

# Groton Daily Independent

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**Any one wanting to sponsor the 7th grade volleyball match or JV volleyball match on Monday with Aberdeen Christian, let me know.**

**Email: [paperpaul@grotonsd.net](mailto:paperpaul@grotonsd.net)  
Text: 605/397-7460  
\$25 per match**



## 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.



## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

## Tvinnereim is new elementary Paraprofessional

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.



Alison Tvinnereim is the new paraprofessional at Groton Elementary School. She and her husband have two children and live in Aberdeen.

"I graduated from Roslyn High School and then attended Mount Marty College, Watertown, where I received a Business Degree," Tvinnereim said. "Following graduation, I started working at the Youth Development Center (YDC) in Aberdeen."

"The YDC is the child care center connected with the YMCA," she explained. "While working there for the past thirteen years, I was in charge of pre-school aged children."

"I decided I'd like to do something a little different so started checking into other jobs," Tvinnereim stated. "Since my sister Shelby Hendrickson is one of the fifth-grade teachers in Groton, I looked seriously into the job openings here."

"My position as a para will include various jobs such as recess and lunch duty," she listed. "However, my main responsibility will be helping the students in the classrooms."

"I'm looking forward to working in a smaller school and having a new and different assignment," Tvinnereim said.



## Gerlach is 3-9 PE Teacher

Kyle Gerlach started in the Groton School District as a paraprofessional in the elementary school and as the assistant boys' basketball coach.

His job assignment changed last year to being a paraprofessional in the middle school / high school Special Education department.

This coming school year, Gerlach will be the physical education / health teacher for grades three through nine and will continue as the assistant boys' basketball coach.

The following are volunteer assistant coaches: Carleen Johnson and Kaylin Kucker, girls' soccer; Garrett Wiedrick, boys' soccer; Carla Tracy, volleyball; and Dalton Locke, football.



## Gridiron Team takes down Redfield



**Evan Nehls tackles Easton Millar.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

It was the same score as last week, but this week, Groton Area came out on top with a 10-7 win over Redfield in football action Friday in Groton.

In the 80 years that these two teams have played, according to master statistician Tom Woods, Groton and Redfield tied in two games and both teams won 39 games. The Groton win gives the Tigers an edge in this year, 40-39.

Groton Area had to get the early game bugs



worked out. The Tiger defensive squad held Redfield's opening drive to four downs before they punted, but the Groton offensive team fumbled the ball on its first play from scrimmage.

Coach Shaun Wanner had talked about working on scoring within the 15 yard line, which is something the Tigers struggled at last week against Clark-Willow Lake. Later in the first quarter, the Tigers were within the 15 yard line and with 2:08 left in the quarter, Kaden Kurtz scored on a one-yard run. Jackson Cogley kicked the PAT and the Tigers took a 7-0 lead.

Redfield would even the score with 2:42 left in the first half when Mason Whitley scored on a 21 yard run. Sean Domke kicked the PAT and it was 7-7. Cogley attempted a 43-yard field goal at the end of the first half but ended up short and to the left. The first half remained tied at seven.

The Tigers marched down the field early in the third quarter and with 7:09 left, Cogley would kick a 28-yard

**Andrew Marzahn finds an opening.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



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field goal and the Tigers would take a 10-7 lead.

Redfield had the ball in the final minutes of the game, but the Tiger defense held them at bay to help secure the win.

The score was close and the stats were equally close with the Tigers getting the edge.

Groton Area had more first downs, 13-12, more yards rushing, 122-109, and more yards passing, 107-90.

In rushing, Groton Area had 29 carries for 122 yards. Kaden Kurtz had 18 carries for 87 yards, Andrew Marzahn eight for 30 and Favian Sanchez two for seven. Redfield had 33 carries for 109 yards. Mason Whitley had nine carries for 52 yards, Easton Millar had 10 for 23 yards, Mason Fey seven for 20 and Corbin Schwartz three for 16.

Kurtz completed nine of 14 passes for 107 yards. Receivers were Jordan Bjerke with four catches for 64 yards, Sanchez had three for 26 yards, Teylor Diegel one for 11 yards and Ethan Gengerke one for six yards. Redfield's Easton Millar completed eight of 16 passes for 90 yards with one interception by Pierce Kettering. Receivers were Keaton Rohlfs had six catches for 86 yards and Nolan Gall had one for six yards.

Groton Area had five penalties for 30 yards and Redfield had three for 40 yards.

Defensive leaders for Groton Area were Kurtz with 14 tackles and one sack, Christian Ehresmann with eight tackles and one sack, Kettering with eight tackles and an interception, Jordan Bjerke with seven tackles and having one sack each were Gengerke, Evan Nehls and Logan Ringgenberg. Keaton Rohlfs led Redfield with nine tackles while Cam Schmidt and Sean Dombke with eight tackles each.

Groton Area, now 1-1 on the season, will travel to Webster on Friday. Redfield, now 1-1 as well, will host Clark/Willow Lake on Friday.

- Paul Kosel

**Kaden Kurtz runs up the middle to gain more yards for the Tigers.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Jordan Bjerke caught the ball and gained a first down for the Tigers.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)





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## Community Events

### Saturday, August 28, 2021

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

**CANCELLED:** 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.)

### Monday, August 30, 2021

Boys JV Game hosts Redfield, 5 p.m.

Volleyball Hosting Aberdeen Christian (7th grade at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow)

### Tuesday, August 31, 2021

Volleyball at Ipswich (8th at 4:30 p.m., C at 5:15 p.m., JV at 6:15 p.m., Varsity to follow)

Boys golf at Lee Park Golf Course, Aberdeen, 10 a.m.

### Thursday, September 2, 2021

Cross Country at Redfield Golf Course, 10 a.m.

### Friday, September 3, 2021

NO SCHOOL

Football at Webster Area, 7 p.m.

### Saturday, September 4, 2021

Soccer - Tea Area at Groton Area. Girls game at 1 p.m. followed by the boys game.

### Monday, September 6, 2021

NO SCHOOL - LABOR DAY



## 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

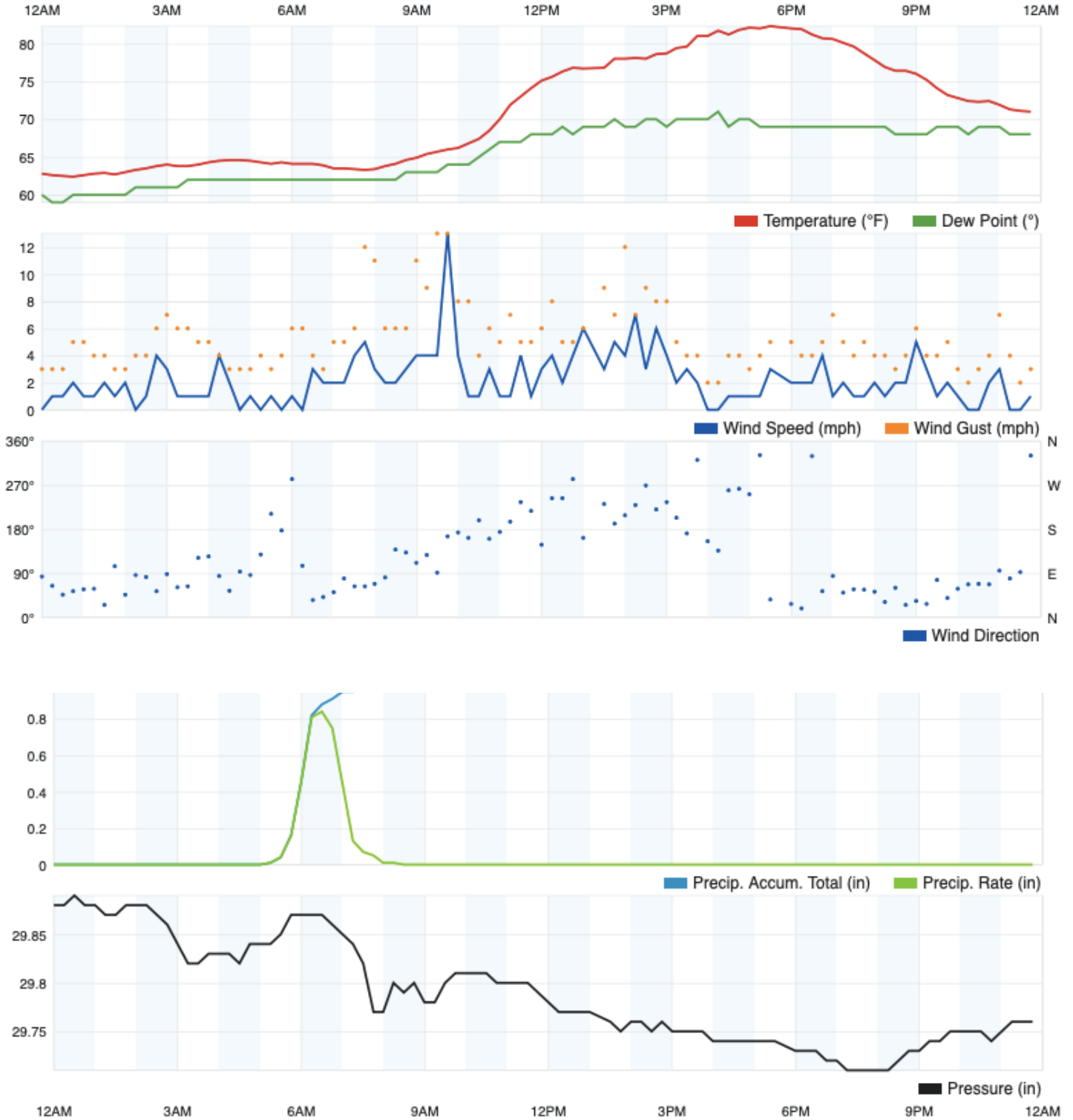
**GROTON**  
Chamber Of Commerce

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Groton SD 57445  
[GrotonChamber.com](http://GrotonChamber.com)

