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Chicken Soup
for the Soul.

"Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women."

-MAYA ANGELOU



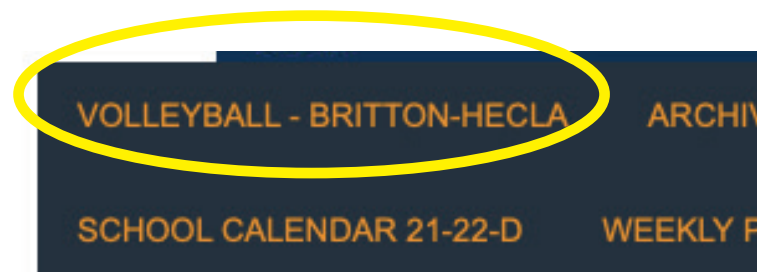
Coming Up on GDILIVE.COM

Britton-Hecla
Volleyball
Groton Area Arena
Thurs., Aug. 26, 2021
7:15 p.m.

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.

GDI Subscribers will have free access to the live feed. When you are logged in, look for the link in the black bar as shown in the image on the right.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Spier is new sixth grade teacher for reading, language arts, and social studies

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.



Joie Spier, originally from Madison, SD, is the new sixth grade teacher for reading, language arts, and social studies.

"Although I lived in Madison, I chose to attend high school in Rutland, SD, located about 14 miles away," Spier said. "I prefer small schools. Besides that, the bus picked me up in front of my house and took me to the school in Rutland, something that is not available inside the city limits of Madison!"

"After graduating from high school, I attended college at Northern State University where I received my Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education with a minor in Special Education," she explained. "I originally enrolled in NSU because I was recruited to play basketball in college."

"For my first year of teaching, I selected Groton because of its size as well as my personal background in attending a small school," Spier admitted. "I believe it will be easier for me to get to know my students when I'm working with smaller numbers."

"This year I'll be teaching reading, language arts, and social studies for all of the sixth graders," she listed. "Mr. Hawkins teaches math and science to the same students. It will be nice for the students to have their main classrooms next door to each other."

"At first I thought about becoming a school counselor, but I later decided to be a classroom teacher instead," Spier said. "I believe that all teachers are really counselors as well so I can sort of do both at the same time!"

"In addition to teaching sixth grade, I will also be the volley ball coach for the seventh grade girls," she stated. "This will help me to get to know some of my students more quickly."

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The second pipe from the new tower to the city's infrastructure was tied in on Wednesday. There are two eight-inch pipes that will feed the city. In the photo, they are dropping in pea rock around the pipe. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Community Events

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.)



GROTON'S UPCOMING EVENTS

- ▶ **Fall City-Wide Rummage Sale**
September 11 • 8:00 am-3:00 pm
- ▶ **Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course**
September 12 • 12:00 pm
- ▶ **Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport**
September 18-19 (Weather Permitting)
- ▶ **Lake Region Marching Band Festival**
October 8 • 10:00 am
- ▶ **Pumpkin Fest at the City Park**
October 9 • 10:00 am-3:00 pm
- ▶ **Groton United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat**
October 29 • 5:30-7:00 pm
- ▶ **Downtown Trick or Treat**
October 29 • 4:00-6:00 pm
- ▶ **Front Porch 605 Christmas at the Barn**
November 12-14 • 10:00 am-5:00 pm
- ▶ **Legion Post #39 Turkey Party**
November 13 • 6:30 pm
- ▶ **Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center**
November 25 • 11:30 am-1:00 pm
- ▶ **Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services**
December 11 • 9:00 am-12:00 pm

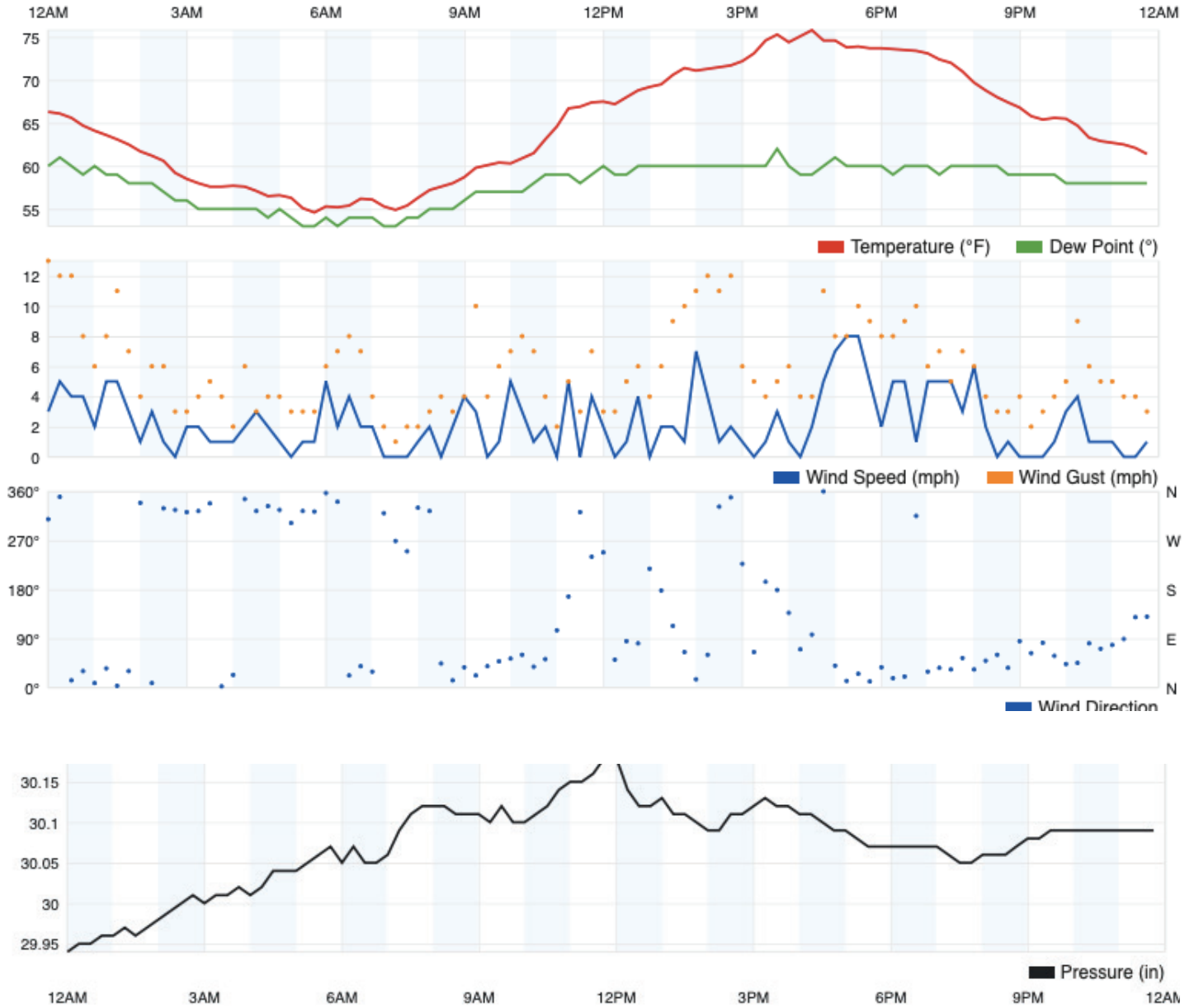
GROTON
Chamber Of Commerce

605.397.8422
120 N Main St,
Groton SD 57445
GrotonChamber.com

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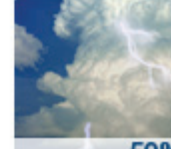
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
 100% → 40%	 40%	 50%	 40%	 50%
Heavy Rain then Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms
High: 69 °F	Low: 59 °F	High: 74 °F	Low: 60 °F	High: 77 °F

Slight Risk

of severe thunderstorms

1 **2** 3 4 5

Hazards

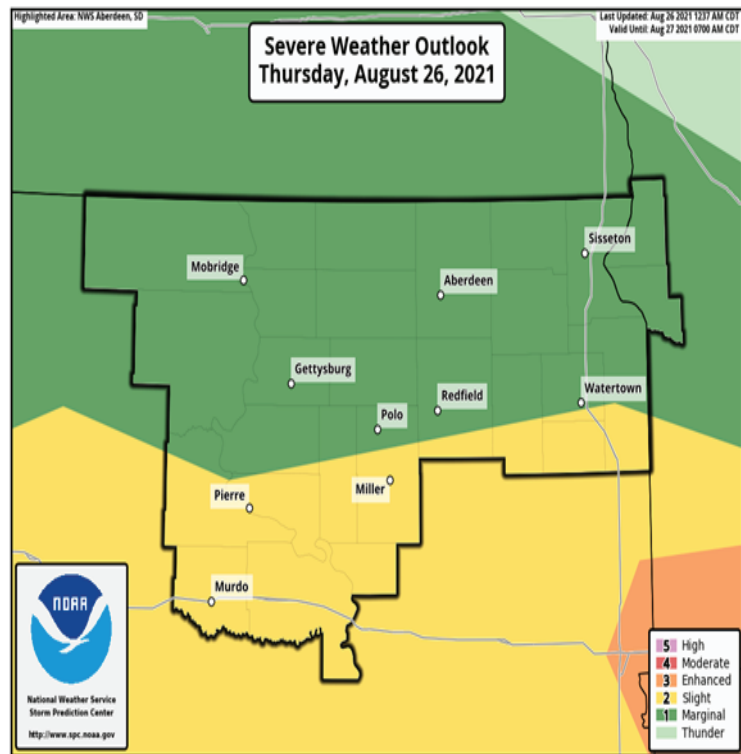
Damaging winds, large hail and heavy rain are all possible with the strongest storms.

Timing

The first round of thunderstorms will track from west to east across the region through the early afternoon hours. A second round will likely track northeast out of south central SD later this afternoon and evening. Yet another, third round of thunderstorms is possible overnight.

Area

Much of the region has the chance of seeing a storm to severe thunderstorm, however best chances are over the southern half of South Dakota.



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

ISSUED: 4:00 AM - Thursday, August 26, 2021

Several rounds of thunderstorms are possible today. Some storms may be severe with damaging winds, large hail and heavy rain all possible. Stay up to date with the latest forecast information for your area.

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Today in Weather History

August 26, 1983: Heavy rainfall up to four and a half inches fell in the town of Mahto, Corson County, flooding basements. Hail, up to three inches in diameter, caused significant damage to roofs and broke numerous windows.

August 26, 1998: Massive rainfall of 3 to over 6 inches fell across far eastern Corson, most of Campbell and Walworth counties during the evening hours of the 26th. The heavy rain caused flooding on many roads along with some highways through the night and into the morning hours on the 27th. Near Selby, high winds, heavy rain, and some hail caused damage to sunflowers and moved a barn three feet off the foundation. In Selby, wind-driven rain pushed water through some ceilings and into basements. An old barn near Glenham was also blown down by the strong winds. Some rainfall amounts include 3.50 inches at Herried, 3.80 inches at Java, 4.20 inches at Selby, 4.50 inches 3N of Selby and just southeast of Mclaughlin, 5 inches at Glenham, 5.75 inches 8N of Mobridge, and 6.35 inches 1.5 miles southeast of Glenham.

1864: A train running from Cincinnati to Chicago was derailed by a tornado in Dearborn County, Indiana, or 75 miles southeast of Indianapolis. Two passenger cars were lifted from the tracks and dropped in a ravine which injured 30 people.

1976: A weak tornado touched down briefly in the Hockley Hills near Kiana, AK, about 29 miles north of the Arctic Circle. This tornado is the most northerly report of a tornado on record. Kiana is 545 miles northwest of Anchorage, Alaska.

1992: Hurricane Andrew made a second landfall near Burns Point, LA as a Category 3 hurricane. Morgan City, LA recorded sustained winds of 92 mph with a peak gust of 108 mph. Hammond, LA was deluged with 11.92 inches of rain. As Andrew moved inland and weakened, it spawned 47 tornadoes from this date through the 28th from the South to the Mid-Atlantic States.

1883 - Krakatoa Volcano exploded in the East Indies. The explosion was heard more than 2500 miles away, and every barograph around the world recorded the passage of the air wave, up to seven times. Giant waves, 125 feet high and traveling 300 mph, devastated everything in their path, hurling ashore coral blocks weighing up to 900 tons, and killing more than 36,000 persons. Volcanic ash was carried around the globe in thirteen days producing blue and green suns in the tropics, and then vivid red sunsets in higher latitudes. The temperature of the earth was lowered one degree for the next two years, finally recovering to normal by 1888. (David Ludlum)

1949 - A hurricane made landfall at Delray Beach. Winds reached 153 mph at the Jupiter Lighthouse before the anemometer failed. The hurricane caused 45 million dollars damage to crops, and also caught the Georgia and South Carolina coast resulting in another two million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1965 - Late night severe thunderstorms associated with an unusually strong late summer cold front produced 100 mph winds straight line winds in the Chicago area and northwest Indiana. In Lake County IND, high winds derailed a train near Crown Point, and left a canoe suspended among telephone lines. Two nights later the temperature at Midway Airport in Chicago dipped to 43 degrees, establishing a record for the month of August. (Storm Data) (Hugh Crowther)

1976 - A weak tornado touched down briefly in the Hockley Hills near Kiana, AK, about 29 miles north of the Arctic Circle. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Showers and thunderstorms drenched northern Illinois during the morning and afternoon hours pushing August rainfall totals for Chicago, Moline and Peoria to new all-time highs for any month of the year. By the end of August, Chicago had received 17.10 inches of rain, which easily surpassed the previous record of 14.17 inches established in September 1961. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A dozen cities in Texas, Colorado and California reported record high temperatures for the date, including readings of 100 degrees at Pueblo CO, 106 degrees at Wichita Falls TX, and 109 degrees at Redding CA. Afternoon thunderstorms in Utah deluged the town of Beaver with more than an inch of rain in twenty minutes. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Anchorage, AK, was soaked with a steady rain, and the 24 hour total of 4.12 inches smashed their previous 24 hour precipitation total of 2.10 inches. It also pushed their rainfall total for the month past their previous record for August. (The National Weather Summary)

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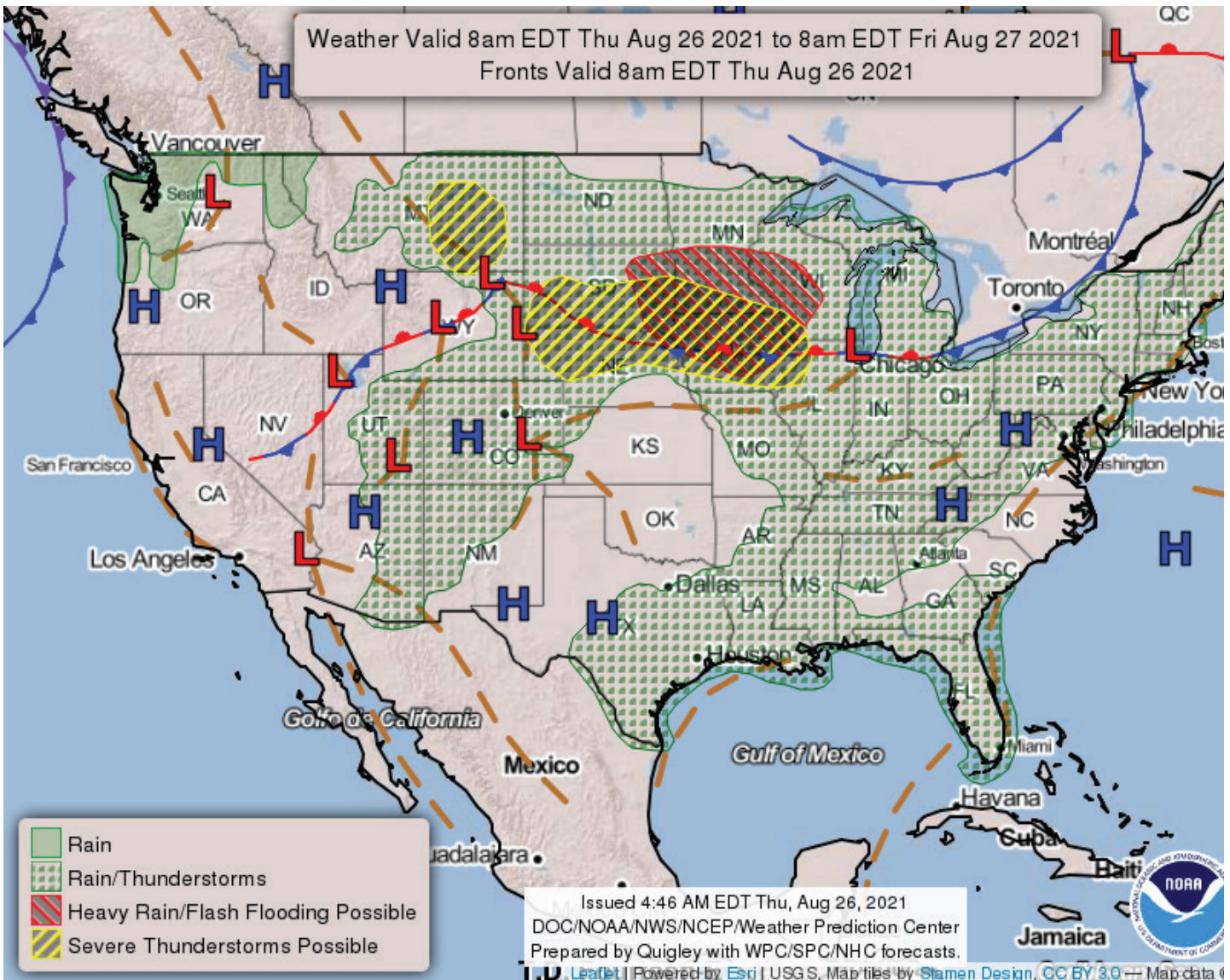
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 77 °F at 4:24 PM
Low Temp: 55 °F at 5:44 AM
Wind: 12 mph at 12:13 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 104° in 1976, 1991
Record Low: 34° in 1914
Average High: 81°F
Average Low: 54°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 1.81
Precip to date in Aug.: 2.19
Average Precip to date: 15.91
Precip Year to Date: 9.46
Sunset Tonight: 8:22 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:49 a.m.



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A RELIABLE REFUGE

The recent tornadoes that have wreaked havoc across the central United States have been devastating. The loss of loved ones, the scope of injuries that will take years to overcome, the destruction of homes and businesses, the feelings of grief and hopelessness that grasped individuals as they sorted through piles of rubbish that at one time represented their entire life is beyond understanding.

In the midst of these great tragedies, however, were the stories and pictures of some who were prepared for such an event. From past encounters with powerful winds and driving rain and hail storms were those who came to the conclusion that preparation for such a time was a top priority. They were the ones who built sturdy shelters beneath the ground where they were sure to be safe. They did not trust their lives to fate or chance. They recognized their need to prepare for the assaults of life.

The author of Psalm 91 spoke of the need we have to prepare for the assaults of life. "He," wrote the author, "will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge."

While storm shelters can protect us from wind and rain, flying objects and falling buildings, only God can protect us from the destructive forces of sin. In Him we have the assurance that He will meet all of our needs - spiritual, emotional and physical - every day of our lives. And through Him we have His promise that He will give us His power and strength, presence and protection to overcome the attacks of the devil.

Prayer: Our hearts rejoice, Father, to know that we can dwell safely "under Your wings" and take refuge in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 91:4 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;

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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

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

04-06-15-27-31

(four, six, fifteen, twenty-seven, thirty-one)

Estimated jackpot: \$59,000

Lotto America

03-37-38-43-50, Star Ball: 7, ASB: 2

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

Estimated jackpot: \$2.55 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$288 million

Powerball

19-31-41-51-53, Powerball: 25

(nineteen, thirty-one, forty-one, fifty-one, fifty-three; Powerball: twenty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$304 million

Court says feds must improve health care for Rosebud Sioux

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The federal government must provide competent, physician-led health care to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, a federal appeals court ruled Wednesday.

The Argus Leader reported the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals issued a 2-1 decision upholding a 2020 South Dakota District Court decision.

The tribe sued in 2016 in the wake of problems at the Indian Health Service hospital on its reservation. The emergency room had to close and patients were diverted to hospitals 50 miles away in Winner, South Dakota, or Valentine, Nebraska. The hospital's operating hours also were cut and other services, including surgeries, were diverted.

The tribe argued an 1868 treaty requires the U.S. government to provide a physician as well as a residence for him or her.

"We do not aim to assign any greater responsibility to the government than the circumstances of this case, and the treaty at issue here, require," Judge Ralph Erickson of North Dakota wrote for the majority in Wednesday's opinion. "In this specific case, the government must do better."

Judge Jonathan Kobes wrote in dissent that the treaty was intended to provide a doctor who would teach the tribe how to provide their own medical care.

"I conclude that no one — neither the government nor the Sioux — understood the treaty to require a single physician to take care of every tribe member's health needs for centuries to come," he wrote.

