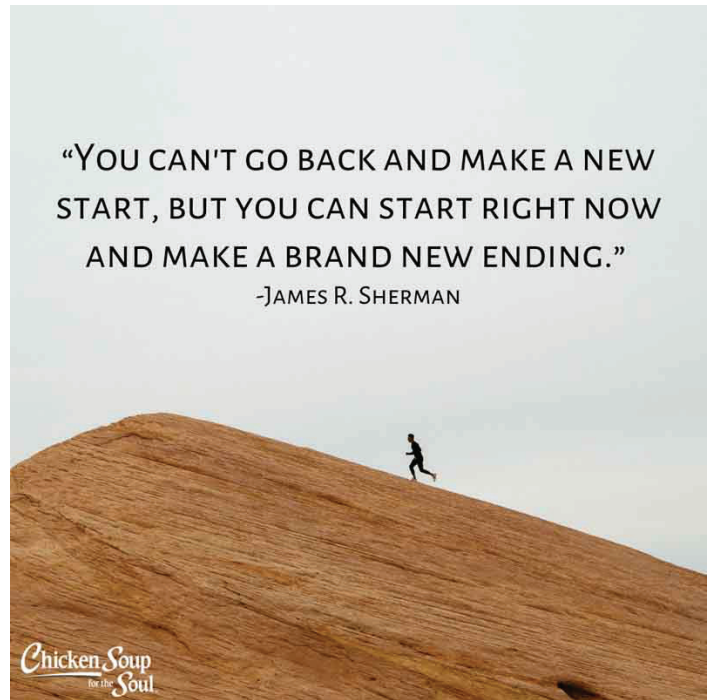


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- [1- D-Day coming for old tower](#)
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D-Day coming for old tower

Slowly the 100-year old water tower is seeing its demise. On Tuesday, the old tower was drained and for the first time, it was darkened as the lights were turned out on the tower. Next Tuesday, the tower will forever be removed from the city's skyline.

BRIDAL SHOWER

OPEN HOUSE BRIDAL Shower for Melynda Sletten, bride-to-be of Lance Larsen, will be held Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. No RSVP needed. Hosted by aunts of the groom. They are registered at Amazon, Target, Wayfair and Menards Gift Cards.

Groton Area boys golf takes second at NEC Meet

Groton Area's boys golf team placed second at the Northeast Conference meet held Tuesday in Milbank. Roncalli won the team title with 337 points followed by Groton Area with 377, Milbank was third with 388 and Redfield was fourth with 438. Those with incomplete teams were Sisseton and Tiospa Zina.

Two Groton Area golfers were medalists at the meet with Brevin Flihs placing third, shooting a 39 and a 42 for a total score of 81. Carter Simon placed 14th, shooting a 46 and a 52 for a total score of 98. Also scoring a 98 was Cole Simon, shooting a 45 and a 53. Tate Larson had a 42 and a 58 for a total score of 100. Jackson Cogley shot a 58 and a 51 for a total score of 109. Andrew Marzahn shot a 49 and a 56 for a total score of 105.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Van Gerpen is new K-12 Counselor

by Dorene Nelson

The Groton School District is getting ready for a new school year with the hiring of five new teachers and one new paraprofessional. Three of the five are filling positions for teachers who retired at the end of last year.



Emily Van Gerpen is the new K-12 counselor for the Groton School District. "I graduated from high school in Avon, SD, and began my college education at the University of South Dakota," Van Gerpen stated. "I received my Bachelor's Degree in psychology as well as Media and Journalism, which allowed me to work in marketing and communications."

"After working in this area for four years, I decided to attend Northern State University where I received a Masters's Degree in Counseling," she said. "I switched to this area because I love school and am fascinated by human interactions and how each individual mind works."

"I previously worked in the Miller, SD, school district as the elementary school counselor," Van Gerpen explained. "In addition to that responsibility, I also worked in the special education area and helped with their dual credit program."

"Here in Groton, I have been assigned to do mental health counseling for students in all grades as well as social/emotional health," she listed. "I will work with one section or grade level at a time."

"I'm especially happy that I have the freedom to set up my own schedule, whether working with groups or with individuals," Van Gerpen

smiled. "In the elementary I will be doing various counseling sessions with individuals, small groups, and classrooms."

"I'm excited to be here in the size of school that I'm familiar with yet close to a larger city," she admitted. "Groton feels like a great place to be!"



The minimall and Ken's Food Fair are having a new curb installed on the north side of the parking lot. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Yard of the Week

The Ann Gibbs yard at 406 E. 9th Ave. was chosen as the Yard of the Week for the week of August 15. The Yard of the Week is sponsored by the Groton Garden Club. Pictured are Jason, Hank and Hazel. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Groton Garden Club August Meeting

The August meeting of the Groton Garden club met at the home of Arlys Kluess. Twelve members answered roll call and recited the pledges in unison. Yard of the week winners were August 1, Bob and Jeanne Wanous, August 8, David and Val McGannon, August 15, Ann Gibbs. The August-September yards will be chosen by Ardella Theunissen, Toni Winther: Bev Sombke and Karyn Babcock. The club will decorate Main Street on September 14 at 1:00, for Jungle Day. We also will have a float for homecoming Chaired by Jolene Townsend. Pam Rix gave the program on "which gardener are you"? A delicious dessert was served following the program.

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Storm rumbles through Groton

A storm, quite literally, rumbled through Groton early Tuesday morning. The lightning did not create cracks of thunder, but a loud constant rumble that shook homes around town. The wind also took down branches and this tree south of the swimming pool. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Community Events

Wednesday, August 25, 2021

First Day of School

Thursday, August 26, 2021

Volleyball hosts Britton-Hecla (C match at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity at 7:15 p.m.)

Friday, August 27, 2021

Football hosts Redfield, 7 p.m.

Saturday, August 28, 2021

Soccer at Vermillion. Girls match at 1 p.m., Boys at 3 p.m.

Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest, 9 a.m., Olive Grove Golf Course

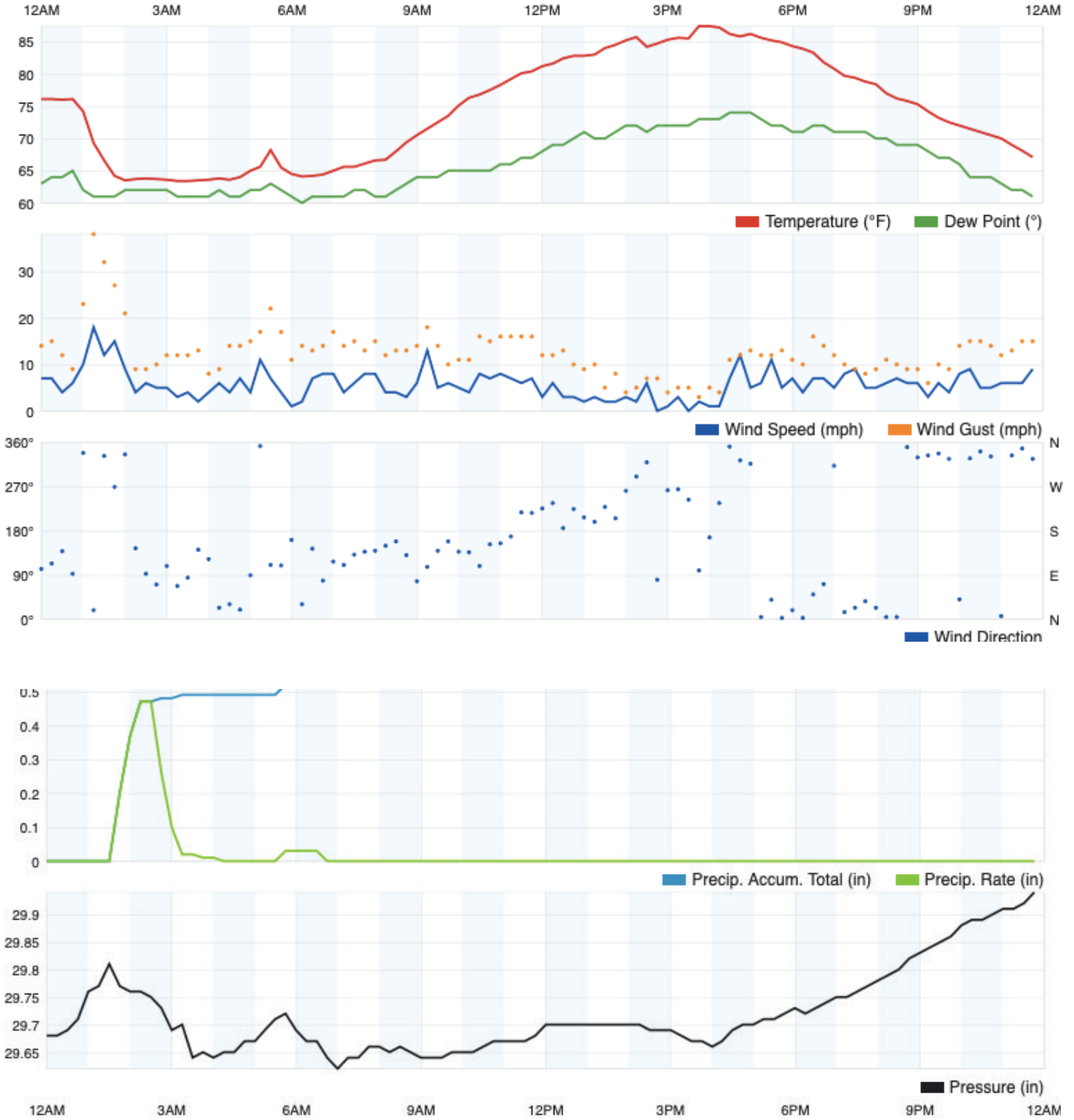
Sunday, August 29, 2021

Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)

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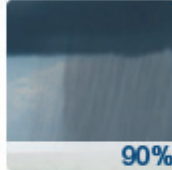


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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Increasing Clouds	Partly Cloudy then Chance Showers	Showers	T-storms	Chance T-storms
High: 73 °F	Low: 53 °F	High: 68 °F	Low: 58 °F	High: 74 °F

Wednesday




Highs: 70-80°
Scattered Showers & Thunderstorms
Through the Day, Light Rain/Sprinkles



On and Off Thunderstorm Chances Through the Weekend
Strong to Severe Storms Possible



Wednesday Night Into Thursday



Lows: 50-60°
Thunderstorm chances increase late Wednesday through the day Thursday. Isolated strong to severe storms are possible.

Widely scattered showers and thunderstorms may bring light rain/sprinkles this afternoon. A stronger system will move in late Wednesday through Thursday bringing higher chances for showers and thunderstorms. Some storms may be strong to severe. Unsettled weather will last into the weekend with on and off thunderstorm chances.

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Today in Weather History

August 25, 1990: Severe thunderstorms moved across central and northeastern South Dakota produce golf ball size hail and wind gusts exceeding 60 mph. One storm produced a weak F0 tornado between Bowdle and Roscoe in Edmunds County.

1814: In the early afternoon, a strong tornado struck northwest Washington D.C. and downtown. The severe tornadic storm arrived the day after the British Troops had set fire to the Capitol, the White House, and other public buildings. The storm's rains would douse those flames. The tornado did major structural damage to the residential section of the city. The tornado's flying debris killed more British soldiers than by the guns of the American resistance. The storm blew off roofs and carried them high up into the air, knocked down chimneys and fences and damaged numerous homes. Some homes were destroyed. It lifted two pieces of cannon and deposited them several yards away. At least 30 Americans were killed or injured in the heavily damaged buildings, and an unknown number of British killed and wounded.

1948: One of the worst tornadoes to strike New Zealand occurred at Hamilton on this day. This estimated F2tornado killed three people, injuring dozens, and destroying or severely damaging almost 150 houses and 50 business premises in Hamilton and Franklin.

1885 - A severe hurricane struck South Carolina causing 1.3 million dollars damage at Charleston. (David Ludlum)

1940 - New Jersey experienced its coldest August morning of record, with lows of 32 degrees at Layton and Charlotteburg. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Morning thunderstorms produced heavy rain in eastern Nebraska and southwestern Iowa. Stanton IA reported 10.50 inches of rain. Water was reported up to the handle of automobiles west of Greenwood NE. Rainfall totals for a two day period ranged from 7 to 14 inches across southwestern Iowa. Crop damage was in the millions for both states. Subsequent flooding of streams in Iowa the last week of August caused millions of dollars damage to crops, as some streams crested ten feet above flood stage. (Storm Data)

1988 - Seven cities in California reported record high temperatures for the date, including Sacramento with an afternoon reading of 104 degrees. Thunderstorms produced locally heavy rains in Arizona. Chino Valley was drenched with 2.50 inches of rain in just thirty minutes washing out a couple of streets in town. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Morning thunderstorms drenched Spencer, IN, with 4.10 inches of rain in three hours causing extensive street flooding. Evening thunderstorms in eastern Kansas produced up to six inches of rain around Emporia, and four inches of rain in just forty-five minutes near Parsons, and also produced wind gusts to 70 mph at Lake Melvern. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Katrina becomes a hurricane just before landfall in south Florida between Hallandale Beach and North Miami Beach. Maximum sustained winds at the time of landfall were near 80 mph. There were eleven fatalities in South Florida, including four by falling trees. More than 1.3 million customers lost electrical services, and preliminary insured loss estimates ranged from \$600 million to \$2 billion in the state of Florida (Associated Press).

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 88 °F at 3:55 PM

Low Temp: 63 °F at 3:26 AM

Wind: 43 mph at 5:20 AM

Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 101° in 1926

Record Low: 38° in 1896

Average High: 82°F

Average Low: 54°F

Average Precip in Aug.: 1.74

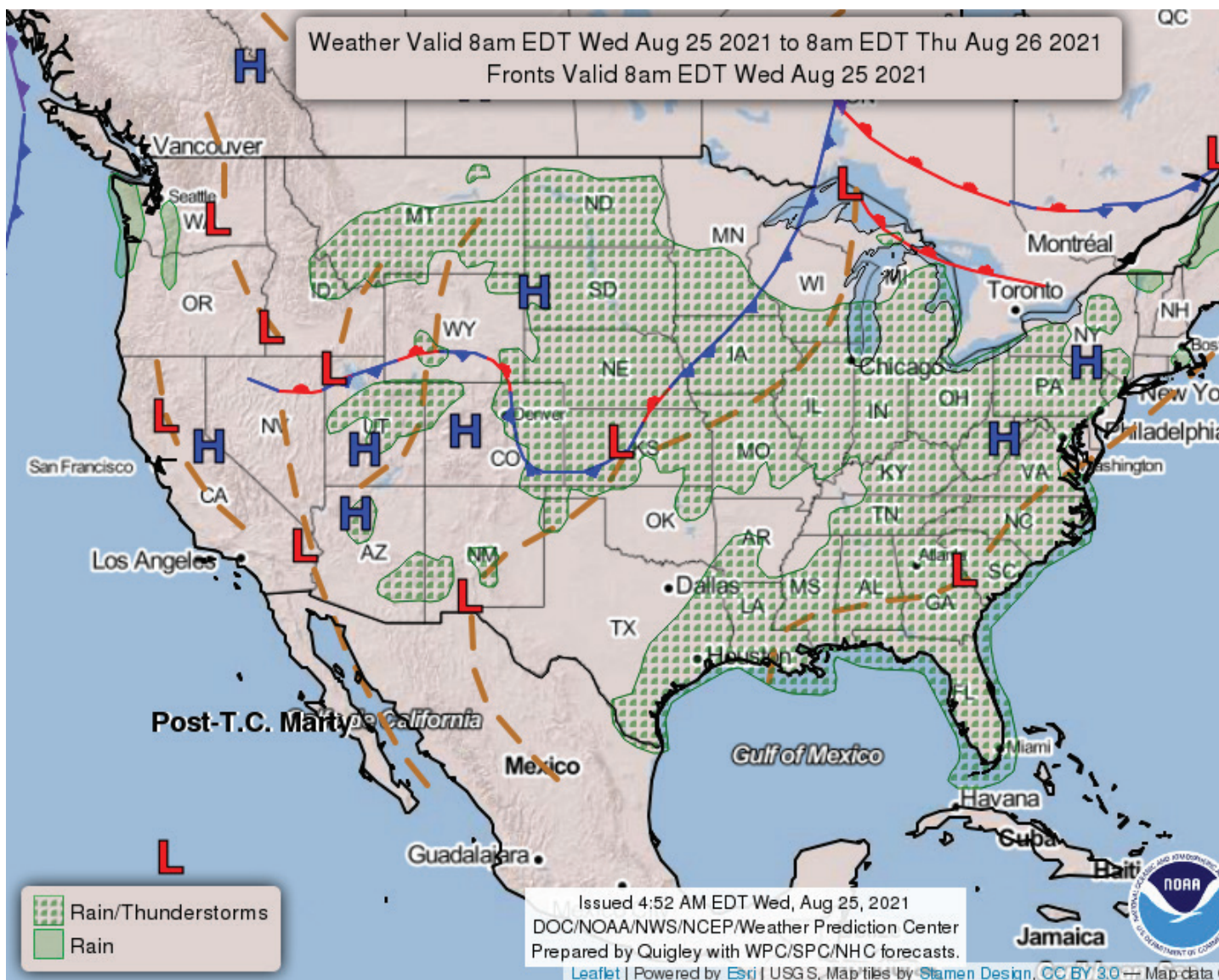
Precip to date in Aug.: 2.19

Average Precip to date: 15.84

Precip Year to Date: 9.46

Sunset Tonight: 8:23 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:48 a.m.





IN AND THROUGH - BUT NOT FROM

It was the middle of the night when the nurse entered my hospital room to take my "vital signs." With quiet confidence she went through her routine reading and recording various numbers.

As she was about to leave my room she stopped and said, "I'm sorry that I had to awaken you."

"Oh, you didn't awaken me," I replied. "Somehow I can't fall asleep tonight."

"Well, have you been saying the Lord's prayer?" she asked. "You know you'll do much better praying the Lord's Prayer than counting all those sheep. And besides, sheep don't count anyway. Only the Lord does."

As the door closed behind her, I began to recite the Lord's Prayer. When I got to the phrase "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" a sense of peace swept over me. As I reflected on those two words - "your will" - God spoke to me and said, "You know, I never said that you would be spared from the pain and suffering of life. Only that I would be with you and guard you in and through your life's journey and deliver you from the snare of the fowler." In His will we are always safe and secure.

Often the "snares" of the "fowler" appear when we least expect them. He would encourage us to doubt God's capabilities or care, His concern or compassion. Certainly he would be delighted if we came to the conclusion that our problems are beyond God's power. Surely he would want us to believe that God has favorites and we are just beyond His grace. But not so! God will protect His own!

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for the assurance we have knowing that if You are for us, no one can destroy us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 91:3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.

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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 Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

17-18-26-52-67, Mega Ball: 19, Megaplier: 2

(seventeen, eighteen, twenty-six, fifty-two, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: nineteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$270 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$304 million

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Central def. Brookings, 24-26, 25-13, 25-13, 19-25, 15-9

Aberdeen Christian def. Ipswich, 25-14, 25-15, 25-12

Belle Fourche def. Sturgis Brown, 25-15, 25-19, 25-16

Bridgewater-Emery def. McCook Central/Montrose, 25-10, 25-15, 25-18

Britton-Hecla def. Leola/Frederick, 25-19, 25-19, 25-22

Canton def. Beresford, 25-16, 25-11, 25-23

Chester def. Flandreau, 25-19, 25-18, 25-21

Clark/Willow Lake def. Castlewood, 25-22, 25-23, 25-11

DeSmet def. Howard, 16-25, 25-15, 25-21, 18-25, 20-18

Douglas def. St. Thomas More, 25-12, 25-13, 18-25, 22-25, 15-13

Elkton-Lake Benton def. Dell Rapids, 25-21, 25-18, 25-18

Estelline/Hendricks def. Iroquois, 22-25, 25-10, 25-18, 25-15

Florence/Henry def. Webster, 25-14, 25-20, 25-17

Garretson def. Tri-Valley, 25-11, 25-12, 25-20

Hill City def. Custer, 25-13, 25-12, 25-13

Jones County def. Sully Buttes, 25-23, 23-25, 25-13, 26-24

Lake Preston def. James Valley Christian, 20-25, 25-21, 25-20, 25-20

Langford def. Waverly-South Shore, 25-20, 25-14, 25-10

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton def. Parkston, 25-12, 15-25, 26-24, 26-28, 16-14

Newell def. Lead-Deadwood, 25-13, 25-6, 25-16

Northwestern def. Aberdeen Roncalli, 25-17, 23-25, 25-19, 25-16

Parker def. Irene-Wakonda, 25-14, 25-11, 25-16

Pierre def. Watertown, 25-11, 19-25, 25-8, 25-22

Sioux Falls Lincoln def. Sioux Falls Jefferson, 25-16, 16-25, 25-15, 25-16

Sioux Falls O'Gorman def. Yankton, 25-12, 25-17, 25-16

Sioux Falls Washington def. Sioux Falls Roosevelt, 25-17, 25-21, 25-18

Sioux Valley def. Deuel, 25-23, 25-20, 25-19

Tripp-Delmont/Armour def. Colome, 25-16, 25-14, 25-11

West Central def. Vermillion, 25-19, 25-18, 25-20

Winner def. Bon Homme, 25-14, 25-11, 25-16

Hanson Early Bird Tournament=

First Round=

Avon def. Hanson, 6-25, 25-16, 25-16

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Freeman def. Andes Central/Dakota Christian, 25-16, 25-18
Platte-Geddes def. Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, 25-21, 25-19
Wessington Springs def. Freeman Academy/Marion, 25-17, 25-8
Semifinal=
Avon def. Wessington Springs, 16-25, 25-21, 25-14
Platte-Geddes def. Freeman, 25-20, 25-15

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

Alleged pipe bomber makes initial court appearance

TYNDALL, S.D. (AP) — A Tabor man accused of building pipe bombs made his first court appearance Tuesday.

KELO-TV reported that 29-year-old Joseph Hanson has been charged with the sale, possession, or transportation of a destructive device and unauthorized possession of substances to make a destructive device. He appeared in Bon Homme County Circuit Court Tuesday morning. His arraignment was set for Sept. 7.

According to court documents, Hansen's neighbor called police on Friday after hearing an explosion and seeing Hanson lying in his driveway. First responders found Hansen unresponsive and suffering from burns.

Witnesses said they had seen Hansen with a pipe bomb earlier in the day and he had been boiling gasoline. Hansen told the witness that he was making napalm.

Hansen told police after he was released from a hospital on Saturday that he was planning to make 12 pipe bombs and had completed three to five bombs before one exploded.

Hansen was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2011 after prosecutors accused him of planning to blow up Sisseton High School.

S.D. court may unseal investigation of billionaire Sanford

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Supreme Court Tuesday weighed whether to unseal a search warrant and affidavits in an investigation into billionaire banker-turned-philanthropist T. Denny Sanford for possible possession of child pornography.

The court documents are sealed and refer only to "an implicated individual," and attorneys did not name Sanford as they made their arguments. However, one person briefed on the case by law enforcement told The Associated Press that the hearing involved Sanford and a legal effort by media organizations to unseal court records in the investigation. The person demanded anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the investigation.

The attorneys at the hearing also matched the lawyer representing Sanford, former South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley, and those for two media outlets — ProPublica and the Sioux Falls Argus Leader — that reported last year Sanford had been investigated for possession of child pornography.

Sanford has not been charged with any crime.

The 85-year-old is the state's richest man, worth an estimated \$2.8 billion, but has vowed to "die broke," and his name adorns dozens of buildings and institutions in South Dakota and beyond.

Even after the investigation was reported last year, Sanford donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the South Dakota government and the state's largest employer, Sanford Health. Some of the state's top lawmakers, including Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, have not distanced themselves from Sanford.

ProPublica first reported that South Dakota investigators had obtained a search warrant, citing four unidentified sources. Two people briefed on the matter by law enforcement confirmed the investigation to the AP. They demanded anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it.

Sanford's electronic devices came to the attention of investigators with the South Dakota attorney general's office after a technology firm reported that child pornography had either been sent, received

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or downloaded on his device, according to one of the people who spoke to AP.

Attorney General Jason Ravensborg determined there was sufficient evidence to move toward prosecuting Sanford, but passed the case to the U.S. Department of Justice because it spanned to Arizona, California and Nebraska, according to both people. Federal prosecutors have given no indication that they are bringing charges against Sanford, and Ravensborg has not dropped plans to prosecute him if the Justice Department declines, according to both people.

The Justice Department and the South Dakota attorney general's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the investigation.

Jackley argued Tuesday that South Dakota courts had ultimate authority over court records and should not heed a state statute that presumes them to be open to the public. He pointed out there has never been a complaint or indictment filed against the "implicated individual." He said he could not comment on whether the case involved Sanford.

Jackley said in a statement after the investigation was reported last year: "Although we know very little about any state or federal inquiry relating to Mr. Sanford, we do know those authorities responsible for investigating allegations obviously did not find information or evidence that supported or resulted in any criminal charges."

Jon Arneson, an attorney for the Argus Leader, told the state Supreme Court that the case boiled down to the public's right to access court documents.

"This is a citizen, saying, 'I want my name removed from it because it's embarrassing,'" he said.

Immediately after the investigation was revealed, organizations, universities and governments stopped accepting Sanford's donations. But in South Dakota — where his name adorns the largest employer, the largest indoor arena, and the largest charitable checks — the distancing was short-lived.