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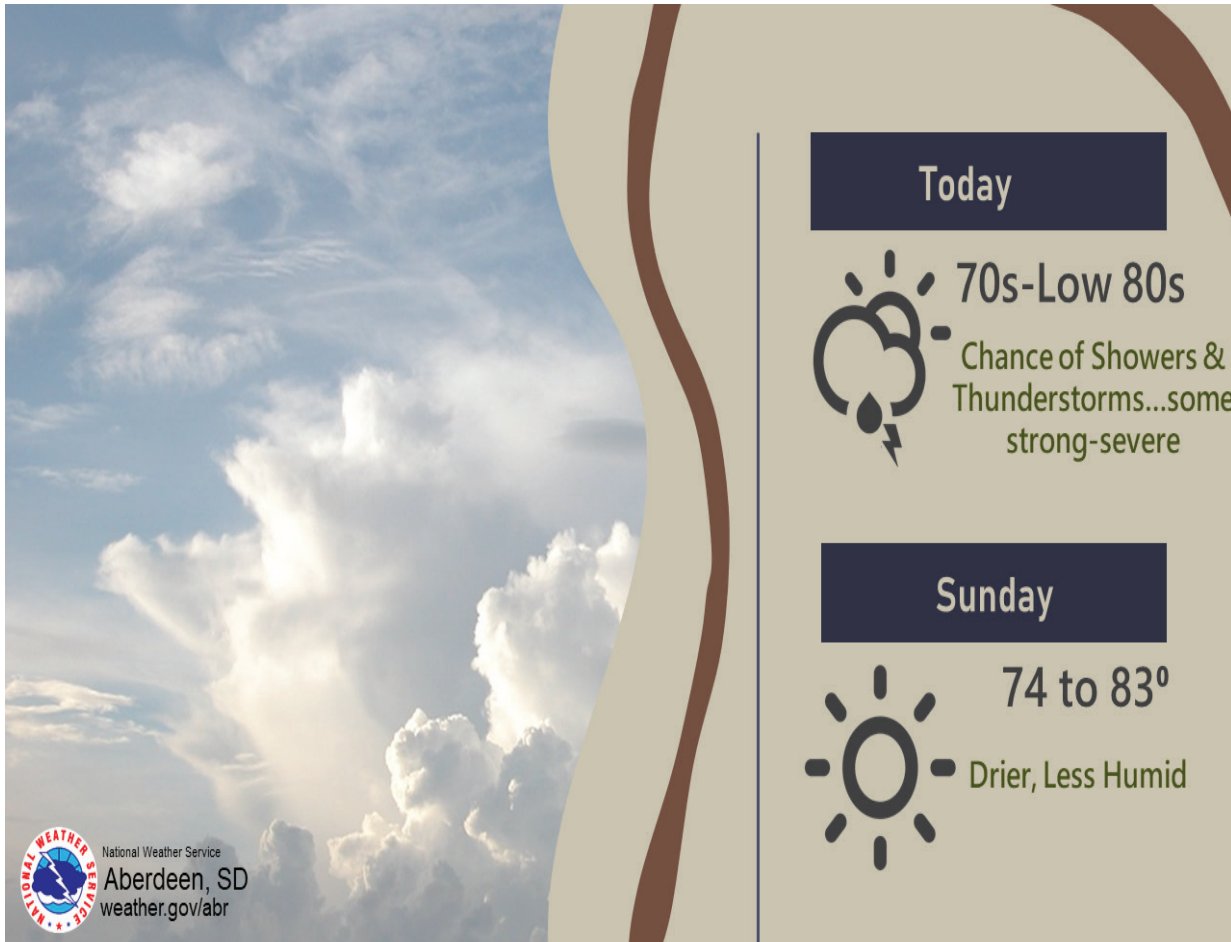
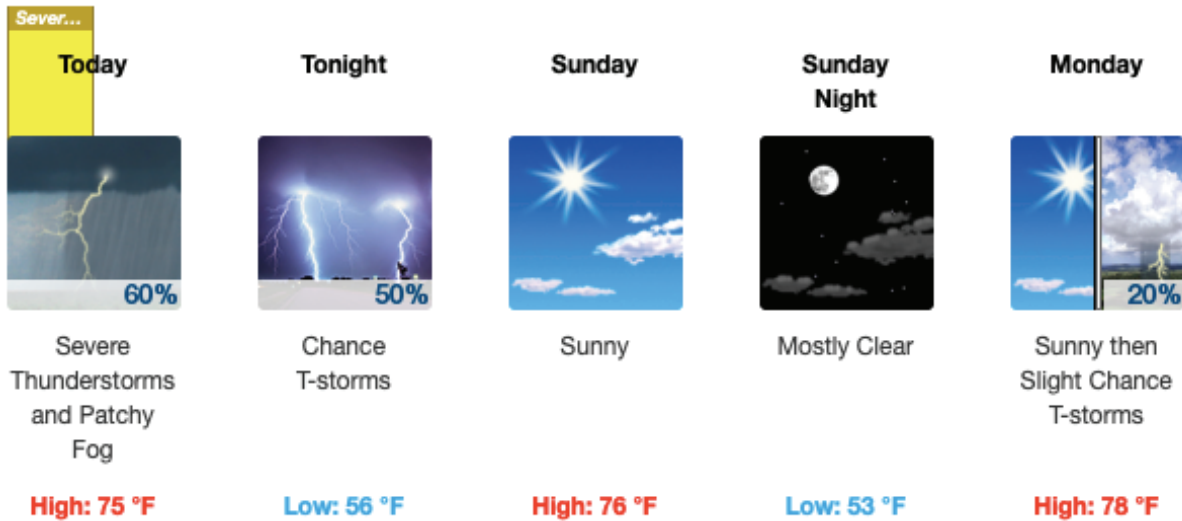
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs




# Broton Daily Independent

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### Today




70s-Low 80s  
Chance of Showers & Thunderstorms...some strong-severe

### Sunday



74 to 83°  
Drier, Less Humid



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD  
weather.gov/abr

Chances for showers and storms will persist across the area today. Some storms could be strong to severe with large hail and damaging winds being the main threats. This activity should begin to clear to the east into Minnesota by the early to late evening hours tonight. A more quiet, drier and less humid day is expected on Sunday. Temperatures throughout the weekend are expected to be close to normal for late August.



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## Today in Weather History

August 28, 2011: Several thunderstorms tracking southeast across the region brought large hail along with damaging winds to parts of the area. Golf ball hail broke some windows on several homes and the church in Herreid in Campbell County. Colossal hail up to three inches in diameter caused some vehicle and siding damage in Tolstoy, in Potter County. In Redfield, seventy mph winds downed a tree along with many large tree branches. Also, the metal on a roof was peeled back.

1898 - Torrents of rain accompanied by a furious wind upset the rain gage at Fort Mohave AZ. However, water in a wash tub set out on the mesa, clear of everything, measured eight inches after the 45 minute storm. (The Weather Channel)

1911 - Saint George, GA, was deluged with 18.00 inches of rain in 24 hours to establish a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1959 - Lieutenant Colonel William Rankin bailed out of his plane at a height of 46,000 feet into a violent thunderstorm, and lived to write about the 45 minute journey (which normally would have been a thirteen minute descent). He described it as one of the most bizarre and painful experiences imaginable. (The Weather Channel)

1971 - Heavy rains from Tropical Storm Doria caused devastating floods in central and northeast New Jersey resulting in 138 million dollars damage. In southeastern Pennsylvania, high winds downed trees and power lines, and in New York City, heavy rains flooded streets and subways. (David Ludlum)

1973: An F4 tornado touched down near Canaan, New York, and moved to western Massachusetts. Three people were killed in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts when a truck stop was destroyed, and another person died in a ruined house nearby.

1986 - The temperature at Apalachicola, FL, dipped to 62 degrees to shatter their previous August record by four degrees, having tied their August record high of 99 degrees on the 2nd of the month. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Severe thunderstorms broke the heat in the southeastern U.S. and the Gulf Coast Region, but not before seven cities reported record high temperatures for the date. The severe thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 80 mph downing large trees around Horse Shoe NC, and pelted southeastern Meridian MS with hail two inches in diameter. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Tropical Storm Chris spawned a tornado near Manning, SC, which killed one person, and spawned three tornadoes in North Carolina. Chris produced one to two foot tides, and three to six inch rains, over coastal South Carolina. Severe thunderstorms in New York State and Vermont, developing ahead of a cold front, spawned a tornado which killed one person at Hector NY, produced tennis ball size hail at Brandon VT, and produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Lyndonville VT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Early morning thunderstorms in Nebraska produced 4.50 inches of rain around McCook, and 4.65 inches near Auburn and Brownville. Showers in Montana pushed the rainfall total for the month at Havre past the previous August record of 3.90 inches. (The National Weather Summary)

1990: Between 3:15 p.m. and 3:45 p.m. a devastating F5 tornado ripped a 16.4 mile-long path through portions of Kendall and Will counties in northern Illinois. A total of 29 people were killed, and 350 more were injured. An estimated \$160 million in damages occurred. The tornado's path width ranged from 200 yards to half a mile. A total of 470 homes were destroyed, and another 1000 homes were damaged. Sixty-five thousand customers lost power.

2005: Hurricane Katrina attained Category 5 status on the morning of August 28 and reached its peak strength at 1800 UTC that day, with maximum sustained winds of 175 mph and a minimum central pressure of 902 mbars (26.6 inHg).



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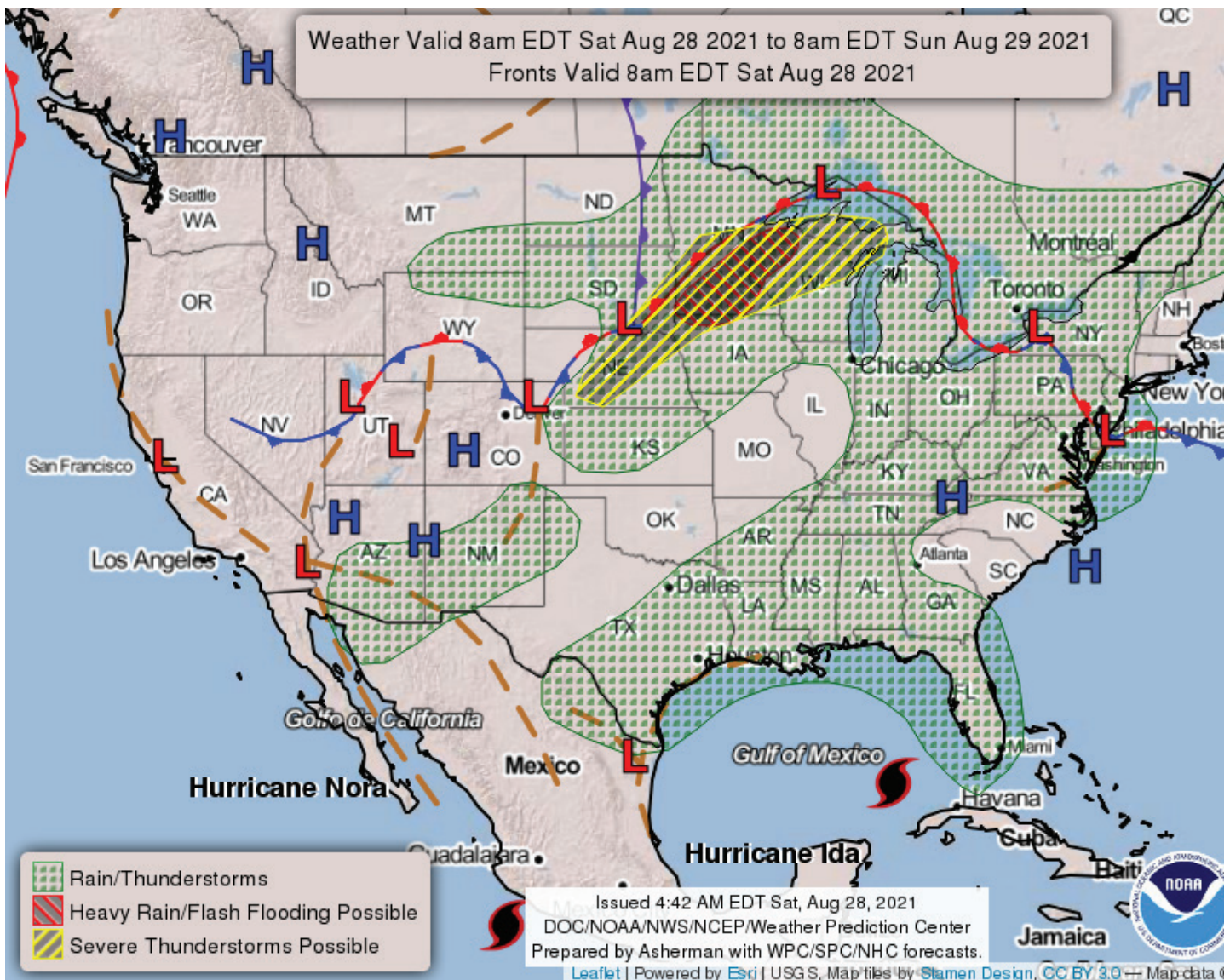
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 83 °F at 5:05 PM**  
**Low Temp: 62 °F at 12:39 AM**  
**Wind: 14 mph at 7:36 AM**  
**Precip: This morning: 1.76**  
**Three-Day Total: 3.62**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 104° in 1937**  
**Record Low: 58° in 1914**  
**Average High: 81°F**  
**Average Low: 54°F**  
**Average Precip in Aug.: 2.03**  
**Precip to date in Aug.: 5.81**  
**Average Precip to date: 16.13**  
**Precip Year to Date: 13.08**  
**Sunset Tonight: 8:18 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:49 a.m.**



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## WHY LOVE GOD?

There is nothing more precious than the "hug" of a child when it is given to us without our asking for it. It is so innocent and undefiled. It is given voluntarily with nothing expected in return. It is an expression of "thanks" for something we may have done that we can no longer remember. It is given freely, honestly, openly and joyfully because the child has no other way to express its feelings.

"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him." The word love in this verse carries with it the idea of being hugged. In other words, God not only loves us by what He says, but by what He does. So, says the Psalmist, "He hugs us" - keeps us as close to Himself as He possibly can.

When God rescues us from sin and graciously and generously provides us with His salvation, we receive an eightfold blessing. After He rescues us, we have:

His protection: We are not exempt from difficulties but are assured of His presence and grace when they come.

He knows us by name: He recognizes us as unique individuals with a plan from Him for our lives.

He will hear us when we call upon Him and give us His solution for our problems.

He will be with us and deliver us when we are surrounded by life's troubles.

He will honor us when we honor Him.

He will satisfy our needs as long as we live and when our life is over join Him in heaven.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to love You as much as You love us - to love You with all of our hearts and minds and souls. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 91:14 Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.



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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  
**Cancelled** 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

### As Sturgis rally clears, COVID cases, hospitalizations rise

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Rumbles from the motorcycles and rock shows of the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally have hardly cleared from the Black Hills of South Dakota, and the reports of COVID-19 infections among rallygoers are already streaming in — 178 cases across five states, according to contact tracers.

In the three weeks since the rally kicked off, coronavirus cases in South Dakota have shot up at a startling pace — sixfold from the early days of August. While it is not clear how much rallygoers spread the virus through secondary infections, state health officials have so far reported 63 cases among South Dakota residents who attended the event.

