparatively high.

By all accounts, the job market has been rebounding with vigor since the pandemic paralyzed economic activity last year and employers slashed more than 22 million jobs. The United States has since recovered 16.7 million jobs. And employers have added a rising number of jobs for three straight months, including a robust 943,000 in July. In the meantime, employers have posted a record 10.1 million openings, and many complain that they can't find enough applicants to fill their open positions.

Last week's drop in applications for aid was larger than many economists had expected, a sign that the job market's recovery remains on track for now despite the worries surrounding the spread of the delta variant.

"As life normalizes and the service sector continues to gain momentum (delta variant permitting), we expect initial jobless claims to remain in a downtrend," Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the consulting firm Maria Fiorini Ramirez, said in a research note.

Shapiro added that "this report points to a continued rapid pace of job gains since the July employment data were collected."

Some employers ascribe their labor shortages to supplemental unemployment benefits from the federal

government — including \$300 a week on top of regular state aid — for discouraging some of the jobless from seeking work. In response, many states have withdrawn from the federal programs, which expire nationwide next month anyway.

Economists point to other factors, too, that have kept some people on the sidelines of the job market. They include difficulty finding or affording child care, fear about becoming infected by the virus at work and the desire of some people to seek better jobs than they had before the pandemic triggered widespread layoffs.

Whatever the causes, the economy remains 5.7 million jobs shy of the number it had in February 2020. And with the U.S. recording an average of more than 100,000 new COVID-19 cases a day — up from fewer than 12,000 in late June — the delta variant is increasingly clouding the outlook for the rest of the year.

Just over 2.8 million people were receiving traditional state jobless benefits in the week of Aug. 7, down by 79,000 from the previous week and the lowest since the pandemic struck.

Including federal benefits, 11.7 million were receiving some type of unemployment benefits in the week of July 31, down from 28.7 million a year earlier. That drop is a result, in part, of the increased number of people working and no longer receiving jobless aid. But it also reflects the cancellation in many states of a federal unemployment aid program for the self-employed and a separate program for the long-term jobless.

Biden: Greater threats than Taliban-controlled Afghanistan

By ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden says even with the Taliban in power in Afghanistan, he sees a greater threat from outposts of al-Qaida and its affiliated groups in other countries, and that it was no longer “rational” to continue to focus U.S. military power there.

“We should be focusing on where the threat is the greatest,” Biden said in an interview that aired on ABC’s “Good Morning America” Thursday.

“And the idea we can continue to spend a trillion dollars, and have tens of thousands of American forces in Afghanistan, when we have North Africa and Western Africa — the idea we can do that and ignore those looming problems, growing problems, is not rational.”

Biden has said repeatedly that America will not send significantly more forces to fight in Afghanistan. The U.S. has not had tens of thousands there for several years and had 2,500 to 3,000 deployed there when Biden took office.

Biden named Syria and East Africa as places where the Islamic State group poses a “significantly greater threat” than in Afghanistan and said that ISIS has “metastasized.” He said while the U.S. doesn’t have a sizable military presence in a place like Syria, it does have an “over the horizon capability to take them out.”

The comments come as the Biden administration has faced sharp criticism for the timing and direction of the Afghanistan withdrawal, after the Taliban came to power more quickly than administration officials predicted. The swift takeover by the Taliban prompted scenes of chaos and violence as thousands of Afghans and Americans sought to flee the country.

Biden also pushed back against concerns about the treatment of women and girls in the country, arguing that it’s “not rational” to try to protect women’s rights around the globe through military force. Instead, it should be done through “diplomatic and international pressure” on human rights abusers to change their behavior.

Up to 15,000 Americans remain in Afghanistan after the Taliban took full control of the nation last weekend. Biden said during the same interview that he’s committed to keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan until every American is evacuated, even if that means maintaining a military presence beyond his Aug. 31 deadline for withdrawal.

Pressed repeatedly on how the administration would help Americans left in the nation after Aug. 31, Biden said, “If there’s American citizens left, we’re gonna stay till we get them all out.”

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said earlier Wednesday that the U.S. military does not have the forces

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and firepower in Afghanistan to expand its current mission from securing the Kabul airport to collecting Americans and at-risk Afghans elsewhere in the capital and escorting them for evacuation.

The question of whether those seeking to leave the country before Biden's deadline should be rescued and brought to the airport has arisen amid reports that Taliban checkpoints have stopped some designated evacuees.

"I don't have the capability to go out and extend operations currently into Kabul," Austin said. "And where do you take that? How far do you extend into Kabul, and how long does it take to flow those forces in to be able to do that?"

Austin, a retired four-star Army general who commanded forces in Afghanistan, spoke at his first Pentagon news conference since the Taliban swept to power in Kabul on Sunday.

He said the State Department was sending more consular affairs officers to speed up the processing of evacuees.

"We're not close to where we want to be" in terms of the pace of the airlift, Austin said.

He said he was mainly focused on the airport, which faced "a number of threats" that must be monitored.