This year, Noem spearheaded an effort to create a scholarship endowment with \$100 million from Sanford and First Premier Bank, the financial institution he founded. He attended a bill signing for it in March with Noem and several top state lawmakers.

First Premier is known for issuing high-interest credit cards to those with poor credit. Sanford, now retired, started it in 1986 amid a rush by lenders to take advantage of South Dakota's lax lending laws.

Sanford told the AP in 2016 that he wanted his fortune to have a positive impact on children after his hardscrabble childhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. His mother died of breast cancer when he was 4, and by the time he was 8, Sanford was working in his father's clothing distribution company. He, along with two siblings, lived in a small apartment.

Sanford has since given away close to \$2 billion.

"You can only have so many cars and all of that kind of stuff so put it into something in which you can change people's lives," Sanford said in 2016.

Sanford Health CEO Bill Gassen announced in March that the billionaire was donating an additional \$300 million to the hospital system that bears his name. He told South Dakota Public Broadcasting at the time that it took the reports of the investigation seriously, but was "satisfied that they were not substantiated."

Sanford has given periodically to Republicans, including Donald Trump. In November 2019 -- before the investigation was reported -- Sanford donated \$20,600 to a joint fundraising committee for Sen. Mike Rounds and the state's Republican party, as well as \$10,000 directly to the South Dakota GOP and \$5,600 to Rounds' reelection campaign.

Last year, he gave \$6,000 to a fundraising committee for former Georgia Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler. The committee returned half of that, according to the Federal Election Commission.

But Sanford's largest checks have gone to universities, health care organizations and children's charities. He started his major charitable giving in 1999 with a \$2 million donation to the Children's Home Society of South Dakota, which aides victims of domestic violence, abuse and neglect. He has since given \$69 million to the organization.

The state Supreme Court has not given a timeline on when it will rule on the case.

Associated Press reporter Jacques Billeaud in Phoenix, Arizona, contributed to this report.

2 US lawmakers' Kabul trip prompts Biden administration fury

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two members of Congress flew unannounced into Kabul airport in the middle of the chaotic evacuation stunning State Department and U.S. military personnel who had to divert resources to provide security and information to the lawmakers, U.S. officials said.

Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., and Rep. Peter Meijer, R-Mich., flew in and out on charter aircraft and were on the ground at the Kabul airport for several hours Tuesday. That led officials to complain that they could be taking seats that would have otherwise gone to other Americans or Afghans fleeing the country, but the congressmen said in a joint statement that they made sure to leave on a flight with empty seats.

"As Members of Congress, we have a duty to provide oversight on the executive branch," the two said in their statement. "We conducted this visit in secret, speaking about it only after our departure, to minimize the risk and disruption to the people on the ground, and because we were there to gather information, not to grandstand."

The two lawmakers are both military veterans, with backgrounds in the region. Moulton, a Marine who has been outspoken critic of the Iraq War, served multiple tours in Iraq. Meijer was deployed as part of the Army Reserves and later worked in Afghanistan at a nongovernmental organization providing aid. Moulton serves on the House Armed Services Committee and Meijer is on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Three officials familiar with the flight said that State Department, Defense Department and White House officials were furious about the incident because it was done without coordination with diplomats or military commanders directing the evacuation.

The U.S. military found out about the visit as the legislators' aircraft was inbound to Kabul, according to the officials. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing military operations.

One senior U.S. official said the administration saw the lawmakers' visit as manifestly unhelpful and several other officials said the visit was viewed as a distraction for troops and commanders at the airport who are waging a race against time to evacuate thousands of Americans, at-risk Afghans and others as quickly as possible.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi issued a statement Tuesday evening taking note of the desire of some legislators to visit Afghanistan and saying she was writing to "reiterate that the Departments of Defense and State have requested that Members not travel to Afghanistan and the region during this time of danger. Ensuring the safe and timely evacuation of individuals at risk requires the full focus and attention of the U.S. military and diplomatic teams on the ground in Afghanistan."

The Pentagon has repeatedly expressed concerns about security threats in Kabul, including by the Islamic State group. When members of Congress have routinely gone to war zones over the past two decades, their visits are typically long planned and coordinated with officials on the ground in order to ensure their safety.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday said he is sticking to his Aug. 31 deadline for completing the risky airlift as people flee Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

The two congressmen said they went into their visit wanting "to push the president to extend the August 31st deadline. After talking with commanders on the ground and seeing the situation here, it is obvious that because we started the evacuation so late, that no matter what we do, we won't get everyone out on time, even by September 11."

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Matthew Lee contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to reflect that Rep. Peter Meijer serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, not the House Armed Services Committee

'Pain compliance': Video shows trooper pummeling Black man

By JAKE BLEIBERG and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MONROE, La. (AP) — Graphic body camera video kept secret for more than two years shows a Louisiana State Police trooper pummeling a Black motorist 18 times with a flashlight — an attack the trooper defended as “pain compliance.”

“I’m not resisting! I’m not resisting!” Aaron Larry Bowman can be heard screaming between blows on the footage obtained by The Associated Press. The May 2019 beating following a traffic stop left him with a broken jaw, three broken ribs, a broken wrist and a gash to his head that required six staples to close.

Bowman’s encounter near his Monroe home came less than three weeks after troopers from the same embattled agency punched, stunned and dragged another Black motorist, Ronald Greene, before he died in police custody on a rural roadside in northeast Louisiana. Video of Greene’s death similarly remained under wraps before AP obtained and published it earlier this year.

Federal prosecutors are examining both cases in a widening investigation into police brutality and potential cover-ups involving both troopers and state police brass.

State police didn’t investigate the attack on Bowman until 536 days after it occurred — even though it was captured on body camera — and only did so weeks after Bowman brought a civil lawsuit.

The agency did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment on the video.

Bowman’s beating was carried out by Jacob Brown, a white trooper who, before resigning in March, tallied 23 use-of-force incidents dating to 2015 — 19 of them targeting Black people, according to state police records.

Aside from the federal investigation, Brown faces state charges of second-degree battery and malfeasance in Bowman’s beating. He also faces state charges in two other violent arrests of Black motorists, including one he boasted about last year in a group chat with other troopers, saying the suspect is “gonna be sore” and “it warms my heart knowing we could educate that young man.”

On the night Bowman was pulled over for a traffic violation, Brown came upon the scene after deputies had forcibly removed Bowman from his vehicle and taken him to the ground. The trooper later told investigators he “was in the area and was trying to get involved.”

Wielding an 8-inch aluminum flashlight reinforced with a pointed end to shatter car glass, Brown jumped out of his state police vehicle and began bashing Bowman on his head and body within two seconds of “initial contact” — unleashing 18 strikes in 24 seconds, detectives wrote in an investigative report.

“Give me your f----- hands!” the trooper shouted. “I ain’t messing with you.”

Bowman tried to explain several times that he was a dialysis patient, had done nothing wrong and wasn’t resisting, saying, “I’m not fighting you, you’re fighting me.”

Brown responded with: “Shut the f--- up!” and “You ain’t listening.”

Bowman later can be heard moaning, still on the ground. “I’m bleeding!” he said. “They hit me in the head with a flashlight!”

Brown, 31, later said Bowman had struck a deputy and that the blows were “pain compliance” intended to get Bowman into handcuffs. Investigators who reviewed Brown’s video months after the fact determined his use of force was not reasonable or necessary.

Brown did not respond to several messages seeking comment.

Bowman, 46, denied hitting anyone and is not seen on the video being violent with officers. But he still faces a list of charges, including battery of a police officer, resisting an officer and the traffic violation for which he was initially stopped, improper lane usage.

Brown not only failed to report his use of force but mislabeled his footage as a “citizen encounter” in what investigators called “an intentional attempt to hide the video from any administrative review.”

Bowman’s defense attorney, Keith Whiddon, said he was initially told there was no body-camera video.

Robert Tew, the district attorney in Monroe, declined to discuss Brown’s case or anything to do with the state police. “We’ll see what the DOJ has to do,” he said during a brief interview outside his home.

Bowman himself hadn’t seen the footage until recently, when prosecutors from the U.S. Justice Depart-

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ment showed it to him and his civil attorney.

"I kept thinking I was going to die that night," Bowman told the AP through tears in a recent interview. "It was like reliving it all over again. By watching it, I broke down all over again."

"I don't want nobody to go through that."

Harris urges Vietnam to join US in opposing China 'bullying'

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

HANOI (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris called on Vietnam to join the U.S. in challenging China's "bullying" in the South China Sea, continuing her sharp rhetoric against Beijing as she met with Vietnamese leaders on Wednesday.

"We need to find ways to pressure and raise the pressure, frankly, on Beijing to abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and to challenge its bullying and excessive maritime claims," she said in remarks at the opening of a meeting with Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

Harris also expressed support for sending an additional U.S. Coast Guard cutter to Vietnam to help defend its security interests in the disputed waterway, and pledged that the U.S. would "maintain a strong presence in the South China Sea" to challenge China.

During remarks in Singapore on Tuesday, Harris said Beijing's actions to press its territorial claims in the South China Sea amount to "coercion" and "intimidation."

The vice president's rebuke of China comes in the middle of her weeklong tour of Southeast Asia, a trip that brought her to Singapore and Vietnam in a bid to strengthen U.S. ties to the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's growing military and economic influence there.

In addition to her commitment to defend the South China Sea against Beijing advances, Harris unveiled an array of new partnerships and support for Vietnam in areas including climate change, trade and the coronavirus pandemic.

She announced that the U.S. will send 1 million additional doses of the Pfizer vaccine to Vietnam, bringing the total U.S. vaccine donation to Vietnam to 6 million doses.

The U.S. will also provide \$23 million to help Vietnam expand distribution and access to vaccines, combat the pandemic and prepare for future disease threats. The Defense Department is also delivering 77 freezers to store vaccines throughout the country.

Vietnam is grappling with a new coronavirus surge driven by the delta variant and low vaccination rates. Only about 2% of the country's 98 million people are fully vaccinated, and the surge in cases prompted a recent lockdown in Ho Chi Minh City, the nation's business hub and the center of the latest outbreak.

The new U.S. aid to Vietnam includes investments to help the country transition to cleaner energy systems and expand the use of electric vehicles, and millions in aid to clear unexploded weapons left over from the Vietnam War.

That U.S. war has returned to the spotlight over the past week as the U.S. struggles with a similarly messy end to the Afghanistan War. Images of the evacuation of Kabul, as the Taliban took full control of Afghanistan, evoked similar shots of U.S. helicopters lifting off from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon decades prior, prompting comparisons between the two failed wars.

On Wednesday in Vietnam, however, Harris referenced the progress the two former foes have made, telling Vietnam's president that "our relationship has come a long way in a quarter of a century."

She also embraced elevating the relationship with Vietnam from a comprehensive partnership to a strategic partnership, a diplomatic designation that would reflect the deepening ties between the two countries.

After her bilateral meetings, Harris took a moment of silence in the pouring rain and laid flowers at the monument where John McCain's plane was shot down by the North Vietnamese in 1967. She noted it was the three-year anniversary of Sen. McCain's death.

For Harris, the focus this week has been on developing U.S. ties in the region to offer a strong contrast to China, which has also sought to woo Singapore and Vietnam with economic support and vaccines. While she emphasized during remarks in Singapore on Tuesday that the U.S. policy in the region is not

merely about countering any one nation, the Biden administration has made confronting China globally a centerpiece of its foreign policy.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin responded to Harris' Wednesday comments by accusing Washington of simply seeking to defend "U.S. hegemony and its own interests," rather than standing up for the rights of small countries.

"China firmly rejects the U.S. deployment of law enforcement forces in the South China Sea, meddling in regional affairs and disrupting regional peace and stability," Wang said at a daily briefing.

In the afternoon, Harris announced the launch of a new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Southeast Asia regional office. The new office will be one of four regional CDC offices globally, and is focused on collaborating with regional governments on research and training to deal with and prevent global health crises. She said that while combating the current pandemic is a priority, "we must be, if we are honest, better prepared for the next one."

But even as Harris aimed to keep her focus squarely on those key agenda items, her visit was shadowed by a recent security scare in Vietnam.

Harris' flight to Vietnam was delayed for hours Tuesday afternoon after the vice president's office was made aware of an investigation into two possible cases of the so-called Havana Syndrome in Hanoi, according to administration officials. The Havana Syndrome is the name for a rash of mysterious health incidents first reported by American diplomats and other government employees in the Cuban capital beginning in 2016 that have since affected diplomats across the globe.

Asked about the incident Wednesday, Harris didn't specifically address the possible cases, but instead expressed her gratitude for the work done by America's diplomatic corps.

"The people who work in our embassies around the world are extraordinary public servants who represent the best of what the United States believes itself to be, and aspires to be, which is a good neighbor to our partners and our allies around the globe," she said after a lease signing for the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi.

The secret bias hidden in mortgage-approval algorithms

By EMMANUEL MARTINEZ and LAUREN KIRCHNER/The Markup The Markup

The new four-bedroom house in Charlotte, North Carolina, was Crystal Marie and Eskias McDaniels' personal American dream, the reason they had moved to this Southern town from pricey Los Angeles a few years ago.

A lush, long lawn, 2,700 square feet of living space, a neighborhood pool and playground for their son, Nazret. All for \$375,000.

Prequalifying for the mortgage was a breeze. They said they had saved much more than they would need for the down payment, had very good credit — scores of 805 and 725 — and earned roughly six figures each, she in marketing at a utility company and Eskias representing a pharmaceutical company. The monthly mortgage payment was less than they'd paid for rent in Los Angeles for years.

They were scheduled to sign the mortgage documents on Aug. 23, 2019 — a Friday — and were so excited to move in they booked movers for the same day.

The Wednesday before the big day, the loan officer called Crystal Marie, and everything changed, she said: The deal wasn't going to close.

The loan officer told the couple he had submitted the application internally to the underwriting department for approval a dozen, 15, maybe 17 times, getting a "no" each time. The couple had spent \$6,000 in fees and deposits — all nonrefundable.

"It seemed like it was getting rejected by an algorithm," she said, "and then there was a person who could step in and decide to override that or not."

She was told she didn't qualify because she was a contractor, not a full-time employee — even though her boss told the lender she was not at risk of losing her job. Her co-workers were contractors, too, and they had mortgages.

Crystal Marie's co-workers are white. She and Eskias are Black.

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"I think it would be really naive for someone like myself to not consider that race played a role in the process," she said.

An investigation by The Markup has found that lenders in 2019 were more likely to deny home loans to people of color than to white people with similar financial characteristics — even when we controlled for newly available financial factors the mortgage industry for years has said would explain racial disparities in lending.

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This story was reported by The Markup, and the story and data were distributed by The Associated Press.

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Holding 17 different factors steady in a complex statistical analysis of more than 2 million conventional mortgage applications for home purchases, we found that lenders were 40% more likely to turn down Latino applicants for loans, 50% more likely to deny Asian/Pacific Islander applicants, and 70% more likely to deny Native American applicants than similar white applicants. Lenders were 80% more likely to reject Black applicants than similar white applicants. These are national rates.

In every case, the prospective borrowers of color looked almost exactly the same on paper as the white applicants, except for their race.

The industry had criticized previous similar analyses for not including financial factors they said would explain disparities in lending rates but were not public at the time: debts as a percentage of income, how much of the property's assessed worth the person is asking to borrow, and the applicant's credit score.

The first two are now public in the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data. Including these financial data points in our analysis not only failed to eliminate racial disparities in loan denials, it highlighted new, devastating ones.

We found that lenders gave fewer loans to Black applicants than white applicants even when their incomes were high — \$100,000 a year or more — and had the same debt ratios. In fact, high-earning Black applicants with less debt were rejected more often than high-earning white applicants who have more debt.

"Lenders used to tell us, 'It's because you don't have the lending profiles; the ethno-racial differences would go away if you had them,'" said José Loya, assistant professor of urban planning at UCLA who has studied public mortgage data extensively and reviewed our methodology. "Your work shows that's not true."

We sent our complete analysis to industry representatives: The American Bankers Association, The Mortgage Bankers Association, The Community Home Lenders Association, and The Credit Union National Association. They all criticized it generally, saying the public data is not complete enough to draw conclusions, but did not point to any flaws in our computations.

Blair Bernstein, director of public relations for the ABA, acknowledged that our analysis showed disparities but that "given the limitations" in the public data we used, "the numbers are not sufficient on their own to explain why those disparities exist."

In written statements, the ABA and MBA criticized The Markup's analysis for not including credit scores and for focusing on conventional loans only and not including government loans, such as those guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration and Department of Veterans Affairs.

Isolating conventional loans from government loans is common in mortgage research because they are different products, with different thresholds for approval and loan terms. Government loans bring people who wouldn't otherwise qualify into the market but tend to be more expensive for the borrower.

Even the Federal Reserve and Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the agency that releases mortgage data, separate conventional and FHA loans in their research on lending disparities. Authors of one academic study out of Northeastern and George Washington universities said they focus on conventional loans only because FHA loans have "long been implemented in a manner that promotes segregation."

As for credit scores, it was impossible for us to include them in our analysis because the CFPB strips them from public view from HMDA data — in part due to the mortgage industry's lobbying to remove them, citing borrower privacy.

When the CFPB first proposed expanding mortgage data collection to include the very data that industry trade groups have told us is vital for doing this type of analysis — credit scores, debt-to-income ratio, and

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loan-to-value ratio — those same groups objected. They didn't want the government to even collect the data, let alone make it public. They cited the risk of a cyberattack, which could reveal borrowers' private information.

"These new (data) fields include confidential financial data," several large trade groups wrote in a letter to the CFPB, including the ABA and MBA. "Consequently, if this (sic) data are inadvertently or knowingly released to the public, the harm associated with re-identification would be even greater."

Government regulators do have access to credit scores. The CFPB analyzed 2019 HMDA data and found that accounting for credit scores does not eliminate lending disparities for people of color.

In addition to finding disparities in loan denials nationally, we examined cities and towns across the country individually and found disparities in 89 metropolitan areas spanning every region of the country. In Charlotte, where Crystal Marie and her family searched for a home, lenders were 50% more likely to deny loans to Black applicants than white ones with similar financial profiles. In other places, the gap was even larger.

Black applicants in Chicago were 150% more likely to be denied by financial institutions than similar white applicants there. Lenders were more than 200% more likely to reject Latino applicants than white applicants in Waco, Texas, and to reject Asian and Pacific Islander applicants than white ones in Port St. Lucie, Florida. And Native American applicants in Minneapolis were 100% more likely to be denied by financial institutions than similar white applicants there.

"It's something that we have a very painful history with," said Alderman Matt Martin, who represents Chicago's 47th Ward.

"Redlining," the now-outlawed practice of branding certain Black and immigrant neighborhoods too risky for financial investments that began in the 1930s, can be traced back to Chicago. Chicago activists exposed that banks were still redlining in the 1970s, leading to the establishment of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, the law mandating the collection of data used for this story.

"When you see that maybe the tactics are different now, but the outcomes are substantially similar," Martin added, "it's just not something we can continue to tolerate."

Who makes these loan decisions? Officially, lending officers at each institution. In reality, software, most of it mandated by a pair of quasi-governmental agencies.

Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae were founded by the federal government to spur homeownership and now buy about half of all mortgages in America. If they don't approve a loan, the lenders are on their own if the borrower skips out.

And that power means Fannie and Freddie essentially set the rules for the industry, starting from the very beginning of the mortgage-approval process.

Fannie and Freddie require lenders to use a particular credit scoring algorithm, "Classic FICO," to determine whether an applicant meets the minimum threshold necessary to even be considered for a conventional mortgage, currently a score of 620.

This algorithm was developed from data from the 1990s and is more than 15 years old. It's widely considered detrimental to people of color because it rewards traditional credit, to which white Americans have more access. It does not consider, among other things, on-time payments for rent, utilities, and cellphone bills — but will lower people's scores if they get behind on them and are sent to debt collectors. Unlike more recent models, it penalizes people for past medical debt even if it's since been paid.

"This is how structural racism works," said Chi Chi Wu, a staff attorney at the National Consumer Law Center. "This is how racism gets embedded into institutions and policies and practices with absolutely no animus at all."

Potentially fairer credit models have existed for years. A recent study by Vantage Score — a credit model developed by the "Big Three" credit bureaus to compete with FICO — estimated that its model would provide credit to 37 million Americans who have no scores under FICO models. Almost a third of them would be Black or Latino.

Yet Fannie and Freddie have resisted a steady stream of plaintive requests since 2014 from advocates,

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the mortgage and housing industries, and Congress to update to a newer model. Even the company that created Classic FICO has lobbied for the agencies to adopt a newer version, which it said expands credit to more people.

"A lot of things that minorities and underserved borrowers are doing, responsible financial behaviors, are going under the radar," said Scott Olson, executive director of CHLA, a trade group representing small and midsized independent mortgage lenders.

Fannie's and Freddie's regulator and conservator, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, continues to allow the companies to stick with Classic FICO, more than five years after ordering them to study the effects of switching to something newer. The FHFA has also expressed concern about the "cost and operational implications" if they would have to continually test new credit scoring models.

Neither of the companies would answer questions from The Markup about why they still require Classic FICO.

"They've been testing alternate scores for years, and I don't know why the process is taking so long," said Lisa Rice, president and CEO of the National Fair Housing Alliance, a consortium of hundreds of fair housing organizations. "Well-deserving consumers are being left behind."

Fannie's and Freddie's approval process also involves other mysterious algorithms: automated underwriting software programs that they first launched in 1995 to much fanfare about their speed, ease and, most important, fairness.

"Using a data base as opposed to human judgment can avoid influences by other forces, such as discrimination against minority individuals and red-lining," Peter Maselli, then a vice president of Freddie Mac, told The New York Times when it launched its software, now called Loan Product Advisor. A bank executive told Congress that year the new systems were "explicitly and implicitly 'color blind,'" since they did not consider a person's race at all in their evaluations.

But, like similar promises that algorithms would make colorblind decisions in criminal risk assessment and health care, research shows that some of the factors Fannie and Freddie say their software programs consider affect people differently depending on their race or ethnicity. These include, in addition to credit histories, the prospective borrowers' assets, employment status, debts, and the size of the loan relative to the value of the property they're hoping to buy.

"The quality of the data that you're putting into the underwriting algorithm is crucial," said Aracely Panameño, director of Latino affairs for the Center for Responsible Lending. "If the data that you're putting in is based on historical discrimination, then you're basically cementing the discrimination at the other end."

Research has shown that payday loan sellers usually place branches in neighborhoods populated mainly by people of color, where bank branches are less common. As a result, residents are more likely to use these predatory services to borrow money. This creates lopsided, incomplete credit histories because banks report both good and bad financial behavior to credit bureaus, while payday loan services only report missed payments.

Gig workers who are people of color are more likely to report that those jobs are their primary source of income — rather than a side hustle they're using for extra cash — than white gig workers. Having multiple sources of income or unconventional employment can complicate the verification process for a mortgage, as Crystal Marie and Eskias McDaniels learned.

Considering an applicant's assets beyond the down payment, which lenders call "reserves," can cause particular problems for people of color. People with fatter bank accounts present a lower risk because they can more easily weather a setback that would leave others unable to pay the mortgage. But, largely due to intergenerational wealth and past racist policies, the typical white family in America today has eight times the wealth of a typical Black family and five times the wealth of a Latino family. People of color are more likely to have smaller savings accounts and smaller (or nonexistent) stock portfolios than white people.

"This is a relatively new world of automated underwriting engines that by intent may not discriminate but by effect likely do," said David Stevens, a former president and CEO of the Mortgage Bankers Association, now an independent financial consultant.

Not even home valuations are free from controversy. The president of the trade group representing

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real estate appraisers, who determine property values for loans, recently acknowledged that racial bias is prevalent in the industry and launched new programs to combat it.

"Any type of data that you look at from the financial services space has a high tendency to be highly correlated to race," said Rice, of the National Fair Housing Alliance.

In written statements, Fannie said its software analyzes applications "without regard to race," and both Fannie and Freddie said their algorithms are routinely evaluated for compliance with fair lending laws, internally and by the FHFA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD said in an email to The Markup that it has asked the pair to make changes in underwriting criteria as a result of those reviews but would not disclose the details.

"This analysis includes a review to ensure that model inputs are not serving as proxies for race or other protected classes," Chad Wandler, Freddie's director of public relations, said in a written statement. He declined to elaborate on what the review entails or how often it's done.

No one outside Fannie and Freddie knows exactly how the factors in their underwriting software are used or weighted; the formulas are closely held secrets. Not even the companies' regulator, the FHFA, appears to know, beyond broad strokes, exactly how the software scores applicants, according to Stevens, who served as Federal Housing commissioner and assistant secretary for housing at HUD during the Obama administration.

The Markup's analysis does not include decisions made by Fannie's and Freddie's underwriting algorithms because, while lenders are required to report those decisions to the government, the CFPB scrubs them from public mortgage data, arguing that including them "would likely disclose information about the applicant or borrower that is not otherwise public and may be harmful or sensitive." Lenders' ultimate mortgage decisions are public, however. Borrowers' names are not reported to the government and addresses are not in the public data.

Fannie and Freddie declined to answer our questions about why their algorithms' decisions are excluded from the public data but said in a 2014 letter to the CFPB that the revelation could allow their decision-making algorithms to be reverse-engineered.

Loan officers say the software's decisions are mysterious even to them.

"When you run so many deals through the automated system, you'll look at one deal that didn't get an approval, and you just know that that's a better client than someone else that might've gotten approved," said Ashley Thomas III, a broker and owner of LA Top Broker, Inc., a minority-owned real estate agency and brokerage in South Los Angeles. "That lack of transparency in the technology is very concerning."