The epicenter of the rally, Meade County, has become red-hot with new cases, reaching a per capita rate that is similar to the hardest-hit Southern states. The county reported the highest rate of cases in the state over the last two weeks, according to Johns Hopkins researchers.

The Black Hills region's largest hospital system, Monument Health, warned Friday that it has seen hospitalizations from the virus rise from five to 78 this month. The hospital was bracing for more COVID-19 patients by converting rooms to intensive care units and reassigning staff.

Virus cases were already on the rise when the rally started, and it's difficult to measure just how much the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally is to blame in a region where local fairs, youth sports leagues and other gatherings have resumed.

However, Meade County could be a harbinger of things to come for the Upper Midwest as infections ripple from those events, said Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.

"This coronavirus forest fire will keep burning any human wood it can find," he said. "It will find you, and it's so infectious."

Health officials in North Dakota, Wyoming, Minnesota and Wisconsin all reported cases among people who attended the rally, with North Dakota also reporting two hospitalizations. Some health officials noted people could have caught the virus elsewhere.

A team from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determined last year's rally looked like a "superspreader event." The team said the event offered a lesson: Such large gatherings can result in "widespread transmission" of infections and attendees should follow precautions like getting vaccinated, wearing masks and social distancing.

The aftermath of this year's rally looks eerily similar to last year — when the event heralded a wave that did not subside until the winter.

But the pandemic fallout from the rally won't be seen for weeks and an exact case count will likely remain unknown, Osterholm said.

Daniel Bucheli, a spokesman for the state Department of Health, said the virus spike is following "a national trend being experienced in every state, not just South Dakota."

He also pointed out that Meade County's vaccination rate of 45% lags behind the statewide rate of 56% eligible people vaccinated.

The city of Sturgis also downplayed the virus numbers, issuing a statement that blamed the increase in positivity rate on a "significant increase in testing performed to proactively reduce the spread of COVID-19" and accusing "individuals in the national media" of mischaracterizing the event.

Despite the more contagious delta variant, this year's motorcycle rally was even bigger than last year. More than 500,000 people showed up during the 10-day rally.

The streets of Sturgis filled with rallygoers drawn to the libertarian rules of South Dakota — motorcycle helmets weren't required, minimal attire and bodypainting were welcome, and masks were often nowhere in sight. Bikers belled up to bars and packed into rock shows.



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Two bands that performed at the rally have canceled shows after musicians came down with the virus. Corey Taylor, the lead singer of Slipknot who had embarked on a solo tour, told fans he was "very, very sick" from COVID-19, though he did not say where he contracted it.

"This is the worst I've ever been sick in my life," Taylor said in a Facebook video this week. "Had I not been vaccinated, I shudder to think how bad it would have been."

## Experts warn of dangers from breach of voter system software

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Republican efforts questioning the outcome of the 2020 presidential race have led to voting system breaches that election security experts say pose a heightened risk to future elections.

Copies of the Dominion Voting Systems software used to manage elections — from designing ballots to configuring voting machines and tallying results — were distributed at an event this month in South Dakota organized by MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell, an ally of former President Donald Trump who has made unsubstantiated claims about last year's election.

"It's a game-changer in that the environment we have talked about existing now is a reality," said Matt Masterson, a former top election security official in the Trump administration. "We told election officials, essentially, that you should assume this information is already out there. Now we know it is, and we don't know what they are going to do with it."

The software copies came from voting equipment in Mesa County, Colorado, and Antrim County, Michigan, where Trump allies had sue unsuccessfully challenging the results from last fall.

The Dominion software is used in some 30 states, including counties in California, Georgia and Michigan.

Election security pioneer Harri Hursti was at the South Dakota event and said he and other researchers in attendance were provided three separate copies of election management systems that run on the Dominion software. The data indicated they were from Antrim and Mesa counties. While it's not clear how the copies came to be released at the event, they were posted online and made available for public download.

The release gives hackers a "practice environment" to probe for vulnerabilities they could exploit and a road map to avoid defenses, Hursti said. All the hackers would need is physical access to the systems because they are not supposed to be connected to the internet.

"The door is now wide open," Hursti said. "The only question is, how do you sneak in the door?"

A Dominion representative declined comment, citing an investigation.

U.S. election technology is dominated by just three vendors comprising 90% of the market, meaning election officials cannot easily swap out their existing technology. Release of the software copies essentially provides a blueprint for those trying to interfere with how elections are run. They could sabotage the system, alter the ballot design or even try to change results, said election technology expert Kevin Skoglund.

"This disclosure increases both the likelihood that something happens and the impact of what would happen if it does," he said.

The effort by Republicans to examine voting equipment began soon after the November presidential election as Trump challenged the results and blamed his loss on widespread fraud, even though there has been no evidence of it.

Judges appointed by both Democrats and Republicans, election officials of both parties and Trump's own attorney general have dismissed the claims. A coalition of federal and state election officials called the 2020 election the "most secure" in U.S. history, and post-election audits across the country found no significant anomalies.

In Antrim County, a judge had allowed a forensic exam of voting equipment after a brief mix-up of election results led to a suit alleging fraud. It was dismissed in May. Hursti said the date on the software release matches the date of the forensic exam.

Calls seeking information from Antrim County's clerk and the local prosecutor's office were not immediately returned; a call to the judge's office was referred to the county clerk. The Michigan secretary of state's office declined comment.

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In Colorado, federal, state and local authorities are investigating whether Mesa County elections staff might have provided unauthorized individuals access to their systems. The county elections clerk, Tina Peters, appeared onstage with Lindell in South Dakota and told the crowd her office was being targeted by Democrats in the state.

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold said she alerted federal election security officials of the breach and was told it was not viewed as a "significant heightening of the election risk landscape at this point." This past week, Mesa County commissioners voted to replace voting equipment that Griswold had ordered could no longer be used.

Geoff Hale, who leads the election security effort at the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said his agency has always operated on the assumption that system vulnerabilities are known by malicious actors. Election officials are focused instead on ways they can reduce risk, such as using ballots with a paper record that can be verified by the voter and rigorous post-election audits, Hale said.

He said having Dominion's software exposed publicly doesn't change the agency's guidance.

Security researcher Jack Cable said he assumes U.S. adversaries already had access to the software. He said he is more concerned the release would fan distrust among the growing number of people not inclined to believe in the security of U.S. elections.

"It is a concern that people, in the pursuit of trying to show the system is insecure, are actually making it more insecure," said Cable, who recently joined a cybersecurity firm run by former CISA Director Christopher Krebs and former Facebook security chief Alex Stamos.

Concerns over access to voting machines and software first surfaced this year in Arizona, where the Republican-controlled state Senate hired Cyber Ninjas, a firm with no previous election experience, to audit the Maricopa County election. The firm's chief executive also had tweeted support of conspiracy theories surrounding last year's election.

After the county's Dominion voting systems were turned over to the firm, Arizona's top election official determined they could never be used again and ordered the county to buy new ones.

Dominion has filed suits contesting various unfounded claims about its systems. In May, it called giving Cyber Ninjas access to its code "reckless," given the firm's bias, and said it would cause "irreparable damage" to election security.

Election technology and security expert Ryan Macias, in Arizona earlier this year to observe that review, was alarmed by a lack of cybersecurity protocols. There was no information about who was given access, whether those people had passed background checks or were asked to sign nondisclosure agreements.

Cyber Ninjas did not respond to an email with questions about the review and their security protocols.

Macias was not surprised to hear that copies of Antrim County's election management system had surfaced online given the questionable motives of the various groups conducting the reviews and the central role that voting systems have played in conspiracy theories.

"This is what I anticipated would happen, and I anticipate it will happen yet again coming out of Arizona," Macias said. "These actors have no liability and no rules of engagement."

## Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP VOLLEYBALL=

Aberdeen Central def. Rapid City Central, 24-26, 25-16, 26-24, 25-21

Edgemont def. Dupree, 25-16, 25-16, 25-19

Mitchell def. Sturgis Brown, 22-25, 25-11, 25-21, 25-19

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte vs. Standing Rock, N.D., ppd.

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



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## Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

PREP FOOTBALL=

Aberdeen Central 49, Douglas 0  
Aberdeen Roncalli 26, Webster 16  
Belle Fourche 42, Sioux Falls Christian 7  
Brandon Valley 14, Rapid City Stevens 0  
Canistota 34, Elkton-Lake Benton 18  
Canton 28, Dell Rapids 6  
Castlewood 55, Britton-Hecla 20  
Chester 43, Bon Homme 0  
Clark/Willow Lake 22, Dakota Hills 0  
Colome 36, Sunshine Bible Academy 12  
Dell Rapids St. Mary 40, Alcester-Hudson 0  
Estelline/Hendricks 40, Waverly-South Shore 0  
Florence/Henry 34, Hamlin 24  
Gregory 45, Irene-Wakonda 14  
Groton Area 10, Redfield 7  
Harrisburg 56, Pierre 20  
Herreid/Selby Area 32, Lemmon/McIntosh 16  
Hot Springs 23, Newcastle, Wyo. 0  
Howard 49, Colman-Egan 0  
Ipswich 54, Dupree 0  
Jim River 21, Baltic 0  
Jones County 58, Timber Lake 8  
Kimball/White Lake 49, Centerville 20  
Lennox 21, West Central 20  
Leola/Frederick 44, Langford 15  
Madison 42, Custer 0  
McLaughlin def. Takini, forfeit  
Milbank 52, Chamberlain 0  
Miller/Highmore-Harrold 2, Lead-Deadwood 0  
Mitchell 28, Spearfish 7  
North Central Co-Op 35, Great Plains Lutheran 0  
Northwestern 52, Hitchcock-Tulare 8  
Omaha Nation, Neb. 42, Lower Brule 36  
Philip 48, Faith 0  
Sioux Falls Jefferson 17, Sioux Falls Washington 14  
Sioux Valley 30, Woonsocket/Wessington Springs/Sanborn Central 14  
St. Thomas More 21, Mobridge-Pollock 0  
Stanley County 43, Parkston 22  
Sully Buttes 30, Corsica/Stickney 8  
Tea Area 47, Brookings 21  
Tiospa Zina Tribal 46, Little Wound 6  
Todd County 46, Crow Creek 0  
Tri-Valley 21, Dakota Valley 20  
Vermillion 38, Sisseton 0  
Viborg-Hurley 36, Deubrook 6  
Wall 32, Harding County 6

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Warner 30, Faulkton 14  
Winnebago, Neb. 41, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 0  
Winner 44, Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan 0  
Yankton 41, Huron 2  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
St. Francis Indian vs. Crazy Horse, ppd.

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

## South Dakota residents still can't buy legalized marijuana

By LEE STRUBINGER South Dakota Public Broadcasting

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Bill Stocker is not your typical marijuana reform advocate—he's retired from the U.S. Marine Corps and the Sioux Falls police department.

"I have 37 years in uniform, and I am a disabled veteran," Stocker says.

You might recognize Stocker from tv ads supporting Amendment A. That was the constitutional amendment legalizing hemp and marijuana.

Stocker supported the ballot measure because he thinks law enforcement's capacity is stretched too thin. He says officers should not focus on marijuana but on other drugs, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported

"Fentanyl is the problem, not marijuana," Stocker says.

Stocker says he not only supported marijuana reform for the state, but also for himself. He suffers from chronic back pain, arthritis and PTSD.

"I pay my taxes. I'm a registered voter. I do my due diligence. I'm a patriot," Stocker says. "I have pain. I don't want to do opioids."

Stocker says the only thing that takes care of his pain is edible-based marijuana. He was counting on that treatment option after voters legalized medical and recreational marijuana.

But cannabis use is not yet legal in South Dakota, except on one reservation. Republican Governor Kristi Noem has been resistant to cannabis reform since she took office. She opposed industrial hemp and CBD oil legalization during her first two years in office.

In 2019, Noem urged lawmakers not to pass a bill legalizing industrial hemp.

"I believe if we move ahead with industrial hemp and we aren't prepared with it from a regulatory standpoint, from an enforcement standpoint and if we don't have the equipment or the dollars to do with correctly, that we will be opening the door to allowing marijuana to be legalized in the state of South Dakota."

That bill passed the state House and Senate. Noem vetoed it.

A year and a half later, Noem campaigned against the recreational pot ballot measure.

"I don't think anybody got smarter smoking pot," Noem said.

Noem says state voters made a bad decision when they approved the constitutional amendment.

She's backing a lawsuit to overturn the voter-approved measure on constitutional grounds. The case is awaiting a state Supreme Court decision. That's why South Dakotans cannot purchase recreational marijuana right now.