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

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

Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg 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 Ravnsborg 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.

Jeffrey Beck, an attorney for ProPublica, said: "This is a citizen, saying, 'I want my name removed from it because it's embarrassing.'"

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.

Stanford 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.

This story was first published on Aug. 24, 2021. It was updated on Aug. 25, 2021 to correct the attribution of a quote to ProPublica attorney Jeffrey Beck.

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

Prosecutor: South Dakota AG to take plea deal in fatal crash

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg will avoid a trial and take a plea deal on misdemeanor traffic charges in a crash last year in which he hit and killed a man who was walking along a rural highway, a prosecutor said Wednesday.

Beadle County State's Attorney Michael Moore, who is one of two prosecutors on the case, told The Associated Press that "there won't be a trial and there will be a plea entered," but he declined to discuss further details of the arrangement. The plea will be entered Thursday, when Ravnsborg's trial was scheduled to begin, he said.

Moore said a judge's order that bars state officials from discussing details of the investigation prevented him from disclosing more.

The attorney general's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Ravnsborg, the state's top law enforcement officer, was charged with three misdemeanors that each carry sentences of up to 30 days in jail and up to a \$500 fine. The charges don't affect the Republican's qualification to hold the office of attorney general in South Dakota, but lawmakers from his own party have called for him to step down and pushed for the Legislature to impeach him.

The widow of Joseph Boever, the man who was killed at age 55, has indicated that she plans to file a wrongful death lawsuit against Ravnsborg.

Elected to his first term in 2018, the attorney general initially told authorities that he thought he had struck a deer or another large animal while he was driving home to Pierre from a Republican fundraiser late on Sept. 12. He said he had searched the unlit area with a cellphone flashlight and didn't realize he had killed a man until the next day when he returned to the scene on U.S. 14 near Highmore.

Crash investigators said in November that Ravnsborg was distracted when he veered onto the shoulder of the highway where Boever was walking. But prosecutors took months more to make a charging decision in the crash, launching an investigation that considered cellphone GPS data, video footage from along Ravnsborg's route and DNA evidence.

A toxicology report taken roughly 15 hours after the crash showed no alcohol in Ravnsborg's system, and people attending the fundraiser said he was not seen drinking alcohol.

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In videos released by Gov. Kristi Noem this year, criminal investigators confronted Ravensborg with gruesome details of the crash, including that Boever's eyeglasses were found inside Ravensborg's vehicle. At one point, they told him: "His face was in your windshield, Jason. Think about that."

Ravnsborg seemed unsure in the videos about how he had swerved onto the shoulder, but detectives told him bone scrapings were found on the shoulder's rumble strip.

"I never saw him. I never saw him," Ravensborg told the detectives.

Noem called on Ravensborg to resign in February after the investigation concluded, but Ravensborg resisted those calls, saying he was still capable of fulfilling the duties of his office and asking that he be given due process under the law. Three law enforcement groups, the South Dakota Fraternal Order of Police, the South Dakota Chiefs' of Police Association and the South Dakota Sheriffs' Association, joined the governor's calls for him to step down.

The Republican-dominated Legislature considered impeaching the attorney general this year, but momentum quickly died out and lawmakers decided to wait until after the criminal proceedings to consider whether to proceed. House lawmakers said Wednesday that they were still digesting what the plea deal meant for possible impeachment.

Republican state Rep. Steve Haugaard, an ally of the attorney general, said an impeachment seemed unlikely, especially given that new details about the crash won't come out at a criminal trial.

However, Republican Rep. Tim Goodwin, who has called for Ravensborg to resign, didn't drop the possibility of a fresh effort to remove him from office. It would require a special session, which can be called either by the governor or by two-thirds of both the House and Senate.

"There's still one person that died, and he's our senior law enforcement officer," Goodwin said.

Ravnsborg's attorneys filed a motion last month alleging that Boever's alcoholism and prescription drug abuse led at least one family member, a cousin, to believe that a depressed Boever killed himself by jumping in front of Ravensborg's car.

Ravnsborg hasn't said whether he will seek a second term next year, but his predecessor, Marty Jackley, is running for his old job. Jackley served for 10 years in the post before losing the Republican primary for governor to Noem in 2018.

4 universities form center to disrupt criminal networks

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Four universities in South Dakota are partnering on a new center to disrupt criminal networks.

The schools will use a \$4 million state grant to create the Center for Understanding and Disrupting the Illicit Economy.

South Dakota Mines in Rapid City, South Dakota State University in Brookings, Dakota State University in Madison, and the University of South Dakota in Vermillion are involved in the project.

Dr. Jon Kellar is a professor at South Dakota Mines. He will lead a team focused on identifying counterfeit goods, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported. Kellar said it's a widespread problem that can have big implications.

"Let's say you buy a counterfeit purse, you think, well, I got a good deal and it looks good. And well, you probably think it's a victimless crime," he said. "Well, in fact, those products are being used by terrorists to generate cash to fund their networks."

Kellar said it's important to be a conscientious consumer.

"The first rule of thumb is if it seems too good to be true, it probably is," he said. "You'll notice some of the packaging may not look right, there may be misspellings. Or instead of a regular branded box, it comes in a white bag with some cheese cloth."

Researchers will also focus on tracking fake pharmaceuticals and exploring the dark web and other networks used by criminals.

West warns of possible attack at Kabul airport amid airlift

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By ZIARMAL HASHIMI, JILL LAWLESS and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Western nations warned Thursday of a possible attack on Kabul's airport, where thousands have flocked as they try to flee Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in the waning days of a massive airlift. Britain said an attack could come within hours.

Several countries urged people to avoid the airport, where Belgium said there was a threat of a suicide bombing. But with just days left before the evacuation effort ends and American troops withdraw, few appeared to heed the call.

Over the last week, the airport has been the scene of some of the most searing images of the chaotic end of America's longest war and the Taliban's takeover, as flight after flight landed to pull out those who fear a return to the militants' brutal rule.

Already, some countries have ended their evacuations and begun to withdraw their soldiers and diplomats, signaling the beginning of the end of one of history's largest airlifts. The Taliban have so far honored a pledge not to attack Western forces during the evacuation, but insist the foreign troops must be out by America's self-imposed deadline of Aug. 31.

But overnight, new warnings emerged from Western capitals about a threat from Afghanistan's Islamic State group affiliate, which likely has seen its ranks boosted by the Taliban's freeing of prisoners during their blitz across the country.

British Armed Forces Minister James Heappey told the BBC on Thursday there was "very, very credible reporting of an imminent attack" at the airport, possibly within "hours."

Heappey conceded that people are desperate to leave and "there is an appetite by many in the queue to take their chances, but the reporting of this threat is very credible indeed and there is a real imminence to it."

"There is every chance that as further reporting comes in, we may be able to change the advice again and process people anew, but there's no guarantee of that," he added.

Late Wednesday, the U.S. Embassy warned citizens at three airport gates to leave immediately due to an unspecified security threat. Australia, Britain and New Zealand also advised their citizens Thursday not to go to the airport, with Australia's foreign minister saying there was a "very high threat of a terrorist attack."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid denied that any attack was imminent. "It's not correct," he wrote in a text message after being asked about the warnings. He did not elaborate.

On Thursday, the Taliban sprayed a water cannon at those gathered at one airport gate to try to drive the crowd away, as someone launched tear gas canisters elsewhere. While some fled, others just sat on the ground, covered their face and waited in the noxious fumes.

Nadia, a 27-year-old Afghan woman who gave only her first name for fear of reprisals, carried her 2-year-old daughter with her outside the airport. She and her husband, who had worked with coalition forces, missed a call from a number they believed was the State Department and were trying to get into the airport without any luck. Her husband had pressed ahead in the crowd to try to get them inside.

"We have to find a way to evacuate because our lives are in danger," Nadia said. "My husband received several threatening messages from unknown sources. We have no chance except escaping."

Gunshots later echoed in the area as Nadia waited. "There is anarchy because of immense crowds, she said, blaming the U.S. for the chaos.

Many Afghans have felt the same in the wake of the Taliban's takeover. The hard-line Islamic group wrested back control of the country nearly 20 years after being ousted in a U.S.-led invasion following the 9/11 attacks, which al-Qaida orchestrated while being sheltered by the group.

Amid concerns about attacks, military cargo planes leaving Kabul airport already use flares to disrupt any potential missile fire. But there are also worries someone could detonate explosives in the teeming crowds outside the airport.

"We received information at the military level from the United States, but also from other countries, that there were indications that there was a threat of suicide attacks on the mass of people," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said, talking about the threat around Kabul airport.

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Senior U.S. officials said Wednesday's warning from the embassy was related to specific threats involving the Islamic State group and potential vehicle bombs. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss ongoing military operations.

The Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan grew out of disaffected Taliban members who hold an even more extreme view of Islam. Naming themselves after Khorasan, a historic name for the greater region, the extremists embarked on a series of brutal attacks in Afghanistan that included a 2020 assault on a maternity hospital in Kabul that saw infants and women killed.

The Taliban have fought against Islamic State militants in Afghanistan. However, their advance across the country likely saw IS fighters freed alongside the Taliban's own. There are particular concerns that extremists may have seized heavy weapons and equipment abandoned by Afghan troops who fled the Taliban advance.

Amid the warnings and the pending American withdrawal, some European nations said they would have to end their evacuations.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex told RTL radio said his country's efforts would end Friday evening due to the U.S. pullout.

Danish Defense Minister Trine Bramsen bluntly warned: "It is no longer safe to fly in or out of Kabul."

Denmark's last flight has already departed, and Poland and Belgium have also announced the end of their evacuations. The Dutch government said it had been told by the U.S. to leave Thursday.

The Taliban have said they'll allow Afghans to leave via commercial flights after the deadline next week, but it remains unclear which airlines would return to an airport controlled by the militants. Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said talks were underway between his country and the Taliban about allowing Turkish civilian experts to help run the facility.

The Taliban have promised to return Afghanistan to security and pledged they won't seek revenge on those who opposed them or roll back progress on human rights. But many Afghans are skeptical.

Fueling fears of what Taliban rule might hold, a journalist from private broadcaster Tolo News described being beaten by Taliban. Ziar Yad said the fighters also beat his colleague and confiscated their cameras, technical equipment and a mobile phone as they tried to report on poverty in Kabul.

"The issue has been shared with Taliban leaders; however, the perpetrators have not yet been arrested, which is a serious threat to freedom of expression," Yad wrote on Twitter.

Lawless reported from London and Gambrell from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writers Sylvie Corbet in Paris; Jan M. Olsen from Copenhagen, Denmark; Tameem Akhgar and Andrew Wilks in Istanbul; James LaPorta in Boca Raton, Florida; Mike Corder at The Hague, Netherlands; and Colleen Barry in Milan contributed to this report.

US says up to 1,500 Americans await airlift as threats grow

By ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken said as many as 1,500 Americans may be awaiting evacuation from Afghanistan, a figure that suggests the U.S. may accomplish its highest priority for the Kabul airlift — rescuing U.S. citizens — ahead of President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline despite growing warnings Thursday of terror threats targeting the airport.

Untold thousands of at-risk Afghans, however, were still struggling to get into the Kabul airport, even many thousands of other Afghans already had been flown to safety in nearly two weeks of round-the-clock flights.

Several of the Americans working phones and pulling strings to get out former Afghan colleagues, women's advocates, journalists and other vulnerable Afghans said they were still waiting for U.S. action to get those remaining Afghans past Taliban checkpoints and through U.S.-controlled airport gates to promised evacuation flights.

"It's 100% up to the Afghans to take these risks and try to fight their way out," said Sunil Varghese,

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policy director with the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Blinken, echoing Biden's earlier declarations during the now 12-day-old evacuation, emphasized at a State Department briefing that "evacuating Americans is our top priority."

He added, "We're also committed to getting out as many Afghans at-risk as we can before the 31st," when Biden plans to pull out the last of thousands of American troops.

As more nations began shutting down their own evacuation flights and pulling out ahead of the United States' troop withdrawal, there were new European warnings Thursday of terror threats. British Armed Forces Minister James Heappey told the BBC on Thursday there was "very, very credible reporting of an imminent attack" at the airport, possibly within "hours."

On Wednesday, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul issued a security alert warning American citizens away from three specific airport gates, but gave no further explanation. Senior U.S. officials said the warning was related to ongoing and specific threats involving the Islamic State and potential vehicle bombs, which have set U.S. officials on edge in the final days of the American drawdown. The officials insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss ongoing military operations.

Blinken said the State Department estimates there were about 6,000 Americans wanting to leave Afghanistan when the airlift began Aug. 14, as the Taliban took the capital after a stunning military conquest. About 4,500 Americans have been evacuated so far, Blinken said, and among the rest "some are understandably very scared."

The 6,000 figure is the first firm estimate by the State Department of how many Americans were seeking to get out. U.S. officials early in the evacuation estimated as many as 15,000, including dual citizens, lived in Afghanistan. The figure does not include U.S. Green Card holders.

About 500 Americans have been contacted with instructions on when and how to get to the chaotic Kabul airport to catch evacuation flights.

In addition, 1,000 or perhaps fewer are being contacted to determine whether they still want to leave. Blinken said some of these may already have left the country, some may want to remain and some may not actually be American citizens.

"We are providing opportunity," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said of those Afghans, who include dual Afghan-American citizens. "We are finding ways to get them to the airport and evacuate them, but it is also their personal decision on whether they want to depart."

On a lighter note, the U.S. military said an Afghan baby girl born on a C-17 military aircraft during the massive evacuation will carry that experience with her. Her parents named her after the plane's call sign: Reach.

She was born Saturday, and members of the 86th Medical Group helped in her birth aboard the plane that had taken the family from Kabul to Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Two other babies whose parents were evacuating from Afghanistan have been born over the past week at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the U.S. military hospital in Germany.

In Washington, Blinken emphasized that the U.S. and other governments plan to continue assisting Afghans and Americans who want to leave after next Tuesday, the deadline for Biden's planned end to the evacuation and the two-decade U.S. military role in Afghanistan.

Biden has cited what he U.S. says are rising security threats to U.S. forces, including from an affiliate of the Islamic State terror group, for his determination to stick with Tuesday's withdrawal deadline.

The U.S. Embassy has already been evacuated; staff are operating from the Kabul airport and the last are to leave by Tuesday.

Biden said this week he had asked his national security team for contingency plans in case he decides to extend the deadline. Taliban leaders who took control of Afghanistan this month say they will not tolerate any extensions to the Tuesday deadline. But Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen tweeted that "people with legal documents" will still be able to fly out via commercial flights after Tuesday.

U.S. troops are anchoring a multinational evacuation from the airport. The White House says the airlift overall has flown out 82,300 Afghans, Americans and others on a mix of U.S., international and private

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flights.

The withdrawal comes under a 2020 deal negotiated by President Donald Trump with the Taliban.

Refugee groups are describing a different picture than the Biden administration is when it comes to many Afghans: a disorganized, barely-there U.S. evacuation effort that leaves the most desperate to risk beatings and death at Taliban checkpoints. Some Afghans are reported being turned away from the Kabul airport by American forces controlling the gates, despite having approval for flights.

U.S. military and diplomatic officials appear to still be compiling lists of eligible Afghans but have yet to disclose how many may be evacuated — and how — private Americans and American organizations said.

"We still have 1,200 Afghans with visas that are outside the airport and haven't got in," said James Miervaldis with No One Left Behind, one of dozens of veterans groups working to get out Afghans who worked with the U.S. military during America's nearly 20 years of combat in the country.. "We're waiting to hear from the US. government and haven't heard yet."

U.S.-based organizations, speaking on background to discuss sensitive matters, cite accounts from witnesses on the ground as saying some American citizens, and family members of Afghans with green cards, still were having trouble pushing and talking their way into the Kabul airport for flights.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. military will preserve as much airlift capacity at the airport as possible in the coming days, ahead of Tuesday's deadline. The military will "continue to evacuate needed populations all the way to the end," he said. But he added that in the final days and hours there will have to be a balance in getting out U.S. troops and their equipment as well as evacuees.

Associated Press writers Lolita C. Baldor in Washington and James LaPorta in Boca Raton, Florida, contributed to this report.

Australian mourns beloved aunt with heart-shaped love ewes

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — An Australian farmer couldn't go to his aunt's funeral because of pandemic restrictions so he paid his respects with a novel alternative: dozens of sheep arranged in the shape of a love heart.

Drone-shot video of pregnant ewes munching barley in a paddock while unwittingly expressing Ben Jackson's affection for his beloved Auntie Deb was viewed by mourners at her funeral in the city of Brisbane in Queensland state this week.

Jackson was locked down at the time across a state border at his farm in Guyra in New South Wales state, 430 kilometers (270 miles) away.

"It took me a few goes to get it right ... and the final result is what you see. That was as close to a heart as I could get it," Jackson said on Thursday.

Jackson started experimenting with making shapes with sheep to relieve the monotonous stress of hand-feeding livestock during a devastating drought across most of Australia that broke in the early months of the pandemic.

He discovered that if he spelled the names of his favorite musical bands with grain dropped from the back of a truck that the flock would roughly adopt the same shape for several minutes.

"It certainly lifted my spirits back in the drought," Jackson said.

"This heart that I've done for my auntie, it certainly seems like it's had a bit of an effect across Australia," he added, referring to emotional social media responses.

"Maybe we all just need to give ourselves a big virtual hug," he said.

Jackson said he was lucky to have any grain left on his property after a mouse plague this year that followed the drought.

He continues to supplement the pregnant ewes' diet with grain to improve their condition before they give birth.

Palestinian twins open cafe in converted jet in West Bank

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Few Palestinians in the occupied West Bank get to board an airplane these days. The territory has no civilian airport and those who can afford a plane ticket must catch their flights in neighboring Jordan. But just outside the northern city of Nablus, a pair of twins is offering people the next best thing.

Khamis al-Sairafi and brother Ata have converted an old Boeing 707 into a cafe and restaurant for customers to board.

"Ninety-nine percent of Palestinians have never used an airplane. Only our ambassadors, diplomats, ministers and mayors use them. Now they see an airplane and it is something for them," said Khamis al-Sairafi.

After a quarter century of effort, the brothers opened "The Palestinian-Jordanian Airline Restaurant and Coffee Shop al-Sairafi" on July 21.

Families, friends and couples turned up for drinks in the cafe situated below the body of the plane. Many others came to take photos inside at a price of five shekels (about \$1.50) per person.

Customers said they were motivated to visit after seeing pictures of the renovated plane circulating online. "For a long time, I have wanted to see this place. I wish I had seen this place before it was turned into a café," said customer Majdi Khalid.

For years, the jetliner sat along the side of a major highway in the northern West Bank, providing endless fodder for conversation for passersby baffled by its hulking presence.

The 60-year-old identically dressed twins' dream of transforming the airplane into a cafe and restaurant was born in the late 1990s when Khamis saw the derelict Boeing aircraft near the northern Israeli city of Safed.

At the time, the plane already had an illustrious history. The aircraft was used by the Israeli government from 1961 to 1993 and flew then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin to the United States in 1978 to sign Israel's historic peace agreement with Egypt, according to Channel 12 TV.

It was later bought by three Israeli business partners who dreamed of turning it into a restaurant, but the project was abandoned following disagreements with local authorities, the station said.

After tracking down one of the owners, the brothers agreed to buy it for \$100,000 in 1999. They spent an additional \$50,000 for licenses, permits and to transport it to the West Bank.

Khamis said the then-mayor of Nablus, Ghassan Shakaa, quickly approved the transportation and renovation of the airplane.

Moving the plane to Nablus was a 13-hour operation, requiring the wings to be dismantled and the temporary closure of roads in Israel and the West Bank. At the time, Israel and the Palestinians were engaged in peace talks and movement back and forth was relatively easy.

The al-Sairafi brothers were successful traders and scrap metal merchants. They regularly traveled to and from Israel buying pieces of metal that they then sold and smelted in the West Bank. They also owned a successful waste disposal business and used their earnings to build an amusement park — including a swimming pool and concert venue — on the same patch of land where the plane was placed.

But they said their project was put on hold after the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in late 2000.

An Israeli military checkpoint was built nearby, they said, preventing customers from the nearby city of Nablus from reaching the site. The checkpoint remained for three years and the Israeli military took over the site. The project collapsed.

"They even built tents under the wings of the plane," Ata al-Sairafi said.

The Israeli military did not respond to a request for comment.

For nearly 20 years, the airplane and the site were abandoned. After the uprising faded out in the mid-2000s, the brothers scraped by with their waste disposal business and the small amusement park in Nablus they opened in 2007.

After more than a decade of saving, they decided in 2020 to begin rebuilding what they lost, this time

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starting with the renovation of the airplane. The coronavirus crisis, which included multiple lockdowns, hit the Palestinian economy hard and caused further delays.

Following months of work, the aircraft is almost ready for full service. The interior is freshly painted, fitted with electricity and nine tables and the doors are connected to two old jetways allowing customers to board safely. The nose of the plane has been painted with colors of the Palestinian flag and the tail with Jordanian colors.