The Community Home Lenders Association sent a letter to Fannie and Freddie in April complaining about unannounced changes to both of their underwriting software programs that members discovered when applicants who had previously been approved suddenly were denied.

Scott Olson, executive director of CHLA, said there's no good reason to keep lenders in the dark: "The more transparent, the more clear the guidance is, the easier it is for borrowers to know what they need to do to be in a position to qualify."

Earlier this month — and weeks after we began asking about its algorithms — Fannie announced in a news release that it would start incorporating on-time rent payments in its loan approval software starting in mid-September. When we asked about the timing of that change, spokesperson Katie Penote emailed The Markup a statement saying the company wanted prospective borrowers "to have this option as soon as possible" but was silent about what prompted it.

In addition to using Fannie's or Freddie's software, many large lenders also run applicants through their institutions' own underwriting software, which may be more stringent. How those programs work is even more of a mystery; they are also proprietary.

When we examined the reasons lenders listed for denying mortgages in 2019, the most common reason across races and ethnicities, with the exception of Native Americans, was that applicants had too much debt relative to their incomes. When lenders did list "credit history" as the reason for denial, it was cited more often for Black applicants than white ones in 2019: 33% versus 21%.

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When we examined the decisions by individual lenders, many denied people of color more than white applicants. An additional statistical analysis showed that several were at least 100% more likely to deny people of color than similar white borrowers. Among them: the mortgage companies owned by nation's three largest home builders.

The two principal laws forbidding housing and lending discrimination are the 1968 Fair Housing Act and the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act. An alphabet soup of federal agencies can refer evidence of violations of these laws to HUD or the Justice Department for investigation, but referrals have dropped precipitously over the past decade.

Marcia Fudge, who took over HUD leadership earlier this year, told Axios in June that part of the reason Black ownership rates are so low in America is that "we have never totally enforced the Fair Housing Act." In an email, HUD press secretary Meaghan Lynch told The Markup that Fudge intends to tackle "systemic discrimination in the housing and credit markets that is at the heart of the racial homeownership gap."

"We do have laws that explicitly protect against discrimination, and yet you still see these disparities that you're finding, so that suggests that we need better enforcement of existing laws, and more investigations," said Kevin Stein, deputy director of the California Reinvestment Coalition. "Agencies need to do a better job of ferreting out discrimination and taking serious action once they find it."

Another key housing law, the federal Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) of 1977, allows the federal government to penalize lenders who fail to invest in low-income or blighted neighborhoods but makes no requirements regarding borrowers' race. Stein's group has lobbied for the law to be reformed.

Lenders who violate fair lending rules can be punished with fines in the millions of dollars. Rep. Al Green, a Texas Democrat, has sponsored legislation wending its way through Congress that would make it a crime to engage in lending discrimination.

"Banks already have laws that punish people who commit fraud," he said. "You can be imprisoned for — I hope you have your seatbelt on — 30 years. Why not have some similar law that deals with banks who are invidiously discriminating against people who are trying to borrow money?"

And some fair lending advocates have begun to ask whether the value system in mortgage lending should be tweaked.

"As an industry, we need to think about, what are the less discriminatory alternatives, even if they are a valid predictor of risk," said David Sanchez, a former Federal Housing Finance Agency policy analyst who currently directs research and development at the nonprofit National Community Stabilization Trust. "Because if we let risk alone govern all of our decisions, we are going to end up in the exact same place we are now when it comes to racial equity in this country."

Crystal Marie McDaniels said whatever effect race may have had on her denial, it wasn't overt.

"I'm not sure you ever really know, because there's no klansmen in our yard or anything — but it's definitely something we always think about," she said. "It's just something that we always understand might be a possibility."

The lender, loanDepot, denied race had anything to do with the decision. The company's vice president of communications, Lori Wildrick, said in an email that the company follows the law and expects "fair and equitable treatment" for every applicant. "We take the issues raised by Ms. (McDaniels) very seriously and are conducting a thorough review of her concerns."

Crystal Marie said buying a house was crucial for her because she wants to pass on wealth to her son someday, giving him an advantage she never had. So when the loan officer told her the deal wasn't going to happen, she refused to give up.

With the help of their real estate agent, and multiple emails from her employer on her behalf, she and her husband Eskias pushed back against the denial.

Around 8 p.m. on the night before the original closing date, Crystal Marie got an email from the lender: "You're cleared to close."

She still doesn't understand how the lender went from a no to a yes, but she was relieved and elated.

"It means so much to me, as a Black person, to own property in a place where not that many genera-

tions ago you were property," said Crystal Marie, who said she is descended from slaves in neighboring South Carolina.

She said her family has always had a fraught relationship with money. Some relatives were so mistrustful of banks that they'd insisted on dealing only in cash, she said, making it impossible to build up credit or wealth for future generations.

"It's meant so much," she said, "that we were able to go through this process and finally, eventually, be successful."

This story was reported by The Markup and the story and data were distributed by The Associated Press.

Poland halts Afghan airlift over safety as US deadline looms

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland said Wednesday it halted its airlift evacuations from Kabul's international airport over safety concerns, as Western nations prepare to end operations helping those fleeing the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan ahead of America's looming withdrawal.

The decision comes as U.S. President Joe Biden declared the day before that he is sticking to his Aug. 31 deadline for completing the risky airlift from Kabul.

The Taliban, who have wrested back control of the country nearly 20 years after being ousted in a U.S.-led invasion following the 9/11 attacks, have insisted the airlift must end on Aug. 31. Any decision by Biden to stay longer could reignite a war between the group and the approximately 5,800 American troops and other coalition forces who are executing the airlift at Kabul airport.

Marcin Przydacz, a Polish deputy foreign minister, said that a group taken from Kabul and now in Uzbekistan was the last evacuated by Poland. Another plane is on its way to Warsaw. He said his nation made its decision after consulting with the U.S. and British officials.

"After a long analysis of reports on the security situation we cannot risk the lives of our diplomats and of our soldiers any longer," Przydacz said.

A number of troops will remain briefly to carry out some procedures that include closing the base, Przydacz said.

Poland has used over a dozen planes to bring hundreds of evacuees to Warsaw. Some later traveled on to other countries.

The chaos at the airport has transfixed the world after the Taliban's blitz across Afghanistan saw it seize control of a nation that received hundreds of billions of dollars in reconstruction aid and security support since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion that followed the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Afghans poured onto the tarmac last week, and some clung to a U.S. military transport plane as it took off, later plunging to their deaths. At least seven people died that day, and another seven died Sunday in a panicked stampede. An Afghan security force member was killed Monday in a gunfight under unclear circumstances.

Thousands have thronged the airport in the days since, with the Taliban firing into the air in an attempt to control the crowds.

European nations, including American allies Germany and the United Kingdom, had pressed for a longer window to continue evacuations past the deadline next week. CIA director William Burns even traveled to Kabul on Monday to meet the Taliban's top political leader. However, Biden has stuck to the deadline, even after an emergency online summit of the Group of Seven nations.

Patricia Lewis, director of the international security program at the Chatham House international affairs think-tank, said the practical deadline for the evacuations to stop was "the next couple of days."

"You can't just say, 'OK, midnight, we'll stop now, we'll just pack up gently,'" she said. "There's a huge amount of stuff that has to be done, including getting all the people out who are doing the job and all the equipment, all of the stuff that they need to get out, that they don't want the Taliban to get hold of."

"All of the allies are highly dependent on the U.S. for military cover, particularly air cover," Lewis said.

"They can't put their own people at risk, so it really depends on when the U.S. starts packing up."

Associated Press writer Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, contributed to this report.

More AP coverage of Afghanistan: <https://apnews.com/hub/afghanistan>

Japan further expands virus emergency areas as cases surge

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan expanded its coronavirus state of emergency on Wednesday for a second week in a row, adding eight more prefectures as a surge in infections fueled by the delta variant strains the country's health care system.

The government last week extended the state of emergency until Sept. 12 and expanded the areas covered to 13 prefectures from six including Tokyo. With four new prefectures added to a separate "quasi-emergency" status, 33 of Japan's 47 prefectures are now under some type of emergency measures.

Eight prefectures were upgraded from quasi-emergency status to a full emergency. They include Hokkaido and Miyagi in the north, Aichi and Gifu in central Japan, and Hiroshima and Okayama in the west.

"In order to protect the people's lives, the priority is to maintain the health care system," Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said as he announced the emergency. "In order to overcome this crisis led by the delta strain, I seek further cooperation from everyone."

Japan's state of emergency relies on requirements for eateries to close at 8 p.m. and not serve alcohol, but the measures are increasingly defied. Unenforceable social distancing and tele-working requests for the public and their employers are also largely ignored due to growing complacency.

The Japanese capital has been under the emergency since July 12, but new daily cases have increased more than tenfold since then to about 5,000 in Tokyo and 25,000 nationwide. Hospital beds are quickly filling and many people must now recover at home, including some who require supplemental oxygen.

More than 35,000 patients in Tokyo are recovering at home, about one-third of them unable to find a hospital or hotel vacancies immediately. Only a small percentage of hospitals are taking virus patients, either for financial reasons or because they lack the capability to treat the infections, experts say.

Suga said Wednesday that those recovering at home will receive medical attention via phone calls, online or visits by community doctors and that the government will set up temporary hospitals where patients can receive supplementary oxygen or other treatment.

Japan has weathered the pandemic better than many other countries, with around 15,600 deaths nationwide since the start, but its vaccination efforts lag behind other wealthy nations. About 40% of the population has been fully vaccinated, mainly elderly people.

Economy and Fiscal Policy Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, also in charge of the COVID-19 measures, said Wednesday that infections are spreading among those in their 20s to 50s who are largely unvaccinated. He urged them to take extra caution.

"Just imagine you may be the one getting infected tomorrow," he said.

Suga said the government will distribute 800,000 antigen test kits to kindergartens, elementary and junior high schools for quick detection and isolation of patients when schools reopen after the summer vacation, while promising to accelerate vaccinations for teachers.

Rising infections among schoolchildren and teenagers could accelerate the surge as they begin returning to school, said Dr. Shigeru Omi, top government medical advisor. He proposed schools curtail activity and urged high schools and colleges to return to online classes.

"Infections in Tokyo are showing no signs of slowing, and the severely tight medical systems will continue for a while," he told a parliamentary session Wednesday.

The government has faced criticism for holding this summer's Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics despite strong opposition from the public. Officials deny any direct link between the games and the spike in infections.

Duterte confirms he'll run for Philippines VP next year

By KIKO ROSARIO and DAVID RISING Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Tough-talking Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has confirmed rumblings that he will run next year for vice president, in what critics say is an attempt at an end-run around constitutional term limits.

Duterte, who is notorious for his vulgar rhetoric and crackdown on illegal drugs, which has killed thousands of mostly petty suspects, said in comments broadcast Wednesday that he will run for vice president to "continue the crusade."

"I will run for vice president," he said. "I'm worried about the drugs, insurgency. Well, number one is insurgency, then criminality, drugs."

The Philippines has been struggling through the COVID-19 pandemic, with rising infections and death rates and a slow vaccination rollout, but Duterte's popularity ratings have remained high.

Polls suggest that running Duterte in tandem with his daughter, Sara Duterte, currently the mayor of Davao City, as the presidential candidate would be a strong pairing, said Manila-based political analyst Richard Heydarian.

The idea of the two running together has been discussed since 2019, he said, though Duterte advisers have reportedly said that he has suggested he might not run for vice president if his daughter decides to announce a bid for president.

"The campaign for Sara Duterte has more or less kicked off, it seems, almost irrespective of what Duterte's position will be," Heydarian said. "A Duterte/Duterte tandem is increasingly looking like the formidable team to beat in the next year's elections."

Further muddying the waters, however, Sara Duterte posted on Facebook later Wednesday that her father had told her he would run for vice president with his former aide, Senator Christopher "Bong" Go running for president.

She did not address her own aspirations, but said her father and Go should announce publicly that they would run together if they have made that decision.

"I respectfully advise them to stop talking about me and make me the reason for them running or not running," she wrote.

Philippine presidents are limited by the 1987 Constitution to a single six-year term. At least two former presidents, Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, have made successful runs for lower public offices after serving as president, but not for vice president.

If Duterte goes ahead with his run, it will likely face court challenges from the opposition, though Heydarian noted the Supreme Court has strongly supported the president's moves in the past.

A new opposition coalition, 1Sambayan, whose name means One Nation, said Duterte's decision came as "no surprise," and made the coalition "more determined in unifying the democratic forces in responding to the challenge."

"It shows a clear mockery of our constitution and democratic process," the group said. "The candidacy is both legally and morally wrong, and we trust that the Filipino people will realize his brazen, selfish and self-serving motives."

Duterte, 76, had previously hinted that he may run for vice president, and his confirmation Wednesday came after a senior official of his PDP-Laban party on Tuesday said that the president had agreed to run as its candidate.

Duterte "agreed to make the sacrifice and heed the clamor of the people" to run in the May 9 national elections, said Karlo Nograles, PDP-Laban's executive vice president.

The vice president is elected separately from the president under Philippine law. Those who serve in the post could potentially be propelled to the top role if the president dies or is incapacitated for any reason.

If elected vice president, the move would be reminiscent of the machinations of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who Duterte once called his "favorite hero," to hold on to power despite being constitutionally

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barred from seeking a third consecutive term as president in 2008.

Instead, Dmitry Medvedev was elected president and Putin assumed the nominally subservient position of prime minister from 2008 to 2012. Putin was then reelected president in 2012, and Medvedev slid into the prime minister role.

"This is not to say that, should Sara Duterte become the president, that she will be essentially proxy for the president," Heydarian said. "In Davao the two were together in charge (and) there were significant divergences in approaches and policy differences ... so we may see some iteration of that, if ever the tandem makes it to the presidency."

After the news broke that Duterte said he would run, opposition Sen. Risa Hontiveros warned that electing Duterte as vice president would mean a continuation of his authoritarian policies.

"Next year a lot is really at stake," she said on the ABS-CBN News Channel.

"The president started his presidential run with a lot of drama, and it looks like he'll be leaving us the same way, trying to confuse us, and we the Filipino people still searching for a true leader."

In June, the International Criminal Court's outgoing chief prosecutor said that a preliminary examination found reason to believe crimes against humanity had been committed during Duterte's anti-drug crackdown, and the "shadow" of that and the discussion of possible sanctions against him also likely factor into Duterte's calculus, Heydarian said.

Still, he said, if the past is any guide, Duterte's true intentions might not be known for some time.

"Let's not forget that President Duterte is known for, or notorious for, his strategy of hedging until the 11th hour, or even past the 11th hour," Heydarian said.

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Rising reported from Bangkok.

Biden to tackle cybersecurity with tech, finance leaders

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is meeting Wednesday with top executives from some of the country's leading technology companies and financial institutions as the White House works to enlist the private sector's help in firming up cybersecurity defenses against increasingly sophisticated attacks.

The summit comes during a relentless stretch of ransomware attacks that have targeted critical infrastructure, in some cases extorting multi-million-dollar payments from major corporations, as well as other illicit cyber operations that U.S. authorities have linked to foreign hackers.

Though ransomware is one focus of Wednesday's gathering, the purpose of the meeting is broader and centered on identifying the "root causes of malicious cyber activities" and ways in which the private sector can help bolster cybersecurity, said a senior administration official who briefed reporters about the gathering on the condition of anonymity.

Among the expected guests at Wednesday's summit are Apple chief executive Tim Cook, Amazon chief executive Andy Jassy and Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Alphabet, Google's parent companies. The tech industry is also expected to be represented by the leaders of IBM, Microsoft and ADP. Besides Biden, multiple cabinet secretaries and national security officials will represent the administration.

The meeting is taking place as Biden's national security team has been consumed by the troop withdrawal in Afghanistan and the chaotic evacuation of Americans and Afghan citizens. The fact that the meeting remained on the calendar indicates that cybersecurity is a major agenda item for the administration.

Financial industry executives are also expected, including the chief executives of Bank of America and JPMorgan Chase, as well as representatives from the energy, education and insurance sectors.

The broad cross-section of participants underscores how cyber attacks have cut across virtually all sectors of commerce. In May, for instance, hackers associated with a Russia-based cyber gang launched a ransomware attack on a major fuel pipeline in the U.S., causing the company to temporarily halt operations. Weeks later, the world's largest meat processor, JBS SA, was hit with an attack by a different hacking group.

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In both instances, the companies made multi-million-dollar ransom payments in an effort to get back online.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Through four wars, toll mounts on a Gaza neighborhood

By ADAM GELLER and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

BEIT HANOUN, Gaza Strip (AP) — The electricity is out again tonight in what's left of Zaki and Jawaher Nassir's neighborhood. But from the shell of their sitting room, its wall blown open by Israeli missiles, twilight and a neighbor's fire are enough to see by.

Here, down a narrow lane called Al-Baali, just over a mile from the heavily fortified border separating northern Gaza and Israel, cinderblock homes press against each other before opening to a modest courtyard below the Nassirs' perch.

Until this neighborhood was hammered by the fourth war in 13 years between Israel and Hamas militants, the Nassirs often sipped coffee by a window, watching children play volleyball using a rope in place of a net. Other days, the couple looked out as relatives pulled fruit off the yard's fig and olive trees.

Now they spend day after day surveying the wreckage of the May 14 airstrike from broken plastic chairs while awaiting building inspectors, the gaping holes in surrounding homes serving as windows into their neighborhood's upheaval.

In the skeleton of one building, children play video games atop a slab of fallen concrete. In another, a man stares out from beside a bed covered in debris, ignoring the ceiling fan drooping overhead like a dead flower. The smell of pulverized cement and plaster dust hangs in the air.

Each afternoon, demolition workers arrive to hack away at this real-life stage set so that the Nassirs and their neighbors can start rebuilding -- again.

"We have no peace in our lives and we expect that war can happen again at any time," says Zaki Nassir, who lost a nephew from the household across the yard in the first war, another from next door in this year's war, and whose home is still scarred by shelling during the third war.

The story of the Nassirs, their neighbors and the toll of four wars is Gaza's story.

TO VIEW an enhanced interactive version of this story, [click here](#).

Since 2008, more than 4,000 Palestinians have been killed in the conflicts, according to the U.N. While many were fighters for Hamas or other militant groups, more than half were civilians. Thousands have been injured. On the Israeli side, the death toll from the four wars stands at 106, officials say.

The Islamic militants, who reject Israel's right to exist, have fired thousands of rockets across the border during the conflicts, operating from a maze of underground tunnels. Israel, one of a number of countries that label Hamas a terrorist organization, has repeatedly hit the Strip with overwhelming firepower that, despite its high-tech precision, continues to kill civilians.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has likened Israel's periodic offensives to mowing an unruly lawn. But Israel's policy of degrading Hamas -- and inflicting a toll designed to undermine its public support -- makes little pretense of resolving Gaza's deepening crisis. And international efforts focus only on relief and reconstruction. Meanwhile, each war has boosted approval of Hamas, often when it was flagging.

All told, the wars have done more than \$5 billion in damage to Gaza's buildings, roads, electrical and water systems, roughly double the Strip's annual economic output. Nearly 250,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed.

The wars, coupled with a crippling blockade and the fallout of infighting between Palestinian factions, also have scarred Gaza in ways that can be difficult to quantify.

"It's not (just) about you are losing a building. You are losing the hope that things will get better," says Omar Shaban, an economist who runs a think tank in Gaza City. "Forty percent of the population was

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born under siege.”

Gaza’s crisis is rooted in events that came long before Hamas seized control in 2007. More than half of those packed into the Strip are from Palestinian families who fled or were driven from what is now Israel during the 1948 war over its formation. But the recurrent fighting and the blockade of recent years have made life in Gaza far worse.

Six years ago, U.N. officials warned that wars and economic isolation had done so much to intensify Gaza’s “de-development” that it risked becoming uninhabitable by 2020. Since then, the Strip’s 2 million residents have endured yet another war, even as the economy teeters, with unemployment close to 50 percent, among the world’s highest.

“Every year we write that, OK, Gaza hit rock bottom,” says Rami Alazzeq, a U.N. economist who has studied the long-term costs. “And every year we repeat the same sentence because, actually, it gets worse and worse.”

The Nassirs and their neighbors, many holding on to memories of life before Gaza was so embattled, are all too familiar with that narrative of despair. But they resist it, even after a fourth war.

“This is what we have,” Zaki Nassir says. “We have to live.”

Five decades ago, Zaki Nassir’s father moved his family to a plot of farmland in what was then a village. Today, three- and four-story homes along Al-Baali Street -- at the heart of that tract and named after Zaki’s father -- are filled with Nassirs.

“There were not a lot of residents here like there are today,” says Nassir, 47, recalling the family’s citrus trees, greenhouses and cattle. Some of his brothers were among the tens of thousands of Gaza residents who crossed daily to work in Israel. “Things back then were way better in those days.”

Even then, though, it was no paradise. Since the 1967 war that saw Israel take control of Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, the rights and movements of Palestinians have been dictated by Israeli security concerns. Critics call it a form of apartheid. That infuriates Israel, where Gaza is often spoken of as a foreign country, separate from the larger Palestinian conflict.

Over the years, the Nassir family -- 13 daughters and 12 sons born to two wives -- grew with Beit Hanoun, which today has a population of 57,000. Beyond the archway marking the entrance to town, an ever-present Israeli surveillance balloon hovers over the border wall, keeping the community under watch.

As the Nassir siblings married, they built homes on much of the family’s land, still a few minutes by donkey cart from fields of grain and fruit trees.

Until he was sidelined by a heart condition and the pandemic, Zaki Nassir’s job with the Palestinian Authority had him inspecting area farms and, more recently, working part-time at an agricultural college. Jawaher, 46, is expecting their ninth child in September.

Life in Beit Hanoun deteriorated sharply after Israel withdrew settlers and troops in a 2005 disengagement, isolating Gaza. Hamas, which had killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings, filled the vacuum.

In 2006, militants kidnapped an Israeli soldier, prompting an Israeli incursion that destroyed roads in northern Gaza and flattened groves. After winning Palestinian legislative elections, Hamas prevailed over the rival Fatah party in a clash for control of the Strip. Israel and Egypt imposed a strict economic blockade.

Then, in the last days of 2008, Israel launched a major military offensive after heavy rocket and mortar fire by militants across the border. Soon the first war came to Al-Baali Street.

On an afternoon about 2½ weeks into the war, Israel’s military declared a brief pause so residents could gather needed supplies. Khaldiya Nassir was preparing the family’s remaining vegetables when her husband, Adham -- Zaki Nassir’s nephew -- announced he was taking his donkey and cart out to replenish the family’s supply of flour.

“We told him not be deceived. There is no truce. They are lying,” says Khaldiya Nassir, sitting at the entranceway of her house, a pale pink structure that runs the length of the courtyard.

Adham -- a cart driver prone to working long hours, often returning with boxes of mangoes for his six children -- went anyway.

On his way home that afternoon, a woman flagged him down, pleading for help with her wounded

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daughter. As the 38-year-old Adham carried the girl from their house, he was wounded in the neck and back by a spray of gunfire. Moments later, a rocket obliterated his cart.

Evacuated to an Egyptian hospital, Adham died three weeks later.

His wife blames Israeli special forces. The Israeli military said at the time that he had been carrying rockets, but he was only carrying what they needed to eat, Khaldiya says.

For five years afterward, Khaldiya Nassir set aside much of the orphans' assistance her family received through the Palestinian Authority, the Fatah-led government that still administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. With it, she built a home filled with personal touches, like kitchen tiles illustrated with coffee cups and doors decorated with floral patterns.

This Ramadan, days before the war erupted, her children hand-cut paper hearts to celebrate. They still hang from the ceilings of rooms littered with chunks of concrete. Much of the house will have to be torn down, U.N. inspectors say.

"Everything is gone," she says. "We cannot afford any more fear."

THE FIRST WAR'S TOLL: About 1,400 Palestinians killed and 13 on the Israeli side. Homes damaged or destroyed: 60,000. Fifteen hospitals and 41 primary health care centers were damaged, two destroyed.

Among the casualties were two boys, killed when shells loaded with white phosphorous hit a United Nations-run school where 1,600 people were sheltering.

Phosphorous, used to create smoke screens, was a signature weapon of the first war, which ran from Dec. 27, 2008 to Jan. 18, 2009. Because it burns at up to 1,500 degrees, it caused devastating injuries.

Israel renounced its use in 2013.

With food and construction materials in short supply after the war, Israel continued its blockade, increasing pressure on residents confined to an area less than a tenth the size of the smallest U.S. state.

Israel bars nearly all Palestinians from exiting through its lone crossing for travelers -- a building faced with glass on its side of the border, but with steel doors and a caged enclosure on the Gaza side that give it the feel of a cattle run.

Undeterred by the restrictions, Zaki's brother Jamal and wife Munira took savings from his job driving a taxi and opened the Abu Nashat Grocery, across the street from the courtyard. Jamal, once a construction worker in Israel, ran the shop along with Munira and two of their 12 children, while others drove the taxi.

As neighbors flocked in for cold drinks and other items, earnings grew to \$3,000 a month, paying for family outings to Gaza beaches.

But peace was fleeting. In 2012, after months of Palestinian rocket fire into Israel, an Israeli air strike killed Ahmed Jabari, the leader of Hamas' military wing. The war that followed lasted just eight days, beginning on Nov. 14; this time, the Nassirs and their neighbors were largely spared. But the conflict was never far away.