Seth Pearman is the attorney general for the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, where medical marijuana is legal for tribal members. It's the only jurisdiction in the state that sells medical cannabis. The tribe decided years ago that marijuana was not a high-priority enforcement area. It legalized the plant and wanted to capitalize on the market.

Pearman says conservative states nationwide are resistant to legalization of marijuana.

"But I do think that's changing pretty rapidly," Pearman says.

Pearman says as more states regulate and tax cannabis effectively, legalization will continue to expand.

"This is going to be a trend that continues across the country until every state has something in place or there's some Federal legislation that would completely legalize," Pearman adds.

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A state legislative committee has toured the Native Nations Cannabis dispensary in the Flandreau Reservation. Another committee will write a bill that regulates recreational marijuana.

South Dakota voters surprised the country last November when they voted to legalize medical and recreational marijuana.

In 2020, 55 percent of South Dakota voters voted in favor of legalizing recreational pot. Kristi Noem won the 2018 governor's race with just 51 percent of the vote.

At lot has changed since Noem ran for governor. Her hands-off approach to the coronavirus AND her support of former President Donald Trump have created a national profile.

However, most Americans are not on Noem's side when it comes to marijuana reform. According to a recent Pew research survey, 90 percent of Americans say medical marijuana should be legal. Sixty percent of Americans say marijuana should be legal for medical and recreational use.

And that's lost Noem some support, including retired cop Bill Stocker.

"I will not vote for her," Stocker says. "Matter of fact, if there's a good candidate running against her in '22 I will not only support that candidate, I will actively campaign for that candidate."

Stocker voted for Noem when she ran the first time. He says her commitment to transparency won his vote. However, now Stocker says he's not happy with the governor's position on legalization.

So far, there is no challenger set to run against the rising Republican star. But it's likely that cannabis will play a role in the campaign.

## Potent Hawaii highlights 4-team field in LLWS semifinals

By ADAM BABETSKI Associated Press

SOUTH WILLIAMSPORT, Pa. (AP) — It's championship weekend for the Little League World Series.

In this tournament affected by COVID-19, four American teams -- and no international clubs, because of travel restrictions -- will play in the semifinals Saturday.

Here's a look at those games:

SOUTH DAKOTA vs. OHIO, 12:30 p.m. EDT

— Sioux Falls Little League, South Dakota, Midwest Region

How they got here: South Dakota entered the tournament as a B team, second place in its region, to advance to within a game of the championship. The team owes much of its success to pitching ace Gavin Weir, who threw to all but one batter in a no-hitter early in the tournament and then came back in his next start and tossed a no-no by himself. While South Dakota's offense has generated just six runs in three games, by far the fewest of the remaining teams, its pitching staff has yet to allow a single run.

Players to watch: The bad news for South Dakota is Gavin can't throw this weekend because his pitch count ran too high in Wednesday's 1-0 win over California. But Saturday's probable starter, Maddux Munson, allowed just one hit in a complete-game shutout of Oregon his last time out.

— West Side Little League, Hamilton, Ohio, Great Lakes Region

How they got here: Ohio began the tournament with a nail-biting win over Tennessee in extra innings, then got blown out by California in the second round, 9-0. While many teams may have lost their motivation after a demoralizing loss, Ohio rose to the challenge. After defeating Louisiana and New Hampshire in the losers' bracket, the club beat California 4-2 in a rematch to advance to the semifinal. Ohio is seeking to become the first ever team from the state to win the LLWS.

Players to watch: Right fielder Chance Retherford flashed his speed against California when he raced around the bases for a go-ahead, two-run triple. At 5-foot-9, Chance is one of the tallest players in the tournament and is an imposing force at the plate. First baseman JJ Vogel, who stands at 5-8 himself, led the team with a three-run homer against Louisiana.

HAWAII vs. MICHIGAN, 3:30 p.m. EDT

— Honolulu Little League, Hawaii, West Region

How they got here: Hawaii has been unstoppable throughout the LLWS, having outscored its opponents 22-4 in the first three rounds of the tournament. After coasting by Connecticut in the opening round,



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“Da Boys” looked vulnerable for a brief moment against Nebraska, when they surrendered a game-tying home run in the bottom of the sixth. Hawaii quickly recovered to post eight runs in the next inning and take home the victory in extras. Starting pitcher Ryan Keanu threw a one-hit shutout against Michigan in Hawaii’s last game, a 2-0 victory.

Players to watch: Ryan is a two-way star and plays in the infield when he is not pitching. Although he will be unable to pitch, he is a potent middle of the order bat that could be critical in the game. Shortstop Kekoa Payanal is one of the best contact hitters in the tournament and paced the team with three hits against Nebraska. Kekoa and his brother, Pele, are a combined 7 for 15 at the plate in the tournament.

— Taylor North Little League, Taylor, Michigan, Great Lakes Region

How they got here: Michigan defeated Florida and Texas to begin the tournament, but was knocked into the losers’ bracket when it lost to Hawaii. Michigan responded with the best offensive performance of the tournament in a 15-6 drubbing of Texas. Michigan players will now have to face the only team that has beaten them in order to make it to the championship.

Players to watch: Catcher Cameron Thorning hit a home run and a double in Michigan’s win, and will look to continue his strong performance in the LLWS. Thorning is also a pitcher and could impact the game as closer. Michigan’s ace, Ethan Van Belle, is slated to start against Hawaii.

## Municipal official charged with stealing from highway group

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A grand jury has charged a municipal official with embezzling more than \$100,000 from the South Dakota Association of Highway Superintendents.

Brookings County State’s Attorney Dan Nelson announced Friday that Duane Buthe has been indicted, the Argus Leader reported. Buthe, 41, served as highway superintendent in Minnehaha County from 2010 until last year. He became the public works director in the city of Brookings this past March.

According to the indictment, Buthe embezzled the money from the association between 2013 and 2021 while he served as the group’s secretary. State investigators uncovered numerous questionable transactions and withdrawals that Buthe used for his personal benefit.

“The SDACHS is funded mostly by the hard working taxpayers of South Dakota,” Nelson said in the announcement. “Counties across South Dakota pay thousands of dollars to support the training and education of their highway superintendents. If you’ve paid county taxes in South Dakota during this period, you’ve been impacted by this crime.”

Buthe’s attorney, Sonny Walter, didn’t immediately return a voicemail Friday.

## 12-state human trafficking operation nets rescues 47 victims

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Authorities made 102 arrests and rescued 47 victims as part of a 12-state effort to combat human trafficking, Missouri’s top law enforcement official said Friday.

Most of the arrests occurred Thursday night into Friday morning and came after a months-long investigation, state Attorney General Eric Schmitt said.

“Operation United Front” was conducted in Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin and South Dakota, where authorities conducted their operation during this month’s Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

Undercover law enforcement officers from federal, state and local agencies arranged meetings with potential victims or posed as victims to identify buyers or traffickers, Schmitt said.

Two of the 47 victims were minors and they were rescued in Kentucky, which had the most arrests — 46 — and where 21 victims were rescued.

The Missouri investigation was conducted at a Kansas City business and led to two arrests and the rescue of four victims.

## Former highway superintendent accused of embezzlement

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SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A former Minnehaha County highway superintendent has been indicted by a grand jury on an embezzlement charge.

According to the indictment announced Friday by the Brooking County state's attorney, Duane Buthe is accused of embezzling more than \$100,000 from the South Dakota Association of County Highway Superintendents between 2013 and 2021. Buthe served as the association's secretary.

The 41-year-old Buthe is currently the public works director in Brookings. A call to his office and an email seeking comment were not immediately returned.

Buthe served as the highway superintendent in Minnehaha County for 10 years before taking the job in Brookings earlier this year. Prior to his job in Minnehaha County he had been a project manager with the city of Sioux Falls.

State's Attorney Dan Nelson said Buthe is accused of using the association's fund for personal retail transactions, cash withdrawals and other misappropriations.

"The SDACHS is funded mostly by the hard working taxpayers of South Dakota," Nelson said in a statement. "Counties across South Dakota pay thousands of dollars to support the training and education of their highway superintendents. If you've paid county taxes in South Dakota during this period, you've been impacted by this crime."

In May, the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation opened an investigation into Buthe's involvement with the association.

The indictment was returned by a Minnehaha County grand jury.

## Guilty verdicts reached in fatal shooting in Sioux Falls

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A man accused of opening fire on a group of people, killing one, has been found guilty on all charges in Minnehaha County.

A jury deliberated about four and a-half hours before finding Ramon Deron Smith guilty of second-degree murder, first-degree manslaughter and six counts of aggravated assault Thursday afternoon.

According to court documents, the shootings took place on June 8, 2019, when several men came to an apartment in Sioux Falls to settle a dispute.

The men began banging on the door, demanding to be let in. They left and started to gather outside in the parking lot along with a few others. About a minute later, Smith came out of the apartment building and was approached by one of the men, the Argus Leader reported.

Defense attorney Manuel De Castro said Smith, fearing for his life and acting in self-defense, pulled out a gun and shot a volley of four bullets into the air, striking the man, his brother and the man who died, 44-year-old Larry Carr.

As the group scattered and ran across the street, Smith chased after them, firing the gun two more times, according to security footage.

Smith, 37, was arrested about two weeks later in Minneapolis.

In closing arguments, prosecutor Ashley Trankle said self-defense could only be argued if there's reasonable belief someone will get hurt, but the attack must stop if the threat stops. The state argued that because Smith chased after the group and fired across street, he was no longer acting in self defense.

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

01-10-44-47-56, Mega Ball: 23, Megaplier: 3

(one, ten, forty-four, forty-seven, fifty-six; Mega Ball: twenty-three; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$288 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$322 million

## US airstrike targets Islamic State member in Afghanistan

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Acting swiftly on President Joe Biden's promise to retaliate for the deadly suicide bombing at Kabul airport, the U.S. military said it killed a member of the Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate with a drone strike in the group's eastern stronghold.

The strike Saturday local time came amid what the White House called indications that IS planned to strike again as the U.S.-led evacuation from Kabul airport moved into its final days. Biden has set Tuesday as his deadline for completing the exit.

Biden authorized the drone strike and it was ordered by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, a defense official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to provide details not yet publicly announced. It was not immediately clear whether the targeted IS member was directly involved in Thursday's airport attack.

U.S. Central Command said the targeted individual, whose name and nationality were not released, was an IS "planner" and that he was hit in Nangarhar province, which borders Pakistan in eastern Afghanistan and was an early IS stronghold.

A U.S. official said Saturday that the targeted individual appeared to survive an initial drone strike aimed at the vehicle in which he was riding. A second strike killed him, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to provide details not yet publicly released.

The airstrike was launched from beyond Afghanistan less than 48 hours after the devastating Kabul attack that killed 13 Americans and scores of Afghans with just days left in a final U.S. withdrawal after 20 years of war. U.S. Central Command said it believed its strike killed no civilians.

The speed with which the U.S. military retaliated reflected its close monitoring of IS and years of experience in targeting extremists in remote parts of the world. But it also shows the limits of U.S. power to eliminate extremist threats, which some believe will have more freedom of movement in Afghanistan now that the Taliban is in power.

Central Command said the targeted IS member was believed to be involved in planning attacks against the United States in Kabul. The strike killed one individual, spokesman Navy Capt. William Urban said.

It wasn't clear if the targeted individual was involved directly in the Thursday suicide blast outside the gates of the Kabul airport, where crowds of Afghans were desperately trying to get in as part of the on-going evacuation.

The airstrike came after Biden declared Thursday that perpetrators of the attack would not be able to hide. "We will hunt you down and make you pay," he said. Pentagon leaders told reporters Friday that they were prepared for whatever retaliatory action the president ordered.

"We have options there right now," said Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor of the Pentagon's Joint Staff.

The president was warned Friday to expect another lethal attack in the closing days of a frantic U.S.-led evacuation. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden's national security team offered a grim outlook.

"They advised the president and vice president that another terror attack in Kabul is likely, but that they are taking maximum force protection measures at the Kabul airport," Psaki said, echoing what the Pentagon has been saying since the bombing Thursday at Kabul airport.

Late Friday, the State Department again urged Americans to stay away from airport gates, including "the New Ministry of Interior gate."

Few new details about the airport attack emerged a day later, but the Pentagon corrected its initial report that there had been suicide bombings at two locations. It said there was just one — at or near the Abbey Gate — followed by gunfire. The initial report of a second bombing at the nearby Baron Hotel proved to be false, said Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor of the Pentagon's Joint Staff; he attributed the mistake to initial confusion.

Based on a preliminary assessment, U.S. officials believe the suicide vest used in the attack, which killed



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at least 169 Afghans in addition to the 13 Americans, carried about 25 pounds of explosives and was loaded with shrapnel, a U.S. official said Friday. A suicide bomb typically carries five to 10 pounds of explosives, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss preliminary assessments of the bombing.