The cafe is already open and the brothers hope to open the restaurant next month. They plan to install a kitchen below the body of the plane to serve food to customers on board.

However, their long-term goal of re-building the amusement park and swimming pool remains a long way off. The pair said they were disappointed they had not received financial support from the municipality and are looking for investors.

"God willing, I hope the project works and that it becomes the best it can be," said Ata al-Sairafi.

Japan suspends 1.63M doses of Moderna over contamination

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan suspended use of about 1.63 million doses of Moderna vaccine Thursday after contamination was found in unused vials, raising concern of a supply shortage as the country tries to accelerate vaccinations amid a COVID-19 surge.

The health ministry said contamination was reported from multiple vaccination sites. Some doses might have been administered, but no adverse health effects have been reported so far, officials said.

Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., a Japanese drugmaker in charge of sales and distribution of the vaccine in Japan, said it decided to suspend use of doses manufactured in the same production line as a safety precaution.

It asked Moderna to conduct an emergency investigation and told medical institutions and organizers to stop using the vaccine produced in Spain and shared the production numbers that may be affected.

The health ministry and Takeda did not give details on the type of contamination or if the doses in question may have been distributed outside Japan.

The Moderna vaccine problem came just as Japan struggles with surging infections, with daily new cases hitting new highs in many parts of the country and severely straining the health care system.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told reporters the government and Takeda are discussing ways to minimize the impact on Japan's vaccination progress.

"We will do utmost in order to avoid any impact on vaccination progress, especially at worksites and large-scale centers," Kato said.

Japan relies entirely on foreign-developed vaccines by Moderna, as well as Pfizer Inc. and AstraZeneca. Moderna has been since mid-June at large-scale centers and workplace inoculations and has helped speed up Japan's rollout.

About 43% of the Japanese population have been fully vaccinated, with daily doses of about 1 million.

'Was it worth it?' A fallen Marine and a war's crushing end

By CLAIRE GALOFARO and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SPRINGVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — She was folding a red sweater when she heard a car door slam, went to the window and realized that a moment she always imagined would kill her was about to be made real: three Marines and a Navy chaplain were walking toward her door, and that could only mean one thing.

She put her hand on the blue stars she'd stuck next to the front door, a symbol meant to protect her son, Marine Lance Cpl. Alec Catherwood, who had left three weeks before for the battlefields of Afghanistan.

And then, as she recalls it, she lost her mind. She ran wildly through the house. She opened the door and told the men they couldn't come inside. She picked up a flower basket and hurled it at them. She screamed so loud and for so long the next day she could not speak.

"I just wanted them not to say anything," said Gretchen Catherwood, "because if they said it, it would

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be true. And, of course, it was.”

Her 19-year-old son was dead, killed fighting the Taliban on Oct. 14, 2010.

As she watched the news over the last two weeks, it felt like that day happened 10 minutes ago. The American military pulled out of Afghanistan, and all they had fought so hard to build seemed to collapse in an instant. The Afghan military put down its weapons, the president fled and the Taliban took over. As thousands crushed into the Kabul airport desperate to escape, Gretchen Catherwood felt like she could feel in her hands the red sweater she'd been folding the moment she learned her son was dead.

Her phone buzzed with messages from the family she's assembled since that horrible day: the officer who'd dodged the flowerpot; the parents of others killed in battle or by suicide since; her son's fellow fighters in the storied 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, nicknamed the Darkhorse Battalion, that endured the highest rate of casualties in Afghanistan. Many of them call her "Ma."

Outside of this circle, she'd seen someone declare "what a waste of life and potential" on Facebook. Friends told her how horrible they'd felt that her son had died in vain. As she exchanged messages with the others who'd paid the price of war, she worried its end was forcing them to question whether all they had seen and all they had suffered had mattered at all.

"There are three things I need you to know," she said to some. "You did not fight for nothing. Alec did not lose his life for nothing. I will be here for you no matter what, until the day I die. Those are the things I need you to remember."

In the woods behind her house, the Darkhorse Lodge is under construction. She and her husband are building a retreat for combat veterans, a place where they can gather and grapple together with the horrors of war. There are 25 rooms, each named after one of the men killed from her son's battalion. The ones who made it home have become their surrogate sons, she said. And she knows of more than a half-dozen who have died from suicide.

"I am fearful of what this might do to them psychologically. They're so strong and so brave and so courageous. But they also have really, really big hearts. And I feel that they might internalize a lot and blame themselves," she said. "And oh God, I hope they don't blame themselves."

The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment deployed in the fall of 2010 from Camp Pendleton, California, sending 1,000 U.S. Marines on what would become one of the bloodiest tours for American service members in Afghanistan.

The Darkhorse Battalion spent six months battling Taliban fighters in the Sangin district of Helmand province. An area of green fields and mud compounds, Sangin remained almost entirely in the Taliban's control nearly a decade into the U.S.-led war. Fields of lush poppies used in narcotics gave the militants valued income they were determined to hold.

When the Marines arrived, white Taliban flags flew from most buildings. Loudspeakers installed to broadcast prayers were used to taunt U.S. forces. Schools had closed.

The Marines came under fire as soon as a helicopter dropped them outside their patrol base.

"When the bird landed, we were already getting shot at," recalled former Sgt. George Barba of Menifee, California. "We run, we get inside and I remember our gunnery sergeant telling us: 'Welcome to Sangin. You just got your combat action ribbon.'"

Snipers lurked in the trees. Fighters armed with rifles hid behind mud walls. Homemade bombs turned roads and canals into deathtraps.

Sangin was Alec Catherwood's first combat deployment. He had enlisted in the Marines while still in high school, went to boot camp shortly after graduation, then was assigned to a 13-man squad led by former Sgt. Sean Johnson.

Johnson was impressed by Catherwood's professionalism — physically fit, mentally tough and always on time.

"He was only 19, so that was extra special," Johnson said. "Some are still just trying to figure out how to tie their boots and not get yelled at."

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Catherwood also made them laugh. He carried around a small, stuffed animal he used as a prop for jokes. Barba recalled Catherwood's first helicopter ride during training, and how he was "smiling ear-to-ear and he's swinging his feet like he's a little kid on a highchair."

Former Cpl. William Sutton of Yorkville, Illinois, swore Catherwood would crack jokes even during a firefight.

"Alec, he was a shining light in that darkness," said Sutton, who was shot multiple times fighting in Afghanistan. "And then they took it from us."

On Oct. 14, 2010, after a late night standing watch outside their patrol base, Catherwood's squad headed out to assist fellow Marines under attack, who were running low on ammunition.

They crossed open fields, using irrigation canals for cover. After sending half his squad safely ahead, Johnson tapped Catherwood on the helmet and said: "Let's go."

After running just three steps, he said, gunfire from ambushing Taliban fighters sounded behind them. Johnson looked down and saw a bullet hole in his pants where he had been shot in the leg. Then came a deafening explosion — one of the Marines had stepped on a hidden bomb. Johnson blacked out momentarily, waking up in the water.

Another explosion followed. Looking to his left, Johnson saw Catherwood floating facedown. It was obvious, he said, that the young Marine was dead.

Explosions during the ambush killed another Marine, Lance Cpl. Joseph Lopez of Rosamond, California, and badly wounded another.

Back in the United States, Staff Sergeant Steve Bancroft began an excruciating two-hour drive toward Catherwood's parents' house in northern Illinois. He'd served seven months in Iraq before he became a casualty assistance officer, tasked with notifying families of a death on the battlefield.

"I'd never wish that on anybody, I can't express that enough: I do not wish looking a mom and dad in the face and telling them their only son is gone," said Bancroft, who is now retired.

He was stoic when he had to be, as he escorted families to Dover, Delaware, to watch coffins be rolled out of a plane. But when he was alone, he cried. And he still weeps when he thinks about the moment he arrived at the home of Gretchen and Kirk Catherwood.

They laugh now about the hurled flowerpot. He still regularly talks to them and other sets of parents he notified. Though he never met Alec, he feels like he knows him.

"Their son was such a hero, it's hard to explain, but he sacrificed more than 99% of the people in this world would ever think of doing," he said.

"Was it worth it? We lost so many people. It's hard to think about how many we've lost," he said.

Gretchen Catherwood keeps the cross her son was wearing on a chain around her bedpost with his dog tags.

Alongside it hangs a glass bead, blown with the ashes of another young Marine: Cpl. Paul Wedgewood, who made it home.

The Darkhorse Battalion returned to California in April 2011. After months of intense fighting, they'd largely seized Sangin from the Taliban's grip. Leaders of the provincial government could move about safely. Children, including girls, returned to school.

It came at a heavy price. In addition to the 25 who perished, more than 200 returned home wounded, many with lost limbs, others with scars harder to see.

Wedgewood had trouble sleeping when he finished his four-year enlistment and left the Marine Corps in 2013. As he slept less, he drank more.

A tattoo on his upper arm showed a sheet of scroll paper bearing the names of four Marines who died in Sangin. Wedgewood considered reenlisting, but told his mother: "If I stay, I think it'll kill me."

Instead, Wedgewood enrolled in college back home in Colorado, but soon lost interest. A welding program at a community college proved a better fit.

Wedgewood had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He was taking medication, par-

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icipating in therapy.

"He was very engaged in working on his mental health," said the Marine's mother, Helen Wedgewood. "He was not a neglected veteran."

Still, he struggled. On the Fourth of July, Wedgewood would take his dog camping in the woods to avoid fireworks. He quit a job he liked after a backfiring machine caused him to dive to the floor.

Five years after Sangin, things appeared to be looking up. Wedgewood was preparing for a new job that would take him back to Afghanistan as a private security contractor. He seemed to be in a good place.

After a night of drinking with his roommates, Wedgewood didn't show up for work on Aug. 23, 2016. A roommate later found him dead in his bedroom. He had shot himself. He was 25 years old.

He left a short note.

"He basically said that he loved us, but he was tired," Helen Wedgewood said.

She considers her son and others who took their own lives to be casualties of war every bit as much as those killed in action.

When the Taliban swept back into control of Afghanistan just before the fifth anniversary of her son's death, she felt relief that a war that left more than 2,400 Americans dead and more than 20,700 wounded had finally come to an end. But there was also sadness that gains made by the Afghan people — especially women and children — may be temporary.

"As a mom, this kind of stabs you, because would he still be around, would any of these young men still be around if this whole war hadn't happened?" she said. "But I try to gently correct people when they say this was a waste or this was all for nothing. Because that's not true. We don't know what impacts it's had on the safety of our country, on the safety of the Afghan people."

Some who served with the Darkhorse Battalion are having a hard time seeing it any way other than that their efforts, their blood and the lives of their fallen friends were all for nothing.

"I'm starting to feel like how the Vietnam vets felt. There was no purpose to it whatsoever," said Sutton, 32, who now works in the veterans services office of a county outside Chicago, helping military vets get care.

"We were able to hold our head up high and say we went to the last Taliban stronghold and we gave them hell," Sutton said, "only for it all to be taken away. In the blink of an eye."

Barba, 34, works as a private security guard near Los Angeles. He and his wife are expecting their first child. He said he's had trouble sorting his feelings about the bleak news from Afghanistan. His wife recently woke to Barba screaming in his sleep. "I think your nightmares are back," she told him.

"It really is weird," Barba said. "I've seen my guys get mad. I've seen my guys get frustrated. But not like this. This is like somebody spit in their face."

Johnson, 34, works as a commercial diver in Florida. He said the U.S. should have acknowledged years ago that the Afghan security forces Americans trained and equipped would never be able to defend the country on their own.

"My personal opinion, yeah, we probably should have pulled out years and years ago," Johnson said. "If you're not going to win the damn thing, what are you doing there?"

A few months ago, Gretchen Catherwood was painting the cabins that will become the Darkhorse Lodge. It was dark, still without electricity and no cell service, so it was quiet. She felt suddenly like she could feel her son and his 24 fallen comrades. She could almost see their faces.

"It's a place where I can feel like they're together," she said, "and that they are still caring for their brothers."

The Catherwoods moved out of their home in Illinois. Every time she walked to the front door, Gretchen remembered those four men arriving with the news. She couldn't bear it anymore.

The gold star pins she wore everyday on her chest kept breaking. She'd always disliked tattoos and hassled her son when he got one as a Marine. But then she found herself at a tattoo parlor. She had his

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name inked on her arm, and the shape of a gold star pin put permanently on her chest, just above her heart, so she'd never take it off again.

She could no longer care for her son, she said, but she could for those who made it home. She and her husband moved to the woods in Tennessee and got to work on the Darkhorse Lodge.

They fashioned their logo after the battalion's mascot, a fierce-looking horse, facing left, its mane sharp like a serrated knife and its eyes squinted for battle. The artist who drew theirs softened its edges and turned it to the right, facing toward a future after war.

They raised a million dollars, mostly in small donations. One woman sends a check for \$2 every month. Bancroft, the officer who notified her of her son's death, donates every year. The obituary for one soldier who died by suicide asked for donations to the Darkhorse Lodge in his memory, and checks flooded the Catherwoods' mailbox.

They hope to open next summer and offer free stays for any combat veteran from any war or branch of the military who might benefit from time in the woods, where the only conflict is among the dozens of hummingbirds fighting over the feeders on her front porch.

She is hopeful that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan means no one else will die on a battlefield there. But she also worries that it might rattle the vets who made it home, and who might already be struggling to make sense of what happened there and why.

"That's a constant fear, it's been my fear since they got back but now it's even worse," she said. "They experienced things that 99% of the country never will. I've never watched a friend die. I've never fought to the death. We are losing these people at a frightening, frightening rate to suicides, and we can't afford to lose one more."

She and her husband don't believe that the chaotic end honors their son's service, and are particularly troubled that some of the Afghan interpreters and others who helped the military for years might not make it out alive. But they also can't imagine how it might have ended any other way, had the United States stayed in Afghanistan another year or five or 20.

Part of Alec Catherwood remains there, and for a while that bothered his mother.

When he was alive, she loved to touch his face. He had baby soft skin and when she put her hands on his cheeks, this big tough Marine felt like her little boy. The military did an honorable job making him look whole, she said. But when she touched his cheek as he laid in the casket, she touched a part that had been reconstructed - it wasn't really him.

"That used to be much harder than it is now," she said. "Now, it's like, damn straight, he's still there. He's always going to have a presence there, flipping off the Taliban."

Good things will grow where he is, she likes to think.

"He's part of their dirt, their soil, he's part of the Earth there, he is forever there."

Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia.

Gaps in wildfire smoke warning network leave people exposed

By MATTHEW BROWN and PADMANANDA RAMA Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Huge gaps between air quality sensors in the western U.S. have created blind spots in the warning system for wildfire smoke plumes sweeping North America this summer, amid growing concern over potential health impacts to millions of people exposed to the pollution.

Government programs to alert the public when smoke pollution becomes unhealthy rely on about 950 permanent monitoring stations and dozens of mobile units that can be deployed around major fires.

Those stations are heavily concentrated around major cities on the West Coast and east of the Mississippi River — a patchwork that leaves some people unable to determine local risks from smoke, including in rural areas where air quality can quickly degrade when fires ignite nearby. The problem persists far beyond fire lines because wildfire smoke travels for thousands of miles and loses its tell-tale odor yet remains a danger to public health.

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The monitoring gaps underscore what officials and public health experts say is a glaring shortage of resources for a type of pollution growing worse as climate change brings increasingly long and destructive wildfire seasons to the U.S. West, southern Europe and eastern Russia.

Microscopic particles in wildfire smoke can cause breathing issues and more serious problems for people with chronic health conditions. Long-term effects remain under study but some researchers estimate chronic smoke exposure causes about 20,000 premature deaths a year in the U.S.

"It's a very frustrating place to be where we have recurring health emergencies without sufficient means of responding to them," said Sarah Coefield, an air quality specialist for the city of Missoula, Montana. "You can be in your office just breathing smoke and thinking you're OK because you're inside, but you're not."

Missoula, perched along the Clark Fork River with about 75,000 people, is surrounded by mountains and has become notorious as a smoke trap. All across the region are similar mountain valleys, many without pollution monitors, and smoke conditions can vary greatly from one valley to the next.

Montana has 19 permanent monitoring stations. That's about one for every 7,700 square miles (20,000 square kilometers) or an area almost as big as New Jersey. New Jersey has 30.

Data on air quality is particularly sparse in eastern Montana, where smoke from a 266-square-mile (690-square-kilometer) fire on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation got so bad this month that officials closed a health clinic when air filters couldn't keep up with the pollution.

The smoke prompted tribal authorities to shield elders and others who were at risk by extending an evacuation order for Lame Deer, a town of about 2,000 people that sits beneath fire-scarred Badger Peak and is home to the tribal government complex.

But on the same day, Lame Deer and surrounding areas were left out of a pollution alert from state officials, who said extremely high smoke particle levels made the air unhealthy across large areas of Montana and advised people to avoid prolonged exertion to protect their lungs. A pollution sensor on the reservation had burned in the fire, and the nearest state Department of Environmental Quality monitor, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) away, showed an air quality reading of "good."

That left tribal officials to judge the pollution hazard based on how far they could see — a crude fallback for areas without monitors. On a scale of one to 20, "I would say the smoke was a 19," tribal spokesperson Angel Becker said.

"What makes it difficult is that Lame Deer is sitting in between a couple of ravines," she added. "So when you get socked in (with smoke), it just sits here and that's not good for elders or kids that have asthma or any breathing issues."

Doug Kuenzli, who supervises Montana's air quality monitoring program, said regulators recognize the need for more data on smoke but high-grade monitors can be prohibitively expensive — \$10,000 to \$28,000 each.

Oregon expanded its network over the past two years with five new monitors along the state's picturesque coastline where smoke only recently became a recurring problem, said Tom Roick with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

"We're seeing more prevalence of wildfire smoke and increased intensity," Roick said. "It's not because we have more monitoring; it's getting worse."

Throughout the West, public health officials have struggled to get the message about dangers of smoke to at-risk communities, such as migrant workers who spend lots of time outdoors, people in houses without air filters and the elderly. Children, too, are more at risk of health problems.

That's no small subset of society: People over 65 and children under 18 make up 40% of the population, said Kaitlyn Kelly, a wildfire smoke pollution specialist with the Washington Department of Health.

Rapid technological advancements mean households can buy their own monitoring equipment for around \$250. The equipment is not as reliable as government stations, officials said, but the data from many of the privately-owned sensors is now displayed on an interactive smoke exposure map by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Forest Service.

Although inaccurate readings have been reported for some consumer-grade sensors, officials said they

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can help fill blind spots in the government's network. The number in use is fast increasing — from about 6,000 private sensors last year to more than 10,000 currently, according to EPA.

"There's still gaps," said Kelly. "The low-cost sensors are the first step in filling in the gaps where we don't have (government) monitors."

In Missoula, a small non-profit group founded to bring attention to global warming is going beyond warning people about smoke. It's providing makeshift air filters and portable air cleaners to the homebound elderly and impoverished households.

Vinette Rupp, a 74-year-old Missoula woman who received a portable air cleaner, said she "can almost taste it" when the smoke gets thick in town. Neighbor Maureen Fogarty, 67, who has lung cancer and suffers from breathing problems, said her coughing has eased since she got one of the filters.

"Well it's a lifesaver because I can breathe easier now," Fogarty said. "The way it is, you know, you've got to come and go and you're bringing in the unhealthy air, and it's gonna affect you."

Climate Smart Missoula, which provided the portable air cleaner, also makes and distributes filters through a local food bank. Costing about \$30 apiece — versus \$150 or more for a manufactured unit — the do-it-yourself purifiers are endorsed by public health officials. They're crafted from box fans with high-efficiency furnace filters duct-taped to the back to trap pollution particles as air passes through.

Climate Smart Missoula director Amy Cilimburg said she and a colleague have built roughly 200 of them, paid for largely with donations.

"Our strategies for dealing with wildfire smoke were pray for rain, or leave town, or suffer — and that seemed inadequate," Cilimburg said "It's kind of caught up with us, even though scientists have told us it's coming. I felt like we needed to get to work."

Follow Matthew Brown on Twitter: @MatthewBrownAP

Israeli PM to make case to Biden against Iran nuclear pact

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett are set to hold their first face-to-face meeting Thursday, and Israel's new leader intends to press Biden to give up pursuit of reviving the Iran nuclear deal.

Before arriving in Washington, Bennett made clear the top priority of the visit to the White House was to persuade Biden not to return to the nuclear accord, arguing Iran has already advanced in its uranium enrichment, and that sanctions relief would give Iran more resources to back Israel's enemies in the region.

The Israeli leader met separately Wednesday with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to discuss Iran and other issues. The visit was his first to the U.S. as prime minister.

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

Biden has made clear his desire find a path to salvage the 2015 landmark pact cultivated by Barack Obama's administration but scuttled in 2018 by Donald Trump's. But U.S. indirect talks with Iran have stalled and Washington continues to maintain crippling sanctions on the country as regional hostilities simmer.