On Nov. 19, an Israeli bomb dropped on a home in the nearby Jabaliya refugee camp killed a 46-year-old school janitor and his children, ages 4 and 2. A day later, a missile strike killed a farmer and his two children as they gathered mint from their garden in the neighboring town of Beit Lahiya.

"We are the owners of this land, so why does this always happen?" says Kemal Al Kafarna, whose home a few minutes walk from Al-Baali's courtyard had been strafed in 2008, then occupied by Israeli troops.

"We are not against Israeli people, the normal ones. We are against those who come to our country to take it."

THE SECOND WAR'S TOLL: 168 people in Gaza, six Israelis. About 450 homes destroyed between Nov. 14 to 21, along with two stadiums and eight sport clubs; 10,000 homes and more than two dozen schools damaged.

The war marked the first time rockets fired from Gaza reached Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

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In July 2014, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped from a bus stop in the West Bank and found dead weeks later. Members of Hamas eventually claimed responsibility and Israel arrested scores of the group's leaders in the West Bank.

Militants responded by firing rockets from Gaza into southern Israel, igniting a crackdown that exploded into yet another war, from July 8 to Aug. 26. At seven weeks, it was by far the longest and most deadly. Israel launched scores of air attacks on targets throughout the Strip, then sent in ground forces.

In Beit Hanoun, residents were told to evacuate and seek shelter. On Al-Baali street, though, some were reluctant.

Jawaher Nassir, seven months pregnant, worried she might not be strong enough to flee on foot. Three doors down, neighbors Fauzi and Neama Abu Amsha told their sons that they were staying put, insisting that at 63 and 62, the Israeli military would never see them as a threat.

There was little time to argue. With Israeli tanks firing on Beit Hanoun, residents of Al-Baali street joined a tide of people coursing toward a U.N. school providing shelter in Jabaliya. Every few minutes, Jawaher stopped to rest on the side of the road, her strength sapped by Ramadan fasting.

"But when we got to the school we found there was no room for us," she recalls. "We had to stay in the stairwell." The others assigned her the bottom step, while they crowded the floor.

The space became the family's home for the next 51 days. Some 3,000 people took refuge at the school, including one of Zaki's sisters, Wafaa Sihueil, and her husband Thaer.

Two weeks later, a barrage of Israeli artillery shells hit the building around 4:45 a.m. Parents and children lost each other in the smoke.

"We didn't know what was happening," Thaer Sihueil says, visibly upset by the recollection. "After the bombing stopped I started searching for my children. I found them screaming, 'Here I am, Dad!' And then I found my nephews."

One of the teens was dead, his head bloody and disfigured. The other, his shoulder pierced by shrapnel, would survive for three months before dying of infection. More than 20 people died in the attack, one of seven on U.N. schools being used as shelters.

When the war ended in late August, the Sihueils and others returned to a war-scarred neighborhood. Zaki and Jawaher found their home littered with shrapnel, with cracks crossing the ceiling and a hole that funneled in rainwater. In his brother's home next door, an incendiary shell had scorched the ceiling black.

Down the street, neighbor Akram Abu Amsha and his brothers also returned home. But their parents were not in the spot under the stairs where they'd promised to hide. Then the men turned to a narrow space between the buildings -- the most direct escape route, but one readily visible to drones.

"We found them in pieces," Akram says.

THE THIRD WAR'S TOLL: 2,251 Palestinians dead -- about three out of four of them civilians, according to the U.N. Seventy-four people on the Israeli side were killed, including 6 civilians. More than 11,000 Palestinians and 2,400 Israelis injured.

The longest and most devastating of the four conflicts, it destroyed 17,800 homes in Gaza and damaged 150,000. It displaced 100,000 people and inflicted an especially harsh toll on Gaza's children, killing 550, destroying 22 schools and damaging 118 others.

In the aftermath of the 2014 war, Khaldiya Nassir spent \$12,000 mending holes in the ceiling of the house she'd only just finished building.

"This is where we find comfort, in our own place," she says.

With the U.N. giving priority to rebuilding homes that had been destroyed, many neighbors had to pick up the bill for lesser repairs.

A few blocks closer to the border, Kemal Al Kefarna had difficult choices to make. Shelling had perforated the facade of his three-story home with scores of holes, from the front steps to the parapet.

With only enough to replace windows and fix the interior, he left the outside as is: "I will fix it in the

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future when I get money. Even if they destroy it again and again. And if they destroy it after that, my children will fix it."

Seven years passed. But as he forecast, war returned to Beit Hanoun.

This May protests erupted over the anticipated eviction of Palestinian families from homes in east Jerusalem and Israeli restrictions on Ramadan gatherings. That led to a clash with Israeli police at the holy city's Al-Aqsa mosque. Hamas demanded the forces withdraw by 6 p.m. on May 10.

An hour before the deadline, the home of Zaki's older brother, Ali, buzzed with excitement over the imminent birth of his new grandchild. With a couple of hours of light left, another of Ali's sons, 24-year-old Mohamed, told his parents he was going out to pick up grain his employer sought for his horses.

Just outside town, Mohamed pulled his cart alongside the field farmed by 23-year-old Mohamed al-Masri and his family. The men settled on a price for a few bags of grain as the al-Masri children played.

As al-Masri filled the bags, he says, he "heard the rocket coming." A moment later, it exploded into the gathering, killing Mohamed Nassir, a companion and six members of al-Masri's family.

Al-Masri, his right eye, abdomen and leg injured, says he "looked to the right and to the left and I saw the body parts of children. We had all been together just seconds before and now there were just (body) parts all around me."

The Israeli military says the victims were hit by a rocket, fired by militants, that missed its target. Indeed, Hamas and other militant groups fired more than 4,300 rockets toward Israeli cities during the 11-day conflict. But Human Rights Watch recently concluded that the strike was delivered by an Israeli missile.

A half hour after Mohamed Nassir was killed, his brother's wife gave birth to a son -- "a gift from God to mitigate the sadness," Ali Nassir says. They named the baby Mohamed.

Three nights later, the Nassirs and their neighbors hunkered down, the sound of shelling cutting through the dark. In Zaki and Jawaher's second-floor home, the couple and their children clustered in an interior room, away from any windows, the youngest boys sleeping while their oldest daughter studied for a college medical studies test.

Across the yard, dozens of relatives of Itzhak Fayyad packed into the four-story building he shares with his brothers, many sleeping on mattresses they'd carted from homes near the border susceptible to artillery fire.

A little after 12:30 a.m. on May 14, shouts from outside the Fayyad home warned of military fire to the east. Itzhak, 46, ran upstairs to reassure those sleeping on the roof, just as the first of seven Israeli missiles exploded into the courtyard.

The force flung Fayyad to the ground from a fourth-floor window, shattering his right leg. (Hospitalized in Egypt, his family says Fayyad faces at least two months of recovery.) Two buildings away, shrapnel and debris lacerated 27-year-old Shaima Nassir, who relatives say has since required four rounds of surgery to reconnect severed nerves.

Across the yard, the shockwaves flattened the Nassirs' grocery and killed several horses and donkeys. Inside, bricks shaken loose from the wall fell on Jalal Nassir, leaving his back twisted in pain.

"I put my fingers in my ears and we were screaming," says Lama Sihueil, Zaki's 14-year-old niece.

"May nobody, neither Jews nor Arabs, ever experience such a night," Fayyad's brother, Khalil, says.

The Israeli military told The Associated Press it targeted Al-Baali because the area sat atop an underground tunnel belonging to Palestinian militants. The Air Force had used "precision weapons" to demolish the tunnel, while avoiding civilian casualties, it said.

It is true that Israeli missiles did not hit any of the homes directly. But the force blew walls and ceilings apart and left deep craters in the street and yard.

Residents have returned to what's left. Inspectors, though, say most of the buildings facing the courtyard will have to be torn down and rebuilt or require major repairs. Looking over the damage, they recall visiting some of the same homes after previous wars.

U.N. engineer Sayeed Abu Shaban has inspected destroyed or damaged homes since the first conflict. "You see the same thing every couple of years," he says. "Unfortunately, only civilians pay the price. That's here and in Israel."

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THE FOURTH WAR'S TOLL: More than 250 dead in Gaza, including 129 civilians, according to the U.N.; 13 deaths in Israel. More than 4,000 homes destroyed or severely damaged, and thousands more requiring repair.

Worst hit was densely populated Gaza City, where airstrikes destroyed a number of high-rise apartment buildings and 122 were killed.

If his father was alive to see what has become of Al-Baali Street, he would surely weep, Zaki Nassir says. Still, it's home.

"Our memories are here," Jawaher Nassir says, sitting beside a bare wall that used to hold photos of her children and of her husband receiving his diploma in agriculture.

U.N. inspectors say the building will have to come down. The Nassirs and their neighbors say they'll rebuild. Until then, most sleep in apartments rented nearby or at the homes of relatives, returning each morning despite inspectors' warnings not to spend time in the wreckage.

"They said it's not safe, that we should be afraid," Zaki says. He grins, reassuring a visitor that if the house begins to collapse, "I'll hold it up so you can get out."

But even after four wars in 13 years, and with every expectation that conflict will erupt again, he is staying put.

"We've been here for a month," he says, "and so far, nothing bad has happened."

Associated Press reporters Helen Wieffering in Washington, Wafaa Shurafa and Felipe Dana in Gaza and Josef Federman and Joseph Krauss in Jerusalem contributed to this story.

Jewish prayers held discreetly at contested Jerusalem shrine

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As police protected them, three Jewish men stepped forward, placed their hands out at chest level and began reciting prayers in low tones in the shadow of Jerusalem's golden Dome of the Rock.

Jewish prayers at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, were once unthinkable. But they have quietly become the new norm in recent years, flying in the face of longstanding convention, straining a delicate status quo and raising fears that they could trigger a new wave of violence in the Middle East.

"What is happening is a blatant and dangerous violation of the status quo," said Sheikh Omar al-Kiswani, a top official with the Waqf, the Jordanian-backed Islamic trust that administers the site. "The Israeli police must stop providing protection to extremists."

The hilltop compound is the holiest site for Jews, revered as the location of two ancient temples destroyed in antiquity. Three times a day for 2,000 years, Jews have turned to face it during prayers. It also is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam.

Israel captured the hilltop, along with the rest of east Jerusalem and the walled Old City, in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed it, a move that was not recognized by most of the international community. The Palestinians seek east Jerusalem as capital of a future independent state.

The flashpoint site is the emotional epicenter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many rounds of deadly fighting in the decades-long conflict have erupted around it. The most recent was in May, when an Israeli police crackdown on stone-throwing Palestinian protesters inside the mosque helped precipitate an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and violent upheaval in Israeli cities.

Since 1967, a loose set of rules known as the "status quo" have governed day-to-day operations at the site. Any actual or perceived changes to the status quo has the potential to ignite violence.

For decades, Jews avoided worship at the site for religious reasons. Many leading rabbis, including the country's Chief Rabbinate, ruled after the 1967 war that Jews "should not enter the entire area of the

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Temple Mount" out of concern for ritual impurity and uncertainty over the exact location of the ancient Temple's holy of holies.

But attitudes are changing, particularly among Israel's hard-line, religious nationalist right wing.

Amnon Ramon, a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Center for Policy Research, said the issue of Jewish prayer has transformed in recent decades "from a matter that was on the fringe to a subject in the mainstream for the religious nationalist public." Most in that community appears to support some degree of Jewish worship there, as do a growing number of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

New Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who leads a small, hard-line religious party, caused an uproar last month on the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av when he said Israel was committed to protecting "freedom of worship" for Jews at the compound. His office quickly issued a clarification stating there was "no change whatsoever" in the status quo.

Rabbi Eliyahu Vebr, head of the Temple Mount Yeshiva, said that for over a year, he has entered the site daily, most of the time with at least 10 Jewish men necessary for a group prayer.

"So long as things are not conspicuous, in a way that disturbs, the police allow it," he said. Some days there is friction with Muslim worshippers and authorities, he said, but mostly there isn't. Palestinian media, including those of the Islamist militant group Hamas, publish videos almost daily of "Jewish settlers storming the Al-Aqsa Mosque."

Flanked by a detachment of paramilitary Border Police troopers, a quorum of 10 men entered the shrine on a recent morning and made their way to a secluded area of the eastern side of the compound. They prayed discreetly in hushed tones while a handful of guards from the Waqf watched from a distance.

Kiswani, who is the Waqf's director of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, said Muslim authorities have strongly protested the Jewish prayers, both to Israeli police and to the Jordanian government.

But he said Israeli police forcibly prevent Waqf personnel from approaching Jewish worshippers and in some cases, arrest or expel them. "The mosque is a pure right for Muslims alone, and there is no prayer in the mosque except for Muslims," he said.

Israeli police said its forces operate "in accordance with the terms of visitation customary at the site," while maintaining public order. It said the regulations for visitors are determined by the government and court decisions.

Akiva Ariel, a spokesman for Beyadenu, a Jewish activist group advocating for Jewish prayer at the site, said things began to change under the government of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who led the country for 12 years before he was ousted in May.

"The police turn a blind eye" to the worship, so long as it's done inconspicuously, Ariel said. During the recent visit, the men conducted the ancient blessing, in which priests make V's with each hand, spreading their ring and middle fingers, and quietly recited a special benediction, while others performed surreptitious bows while praying. But they did not don prayer shawls or phylacteries — small cases holding slips inscribed with passages of Scripture bound to the head and arm— that are customarily worn during morning prayers.

For many Jewish Temple Mount activists, the main aim is a place for Jewish worship at the site, Ariel said. "This is our holiest place. We aren't demanding that Muslim be evicted from here, heaven forbid," he said.

Palestinians have long feared that Israel may change routines at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, such as partitioning the site, similar to a holy site in Hebron revered by Muslims as the Ibrahimi Mosque and by Jews as the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

Ramon said that Palestinians fear that if they give an inch, Israel may take a mile.

"It's hard to know how and when it will explode," he said. "But it definitely can happen."

1st sentence to be handed down in Michigan gov's kidnap plot

By DAVID EGGERT and ED WHITE Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Prosecutors preparing for the first prison sentence in an alleged plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer are loudly signaling to five other defendants that a key insider

has shared extraordinary details about the operation.

Ty Garbin cooperated within weeks of being arrested, willingly putting a "target on his back to begin his own redemption," the government said in a court filing.

Prosecutors want U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker to take that into consideration Wednesday when he sentences Garbin for conspiracy. The government is recommending a nine-year prison term, a long stretch but one that would be even longer if he had not assisted investigators after being charged.

The FBI last October said it broke up a scheme to kidnap the Democratic governor by anti-government extremists who were upset over Whitmer's coronavirus restrictions. Six men were charged in federal court, while others were charged in state court with aiding them.

When the kidnapping case was filed, Whitmer pinned some blame on then-President Donald Trump, saying his refusal to denounce far-right groups had inspired extremists across the U.S.

The governor last year put major restrictions on personal movement and the economy because of COVID-19, although many limits were eventually lifted. The Michigan Capitol was the site of rallies, including ones with gun-toting protesters calling for Whitmer's removal.

Whitmer exchanged barbs with Trump on social media, with Trump declaring in April 2020, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"

Garbin, a 25-year-old airplane mechanic, is the only federal defendant to plead guilty in the plot; the others are awaiting trial.

"He filled in gaps in the government's knowledge by recounting conversations and actions that did not include any government informant or ability to record," Assistant U.S. Attorney Nils Kessler said.

"Second, he confirmed that the plot was real; not just 'big talk between crackpots,' as suggested by co-defendants. Third, he dispelled any suggestion that the conspirators were entrapped by government informants," the prosecutor said.

In his plea agreement, Garbin said the six men trained at his property near Luther, Michigan, constructing a "shoot house" to resemble Whitmer's vacation home and "assaulting it with firearms."

A Tennessee-based group called Parents for Peace said it helps people move away from extremist movements. It is asking the judge for a "minimal" prison sentence, noting that Garbin's rocky childhood and other factors contributed to his decisions.

The group's hotline has "received a significant increase in calls during the COVID-19 pandemic," Parents for Peace said in a court filing. "Extremism has continued to be on the rise, and as more and more people were stuck at home, online and found their social networks broken, people turned to extremism."

White reported from Detroit.

Supreme Court orders 'Remain in Mexico' policy reinstated

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court says the Biden administration likely violated federal law in trying to end a Trump-era program that forces people to wait in Mexico while seeking asylum in the U.S.

With three liberal justices in dissent, the high court on Tuesday refused to block a lower court ruling ordering the administration to reinstate the program informally known as Remain in Mexico.

It's not clear how many people will be affected and how quickly. Under the lower court ruling, the administration must make a "good faith effort" to restart the program.

There also is nothing preventing the administration from trying again to end the program, formally called Migrant Protection Protocols.

A federal judge in Texas had previously ordered that the program be reinstated last week. Both he and the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused the administration's request to put the ruling on hold.

Justice Samuel Alito ordered a brief delay to allow the full court time to consider the administration's appeal to keep the ruling on hold while the case continues to make its way through the courts.

The 5th Circuit ordered expedited consideration of the administration's appeal.

The court offered little explanation for its action, although it cited its opinion from last year rejecting

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the Trump administration's effort to end another immigration program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. In that case, the court held that the decision to end DACA was "arbitrary and capricious," in violation of federal law.

The administration has "failed to show a likelihood of success on the claim that the memorandum rescinding the Migrant Protection Protocols was not arbitrary and capricious," the court wrote Tuesday in an unsigned order.

The three dissenting justices, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, did not write an opinion expressing their views of the case.

In a statement, the Department of Homeland Security said it regrets that the high court declined to issue a stay. The department said it would continue to challenge the district court's order.

The American Civil Liberties Union called on the administration to present a fuller rationale for ending Remain in Mexico that could withstand court scrutiny.

"The government must take all steps available to fully end this illegal program, including by re-terminating it with a fuller explanation. What it must not do is use this decision as cover for abandoning its commitment to restore a fair asylum system," said Omar Jadwat, director of the ACLU's immigrant rights project.

During Donald Trump's presidency, the policy required tens of thousands of migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. to turn back to Mexico. It was meant to discourage asylum seekers but critics said it denied people the legal right to seek protection in the U.S. and forced them to wait in dangerous Mexican border cities.

The judge, U.S. District Judge Judge Matthew J. Kacsmaryk in Amarillo, Texas, ordered that the program be reinstated in response to a lawsuit filed by the states of Texas and Missouri, whose governors have been seeking to reinstate some of the hard-line anti-immigration policies of the Trump administration.

The Biden administration argued in briefs that the president has "clear authority to determine immigration policy" and that Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas had discretion in deciding whether to return asylum seekers to Mexico.

The policy has been dormant for more than a year and the administration argued that abruptly reinstating it "would prejudice the United States' relations with vital regional partners, severely disrupt its operations at the southern border, and threaten to create a diplomatic and humanitarian crisis."

The Trump administration largely stopped using the "Remain in Mexico" policy at the start of the pandemic, at which point it began turning back virtually everyone crossing the Southwest border under a different protocol — a public health order that remains in effect.

President Joe Biden suspended the program on his first day of office and the Homeland Security Department ended it in June.

Kacsmaryk was nominated to the federal bench by Trump. The 5th Circuit panel that ruled Thursday night included two Trump appointees, Andrew Oldham and Cory Wilson, along with Jennifer Walker Elrod, nominated to the appeals court by President George W. Bush.

At the high court, at least five of the six conservative justices, including three Trump appointees, voted for the restart of the program. Under the court's opaque treatment of emergency appeals, the justices don't always say publicly how they voted.

Report details mishandling of police emergency system on 1/6

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Capitol Police didn't adequately respond to frantic calls for help from officers when they pressed panic buttons on their radios seeking immediate backup as scores of pro-Trump rioters beat officers with bats, poles and other weapons, an inspector general's report found.

The report obtained by The Associated Press offered new details about the shortcomings by law enforcement during the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

The report found that most of the emergency activations from individual officers' radios were never simulcast on police radio, a standard protocol designed to spread the word to other officers about emergencies and crises. The on-duty watch commander appears not to have been made aware of at least some of the system activations, the report said.

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

"Without the ability to connect with help or request reinforcements during emergencies, officers are at risk of facing dangerous or even deadly situations," the report said. "Without being aware of an officer's emergency, the Department does not dispatch additional units or resources for an officer in distress. And if the on-duty Watch Commander is not notified of emergency identifier activations, they cannot respond to a situation."

Capitol Police said senior department officials had been using their cellphones on Jan. 6 to communicate orders to others down the chain of command in an effort to limit the number of radio transmissions being broadcast.

The findings on the emergency radio system are included in a "flash report" by the Capitol Police inspector general, the fifth in an ongoing series of assessments of how the agency fell short in its handling of Jan. 6 and how it can do better in the future. It follows earlier reports that have focused on issues including the agency's handling of threat assessments and approach to civil disturbances and that, taken together, have shown a pattern of flawed preparation for — and response to — the violence of that day.

The July report focuses on deficiencies inside the Capitol Police Command and Coordination Bureau, which among other responsibilities prepares for special events and manages the response to emergencies at the Capitol complex. The inspector general detailed what it said were outdated and vague policies and procedures as well as problems in preparedness, coordination and emergency planning.

Capitol Police said in a statement that its policies and procedures were being updated and that "a comprehensive training plan is being developed."

"The USCP has acknowledged there were communication gaps on January 6. Given the events of January 6th, the enormous amount of radio traffic that day was not surprising. Additionally, the size and magnitude of January 6 made it difficult to respond to each officer's emergency radio broadcast in real-time," the statement said.

A law enforcement official said because so many officers were pressing their panic buttons, fellow officers couldn't respond to all of the calls at once and needed to prioritize their emergency responses. The official spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity to discuss the report because it has not been publicly released.

Even so, the inspector general report says, the emergency system was not handled properly.

Of the 36 emergency system activations that day, the inspector general located only 13 in the transcripts of radio traffic. Though there may be additional activations that were not reflected in the transcripts, "it is clear not all were simulcast," the report said.

In addition, the report said, Command Center officials did not always ensure that the on-duty watch commander was even aware of the system activations.

The findings reflect a notable departure from the way the system is supposed to work. The watchdog report cites standard protocol showing that when an officer activates the radio emergency system, the officer's name and personal identification number appear on the dispatch console. The dispatcher is then required to simulcast on all talk groups that an emergency is in progress.

The failure to appropriately respond to the emergency system activations, the report says, "can place officers at increased risk."

In its statement, the Capitol Police said it has been working to improve communication during critical incidents and is deploying "new and improved policies, practices and procedures" for monitoring emergency signals and communication with other law enforcement agencies.

The force has also brought on a retired Secret Service agent to help plan for major events.

Israeli leader meets with Biden as Mideast tensions grow

WASHINGTON (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's meeting with President Joe Biden comes in

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the midst of heightened tensions with its regional arch-enemy, Iran, and as Israel grapples with a gradual resurgence of hostilities on its southern border with the Gaza Strip.

Bennett, in his first state visit overseas since taking office, was scheduled to meet Wednesday with senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and on Thursday with Biden.

In a statement released by the Prime Minister's Office before his departure, Bennett said the top priority in his conversation with Biden would be Iran, "especially the leapfrogging in the past two to three years in the Iranian nuclear program." He said other issues would also be discussed, including the Israeli military's qualitative edge, the coronavirus pandemic and economic matters.

Bennett has spoken out against the possibility of a new nuclear accord between Iran and world powers, and says that any agreement must also put the brakes on Iran's regional aggression. Recent months have seen a string of attacks on Israeli-connected shipping, believed to have been carried out by Iran.

Earlier this week, Bennett told his Cabinet that he would tell the American president "that now is the time to halt the Iranians, to stop this thing" and not re-enter "a nuclear deal that has already expired and is not relevant, even to those who thought it was once relevant."

Friction between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers has been building in the three months since an 11-day war with Islamist militant group left least 265 dead in Gaza and 13 in Israel.

Indirect negotiations between the two sides to reach an arrangement for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip have broken down in the past week. Hamas has launched incendiary balloons into southern Israel and staged violent demonstrations on the border, raising the specter of renewed violence.

"There's a new government in the U.S. and a new government in Israel, and I bring with me from Jerusalem a new spirit of cooperation, and this rests on the special and long relationship between the two countries," Bennett said before take-off.

Bennett took office two months ago after cobbling together a ruling coalition of eight disparate political parties — ranging from Jewish ultranationalists to a small Islamist faction — ousting longtime leader Benjamin Netanyahu from office following the country's fourth consecutive parliamentary election in two years.

Crews struggle to stop fire bearing down on Lake Tahoe

By SAM METZ and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A California fire that gutted hundreds of homes advanced toward Lake Tahoe on Wednesday as thousands of firefighters tried to box in the flames and tourists who hoped to boat or swim found themselves looking at thick yellow haze instead of alpine scenery.

The Caldor Fire was less than 20 miles (32 kilometers) east of the lake that straddles the California-Nevada state line. The fire was eating its way through rugged timberlands and was "knocking on the door" of the Lake Tahoe basin, California's state fire chief Thom Porter warned this week.

On Tuesday, ash rained down and tourists ducked into cafes, outdoor gear shops and casinos on Lake Tahoe Boulevard for a respite from the unhealthy air.

Inside the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, cocktail waitresses in fishnet stockings and leopard-print corsets served customers playing slots and blackjack.

Sitting at a slot machine near a window looking out at cars driving through the haze, Ramona Trejo said she and her husband would stay for their 50th wedding anniversary, as planned.

Trejo, who uses supplemental oxygen due to respiratory problems, said her husband wanted to keep gambling.