Biden still faces the problem over the longer term of containing an array of potential extremist threats based in Afghanistan, which will be harder with fewer U.S. intelligence assets and no military presence in the nation.

Emily Harding, a former CIA analyst and deputy staff director for the Senate Intelligence Committee, said she doubted Biden's assurances that the United States will be able to monitor and strike terror threats from beyond Afghanistan's borders. The Pentagon also insists this so-called "over the horizon" capability, which includes surveillance and strike aircraft based in the Persian Gulf area, will be effective.

In an Oval Office appearance Friday, Biden again expressed his condolences to victims of the attack. The return home of U.S. military members' remains in coming days will provide painful and poignant reminders not just of the devastation at the Kabul airport but also of the costly way the war is ending. More than 2,400 U.S. service members died in the war and tens of thousands were injured over the past two decades.

The Marine Corps said 11 of the 13 Americans killed were Marines. One was a Navy sailor and one an Army soldier. Their names have not been released pending notification of their families, a sometimes-lengthy process that Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said involves "difficult conversations."

Still, sorrowful details of those killed were starting to emerge. One Marine from Wyoming was on his first tour in Afghanistan and his wife is expecting a baby in three weeks; another was a 20-year-old man from Missouri whose father was devastated by the loss. A third, a 20-year-old from Texas, had joined the armed services out of high school.

Biden ordered U.S. flags to half-staff across the country in honor of the 13.

They were the first U.S. service members killed in Afghanistan since February 2020, the month the Trump administration struck an agreement with the Taliban that called for the militant group to halt attacks on Americans in exchange for a U.S. agreement to remove all American troops and contractors by May 2021. Biden announced in April that he would have all forces out by September.

Psaki said the next few days of the mission to evacuate Americans and others, including vulnerable Afghans fleeing Taliban rule, "will be the most dangerous period to date."

The White House said that as of Saturday morning, about 6,800 people were airlifted from Kabul in the past 24 hours on U.S. and coalition aircraft. Nearly 112,000 people have been airlifted over the last two weeks, according to the White House. The administration has said it intends to push on and complete the airlift despite the terrorist threats.

Kirby told reporters the U.S. military is monitoring credible, specific Islamic State threats "in real time."

"We certainly are prepared and would expect future attempts," Kirby said. He declined to describe details of any additional security measures being taken, including those implemented by the Taliban, around the airport gates and perimeter. He said there were fewer people in and around the gates Friday.

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Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani, Darlene Superville and Nomaan Merchant contributed to this report.

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This story has been corrected to reflect that the name of the province where the drone strike took place is Nangarhar, not Nangahar

## **Biden in the 'loneliest job,' a presidency driven by crisis**

By CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's called the loneliest job in the world for a reason.

Surrounded by everything a superpower can offer and watched by all, President Joe Biden wore the weight of a lonely man as he came to grips in recent days with the deadly end of the American effort in Afghanistan and tried to keep the focus on what, to him, is the bottom line.

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"Ladies and gentlemen," he said as the death toll mounted in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, "it was time to end a 20-year war."

The need for crisis-driven leadership comes to all presidents. Now, on several fronts at once, it has come to him, and fast.

In the aftermath of the Kabul suicide bombing that killed 13 U.S. troops and more than 170 Afghans, U.S. military forces are racing to get fellow citizens, aligned Afghans and themselves out of the country by Biden's stated deadline of Tuesday.

Biden found himself in a real-time crisis that overrides the platitudes he offered when running for the office and in the early months of his presidency. "America is back," he likes to say. But in Afghanistan, after the longest war in U.S. history, America is conspicuously leaving.

The U.S. is leaving with the Taliban forces it long fought against back in control and with an affiliate of the Islamic State group — an organization declared vanquished by the last U.S. president — reasserting its virulence in the devastation at Kabul's airport.

Goodwill washed over Biden through his first six months or so, when he scored points with the public and much of the world simply by not being Donald Trump. The United States appeared on the verge of victory over the pandemic, too. Vaccine supplies surged, cases plunged in response and even Republicans gave Biden a measure of the credit.

Those days now seem like a distant memory. Criticism is raining down on him, with Republicans blaming him for the calamity in Kabul and even Democrats breaking from him for the first time on a major issue.

Asked whether Biden is feeling frustrated or a sense of resignation from the turmoil of the moment, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said "there's just not a lot of time for self-reflection right now."

To Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis, the bloody, harried scenes the world is witnessing from Kabul are not the fruit of poor evacuation planning or incompetence by the United States, but, simply, of defeat.

"It seems to me that we're watching something occur that was inevitable once we stepped in," he said. "There's no memory here. This is what happens when you lose a war."

Presidents are defined by how they handle crises, and Biden now confronts more than one, each requiring urgent attention.

While the drama in Kabul unfolds, the delta variant of the coronavirus threatens to undo much of the progress his administration had achieved in the first six months. On top of that, he has had to address deadly flooding in Tennessee, devastating wildfires in the West, a hurricane that grazed the East Coast and relief efforts for earthquake-stricken Haiti.

This past week, he was also dealt setbacks by the Supreme Court. First, justices ordered the reinstatement of a Trump-era policy that forced migrants seeking U.S. asylum to wait in Mexico, often in dire conditions.

Then, as pandemic-era housing aid sits bottlenecked in state and local governments, the court's conservative majority blocked the Biden administration from enforcing a temporary ban on evictions, leaving perhaps 3.5 million people at risk of losing their homes.

For now, Afghanistan overshadows everything. Biden declared "the buck stops with me" yet has alternately blamed Afghan forces and their government for caving to the Taliban, and Trump for negotiating a bad agreement for the U.S. exit.

It was Biden's choice, though, to execute the U.S. withdrawal called for in that agreement, even if a few months later, and he will be measured by the consequences of having done so. One of his central rationales for the presidency is being tested: that four decades of experience at the highest levels of government prepared him to handle the pressures of the office with seasoned competence.

Cal Jillson, a presidential historian at Southern Methodist University, said there was no good way to leave Afghanistan.

"You cannot stick the dismount," he said. "Unless you win, it is bound to be ugly. And we did not win."

He said that "while Trump actually arrived at a deeply flawed agreement with the Taliban, it was Biden who undertook to execute that plan, with minor revisions." Biden, he said, "along with the public, wanted

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out of Afghanistan, the sooner the better. Nobody likes the exit.”

Crises can forever stain the legacies of presidents, or they can pass.

President Bill Clinton in his first year endured the bloody tragedy of the battle of Mogadishu, Somalia, while President George W. Bush had the false predicate of weapons of mass destruction for starting a war with Iraq. President John F. Kennedy survived the embarrassment of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Trump survived himself.

At least one of those presidents was enough of a student of history to know that the loneliness of the office, spoken of by William Howard Taft as he left that office in 1913, would come with the territory.

“He is alone — at the top — in the loneliest job in the world,” Kennedy told a 1960 Democratic dinner before his election that fall.

“He cannot share this power, he cannot delegate it, he cannot adjourn. ... He alone must decide what areas we defend — not the Congress or the military or the CIA. And certainly not some beleaguered generalissimo on an island.”

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Associated Press writer Darlene Superville contributed to this report.

## **‘Today is it.’: Louisiana braces for menacing Hurricane Ida**

By REBECCA SANTANA and KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Weather forecasters warned residents along Louisiana’s coast to rush preparations Saturday in anticipation of an intensifying Hurricane Ida, which is expected to bring winds as high as 140 mph (225 kph) when it slams ashore on Sunday.

Authorities called a combination of voluntary and mandatory evacuations for cities and communities across the region. In New Orleans the mayor ordered a mandatory evacuation for areas outside the city’s levee system and a voluntary evacuation for residents inside the levee system. But since the storm quickly escalated in intensity, Mayor LaToya Cantrell said it was not possible to order a mandatory evacuation for the entire city, which would require using all lanes of some highways to leave the city.

Traffic was heavy on westbound routes out of town early Saturday and gas stations were busy.

The storm is expected to make landfall on the exact date Hurricane Katrina devastated a large swath of the Gulf Coast 16 years earlier. But whereas Katrina was a Category 3 when it made landfall southwest of New Orleans, Ida is expected to reach an extremely dangerous Category 4 hurricane, with top winds of 140 mph (225 kph) before making landfall likely west of New Orleans late Sunday.

“Today is it,” Jamie Rhome, acting deputy director of the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami, said Saturday. “If you’re in coastal Louisiana and Mississippi, you really, really have to get going because today is it in terms of protecting life and property.”

Ida intensified rapidly Friday from a tropical storm to a hurricane with top winds of 80 mph (128 kph) as it crossed western Cuba. It’s expected to pick up steam as it goes over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

On Saturday morning, Ida was centered 440 miles (710 kilometers) southeast of New Orleans. It was traveling northwest at 16 mph (26 kph), forecasters said. It’s maximum sustained winds had increased to 85 mph (140kph).

In New Orleans, city officials said residents need to be prepared for prolonged power outages, and asked elderly residents to consider evacuating. Collin Arnold, the city’s emergency management director, said the city could be under high winds for about ten hours. Earlier Friday, Cantrell called for a mandatory evacuation for residents outside the city’s levee protections — a relatively small sliver of the city’s population.

Ida would be the latest test of the New Orleans’ aging street drainage system. In a statement Friday, the city outlined steps it was taking to ensure that pumps were working and power sources to those pumps were ready. But, the amount of rain could be enough to overwhelm even a fully functional system.

“We want to be clear, that with the amount of rain now forecasted, approximately 10 inches over the course of the event, it is likely that we will experience flooding,” the city said in a late Friday statement.



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Some ordinarily bustling businesses were closed Saturday. One popular breakfast spot was locked up tight with sandbags against the door to guard against flash floods.

With the storm's forward speed slowing down and the intensity picking up, the storm surge may overtop some levees that protect parts of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River, said Heath Jones, emergency manager, of the Army Corps of Engineers' New Orleans District. However he said they are designed to be overtopped and have protections in place to prevent more damage. There does not appear to be any danger of storm surge coming over the levees that protect the city's east bank, which makes up most of the city, he said.

Across the region, residents were filling sandbags, getting gas for cars and generators and stocking up on food. Capt. Ross Eichorn, a fishing guide on the coast about 70 miles (112 kilometers) southwest of New Orleans, said he fears warm Gulf waters will "make a monster" out of Ida.

"With a direct hit, ain't no telling what's going to be left — if anything," Eichorn said. He added: "Anybody that isn't concerned has got something wrong with them."

A hurricane warning was issued for most of the Louisiana coast from Intracoastal City to the mouth of the Pearl River. A tropical storm warning was extended to the Mississippi-Alabama line.

At the same time hospitals are preparing for the storm, they are still dealing with a fourth surge of the coronavirus. Officials decided against evacuating New Orleans hospitals. There's little room for their patients elsewhere, with hospitals from Texas to Florida already packed with patients, said Dr. Jennifer Avengo, the city's health director.

At the state's largest hospital system, Ochsner Health System, officials ordered 10 days worth of fuel, food, drugs and other supplies and have backup fuel contracts for its generators. One positive was that the number of COVID-19 patients had dropped from 988 to 836 over the past week — a 15% decline.

President Joe Biden approved a federal emergency declaration for Louisiana ahead of the storm. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said FEMA plans to send nearly 150 medical personnel and almost 50 ambulances to the Gulf Coast to assist strained hospitals.

Ida made its first landfall Friday afternoon on Cuba's southern Isle of Youth. The Cuban government issued a hurricane warning for its westernmost provinces, where forecasters said as much as 20 inches (50 centimeters) of rain could fall in places, possibly unleashing deadly flash floods and mudslides. Landfall in the U.S. is expected late Sunday in the Mississippi River delta region.

If that forecast holds true, Ida would hit 16 years to the day that Hurricane Katrina made landfall with 125 mph (201 kph) winds near the riverside community of Buras.

Katrina is blamed for an estimated 1,800 deaths from the central Louisiana coast to around the Mississippi-Alabama state line. A massive storm surge scoured the shores and wiped houses off the map. In New Orleans, failures of federal levees led to catastrophic flooding. Water covered 80% of the city and many homes were swamped to the rooftops. Some victims drowned in their attics. The Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center became scenes of sweltering misery as tens of thousands were stranded without power or running water.

Additionally, the hurricane center said a new tropical depression formed early Saturday. It was centered 820 miles (1,320 kilometers) east-southeast of the Leeward Islands. It was expected to remain over the open Atlantic Ocean and posed no hazards to land.