Trump's decision to withdraw from Iran's nuclear deal led Tehran to abandon over time every limitation the accord imposed on its nuclear enrichment. The country now enriches a small amount of uranium up to 63%, a short step from weapons-grade levels, compared with 3.67% under the deal. It also spins far more advanced centrifuges and more of them than were allowed under the accord, worrying nuclear nonproliferation experts even though Tehran insists its program is peaceful.

The Biden-Bennett sit-down comes weeks after Ebrahim Raisi was sworn in as Iran's new president.

Raisi, 60, a conservative cleric with close ties to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has suggested he'll engage with the U.S. But he also has struck a hard-line stance, ruling out negotiations aimed at limiting Iranian missile development and support for regional militias — something the Biden administration

wants to address in a new accord.

Administration officials acknowledged that Iran's potential "breakout" — the time needed to amass enough fissile material for a single nuclear weapon — is now down to a matter of months or less.

But a senior administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to preview the Biden-Bennett meeting, said the administration sees the maximum pressure campaign employed by the Trump administration as having emboldened Iran to push ahead with its nuclear program.

Bennett is also looking to turn the page from his predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu had a close relationship with Trump after frequently clashing with Obama. Biden, who has met with every Israeli prime minister since Golda Meir, had his own tensions with Netanyahu over the years.

During his latest White House campaign, Biden called Netanyahu "counterproductive" and an "extreme right" leader.

Biden waited nearly a month after his election before making his first call to Netanyahu, raising concerns in Jerusalem and among some Netanyahu backers in Washington that the two would have a difficult relationship. The president called Bennett just hours after he was sworn in as prime minister in June to offer his congratulations.

Jeremy Ben-Ami, president of the liberal Jewish advocacy group J Street, said Bennett is intent on building a positive working relationship with the Biden administration. But Ben-Ami, whose group supports a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, noted that the two leaders are out of sync on several issues in addition to Iran. Bennett opposes the creation of a Palestinian state and supports expansion of settlements in the West Bank, which Biden opposes.

In an interview with The New York Times ahead of his visit, Bennett declined to comment on whether he would move to block Biden administration plans to reopen a U.S. consulate for Palestinians in Jerusalem.

"The warmth that is going to be projected and the good solid working relationship cannot fully mask the fact that the agenda that Prime Minister Bennett comes to Washington with and the agenda that the Biden administration is pursuing on some of the core issues are still almost as different as they could possibly be," Ben-Ami said.

Migrant children spend weeks at US shelters as more arrive

By AMY TAXIN and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

Five months after the Biden administration declared an emergency and raced to set up shelters to house a record number of children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone, kids continue to languish at the sites, while more keep coming, child welfare advocates say.

More than 700 children spent three weeks or longer at the government's unlicensed sites in mid-July, according to declarations filed with a federal court overseeing custody conditions for immigrant youth. Advocates say children should be released quickly to their relatives in the U.S. or sent to a licensed facility.

In one of the filings, a 16-year-old Salvadoran boy said children were served raw meat. It took more than a month for the boy, who said he speaks with both his parents each week, to be released to his father in Georgia.

"When I wake up every day, I feel really frustrated. Of the youth that I arrived with, I am the last one here," the boy said in his declaration. "I would like to be home with my dad right now."

When the Biden administration erected the emergency sites in March to ease dangerous overcrowding at border stations, they were meant to be a temporary fix. But months later, some wonder whether that's still the case.

Border crossings by children without an adult in July neared the same levels they did in March despite the summer heat.

"If you have a dinner party that you plan to have for three people, and 30,000 people show up, you're going to have a problem," U.S. District Judge Dolly M. Gee, who oversees the decades-old settlement agreement that governs custody conditions for the children, said at a recent hearing.

"The infrastructure is not set up for tens of thousands of people coming in at one time, and somehow

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the paradigm has to shift to figure out how to deal with these types of numbers.”

U.S. border authorities reported more than 18,000 encounters with unaccompanied immigrant children in July, up 24% from a month earlier. The rise comes in the busiest month yet for the Biden administration on the border, with a total of nearly 200,000 encounters even though crossings are typically expected to slow during the summer.

According to a government report in early August, the Department of Health and Human Services had nearly 15,000 children in its care but only 11,000 licensed shelter beds for the immigrant children. Using large-scale facilities can fill this gap, though advocates said the government would do better by expanding licensed shelters where children are given case workers, recreation and six hours of education on each weekday.

The Department of Health and Human Services is tasked with caring for the children until they can be sent to live with relatives or other sponsors in the United States while they wait for an immigration judge to decide whether they can stay in the country legally. While the agency has a broad network of state-licensed shelters that could be expanded, ample space in foster care programs and large, so-called influx care facilities that adhere to specific standards for staffing and conditions, it continues to turn to these emergency sites.

Advocates say the emergency intake sites adhere to none of the agency’s existing standards and are an inadequate and expensive option, especially for young, vulnerable children already coping with the trauma of leaving home and making the dangerous trip north.

“There are other ways to do this. They kind of stick their head in the sand and act like the emergency intake sites are the only game in town, and it’s just so far from the truth,” said Leecia Welch, senior director of legal advocacy and child welfare at the National Center for Youth Law and one of the attorneys representing children in the federal court case. “When you start at horrifying, and better is still awful, that’s just not OK.”

Advocates have asked Gee to order the administration to follow standards at emergency sites like it does for its influx care facilities, which also aim to offset an increase in arrivals. For example, a Carrizo Springs, Texas, facility for up to 1,000 children must provide a care worker for every eight children while they’re awake and at least one individual counseling session each week for each child. A hearing on the issue is scheduled for Oct. 1.

Officials at the Department of Health and Human Services did not answer questions from The Associated Press.

The Obama and Trump administrations also opened temporary facilities when there was a jump in children crossing the border alone, but the numbers were not near what the Biden administration has seen.

Once the coronavirus appeared, the Trump administration largely shut down the Southwest border to asylum seekers under a pandemic-related measure, turning away many immigrants. Then, in November, a federal judge ordered the administration to stop expelling unaccompanied children under the policy.

Two months later, President Joe Biden took office and the number of immigrant children seeking to cross began to rise. Shelters for immigrant youth were still running at reduced capacity due to coronavirus concerns, and the Department of Health and Human Services was suddenly strapped for space to house them.

In recent months, the average length of stay at the emergency intake sites has declined and the Department of Health and Human Services has shut down some sites and worked to improve conditions in others. But at one point, some children were so desperate to get out of the government’s largest emergency facility at Fort Bliss Army Base, in Texas, that they tried to escape, according to declarations filed with the court.

After getting caught, some children were sent to a more restrictive youth shelter in New York. A 16-year-old from Honduras said that was an improvement since they received pizza and other good food instead of the raw, bloody chicken served at the Army base. They also had teachers, while there was no class before.

“If anything, it paid off to misbehave,” the teen, who would spend the day in bed at Fort Bliss feeling like a hostage, said in a declaration. “I am so grateful that I tried to escape from that hellhole. It was horrible, and I could never sleep.”

Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said U.S. policies are

making the problem worse. He believes parents are sending their children to the border knowing they have a better chance of getting in alone than with a relative.

Biden has maintained public health rules implemented by the Trump administration that have barred people from seeking asylum at the border, but he exempted children who cross alone.

If the U.S. let families apply to enter the country legally, authorities could manage the flows, eliminating the need for these emergency shelters, he said.

"We are still in an emergency — the numbers are still high — but this absolutely is not the way to deal with it," Nowrasteh said. "We have the capacity to process enormous numbers of asylum claims if we want to. It is only whether the government wants to."

What is a COVID-19 vaccine passport, and do I need one?

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

What is a COVID-19 vaccine passport, and do I need one?

"Vaccine passports" are digital or paper documents that show you were vaccinated against COVID-19, and could help you get into a growing number of places.

What they look like and why you might want one depend on where you live, but more private venues, workplaces and governments are requiring proof of vaccination in public settings.

Europe and U.S. states like California and New York created official digital credentials that let you verify your COVID-19 immunization record and convert it into a scannable QR code you can pull up on your cellphone.

Most places that require vaccination proof also accept simpler options, such as the paper card noting the dates of your shots from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the U.S., showing a photo of that card on your phone will usually suffice.

Denmark, Greece, France, Italy, some Canadian provinces and the U.S. cities of New Orleans, New York and San Francisco are among the places that have vaccination requirements to get into places like indoor restaurants or theaters. Enforcement varies and many places also accept a recent negative test for the virus, a partial vaccination or proof that you previously recovered from the disease.

Even without government mandates, more businesses in countries where vaccines are readily available are starting to ask for proof that you got the shots, so long as their local governments haven't blocked them from doing so.

Officials around the world were initially reluctant to mandate vaccines, but some now hope doing so will persuade more people to get the shots. Businesses requiring proof of vaccination say they are trying to make customers and employees feel safe.

Protesters in France and elsewhere have criticized vaccine mandates as invasive and restricting freedom of movement. Privacy advocates have raised concerns about getting people in the habit of having their phones scanned wherever they go, and generally favor options that won't be tracked, such as a paper record or a digital copy in your phone that can be shown at the door.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

What is being done to distribute COVID-19 vaccines globally?

Do the COVID-19 vaccines affect my chances of pregnancy?

Can I get 'long COVID' if I'm infected after vaccination?

House panel probing 1/6 riot seeks host of Trump-era records

By COLLEEN LONG and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the January insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is demanding a trove of records from federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies, showing the sweep

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of the lawmakers' review of the deadly attack by a mob of Donald Trump supporters.

The request Wednesday seeks information about events leading up to the Jan. 6 riot, including communication within the White House under then-President Trump and other agencies, and information about planning and funding for rallies held in Washington. Among them is an event at the Ellipse, near the White House, featuring remarks by Trump where he egged on a crowd of thousands before loyalists stormed the Capitol.

The requested documents are just the beginning of what is expected to be lengthy, partisan and rancorous investigation into how the mob was able to infiltrate the Capitol and disrupt the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's presidential victory, inflicting the most serious assault on Congress in two centuries.

In a statement Wednesday evening, Trump accused the committee of violating "long-standing legal principles of privilege."

"Executive privilege will be defended, not just on behalf of my Administration and the Patriots who worked beside me, but on behalf of the Office of the President of the United States and the future of our Nation," Trump said.

Committee members are also considering asking telecommunications companies to preserve phone records of several people, including members of Congress, to try to determine who knew what about the unfolding riot and when they knew it. With chants of "hang Mike Pence," the rioters sent the then-vice president and members of Congress running for their lives and did more than \$1 million in damage, and wounded dozens of police officers.

Records requests are typically the starting point for investigations, and the committee is expected to conduct a wide-ranging review as it builds a public record detailing the chaos on Jan. 6. That inquiry could take more than a year, until the end of the congressional session.

The demands are being made for White House records from the National Archives, along with material from the departments of Defense, Justice, Homeland Security and Interior, as well as the FBI and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

The committee is also seeking information about efforts within the Trump administration to push the president's baseless claims of election fraud and any efforts to try to overturn the results of November's election or to "impede the peaceful transfer of power."

The request for the National Archives and Records Administration is 10 pages long. The committee is seeking "All documents and communications within the White House on January 6, 2021" related to Trump's close advisers and family members, the rally at the Ellipse and Trump's Twitter feed. It asks for his specific movements on that day and communications, if any, from the White House Situation Room. Also sought are all documents related to the claims of election fraud, as well as Supreme Court decisions on the topic.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., is heading the committee, appointed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., after all but two Republicans opposed the creation of the 13-person panel.

The committee so far has heard from police officers who were at the Capitol on Jan. 6. In emotional testimony, those officers spoke of how afraid and frustrated they were by the failure of law enforcement leaders to foresee the potential for violence and understand the scope of planning by the Trump backers. A Capitol Police officer who fatally shot protester Ashli Babbitt was cleared months ago of criminal wrongdoing and was cleared internally by the department this week, and was planning to reveal his identity in an NBC interview to air Thursday.

Most in the GOP argued that the majority-Democratic committee would conduct a partisan inquiry. House Democrats originally attempted to create an evenly split, independent commission to investigate the insurrection, but that effort fell short when it was blocked by Senate Republicans.

Thompson did not identify the lawmakers whose records the committee would seek, but he has said officials would be contacting communication companies, social media platforms and other tech giants.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California, who had been in touch with Trump from the besieged Capitol on Jan. 6, again dismissed the committee's investigation as "so political."

When he was asked whether he would turn over his own phone logs from Jan. 6, he said Wednesday, "I

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told the American public who I talked to that day," referring to his television news appearances that day.

In a Fox News appearance Tuesday evening, Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., whose phone records may also be sought, said it was "an abuse of power" to investigate lawmakers.

Thompson, in a written statement, said the committee's work was rooted in apolitical fact-finding.

"Our Constitution provides for a peaceful transfer of power, and this investigation seeks to evaluate threats to that process, identify lessons learned and recommend laws, policies, procedures, rules, or regulations necessary to protect our republic in the future," he said.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

California wildfire dangers may be spreading south

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A wildfire that burned several homes near Los Angeles may signal that the region is facing the same dangers that have scorched Northern California.

The fire in San Bernardino County erupted Wednesday afternoon, quickly burned several hundred acres and damaged or destroyed at least a dozen homes and outbuildings in the foothills northeast of LA, fire officials said. Crews used shovels and bulldozers and mounted an air attack to keep the South Fire from the tiny communities of Lytle Creek and Scotland near the Cajon Pass.

Some 600 homes and other buildings were threatened along with power transmission lines, and 1,000 residents were under evacuation orders.

By nightfall, firefighters appeared to have gained the upper hand and few flames were to be seen. But the blaze was worrying because Southern California's high fire season is typically later in the year when strong, dry Santa Ana winds blast out of the interior and flow toward the coast.

After a few cooler days, the southern region was expected to see a return of hot weather heading into the weekend. In addition to dangerously dry conditions, the region is faced with firefighting staffing that is increasingly stretched thin, said Lyn Sieliet, spokeswoman for the San Bernardino National Forest.

"Some of our firefighters that we normally have on our forests are working on fires in Northern California, or Idaho and Washington," she told KTLA-TV. "We don't have the full staff that we normally do."

The largest fires in the state and in the nation were in Northern California, where they have burned down small mountain towns and destroyed huge swaths of tinder-dry forest.

The Caldor Fire destroyed some 500 homes since Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada southwest of Lake Tahoe, including much of the tiny hamlet of Grizzly Flats. It was 12% contained and threatened more than 17,000 structures.

Buck Minitch, a firefighter with the Pioneer Fire Protection District, was called to the fire lines last week while his wife fled their Grizzly Flats home with their two daughters, three dogs, a kitten and duffel bag of clothes, the San Jose Mercury News reported.

Hannah Minitch evacuated to her parents' property and the next morning received a text from her husband showing only a chimney where their house once stood. The two briefly wept together during a telephone call before he got back to work.

"We've got nothing left here," she recalled him saying. "I've got to go protect what's left for other people."

At times the wind-driven fire was burning 1,000 acres of land per hour and on Wednesday it was less than two dozen miles from Lake Tahoe, an alpine vacation and tourist spot that straddles the California-Nevada state line.

There weren't any evacuations in Tahoe but the fire continued to cast a sickly yellow pall of smoke over the scenic region.

South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe City on the west shore had the nation's worst air pollution at midmorning Wednesday, according to AirNow, a partnership of federal, state and local air agencies.

Meanwhile, California's Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history at 1,160 square miles (3,004 square

kilometers), was burning only about 65 miles (104 kilometers) to the north. It was 45% contained. Some 700 homes were among nearly 1,300 buildings that have been destroyed.

In the southern Sierra Nevada, there was growing concern as the French Fire expanded near Lake Isabella, a popular fishing and boating destination. About 10 communities were under evacuation orders. The fire has blackened 32 square miles (83 square kilometers) since Aug. 18.

Smoke from the fires had fouled air farther south. The South Coast Air Quality Management District issued an advisory through Thursday morning for large portions of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Nationally, 92 large fires were burning in 13 mainly Western states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

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.

Cruise lines require vaccinations, tests, amid virus surge

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Joel Steckler was eager for his first cruise in more than a year and a half, and he chose the ship that just two months ago became the first to accept passengers again after a long pandemic shutdown.

Steckler was fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and that was enough to resume cruising, under initial guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Now, the 63-year-old from Long Island, New York, is going to postpone the trip he had planned for Saturday amid new, tighter guidelines prompted by the delta-variant-fueled surge in cases and breakthrough infections.

"You just have to make a personal decision," said Steckler, who takes medication that suppresses his immune system and changed his plans after consulting his doctor. "You don't want to be in a position where you are sick on a cruise and you have to fly home or somehow get home."

Cruise lines have detected infections among vaccinated crew members and passengers, including in an elderly traveler who recently died. Last Friday, the CDC began advising travelers who are at a higher risk for severe COVID-19 illness to avoid cruises. It is also recommending that passengers show both a recent negative COVID test and proof they've been immunized.

In addition to the surging delta virus, the CDC changed its cruise guidelines for high-risk groups because of the close proximity of ship passengers, the limited options for care on board and the challenges of medically evacuating travelers at sea, Centers spokeswoman Kristen Nordlund said Tuesday.

Some cruise lines — and cruise destinations — are also revising their own guidelines.

Starting Sept. 3, the Bahamas — a favored stop for cruises — is requiring all passengers 12 and older to be vaccinated against COVID-19 as a condition for ships to dock. That has prompted companies including Disney Cruise Line, Royal Caribbean and Carnival to announce this week that they are adopting the same requirement. The companies will ask for a government vaccination card or a record from a health care provider.

They've been able to do so in Florida after a federal judge this month temporarily blocked a state law banning cruise lines from requiring passengers to prove they're vaccinated.

The companies are also once again requiring masks in indoor areas of the ships and other places where people gather.

"Unfortunately, no venue on land or at sea is COVID-free right now," Carnival Corp. said in a written statement.

Carnival commented on the case of a vaccinated 77-year-old woman who later came down with the virus. The company said the woman "almost certainly did not contract COVID on our ship," suggesting she was already infected when she embarked.

Neither cruise lines nor the federal government are reporting how many cases they have had on their

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ships. They have only acknowledged that there have been infections.

Officials in Belize, however, recently reported that 26 crew members and one passenger of a Carnival cruise ship — all of whom had been vaccinated — tested positive for COVID-19. They said all of them had mild or no symptoms, and were in isolation.

Jaime Katz, an analyst who covers the cruise industry for the Morningstar financial services company, said while many high-risk travelers might postpone their trips, others will continue to book for the future, betting that the current wave of cases will subside by the time their ship sails.

"Flexible booking and cancellation policies have made cruising more palatable for nervous travelers," he said.

Companies are offering full refunds if people test positive for COVID-19 or decide to cancel after a cruise line shortens the length of a planned trip. Royal Caribbean International is also offering to fly people home if they or anyone in their party test positive during the cruise.

Chris Woronka, a Deutsche Bank analyst who follows the leisure industry, said cruisers, including those over 65, are an avid bunch — so eager to get back on the water that they won't easily be dissuaded by the current COVID surge and more stringent travel requirements.

"I don't think this is permanent unless we're dealing with delta 2.0 or whatever the next one is," Woronka said.

Koenig reported from Dallas.

Crews struggle to stop fire bearing down on Lake Tahoe

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A Northern California fire that gutted hundreds of homes advanced toward Lake Tahoe on Wednesday as thousands of firefighters tried to box in the flames, and a thick yellow haze of the nation's worst air enveloped tourists.

In Southern California, at least a dozen homes and outbuildings were damaged or destroyed after a fire broke out Wednesday afternoon and quickly ran through tinder-dry brush in mountains northeast of Los Angeles. Evacuations were ordered for about 1,000 people.

Crews mounted an air attack to keep the South Fire from the tiny communities of Lytle Creek and Scotland near the Cajon Pass in San Bernardino County. By nightfall, the fire appeared to be mostly contained.

To the north, a new fire erupted in the Sierra Nevada foothills and quickly burned at least 1,000 acres of land near New Melones Lake in Calaveras County, prompting evacuations.

Meanwhile, the Caldor Fire spread to within 20 miles (32 kilometers) southwest of Lake Tahoe, eating its way through rugged timberlands and "knocking on the door" of the basin that straddles the California-Nevada state line, California's state fire chief Thom Porter warned this week.

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

South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe City on the west shore had the nation's worst air pollution at midmorning Wednesday, reaching 334, in the "hazardous" category of the 0-500 Air Quality Index, according to AirNow, a partnership of federal, state and local air agencies.

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 fiance 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 Tuesday.

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

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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 two days in Reno, Nevada, which is about 60 miles (100 kilometers) from the fire.

The school district that includes Reno reopened most schools on Wednesday, citing improved air quality conditions. However, the Washoe County School District's schools in Incline Village on the north shore of Lake Tahoe remained closed, the district said in a statement.

The Caldor fire has scorched more than 197 square miles (510 square kilometers) and destroyed at least 461 homes since Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada southwest of the lake. It was 11% contained and threatened more than 17,000 structures.