"We cannot afford to either not defend that airfield or not have an airfield that's secure, where we have hundreds or thousands of civilians that can access the airfield," he said, adding that talks with the Taliban were continuing to ensure safe passage for those evacuating.

Austin said there were about 4,500 U.S. troops at the airport, maintaining security to enable the State Department-run evacuation operation that has been marked by degrees of chaos and confusion.

Biden, however, told ABC that there wasn't anything his administration could have done to avoid such chaos.

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

Senior U.S. military officers were talking to Taliban commanders in Kabul about checkpoints and curfews that have limited the number of Americans and Afghans able to enter the airport.

John Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, said that over 24 hours about 2,000 people, including 325 American citizens, had left aboard 18 flights by U.S. Air Force C-17 transport planes. The number of departing Air Force flights was likely to be similar in the coming 24 hours, Kirby said, although he said he could not estimate how many people they would carry.

Nearly 6,000 people had been evacuated by the U.S. military since Saturday, a White House official said Wednesday night.

Kirby said the administration was considering its options for dealing with a separate but related problem — the abandonment by Afghan security forces of an array of military equipment, weapons and aircraft that have fallen into the hands of the Taliban or other militant groups.

"We don't, obviously, want to see our equipment in the hands of those who would act against our interests or the interests of the Afghan people and increase violence and insecurity inside Afghanistan," Kirby said. "There are numerous policy choices that can be made, up to and including destruction." He said those decisions had not yet been made.

Kirby said several hundred more U.S. troops were expected to arrive at the airport by Thursday.

An Air Force unit arrived overnight that specializes in rapidly setting up and maintaining airfield operations, Kirby said. And he said Marines trained in evacuation support have continued to arrive and will assist in getting civilians onto flights.

The top congressional Republicans, Rep. Kevin McCarthy and Sen. Mitch McConnell, asked Biden on Wednesday for a classified briefing with the "gang of eight" — the top Democrats and Republicans on the House and Senate intelligence committees as well as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, McCarthy and McConnell.

McCarthy and McConnell said they want a briefing on the number of Americans still in Afghanistan and the plans to evacuate those outside of Kabul. Their letter prompted Pelosi spokesman Drew Hammill to tweet that she had already requested such a meeting. He also said House members will receive an unclas-

sified telephone briefing Friday and an in-person briefing Tuesday.

Afghanistan war unpopular amid chaotic pullout: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK, HANNAH FINGERHUT and BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A significant majority of Americans doubt that the war in Afghanistan was worthwhile, even as the United States is more divided over President Joe Biden's handling of foreign policy and national security, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Roughly two-thirds said they did not think America's longest war was worth fighting, the poll shows. Meanwhile, 47% approve of Biden's management of international affairs, while 52% approve of Biden on national security.

The poll was conducted Aug. 12-16 as the two-decade war in Afghanistan ended with the Taliban returning to power and capturing the capital of Kabul. Biden has faced bipartisan condemnation in Washington for sparking a humanitarian crisis by being ill-prepared for the speed of the Taliban's advance.

The president has stood by his decision to exit the country, insisting that he will not allow the war to continue indefinitely and betting that Americans agree with him.

Mark Sohl is among those who do. The 62-year-old Democrat from Topeka, Kansas, said "it wasn't worth losing more American lives over a mess."

Sohl added: "After 20 years, you got to cut loose."

Others felt more conflicted after seeing grim scenes in Afghanistan even if they opposed the war overall. In one image likely to endure, Afghans clung to U.S. military planes in a desperate bid to flee the country

"I don't believe we should have been in there to begin with," said Sebastian Garcia, a 23-year-old Biden voter from Lubbock, Texas, who said he had three cousins serve in Afghanistan. "But now that we're leaving, I do feel we probably should stay after seeing, I guess you'd say, the trouble we've caused."

Roughly two-thirds also suggest the Iraq War that coincided with Afghanistan was a mistake. Republicans are somewhat more likely than Democrats to say the wars in both countries were worth fighting. About 4 in 10 Republicans do, compared with about 3 in 10 Democrats.

Deborah Fulkerson of Pueblo, Colorado, believes it would be wise for the U.S. to remain in Afghanistan.

"I feel like us having a presence there just keeps things more neutral and safer there for those people and for us," said the 62-year-old, who describes herself as "more conservative," particularly on social issues.

Fulkerson acknowledged that she does not follow Afghanistan that closely, saying she is more concerned with gas prices and local news.

"I'm a Christian and I know where my future lies, and all of this stuff that's going on that I have no control over except through prayer, I just can't watch it all the time," she said. "I would be negative all the time."

About half of Americans say they are extremely or very concerned about the threat to the U.S. posed by extremist groups based outside of the United States; about another one-third are moderately concerned. Only about 1 in 10 say they are not concerned.

But nearly 20 years after the Sept. 11 attacks that spurred the Afghanistan war, more Americans say they perceive the major national security threats as being internal.

Roughly two-thirds say they are extremely or very concerned about the threat of extremist groups based inside the United States. About one-quarter are somewhat concerned, and about 1 in 10 are not concerned.