## Final UK evacuation flight leaves Kabul; troops head home

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain ended evacuation flights from Kabul airport on Saturday and began bringing troops home, even as the U.K.'s top military officer acknowledged "we haven't been able to bring everybody out."

Britain's defense ministry said the final flight for Afghan citizens had left Kabul and further flights over the weekend will bring home British troops and diplomats, though they may also carry a few remaining U.K. or Afghan civilians.

Britain's ambassador to Afghanistan, Laurie Bristow, said from Kabul airport that it was "time to close

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this phase of the operation now.”

“But we haven’t forgotten the people who still need to leave,” Bristow said in a video posted on Twitter. “We’ll continue to do everything we can to help them. Nor have we forgotten the brave, decent people of Afghanistan. They deserve to live in peace and security.”

A Royal Air Force plane carrying U.K. diplomatic staff and soldiers landed at the RAF Brize Norton airbase northwest of London early Saturday morning. The troops from the 16 Air Assault Brigade were part of a contingent of 1,000 British soldiers who have been based in Kabul to help run the airlift.

Britain says it has evacuated more than 14,500 people from Kabul in the past two weeks but that as many as 1,100 Afghans who were entitled to come to the U.K. have been left behind. Some British lawmakers who have been trying to help stranded constituents and their families believe the true total is higher.

“We haven’t been able to bring everybody out, and that has been heartbreaking, and there have been some very challenging judgments that have had to be made on the ground,” the head of British armed forces, Gen. Nick Carter, told the BBC.

Foreign citizens from around the world and the Afghans who worked with them have sought to leave the country since the Taliban’s swift takeover this month after most U.S. forces departed. More than 100,000 people have been evacuated through Kabul airport, according to American officials.

The desperate, chaotic exodus turned deadly on Thursday, when a suicide bomber struck crowds gathered near the Kabul airport. The attack killed 169 Afghans, according to a preliminary count, and 13 American troops. Two British citizens and the child of another Briton also were among the people killed.

In London, Afghans came to the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association advice center, desperate for news of friends and relatives.

Saraj Deen Safi said he had been unable to make contact with relatives who were near Kabul airport since Thursday’s bomb attack. He said he hoped they would be able to reach a safe European country, but he felt “despaired” at the lack of news.

While the U.K. has evacuated thousands of former interpreters and others who worked with British forces, the advice program coordinator for the London association, Shabnam Nasimi, said she was “devastated” for many others.

“There are many others who indirectly supported our work there to bring about democracy and free speech and a much better society for Afghanistan,” Nasimi said. “And the fact we haven’t recognized that and now abandoned those people. And these include journalists and judges, for instance, who are directly going to be targeted by the Taliban.”

“The future of these individuals is very bleak,” she said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised Friday to “shift heaven and earth” to get more people from Afghanistan to Britain by other means, though no concrete details have been offered.

U.K. officials hope some people may be able to leave Afghanistan overland for neighboring countries, where their claims to come to the U.K. could be processed. That will depend on diplomatic coordination and cooperation — not least from the Taliban.

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Associated Press video journalist Jo Kearney contributed to this story.

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## Mask debate moves from school boards to courtrooms

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The rancorous debate over whether returning students should wear masks in the classroom has moved from school boards to courtrooms.

In at least 14 states, lawsuits have been filed either for or against masks in schools. In some cases, normally rule-enforcing school administrators are finding themselves fighting state leaders in the name of keeping kids safe.

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Legal experts say that while state laws normally trump local control, legal arguments from mask proponents have a good chance of coming out on top. But amid protests and even violence over masks around the United States, the court battle is just beginning.

Mask rules in public schools vary widely. Some states require them; others ban mandates. Many more leave it up to individual districts.

Big school districts that want to require masks are in court and battling governors in Florida, Texas and Arizona. Worried parents are suing over similar legislative bans on mandates in Utah, Iowa and South Carolina.

Suits fighting mask requirements have popped up in Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky and Montana.

At the heart of the debates are parents, scared or frustrated for their children in an unprecedented time. The early court record is mixed, with victories for mask proponents in Arkansas and Arizona followed by back-to-back decisions in two big states going opposite ways. The Texas Supreme Court blocked another school mask mandate Thursday while a Florida judge allowed the rules to go forward Friday.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending universal mask wearing in schools. Students age 12 and younger remain ineligible for COVID-19 vaccines.

Republican officials who restrict mask mandates argue there are downsides to kids being masked all day and that parents should decide whether to put them on children, who are generally far less vulnerable to the virus than are older adults.

But public health experts say masks are a key coronavirus-prevention tool that does not pose health risks for children older than toddler age, and truly effective when worn by a large number of people.

"This idea of parental freedom to decide what's best for their child is not unlimited. It has never been unlimited in our system," said Ellen Clayton, a pediatrician and law professor at Vanderbilt Law School in Nashville, Tennessee.

Nationwide, COVID-19 deaths are running at more than 1,100 a day, the highest level since mid-March. New cases per day are averaging over 152,000, turning the clock back to the end of January.

The surge is largely fueled by the highly contagious delta variant among people who are unvaccinated. In areas where vaccination rates are particularly low, doctors have pleaded with their communities to get inoculated to spare overburdened hospitals.

They have also sounded the alarm about the growing toll of the variant on children and young adults.

In Tennessee, for example, children now make up 36% of the state's reported COVID-19 cases. Gov. Bill Lee has not banned schools from requiring masks but has ordered that any parent can opt out — and remote education options are limited this year. Few schools in the state have adopted mask mandates.

South Carolina passed anti-mask regulations and is now facing a federal lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU argues that the state is putting students with disabilities at greater risk in violation of federal law amid skyrocketing infections, particularly among younger children.

Susan Mizner, director of the ACLU's Disability Rights Project, said offering students with disabilities or medical conditions a remote option is not a good alternative. Limiting medically fragile students and those with disabilities to a remote-only education denies them equal opportunity, she said.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act, public schools cannot exclude students with disabilities or segregate them unnecessarily from their peers. Schools are also required to provide reasonable modifications to allow students with disabilities to participate fully. Lawyers have filed for a temporary injunction requiring masks while the court case plays out.

"We understand people are tired," Mizner said. "We understand people are frustrated with the pandemic, we understand there is a lot going on here. We just want them to draw on their better selves to care about the kids in their communities who are most at risk and really need their help at protecting them."

Schools already have plenty of restrictions aimed at protecting kids' health. Rules against peanuts are a good example, said Ruth Colker, a law professor at Ohio State University and a disability-law expert.

Those rules are aimed at protecting kids with potentially fatal peanut allergies that can be triggered by particles in the air. Similarly, the argument goes, kids especially vulnerable to COVID-19 need everyone to



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wear masks so they don't get sick.

"They need the people around them not to be spreading the particles of peanuts," Colker said. "COVID is just like peanuts. In fact, is more contagious."

Because schools that accept federal money are subject to federal disability law, she sees those arguments as likely to win in court. While many court decisions generally apply to one school or state, that could change if the federal government enters the legal fray. President Joe Biden has ordered his education secretary to explore possible legal action against several states that have blocked school mask mandates and other educational public health measures.

Whatever happens in court, though, is unlikely to bridge the vast and contentious political divides over masks. A recent poll from The Associated Press and NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found about 6 in 10 Americans wanted students and teachers to be required to wear face masks while in school.

But that poll also found just 3 in 10 Republicans favor mask requirements, compared with about 8 in 10 Democrats.

The divide is playing out in Florida and Texas, where several big school districts are defying governors' executive order against school mask mandates.

In Texas, dozens of school districts have defied the Gov. Greg Abbott's mask mandate ban. But the state's highest court sided with the governor this past week as the Republican judges found the "status quo" of authority on masks should rest with him while the case plays out.

"The decision to enforce mask mandates lies with the governor's legislatively-granted authority," Attorney General Ken Paxton said Thursday. "Mask mandates across our state are illegal."

In Florida, more than half of public school students are now in mask-requiring districts, despite an executive order from Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis. He wants to leave such decisions up to parents, but on Friday a judge decided that schools need to be able to require masks to protect public health.

Executive orders such as the rule from DeSantis, though, are easier to get around legally, said Jonathan Turley, a legal scholar at Georgetown University. He expects suits to continue through fall and winter.

"It's only going to get more intense," he said. "All of these issues are coming to the forefront, we have new studies that are offering a more complex picture of the efficacy of vaccines, the viability of natural antibodies, the ability of the variant to evade the vaccinations, so all of that is going to create much more difficult content to render decisions."

In places such as Utah and Iowa, where legislatures have passed laws restrictions or bans on mask mandates, the state could have a legal upper hand because state laws generally trumps local control. Lawrence Gostin, professor of global health law at Georgetown and director of the World Health Organization Center on Global Health Law, said he considers restrictions on mask mandates "utterly irresponsible" and "a breach of public trust" but sees the legal landscape as hazy at best.

"There's going to be really fierce battles in the courtrooms across America," he said.

Whitehurst reported from Salt Lake City.

## Taliban largely seal off Kabul airport as airlift winds down

By SAYED ZIARMAL HASHEMI, RAHIM FAIEZ and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban deployed extra forces around Kabul's airport Saturday to prevent large crowds from gathering after a devastating suicide attack two days earlier, as the massive U.S.-led airlift wound down ahead of an Aug. 31 deadline.

New layers of checkpoints sprang up on roads leading to the airport, some manned by uniformed Taliban fighters with Humvees and night-vision goggles captured from Afghan security forces. Areas where large crowds of people have gathered over the past two weeks in hopes of fleeing the country following the Taliban takeover were largely empty.

A suicide attack on Thursday by an Islamic State affiliate killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, and there are concerns that the group, which is far more radical than the Taliban, could strike again.

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The U.S. military said it killed an IS militant early Saturday in a drone strike, after U.S. President Joe Biden had promised swift retaliation.

Many Western nations have already completed their evacuation operations ahead of Tuesday's deadline for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces.

An Afghan who had worked as a translator for the U.S. military said he was with a group of people with permission to leave who tried to reach the airport late Friday. After passing through three checkpoints they were stopped at a fourth. An argument ensued, and the Taliban said they had been told by the Americans to only let U.S. passport-holders through.

"I am so hopeless for my future," the man told The Associated Press after returning to Kabul, speaking on condition of anonymity because of security concerns. "If the evacuation is over, what will happen to us?"

On Saturday, the Taliban fired warning shots and deployed some kind of colored smoke on a road leading to the airport, sending dozens of people scattering, according to a video circulating online that was consistent with AP reporting.

More than 110,000 people have been safely evacuated through the Kabul airport since the Taliban takeover, according to the U.S., including around 6,800 in the last 24 hours. But thousands more are struggling to leave and may not make it out by Tuesday.

In Kabul itself, hundreds of protesters, including many civil servants, gathered outside a bank while countless more lined up at cash machines. The protesters said they had not been paid for the past three to six months and were unable to withdraw cash. ATM machines are still operating, but withdrawals are limited to around \$200 every 24 hours.

Later Saturday, the central bank ordered commercial bank branches to open and dispense up to \$200 a day to customers, calling it a temporary measure.

The economic crisis, which predates the Taliban takeover earlier this month, could give Western nations leverage as they urge Afghanistan's new rulers to form a moderate, inclusive government and allow people to leave after Tuesday.

Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international aid, which covered around 75% of the toppled Western-backed government's budget. The Taliban have said they want good relations with the international community and have promised a more moderate form of Islamic rule than when they last governed the country, but many Afghans are deeply skeptical.

The Taliban cannot access almost any of the central bank's \$9 billion in reserves, most of which is held by the New York Federal Reserve. The International Monetary Fund has also suspended the transfer of some \$450 million. Without a regular supply of U.S. dollars, the local currency is at risk of collapse, which could send the price of basic goods soaring.

A U.N. agency meanwhile warned that a worsening drought threatens the livelihoods of more than 7 million people. The Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization said Afghans are also suffering from the coronavirus pandemic and displacement from the recent fighting.

Earlier this month, the U.N. World Food Program estimated that some 14 million people — roughly one out of every three Afghans — urgently need food assistance.

The FAO said that crucial help is needed ahead of the winter wheat planting season, which begins in a month in many areas. So far, funding would cover assistance to only 110,000 families of farmers, while some 1.5 million need help, the agency said, adding that the current harvest is expected to be 20% below last year's.

Biden has said he will adhere to a self-imposed Aug. 31 deadline for withdrawing all U.S. forces. The Taliban, who control nearly the entire country outside Kabul's airport, have rejected any extension.

Italy said its final evacuation flight had landed in Rome but that it would work with the United Nations and countries bordering Afghanistan to continue helping Afghans who had worked with its military contingent to leave the country.