The western side of the blaze continued to threaten more than a dozen small communities and wineries. On the fire's eastern side, crews bulldozed fire lines, opened up narrow logging roads and cleared 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, including big fire-fighting aircraft, fire officials said.

Meanwhile, California's Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history at 1,148 square miles (2,973 square kilometers), was burning only about 65 miles (104 kilometers) to the north. New evacuations were ordered after winds pushed the blaze to the northeast on Wednesday, as flames crossed State Route 44 and headed toward campgrounds near Eagle Lake.

The Dixie Fire, which broke out July 13, was 43% contained. At least 682 homes were among more than 1,270 buildings that have been destroyed.

In the southern Sierra Nevada, there was growing concern after the French Fire expanded near Lake Isabella, a popular fishing and boating destination.

"The fire really made a big push and put up a huge column of smoke," fire spokesman Alex Olow said Wednesday. Because flames were still active, assessment teams have been unable to get into neighborhoods to see if any homes were damaged, he said.

About 10 communities were under evacuation orders. The fire has blackened 32 square miles (83 square kilometers) since Aug. 18.

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 experienced 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.

Nirvana sued by man who was nude baby on 'Nevermind' cover

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A 30-year-old man who appeared nude at 4 months old in 1991 on the cover of Nirvana's "Nevermind" album is suing the band and others, alleging the image is child pornography they have profited from.

The lawsuit, filed by Spencer Elden on Tuesday in federal court in California, alleges that Nirvana and the record labels behind "Nevermind" "intentionally commercially marketed Spencer's child pornography and leveraged the shocking nature of his image to promote themselves and their music at his expense."

The lawsuit says Elden has suffered "lifelong damages" from the ubiquitous image of him naked underwater appearing to swim after a dollar bill on a fish hook.

It seeks at least \$150,000 from each of more than a dozen defendants, including the Kurt Cobain estate, surviving Nirvana members Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl and Geffen Records.

Emails seeking comment from representatives for the defendants were not immediately returned.

Elden is filing the lawsuit now because he "finally has the courage to hold these actors accountable,"

one of his attorneys, Maggie Mabie, told The Associated Press Wednesday.

Mabie said despite the photo being 30 years old, the lawsuit is within the statute of limitations of federal child pornography law for several reasons, including the fact that the image is still in circulation and earning money.

Elden also wants any new versions of the album altered.

"If there is a 30th anniversary re-release, he wants for the entire world not to see his genitals," Mabie said.

When the cover was shot, Nirvana was a little-known grunge band with no sense they were making a generation-defining album in "Nevermind," their first major label release, whose songs included "Smells Like Teen Spirit," "Come as You Are" and "Lithium."

Elden's father was a friend of the photographer, Kirk Weddle, who took pictures of several swimming babies in several scenarios at the Rose Bowl Aquatic Center in Pasadena, California.

"Cobain chose the image depicting Spencer — like a sex worker — grabbing for a dollar bill that is positioned dangling from a fishhook in front of his nude body with his penis explicitly displayed," the lawsuit says.

Elden has recreated the image several times, always with clothes or swim trunks on, for anniversaries of the album's release, and he has expressed mixed feelings about it in interviews that have grown increasingly negative through the years.

He told the New York Post in 2015 that it was "cool but weird to be part of something so important that I don't even remember."

He added, "It'd be nice to have a quarter for every person that has seen my baby penis."

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been victims of sexual abuse, but may when they have repeatedly come forward publicly, as Elden has.

This story has been updated to correct the spelling of Novoselic.

Follow AP Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andyjamesdalton>

EXPLAINER: Is Hawaii's Kilauea volcano going to erupt again?

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — The ground at the summit of Kilauea volcano in Hawaii has been rumbling and swelling in recent days, prompting scientists to warn that the mountain could once again disgorge lava. But there's no indication an eruption is imminent. The volcano, which is among the world's most active, has behaved similarly in the past without any magma breaking the surface.

Here's an overview of the latest developments at Kilauea:

WHAT ACTIVITY ARE SCIENTISTS SEEING?

Scientists at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory on Monday noticed a surge of earthquakes and the ground swelling at the southern part of the crater at Kilauea's summit. There are indications magma is shifting about a half-mile to a mile (1 to 2 kilometers) below the surface.

It's not uncommon for Kilauea to have earthquakes, which could indicate rocks are moving. It's also not unusual for the ground to swell as the heat from the sun and saturation from rain can cause the ground to expand and contract.

However, earthquakes and ground swelling at the same time may indicate magma is on the move.

"We get a lot of earthquakes here and we get a lot of deformation here, but the combination of the two makes us much more aware," said Jefferson Chang, a geophysicist at the observatory, which is part of the U.S. Geological Survey.

There have been hundreds of earthquakes since Monday, striking as often as 25 times an hour. The strongest measured magnitude 3, with most coming in between magnitude 1 and 2. At these levels, the quakes are generally too small for people to notice. Chang said there haven't been any reports of people feeling them.

WHERE IS THE ACTIVITY HAPPENING?

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It's occurring at the summit of Kilauea volcano, an uninhabited area within Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island. This is about 200 miles southeast of Honolulu, which is on a different island called Oahu.

The site is miles from the nearest town. The park has close off this part of the summit to the public since 2008.

Ben Hayes, the park's interpretation and education program manager, said the park is preparing for a potential eruption, but he said there's nothing to be alarmed about. "It's a natural process at one of the world's most active volcanoes," he said.

HAS THIS HAPPENED BEFORE?

Chang said scientists observed activity in the same part of the summit in 2015. That episode lasted three days, and the volcano didn't erupt. Just like this time, the ground swelled. One difference is that there were more earthquakes then.

The last time Kilauea erupted at the southern part of its caldera or crater was in 1974.

WHAT'S THE CURRENT SITUATION?

The earthquake swarm stopped about 4:30 a.m. Monday. The ground swelling has also subsided. But the activity could return. Chang said sometimes there's a lull in activity lasting a day or two.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CHANGE THE ALERT LEVEL?

The observatory changed Kilauea's volcano alert level to watch from advisory on Tuesday, meaning the mountain was showing heightened unrest with increased potential to erupt.

But scientists don't know when that eruption may occur, if it does. If scientists believe a hazardous eruption is imminent, they will change the alert level to warning.

The observatory also changed the aviation color code to "orange," alerting pilots that there's potential for an eruption and they may need to avoid the area if one occurs.

HOW OFTEN HAS KILAUEA ERUPTED BEFORE?

Hawaiian chants and stories tell the stories of countless eruptions. In Hawaiian tradition, Kilauea is home to the volcano goddess Pele.

Kilauea has erupted 34 times since 1952. From 1983 to 2018, it erupted almost continuously, in some cases sending streams of lava that covered farms and homes. At the end of this decades-long eruption, Kilauea spewed lava from vents in a residential neighborhood on its eastern flank and destroyed more than 700 homes.

In December, Kilauea erupted at the crater, creating a lake with enough lava to fill 10 Hoover dams. That eruption ended in May.

EXPLAINER: What's next for the 'Remain in Mexico' policy?

By ANITA SNOW and AMY TAXIN Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Supreme Court's decision to order the reinstatement of the "Remain in Mexico" immigration policy is sparking criticism from advocacy groups and praise by former President Donald Trump. It's also prompting promises by the Biden administration to keep pushing back against a lower court's decision to reactivate the policy, which forced people to wait in Mexico while seeking asylum in the U.S.

The high court's decision, which came late Tuesday, said the Biden administration likely violated federal law by trying to end the Trump-era program, known as the Migrant Protection Protocols. The ruling raised many questions, ranging from whether a legal challenge would prevail to the practical effects of reinstatement if it stands.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION?

The Department of Homeland Security said it was taking steps to comply with the high court's decision while the Biden administration appeals.

The administration could try again to end the program by having the department provide a fuller explanation for its decision to end Migrant Protection Protocols.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Wednesday the administration had appealed a district court

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decision that the Supreme Court's order sprang from, and would continue to "vigorously challenge" it.

Trump, meanwhile, welcomed the court order and said the Biden government must now reinstate "one of my most successful and important programs in securing the border."

During 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.

U.S. immigration experts note that no matter what happens over the long term, the Biden administration has wide discretion on how much it would reimplement the policy if appeals are unsuccessful.

"It could reimplement it on a very small scale for families who meet certain criteria from very specific nationalities, or it could do something broader," said Jessica Bolter, associate policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington.

HOW IS MEXICO REACTING?

Mexico's Foreign Relations Department refused to say late Wednesday whether the government will allow the U.S. to reinstate the policy of sending asylum seekers back across the border to wait for hearings on asylum claims.

Roberto Velasco, Mexico's director for North American affairs, said the court ruling is not binding on Mexico. He stressed that Mexico's "immigration policy is designed and executed in a sovereign manner."

"The Mexican government will start technical discussions with the U.S. government to evaluate how to handle safe, orderly and regulated immigration on the border," Velasco said.

Mexico is not legally obligated to receive returning migrants who are not Mexican citizens, and most of the asylum seekers are not.

During the Trump administration, the Mexican government said it was cooperating with the program for humanitarian reasons. Although migrants were granted humanitarian visas to stay in Mexico until they had their U.S. hearings, they often had to wait in dangerous areas controlled by cartels, leaving them vulnerable to being kidnapped, assaulted, raped or even killed. Others were transported by bus to parts of southern Mexico or "invited" to return to their home countries.

Mexico technically could block the program by refusing to accept migrants asked to stay in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP. But analysts like Tonatiuh Guillén, former head of Mexico's migration agency, consider that unlikely given the country's history of cooperation with the U.S.

Guillén said Mexican officials will probably go along even though the country doesn't have sufficient resources to deal with an influx of asylum seekers at the border and nonprofit shelters south of the border are overwhelmed.

Still, more than 70 Mexican, U.S. and international NGOs have sent a letter asking President Andrés Manuel López Obrador not to accept the U.S. court decision.

"I don't think either Mexico or the Biden administration want to reimplement MPP at its maximum capacity right now," Bolter said. "If it is reimplemented at a low level, it will have serious consequences for the families or other migrants who are subjected to it. But overall, I think it's unlikely to drastically change the policy landscape at the border."

HOW ROBUST WAS THE PROGRAM IN RECENT YEARS?

Immigration specialists note that Migrant Protection Protocols already had been significantly scaled back during the pandemic as officials began using public health protocols to swiftly expel migrants.

The Trump administration placed roughly 6,000 migrants into the program from April 2020 to January 2021 — a fraction of the more than 71,000 migrants placed into the program overall, said Bolter. It launched the program in January 2019.

"Clearly, it wasn't operating at the level it had been operating before, but there definitely were still people being placed into it," said Bolter. She added that the program was largely being used for migrants who Mexico refused to take back under pandemic-era health protocols known as Title 42.

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Victoria Neilson, managing attorney with CLINIC's defending vulnerable populations program, noted that since the pandemic far fewer migrants have been placed in the MPP program, with many expelled from the border under the health protocols initiated under the Trump administration and continued by President Joe Biden.

WHAT ABOUT TITLE 42 EXPULSIONS?

The State Department is holding talks with the Mexican government as the administration reviews the Trump-era protocols to determine how they can be implemented while Title 42 is in effect, said a Homeland Security official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention renewed the Title 42 public health powers early this month. The administration has emphasized that Title 42 is not an immigration authority, but a public health authority, and its continued use is dictated by the CDC's analysis of the public health situation.

While Title 42 expulsions continue, the U.S. for now has suspended the processing into the U.S. of people who were returned to Mexico under Migrant Protection Protocols during the Trump administration.

In recent weeks, Central American migrants expelled under Title 42 have been flown by the U.S. into Mexico's south, sparking concerns by U.N. agencies about vulnerable migrants who they say need humanitarian protection.

The U.S. government has intermittently flown Mexicans deep into Mexico for years to discourage repeat attempts, but flights that began this month from Brownsville, Texas, to the Mexican state capitals of Villahermosa and Tapachula, near the Guatemalan border, appear to be the first time that Central Americans have been flown deep into Mexico.

Taxin reported from Orange County, California. Maria Verza in Mexico City and Ben Fox and Mark Sherman in Washington contributed to this report.

US says 1,500 Americans may still await Kabul evacuation

By ROBERT BURNS, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday that as many as 1,500 Americans may be awaiting evacuation from Afghanistan, a figure that suggests the U.S. may accomplish its highest priority for the Kabul airlift — rescuing U.S. citizens — ahead of President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline despite growing concerns of terror threats targeting the airport.

Untold thousands of at-risk Afghans, however, still are struggling to get into the Kabul airport, while many thousands of other Afghans already have been flown to safety in 12 days of round-the-clock flights.

On Wednesday, several of the Americans working phones and pulling strings to get out former Afghan colleagues, women's advocates, journalists and other vulnerable Afghans said they have seen little concrete U.S. action so far to get those Afghans past Taliban checkpoints and through U.S.-controlled airport gates to promised evacuation flights.

"It's 100% up to the Afghans to take these risks and try to fight their way out," said Sunil Varghese, policy director with the International Refugee Assistance Project.

Blinken, echoing Biden's earlier declarations during the now 12-day-old evacuation, emphasized at a State Department briefing that "evacuating Americans is our top priority."

He added, "We're also committed to getting out as many Afghans at-risk as we can before the 31st," when Biden plans to pull out the last of thousands of American troops.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul issued a security alert warning American citizens away from three specific airport gates, but gave no further explanation. Senior U.S. officials said the warning was related to ongoing and specific threats involving the Islamic State and potential vehicle bombs, which have set U.S. officials on edge in the final days of the American drawdown. The officials insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss ongoing military operations.

Blinken said the State Department estimates there were about 6,000 Americans wanting to leave Af-

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ghanistan when the airlift began Aug. 14, as the Taliban took the capital after a stunning military conquest. About 4,500 Americans have been evacuated so far, Blinken said, and among the rest "some are understandably very scared."

The 6,000 figure is the first firm estimate by the State Department of how many Americans were seeking to get out. U.S. officials early in the evacuation estimated as many as 15,000, including dual citizens, lived in Afghanistan. The figure does not include U.S. Green Card holders.

About 500 Americans have been contacted with instructions on when and how to get to the chaotic Kabul airport to catch evacuation flights.

In addition, 1,000 or perhaps fewer are being contacted to determine whether they still want to leave. Blinken said some of these may already have left the country, some may want to remain and some may not actually be American citizens.

"We are providing opportunity," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said of those Afghans, who include dual Afghan-American citizens. "We are finding ways to get them to the airport and evacuate them, but it is also their personal decision on whether they want to depart."

On a lighter note, the U.S. military said an Afghan baby girl born on a C-17 military aircraft during the massive evacuation will carry that experience with her. Her parents named her after the plane's call sign: Reach.

She was born Saturday, and members of the 86th Medical Group helped in her birth aboard the plane that had taken the family from Kabul to Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Two other babies whose parents were evacuating from Afghanistan have been born over the past week at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the U.S. military hospital in Germany.

In Washington on Wednesday, Blinken emphasized that the U.S. and other governments plan to continue assisting Afghans and Americans who want to leave after next Tuesday, the deadline for Biden's planned end to the evacuation and the two-decade U.S. military role in Afghanistan. "That effort will continue, every day, past Aug. 31," he said.

Biden has cited what he U.S. says are rising security threats to U.S. forces, including from an affiliate of the Islamic State terror group, for his determination to stick with Tuesday's withdrawal deadline. Germany has said Western officials are particularly concerned that suicide bombers may slip into the crowds surrounding the airport.

The U.S. Embassy has already been evacuated; staff are operating from the Kabul airport and the last are to leave by Tuesday.

Biden said this week he had asked his national security team for contingency plans in case he decides to extend the deadline. Taliban leaders who took control of Afghanistan this month say they will not tolerate any extensions to the Tuesday deadline. But Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen tweeted that "people with legal documents" will still be able to fly out via commercial flights after Tuesday.

U.S. troops are anchoring a multinational evacuation from the airport. The White House says the airlift overall has flown out 82,300 Afghans, Americans and others on a mix of U.S., international and private flights.

The withdrawal comes under a 2020 deal negotiated by President Donald Trump with the Taliban.

Refugee groups are describing a different picture than the Biden administration is when it comes to many Afghans: a disorganized, barely-there U.S. evacuation effort that leaves the most desperate to risk beatings and death at Taliban checkpoints. Some Afghans are reported being turned away from the Kabul airport by American forces controlling the gates, despite having approval for flights.

U.S. military and diplomatic officials appear to still be compiling lists of eligible Afghans but have yet to disclose how many may be evacuated — and how — private Americans and American organizations said.

"We still have 1,200 Afghans with visas that are outside the airport and haven't got in," said James Miervaldis with No One Left Behind, one of dozens of veterans groups working to get out Afghans who worked with the U.S. military during America's nearly 20 years of combat in the country.. "We're waiting to hear from the US. government and haven't heard yet."

Marina LeGree of Ascend, a U.S.-based nonprofit that worked to develop fitness and leadership in Afghan girls and young women, described getting calls from U.S. officials telling the group's interns and staffers to go to the airport for evacuation flights, only to have them turned away by American forces keeping gates closed against the throngs outside.

One Afghan intern who went to the airport with her family saw a person killed in front of them, and a female colleague was burned by a caustic agent fired at the crowd, LeGree said.

"It's heartbreaking to see my government fail so badly," said LeGree, the group's American director, who is in Italy but in close contact with those in Kabul.

U.S.-based organizations, speaking on background to discuss sensitive matters, cite accounts from witnesses on the ground as saying some American citizens, and family members of Afghans with green cards, still were having trouble pushing and talking their way into the Kabul airport for flights.

Kirby said the U.S. military will preserve as much airlift capacity at the airport as possible in the coming days, ahead of Tuesday's deadline. The military will "continue to evacuate needed populations all the way to the end," he said. But he added that in the final days and hours there will have to be a balance in getting out U.S. troops and their equipment as well as evacuees.

Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor, the deputy director of regional operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said U.S. forces had conducted another helicopter mission beyond the perimeter of the airport to pick up people seeking to evacuate.

The number of U.S. troops at the airport has dropped by about 400, to 5,400, but the final withdrawal has not begun, Kirby said Wednesday.

Associated Press writers Lolita C. Baldor in Washington and James LaPorta in Boca Raton, Florida, contributed to this report.

Masks ordered for most Florida students, defying DeSantis

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Just over half of Florida's 2.8 million public school students now face mandates to wear masks in classrooms as a courtroom battle continues over efforts by Gov. Ron DeSantis to leave such decisions up to parents.

A majority of school board members in Orange County told the superintendent on Tuesday to require most students to wear masks, and agreed with her recommendation to keep the mandate through Oct. 30.

The district began its school year this month with a parental opt-out, but a surge in students across the Orlando area testing positive for COVID-19 has disrupted classes. Through Tuesday, the district reported 1,968 positive cases among students since school began, with 1,491 people under active quarantine, according to the district's dashboard.

At least 10 school boards making up some of the largest districts in Florida are now defying the governor's attempt to ban local mandates on masks in schools. The Orange County board also said it wants to challenge the legality of a Florida Department of Health rule enforcing the ban.

In Fort Lauderdale, the Broward County School Board told the Department of Education on Tuesday that it won't back down on its mask policy, which gives parents a medical opt-out for students. The board said it believes that complies with the governor's order and the department's mask rule.

Parents, the board said, don't have an unlimited right to send their kids to school unmasked, infringing on the rights of other parents who want their children kept safe.

DeSantis is not backing down. At a news conference Wednesday, the governor warned of additional consequences for defiant schools districts, but didn't elaborate. DeSantis contends those boards are violating the Parents Bill of Rights, signed into law this summer. It gives parents authority to direct their children's education.

"Those schools districts are violating state law and they are overriding what the parents' judgment is on this," he said, stressing repeatedly that cloth masks don't prevent the spread of aerosols.

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"If these entities are going to violate state law and take away parent's rights there's consequences for that," DeSantis added.

The state had given Broward and Alachua counties until Tuesday to end their mask mandates. Broward's students began school a week ago with a mask policy in place. State officials have threatened to withhold funding equal to school board salaries if a district doesn't comply. Those funds make up less than 1% of each district's budget.

The debate over masks has gotten heated.

On Wednesday morning, police said the father of a student who tried to enter Fort Lauderdale High School without a mask was arrested after he forcefully pushed another student who tried to grab his cellphone. A police report said the father was recording video of students at the school's front gate and the student didn't want to be filmed.

The father was charged with one count of aggravated child abuse.

School board members from Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties held a virtual news conference Wednesday to discuss the possibility of suing DeSantis and the state. All three said they've received online threats over the mask issue.

"We will not be pressured by the governor or the state Board of Education when the safety and health of our students is involved. We have a constitutional duty to protect our students," said Miami-Dade school board member Lucia Baez-Geller. "Governor DeSantis has made this issue divisive with his rhetoric and threats."