"I would want to go now," she said.

South of Tahoe, Rick Nelson and his wife, Diane, had planned to host a weekend wedding at Fallen Leaf Lake, where his daughter and her fiancé had met. However, the smoke caused most of the community to leave. The sun was an eerie blood orange and the floats and boats in the lake were obscured by haze.

In the end, the Nelsons spent two days arranging to have the wedding moved from the glacial lake

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several hours southwest to the San Francisco Bay Area.

"Everybody's trying to make accommodations for the smoke. And I think it's becoming a reality for us, unfortunately," Diane Nelson said. "I just think that the smoke and the fires have gotten bigger, hotter and faster-moving."

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

Although there were no evacuations ordered for Lake Tahoe, it was impossible to ignore a blanket of haze so thick and vast that it closed schools for a second day in Reno, Nevada, which is about 60 miles (100 kilometers) from the fire.

The last major blaze in the area took South Lake Tahoe by surprise after blowing up from an illegal campfire in the summer of 2007. The Angora Fire burned less than 5 square miles (13 square kilometers) but destroyed 254 homes, injured three people and forced 2,000 people to flee.

The Caldor fire had scorched more than 190 square miles (492 square kilometers) and destroyed at least 455 homes since Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada southwest of the lake. It was 11% contained and threatened more than 17,000 structures.

On its western side, the blaze continued to threaten more than a dozen small communities and wineries. On the eastern side, crews were bulldozing fire lines, opening up narrow logging roads and clearing ridgetops in hopes of stopping its advance, fire officials said.

More than 2,500 firefighters were on the line and more resources were streaming in, fire officials said. Big firefighting aircraft were being brought in.

"It's the No. 1 fire in the country right now ... there's dozens of crews and dozers and engines and others that are on their way right now," said Jeff Marsolais, supervisor for the Eldorado National Forest and an administrator on the fire.

The resources were desperately needed.

"This fire has just simply outpaced us. We emptied the cupboards of resources," Marsolais said, adding that while the blaze had slowed its explosive growth in recent days, "that can change."

Meanwhile the Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history at 1,140 square miles (2,953 square kilometers) was burning only about 65 miles (104 kilometers) to the north. It was 43% contained.

Nationally, 92 large fires were burning in a dozen mainly Western states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

Northern California has seen a series of disastrous blazes that have burned hundreds of homes and many remain uncontained. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden declared that a major disaster exists in California and ordered federal aid made available to local governments, agencies and fire victims in four northern counties ravaged by blazes dating back to July 14.

Melley reported from Los Angeles.

Sam Metz is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

House passes bill bolstering landmark voting law

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats have passed legislation that would strengthen a landmark civil rights-era voting law weakened by the Supreme Court over the past decade, a step party leaders tout as progress in their quest to fight back against voting restrictions advanced in Republican-led states.

The bill, which is part of a broader Democratic effort to enact a sweeping overhaul of elections, was approved on a 219-212 vote, with no Republican support. Its Tuesday passage was praised by President Joe Biden, who said it would protect a "sacred right" and called on the Senate to "send this important bill to my desk."

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But the measure faces dim prospects in that chamber, where Democrats do not have enough votes to overcome opposition from Senate Republicans, who have rejected the bill as “unnecessary” and a Democratic “power grab.”

That bottleneck puts Democrats right back where they started with a slim chance of enacting any voting legislation before the 2022 midterm elections, when some in the party fear new GOP laws will make it harder for many Americans to vote.

But they still intend to try.

Speaking from the House floor, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said it was imperative for Congress to counteract the Republican efforts, which she characterized as “dangerous” and “anti-democratic.”

“Democracy is under attack from what is the worst voter suppression campaign in America since Jim Crow,” Pelosi said.

The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, named for the late Georgia congressman who made the issue a defining one of his career, would restore voting rights protections that have been dismantled by the Supreme Court. Under the proposal, the Justice Department would again police new changes to voting laws in states that have racked up a series of “violations,” drawing them into a mandatory review process known as “preclearance.”

The practice was first put in place under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But it was struck down by a conservative majority on the Supreme Court in 2013, which ruled the formula for determining which states needed their laws reviewed was outdated and unfairly punitive. The court did, however, say that Congress could come up with a new formula, which is what the bill does.

A second ruling from the court in July made it more difficult to challenge voting restrictions in court under another section of the law.

The bill’s sponsor, Rep. Terri Sewell, said “old battles have indeed become new again,” enabled by the Supreme Court’s rulings.

“While literacy tests and poll taxes no longer exist, certain states and local jurisdictions have passed laws that are modern day barriers to voting,” said Sewell, an Alabama Democrat.

In many cases, the new bill wouldn’t apply to laws enacted in the years since the court’s 2013 ruling. That likely includes the wave of new Republican-backed restrictions inspired by Donald Trump’s false claims of a stolen 2020 election.

But if signed into law along with Democrats’ other election bill, the For the People Act, many of those restrictions could be neutralized — and likely prevented from getting approved again. Both laws would likely face legal challenges.

In the short term, the vote Tuesday was expected to soothe restive Democratic activists who have been frustrated by inaction on the issue in the Senate.

NAACP President Derrick Johnson said he was “encouraged” by the bill’s passage. But he also offered a thinly veiled threat, pledging to watch closely as the Senate takes it up and “keep track of every ye and every nay” vote.

“Make no mistake, we will be there, on the ground in 2022, in every state that needs a new Senator,” he said in a statement.

Democrats’ slim 50-50 majority in the Senate means they lack the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster. For months, progressives have called for scrapping the filibuster, but a number of moderate Democrats oppose the idea, denying the votes needed to do so.

It’s also not clear that the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, as written, would be supported by all Democrats in the Senate, where there are no votes to spare.

One provision in the bill would ban many types of voter ID laws, including those already on the books. That’s at odds with a proposal from West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, who is the chamber’s most conservative Democrat. He’s spent weeks working with Senate leadership to develop a more narrowly focused alternative to the For the People Act, and has specifically called for a voter ID standard that would allow for people to use a document like a utility bill.

Republicans, meanwhile, blasted the timing of the measure, noting that Pelosi called Democrats back from August recess to pass the bill, as well as to take votes on Democrats' spending priorities, when the U.S. is dealing with its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"If there's any moment in time to put an election aside, if there's any moment of time to put politics aside I would have thought today was this day," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy.

Conservatives also criticized the bill as a departure from the 1965 voting law, which used minority turnout data as well as a place's history of enacting discriminatory voting laws when determining which places would be subject to preclearance.

The new bill, instead, leans heavily on looser standards, such as using the number of legal settlements and consent decrees issued in voting rights cases, to pull places into preclearance.

That would, Republicans argue, play into the hands of Democrats, who have built a sophisticated and well-funded legal effort to challenge voting rules in conservative-leaning states.

Rep. Michelle Fischbach, a Minnesota Republican, predicted it would be a boon for Democratic advocacy groups and trial lawyers, who would "file as many objections as possible to manufacture litigation."

"It empowers the attorney general to bully states and seek federal approval before making changes to their own voting laws," she said.

—
This story has been corrected to show Rep. Fischbach is a Minnesota Republican, not from Iowa.

House passes \$3.5T Biden blueprint after deal with moderates

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Striking a deal with moderates, House Democratic leaders have muscled President Joe Biden's multitrillion-dollar budget blueprint over a key hurdle, ending a risky standoff and putting the party's domestic infrastructure agenda back on track.

The 220-212 vote Tuesday was a first move toward drafting Biden's \$3.5 trillion rebuilding plan this fall, and the narrow outcome, in the face of unanimous Republican opposition, signaled the power a few voices have to alter the debate and the challenges ahead still threatening to upend the president's agenda.

From the White House, Biden praised the outcome as "a step closer to truly investing in the American people." He said at a news conference that he had called to congratulate House leaders for the work.

Tensions had flared during a turbulent 24 hours that brought the House to a standstill as a band of moderate lawmakers threatened to withhold their votes for the \$3.5 trillion plan. They were demanding the House first approve a nearly \$1 trillion bipartisan package of other public works projects that's already passed the Senate.

Backed by the White House, Speaker Nancy Pelosi huddled privately with lawmakers and leaders to engineer an offramp. In brokering the compromise, Pelosi committed to voting on the bipartisan package no later than Sept. 27, an attempt to assure lawmakers it won't be left on the sidelines. It's also in keeping with Pelosi's insistence that the two bills move together as a more complete collection of Biden's priorities. Pelosi has set a goal of passing both by Oct. 1.

Pelosi told her colleagues before the vote that the legislation would lead to a federal investment on par with the New Deal and the Great Society.

She brushed aside the delays. "That's just part of the legislative process," she said, according to an aide granted anonymity to discuss a closed-door caucus meeting.

"Not only are we building the physical infrastructure of America, we are building the human infrastructure of America," Pelosi said on the House floor.

Easing off the stalemate will shelve, for now, the stark divisions between moderate and progressive lawmakers who make up the Democrats' so-slim House majority. But as the drama spilled out during what was supposed to be a quick session as lawmakers returned to work for a few days in August, it showcased the party differences that threaten to upend Biden's ambitious rebuilding agenda.

With Republicans fully opposed to the president's big plans and arguing that Congress should be focused

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instead on the crisis in Afghanistan, the Democratic leaders have just a few votes to spare. That gives any band of lawmakers leverage that can be used to make or break a deal, as they are in position to do in the weeks to come as moderates and progressives draft and vote on the broader \$3.5 trillion package.

"I think it's important to those of us who are moderate Democrats to make sure that our voices are heard," said Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., one of the negotiators.

Challenging their party's most powerful leaders, nine moderate Democrats signed onto a letter late last week raising their objections to pushing ahead with Biden's broader infrastructure proposal without first considering the smaller public works plan of road, public transit and broadband spending that has already passed the Senate.

Their ranks grew as other moderates, including Rep. Stephanie Murphy, D-Fla., a leader of the Blue Dog caucus of centrist Democrats, raised similar concerns.

Progressives were outraged at the moderates, blaming them for potentially jamming Biden's agenda, which is stocked with hard-fought party goals like child care, paid family leave and Medicare expansion, along with green infrastructure spending.

Outside groups, including Justice Democrats, started running campaign ads and members of Our Revolution, the organization aligned with Bernie Sanders, protested Tuesday outside the New Jersey office of Rep. Josh Gottheimer, a leader of the moderate effort.

"This is a 'which side are you on' moment," said Our Revolution executive director Joseph Geevarghese, who promised to "organize like never before to hold Democrats accountable and get this bill over the finish line."

The budget measure is at the heart of Biden's "Build Back Better" vision for helping families and combating climate change and is progressives' top priority, all of it largely financed with tax increases on the rich and big business.

The House committees are already fast at work drafting legislation to fill in the details of the \$3.5 trillion package for consideration later this fall.

Progressives signaled early on they wanted the Biden budget priorities first before they agree to the smaller Senate package, worried it would be an insufficient down-payment on his goals.

But the moderates want the opposite, insisting Congress quickly send the smaller, bipartisan infrastructure measure they helped shape with the senators to Biden so he can sign it before the political winds shift.

While the moderates insist they also want to support Biden's broader package, progressives are skeptical. Senate centrists Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., have said they cannot support a \$3.5 trillion package.

In fact, the moderates were also trying to win assurances from Pelosi that whatever version of the broader bill they draft in the House will be the same in the Senate — setting up another showdown between the party's competing flanks and their vision for the rebuilding priorities.

"We have established a path forward," Gottheimer said in a statement.

The compromise structured Tuesday's vote to include passage of the budget resolution and the commitment for the September vote on the bipartisan package as part of a procedural vote, called the Rule.

So far, the White House has backed Pelosi as she has led her party in a tightly scripted strategy.

Republicans plan to reject the the \$3.5 trillion effort as big government spending, and GOP support for the slimmer \$1 trillion bipartisan measure is now uncertain.

The conservative House Freedom Caucus said it opposes both the Biden budget and the bipartisan bill.

Republicans blasted Democrats for pursuing their priorities at a time when they said all focus should be on Afghanistan, as thousands of people including Americans are trying to flee the country as the U.S. withdraws its forces.

"We should be doing nothing else on this floor until every single American is home," said Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader.

Inserting his own wedge into the politics of the situation, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday on Fox News that he was rooting for the House moderates.

"I wish the moderates in the House success," McConnell said. "I'm pulling for them."

Associated Press writers Darlene Superville, Alan Fram and Brian Slodysko contributed to this report.

Cleanup begins of Haiti town's earthquake-crumbled homes

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN and EVENS MARY Associated Press

MANICHE, Haiti (AP) — At the edge of a pile of rubble, Michael Jules plunged an iron bar over and over into the crumbling concrete of his grandmother's home. A younger cousin squatted at his feet, pulling away debris with a trowel.

It was Jules' third day working the spot like an archaeologist, removing layer upon layer of rock. He had established more or less the perimeter of his room. On Tuesday morning he uncovered a corner of his mattress.

While Jules, 21, toiled with hand tools, and at times his bare hands, just down the street heavy-duty earthmovers cleared lots, depositing entire homes into dump trucks or scraping collapsed dwellings into neat piles. For some victims of Haiti's Aug. 14 earthquake, the necessary prelude to rebuilding has begun.

Joseph Gervain, another of Jules' cousins, watched from the street. He lived in a house behind that was also damaged. He wondered how the earthmovers decide which lots to clear and which to pass.

"I see people removing debris, but I don't know what the conditions are," Gervain said. "Maybe they pay to have the debris removed. I see they skip houses. Someone is giving orders about which house to remove debris from."

The machines bore the logos of nongovernmental organizations, but who they helped appeared to be guided by Maniche's mayor.

Jean Favard watched one of the large yellow machines push away the rubble of his vacation home just up the street from Jules' grandmother's house. No one had been living at Favard's home and he said he planned to rebuild once it was cleared.

Meanwhile, Gervain said he had no idea what his family would do on the lot where a two-story house with eight bedrooms — home to 12 people — had been reduced to a one-story pile of concrete and twisted rebar.

Jules kept digging. His goal was twofold: his clothes — he was wearing only borrowed Spider-Man boxers — and his passport.

"I have not found anything yet," Jules said.

Maniche is a teeth-rattling hour's drive from paved road, over a mountain pass and settled in a wide, green valley. The town lost 80% to 90% of its homes, according to preliminary estimates. Piles of rubble like Jules' grandmother's house dot every street.

Even most of those houses still standing will have to be torn down.

Relatively undisturbed appeared to be Maniche's riverside market. Even on a Tuesday — market day is Saturday — farmers from surrounding areas crossed the river carrying sacks of beans and peanuts atop their heads. Mules splashed through the water, their woven panniers laden with heavy bunches of plantains.

Gervain, Jules' cousin, said it was lucky the earthquake occurred on a Saturday because most people were outdoors, at the market.

Jules was not. He had to run out of the house when the magnitude 7.2 quake struck. Now he was desperate to find his passport because he is a professional soccer player for the Haitian League club America des Cayes.

"I need to have my passport if I need to travel with the club for a tournament to the Dominican Republic or Cuba," Jules said, though such games will have to wait: The current season was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Well out of uniform and standing atop a rubble pile, the right fullback was still immediately recognized by a fan.

"You're from here?" the man, a motorcycle taxi driver from Les Cayes, asked in disbelief. "I didn't know

you were from Maniche.”

Help was slowly arriving to in the town of about 20,000 people.

Philemon Charles, a carpenter, said the top necessity was shelter. His family had been sleeping outside their damaged home for more than a week.

On Tuesday, U.S.-based relief organization Samaritan's Purse handed out big blue tarps for temporary shelters and small solar lights that also allow people to charge their cell phones. Actor Sean Penn's Haiti relief outfit, Community Organized Relief Effort, had brought in the heavy machinery. And convoys of various United Nations agencies rumbled into town.

By the time the punishing sun chased Jules from the rock pile Tuesday, he had managed to remove his twin mattress. More crumbling concrete immediately fell into the temporary void he'd just created.

Pristine Lake Tahoe shrouded in smoke from threatening fire

By SAM METZ and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — Ash rained down on Lake Tahoe on Tuesday and thick yellow smoke blotted out views of the mountains rimming its pristine blue waters as a massive wildfire threatened the alpine vacation spot on the California-Nevada state line.

Tourists ducked into cafes, outdoor gear shops and casinos on Lake Tahoe Boulevard for a respite from hazardous air coming from an erratic blaze less than 20 miles (32 kilometers) away.

The Caldor Fire erupted over the course of a week into the nation's No. 1 firefighting priority and was "knocking on the door" of Tahoe, said Thom Porter, California's state fire chief. A major wildfire has not penetrated the Lake Tahoe Basin since 2007.

Tourists typically come to swim and hike, relax along the lake's calm shores or take their chances gambling, not risk their lives in the face of a potential disaster.

Although there were no evacuations ordered and Porter said he didn't think the fire would reach the lake, it was impossible to ignore the blanket of haze so thick and vast that it closed schools for a second day in Reno, Nevada, which is about 60 miles (100 kilometers) from the fire.

Visitors wore masks outdoors — not because the coronavirus pandemic, but because of the toxic air and inescapable stench of fire. The gondola that ferries summer passengers to the summit of the Heavenly Mountain ski area was closed until winter due to the wildfire risk.

Cindy Osterloh, whose husband pushed a relative in a wheelchair beneath the idled cables, said she and family members visiting from San Diego were all on allergy medications to take the sting out of their eyes and keep their noses from running so they can ride out the smoke for the rest of their vacation.

"We got up and it was a lot clearer this morning. We went for a walk and then we came back and now it's coming in again," she said of the smoke. "We're going to go and see a movie and hopefully it clears up enough that we can go do our boat rides."

An army of firefighters worked to contain the blaze, which has spread explosively in a manner witnessed in the past two years during extreme drought. Climate change has made the West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

Massive plumes have erupted in flames, burning embers carried by gusts have skipped miles ahead of fire lines, and fires that typically die down at night have made long runs in the dark.

Northern California has seen a series of disastrous blazes that have burned hundreds of homes and many remain uncontained. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden declared that a major disaster exists in California and ordered federal aid made available in four northern counties ravaged by blazes dating back to July 14.

The Caldor Fire had scorched more than 190 square miles (492 square kilometers) and destroyed at least 455 homes since Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada southwest of Lake Tahoe. It was 11% contained and threatened more than 17,000 structures.

Nationally, 92 large fires were burning in a dozen states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. Although many fires are larger, the Caldor Fire has become the top priority to

keep it from sweeping into the Tahoe.

As the fire grew last week, politicians, environmentalists, and policy makers gathered on the shore for the 25th annual Lake Tahoe Summit dedicated to protecting the lake and the pine-covered mountains that surround it.

With the Caldor Fire burning to the southwest and the Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history with a 500-mile (804-kilometer) perimeter, burning about 65 miles (104 kilometers) to the north, the risk to the lake was top of mind.

"The fires that are raging all around us nearby are screaming this warning: Tahoe could be next," said Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif.

The last major blaze in the area took South Lake Tahoe by surprise after blowing up from an illegal campfire in the summer of 2007. The Angora Fire burned less than 5 square miles (13 square kilometers) but destroyed 254 homes, injured three people and forced 2,000 people to flee.

Scars from the fire can still be seen not far from the commercial strip where South Lake Tahoe meets the Nevada border in Stateline, where tourists go to gamble.

Inside the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, cocktail waitresses in fishnet stockings and leopard-print corsets served customers playing slots and blackjack who said they weren't overly concerned about the fire.

Sitting at a slot machine near a window looking out at cars driving through the haze on Lake Tahoe Boulevard, Ramona Trejo said she and her husband would stay for their 50th wedding anniversary, as planned.

Trejo, who uses supplemental oxygen due to respiratory problems, said her husband wanted to keep gambling.

"I would want to go now," she said.

Melley reported from Los Angeles.

Sam Metz is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Supreme Court orders 'Remain in Mexico' policy reinstated

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Tuesday said the Biden administration likely violated federal law in trying to end a Trump-era program that forces people to wait in Mexico while seeking asylum in the U.S.

With three liberal justices in dissent, the high court refused to block a lower court ruling ordering the administration to reinstate the program informally known as Remain in Mexico.

It's not clear how many people will be affected and how quickly. Under the lower court ruling, the administration must make a "good faith effort" to restart the program.

There also is nothing preventing the administration from trying again to end the program, formally called Migrant Protection Protocols.

A federal judge in Texas had previously ordered that the program be reinstated last week. Both he and the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused the administration's request to put the ruling on hold.

Justice Samuel Alito ordered a brief delay to allow the full court time to consider the administration's appeal to keep the ruling on hold while the case continues to make its way through the courts.

The 5th Circuit ordered expedited consideration of the administration's appeal.

The court offered little explanation for its action, although it cited its opinion from last year rejecting the Trump administration's effort to end another immigration program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. In that case, the court held that the decision to end DACA was "arbitrary and capricious," in violation of federal law.

The administration has "failed to show a likelihood of success on the claim that the memorandum re-

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scinding the Migrant Protection Protocols was not arbitrary and capricious," the court wrote Tuesday in an unsigned order.

The three dissenting justices, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, did not write an opinion expressing their views of the case.

In a statement, the Department of Homeland Security said it regrets that the high court declined to issue a stay. The department said it would continue to challenge the district court's order.

The American Civil Liberties Union called on the administration to present a fuller rationale for ending Remain in Mexico that could withstand court scrutiny.

"The government must take all steps available to fully end this illegal program, including by re-terminating it with a fuller explanation. What it must not do is use this decision as cover for abandoning its commitment to restore a fair asylum system," said Omar Jadwat, director of the ACLU's immigrant rights project.

During Donald Trump's presidency, the policy required tens of thousands of migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. to turn back to Mexico. It was meant to discourage asylum seekers but critics said it denied people the legal right to seek protection in the U.S. and forced them to wait in dangerous Mexican border cities.

The judge, U.S. District Judge Judge Matthew J. Kacsmaryk in Amarillo, Texas, ordered that the program be reinstated in response to a lawsuit filed by the states of Texas and Missouri, whose governors have been seeking to reinstate some of the hard-line anti-immigration policies of the Trump administration.

The Biden administration argued in briefs that the president has "clear authority to determine immigration policy" and that Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas had discretion in deciding whether to return asylum seekers to Mexico.

The policy has been dormant for more than a year and the administration argued that abruptly reinstating it "would prejudice the United States' relations with vital regional partners, severely disrupt its operations at the southern border, and threaten to create a diplomatic and humanitarian crisis."

The Trump administration largely stopped using the "Remain in Mexico" policy at the start of the pandemic, at which point it began turning back virtually everyone crossing the Southwest border under a different protocol — a public health order that remains in effect.

President Joe Biden suspended the program on his first day of office and the Homeland Security Department ended it in June.

Kacsmaryk was nominated to the federal bench by Trump. The 5th Circuit panel that ruled Thursday night included two Trump appointees, Andrew Oldham and Cory Wilson, along with Jennifer Walker Elrod, nominated to the appeals court by President George W. Bush.

At the high court, at least five of the six conservative justices, including three Trump appointees, voted for the restart of the program. Under the court's opaque treatment of emergency appeals, the justices don't always say publicly how they voted.

Report details mishandling of police emergency system on 1/6

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Capitol Police didn't adequately respond to frantic calls for help from officers when they pressed panic buttons on their radios seeking immediate backup as scores of pro-Trump rioters beat officers with bats, poles and other weapons, an inspector general's report found.

The report obtained by The Associated Press offered new details about the shortcomings by law enforcement during the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

The report found that most of the emergency activations from individual officers' radios were never simulcast on police radio, a standard protocol designed to spread the word to other officers about emergencies and crises. The on-duty watch commander appears not to have been made aware of at least some of the system activations, the report said.

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

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"Without the ability to connect with help or request reinforcements during emergencies, officers are at risk of facing dangerous or even deadly situations," the report said. "Without being aware of an officer's emergency, the Department does not dispatch additional units or resources for an officer in distress. And if the on-duty Watch Commander is not notified of emergency identifier activations, they cannot respond to a situation."

Capitol Police said senior department officials had been using their cellphones on Jan. 6 to communicate orders to others down the chain of command in an effort to limit the number of radio transmissions being broadcast.

The findings on the emergency radio system are included in a "flash report" by the Capitol Police inspector general, the fifth in an ongoing series of assessments of how the agency fell short in its handling of Jan. 6 and how it can do better in the future. It follows earlier reports that have focused on issues including the agency's handling of threat assessments and approach to civil disturbances and that, taken together, have shown a pattern of flawed preparation for — and response to — the violence of that day.

The July report focuses on deficiencies inside the Capitol Police Command and Coordination Bureau, which among other responsibilities prepares for special events and manages the response to emergencies at the Capitol complex. The inspector general detailed what it said were outdated and vague policies and procedures as well as problems in preparedness, coordination and emergency planning.

Capitol Police said in a statement that its policies and procedures were being updated and that "a comprehensive training plan is being developed."

"The USCP has acknowledged there were communication gaps on January 6. Given the events of January 6th, the enormous amount of radio traffic that day was not surprising. Additionally, the size and magnitude of January 6 made it difficult to respond to each officer's emergency radio broadcast in real-time," the statement said.

A law enforcement official said because so many officers were pressing their panic buttons, fellow officers couldn't respond to all of the calls at once and needed to prioritize their emergency responses. The official spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity to discuss the report because it has not been publicly released.

Even so, the inspector general report says, the emergency system was not handled properly.

Of the 36 emergency system activations that day, the inspector general located only 13 in the transcripts of radio traffic. Though there may be additional activations that were not reflected in the transcripts, "it is clear not all were simulcast," the report said.