"Our imperative must be to not abandon the Afghan people," especially women and children, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said Saturday. He said 4,890 Afghans were evacuated by Italy's air force on 87 flights, but did not say how many others were still eligible.

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Britain's Defense Ministry said the final U.K. evacuation flight for Afghan nationals left Kabul. Further flights over the weekend will bring home British troops and diplomats, though they may also carry some remaining U.K. or Afghan civilians.

The Taliban have encouraged Afghans to stay in the country, pledging amnesty even to those who fought against them. They have said commercial flights will resume after the U.S. withdrawal, but it's unclear if airlines will be willing to offer service.

The U.S. and its allies have said they will continue providing humanitarian aid through the U.N. and other partners, but any broader engagement — including development assistance — is likely to hinge on whether the Taliban deliver on their promises of more moderate rule.

When the Taliban last governed Afghanistan, from 1996 until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, they imposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Women were largely confined to their homes, television and music were banned, and suspected criminals were maimed or executed in public.

This time, the Taliban say women will be allowed to attend school and work outside the home. They have been negotiating with senior Afghan officials from previous governments and say they want an "inclusive, Islamic government."

But even as the group's top leadership has struck a more moderate tone, there have been reports of human rights abuses in areas under Taliban control. It's unclear whether fighters are acting under orders or on their own.

Taliban fighters beat up a cameraman for the private broadcaster Tolo TV earlier this week in Kabul. Saad Mohseni, the CEO of the group that owns the channel, said the Taliban have been in touch with the station's management about the incident. He said the fighter has been identified, but it's unclear if he has faced any disciplinary action. There was no comment from the Taliban.

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Faiez reported from Istanbul and Krauss from Jerusalem. Associated Press writers Frances D'Emilio in Rome and Kathy Gannon in Islamabad contributed.

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

## The Latest: Final UK evacuation flight for Afghans departs

By The Associated Press undefined

LONDON — Britain's defense ministry says the final U.K. evacuation flight for Afghan nationals has left Kabul, as the country's ambassador announced that it's "time to close this phase of the operation."

The U.K. military says further flights over the weekend will bring home British troops and diplomats, though they may also carry some remaining U.K. or Afghan civilians.

Britain's ambassador to Afghanistan, Laurie Bristow, said from Kabul airport it was "time to close this phase of the operation now."

"But we haven't forgotten the people who still need to leave," he said in a video posted on Twitter. "We'll continue to do everything we can to help them. Nor have we forgotten the brave, decent people of Afghanistan. They deserve to live in peace and security."

MORE ON AFGHANISTAN:

- Afghanistan's economic crisis deepens as airlift winds down
- GOP rift widens amid growing hostility to Afghan refugees
- Taliban success in Afghanistan seen as boost for extremists
- Explainer: How dangerous is Afghanistan's Islamic State?

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HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban have deployed extra forces around Kabul's airport to prevent large



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crowds from gathering after a deadly suicide attack two days earlier.

The massive U.S.-led airlift is winding down ahead of an Aug. 31 deadline, with many allies having completed their own operations.

The Taliban on Saturday set up new layers of checkpoints on roads leading to the airport, some manned by uniformed fighters with Humvees and night-vision goggles captured from Afghan security forces.

Areas where large crowds have massed for the past two weeks were largely empty. A suicide attack Thursday by an Islamic State affiliate killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, and there are concerns that the group could strike again.

**KABUL, Afghanistan** — Hundreds of Afghans have protested outside a bank in Kabul as others form long lines at cash machines.

The protesters Saturday at New Kabul Bank included many civil servants demanding their salaries, which they said had not been paid for the past three to six months.

They said even though banks reopened three days ago no one has been able to withdraw cash. ATM machines are still operating, but withdrawals are limited to around \$200 every 24 hours, contributing to the formation of long lines.

Meanwhile, a U.N. agency warned that a worsening drought could leave millions in need of humanitarian aid.

The economic crisis could give Western nations leverage as they urge Afghanistan's new rulers to form an inclusive government and allow people to leave after the planned withdrawal of all U.S. forces on Aug. 31.

**ROME** — A NATO diplomat who helped coordinate evacuations at Kabul airport says the organization will try its best to get those who were left behind to safety.

Stefano Pontecorvo spoke to reporters at Rome's main airport Saturday morning shortly after disembarking from an Italian Air Force plane that carried out Italy's final evacuation of Afghan civilians.

"We crossed the line between possible and impossible to get in (to the airport) everybody we could, keep the airport running, to coordinate whatever" was doable given the situation, said Pontecorvo, who is NATO's senior civilian representative to Afghanistan.

But Pontecorvo said he was "unsatisfied because we left a few behind, which we are not abandoning, but we will strive our best" to get them to safety.

Referring to Thursday's Islamic State attack outside the airport perimeter, Pontecorvo also praised "the generosity of the servicemen, who under threat, went to the gate and pulled family after family" inside the facility.

He referred to the 13 members of the U.S. military whose lives were lost, saying "even having lost in that way 12 brothers and one sister, in a couple of hours (the U.S. military) had the airport and everything else back running so we could get people out."

**TEHRAN, Iran** — Iran's supreme leader has called the situation in Afghanistan a tragedy and blamed the U.S. for the problems there.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in his first official meeting with new president Ebrahim Raisi's Cabinet on Saturday said "the tragedies in Afghanistan are deeply affecting human beings (and were) made by America."

"The hardships they are suffering, the incidents that are happening, Thursday's incident, such killings, all by America," he said.

At the Kabul airport, thousands are still gathering in hope of fleeing the country after the Taliban takeover, even after a suicide attack Thursday killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members and amid warnings of more attacks. A massive U.S.-led airlift is winding down

Khamenei said Americans "occupied" Afghanistan for 20 years.

**LONDON** — Britain is starting to bring its troops home from Afghanistan as the country's evacuation

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operation at Kabul airport ends.

A Royal Air Force plane carrying soldiers landed at the RAF Brize Norton air base northwest of London on Saturday morning. The troops are part of a contingent of 1,000 that has been based in Kabul to help run the airlift.

Flights bringing U.K. citizens and Afghans have largely ended, though the head of the armed forces, Gen. Nick Carter, said there would be a "very few" more on Saturday.

Britain says it has evacuated more than 14,500 people from Kabul in the past two weeks, but that as many as 1,000 Afghans entitled to come to the U.K. have been left behind.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised Friday to "shift heaven and earth" to get more people from Afghanistan to Britain by other means, though no concrete details have been offered.

ROME — Italy's final evacuation flight of refugees from Afghanistan has landed at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport.

The Italian Air Force C-130J with 58 Afghan citizens aboard arrived Saturday morning, some 17 hours after it departed from the Kabul airport and after a planned stopover.

Also aboard were Italy's consul and a NATO diplomat who had coordinated evacuations at the Kabul airport.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said Italy was prepared to work with the United Nations and with countries bordering Afghanistan on what he described as the "more difficult phase."

He said that consisted of efforts to evacuate other Afghan citizens who worked with Italy's military during its 20-year presence in Afghanistan but weren't able to get into Kabul airport in time for the evacuation flights. He didn't say how many still were eligible for evacuation to Italy.

Rescuing those citizens "would give them the same possibility" of starting a new life outside their homeland, Di Maio said in a brief statement at Rome's airport. He said the 4,890 Afghans evacuated by Italy's air force in 87 flights was the highest number of any European Union nation.

Italy's remaining soldiers left on a separate flight from Kabul on Friday night. That air force flight went to Kuwait and the troops are due back in Italy early next week.

ROME — A U.N. agency is warning that worsening drought in Afghanistan threatens the livelihoods of more than 7 million people.

The Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on Saturday issued an appeal for humanitarian assistance. Adding to the plight of what the agency termed "severe drought" are the economic impact of COVID-19 and widespread internal displacement of Afghans amid enduring conflict.

Earlier this month, the U.N. World Food Program, another Rome-based agency, estimated that some 14 million people — roughly one out of every three Afghans — urgently need food assistance.

The FAO said crucial help is needed ahead of the winter wheat planting season, which begins in a month in many areas.

FAO's representative in Afghanistan, Richard Trenchard, said in a statement that "disaster looms" if sufficient help doesn't materialize for the next winter wheat season.

WASHINGTON — The United States military struck back at the Islamic State on Saturday, bombing an IS member in Afghanistan less than 48 hours after a devastating suicide bombing claimed by the group killed as many as 169 Afghans and 13 American service members at the Kabul airport.

U.S. Central Command said the U.S. conducted a drone strike against an Islamic State member in Nangarhar believed to be involved in planning attacks against the U.S. in Kabul. The strike killed one individual, and spokesman Navy Capt. William Urban said they knew of no civilian casualties.

It wasn't clear if that individual was involved specifically in the Thursday suicide blast outside the gates of the Kabul airport, where crowds of Afghans were desperately trying to get in as part of the ongoing evacuation from the country after the Taliban's rapid takeover.

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The airstrike fulfilled a vow President Joe Biden made to the nation Thursday when he said the perpetrators of the attack would not be able to hide. "We will hunt you down and make you pay," he said. Pentagon leaders told reporters Friday that they were prepared for whatever retaliatory action the president ordered. "We have options there right now," said Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor of the Pentagon's Joint Staff.

## Hurricane Nora forms; on track to skirt along Mexico's coast

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Hurricane Nora formed early Saturday in the eastern Pacific on a forecast track that would bring it near the Puerto Vallarta area and then head toward a close encounter with resorts at the tip of Baja California Peninsula.

Nora had maximum sustained winds of 75 mph (120 kph) Saturday morning, with tropical storm force winds extending out 205 miles (335 kilometers) from the center in some places.

The storm's large wind field and heavy rains mean much of Mexico's central and northern Pacific Coast is likely to see floods, mudslides and perilous surf even if it misses the very heart of the hurricane.

The weakened remnants may even bring rains later next week to the U.S. Southwest, the Great Basin and Central Rockies, forecasters said.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center forecast track showed Nora skirting close to the bay sheltering Puerto Vallarta by Sunday morning and then shooting straight up the narrow Gulf of California a day later, passing very close to the Los Cabos resorts. Also near that track is the resort of Mazatlan.

Nora was expected to start weakening as it blows further north toward the Arizona border region.

It was centered about 230 miles (370 kilometers) south of Cabo Corrientes, the point jutting into the Pacific south of Puerto Vallarta, and it was heading to the north-northwest at 10 mph (17 kph).

The Hurricane Center said the Mexican states of Guerrero, Michoacan, Colima and Jalisco could see rainfall totals 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30 centimeters) with isolated maximums still higher.

Baja California Sur state could see 4 to 8 inches of rain, with more in isolated spots.

## Palestinian child dies week after being shot at Gaza border

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — A 12-year-old Palestinian boy who was shot in the head by Israeli fire during a violent demonstration at the Gaza-Israeli border last week died of his wounds Saturday, Gaza health officials said.

Hassan Abu al-Neil was shot Aug. 21 during the demonstration organized by Gaza's Hamas rulers to protest the crippling blockade imposed by Egypt and Israel.

Violence erupted when Palestinian protesters began throwing rocks and explosives at Israeli troops near the fortified border. Israeli troops responded by opening fire, wounding over 40 Palestinians, including al-Neil.

Another Palestinian man, later identified as a member of Hamas' military wing, died from his wounds Wednesday.

An Israeli soldier remains in critical condition after being shot in the head from point blank range by a protestor during the clashes.

Hundreds of Palestinian protesters demonstrated Wednesday near the Gaza-Israeli border, again calling for the easing of the blockade. Under pressure from Egyptian mediators, Hamas kept demonstrators away from the separation fence and the protests ended without a recurrence of last week's deadly violence.

Following Wednesday's protest, Israel said it was easing some of the commercial restrictions on Gaza, allowing vehicles, goods and equipment for rebuilding projects to enter the Palestinian enclave. Israel's Defense Ministry said the easing could expand further if things remain quiet.

Egypt, which had closed its border crossing with Gaza to put pressure on Hamas, also partially reopened the crossing to allow a light flow of traffic to enter Gaza from Egypt.

The Israeli government reached an agreement with Qatar on Aug. 19 allowing the gulf country to resume aid payments to families in the Gaza Strip, a move aimed at reducing tensions with Hamas in the after-



math of May's 11-day war, the fourth since the militant group seized power in 2007. Israel suspended aid payments in May and said the move was necessary to ensure Hamas did not benefit from cash injections.

At least 260 Palestinians were killed during May's Gaza-Israel war, including 67 children and 39 women, according to the Gaza health ministry. Hamas has acknowledged the deaths of 80 militants. Twelve civilians, including two children, were killed in Israel, along with one soldier.