Later Wednesday, the Palm Beach County school board voted unanimously to allow the district's general counsel to work with outside attorneys to potentially file or join a lawsuit against the state.

Monroe County's board decided Tuesday to require masks rather than strongly encourage them, but with a parental opt-out that should comply with the DeSantis order.

In Tallahassee on Wednesday, testimony ended in a three-day hearing that pits pro-mask parents against the DeSantis administration and state education officials. Circuit Judge John C. Cooper said he would hear closing arguments Thursday and rule Friday.

The state contends that parents, not schools, should choose whether their children cover up in classrooms.

"I take my rights and my freedom very seriously," testified Jennifer Gillen, who supports the governor's order and has two sons in Lee County schools where there is no strict mask mandate. "Our rights are actually being threatened."

Dr. Jay Battacharya, a Stanford University medical professor and researcher who also supports the governor's approach, said he typically masks up only when required to, or to make others feel at ease — not because he believes they prevent coronavirus exposure. "I don't believe there is high-quality evidence to show masks are effective in stopping disease spread," he testified Wednesday.

The highly contagious delta variant led to a surge in cases around Florida and record high hospitalizations just as schools reopen. By mid-August more than 21,000 new cases were being added per day, compared with about 8,500 a month earlier. However, new cases and hospitalizations have leveled off this past week. There were 16,820 people being treated for the disease in Florida hospitals Tuesday, U.S. Health Department figures showed, down from a record high above 17,000 last week.

About 6 in 10 Americans say students and teachers should be required to wear face masks while in school, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Associated Press writers Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee and Kelli Kennedy in Fort Lauderdale contributed to this story.

House panel probing 1/6 riot seeks host of Trump-era records

By COLLEEN LONG and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House committee investigating the January insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is demanding a trove of records from federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies, showing the sweep

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of the lawmakers' review of the deadly attack by a mob of Donald Trump supporters.

The request Wednesday seeks information about events leading up to the Jan. 6 riot, including communication within the White House under then-President Trump and other agencies, and information about planning and funding for rallies held in Washington. Among them is an event at the Ellipse, near the White House, featuring remarks by Trump where he egged on a crowd of thousands before loyalists stormed the Capitol.

The requested documents are just the beginning of what is expected to be lengthy, partisan and rancorous investigation into how the mob was able to infiltrate the Capitol and disrupt the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's presidential victory, inflicting the most serious assault on Congress in two centuries.

In a statement Wednesday evening, Trump accused the committee of violating "long-standing legal principles of privilege."

"Executive privilege will be defended, not just on behalf of my Administration and the Patriots who worked beside me, but on behalf of the Office of the President of the United States and the future of our Nation," Trump said.

Committee members are also considering asking telecommunications companies to preserve phone records of several people, including members of Congress, to try to determine who knew what about the unfolding riot and when they knew it. With chants of "hang Mike Pence," the rioters sent the then-vice president and members of Congress running for their lives and did more than \$1 million in damage, and wounded dozens of police officers.

Records requests are typically the starting point for investigations, and the committee is expected to conduct a wide-ranging review as it builds a public record detailing the chaos on Jan. 6. That inquiry could take more than a year, until the end of the congressional session.

The demands are being made for White House records from the National Archives, along with material from the departments of Defense, Justice, Homeland Security and Interior, as well as the FBI and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

The committee is also seeking information about efforts within the Trump administration to push the president's baseless claims of election fraud and any efforts to try to overturn the results of November's election or to "impede the peaceful transfer of power."

The request for the National Archives and Records Administration is 10 pages long. The committee is seeking "All documents and communications within the White House on January 6, 2021" related to Trump's close advisers and family members, the rally at the Ellipse and Trump's Twitter feed. It asks for his specific movements on that day and communications, if any, from the White House Situation Room. Also sought are all documents related to the claims of election fraud, as well as Supreme Court decisions on the topic.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., is heading the committee, appointed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., after all but two Republicans opposed the creation of the 13-person panel.

The committee so far has heard from police officers who were at the Capitol on Jan. 6. In emotional testimony, those officers spoke of how afraid and frustrated they were by the failure of law enforcement leaders to foresee the potential for violence and understand the scope of planning by the Trump backers. A Capitol Police officer who fatally shot protester Ashli Babbitt was cleared months ago of criminal wrongdoing and was cleared internally by the department this week, and was planning to reveal his identity in an NBC interview to air Thursday.

Most in the GOP argued that the majority-Democratic committee would conduct a partisan inquiry. House Democrats originally attempted to create an evenly split, independent commission to investigate the insurrection, but that effort fell short when it was blocked by Senate Republicans.

Thompson did not identify the lawmakers whose records the committee would seek, but he has said officials would be contacting communication companies, social media platforms and other tech giants.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California, who had been in touch with Trump from the besieged Capitol on Jan. 6, again dismissed the committee's investigation as "so political."

When he was asked whether he would turn over his own phone logs from Jan. 6, he said Wednesday, "I

told the American public who I talked to that day," referring to his television news appearances that day. In a Fox News appearance Tuesday evening, Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., whose phone records may also be sought, said it was "an abuse of power" to investigate lawmakers.

Thompson, in a written statement, said the committee's work was rooted in apolitical fact-finding. "Our Constitution provides for a peaceful transfer of power, and this investigation seeks to evaluate threats to that process, identify lessons learned and recommend laws, policies, procedures, rules, or regulations necessary to protect our republic in the future," he said.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

Lawyers allied with Trump penalized over Michigan lawsuit

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Nine lawyers allied with former President Donald Trump face financial penalties and other sanctions after a judge Wednesday said they had abused the court system with a lawsuit that challenged Michigan's election results in favor of Joe Biden.

U.S. District Judge Linda Parker said the lawsuit last fall was a sham intended to deceive the court and the public, just a few days after Biden's 154,000-vote victory in the state was certified.

"Despite the haze of confusion, commotion and chaos counsel intentionally attempted to create by filing this lawsuit, one thing is perfectly clear: Plaintiffs' attorneys have scorned their oath, flouted the rules, and attempted to undermine the integrity of the judiciary along the way," Parker said in the opening of a scathing 110-page opinion.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of six Republican voters who wanted Parker to decertify Michigan's results and impound voting machines. The judge declined in December, calling the request "stunning in its scope and breathtaking in its reach."

The state and Detroit subsequently asked Parker to order sanctions against Sidney Powell, L. Lin Wood and seven other attorneys who were part of the litigation.

The judge agreed, telling the state and city to tally the costs of defending the lawsuit and submit the figures within 14 days.

Parker said lawyers for Trump supporters filed affidavits stuffed with sinister "speculation and conjecture" about the vote-counting process without checking for evidence to support the claims.

"Individuals may have a right — within certain bounds — to disseminate allegations of fraud unsupported by law or fact in the public sphere," the judge said. "But attorneys cannot exploit their privilege and access to the judicial process to do the same."

Parker ordered 12 hours of legal education, including six hours in election law, for each attorney. Her decision will also be sent to the states where the lawyers are licensed for possible disciplinary action there.

It was one of the few efforts to wrench fines or other penalties from dubious post-election lawsuits across the U.S. There was no immediate response to messages seeking comment from attorneys for Wood and Powell.

"I appreciate the unmistakable message she sends with this ruling — those who vow to uphold the Constitution must answer for abandoning that oath," said Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, a Democrat.

There is no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election. Indeed, election officials from both political parties have stated publicly that the election went well, and international observers confirmed there were no serious irregularities.

During a July court hearing, Powell took "full responsibility" for the lawsuit and compared the legal fight to the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in schools.

"It is the duty of lawyers and the highest tradition of the practice of law to raise difficult and even unpopular issues," Powell told the judge, adding that efforts to impose sanctions would diminish the public's view of the court system.

Wood's name was on the lawsuit, but he insisted he had no role other than to tell Powell that he would

be available if she needed a seasoned litigator.

In New York, Rudy Giuliani was suspended from practicing law because he made false statements while trying to get courts to overturn Trump's election loss.

Follow Ed White at <http://twitter.com/edwritez>

Spain judge nixes backup site for disputed Hawaii telescope

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — A Spanish judge in a decision cheered by environmentalists has put a halt to backup plans for the construction of a giant telescope in the Canary Islands — eliminating at least for now the primary alternative location to the preferred spot in Hawaii, where there have been protests against the telescope.

Construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope, or TMT, on Hawaii's tallest mountain, Mauna Kea, has been stalled by opponents who say the project will desecrate land held sacred to some Native Hawaiians.

Telescope officials had selected the alternate location near an existing scientific research facility on the highest mountain of La Palma, one of the Spanish islands off the western African coast, in the Atlantic Ocean.

But an administrative court in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the capital of the Spanish archipelago, ruled last month that the 2017 concession by local authorities of public land for the tentative project was invalid. The ruling was dated on July 29, but only became public this week after local media reported about the decision.

In the ruling obtained by The Associated Press, Judge Roi López Encinas wrote that the telescope land allocation was subject to an agreement between the Canary Astrophysics Institute, or IAC, and the telescope's promoter, the TMT International Observatory (TIO) consortium.

But the judge ruled that the agreement was not valid because TIO had not expressed an intention to build on the La Palma site instead of at the Hawaii site.

The judge also sided with the plaintiff, the environmental group Ben Magec-Ecologistas en Acción, in rejecting arguments by TIO's legal team and the island's government that the land concession was covered by an international treaty on scientific research.

An official for the Canary Islands High Court said questions about the ruling could not be answered because other court officials in a position to answer the questions were on vacation. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to be named in media reports.

The island's local elected government chief, Mariano Zapata, said it was "sad" that advocacy groups "are so occupied by administrative matters instead of environmental issues."

"I wish we were all in the same boat with the intent of creating jobs in the La Palma island so it can keep being an international reference on scientific research," Zapata said. His government estimated last year that the telescope would generate 500 permanent jobs and at least 400 million euros (\$470 million) in investment.

Scott Ishikawa, a spokesperson for the consortium hoping to build the telescope, said that the consortium plans to appeal the ruling.

"While we respect the court's ruling in La Palma, we will pursue the legal process to retain La Palma as our alternative site. Hawaii remains our preferred location for TMT, and we have renewed our efforts to better connect with the Hawaii community in a meaningful and appropriate way," he said in an email to The Associated Press.

Pablo Batista, a spokesman of the Ben Magec-Ecologistas en Acción group, hailed the decision as a big setback for what he called a "fraudulent" project that he said made "fake promises" of new jobs for the island.

"The whole idea of offering the island as a back-up was nothing else but as a strategy to put pressure on the Hawaii plans," Batista said.

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In a statement, the group also said that “the five years that the TIO consortium has lost on La Palma should make it reflect on the arrogant and disrespectful strategy that they have carried out both in Hawaii and in the Canary Islands, emboldened by institutional support and despising the arguments of the opposition to the TMT.”

The group’s concerns echo some of the concerns expressed by those fighting the telescope in Hawaii, said Kealoha Pisciotta, one of the leaders seeking to keep the project off Mauna Kea.

“I’m glad that they challenged it, because like here, the challenge helps bring awareness to TMT’s not only lack of following the process, but caring for the environment and Hawaiians’ sacred site,” she said.

Associated Press writers Audrey McAvoy and Jennifer Sinco Kelleher contributed to this report from Honolulu.

New NY governor adds 12,000 deaths to publicized COVID tally

By MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — Delivering another blow to what’s left of former Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s legacy, New York’s new governor acknowledged on her first day in office that the state has had nearly 12,000 more deaths from COVID-19 than Cuomo told the public.

“The public deserves a clear, honest picture of what’s happening. And that’s whether it’s good or bad, they need to know the truth. And that’s how we restore confidence,” Gov. Kathy Hochul said on NPR.

In its first daily update on the outbreak Tuesday evening, Hochul’s office reported that nearly 55,400 people have died of the coronavirus in New York based on death certificate data submitted to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That’s up from about 43,400 that Cuomo reported to the public as of Monday, his last day in office. The Democrat who was once widely acclaimed for his leadership during the COVID-19 outbreak resigned in the face of an impeachment drive after being accused of sexually harassing at least 11 women, allegations he disputed.

The higher number is not entirely new. Federal health officials and some academic institutions tracking COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. have been using the higher tally for many months because of known gaps in the data Cuomo had been choosing to publicize.

But Hochul, who was lieutenant governor before being propelled to the state’s highest office, said it is vital to be fully transparent about the numbers.

“There’s a lot of things that weren’t happening, and I’m going to make them happen,” Hochul said Wednesday on MSNBC. “Transparency will be the hallmark of my administration.”

The Associated Press first reported in July on the large discrepancy between the figures publicized by the Cuomo administration and numbers the state was reporting to the CDC.

The count used by Cuomo in his news media briefings and on the state’s COVID-19 fatality tracker included only laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 deaths reported through a state system that collects data from hospitals, nursing homes and adult care facilities.

That meant the tally excluded people who died at home, in hospice, in prisons or at state-run homes for people with disabilities. It also excluded people who doctors believed died of COVID-19 but never got a positive test to confirm the diagnosis. Such tests were scarce in the initial months of the pandemic, when hundreds of New Yorkers were dying each day.

“There are presumed and confirmed deaths. People should know both,” Hochul said.

Cuomo’s spokesperson, Rich Azzopardi, said the former administration had only been reporting “clearly labeled confirmed COVID deaths” to ensure accuracy, but had been fulfilling its obligation to report “presumed” deaths to the CDC.

“New York always reported these numbers and they were always publicly available,” Azzopardi said. He didn’t address why the state had chosen not to add deaths outside hospitals and nursing homes.

By Wednesday, the state’s website included the higher tally.

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Under the Cuomo administration, the state Health Department refused to make an expert available to the AP to explain its continued decision to publicize only the lower tally.

During the spring of 2020, when New York was the deadliest hot spot in the U.S., Cuomo emerged in the eyes of many Americans as a hero of the pandemic for his daily PowerPoint briefings and stern but reassuring language. He won an international Emmy and wrote a book on leadership in a crisis.

But Cuomo's critics long charged that he was manipulating coronavirus statistics to burnish his image. Months later, it turned out that his administration had minimized the death toll among nursing home residents by excluding several thousand who had succumbed after being transferred to hospitals.

Cuomo used those lower numbers last year to erroneously claim that New York was seeing a much smaller percentage of nursing home residents dying of COVID-19 than other states.

On Wednesday, several lawmakers from both parties called on Hochul to fire state Health Commissioner Howard Zucker. The department did not immediately respond to a request to interview him.

Republican state Sen. Sue Serino called Hochul's disclosure "a welcome step forward on the transparency front" and pushed for an investigation of New York's COVID-19 response in nursing homes.

"In order to rebuild public trust, it will be important that anyone who had a hand in manipulating or withholding relevant data from the public no longer has a place in state government," she said.

Sen. Gustavo Rivera, a Bronx Democrat who chairs the Senate Health Committee, was among those calling for Zucker's removal, saying he "aided and abetted in the worst times of the pandemic what is obviously the governor's efforts to burnish his image."

"What you have here is just the clearest evidence, as if we didn't have enough, that this administration went out of its way to make the governor seem much better, much more skilled and that he had handled the pandemic much better than anyone else," Rivera said.

Federal prosecutors have been investigating Cuomo's administration's handling of the nursing home data. The state Assembly Judiciary committee has also been investigating the matter.

This week, in the wake of the sexual harassment scandal, Cuomo's Emmy was rescinded. And the publisher of his book has said it will no longer print hardcover copies and will not come out with a paperback edition.

Court upholds death sentence for church shooter Dylann Roof

By MEG KINNARD and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A federal appeals court Wednesday upheld Dylann Roof's conviction and death sentence for the 2015 racist slayings of nine members of a Black South Carolina congregation, saying the legal record cannot even capture the "full horror" of what he did.

A unanimous three-judge panel of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond rejected arguments that the young white man should have been ruled incompetent to stand trial in the shootings at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston.

In 2017, Roof became the first person in the U.S. sentenced to death for a federal hate crime. Authorities have said Roof opened fire during the closing prayer of a Bible study at the church, raining down dozens of bullets on those assembled. He was 21 at the time.

In his appeal, Roof's attorneys argued that he was wrongly allowed to represent himself during sentencing, a critical phase of his trial. Roof successfully prevented jurors from hearing evidence about his mental health, "under the delusion," his attorneys argued, that "he would be rescued from prison by white-nationalists — but only, bizarrely, if he kept his mental-impairments out of the public record."

Roof's lawyers said his convictions and death sentence should be vacated or his case should be sent back to court for a "proper competency evaluation."

The 4th Circuit found that the trial judge did not commit an error when he found Roof was competent to stand trial and issued a scathing rebuke of Roof's crimes.

"Dylann Roof murdered African Americans at their church, during their Bible-study and worship. They had welcomed him. He slaughtered them. He did so with the express intent of terrorizing not just his immediate victims at the historically important Mother Emanuel Church, but as many similar people as would

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hear of the mass murder," the panel wrote in its ruling.

"No cold record or careful parsing of statutes and precedents can capture the full horror of what Roof did. His crimes qualify him for the harshest penalty that a just society can impose," the judges wrote.

One of Roof's attorneys, Margaret Alice-Anne Farrand, a deputy federal public defender, declined to comment on the ruling. Roof's other attorneys did not immediately respond to emailed requests seeking comment.

The Rev. Kylon Middleton, a close friend of Mother Emanuel Pastor Clementa Pinckney, a state senator who was killed in the massacre, said Roof's appeal reopened some of the psychological wounds felt by loved ones of the victims and survivors. Middleton said he is personally opposed to the death penalty, but had accepted that as the sentence Roof received.

"We just want whatever the consequence or the justice that had been delivered based on the court's ruling to be final, period," Middleton said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Nathan Williams, one of the lead prosecutors on the case, said the mass shooting was one of the worst events in South Carolina's history.

"Our office is grateful for the decision of the court, a decision that ensures, as the Court stated, that 'the harshest penalty a just society can impose' is indeed imposed," Williams said in a statement.

All of the judges in the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which covers South Carolina, recused themselves from hearing Roof's appeal; one of their own, Judge Jay Richardson, prosecuted Roof's case as an assistant U.S. Attorney. The panel that heard arguments in May and issued the ruling on Wednesday was comprised of judges from several other appellate circuits.

Following his federal trial, Roof was given nine consecutive life sentences after pleading guilty in 2017 to state murder charges, leaving him to await execution in a federal prison and sparing his victims and their families the burden of a second trial.

Last month, however, Attorney General Merrick Garland issued a moratorium and halted all federal executions while the Justice Department conducts a review of its execution policies and procedures. The review comes after a historic run of capital punishment at the end of the Trump administration, which carried out 13 executions in six months. A federal lawsuit has also been filed over the execution protocols — including the risk of pain and suffering associated with the use of pentobarbital, the drug used for lethal injection.

President Joe Biden as a candidate said he'd work to end federal executions. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in March that he continues to have "grave concerns" about it.

Biden has connections to the case. As vice president, Biden attended the funeral for one of those slain, state Sen. Clementa Pinckney, who also pastored the congregation. During his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden frequently referenced the shooting, saying that a visit to Mother Emanuel helped him heal in the aftermath of the death of his son, Beau.

Roof's attorneys could ask the full 4th Circuit to reconsider the panel's ruling. If unsuccessful in his direct appeal, Roof could file what's known as a 2255 appeal, or a request that the trial court review the constitutionality of his conviction and sentence. He could also petition the U.S. Supreme Court or seek a presidential pardon.

Kinnard reported from Houston.

Porn actor Ron Jeremy indicted on over 30 sex assault counts

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A grand jury has indicted adult film actor Ron Jeremy on more than 30 counts of sexual assault involving 21 women and girls across more than two decades, authorities said.

Jeremy, 68, whose legal name is Ronald Jeremy Hyatt, pleaded not guilty in Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday to all of the allegations, which include 12 counts of rape.

The indictment, which was returned Aug. 19 and unsealed Wednesday, covers allegations dating from 1996 to 2019 with victims aged 15 to 51. The counts appear to be identical to charges filed against Jeremy last year, which he also denied.

In a tactical move also employed in their case against Harvey Weinstein, LA County prosecutors used secret grand jury proceedings to get an indictment that replaces the original charges, allowing them to skip a public preliminary hearing on the evidence and proceed to trial.

Defense attorney Stuart Goldfarb said in an email that Jeremy's "position is the same as when the criminal complaint was filed. He is innocent of all the charges."

Jeremy has been held in jail on \$6.6 million bail since his arrest in June 2020.

The indictment includes allegations that Jeremy raped a 19-year-old woman during a photo shoot in 1996, raped a 26-year-old woman at a nightclub in 2003 and raped a 17-year-old girl at a home in 2008.

He is also charged with sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl in 2004.

No trial date has been set. Jeremy was told to return to court in October for a pretrial hearing.

Nicknamed "The Hedgehog," Jeremy has been among the best-known and most prolific performers in the porn industry for decades, appearing in hundreds of films since the 1970s. He has also made regular appearances in mainstream films and on reality TV shows.