Republicans and Democrats see the threat of extremist groups based outside of the U.S. similarly: about half across party lines are extremely or very concerned. But Democrats are more likely than Republicans to be strongly concerned about the threat of extremist groups based in the U.S., 75% to 57%.

Biden has largely focused his policy agenda on domestic issues such as rebuilding the U.S. economy after the coronavirus pandemic. That appears to be resonating with some Americans who see Afghanistan as a distant war but the costs of food, housing and transportation as inescapable.

Michael Lee Bettger, 47, said he voted for Donald Trump, but has been impressed by the economy under Biden and that is his priority. Bettger lives in Austin, Arkansas, and has never been this busy working industrial maintenance.

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"Jobs are just overflowing," Bettger said. "There's not enough of me to go around."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Aug. 20, the 232nd day of 2021. There are 133 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 20, 1968, the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations began invading Czechoslovakia to crush the "Prague Spring" liberalization drive.

On this date:

In 1862, the New York Tribune published an open letter by editor Horace Greeley calling on President Abraham Lincoln to take more aggressive measures to free the slaves and end the South's rebellion.

In 1866, President Andrew Johnson formally declared the Civil War over, months after fighting had stopped.

In 1882, Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" had its premiere in Moscow.

In 1953, the Soviet Union publicly acknowledged it had tested a hydrogen bomb.

In 1955, hundreds of people were killed in anti-French rioting in Morocco and Algeria.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, a nearly \$1 billion anti-poverty measure.

In 1979, swimmer Diana Nyad (NY'-ad) succeeded in her third attempt at swimming from the Bahamas to Florida.

In 1986, postal employee Patrick Henry Sherrill went on a deadly rampage at a post office in Edmond, Okla., shooting 14 fellow workers to death before killing himself.

In 1988, a cease-fire in the war between Iraq and Iran went into effect.

In 1989, fifty-one people died when a pleasure boat sank in the River Thames (tehms) in London after colliding with a dredger.

In 2017, actor, comic and longtime telethon host Jerry Lewis died of heart disease in Las Vegas at the age of 91.

In 2019, President Donald Trump abruptly canceled an upcoming trip to Denmark, which owns Greenland, after the Danish prime minister dismissed the idea of the United States purchasing the mostly frozen island.

Ten years ago: North Korean leader Kim Jong Il arrived in Russia's Far East on a nearly weeklong visit. Jordyn Wieber won her first title at the U.S. gymnastics championships in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Five years ago: Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump told a rally in Virginia that his party had to do a better job of appealing to African-American voters. At the Rio Games, the U.S. women's basketball team won a sixth consecutive Olympic gold medal, routing Spain 101-72. Allyson Felix and LaShawn Merritt anchored the 4x400 relay teams to victory.

One year ago: Accepting the Democratic presidential nomination, Joe Biden vowed to move the nation past the chaos of Donald Trump's tenure and return it to its leadership role in the world; capping a virtual convention amid the pandemic, Biden spoke to a largely empty arena in Delaware. A federal judge cleared the way for a New York prosecutor to get President Donald Trump's tax returns. Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, was pulled from a yacht and arrested on charges that he and three associates ripped off donors trying to fund a southern border wall. (Trump, in his final hours in office, would pardon Bannon.) Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny became ill on a flight to Moscow from Siberia and was hospitalized in a coma. (Navalny would spend five months in Germany recovering from a nerve agent poisoning that he blamed on the Kremlin; he was arrested after his return to Russia.) Officials announced a \$600 million settlement between the state of Michigan and Flint residents who were harmed by lead-tainted water. The Minnesota Timberwolves won the NBA lottery giving them the first pick in the upcoming draft. (The Timberwolves would select Georgia shooting guard Anthony Edwards.)

Today's Birthdays: Boxing promoter Don King is 90. Former Sen. George Mitchell, D-Maine, is 88. Former U.S. Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, is 86. Former MLB All-Star Graig Nettles is 77. Broadcast journalist Connie

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Chung is 75. Musician Jimmy Pankow (Chicago) is 74. Actor Ray Wise is 74. Actor John Noble is 73. Rock singer Robert Plant (Led Zeppelin) is 73. Country singer Rudy Gatlin is 69. Singer-songwriter John Hiatt is 69. Actor-director Peter Horton is 68. TV weatherman Al Roker is 67. Actor Jay Acovone is 66. Actor Joan Allen is 65. Movie director David O. Russell is 63. TV personality Asha Blake is 60. Actor James Marsters is 59. Rapper KRS-One is 56. Actor Colin Cunningham is 55. Actor Billy Gardell is 52. Rock singer Fred Durst (Limp Bizkit) is 51. Actor Jonathan Ke Quan is 51. Rock musician Brad Avery is 50. Actor Misha Collins is 47. Rock singer Monique Powell (Save Ferris) is 46. Jazz/pop singer-pianist Jamie Cullum is 42. Actor Ben Barnes is 40. Actor Meghan Ory is 39. Actor Andrew Garfield is 38. Actor Brant Daugherty is 36. Actor-singer Demi Lovato is 29. Actor Christopher Paul Richards is 18.