In addition, the report said, Command Center officials did not always ensure that the on-duty watch commander was even aware of the system activations.

The findings reflect a notable departure from the way the system is supposed to work. The watchdog report cites standard protocol showing that when an officer activates the radio emergency system, the officer's name and personal identification number appear on the dispatch console. The dispatcher is then required to simulcast on all talk groups that an emergency is in progress.

The failure to appropriately respond to the emergency system activations, the report says, "can place officers at increased risk."

In its statement, the Capitol Police said it has been working to improve communication during critical incidents and is deploying "new and improved policies, practices and procedures" for monitoring emergency signals and communication with other law enforcement agencies.

The force has also brought on a retired Secret Service agent to help plan for major events.

Trump-backed Herschel Walker seeks Georgia Senate seat

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Herschel Walker on Tuesday filed paperwork to run for U.S. Senate in Georgia after months of speculation, joining other Republicans seeking to unseat Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock in 2022.

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Walker, 59, joins the race with high name recognition, having won the Heisman Trophy in 1982 as a University of Georgia running back. Perhaps more important in today's Republican Party, he carries the backing of former President Donald Trump.

Walker has never run for office and will likely face scrutiny over his turbulent personal history as well as policy stances. But if he emerges from the Republican primary, the Senate contest would feature two Black men vying for a seat in the heart of the Deep South.

Walker stayed mum Tuesday, continuing a pattern of few comments as he started to put a Senate bid in motion. He registered to vote last week, using an Atlanta residence owned by his wife, Julie Blanchard. Walker signed Federal Election Commission papers Tuesday declaring his candidacy, allowing him to raise money for a Senate run.

Republicans already running for the Senate seat include state Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black, former banking executive and Navy veteran Latham Saddler and contractor Kelvin King. Some other potential GOP candidates may not run with Walker's entry into the race, including former Sen. Kelly Loeffler, who lost to Warnock in a January special election, and U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, a four-term congressman from near Savannah.

Walker and Trump's relationship dates back to the 1980s, when Walker played for a Trump-owned team in the short-lived United States Football League. Walker, who went on to play 12 seasons in the NFL, spoke in support of Trump at the 2020 Republican National Convention and later attended Trump's private birthday celebration.

Trump has publicly encouraged Walker to enter the primary, telling a radio show in June that "he's a great guy, he's a patriot and he's a very loyal person, he's a very strong person. They love him in Georgia, I tell you."

With Trump the "defining figure" in today's GOP, University of Georgia political science Professor Charles Bullock said his backing might be all Walker needs.

"If he tells them they need to go out and vote for Herschel Walker, that's the strongest endorsement he can possibly get," Bullock said.

Walker's supporters hope he can reach moderate Republicans and peel off some traditionally Democratic African Americans. But the former president's support could be a liability in a general election in closely divided Georgia, where a crucial fraction of more affluent GOP voters defected to Democrat Joe Biden.

"By the end of this long, divisive, and expensive intra-party fight, it'll be clear that none of these candidates are focused on the issues that matter most to Georgians," Georgia Democratic Party spokesperson Dan Gottlieb said in a statement.

Walker could share a Republican ticket with Gov. Brian Kemp, a frequent target of Trump attacks, as Kemp seeks reelection. Trump has vowed vengeance against Kemp, saying he didn't do enough to overturn Trump's election loss. It's unclear if that enmity would damage Republican chances, with Democrats possibly fielding a united ticket of Warnock and Stacey Abrams. Walker endorsed Kemp, a fervent Georgia football fan, in Kemp's 2018 victory over Abrams.

Warnock has already raised \$10.5 million for the 2022 race but has downplayed Walker's entry. He's now traveling the state promoting a jobs agenda.

"And I hear there's a race next year," Warnock told the Atlanta Press Club last week when asked about Walker.

Black has tweaked Walker for his long absence from Georgia, and did so again Tuesday in a video "welcoming" Walker to the race and challenging him to come to a Republican fish fry Saturday south of Macon.

"I suppose I've always wanted an autograph," Black said, holding up a weathered football. "But there are some things that are far more important now: the future of our country, the future of our families."

Sadler said in a statement that he's a better choice as a "next generation conservative leader who can beat Raphael Warnock."

"This campaign isn't about the glories of yesterday; it's about our nation's future," Sadler said.

Walker has been living outside Dallas and is making his first run for office. Untested as a candidate, it's unclear whether he will be an adept campaigner or fundraiser, while also fleshing out positions on policy matters he's never had to address in detail. Walker has supported Trump's baseless assertions that he

was cheated out of reelection.

Walker also has a turbulent personal history that could factor into a campaign.

An Associated Press review of public records uncovered detailed accusations that Walker repeatedly threatened the life of his ex-wife, Cindy Grossman, by telling her relatives he would kill Grossman and her new boyfriend. Walker denied the accusations, but a judge granted a protective order in 2005 and for a time barred Walker from owning guns.

In 2008, Walker wrote a book that detailed his struggles with mental illness. He wrote that he'd been diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, once known as multiple personality disorder. He said he constructed alternate personalities as a defense against bullying he suffered as a stuttering, overweight child. Walker was raised in Wrightsville, 50 miles (80 kilometers) east of Macon.

Walker also wrote of playing Russian roulette with a gun at his kitchen table in 1991. Overall, Walker cast his story as a turnaround, saying he found a path to "integration" because of therapy and his Christian faith.

The book caused problems for one of Walker's key business relationships. In a 2019 legal deposition, a manager for food distributor Sysco said the company almost cut ties with Walker's poultry company, Renaissance Man Food Services, when the book created "havoc." Ultimately, Sysco stuck with Walker's company until the controversy died down.

Walker has more recently made outsized claims about his business success. He repeatedly claimed his company employed hundreds of workers and grossed \$70 million or more in annual sales.

But Walker's company reported just eight employees when it applied for a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan last year. In a recent court case, Walker said his company averaged about \$1.5 million a year in profit from 2008 to 2017.

State election officials opened an investigation into his wife's residency after The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that records show Blanchard voted in Georgia despite living in Texas. Walker is among Trump supporters who continue to repeat the president's false claim that the 2020 election was stolen from him through fraud. Election officials nationwide found no widespread fraud.

Follow Jeff Amy on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/jeffamy>.

Biden holds to Kabul Aug. 31 deadline despite criticism

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, ROBERT BURNS AND RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

U.S. President Joe Biden declared Tuesday he is sticking to his Aug. 31 deadline for completing a risky airlift of Americans, endangered Afghans and others seeking to escape Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The decision defies allied leaders who want to give the evacuation more time and opens Biden to criticism that he caved to Taliban deadline demands.

"Every day we're on the ground is another day that we know ISIS-K is seeking to target the airport and attack both us and allied forces and innocent civilians," Biden said at the White House, referring to the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate, which is known for staging suicide attacks on civilians.

He said the Taliban are cooperating and security is holding despite a number of violent incidents. "But it's a tenuous situation," he said, adding, "We run a serious risk of it breaking down as time goes on."

The United States in recent days has ramped up its airlift amid new reports of rights abuses that fuel concern about the fate of thousands of people who fear retribution from the Taliban and are trying to flee the country. The Pentagon said 21,600 people had been evacuated in the 24 hours that ended Tuesday morning, and Biden said an additional 12,000 had been flown out in the 12 hours that followed. Those include flights operated by the U.S. military as well as other charter flights.

Biden said he had asked the Pentagon and State Department for evacuation contingency plans that would adjust the timeline for full withdrawal should that become necessary.

Pentagon officials expressed confidence the airlift, which started on Aug. 14, can get all Americans out by next Tuesday, the deadline Biden had set long before the Taliban completed their takeover. But unknown thousands of other foreign nationals remain in Afghanistan and are struggling to get out.

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The Taliban, who have wrested control of the country back nearly 20 years after being ousted in a U.S.-led invasion after the 9/11 attacks, insist the airlift must end on Aug. 31. Any decision by Biden to stay longer could reignite a war between the militants and the approximately 5,800 American troops who are executing the airlift at Kabul airport.

In Kabul, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told a news conference the U.S. must stick to its self-imposed deadline, saying "after that we won't let Afghans be taken out" on evacuation flights. He also said the Taliban would bar Afghans from accessing roads to the airport, while allowing foreigners to pass in order to prevent large crowds from massing.

At the Pentagon, spokesman John Kirby said Aug. 31 leaves enough time to get all Americans out, but he was less specific about completing the evacuation of all at-risk Afghans. He said about 4,000 American passport holders and their family members had been evacuated from Kabul as of Tuesday.

"We expect that number to grow in coming days," Kirby said.

With the full U.S. withdrawal looming, the Pentagon said several hundred U.S. troops have been withdrawn because they are no longer needed to complete the evacuation mission. Kirby said these are headquarters staff, maintenance personnel and others. "It will have no impact on the mission at hand," he said.

It's unclear how many Americans who want to leave are still in the country, but their status is a hot political topic for Biden. Some Republicans bristled Tuesday at the U.S. seeming to comply with a Taliban edict. "We need to have the top priority to tell the Taliban that we're going to get all of our people out, regardless of what timeline was initially set," said Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

And Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff of California, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, told reporters Monday that "it was hard for me to imagine" wrapping up the airlifts by the end of the month.

One of the main refugee groups resettling Afghan evacuees in the United States said many people, including some American citizens, still were finding it impossible to get past Taliban checkpoints and crushing throngs outside the airport.

"The United States cannot pat itself on the back for a job half-done," said Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

Biden decided in April that he was ending the U.S. war, which began in October 2001. Former President Donald Trump had earlier agreed in negotiations with the Taliban to end the war in May.

However, Biden waited until the Taliban had swept to power this month, following the collapse of the U.S.-backed government and its army, to begin executing an airlift.

Tragic scenes at the airport have transfixed the world. Afghans poured onto the tarmac last week and some clung to a U.S. military transport plane as it took off, later plunging to their deaths. At least seven people died that day, and another seven died Sunday in a panicked stampede. An Afghan soldier was killed Monday in a gunfight.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the Group of Seven nations will not recognize a Taliban government unless it guarantees people can leave the country if they wish, both before and after the August deadline. A day earlier, the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, William Burns, met with a top Taliban leader in Kabul. The extraordinary meeting reflected the gravity of the crisis and America's need to coordinate with a Taliban group it has accused of gross human rights abuses.

For now, the U.S. military coordinates all air traffic in and out of the Kabul airport, but the Taliban will take over there after the U.S. pullout.

Meanwhile, a U.S. official said Burns, the CIA director, met with Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar — an extraordinary moment for the U.S. spy agency, which for two decades targeted the Taliban in paramilitary operations. It was not clear what exactly they discussed.

The CIA partnered with Pakistani forces to arrest Baradar in 2010, and he spent eight years in a Pakistani prison before the Trump administration persuaded Pakistan to release him in 2018 ahead of U.S. peace talks with the Taliban.

Mujahid, meanwhile, pushed back on the idea that Afghans need to flee, arguing that the Taliban have

brought peace and security to the country. He said the main problem was the chaos at the airport, and he accused the U.S. of luring away engineers, doctors and other professionals on which the country relies.

Earlier, U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said she had credible reports of "summary executions" of civilians and former security forces who were no longer fighting, the recruitment of child soldiers and restrictions on the rights of women to move around freely and of girls to go to school.

She did not specify the timing or source of her reports.

It has been difficult to determine how widespread abuses might be and whether they contradict the Taliban's public statements or reflect disunity in its ranks.

From 1996 until the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, the Taliban largely confined women to their homes, banned television and music, chopped off the hands of suspected thieves and held public executions.

Burns reported from Washington, Lemire from Lowell, Massachusetts., Faiez from Istanbul. Associated Press writers Ellen Knickmeyer and Matthew Lee in Washington, Jon Gambrell in Dubai, Jamey Keaten in Geneva and Jill Lawless in London contributed to this report.

Hochul vows swift action as she takes helm in New York

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Kathy Hochul became the first female governor of New York on Tuesday and in her first hours on the job sought to bring a sense of urgency to tackling big problems that went unaddressed during Andrew Cuomo's distracted final months in office.

In an afternoon speech in which she laid out her initial priorities, the Democrat promised swift action to improve COVID-19 safety in schools, a fix for broken aid programs for people hit by the pandemic and improved government ethics.

Hochul said she was directing state health officials to make masks mandatory for anyone entering public or private schools. Her administration will also work, she said, to implement a requirement that all school staff statewide either be vaccinated or undergo weekly COVID-19 testing.

"None of us want a rerun of last year's horrors with COVID-19," Hochul said. "Therefore we will take proactive steps to prevent that from happening."

Hochul pledged quick action to unstick an application bottleneck that has kept federal aid money from flowing to renters who suffered financially because of the pandemic. She said she's readying the state to distribute vaccine booster shots, when they become widely available, including possibly reopening mass inoculation sites. And she said New Yorkers "can expect new vaccine requirements," though she didn't specify what those might be.

"More on that soon," she said.

Hochul, a former member of Congress from western New York, took the oath of office just after midnight in a brief, private event overseen by the state's chief judge, Janet DiFiore.

At a ceremonial swearing-in later Tuesday morning at the State Capitol, Hochul promised a "fresh, collaborative approach" to government. She said she had already begun speaking with other Democratic leaders who have, for years, complained about being shut out of key decisions and of being bullied by Cuomo, including New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio.

"There'll be no blindsiding; there'll just be full cooperation," Hochul said.

Over the next few months, Hochul, who was little known as lieutenant governor, will have an opportunity to reshape Albany, where Cuomo dominated decision-making before being felled in a sexual harassment scandal.

For generations, it's been said that all real decisions in the state government were made by "three men in a room" — the governor and the leaders of the state Senate and Assembly.

Now, for the first time, two of those three — Hochul and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins — are women. Only the state Assembly is led by a man, Speaker Carl Heastie.

Hochul, her daughter and her daughter-in law all wore white to her ceremonial swearing-in Tuesday to

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honor suffragists who fought to get women the right to vote.

On her first day, Hochul said she was ordering an overhaul of state government policies on sexual harassment, including requiring that all training be done live, "instead of allowing people to click their way through a class" online. And she said she would order ethics training for every state government employee.

Cuomo left office at midnight, two weeks after announcing he would resign rather than face an impeachment battle that appeared inevitable after a report overseen by state Attorney General Letitia James concluded he had sexually harassed 11 women.

On his final day Monday, Cuomo, who denies the allegations, released a recorded farewell address in which he portrayed himself as the victim of a "media frenzy."

Over the spring and summer, the embattled Cuomo administration struggled to get pandemic aid out the door. Little of the \$2 billion set aside last winter by the federal government to help New Yorkers pay off rent debt was distributed. Thousands face the possibility of eviction after state and federal protections expire.

Hochul also pledged quick action to distribute money from a new \$2 billion state fund intended to benefit unauthorized immigrants who didn't qualify for federal pandemic relief aid.

"The money's there," Hochul said. "These people are not eligible for other forms of assistance, and they're hurting and they're part of the New York family."

Republicans wished Hochul luck, but questioned why she hadn't met with GOP leaders Tuesday.

Assembly Minority Leader Will Barclay said preventing COVID-19 outbreaks in schools is a "laudable goal," but pushed back on the idea of statewide mandates.

"I would strongly urge Gov. Hochul to learn from the mistakes we witnessed over the course of the pandemic. New Yorkers do not need an extension of the heavy-handed, blanket mandates that used a one-size-fits-all approach and virtually eliminated all local decision-making authority," he said.

The leaders of groups representing teachers and superintendents voiced support for universal masking in schools. New York State United Teachers President Andy Pallotta said the union also supported Hochul's move to require regular testing for unvaccinated staff, but said it is "critical that educators continue to have a voice in the implementation of vaccine requirements and other COVID policies at the local level."

New York City this week announced a mandatory vaccination policy for all school staff, with no way to opt out through frequent testing.

Former New York Gov. David Paterson, who, like Hochul, unexpectedly became governor when his predecessor resigned, said one of her tasks will be to restore faith in government.

"There's going to be some pressure on Gov. Hochul, as there was on me, to kind of restore the values and to restore the conduct and the decorum that bespeaks a governor," Paterson said.

She'll have to work quickly. Hochul has already said she intends to run for a full term and will have just months to establish herself before a spring Democratic primary.

In the meantime, she'll be building an administration — a task that began in the first minutes of Tuesday with the oath of office, hours ahead of the restaging of the event for television cameras in mid-morning.

DiFiore administered the oath in the Capitol in front of a stone fireplace, atop which were placed family pictures.

Hochul, her husband and DiFiore entered the room wearing masks, taking them off when the ceremony began. Hochul placed her hand on a Bible held by her husband, Bill Hochul, a former federal prosecutor and current general counsel for the food service and hospitality company Delaware North.

Hochul signed a pile of papers, including the oath, using a set of 10 pens dated "August 24, 2021," while her family stood behind her, looking on.

Possible Havana syndrome case delays Harris trip to Vietnam

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and JONATHAN LEMIRE undefined

HANOI (AP) — U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' trip from Singapore to Vietnam was delayed several hours Tuesday by an investigation into two possible cases of the so-called Havana Syndrome in Hanoi, administration officials said.

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The investigation was in its early stages and officials deemed it safe for Harris to make her scheduled stop in Vietnam, which is part of her trip across Asia meant to reassure allies about American foreign policy amid the tumultuous evacuation of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The Havana Syndrome is the name for a rash of mysterious health incidents first reported by American diplomats and other government employees in the Cuba capital beginning in 2016.

U.S. officials "take any reported incident of Havana syndrome seriously," press secretary Jen Psaki said at a White House press briefing later Tuesday.

U.S. officials had not yet confirmed the latest reported case, and it did not involve anyone traveling with Harris, Psaki said. In light of the reports, "there was an assessment done of the safety of the vice president, and there was a decision made that she could continue travel along with her staff," Psaki said.

There have been two separate cases of unexplained health incidents reported by U.S. personnel in Vietnam within the past week, the officials said. It was not immediately clear who was impacted by the syndrome, though officials said it was not someone who worked for the vice president or the White House, according to the officials, who were not authorized to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation.

The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi issued a statement saying the delay was because Harris' office learned about a report of a "recent possible anomalous health incident" in the Vietnamese capital. The embassy provided no details, but said Harris' office decided to travel to Hanoi "after careful assessment."

The U.S. government uses "anomalous health incident" to describe the syndrome. Some of those impacted report hearing a loud piercing sound and feeling intense pressure in the face. Pain, nausea, and dizziness sometimes followed.

Similar, unexplained health ailments have since been reported by Americans serving in other countries, including Germany, Austria, Russia and China. A variety of theories have been floated to explain the incidents, including targeted microwaves or sonic attack, perhaps as part of an espionage or hacking effort.

Particularly alarming are revelations of at least two possible incidents in the Washington area, including one case near the White House in November in which an official reported dizziness. Administration officials have speculated that Russia may be involved, a suggestion Moscow has denied.

Harris was set to depart for Hanoi on Tuesday evening after delivering a speech in Singapore, castigating China for its incursions into the South China Sea, and a discussion of supply chain issues with business leaders.

But the flight was delayed for more than three hours and Symone Sanders, Harris' chief spokesperson, refused to explain. Unprompted, Sanders volunteered that Harris was "well" although reporters had seen the vice president several times Tuesday and had no reason to be concerned about her health.

Congress has raised alarms over such attacks, finding rare bipartisan support in House and Senate for continued government-wide investigation into the syndrome, response as well as millions in support for American personnel medical monitoring and treatment.

The Biden administration is facing new pressure to resolve the mystery as the number of reported cases of possible attack has sharply grown. But scientists and government officials aren't yet certain about who might have been behind any attacks, if the symptoms could have been caused inadvertently by surveillance equipment — or if the incidents were actually attacks.

Whatever an official review concludes could have enormous consequences. Confirmation that a U.S. adversary has been conducting damaging attacks against U.S. personnel would unleash calls for a forceful response by the United States.

For now, the administration is providing assurances that it takes the matter seriously, is investigating aggressively and will make sure those affected have good medical care.

One key analysis identified "directed, pulsed radio frequency energy" as the most plausible culprit. Published in December by the National Academy of Sciences, the report said a radio frequency attack could alter brain function without causing "gross structural damage." But the panel could not make a definitive finding on how U.S. personnel may have been hit.

And a declassified 2018 State Department report cited "a lack of senior leadership, ineffective communications, and systemic disorganization" in responding to the Havana cases. The report says the cause of

the injuries was "currently unknown." The document was published by George Washington University's National Security Archive.

Chris Miller, the acting defense secretary during the last months of the Trump administration, created a Pentagon team to investigate the suspected attacks. That was after he met a soldier late last year who described how, while serving in a country Miller wouldn't identify, he had heard a "shrieking" sound and then had a splitting headache.

Lemire reported from Lowell, Mass. Additional reporting contributed by Associated Press writers Matthew Lee and Lisa Mascaro in Washington

Drummer Charlie Watts, Rolling Stones backbone, dies at 80

By JILL LAWLESS and GREGORY KATZ Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Charlie Watts, the self-effacing and unshakeable Rolling Stones drummer who helped anchor one of rock's greatest rhythm sections and used his "day job" to support his enduring love of jazz, has died, according to his publicist. He was 80.

Bernard Doherty said Tuesday that Watts "passed away peacefully in a London hospital earlier today surrounded by his family."

"Charlie was a cherished husband, father and grandfather and also as a member of The Rolling Stones one of the greatest drummers of his generation," Doherty said.

Watts had announced he would not tour with the Stones in 2021 because of an undefined health issue.

The quiet, elegantly dressed Watts was often ranked with Keith Moon, Ginger Baker and a handful of others as a premier rock drummer, respected worldwide for his muscular, swinging style as the Stones rose from their scruffy beginnings to international superstardom. He joined the band early in 1963 and remained for nearly 60 years, ranked just behind Mick Jagger and Keith Richards as the group's longest lasting and most essential member.

Watts stayed on, and largely held himself apart, through the drug abuse, creative clashes and ego wars that helped kill founding member Brian Jones, drove bassist Bill Wyman and Jones' replacement Mick Taylor to quit and otherwise made being in the Stones a most exhausting job.

A classic Stones song like "Brown Sugar" and "Start Me Up" often began with a hard guitar riff from Richards, with Watts following closely behind, and Wyman, as the bassist liked to say, "fattening the sound." Watts' speed, power and time keeping were never better showcased than during the concert documentary, "Shine a Light," when director Martin Scorsese filmed "Jumpin' Jack Flash" from where he drummed toward the back of the stage.

The Stones began, Watts said, "as white blokes from England playing Black American music" but quickly evolved their own distinctive sound. Watts was a jazz drummer in his early years and never lost his affinity for the music he first loved, heading his own jazz band and taking on numerous other side projects.

He had his eccentricities — Watts liked to collect cars even though he didn't drive and would simply sit in them in his garage. But he was a steadying influence on stage and off as the Stones defied all expectations by rocking well into their 70s, decades longer than their old rivals the Beatles.

Watts didn't care for flashy solos or attention of any kind, but with Wyman and Richards forged some of rock's deepest grooves on "Honky Tonk Women," "Brown Sugar" and other songs. The drummer adapted well to everything from the disco of "Miss You" to the jazzy "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" and the dreamy ballad "Moonlight Mile."

Jagger and Richards at times seemed to agree on little else besides their admiration of Watts, both as a man and a musician. Richards called Watts "the key" and often joked that their affinity was so strong that on stage he'd sometimes try to rattle Watts by suddenly changing the beat — only to have Watts change it right back.

He also had an impact on the Rolling Stones that extended beyond drumming. He worked with Jagger on the ever more spectacular stage designs for the group's tours. He also provided illustrations for the

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back cover of the acclaimed 1967 album "Between the Buttons" and inadvertently gave the record its title. When he asked Stones manager Andrew Oldham what the album would be called, Oldham responded "Between the buttons," meaning undecided. Watts thought that "Between the Buttons" was the actual name and included it in his artwork.

To the world, he was a rock star. But Watts often said that the actual experience was draining and unpleasant, and even frightening. "Girls chasing you down the street, screaming ... horrible!... I hated it," he told The Guardian newspaper in an interview. In another interview, he described the drumming life as a "cross between being an athlete and a total nervous wreck."

Watts found refuge from the rock life, marrying Shirley Ann Shepherd in 1964 and having a daughter, Seraphina, soon after. While other famous rock marriages crumbled, theirs held. Jagger and Richards could only envy their bandmate's indifference to stardom and relative contentment in his private life, which included happily tending horses on a rural estate in Devon, England.

Author Philip Norman, who has written extensively about the Rolling Stones, said Watts lived "in constant hope of being allowed to catch the next plane home." On tour, he made a point of drawing each hotel room he stayed in, a way of marking time until he could return to his family. He said little about playing the same songs for more than 40 years as the Stones recycled their classics. But he did branch out far beyond "Satisfaction" and "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by assembling and performing with jazz bands in the second half of his career.

Charles Robert Watts, son of a truck driver and a homemaker, was born in Neasden, London, on June 2, 1941. From childhood, he was passionate about music — jazz in particular. He fell in love with the drums after hearing Chico Hamilton, and taught himself to play by listening to records by Johnny Dodds, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington and other jazz giants.

He worked for a London advertising firm after he attended London's Harrow Art College and played drums in his spare time. London was home to a blues and jazz revival in the early 1960s, with Jagger, Richards and Eric Clapton among the future superstars getting their start. Watts' career took off after he played with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, for whom Jagger also performed, and was encouraged by Korner to join the Stones.