Along with Weinstein, he is one of only a few men investigated and charged by a district attorney's task force formed to take on sexual misconduct in the entertainment industry as the #MeToo era gained momentum in late 2017.

Weinstein has pleaded not guilty to 10 counts of sexual assault and is also awaiting trial. A judge dismissed an 11th count.

Follow AP Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andyjamesdalton>

Man gets 6 years in prison in Michigan governor kidnap plot

By DAVID EGGERT and ED WHITE Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — A man upset over state-ordered coronavirus restrictions was sentenced to just over six years in prison Wednesday for planning to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a significant break that reflected his quick decision to cooperate and help agents build cases against others.

Ty Garbin admitted his role in the alleged scheme weeks after his arrest last fall. He is among six men charged in federal court but the only one to plead guilty so far. It was a key victory for prosecutors as they try to prove an astonishing plot against the rest.

Garbin apologized to Whitmer, who was not in court, and her family.

"I cannot even begin to imagine the amount of stress and fear her family felt because of my actions. And for that I am truly sorry," the 25-year-old aviation mechanic told the judge.

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."

The government, noting Garbin's exceptional cooperation, asked U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker to give him credit for helping investigators reinforce their case against his co-defendants.

The "Constitution is designed to ensure that we work out our fundamental and different views peacefully, not at the point of a gun, not with some other blunt force threat or a kidnapping conspiracy," the judge said.

Prosecutors recommended a nine-year prison term. But Jonker went shorter, at 6 1/4 years, saying he was convinced that Garbin was an "excellent prospect" to stay out of trouble when released from prison.

The government and Garbin's lawyers took turns praising his willingness to admit guilt even before investigators revealed all the evidence following his arrest.

Garbin "didn't hold back," Assistant U.S. Attorney Nils Kessler said. "He would come out and say, 'We planned to do this and I was knowingly a part of it.' He sat for hours answering all of our questions."

Indeed, defense attorney Gary Springstead told the judge that Garbin "is going to be a star witness" against the others. He later told reporters that Garbin "can tell what was in his mind at the time, which is that this wasn't some fanciful plot. This was real. And he can tell the government why he believes other people had the same intent that he did and show them where to look."

"Ty Garbin testified in front of the grand jury in support of the indictment that got him indicted. He is

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truly, genuinely and sincerely sorry," said Mark Satawa, another defense lawyer.

When the kidnapping case was filed in October, Whitmer, a Democrat, pinned some blame on then-President Donald Trump, saying his refusal to denounce far-right groups had inspired extremists across the U.S. It added even more heat to the final weeks of a tumultuous election season. Trump had earlier urged supporters to "LIBERATE" Michigan from stay-at-home mandates.

Whitmer wrote a victim impact statement to the judge, saying, "things will never be the same."

"Threats continue," she said in June. "I have looked out my windows and seen large groups of heavily armed people within 30 yards of my home. I have seen myself hung in effigy. Days ago at a demonstration there was a sign that called for 'burning the witch.'"

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

Some of those accused in the plot, including defendants charged in state court, joined the protests. Prosecutors have said the ringleader initially talked of recruiting 200 men to storm the building, take hostages and "execute tyrants."

"The plots and threats against me, no matter how disturbing, could not deter me from doing everything I could to save as many lives as possible by listening to medical and health experts," Whitmer said. "To me it is very simple: this had to be the priority."

White reported from Detroit.

Serena, Venus Williams out of US Open; 1st time since 2003

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Serena and Venus Williams added themselves to the list of big-name withdrawals from the U.S. Open on Wednesday, making this the first time since 2003 neither of the sisters will appear in the year's last Grand Slam tournament.

Serena, who turns 40 next month, cited a torn right hamstring that has kept her out of competition since she was injured in the first set of her first-round match at Wimbledon in late June.

Venus, who is 41, said she has a leg injury.

They announced their decisions via social media posts about 10 hours apart.

"Not the best news from Serena and I today. I, too, am unable to play the U.S. Open. It's super super super disappointing," Venus said. "Having some issues with my leg all this summer and just couldn't work through it."

The Americans join Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in sitting out the competition in Flushing Meadows, where play begins next Monday, raising questions about what the future of tennis might look like without them. The draw for the tournament is Thursday.

This will be the first major tournament since the 1997 Australian Open without any of the four in the singles brackets. Venus made her Grand Slam debut at the 1997 French Open; Serena arrived the next year; Federer showed up in 1999; Nadal in 2003.

Serena has won 23 Grand Slam singles titles, a record in the professional era. Only one player in tennis history owns more, Margaret Court with 24. Venus has won seven, including at the U.S. Open in 2000 and 2001.

Federer, Nadal and Novak Djokovic share the men's record of 20.

"After careful consideration and following the advice of my doctors and medical team, I have decided to withdraw from the US Open to allow my body to heal completely from a torn hamstring," Serena wrote in her post Wednesday.

Her note ended with: "I'll see you soon."

Serena's coach, Patrick Mouratoglou, also put up a post on social media, saying, "we've done everything we could" and adding: "It is heartbreaking, but this is the only possible decision."

She has won six singles championships at the U.S. Open, most recently in 2014. In her five appearances at the hard-court tournament in New York since then, she has made it to the final twice — losing to Naomi Osaka in 2018 and Bianca Andreescu in 2019 — and the semifinals three other times, including last year.

Her best-in-the-game serve and powerful groundstrokes have allowed Serena to remain among the title contenders at the biggest tournaments, especially on hard courts and grass.

This season, she was a semifinalist at the Australian Open in February, before losing to eventual champion Osaka there. At the French Open, played on red clay, Serena lost in the fourth round to Elena Rybakina.

At Wimbledon, Serena was serving while leading 3-1 in her opening match when her left shoe seemed to lose its traction while she was hitting a forehand and her right leg flexed awkwardly.

She tried to continue but eventually needed to stop playing, only the second mid-match retirement of her Grand Slam career and first since 1998.

More AP tennis coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

EXPLAINER: What's happening with Afghanistan evacuations?

By BEN FOX and JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Since the Taliban seized the Afghan capital on Aug. 14, more than 82,000 people have been evacuated from Afghanistan in one of the largest U.S. airlifts in history. While the pace has picked up in recent days, it's still a chaotic scramble as people seek to escape. Afghans trying to reach the Kabul airport face a gauntlet of danger, and there are far more who want to leave than will be able to do so. Those who do make it out will face the many challenges of resettlement, either in the U.S. or somewhere else.

Time may also be running short. President Joe Biden set an Aug. 31 deadline to complete the U.S.-led evacuation, but the president has also asked for contingency plans in case the U.S. still needs to get people out beyond that date.

Here's a look at where the situation stands:

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

President Donald Trump signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020 as part of an effort to end what he called the "endless wars" in the Middle East. He agreed to a May 1 deadline to have all troops out of the country. Biden, who says he no longer wants to risk American lives in a civil war among Afghans, kept with the withdrawal plan but extended the deadline to September. The Taliban quickly seized control of most of the country as the U.S. withdrew air support to the Afghan military. Afghans, fearing retribution and the harsh rule of the Taliban, rushed to the airport in hopes of getting out of the country.

WHO IS GETTING FLOWN OUT OF THE COUNTRY?

The 82,300 evacuees flown out so far have included about 4,500 American citizens — out of an estimated 6,000 who were known to be in the country and wanted to leave — as well as Afghans who have obtained a limited number of special immigrant visas, which are for people who have worked for the U.S. or NATO as interpreters or in some other capacity. The U.S. is also evacuating Afghans, along with their immediate families, who have applied for the visas but not yet received them, and people who face particular danger from the Taliban. That includes people who worked for the government, members of civil society, journalists and human rights activists.

WHERE ARE THEY GOING?

American citizens and people who already have legal U.S. residency, including those who have been approved for the special immigrant visa, can proceed to the U.S. after a stopover, typically in Qatar or another Gulf nation. Afghans who have applied for but not yet received the special visa, or who are seeking to enter the U.S. as refugees, must first go to a "transit hub" in Europe or Asia for security vetting by U.S. intelligence and law enforcement authorities, according to the White House.

After they are screened, they can be flown to the U.S. and housed at military bases in Virginia, New Jersey, Texas and Wisconsin until their applications are completed and they can be resettled. The White

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House says everyone will be tested for COVID-19 upon arrival in the U.S. It's unclear how long it will take to process people at military bases.

In addition, at least 13 countries, including Uganda, Rwanda, Costa Rica and Albania have agreed to temporarily house Afghan refugees until they can be resettled.

"The critical issue now is evacuation, and then you can sort out resettlement to the United States," said Bill Frelick, director of the refugee and migrant rights division at Human Rights Watch.

HAS ANYTHING LIKE THIS HAPPENED BEFORE?

The scale and speed of this airlift are unprecedented, but the U.S. has a history of taking in refugees from overseas conflicts. The U.S. airlifted about 7,000 people with the fall of Saigon in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War and ultimately took in more than 100,000 refugees from Southeast Asia. In 1996, the U.S. evacuated about 5,000 Kurds and other Iraqi minorities from northern Iraq after then-President Saddam Hussein regained control of the region.

In 1999, about 20,000 victims of Yugoslavian "ethnic cleansing" against Albanians in the province of Kosovo were brought to the United States as refugees and temporarily housed for processing in Fort Dix, New Jersey. The U.S. has admitted more than 3.1 million refugees since 1980.

HOW DO AFGHANS GET SETTLED INTO THEIR NEW LIVES IN THE U.S.?

Nine nonprofit resettlement agencies, including the International Rescue Committee and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, oversee a network of affiliates that work to help refugees. Once they are placed in their new cities, they typically get food and housing assistance for the first 90 days but are expected to become self-sufficient. They are greeted at the airport and taken to their new home, generally an apartment.

The nonprofit groups — which operate with a combination of government grants and private donations — help them find a job and get acclimated. "People are intimidated and nervous and all of those emotions. But they're also, I think, excited. People come in just feeling safe again," said Mark Hagar, the Dallas-area director for Refugee Services of Texas. Refugees are expected to reimburse the government for their flight to the U.S.

HOW CAN PEOPLE HELP?

The groups that help resettle refugees not only need donations, but also volunteers to meet families at the airport, help set up their apartments and help them get oriented to the new culture.

The International Rescue Committee, for instance, says that in addition to financial contributions, it can use donated furniture, groceries and items for babies.

Hagar said the agency has been heartened to see an influx of volunteers in response to events in Afghanistan. He said a volunteer training session over the weekend that would normally involve about 50 people had about 300.

SHOULDN'T THIS PROCESS HAVE STARTED EARLIER?

Members of Congress and others have long complained about the length of time and the bureaucratic hurdles required for former interpreters and others who worked for the U.S. to get visas. The process slowed further under Trump, whose administration also cut the number of refugees allowed into the U.S., and it came to a virtual halt with the outbreak of COVID-19.

This summer, as the U.S. withdrawal approached, the U.S. held off on a mass evacuation at the request of the Afghan government, which feared it would trigger a panic that would make it even harder to hold off the Taliban, according to Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser. But he said even starting earlier would not have avoided the chaos at the airport.

"This operation is complex. It is dangerous. It is fraught with challenges — operational, logistical, human. And it's produced searing images of pain and desperation," he told reporters this week. "But no operation like this, no evacuation from a capital that has fallen in a civil war, could unfold without those images."

Stengle contributed to this report from Dallas.

Experts on WHO team say search for COVID origins has stalled

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By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — The international scientists dispatched to China by the World Health Organization to find out where the coronavirus came from said Wednesday the search has stalled and warned that the window of opportunity for solving the mystery is “closing fast.”

Meanwhile, a U.S. intelligence review ordered up by President Joe Biden proved inconclusive about the virus’s origin, including whether it jumped from an animal to a human or escaped from a Chinese lab, The Washington Post reported Wednesday.

In a commentary published in the journal Nature, the WHO-recruited experts said the origins investigation is at “a critical juncture” requiring urgent collaboration but has instead come to a standstill. They noted among other things that Chinese officials are still reluctant to share some raw data, citing concerns over patient confidentiality.

Earlier this year, WHO sent a team of experts to Wuhan, where the first human COVID-19 cases were detected in December 2019, to probe what might have triggered the pandemic now blamed for nearly 4.5 million deaths worldwide, with more than 10,000 people a day succumbing despite more than 5 billion doses of vaccine administered.

In their analysis, published in March, the WHO team concluded the virus probably jumped to humans from animals, and they described the possibility of a laboratory leak as “extremely unlikely.”

But the WHO experts said their report was intended only as a first step and added, “The window of opportunity for conducting this crucial inquiry is closing fast: any delay will render some of the studies biologically impossible.”

For example, they said, “Antibodies wane, so collecting further samples and testing people who might have been exposed before December 2019 will yield diminishing returns.”

China said Wednesday that officials should “concentrate on other possible avenues that may help trace the origin” of COVID-19 and suggested studies should be pursued in other countries.

Fu Cong, a director-general in China’s Foreign Ministry, agreed it is a “pity” the search for COVID-19’s origins has stalled but said it wasn’t China’s fault. “China has always supported and will continue to participate in the science-based origin tracing efforts,” he said.

He accused the U.S. of “hyping the lab leak theory” and trying to shift the blame onto China, and implied the coronavirus might be linked to high-level American research labs, suggesting the United States invite WHO to investigate some of its installations.

Marion Koopmans and her WHO-recruited colleagues listed a number of priorities for further research, including conducting wider antibody surveys that might identify places where COVID-19 was spreading undetected, both in China and beyond, testing wild bats and farm-raised animals as potential reservoirs of the virus, and investigating any credible new leads.

Some other scientists fear the best opportunities to collect samples might have been missed during the first few weeks after some of the earliest human cases appeared linked to a Wuhan seafood market.

Chinese researchers collected hundreds of environmental samples immediately after the coronavirus was found, but it is unclear how many people or animals were tested.

“Once you have wildlife traders shifting over to other kinds of employment because they’re worried about whether they’ll be able to do this anymore, that window starts to close,” said Maciej Boni, a Pennsylvania State University biology professor who has studied virus origins and was not part of the WHO team.

Still, Boni said scientists might be able to pinpoint COVID-19’s animal source by hunting for closely related viruses in species like raccoon dogs, mink or ground squirrels. But he said it could take about five years to do the kind of extensive studies necessary.

The search for COVID-19’s origins has become a bitter source of dispute between the U.S. and China, with increasing numbers of American experts calling for the two Wuhan laboratories close to the seafood market to be investigated, something China has flatly rejected and branded “scapegoating.”

Biden in May ordered a 90-day review by U.S. intelligence agencies of both the animal-to-human hypothesis and the lab leak theory. In July, even WHO’s Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said it was premature to have rejected the lab theory, adding that research accidents are common.

Ken Moritsugu in Beijing contributed to this report.

Conservative hoaxers face \$5.1M fine for election robocalls

By DAVID EGGERT Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Two conservative hoaxers face a record \$5.1 million fine for allegedly making illegal robocalls to wireless phones without the owners' consent in the 2020 election.

The Federal Communications Commission said Tuesday that the proposed fine for Jacob Wohl, Jack Burkman and Burkman's lobbying firm would be the largest ever for violating the Telephone Consumer Protection Act.

The men already face criminal charges in multiple states over allegedly organizing 85,000 robocalls that falsely warned people in predominantly Black areas of New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio and Michigan that information gleaned from mail-in ballots could lead to their arrest, debt collection and forced vaccination.

The FCC said federal law prohibits making prerecorded calls to cellphones without the permission of those receiving the calls. The agency, which determined 1,141 calls went to mobile phones on Aug. 26 and Sept. 14, proposed a \$4,500 fine for each one.

Regulators launched their investigation following consumer complaints and concerns raised by a national civil rights group, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

The FCC said it worked with the Ohio attorney general's office to obtain subpoenas from two dialing service providers showing emails from Burkman and Wohl, including ZIP codes to target and "the tape we want to go out." They will have an opportunity to respond before the commission takes action.

In emails to The Associated Press on Wednesday, Wohl and Burkman said the Biden administration is looking to distract from the U.S. pullout of Afghanistan and other woes.

"We will not be deterred or discouraged," Wohl said. Burkman called the proposed fine "sad."

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, whose office is prosecuting the men, said "this massive fine properly reflects the seriousness of the allegations these two political operatives face."

The FCC said it was the first time it issued notice of a fine without first issuing a citation, citing a 2019 change in the law.

Follow David Eggert at <https://twitter.com/DavidEggert00>

OnlyFans reverses explicit content ban after outcry

By TALI ARBEL and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

OnlyFans says it has suspended a plan to ban sexually explicit content following an outcry from its creators and advocates for sex workers.

The subscription site said in a prepared statement Wednesday that the planned ban was "no longer required due to banking partners' assurances that OnlyFans can support all genres of creators" and declined to answer further questions.

OnlyFans had said last Thursday that it would ban explicit content starting Oct. 1, blaming policies of banks and payment processors for the policy change. "The new rules are necessary to comply with the requirements of these financial institutions and are the only way to help ensure the long-term sustainability of OnlyFans," the company said in a message to users last week.

OnlyFans has become famous as a place where sex workers can get paid in a safer way as well as a space for celebrities to interact with fans.

Last week's abrupt change upset the site's creators, many of whom threatened to move to another website. A lot of sex workers joined OnlyFans during the pandemic when in-person venues shut down or became more dangerous because of COVID-19. The site has been tremendously lucrative for some people, allowing them to earn thousands every month. OnlyFans says it has 130 million users and 2 million creators who have collectively earned \$5 billion.

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Lacy Lennon, who says she makes tens of thousands of dollars a month from OnlyFans charging \$100 a minute for custom videos, remains skeptical on the ban reversal. "What's scary is what's the safety on this? How do we know it won't happen again?"

There are other sites where people can pay for porn, and a crop of new ones started trying to lure upset OnlyFans creators. Rapper Tyga was promoting his plans for a new platform called myystar in media interviews after OnlyFans announced their ban, saying, "We're not putting a limit to any content that you do."

"We've been in the adult industry for 20 years and we're tired of seeing sex workers get bullied and exploited by the platforms that make the money off them," said Mattie McCoy, whose Nevada company is also developing a site that could offer an alternative to OnlyFans for sex workers, called Naughty Popcorn.

Advocates had criticized OnlyFans' planned ban, saying they were concerned it would push people into more dangerous street-based sex work. They say taking away a safer virtual space and cutting people's income makes them more vulnerable to the risk of being trafficked.

"Not having the online outlet is going to hinder and harm a lot of people. Online is much safer, particularly for trans and gender nonconforming folks," said LaLa Zannell, the ACLU's trans justice campaign manager who leads the rights group's effort to decriminalize sex work.

The online porn industry is changing amid concerns about sex trafficking and the exploitation of minors. Two 2018 laws, the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, were meant to stop sex trafficking online, and led some spaces to shut down. But many sex workers say these changes have also made their jobs more dangerous.

Elected officials had also raised concerns about OnlyFans. A bipartisan group of over 100 members of Congress called on the Justice Department to investigate OnlyFans earlier in August, saying the site was a "major marketplace" for sexual videos with children in them. The letter cited anti-porn group National Center on Sexual Exploitation, which has its origins in the faith-based group Morality in Media, as a source, as well as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Sex workers and their advocates say conservative and religious groups are trying to erase sex from the internet under the guise of combating sex trafficking and child pornography.

"The only reason they're going after porn sites is because they're ideologically opposed to sexual content," said Cathy Reisenwitz, a writer and OnlyFans creator who makes between \$1,600 and \$3,500 a month on the site. "Trafficking and porn are totally different."

OnlyFans CEO Tim Stokely blamed banks such as Bank of New York Mellon for the planned ban in an interview with the Financial Times on Tuesday, saying they refuse the site's business.

Adult-content companies have to navigate higher fees and requirements from financial companies beyond what most retailers encounter; others won't touch it. Both Mastercard and Visa last year began blocking customers from using credit cards on Pornhub after accusations that the site had videos of rape and underage sex. American Express cards, meanwhile, can't be used on online pornography. Stripe won't process adult content.

"I want to be optimistic, but I'm very skeptical," said Phoenix Calida, an OnlyFans creator who works with nonprofit advocacy group Sex Workers Outreach Project USA. "It seems as though OF changed without consulting sex workers, and I've not seen anything that indicates that they understand why that's a problem."

Calida hopes the reversal stays, but added "I am worried that the company still doesn't seem to think it needs to consult sex workers before policy changes instead of responding to criticism after."

The anti-porn group, NCOSE, said it "remains steadfast in holding OnlyFans accountable for enabling abuse and exploitation" and called its age verification process "useless in practice."

Associated Press writers Barbara Ortutay and Ken Sweet contributed to this story.

Pentagon: US troops must get their COVID-19 vaccines ASAP

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Military troops must immediately begin to get the COVID-19 vaccine, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a memo Wednesday, ordering service leaders to “impose ambitious timelines for implementation.”

More than 800,000 service members have yet to get their shots, according to Pentagon data. And now that the Pfizer vaccine has received full approval from the Food and Drug Administration, the Defense Department is adding it to the list of required shots troops must get as part of their military service.