Watts wasn't a rock music fan at first and remembered being guided by Richards and Brian Jones as he absorbed blues and rock records, notably the music of bluesman Jimmy Reed. He said the band could trace its roots to a brief period when he had lost his job and shared an apartment with Jagger and Richards because he could live there rent-free.

"Keith Richards taught me rock and roll," Watts said. "We'd have nothing to do all day and we'd play these records over and over again. I learned to love Muddy Waters. Keith turned me on to how good Elvis Presley was, and I'd always hated Elvis up 'til then."

Watts was the final man to join the Stones; the band had searched for months to find a permanent drummer and feared Watts was too accomplished for them. Richards recalled the band wanting him so badly to join that members cut down on expenses so they could afford to pay Watts a proper salary. Watts said he believed at first the band would be lucky to last a year.

"Every band I'd ever been in had lasted a week," he said. "I always thought the Stones would last a week, then a fortnight, and then suddenly, it's 30 years."

For much of his career, Watts resisted the excesses of his bandmates, but he fell into heroin addiction in the mid-1980s. He would credit his stable relationship with his wife for getting him off drugs.

"I was warring with myself at that time," he told Rolling Stone magazine.

With his financial future secure because of the Stones' status as one of the world's most popular live bands, Watts was able to indulge his passion for jazz by putting together some of the most talented musicians in Britain for a series of recordings and performances. They typically played during the long breaks between Stones tours.

His first jazz record, the 1986 "Live at Fulham Town Hall," was recorded by the Charlie Watts Orchestra. Others by the Charlie Watts Quintet followed, and he expanded that group into the Charlie Watts and the Tentet.

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Watts was an acclaimed jazz bandleader when he was stricken with throat cancer in 2004. He received extensive treatment and made a full recovery. His return to health allowed him to resume touring with both the Stones and his jazz band.

By then, the young man who had worn his brown hair down to his shoulders in the late 1960s had evolved into a craggy, white-haired, impeccably dressed senior statesman of rock. Getting Watts to talk about his place in rock history was almost impossible, but he seemed to enjoy talking about fashion. It was not unusual to see him attired in a custom-made suit and polka dot tie while his bandmates wore jeans and T-shirts.

In the tumultuous, extremely competitive world of rock and roll, Watts seemed to make few enemies.

"It all seems to boil down to a certain quality which is as rare as hen's teeth in the music business, but which Charlie Watts is perceived to have in abundance. In a word, decency," columnist Barbara Ellen wrote after interviewing Watts in 2000. "You've got to hand it to a ... man who's played with the world's most influential rock 'n' roll band ... and stayed happily married to his wife, Shirley ... A man who, moreover, remains resolutely determined not to take his elevated position too seriously."

Watts is survived by his wife Shirley, sister Linda, daughter Seraphina and granddaughter Charlotte.

Katz contributed to this report before his death. National Writer Hillel Italie in New York and former Associated Press Writer Janelle Stecklein also contributed.

Nowhere to go for Haiti quake victims upon hospital release

BY CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN and EVENS SANON Associated Press

LES CAYES, Haiti (AP) — Orderlies pushed Jertha Ylet's bed from the center of the hospital ward to one side so Dr. Michelet Paurus could plug in his electric saw. She was silent as the doctor cut off her plaster cast in measured strokes.

Today she would have to leave the hospital, the doctor said.

Ylet had resisted until the cast came off. She'd been at Les Cayes' General Hospital since being brought there Aug. 14, unconscious and with her leg crushed, after a 7.2-magnitude earthquake destroyed her house, killing her father and two other relatives and seriously injuring her brother. There is no home to return to.

A surgeon inserted a metal rod in her lower left leg on Thursday. Ylet, 25, had not been out of bed, much less tried to walk, since she arrived. Her 5-year-old daughter, Younaika, who was not injured, shared her bed and spent her days playing with other children around the ward.

More than a week after the earthquake on Haiti's southwestern peninsula killed at least 2,207 people, injured 12,268 and destroyed nearly 53,000 houses, Ylet represents an emerging dilemma for the region's limited health care services: how to turn over hospital beds when discharged patients have nowhere to go.

"I said to the doctor, 'I don't have any place to go,'" Ylet said. "I told them everything. The doctor doesn't understand."

In the first days after the quake, the hospital was overwhelmed with patients. The injured lay on patios and breezeways awaiting care. Now there are still people in those areas, but they are discharged patients or people who were never admitted at all, who have been drawn by the donations of food, water and clothing that arrive at the hospital daily.

"We have a lot patients who have been discharged, but are still hanging out in the yard," said hospital director Peterson Gede. "The fact they know they will receive food and water ... they don't have any intention to leave."

On Monday, Gede issued an order for hospital staff to begin to "motivate" patients to leave, "to make them understand that we need beds for new patient admissions."

It proved easier said than done. Not having a home to return to was a significant obstacle for Ylet and many others.

Ylet lost consciousness when a wall of her cinderblock house in Camp-Perrin fell on her as the quake struck.

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Her boyfriend, Junior Milord, had left 20 minutes earlier for work. He froze in the street until the shaking stopped, then ran back to Ylet's house. He found her buried near the front of the building, which unlike the back, had not completely collapsed.

"I thought she was dead when I first started removing the blocks," Milord said.

He pulled her out and flagged down a passing car, which took her to the hospital in Les Cayes. "When I woke up I was in the hospital," she said.

Milord then returned to help dig out the bodies of Ylet's father, cousin and brother-in-law. Their bodies are still at a funeral home, because the family doesn't have the money to bury them. Milord lost his own home, plus two uncles, an aunt and a brother in the quake.

Milord said some of Ylet's surviving relatives are camping in her yard. If Ylet and her daughter have to leave, he said, they will end up there too.

Across the ward, nurse Gabrielle Lagrenade understands that reality as well as anyone.

Lagrenade and her 21-year-old daughter, Bethsabelle, have been sleeping outside since the quake hit. They struggle to sleep on the gravel roadside with their heads less than 6 feet from the highway. All night long mopeds, SUVs and tractor trailers rain dust and pebbles on them.

It's the only level ground around the two-story building where they'd rented an apartment above a small clothing store. The land drops precipitously from the road to a stream running behind the building, which was constructed on reinforced concrete columns above a drainage gully that feeds into the stream. Two columns now display gaping spaces between the bottom of the building and the top of the supports. The landlord has wisely decided to tear it down.

Despite her own precarious situation, Lagrenade, 52, continues to arrive daily for her shift at the hospital, carefully folding and stowing her bedding, discreetly slipping behind the row of roadside buildings to bathe and re-emerging in her spotless white nurse's smock to hail a motorcycle taxi for the ride to work.

Ylet is on her ward. About 22 beds spread across the room. Nurses and doctors wear masks, but patients do not, despite virtually no one in Haiti having been vaccinated for COVID-19. Nurses huddle around a wooden table at one end. Medical waste is tossed into a cardboard box in a corner.

Lagrenade is not unsympathetic to Ylet's plight and that of other newly homeless patients, but she is pragmatic.

The beds are needed, she said.

"After someone gets well they have to go," Lagrenade said.

This is what Paurus was trying to explain to Ylet.

An orthopedist who came from Port-au-Prince to operate on her leg had cleared her to leave, the doctor said.

"If we decide to keep patients whose homes were destroyed there won't be room for (new) patients," he said. "We have a lot of patients and emergencies who need a bed."

Then Paurus got his saw.

After her cast was off, Ylet said she would give up her bed, but camp outside on the hospital grounds, because they told her to come back Thursday for a follow-up appointment.

But then some volunteers brought hot lunches. By the end of the day, Ylet was still in her bed. Milord said no one had come back to tell her to leave so there she was.

"The doctor needs to understand that I don't have a place to go and I am not leaving," Ylet said. "I will stay in the hospital's yard and sleep there until I am able to figure it out."

Biden sticking to pullout deadline though lawmakers complain

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, ROBERT BURNS and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has decided to stick with his deadline next week for completing the U.S.-led evacuation from Afghanistan, an administration official said Tuesday. The decision reflects a growing fear of extremist attacks at the Kabul airport but also opens Biden to domestic political complaints of caving to Taliban demands and of potentially leaving some Americans and Afghan allies behind.

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A Taliban spokesman, speaking prior to word of Biden's decision, said anew that the militant group would oppose any extension of the Aug. 31 deadline. It has allowed the airlift to continue without major interference.

Pressure from U.S. allies, Democratic and Republican lawmakers, veterans groups and refugee organizations has grown for Biden to extend his deadline, which he set well before the Taliban completed its lightning takeover of Afghanistan on Aug. 15. It remains unclear whether the airlift from Kabul's international airport can get out all American citizens and other foreigners by next Tuesday, as well as former translators and other at-risk Afghans who fear for their lives under Taliban rule.

Some Republicans bristled Tuesday at the U.S. seeming to comply with a Taliban edict. "We need to have the top priority to tell the Taliban that we're going to get all of our people out, regardless of what timeline was initially set," said Rep. Steve Scalise, a Louisiana Republican.

And Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff of California, chairman of the House intelligence committee, told reporters after a committee briefing Monday on the Afghanistan withdrawal that "it was hard for me to imagine" wrapping up the airlifts by the end of the month. He also said it was clear there had been "any number of warnings" to the administration "of a very rapid takeover" by the Taliban.

Biden asked his national security team to create contingency plans in case a situation arose for which the deadline needed to be extended slightly, the official said.

The chief Pentagon spokesman, John Kirby, said Aug. 31 leaves enough time to get all Americans out, but he was less specific about completing the evacuation of all at-risk Afghans.

"We believe we have the ability to get that done by the end of the month," he said, referring to the unspecified number of American citizens who are seeking to leave. He said several hundred were evacuated on Monday and that "several thousand" have gotten out since the airlift began. He would not be more specific.

The U.S. has repeatedly stressed the risk of continuing the airlift, due to threats of violence by the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate. Germany's top military commander, Gen. Eberhard Zorn, said Tuesday the United States and Germany were particularly concerned about ISIS suicide bombers possibly slipping into crowds in Kabul.

The U.S. ramped up its round-the-clock airlift of evacuees from Afghanistan to its highest level yet on Tuesday. About 21,600 people were flown out in the 24-hour period that ended early Tuesday, the White House said. That compares with about 16,000 the previous day.

Thirty-seven U.S. military flights — 32 C-17s and 5 C-130s — carried about 12,700 evacuees. An additional 8,900 people flew out aboard 57 flights by U.S. allies.

Biden had considered whether to extend his self-imposed deadline, taking into account the continued security threats by extremist groups in the Afghan capital, the Taliban's resistance to an extension and the prospect that not all Americans and at-risk Afghan allies can be evacuated by next Tuesday.

At a news conference in Kabul, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said Tuesday his group will accept "no extensions" of the deadline.

Later Tuesday, Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, said the military will need "at least several days" to fully withdraw its several thousand troops and their equipment from Kabul.

NATO partners and other countries say they will have to shut down their own evacuations if the U.S. withdraws the 5,800 troops it has flown in to run and protect the massive airlifts out of Taliban-ruled Kabul.

British Defense Minister Ben Wallace said earlier that no country would have time to complete evacuations by Aug. 31.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had pressed Biden via an emergency virtual G-7 leaders' meeting Tuesday to stay, said British evacuations "will go on right up until the last moment that we can."

Amid the tense operation to get people out of the country, CIA Director William Burns secretly swooped into Kabul on Monday to meet with the Taliban's top political leader, Abdul Ghani Baradar, a U.S. official told The Associated Press.

The Washington Post first reported Burns' meeting. The U.S. official later confirmed the meeting for the AP.

A 2020 deal struck by President Donald Trump and the Taliban initially set a May deadline for U.S. troops to fully withdraw from Afghanistan, after nearly 20 years of war there. Biden extended the deadline to Aug. 31 but is adamant he, too, wants to end the U.S. military role in Afghanistan, and he is rejecting criticism following the Taliban's sudden conquest of the country this month and the collapse of the U.S.-backed government and military.

With access to the airport still dangerous, U.S. helicopter crews have been carrying out sorties beyond the airport walls to retrieve evacuees, including 16 Americans on Monday.

Since Aug. 14, the U.S. has evacuated and facilitated the evacuation of more than 58,000 people.

Associated Press writers Nomaan Merchant, Padmananda Rama, Darlene Superville, Aamer Madhani, Frank Jordans, Lolita C. Baldor, Hope Yen, Alexandra Jaffe, James LaPorta, Matthew Lee and Dan Huff contributed to this report.

US outbreaks force early reversals on in-person learning

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A few weeks into the new school year, growing numbers of U.S. districts have halted in-person learning or switched to hybrid models because of rapidly mounting coronavirus infections.

More than 80 school districts or charter networks have closed or delayed in-person classes for at least one entire school in more than a dozen states. Others have sent home whole grade levels or asked half their students to stay home on hybrid schedules.

The setbacks in mostly small, rural districts that were among the first to return dampen hopes for a sustained, widespread return to classrooms after two years of schooling disrupted by the pandemic.

In Georgia, where in-person classes are on hold in more than 20 districts that started the school year without mask requirements, some superintendents say the virus appeared to be spreading in schools before they sent students home.

"We just couldn't manage it with that much staff out, having to cover classes and the spread so rapid," said Eddie Morris, superintendent of the 1,050-student Johnson County district in Georgia. With 40% of students in quarantine or isolation, the district shifted last week to online instruction until Sept. 13.

More than 1 of every 100 school-aged children has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past two weeks in Georgia, according to state health data published Friday. Children age 5 to 17 are currently more likely to test positive for COVID-19 than adults.

Around the country, some schools are starting the year later than planned. One district in Western Oregon pushed back the start of classes by a week after several employees were exposed to a positive teacher during training.

Before the latest virus resurgence, hopes were high that schools nationwide could approach normalcy, moving beyond the stops and starts of remote learning that interfered with some parents' jobs and impaired many students' academic performance.

Most epidemiologists say they still believe that in-person school can be conducted safely, and that it's important considering the academic, social and emotional damage to students since the pandemic slammed into American schools in March 2020.

In some cases, experts say, the reversals reflect a careless approach among districts that acted as if the pandemic were basically over.

"People should realize it's not over. It's a real problem, a real public health issue," said Dr. Tina Tan, a Northwestern University medical professor who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Infectious Diseases. "You have to do everything to prevent the spread of COVID in the school."

Tan and others say that means not just masks in schools but a push for vaccination, social distancing, ventilation and other precautions, providing multiple layers of protection.

Dairean Dowling-Aguirre's 8-year-old son was less than two weeks into the school year when he and other third graders were sent home last week in Cottonwood, Arizona.

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The boy took classes online last year and was overjoyed when his parents said he could attend school in-person. But Dowling-Aguirre said she grew more anxious as infections climbed. Masks were optional in her son's class, and she said fewer than 20% of students were wearing them.

Then she got a call from the principal saying her son had been exposed and had to stay home at least a week. Of particular concern was that her parents watch her son after school and her mother has multiple sclerosis.

"It's definitely a big worry about how it's going to go from here on in and how the school's going to handle it," she said.

In Georgia, more than 68,000 students — over 4% of the state's 1.7 million in public schools — are affected by shutdowns so far. Many superintendents said they have already recorded more cases and quarantines than during all of last year, when most rural districts held in-person classes for most students.

"This year, you saw it very quickly," said Jim Thompson, superintendent in Screven County, Georgia. "Kids in the same classroom, you'd have two or three in that classroom."

Thompson said the county's 25-bed hospital warned it was being overloaded by infections but what led him to send the district's 2,150 students home was concern that he wouldn't be able to staff classes.

"You don't want to start the school day and find you don't have enough teachers," Thompson said.

The onslaught is driving changes in mask policies. Weeks before school started, only a handful of large districts covering fewer than a quarter of students across Georgia were requiring face coverings. Now, mask mandates cover more than half of students.

Part of the mask policy change is driven by a shift in U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance. The CDC now advises that when everyone is wearing masks, exposed students 3 feet (1 meter) or more apart don't have to be sent home if they're not showing symptoms.

Angela Williams, the superintendent in Burke County, Georgia, said she believes masks and that rule will allow her 4,200-student district near Augusta to avoid further disruptions after its current two-week shutdown.

"That is going to cut down on the number of students we're having to quarantine," Williams said.

Georgia told districts in early August that they could choose their own quarantine policy, and some loosened rules.

Thompson, though, said Screven is likely to retighten its policy when it returns and require everyone who is exposed to quarantine for at least a week because of delta's high contagion level.

"We started with utilizing that latitude to its fullest," Thompson said. "That did not work for us locally."

Some districts are also looking to boost vaccination rates among staff and eligible students, but most Southern schools appear unlikely to mandate teacher vaccination or testing, unlike states on the West Coast and in the Northeast. Thompson said he sought to schedule a vaccine clinic in Screven County last week but got so few takers it was canceled.

Despite disruptions, there's still strong resistance to masks. In the 28,000-student Columbia County in suburban Augusta, officials said they were putting plexiglass dividers back up in school cafeterias, as well as limiting field trips, school assemblies and classroom group work. But the district continues to only "strongly recommend" masks.

Even some districts that have sent all their students home don't expect to require masks when they return, facing opposition from parents and the school board.

"They wanted that that should be the parents' decision," Morris said of school board members.

Follow Jeff Amy on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/jeffamy>.

Another virus surge brings more misery to Louisiana hospital

By SARAH BLAKE MORGAN Associated Press

SHREVEPORT, La. (AP) — Lauren Debroeck slowly leans in closer to her husband's face, hoping this might be the day he wakes up after nearly a month.

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Debroeck does her hair and makeup impeccably each morning because she wants him to look at her and know that, despite the maze of wires and tubes around his hospital bed, everything is OK.

"I love you so much," she whispers while stroking the 36-year-old's forehead.

Debroeck herself was hospitalized three doors down from her husband in her own battle with COVID-19 earlier this month, and every time she heard alarms from medical machines or someone gasping for breath echoing down the hall, nurses ran in to assure her it wasn't her beloved Michael.

"I want him to look at us and see we're making it," Debroeck said. "Even if we're falling apart."

The bedside vigil is playing out in a Shreveport hospital that is packed with patients from across Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas and overwhelming medical staff, who describe crying on the way to work and becoming numb to the sound of zipping up body bags and sending dead patients off to funeral homes. About 120 of Willis-Knighton Medical Center's 138 coronavirus patients are unvaccinated, including the Debroecks.

Michael was against the COVID-19 vaccine. Lauren simply never found the time.

"I made the appointment three times and canceled it because I was too busy," she said.

Nursing Coordinator Beth Springer recalls how, a month ago, the ICU hallways were nearly clear. Now the pandemic seems worse than ever before.

"I see a lot of sadness. I see a lot that I never thought I'd see in my career," said Springer, who has been a nurse nearly 20 years.

Early in the pandemic, nursing staff at Willis-Knighton would hang a paper angel on the wall every time they lost a patient to the virus. But as the months progressed and the death toll rose from one surge after another, the visual became a brutal sight for providers to look at hour after hour.

Willis-Knighton's Chief Nursing Officer, Denise Jones, breaks down in tears when she explains how they replaced the angels with colorful paper streamers hanging above the hallway — anything to give solace to a staff that has zipped patients who didn't make it into body bags and held up phones so families could talk to their sick loved ones.

"We're looking for anything we can do for the staff to find some joy in their every day because there's very little in it right now," said Jones.

Registered nurse Melinda Hunt is working six or seven days a week, waking up before dawn. She turns on a Disney movie while she gets ready.

But the escape is fleeting. Her eyes fill with tears as she drives to work on a rainy morning. Hunt, 24, decided to become a nurse when she was 6 and she watched the compassionate and skilled professionals help her younger sister who had leukemia.

Hunt used to be upbeat and peppy. But now she feels exhausted and drained. Co-workers have noticed the change and sometimes ask her if she is OK or if she needs a break.

"I don't feel like I can take a break because we already don't have nurses," she said.

By the time Hunt gets to the Infectious Disease Critical Care Unit around 6:30 a.m., she pushes away the tears and the exhaustion. There are COVID-19 patients who need her honesty and compassion.

"These patients ask me, 'Am I going to die?' And I don't want to tell anybody they're going to die," Hunt said. "But I'm not going to give them false reassurance either."

Inside Willis-Knighton, plastic sheeting separates the lobby so potential COVID-19 patients can be isolated as they are examined.

The halls are filled with medical equipment and nurses and doctors in head-to-toe protective gear shuffling from one room to the next.

But those busy hallways are a stark reminder that just when it seems things might get back to normal, the pandemic roared back.

In July, the hospital's number of COVID-19 patients were in the single digits. Now, they are over 100.

"It's more chaotic. It's just the rate at which it's grown and spread is way faster," said Springer, the nursing coordinator for the hospital.

Jones, the hospital's chief nursing officer, has burned-out nurses come into her office every day.

"Imagine the pressure of knowing I don't know if I can do this another day, another hour, but if I don't

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show up tomorrow there's nobody there to care for this patient. There's nobody here to hold this phone and let them talk to their family the last time before we put a tube in them," Jones said.

"I feel very powerless and defeated as a leader that I can't help them more."

ICU Charge Nurse Cheryl Thomas feels duty-bound to be there to comfort patients who are on the verge of death.

"I'm not ever going to let someone die alone," she said, lamenting how virus-related restrictions mean many family members are unable to visit in-person.

She admits that's a heavy burden to carry day after day. But it's why she chose this profession. "Because I do care."

Under those streamers that replaced the paper angels, Hunt hugs a woman whose 70-year-old sister died moments ago, four days after showing up with COVID-19 symptoms.

After the hug, Hunt joins a second nurse who had called the funeral home and they quietly zip up the white body bag with the deceased woman inside. A green blanket is spread over the stretcher and the nurses hope to go unnoticed as they wheel the body onto an elevator and to the first floor of the hospital.

"I don't think anyone ever told me I'd be taking bodies down to the loading dock," nurse Kristen Smith said as they head to a loading dock to meet an employee of the funeral home again.

"I feel like I've become numb to it," Hunt said.

Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina, contributed to this report.

Daily new COVID-19 cases in Israel approach January peak

By LAURIE KELLMAN and ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — New daily coronavirus infections in Israel are approaching record levels, despite the country's largely successful vaccination campaign and the recent rollout of the world's first widespread booster shot.

The spread of the virus has been driven by a surge in the delta variant — even among the vaccinated — and sparked talk of crackdowns on gatherings ahead of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar.

The government recorded 9,831 new cases on Monday, the highest single-day figure since Jan. 18, when 10,118 new cases were detected, Israel's record for the pandemic.

In between, Israel led one of the world's fastest vaccination drives that seemed to turn the tide on the pandemic. A low of a dozen new cases on May 22 kicked off what was expected to be a go-go summer of tourism, concerts and the giddy return of crowds to Israel's restaurants and outdoor marketplaces.

"Who's coming to Israel this summer?!" beckoned Tourist Israel, a popular travel site, on Twitter on June 21. It posted a watermelon popsicle over a photo of Tel Aviv's seaside skyline.

Not many tourists, as it turns out. The same day, the government registered 125 new cases, more than double the previous day's count of 49, a snapshot of the spike that's continued since then.

The government soon indefinitely postponed the Aug. 1 target date for reopening the country to foreign tourists, a gut punch to the industry that has suffered a more than 80% drop in incoming visitors during the pandemic. Officials began to issue dire warnings about the return to school and the possibility of new restrictions during the Jewish High Holidays that begin in September.

Mandatory masks and green passports, which had been lifted as infections bottomed out in May, are again required to enter public indoor spaces.

More than 5.9 million of Israel's 9.3 million people have received at least a single dose of vaccine, and the government's data show the shots help people avoid severe illness. A disproportionate number of people hospitalized in serious condition are unvaccinated. And morbidity remains lower than at Israel's peak.

Still, officials have pointed to evidence that the initial round of vaccines become less effective over time.

The surge of infections, said one specialist, is "not entirely unexpected," but human behavior helped fuel it.

"When the rates went very much down, we didn't reach herd immunity," said epidemiologist Manfred

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Green of the University of Haifa's school of public health. "But we acted as if we had reached herd immunity."

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said Sunday that research is showing a rise in infections among a perhaps unexpected segment of the population: Israelis of middle age who received two shots near the beginning of the year, but not a booster.

"This is because they are going around with the sense that they are protected," Bennett told his Cabinet. "They do not understand that the second dose erodes over time against the delta strain and that they must be inoculated with the third dose quickly."

Late last month, Israel began offering booster shots to its people. Beginning with its oldest citizens, that effort has expanded to include anyone over the age of 30 and select others, including health care workers and teachers of all ages.

Almost 1.6 million people have received the third shot, according to the Health Ministry. Early indications are that the booster is helping.

Ran Balicer, an epidemiologist who heads the Clalit Research Institute, which is affiliated with the country's largest health insurer, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday that while "the rise in serious cases has yet to be fully halted" in recent weeks, "without a doubt there is a change in the trend of defending the vaccinated thanks to the booster."

The drive for third jabs comes despite the World Health Organization's appeal for wealthy countries like Israel to share their vaccines with poor nations that have not yet inoculated their citizens. Several other countries, including the United States and Hungary, as well as nations in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, are already offering or planning to offer COVID-19 booster shots.

Over the course of the pandemic, Israel has come under criticism for being slow to share vaccines with the Palestinians.

It has vaccinated its own Arab population, including Palestinians in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. But it has only shared limited supplies with the West Bank.

The Palestinians withdrew from an agreement to accept vaccines from Israel in an exchange earlier this summer, saying the medicines were too close to expiring. The Palestinians received a boost on Monday with the delivery of 500,000 Moderna vaccines donated by the U.S. government.