The Austin memo does not dictate a specific timeline for completing the vaccinations. But it says the military services will have to report regularly on their progress. A senior defense official said that Austin has made it clear to the services that he expects them to move quickly, and that this will be completed in weeks not months.

“To defend this Nation, we need a healthy and ready force,” Austin said in the memo. “After careful consultation with medical experts and military leadership, and with the support of the President, I have determined that mandatory vaccination against coronavirus disease...is necessary to protect the Force and defend the American people.”

Troops will be able to get their Pfizer shots at their bases and from their commands around the world. The Pentagon has said it has enough vaccine supply to meet demand. Individual service members may also go out and get any of the other COVID vaccines on their own.

Fulfilling the vaccine mandate, however, may be a challenge for National Guard forces who are scattered around the country, and gather just once a month for their required drills.

According to the Pentagon, there are more than 1.3 million troops on active duty and close to 800,000 in the Guard and Reserve. And, as of Aug. 18, more than 1 million active duty, Guard and Reserve service members were fully vaccinated and nearly 245,000 more had received at least one shot.

Senior military leaders have consistently pressed their forces to get vaccines through a wide range of public pleas, and via social media and other campaigns. But — as is true among the U.S. population — many service members have been reluctant.

Defense officials have said it’s critical for troops to get the vaccine because they live and work closely together and outbreaks could hamper the U.S. military’s ability to defend America.

Military officials have said they don’t have specific numbers on how many Guard troops are not yet vaccinated, and the Pentagon only provides a troop total that lumps active duty, Guard and Reserve into one statistic.

Guard officials have said all along that it is very difficult to assess how many of their citizen soldiers have gotten a vaccine. And only now will they be able to begin actually tracking the number with more precision as Guard members report to their drill weekends this fall.

Austin’s decision to mandate the vaccine fulfills a vow he made earlier this month to require it no later than mid-September, or immediately upon FDA licensure, whichever came first. His move reflects similar actions by governments and companies around the world, as nations struggle with the highly contagious delta variant that has sent U.S. cases surging to heights not seen since last fall.

Hospitalizations and deaths are increasing among the military. Over the past month, the number of service member deaths jumped from 25 to 34 — by more than a third.

“Our vaccination of the Force will save lives,” said the Austin memo. “Thank you for your focus on this critical mission.”

Members of the U.S. military are already required to get as many as 17 different vaccines, depending on where they are deployed. The requirements — which include shots for smallpox, hepatitis, polio and the flu — also provide for a number of temporary and permanent exemptions for either medical or administrative reasons.

Austin in the memo noted that the new requirement will allow for exemptions that are consistent with the current policies for all the other vaccines. Permanent exemptions include serious medical reactions to the vaccine, immune deficiencies such as HIV infection, and “evidence of existing immunity” by a serologic antibody test or “documentation of previous infection or natural infection presumed.”

There also are administrative exemptions, including one for religious reasons. The religious exemption is

granted by the military services based on their policies, and it appears to be relatively rare. The decision is made by commanders based on consultation with medical personnel and chaplains.

Briefing the news media on Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said commanders are expected to carry out the vaccine order with "skill and a measure of compassion." Service members who object, he said, will have the opportunity to meet with medical personnel and with their own leadership, to ensure the troops understand the risks to themselves and their teammates if they don't take the vaccine.

Asked about specific punishments for noncompliance, Kirby said commanders have a "wide range of tools" to use. "It's a lawful order and we fully anticipate that our troops are going to follow lawful orders," he added.

The Navy and the Marine Corps said they have had zero religious exemption requests for other vaccines in recent years and the Air Force said there were few. The Army was not able to provide any data.

A little over half of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated with one of the country's three options, from Pfizer, Moderna or Johnson & Johnson.

The Pentagon decision only applies to the Pfizer vaccine. Moderna has also applied to the FDA for full approval of its vaccine. J&J said it hopes to do so later this year.

Feds report most rental assistance has still not gone out

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — States and localities have only distributed 11% of the tens of billions of dollars in federal rental assistance, the Treasury Department said Wednesday, the latest sign the program is struggling to reach the millions of tenants at risk of eviction.

The latest data shows that the pace of distribution increased in July over June and that nearly a million households have been helped.

But with the Supreme Court considering a challenge to the federal eviction moratorium, the concern is that a wave of evictions will happen before much of the assistance has been distributed. Some 3.5 million people in the U.S. as of Aug. 16 said they face eviction in the next two months, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey.

Lawmakers approved \$46.5 billion in rental assistance earlier this year and most states are distributing the first tranche of \$25 billion. According to the Treasury Department, \$5.1 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance has been distributed by states and localities through July, up from \$3 billion at the end of June and only \$1.5 billion by May 31.

Several states, including Virginia and Texas, have been praised for moving quickly to get the federal money out. But many others have still only distributed a small percentage of the rental help.

Housing advocates blame the slow rollout partly on the Treasury Department under President Donald Trump, which they say was slow to explain how the money could be spent. The criteria, while clearer under the Biden administration, was still criticized for a burdensome process that seemed more focused on preventing fraud than helping tenants.

Advocates also said states made things worse — some waited months to set up programs and others created bureaucratic hurdles.

Efforts to use coronavirus relief money for rental assistance last year faced similar challenges.

"Nearly 1 million households assisted is meaningful progress, but the overall rate of spending emergency rental assistance remains much too slow," said Diane Yentel, CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

"Some communities are spending the money quickly and well, proving that it's possible and making the many communities who aren't all the more glaring and unacceptable" she said. "Seven months after funds were first allocated to them, nine states have spent less than 3% of the money and 16 states have spent less than 5%."

National Apartment Association president and CEO Bob Pinnegar called the assistance rollout "a disaster, marred with programmatic inefficiencies and difficulties."

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"Americans are hurting and we are on the edge of another financial cliff as distribution deadlines loom and the future availability of rental assistance funds is jeopardized," he said.

The Treasury Department has repeatedly tweaked its guidance to encourage states and local governments to streamline the distribution of the funds. The Biden administration has also asked states to create eviction diversion programs that aim to resolve disputes before they reach the courts.

On Wednesday, Treasury released additional guidance to try to speed up the process. This includes programs to allow tenants to self-assess their income and risk of becoming homeless among other criteria. Many states and localities, fearing fraud, have measures in place that can take weeks to verify an applicant qualifies for help.

Treasury also said states and localities now can distribute money in advance to landlords and utility providers "in anticipation of the full satisfaction of (the) application and documentation requirement." And they approved providing money for tenants who have outstanding rental debt in collection, which would make it easier for them to find new housing.

"For those cities and states that wanted even more clarity that they can and should use simpler applications, speedier processes and a self-attestation option without needless delays — this answers that call," said Gene Sperling, who is charged with overseeing implementation of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package.

"The guidance could not be more clear in expressing that this is a public health and eviction emergency that requires putting quick and sound rental relief above unnecessary paperwork that will not reach families in time."

The administration also announced measures aimed at averting evictions at federally-backed housing, including 400,000 rental units in Department of Agriculture-backed multifamily properties. It also is offering additional rental assistance to at-risk veterans and their families and working to ensure tenants in public housing can access rental assistance.

'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 state police released a statement Wednesday saying that Jacob Brown, the white trooper who struck Bowman, "engaged in excessive and unjustifiable actions," failed to report the use of force to his supervisors and "intentionally mislabeled" his body camera video.

Before resigning in March, Brown 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."

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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.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana said the video was further impetus for federal authorities to conduct a so-called "pattern and practice" investigation of the state police.

"In the absence of federal oversight, LSP will continue to put Louisianans at risk of constitutional rights violations," said the group's executive director, Alanah Odoms.

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 Department 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."

New Asian American bakeries find bicultural sweet spot

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — For some Asian Americans, the dim sum cookie at Sunday Bakeshop here will taste like childhood.

It looks like a typical sugar cookie except with sesame seeds on top. But bite into the creamy, red bean center and it's reminiscent of the fried, filled sesame balls served at a Chinese dim sum restaurant.

The concoction is pastry chef Elaine Lau's nod to her grandmother, who would often make them. The baked goods that Lau's team churns out — like hojicha chocolate croissants and Chinese White Rabbit candy cookies — aren't going to be found in any bakery in Asia. There's an intrinsic American sensibility at the nearly 3-month-old shop.

"Talking to some of the Asian Americans and other people that have tried some of our pastries, we get a lot of comments where they're just like... 'Oh this took me back several years,' when they were growing up," said Lau, 35, who was born in Oakland.

"For us, it's kind of nice we can evoke some positive memories and feelings with our pastries."

From ube cakes to mochi muffins, bakeries that sweetly encapsulate growing up Asian and American

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have been popping up more in recent years. Their confections are a delectable vehicle for young and intrepid Asian Americans to celebrate their dual identity.

Ingredients they found embarrassing as children are being blended with European or "traditional" American pastries into something new. Some of the bakers welcome the chance to dispel culinary and societal misconceptions, especially given months of anti-Asian hate.

The experience of being an immigrant kid in between two very different cultures is what inspired the name and concept behind Third Culture Bakery, a few miles away from Sunday Bakeshop, in Berkeley. Open since 2018, it's the brainchild of husbands Wenter Shyu, 31, and Sam Butarbutar, 32. Nine months into their courtship, they decided to open a bakery together and expand Butarbutar's mochi muffin business beyond wholesale and pop-ups. The mochi muffin, still a signature item, is influenced by Butarbutar's Indonesian roots and made with California-grown mochiko rice flour.

The operation has blossomed, with two locations in Colorado and a second San Francisco Bay Area store planned. Their menu includes mochi brownies and butter mochi doughnuts with glazes like matcha, ube and black sesame.

Shyu said many non-Asian patrons have never been exposed to some of the ingredients.

"It's a lot of educating. Even when you educate and share where it comes from, people are judging it. It's a very mixed bag. It's also very rewarding because then you get to see their reaction trying this new thing they've never had in their life," he said.

Shyu recalls some awkward situations, such as one in May when Third Culture was featured on a Denver TV station as part of Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month. The finished segment included "Oriental music" that Shyu, who was born in Taiwan, described as "cringe-y and uncomfortable."

"I told the news station, if you guys did a piece on Black History Month and added tribal African music, there would be an outrage," Shyu said. "Somehow for Asian Americans, that's OK. That's the exact thing we're trying to fight against."

For these bakeries, integrating Asian flavor profiles isn't a gimmick. It's what feels natural and authentic, said Deuki Hong, 31, whose Sunday Family Hospitality Group launched Sunday Bakeshop, and who loves Lau's outside-the-pastry-box thinking.

"When I was running a Korean barbecue, we were known also for corn cheese, a little melty side dish... She took that and was like, 'I'm gonna make a pastry out of it,'" said Hong, co-author of "Koreatown: A Cookbook." "Wow, this came from our conversation that was very personal to me and it also tastes really delicious."

Rose Nguyen, a 34-year-old former nurse, switched careers and opened Rose Ave Bakery inside The Block Foodhall in Washington, D.C., in March 2020, just before a pandemic shutdown. Nguyen was peddling Instagrammable morsels like strawberry lychee rose donuts, ube cake and matcha chocolate cookies. She won over enough foodies to keep going with online orders until fully reopening this June.

Born in Rhode Island to Vietnamese immigrants, Nguyen said it sometimes hurt when, growing up, her white friends thought her food from home was weird or gross. So, it's gratifying now to showcase Asian flavors unapologetically.

"It was never about trends or satisfying other people," Nguyen said. "It's just me, basically. The business goes hand in hand with who I am."

As fixtures in their neighborhoods, these bakery owners all felt compelled to do something when racist attacks against Asians tied to the COVID-19 pandemic started. Third Culture Bakery raised donations at its locations to pay for and distribute 21,000 safety kits for Asian seniors. Sunday Bakeshop and Rose Ave Bakery have donated pastries and profits to anti-Asian hate organizations.

The bakers felt a disconnect between that hatred and the joyful connection that their food can make across cultures.

"It's so unfortunate that it's happening, and still happening, because people say they love Asian food and Asian American food," Nguyen said. "Yet, they don't even realize you love the food and don't love the people."

Older, traditional Asian bakeries started out as a means of replicating something immigrants missed

back in their home country. The new bakeries' bolder assertion of identity is a natural evolution, said Robert Ji-Song Ku, an Asian American studies professor at Binghamton University and author of "Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA."

Chefs like Roy Choi and David Chang came to fame in the early 2000s embracing their Korean heritage. But the baking world is still "a real frontier," Ku said.

"It goes against stereotypes of Asians as math geeks. It's sort of the artistic side of Asian American identity that's often ignored," Ku said. "They're instead really trying to fuse things together — create this mixture."

These first- and second-generation Asian American bakery owners seem passionate about bringing visibility to the Asian American community, which often feels invisible, Ku added.

They're showing that an ube snickerdoodle or a black sesame muffin is as American as any apple pie.

"There's nothing wrong with apple pie," Hong said. "But there's a lot more interesting things being done... there's a lot of Asian creators and entrepreneurs, and gradually they'll be more vocal."

___ Terry Tang is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>

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 treatment 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, on-line or with visits by community doctors, and that the government will set up temporary hospitals where patients can receive supplementary oxygen or other treatments.

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.

Suga brushed off criticism that he is simply repeating increasingly ineffective emergency measures and stressed the progress of vaccinations despite their late start and slow pace. He said he is convinced that vaccines are key to a return to normal lives and hopes to achieve a 60% vaccination rate by around September.

Suga said the government will distribute 800,000 antigen test kits to kindergartens, elementary and junior

high schools for quick detection and isolation of cases 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, the top government medical adviser. He proposed that schools curtail activities and urged high schools and colleges to return to online classes.

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

Omi said later that the emergency measures are not effective because people are not cooperating with the requests. He urged lawmakers to discuss a legal framework to enforce social distancing and the involvement of more hospitals.

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

Possible 'Havana Syndrome' incidents probed in Harris delay

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and JONATHAN LEMIRE undefined

HANOI (AP) — U.S. officials are continuing to investigate two possible cases of so-called Havana Syndrome health incidents that delayed Vice President Kamala Harris' trip from Singapore to Vietnam.

The investigation was in its early stages and officials deemed it safe for Harris to make her scheduled stop in Vietnam, after initially hitting pause for a few hours on Tuesday. 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. Harris on her trip is reassuring Asian allies after the tumultuous evacuation of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

U.S. officials had not yet confirmed the latest reported Havana Syndrome case, and it did not involve anyone traveling with Harris, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday. 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, U.S. 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.

On Wednesday, Harris appeared before U.S. diplomatic staff in Hanoi to sign a lease to a new embassy there. She didn't weigh in directly on the Havana Syndrome situation but expressed gratitude to those working for the U.S. across the globe.

"Here's my message to embassy staff: thank you. 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 for our partners and our allies around the globe," she said.

On Wednesday Harris was highlighting the announcement that the U.S. will send 1 million additional doses of the Pfizer vaccine to Vietnam, bringing the total U.S. vaccine donation to that country 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.

Some of those impacted by Havana Syndrome report hearing a loud piercing sound and feeling intense pressure in the face. Pain, nausea, and dizziness sometimes follow.

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.

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

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

Rolling Stones bandmates salute late drummer Charlie Watts

By MIKE FULLER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Members of the Rolling Stones have saluted their unshakeable drummer Charlie Watts, who died Tuesday at the age of 80.

Mick Jagger, the legendary rock band's frontman, posted a photo on Twitter of a smiling Watts seated behind a drum.

Lead guitarist Keith Richards shared a picture of a drum set with a hanging "Closed" sign.

Watts' publicist announced Tuesday afternoon that the musician had "passed away peacefully in a London hospital earlier today surrounded by his family."

Guitarist Ronnie Wood posted a photo of himself and his late bandmate captioned "I love you my fellow Gemini - I will dearly miss you - you are the best."

On the Rollingstones.com website, only a black-silhouetted portrait of Watts appeared.

Having joined the Stones in 1963, the drummer ranked just behind Jagger and Richards as the group's longest lasting and most essential member.

Watts was present throughout the band's 30 studio albums, largely holding himself apart from the drug abuse, creative clashes and ego wars of rock 'n' roll.

He had previously announced he would not tour with the Stones in 2021 because of an undefined health issue. He was replaced by American musician Steve Jordan for the "No Filter" series of shows in the United States, due to begin in St. Louis on Sept. 26.

The 80-year-old's death has drawn tributes from across the music industry, including from Paul McCartney, Elton John and Patti Smith. Fellow drummers praised the talent and influence, who also recorded jazz albums.

Watts is survived by his wife Shirley, sister Linda, daughter Seraphina and granddaughter Charlotte.

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."

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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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Aug. 26, the 238th day of 2021. There are 127 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing American women's right to vote, was certified in effect by Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby.

On this date:

In 1817, the University of Michigan was founded.

In 1883, the island volcano Krakatoa began cataclysmic eruptions, leading to a massive explosion the following day.

In 1939, the first televised major league baseball games were shown on experimental station W2XBS: a double-header between the Cincinnati Reds and the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field. (The Reds won the first game, 5-2, the Dodgers the second, 6-1.)

In 1944, French Gen. Charles de Gaulle braved the threat of German snipers as he led a victory march

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in Paris, which had just been liberated by the Allies from Nazi occupation.

In 1957, the Soviet Union announced it had successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile.

In 1968, the Democratic National Convention opened in Chicago; the four-day event that resulted in the nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey for president was marked by a bloody police crackdown on antiwar protesters in the streets.

In 1972, the summer Olympics opened in Munich, West Germany.

In 1985, 13-year-old AIDS patient Ryan White began "attending" classes at Western Middle School in Kokomo, Indiana, via a telephone hook-up at his home -- school officials had barred Ryan from attending classes in person.

In 2004, the nation's supply of vaccine for the impending flu season took a big hit when Chiron Corp. announced it had found tainted doses in its factory, and would hold up shipment of about 50 million shots.

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey spun into Texas, unloading extraordinary amounts of rain. (The hurricane killed nearly 70 people, damaged more than 300,000 structures and caused an estimated \$125 billion in damage.)

In 2015, Alison Parker, a reporter for WDBJ-TV in Roanoke, Virginia, and her cameraman, Adam Ward, were shot to death during a live broadcast by a disgruntled former station employee who fatally shot himself while being pursued by police.

In 2018, a gunman opened fire on fellow gamers at a video game tournament in Jacksonville, Fla., killing two men and wounding 10 others before taking his own life. Playwright Neil Simon, whose comedies included "The Odd Couple" and "Barefoot in the Park," died at the age of 91.

Ten years ago: More than 2 million people along the Eastern Seaboard were ordered to move to safer ground as Hurricane Irene approached the coast. A Boko Haram sect member detonated a car loaded with explosives at the United Nations headquarters in Nigeria's capital Abuja, killing 25 people and wounding more than 100 others.

Five years ago: San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick remained seated on the team's bench rather than standing for the national anthem before the Niners played host to the Green Bay Packers in an exhibition game, saying he believed the United States was oppressing African Americans and other minorities.

One year ago: Seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse was arrested in Illinois in the shooting deaths of two people and the wounding of another during a third night of protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, over the police shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake. (Rittenhouse, who said he was defending himself after the three men attacked him, is awaiting trial on charges including two homicide counts.) On the third night of their convention, Republicans led by Vice President Mike Pence aggressively defended law enforcement; the convention unfolded amid new protests against racial injustice. The U.N. children's agency said at least a third of children around the world couldn't access remote learning when the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools. All three scheduled NBA playoff games were postponed, with players choosing to boycott in their strongest statement yet against racial injustice. (The games resumed three days later, after players and owners agreed to expand initiatives, many tied to increased voting awareness and opportunities.)

Today's Birthdays: Pop singer Vic Dana is 81. Former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge is 76. R&B singer Valerie Simpson is 76. Pop singer Bob Cowsill is 72. Broadcast journalist Bill Whitaker is 70. Actor Brett Cullen is 65. Former NBA coach Stan Van Gundy is 62. Jazz musician Branford Marsalis is 61. Country musician Jimmy Olander (Diamond Rio) is 60. Actor Chris Burke is 56. Actor-singer Shirley Manson (Garbage) is 55. Rock musician Dan Vickrey (Counting Crows) is 55. TV writer-actor Riley Weston is 55. Rock musician Adrian Young (No Doubt) is 52. Actor Melissa McCarthy is 51. Latin pop singer Thalia is 50. Actor Meredith Eaton is 47. Rock singer-musician Tyler Connolly (Theory of a Deadman) is 46. Actor Mike Colter is 45. Actor Macaulay Culkin is 41. Actor Chris Pine is 41. Comedian/actor/writer John Mulaney is 39. Actor Johnny Ray Gill is 37. Country singer Brian Kelley (Florida Georgia Line) is 36. R&B singer Cassie (AKA Cassie Ventura) is 35. Actor Evan Ross is 33. Actor Danielle Savre is 33. Actor Dylan O'Brien is 30. Actor Keke Palmer is 28.