Bennett this week dangled the incentive of holding off on new restrictions if people observe safety measures. That way, he said, "we will celebrate the holidays with our families, freely."

Amir Halevi, director general of Israel's Tourism Ministry, said he understands the need for the restrictions. But he said taking a break will mean more difficulties for the struggling industry.

"After the vaccinations, we (had) wonderful momentum to bring back tourists to Israel," he said. Operators, he said, "will survive because in this industry, they are very optimistic."

He said the government, for now, is promoting domestic tourism to help the industry survive this period of volatility. The crash caused by the pandemic, he said, came on the heels of a record-breaking 2019, when nearly 4.6 million foreign tourists visited the country.

Over at Tourist Israel, a blog asks: "When will travel to Israel resume?" It promises: "We've got your back with updates and inspiration to dream up adventures to come!"

The posting was updated earlier this week, noting the glum reality.

"The re-opening of Israel for individual tourists has been pushed back to an unconfirmed date," it says. "We do not recommend booking until it is clear what the travel regulations are."

Ben Zion contributed from Jerusalem.

Paralympics open in empty stadium — just like Olympics

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — The Paralympics began Tuesday in the same empty National Stadium — during the same pandemic — as the opening and closing ceremonies of the recently completed Tokyo Olympics.

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Japanese Emperor Naruhito got it all started again, this time under the theme "We Have Wings." Among the few on hand were Douglas Emhoff, husband of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, International Paralympic Committee President Andrew Parsons and International Olympic President Thomas Bach.

It was a circus-like opening with acrobats, clowns, vibrant music and fireworks atop the stadium to mark the start of the long parade of athletes.

"I cannot believe we are finally here," Parsons said in his opening remarks. "Many doubted this day would happen. Many thought it impossible. But thanks to the efforts of many, the most transformative sport event on earth is about to begin."

The opening ceremony featured the national flags of the 162 delegations represented, which included the refugee team. In addition, the flag of Afghanistan was carried by a volunteer despite the delegation not being on hand in Tokyo.

Comparisons to the Olympics stop with the colorful jamboree, save for the logistical and medical barriers during the pandemic, and the hollowing out of almost everything else.

Tokyo and Paralympic organizers are under pressure from soaring new infections in the capital. About 40% of the Japanese population is fully vaccinated. But daily new cases in Tokyo have increased four to five times since the Olympics opened on July 23. Tokyo is under a state of emergency until Sept. 12, with the Paralympics ending Sept. 5.

Organizers on Tuesday also announced the first positive test for an athlete living in the Paralympic Village. They gave no name or details and said the athlete had been isolated.

The Paralympics are being held without fans, although organizers are planning to let some school children attend, going against the advice of much of the medical community.

Parsons and Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the Tokyo organizing committee, say the Paralympics can be held safely. Both have tried to distance the Paralympics and Olympics from Tokyo's rising infection rate.

"For the moment we don't see the correlation between having the Paralympics in Tokyo with the rising number of cases in Tokyo and Japan," Parsons told The Associated Press.

Some medical experts say even if there is no direct link, the presence of the Olympics and Paralympics promoted a false sense of security and prompted people to let down their guard, which may have helped spread the virus.

The Paralympics are about athletic prowess. The origin of the word is from "parallel" — an event running alongside the Olympics.

Markus Rehm — known as the "Blade Jumper" — lost his right leg below the knee when he was 14 in a wakeboarding accident, but earlier this year he jumped 8.62 meters, a distance that would have won the last seven Olympics, including the Tokyo Games. Tokyo's winning long jump was 8.41 meters.

"The stigma attached to disability changes when you watch the sport," said Craig Spence, a spokesman for the International Paralympic Committee. "These games will change your attitude toward disability.

"If you look around Japan, it's very rare you see persons with disabilities on the street," Spence added. "We've got to go from protecting people to empowering people and creating opportunities for people to flourish in society."

Archer Matt Stutzman was born with no arms, just stumps at the shoulders. He holds a world record — for any archer, disabled or otherwise — for the longest, most accurate shot, hitting a target at 310 yards, or about 283 meters.

Wheelchair fencer Bebe Vivo contracted meningitis as a child and to save her life, doctors amputated both her forearms and both her legs at the knees.

"So many people told me that it was impossible to do fencing without any hands," Vivo said in a recent interview. "So it was so important to me to demonstrate and show people that it doesn't matter if you don't have hands, or you don't have legs or whatever. If you have a dream and you really want to achieve it, just go and take it."

Stutzman and Vivo are both set to compete in Tokyo and have already won medals in previous games, superstars who told their stories last year in the Netflix documentary about the Paralympics called "Ris-

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ing Phoenix.”

The rest of the 4,403 Paralympic athletes in Tokyo — a record number for any Paralympics — will be telling their stories until the closing ceremony.

“I feel like I’m meeting movie stars,” said 14-year-old Ugandan swimmer Husnah Kukundakwe, who is competing for the first time.

She acknowledged being a self-conscious adolescent, even more so because of a congenital impairment that left her with no lower right arm, and her left hand slightly misshapen.

“Since it’s the Paralympics and everybody else is disabled, I feel really comfortable with myself,” she said. “In Uganda, there are very few people who have disabilities who want to come out and be themselves.”

Paralympic organizers played a part last week in launching “WeThe15,” a human-rights campaign aimed at 1.2 billion people — 15% of the global population — with disabilities. They’ve also produced a 90-second video to promote the cause of social inclusion.

“Difference is a strength, it is not a weakness,” Parsons said, speaking in the largely empty stadium. “And as we build back better in the post-pandemic world, it must feature societies where opportunities exist for all.”

Shingo Katori, a member of boy band SMAP that had its roots in the 1980s, now works with Paralympic organizers. He acknowledged his early fears of working with people with disabilities.

“Frankly speaking, people in wheelchairs or people with artificial legs — I hadn’t had an opportunity to meet these people and I didn’t know how to communicate with them,” he said. “But through Paralympic sports, such hesitation faded away.”

Stutzman, known as the “Armless Archer,” has a disarming sense of humor — pardon the pun. He jokes about growing up wanting to be like former NBA star Michael Jordan.

“I gave it up,” he deadpans. “I wasn’t tall enough.”

More AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/2020-tokyo-olympics> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Fossil leaves may reveal climate in last era of dinosaurs

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Richard Barclay opens a metal drawer in archives of the Smithsonian Natural History Museum containing fossils that are nearly 100 million years old. Despite their age, these rocks aren’t fragile. The geologist and botanist handles them with casual ease, placing one in his palm for closer examination.

Embedded in the ancient rock is a triangular leaf with rounded upper lobes. This leaf fell off a tree around the time that T-rex and triceratops roamed prehistoric forests, but the plant is instantly recognizable. “You can tell this is ginkgo, it’s a unique shape,” said Barclay. “It hasn’t changed much in many millions of years.”

What’s also special about ginkgo trees is that their fossils often preserve actual plant material, not simply a leaf’s impression. And that thin sheet of organic matter may be key to understanding the ancient climate system — and the possible future of our warming planet.

But Barclay and his team first need to crack the plant’s code to read information contained in the ancient leaf.

“Ginkgo is a pretty unique time capsule,” said Peter Crane, a Yale University paleobotanist. As he wrote in “Ginkgo,” his book on the plant, “It is hard to imagine that these trees, now towering above cars and commuters, grew up with the dinosaurs and have come down to us almost unchanged for 200 million years.”

If a tree fell in an ancient forest, what can it tell scientists today?

“The reason scientists look back in the past is to understand what’s coming in the future,” said Kevin Anchukaitis, a climate researcher at the University of Arizona. “We want to understand how the planet has responded in the past to large-scale changes in climate — how ecosystems changed, how ocean

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chemistry and sea levels changed, how forests worked.”

Of particular interest to scientists are “hothouse” periods when they believe carbon levels and temperatures were significantly higher than today. One such time occurred during the late Cretaceous period (66 million to 100 million years ago), the last era of the dinosaurs before a meteor slammed into Earth and most species went extinct.

Learning more about hothouse climates also gives scientists valuable data to test the accuracy of climate models for projecting the future, says Kim Cobb, a climate scientist at Georgia Institute of Technology.

But climate information about the distant past is limited. Air bubbles trapped in ancient ice cores allow scientists to study ancient carbon dioxide levels, but those only go back about 800,000 years.

That’s where the Smithsonian’s collection of ginkgo leaves come in. Down a warren of corridors, Barclay hops across millennia – as is only possible in a museum – to the 19th century, when the Industrial Revolution had started changing the climate.

From a cabinet, he withdraws sheets of paper where Victorian-era scientists taped and tied ginkgo leaves plucked from botanical gardens of their time. Many specimens have labels written in beautiful cursive, including one dated Aug. 22, 1896.

The leaf shape is virtually identical to the fossil from around 100 million years ago, and to a modern leaf Barclay holds in his hand. But one key difference can be viewed with a microscope — how the leaf has responded to changing carbon in the air.

Tiny pores on a leaf’s underside are arranged to take in carbon dioxide and respire water, allowing the plant to transform sunlight into energy. When there’s a lot of carbon in the air, the plant needs fewer pores to absorb the carbon it needs. When carbon levels drop, the leaves produce more pores to compensate.

Today, scientists know the global average level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is about 410 parts per million – and Barclay knows what that makes the leaf look like. Thanks to the Victorian botanical sheets, he knows what ginkgo leaves looked like before humans had significantly transformed the planet’s atmosphere.

Now he wants to know what pores in the fossilized ginkgo leaves can tell him about the atmosphere 100 million years ago.

But first he needs a codebreaker, a translation sheet — sort of a Rosetta stone to decipher the handwriting of the ancient atmosphere.

That’s why he’s running an experiment in a forest clearing in Maryland.

One morning earlier this year, Barclay and project assistant Ben Lloyd tended rows of ginkgo trees within open-topped enclosures of plastic sheeting that expose them to rain, sunlight and changing seasons. “We are growing them this way so the plants experience natural cycles,” Barclay said.

The researchers adjust the carbon dioxide pumped into each chamber, and an electronic monitor outside flashes the levels every five seconds.

Some trees are growing at current carbon dioxide levels. Others are growing at significantly elevated levels, approximating levels in the distant past, or perhaps the future.

“We’re looking for analogues — we need something to compare with,” said Barclay. If there’s a match between what the leaves in the experiment look like and what the fossil leaves look like, that will give researchers a rough guide to the ancient atmosphere.

They also are studying what happens when trees grow in super-charged environments, and they found that more carbon dioxide makes them grow faster.

But adds Barclay, “If plants grow very quickly, they are more likely to make mistakes and be more susceptible to damage. ... It’s like a race car driver that’s more likely to go off the rails at high speeds.”

Follow Christina Larson on Twitter: @larsonchristina

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

This story has been corrected to reflect that the name of the school is Georgia Institute of Technology, not Georgia Tech University.

At-risk Afghans fearing Taliban hunker down, wait to leave

By SAMYA KULLAB and ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

A knock at the door could spell doom. Every passing hour seems endless. That's the new reality for many Afghans who feel they have most to fear from the Taliban and have gone into hiding or are staying off the streets since the fighters swept to power this month.

Those hunkering down include employees of the collapsed government, civil society activists and women. They are desperate for news that they might be granted asylum somewhere else.

They fear a massive rollback of women's rights, or they are distrustful of the Taliban's promises that they won't seek revenge on former adversaries and that they want to form an inclusive government as the U.S. ends its 20-year war.

One of those in hiding is Mobina, 39, a journalist from the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. After the Taliban overran her city, she fled with her two children and has found refuge in a safe house in Kabul.

"We are asking ourselves 'What is next?' We are crying because nothing can be fixed," Mobina said.

Elsewhere in the Afghan capital, Mumtaz is huddled with his family in their apartment. His father worked for the government and his brother was killed in a grenade attack in 2010 in Laghman province, where the Taliban have long been active. The family made a run to Kabul's airport after the Taliban entered the city on Aug. 15, but they encountered huge crowds, chaos and gunfire and went back home.

They haven't left the apartment since. Their anxiety grew after a neighbor warned them a group of armed men were looking for them. It is not always clear whether those knocking on doors or spreading fear are Taliban or criminals freed from prison during their sweep through the country.

"We can't go out. We just ask our neighbor to bring us food. ... We are really scared," said Mumtaz, 26, who recently graduated from law school. He said he has lost all sense of time.

Mobina and Mumtaz spoke on condition they be identified only by their first names, fearing reprisals. Both said they have not received threats directly from the Taliban so far.

Taliban fighters have set up checkpoints throughout Kabul, stopping motorists to ask where they are headed or checking car papers. There have also been some reports of Taliban going door to door in search of former government workers and civil activists.

Such reports could not always be independently verified, and it's not clear if they indicate that Taliban leaders are saying one thing and doing another, or if some on the ground are taking matters into their own hands. There is no indication of large-scale house-to-house searches.

Taliban commanders have said they have instructions to confiscate government property, including weapons and cars, but that they have told their men to respect private property. Taliban leaders have also encouraged government workers to return to work.

Still, there are growing signs of restrictions.

In the province of Sar-e-Pol, the Taliban issued a list of directives. They included banning music, Western-style dress, and jobs that require women to appear in public. The punishment for transgressions is beating. Girls in the city of Herat, the country's third-largest, meanwhile, were allowed to return to school as long as their teachers were women, or elderly men.

Some say it is in the interest of the Taliban not to revert to the brutality they displayed when they ruled from 1996 to 2001. In those years, they denied girls and women the right to an education, barred them from the public life, meted out brutal punishments, such as cutting of the hands of thieves, and carried out public executions.

Today, the Taliban will depend on foreign donor assistance to run the country, and may have a motive not to alienate the international community.

But those looking to leave the country fear that may not be enough, expressing concern what will hap-

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pen as time passes and international focus falls elsewhere.

Mobina, the journalist, is in hiding with 25 people. The others include heads of civil society groups, women's rights defenders and leaders of development projects.

They are too scared to leave the safe house. They say they hear Taliban fighters are roaming the streets, stopping women and asking them where their male escort is. Under the Taliban's previous rule, women were required to have such an escort.

"Our friends are sending us money so we can afford to eat," Mobina said. "That is how we know we aren't forgotten."

And yet, the way out of Afghanistan is also treacherous.

Evacuations are being organized largely by embassies prioritizing their own nationals and the Afghans who worked directly with them. But thousands of other at-risk Afghans don't immediately qualify.

Those who are approved for evacuation face huge crowds at the airport, and Taliban patrols make it difficult for travelers to reach the gates. Stories abound of failed attempts over successive days.

Many others struggle to even reach the airport. Humaira Sadeq, the co-founder of the Afghan Women's Media Network, said women who fear they are on the Taliban's radar are advised to take precautions when they travel to Kabul from the outlying areas, including leaving behind mobile phones and covering up with a burqa.

Sadeq managed to get out of Afghanistan after the Taliban seizure of the capital and traveled to another country. She spoke on condition that country was not named.

Now she spends sleepless nights fighting to get her fellow activists out. She submitted 22 names to an organization helping people leave, but none have made it onto evacuation lists yet. Sadeq said that some of the women don't have passports or are stuck in the provinces.

Women's rights activists say the world's seeming disregard for their fate was apparent when the United States, starting under then-President Donald Trump, negotiated a deal directly with the Taliban, bypassing Afghan political leaders and civil society groups. The deal, signed more than a year ago, included the terms and timetable for a withdrawal of foreign troops.

"The U.S. made a deal with the Taliban on our behalf," said Zubaida Akbar, an activist now based in the U.S. She works with FEMENA, a women's organization that is helping Mobina and others with temporary housing and trying to get them on evacuation lists.

President Joe Biden called the anguish of trapped Afghans "gut-wrenching" and insisted that the U.S. would work to help get vulnerable Afghans, including women leaders and journalists, out of the country.

Mobina said she can't bring herself to tell the young women who looked to her for inspiration that she is trying to leave.

"If there was any chance for me to stay, I would," she said.

Kullab reported from Baghdad and Ganley from Paris.

Some Afghans vow to resist Taliban from mountain enclave

By JOSEPH KRAUSS and RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

In a mountain valley north of Kabul, the last remnants of Afghanistan's shattered security forces have vowed to resist the Taliban in a remote region that has defied conquerors before. But any attempt to reenact that history could end in tragedy — or farce.

Nestled in the towering Hindu Kush, the Panjshir Valley has a single narrow entrance and is the last region not under Taliban control following their stunning blitz across Afghanistan. Local fighters held off the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban a decade later under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a guerrilla fighter who attained near-mythic status before he was killed in a suicide bombing.

His 32-year-old foreign-educated son, Ahmad Massoud, and several top officials from the ousted Western-backed government have gathered in the valley. They include Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who claims to be the caretaker leader after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

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They have vowed to resist the Taliban and are calling for Western aid to help roll them back.

"I write from the Panjshir Valley today, ready to follow in my father's footsteps, with mujahideen fighters who are prepared to once again take on the Taliban," Massoud wrote in an op-ed for the Washington Post. "We have stores of ammunition and arms that we have patiently collected since my father's time, because we knew this day might come."

But experts say a successful resistance is highly unlikely — and could potentially aggravate Afghanistan's already considerable problems.

While the Panjshir Valley remains as impregnable as ever, it's unclear how long its residents can hold out if the Taliban besiege the area or attack it using the U.S.-supplied armaments they have seized in recent weeks. Western countries, stunned by the collapse of a costly, two-decade attempt at remaking Afghanistan, are unlikely to invest in another proxy war.

Ahmad Shah Massoud, nicknamed the "Lion of Panjshir," was one of the main leaders of the Afghan mujahideen, self-styled holy warriors who defeated the Soviets in 1989. His Northern Alliance included fellow Tajiks as well as fighters from other ethnic groups, in keeping with his vision of an independent, multi-ethnic Afghanistan under a moderate form of Islamic rule.

But as the country slid into war in the early 1990s, he found himself battling rival warlords and eventually the Taliban, who seized power in 1996. During their five-year rule his forces were confined to Panjshir and other remote areas in northeastern Afghanistan.

Two days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, al-Qaida militants disguised as Arab journalists who had come to interview Massoud killed the commander in a suicide bombing.

His forces remained intact, however, and partnered with the U.S. when it invaded Afghanistan weeks later, scattering al-Qaida, which orchestrated the 9/11 attacks, and driving the Taliban from power. Along with other former warlords, they went on to form the core of the government and security forces that the U.S. and its allies would spend the next two decades arming and training, at a cost of billions of dollars.

Those forces, which from the beginning were rife with corruption, collapsed in a matter of days earlier this month, as the Taliban captured most of the country less than three weeks before the U.S. was set to withdraw its last troops.

The younger Massoud, who was just 12 when his father was killed, trained at the British military academy at Sandhurst and also earned a master's degree in international politics from the City University of London.

He has little, if any, combat experience. Sandy Gall, a veteran foreign correspondent who wrote "Afghan Napoleon: The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud," described his son as "a very personable young man with political ambitions."

Massoud says he has been joined by highly-trained Afghan special forces and other soldiers "disgusted by the surrender of their commanders," but neither proved to be any match for the Taliban elsewhere in the country.

Torek Farhadi, an Afghan analyst and former government adviser, said the group poses little threat to the Taliban, and he cast doubt on Saleh's claims that he could lead a resistance, calling him a "social media person."

"If he was a real threat he should have stayed the day Ghani fled and defended the palace. He was the vice president and soldiers were under his order," said Farhadi.

But even the specter of such a standoff, he said, risks plunging the country into another period violence and turmoil, with dire consequences for ordinary Afghans.

The Associated Press contacted several people close to both Massoud and Saleh in order to seek comment, but was unable to reach them. Many Afghans with ties to the ousted government have fled the country or gone into hiding.

The ousted leaders holed up in Panjshir may end up joining the negotiations that the Taliban are holding with other former Afghan officials. The Taliban have said they want an "inclusive, Islamic government" but will hold off on forming one until the U.S. completes its withdrawal.

"We must use our weight with the international community to get guarantees from the Taliban for an all-encompassing government that includes women and non-Taliban," said Farhadi.

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Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, a senior Taliban official, said their forces have surrounded Panjshir. "We are doing our best to solve the issue through negotiations, but if they don't accept the talks, we are ready to fight," he said.

In an interview with the Al-Arabiya news network over the weekend, Massoud said he would not surrender territory but could support a broad-based government.

A resident of Panjshir reached by phone said Massoud had warned people that the Taliban might attack and said families could leave if they wished. Those who stayed would prefer a negotiated solution but are loyal to Massoud and prepared to fight if necessary, the man said on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

"Panjshir people are used to this," he said. "They have gone through these situations several times and they are ready for it once again."

Krauss reported from Jerusalem and Faiez reported from Istanbul.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Aug. 25, the 237th day of 2021. There are 128 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 25, 1944, during World War II, Paris was liberated by Allied forces after four years of Nazi occupation.

On this date:

In 1718, hundreds of French colonists arrived in Louisiana, with some settling in present-day New Orleans.

In 1875, Capt. Matthew Webb became the first person to swim across the English Channel, getting from Dover, England, to Calais (ka-LAY'), France, in 22 hours.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed an act establishing the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior.

In 1928, an expedition led by Richard E. Byrd set sail from Hoboken, N.J., on its journey to Antarctica.

In 1975, the Bruce Springsteen album "Born to Run" was released by Columbia Records.

In 1981, the U.S. spacecraft Voyager 2 came within 63,000 miles of Saturn's cloud cover, sending back pictures of and data about the ringed planet.

In 2001, R&B singer Aaliyah (ah-LEE'-yah) was killed with eight others in a plane crash in the Bahamas; she was 22.

In 2012, Neil Armstrong, 82, who commanded the historic Apollo 11 lunar landing and was the first man to set foot on the moon in July 1969, died in Cincinnati, Ohio.

In 2009, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the liberal lion of the U.S. Senate, died at age 77 in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, after a battle with a brain tumor.

In 2014, a funeral was held in St. Louis for Michael Brown, the Black 18-year-old who was shot to death by a police officer in suburban Ferguson.

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey, the fiercest hurricane to hit the U.S. in more than a decade, made landfall near Corpus Christi, Texas, with 130 mph sustained winds; the storm would deliver five days of rain totaling close to 52 inches, the heaviest tropical downpour ever recorded in the continental U.S. The hurricane left at least 68 people dead and caused an estimated \$125 billion in damage in Texas.

In 2018, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, who had spent years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam before a 35-year political career that took him to the Republican presidential nomination, died at the age of 81 after battling brain cancer for more than a year.

Ten years ago: Fifty-two people were killed in a fire at a casino in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey that was allegedly targeted by a drug cartel. The New York Yankees became the first team in major league history to hit three grand slams in a game, with Robinson Cano, Russell Martin and Curtis Grand-

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erson connecting in a 22-9 romp over the Oakland Athletics.

Five years ago: Hillary Clinton said that Donald Trump had unleashed the "radical fringe" within the Republican Party, dubbing Trump's campaign as one that will "make America hate again"; Trump defended his hard-line approach to immigration while trying to make the case to minority voters that Democrats had abandoned them.

One year ago: Two people were shot to death and a third was wounded as a gunman fired on protesters with an AR-15-style rifle during a third night of protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, over the police shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake. (Seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, who was taken into custody in Illinois the next day, is facing charges including reckless homicide; he said he was defending himself after the three men attacked him as he tried to protect businesses from protesters.) The attorney for Jacob Blake's family said Blake was paralyzed in the police shooting, and that it would "take a miracle" for him to walk again. More than half a million people were ordered to flee the Gulf Coast as Hurricane Laura threatened Texas and Louisiana. Jerry Falwell Jr. announced his resignation as the head of Liberty University after a provocative photo and revelations of his wife's extramarital affair roiled the evangelical Virginia school founded by his father.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Tom Skerritt is 88. Jazz musician Wayne Shorter is 88. Movie director Hugh Hudson is 85. Author Frederick Forsyth is 83. Movie director John Badham is 82. Filmmaker Marshall Brickman is 82. Rhythm-and-blues singer Walter Williams (The O'Jays) is 78. Actor Anthony Heald (held) is 77. Rock singer-actor Gene Simmons is 72. Actor John Savage is 72. Author Martin Amis (AY'-mihs) is 72. Country singer-musician Henry Paul (Outlaws; Blackhawk) is 72. Rock singer Rob Halford is 70. Rock musician Geoff Downes (Asia) is 69. Rock singer Elvis Costello is 67. Movie director Tim Burton is 63. Actor Christian LeBlanc is 63. Actor Ashley Crow is 61. Actor Ally Walker is 60. Country singer Cyrus (AKA Billy Ray Cyrus) is 60. Actor Joanne Whalley is 60. Rock musician Vivian Campbell (Def Leppard) is 59. Actor Blair Underwood is 57. Actor Robert Maschio is 55. Rap DJ Terminator X (Public Enemy) is 55. Alternative country singer Jeff Tweedy (Wilco) is 54. Actor David Alan Basche (BAYSH) is 53. Television chef Rachael Ray is 53. Actor Cameron Mathison is 52. Country singer Jo Dee Messina is 51. Model Claudia Schiffer is 51. Country singer Brice Long is 50. Actor Nathan Page is 50. Actor-writer-director Ben Falcone is 48. Actor Eric Millegan is 47. Actor Alexander Skarsgard is 45. Actor Jonathan Togo is 44. Actor Kel Mitchell is 43. Actor Rachel Bilson is 40. Actor Blake Lively is 34. Actor Josh Flitter is 27.