## Evacuee: World has 'abandoned' Afghanistan's new generation

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Until last week, Shabeer Ahmadi was busy covering the news in Afghanistan. But after a hasty and excruciating decision to leave his Taliban-controlled country for an uncertain future in Spain, he's helplessly glued to news feeds on his cellphone, following every twist in the dramatic end of the evacuation of Afghans from Kabul.

The 29-year-old journalist and nine close relatives managed to board one of the evacuation planes and are now going through the lengthy asylum process while starting a new life in a northern Spanish city. But the future of thousands of Afghans who have not been able to escape, including members of his own family, is now the focus of his fears, Ahmadi said.

"There is a feeling of desperation in Afghanistan," he said. "Imagine if you had made a building for 20 years now, that building is getting destroyed and you cannot go out from that building. It feels very bad. Our education, our hopes for ourselves, for our children, for our future, for our country is all destroyed."

Tolo News, the private Afghan outlet where Ahmadi worked as deputy head of news, has been a target of the Taliban. But it was not only him who felt under threat in his immediate circle: Ahmadi's mother is an attorney. His father, a former journalist. And his brother, an engineer, worked on hydropower generation, a crucial infrastructure for the operation of the conflict-worn country.

Earlier this month, as the Taliban's siege closed on Kabul, the family started applying for emergency visas to several countries. Spain was the first to react, thanks to the mediation of a Spanish journalist whom Ahmadi had befriended in Kabul.

Ahmad and his relatives spent a challenging day amid the crowds piling up outside Kabul's airport — and another one inside, sleeping among hundreds on the ground — before the 10 were cleared to go, despite some of them lacking passports.

"When I boarded the plane, I was thinking that finally, thank God I'm safe. But what happens to other people who remain in Afghanistan?" he wondered, speaking via video conference from Huesca, where the group was relocated on Thursday, one day after landing in Madrid.

"There are people calling me saying that there's no salary by the government or by the Taliban now. And banks are closed and they cannot afford their families' evacuation," the journalist said.

He explained that as foreign troops are pulling out of the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, many of his acquaintances are looking for alternatives to leave Afghanistan via Iran and Pakistan.

The former correspondent thinks that the future of Afghanistan is bleak. He blames, largely, the U.S. administration of Joe Biden for pressing ahead with the decision to pull out.

"Because it couldn't negotiate a good deal with the Taliban, the U.S. handed over us to the Taliban, to a group that has ties to so many terrorist groups around the world," he said. "They abandoned the new generation of Afghanistan."

He fears that "a very bloody war" will break out between the Taliban and ISIS in the coming months and years, drawing foreign extremist fighters and leaving millions of innocent lives caught in the conflict.

That's why leaving Afghanistan, he said, "hurts every moment." But he couldn't work for the future of his country while his life was at stake, he added. And yet, if things calm down to a degree, if a government is formed that guarantees certain conditions even while the Taliban remain in control, he's pondering returning home.

"I always tell my friends that any strong country is strong because of the people who work for it, so we cannot leave our country forever," Ahmadi said.

"We are a generation that has not seen any single day without war in Afghanistan, but if you want our future generations to see such a day, we have to work for our country."

## Paralympic coverage airs on NBC for the first time on Sunday

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

NBC's Olympics coverage has long been built on a foundation of human-interest stories and showcasing athletes' road to the Games. The same philosophies will apply to the coverage of Paralympics, which will air on the network for the first time.

Sunday will mark the first time that Paralympics coverage will air on the main NBC network and is part of 1,200 hours of programming airing across NBC, NBCSN, Olympic Channel and digital properties. The Paralympics began in Tokyo on Aug. 24 and continues through Sept. 5.

NBC will have three weekend docu-follow series episodes which will show the stories and performances of athletes competing in Tokyo. Sunday's episode, which will air at 7 p.m. EDT, will feature U.S. team flag-bearers Melissa Stockwell (triathlon) and Chuck Aoki (wheelchair rugby), along with swimmer Jessica Long.

NBC's Mark Levy, the SVP of Original Production and Creative, said the one-year delay of the Games due to coronavirus allowed them to be able to dive deeper into athletes' back stories.

"We really want our viewers to feel connected to the Paralympians. We want to give them a chance to care and cheer for them," Levy said. "It's our opportunity through the primetime shows to reach a lot of people and share these back stories."

Long — who entered Tokyo with 23 career medals, including 13 gold — has had part of her story shown on Toyota ads that premiered earlier this year during the Super Bowl. Sunday, though, will allow viewers to see her visit to Russia for the first time in 2013 and meeting her birth mother for the first time.

Long was born with fibular hemimelia, a genetic abnormality which caused her lower legs to not develop properly. She was given up for adoption and was adopted at 13 months old. Her lower legs were amputated five months later.

Future episodes will show Long in competition, as well as how her Toyota ad has inspired people.

Stockwell is the first female American soldier to lose a limb in active combat when a roadside bomb exploded while she was leading a convoy in Iraq. She was also the first Iraq War veteran who qualified for the Paralympics in 2008.

Aoki and the wheelchair rugby team are looking to win gold after a tough loss to Australia in Rio in 2016.

The shows will also show swimmer Abbas Karimi, who is part of the six-member Paralympic Refugee Team. "To be able to showcase all these athletes with disabilities and the opportunity to create a dialogue, we're hoping that people's perceptions might change," Levy said. "That's really compelling for us and a real important reason why we're sharing these stories."

Levy is also hoping that people who watch Sunday will possibly tune in at some point to the 12 hours of daily coverage that is on NBCSN. NBC's other Paralympic docu-follow series will air on Sept. 4 and 5.

More AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## EXPLAINER: Is New Orleans protected from a hurricane?

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

New Orleans finds itself in the path of Hurricane Ida 16 years to the day after floodwalls collapsed and levees were overtopped by a storm surge driven by Hurricane Katrina. That flooding killed more than 1,000 people and caused billions in damage. But Ida arrives at the doorstep of a region transformed since 2005 by a giant civil works project and closer attention to flood control.

The system already has been tested by multiple storms, including 2012's Isaac, with little damage to the areas it protects. Every storm raises questions about New Orleans' defenses, though, and as Ida approaches, here are some answers:

WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE KATRINA?

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The federal government spent \$14.5 billion on levees, pumps, seawalls, floodgates and drainage that provides enhanced protection from storm surge and flooding in New Orleans and surrounding suburbs south of Lake Pontchartrain. With the exception of three drainage projects, that work is complete.

"The post-Katrina system is so different than what was in place before," said U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesperson Matt Roe.

Starting with a giant surge barrier east of the city, the system is a 130-mile (210-kilometer) ring built to hold out storm surge of about 30 feet (9 meters). The National Hurricane Center on Friday projected Ida would bring a surge of 10 feet to 15 feet (3 to 4.6 meters) on the west bank.

At that level, it could come over the levees in some areas, said emergency manager Heath Jones of the Army Corps of Engineers' New Orleans District.

"They're designed to overtop in places" with protections against worse damage, including armoring, splash pads and pumps with backup generators, he said.

"We've built all that since Katrina," and they're designed for a worse storm than the Ida is expected to be, he said.

Jones said there does not appear to be any danger of storm surge coming over the levees on the east bank, which makes up most of the city. It was the east bank levees that broke after Katrina.

Governments as of Friday were not ordering people protected by the levees to evacuate, showing their confidence in the system.

A number of floodgates are being closed as the storm approaches. That includes massive gates that ships can normally sail through, such as ones that close off the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal near the Lower 9th Ward. That has reduced the risk of flooding in an area long viewed as among the city's most exposed. At least one smaller floodgate on land has been removed for maintenance, though, with officials planning to close the gap with sandbags.

## WHAT ABOUT RAINFALL FLOODING?

Inside the ring of levees, rainfall must be pumped out. The New Orleans area has an elaborate system of canals and pumps to remove water, but it can be overwhelmed by persistent heavy rainfall, like in 2017 and 2019, when two storms each dumped more than 9 inches (23 centimeters) of rain in some areas. Heavy downpours have been a constant on the soggy Gulf Coast, but some exceptional rainstorms have been observed in recent years, with experts saying such torrents are becoming more common as a warming atmosphere carries more water vapor.

Capacity in some areas has been improved since 2005 through more than \$2 billion in drainage work, allowing parts of the system to remove as much as 4.7 inches (120 millimeters) of rain in three hours — what designers accounted as a rainstorm that would come only once every 10 years.

The city of New Orleans drainage system has 24 pumping stations with a combined capacity of over 50,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), which is nearly 400,000 gallons (1.5 million liters) per second. That doesn't include pumps in neighboring suburbs.

But some of the pumps as well as the power system supplying them in the city are antiques plagued with reliability problems. On Friday, officials were trying to bring an electrical turbine back online to provide reserve power for the system. Three of 99 pumps were also out of commission, but New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board Executive Director Ghassan Korban said there's enough redundancy to back them up.

One of the lessons of the 2017 and 2019 storms has been that maintenance of drains, pipes and canals has been neglected. Officials urged residents Friday to sweep up around storm drains, underlining a concern that even the best pumps won't work if drains are clogged.

"Our mission is obviously to stay ahead of the storm, stay ahead of the rain and keep the city dry," Korban told reporters Friday. "But at one point, once our system is overrun, our mission shifts from keeping the city dry to just pumping the city as fast as we can."

## WILL THE LEVEES HOLD UP OVER THE LONG RUN?

Experts note that the levee system was built to protect against a 100-year level of storm surge — a surge that has a 1% chance of happening any given year. With rising seas from climate change and the sinking of Louisiana's spongy coast, there's concern that simply isn't enough.



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Reports issued in 2021 recommend spending a projected \$1.7 billion to raise levees and floodwalls to keep providing the 100-year protection through 2078. That includes raising the height of 99 miles (159 kilometers) of levees, replacing more than 1 mile (1.6 kilometers) of floodwall and building 3.2 miles (5.15 kilometers) of new floodwall.

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS IN OUTLYING AREAS?

Areas outside the urban core that the levee system protects may have little or no protection against storm surge. Hurricane Isaac in 2012 flooded about 7,000 homes in LaPlace and other areas upriver from New Orleans after 8 feet (2.5 meters) of storm surge entered Lake Pontchartrain. The Corps of Engineers has started construction on a levee to protect that area, but Corps of Engineers spokesperson Rene Poche said it's not projected to be completed until 2024.

A number of local governments have ordered people to evacuate from low-lying and exposed areas outside of protective levees, including parts of New Orleans.

Suburbs north of Lake Pontchartrain are also not protected by levees or floodgates, although improvements for St. Tammany Parish are being studied. Areas close to the shore, as well as the rivers that feed into the lake and the Mississippi Sound, are vulnerable to storm surge.

## **GOP rift widens amid growing hostility to Afghan refugees**

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the U.S. rushes to evacuate Americans and allies from the chaos of Afghanistan, a growing number of Republicans are questioning why the U.S. should take in Afghan citizens who worked side by side with Americans, further exacerbating divides within the party heading into next year's midterm elections.

Little more than a week ago, as the Taliban's stunning takeover of Afghanistan still was snapping into focus, former President Donald Trump issued a statement saying "civilians and others who have been good to our Country ... should be allowed to seek refuge." But in more recent days, he has turned to warning of the alleged dangers posed by those desperately trying to flee their country before an end-of-month deadline.

"How many terrorists will Joe Biden bring to America?" he asked.

As Republicans level blistering criticism at Biden during his first major foreign policy crisis, some are turning to the nativist, anti-immigrant rhetoric perfected by Trump during his four years in office. It's causing dismay among others in the party who think the U.S. should look out for those who helped the Americans over the last two decades.

"I think these false narratives that these are a bunch of terrorists are just — they're completely baseless in reality," said Olivia Troye, a former White House homeland security adviser who currently serves as director of the Republican Accountability Project. "There's no basis for this at all in terms of the intelligence and national security world."

Neil Newhouse, a veteran Republican pollster, said the rhetoric reflects "a general, overall increase" in concern in the country over the risk of terrorist threats after Afghanistan's fall to the Taliban — not just in the short term from those who may not have been properly vetted, but a year or two down the road.

"There's just a sense that we are less safe as a country as a result of this," he said.

The Biden administration has stressed that every person cleared to come to the U.S. is being thoroughly vetted by officials working around the clock. But the refugees have become an emerging flash point, with Trump and his followers loudly demanding that Americans be prioritized for evacuation and warning of the potential dangers posed by Afghans being rescued in one of the world's largest-ever civilian airlift operations.

That talk intensified Thursday after a suicide bombing ripped through the crowd at the Kabul airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and well over 150 Afghans.

"How many American military personnel have to die to evacuate unvetted refugees?" tweeted Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont. "Get American citizens out and bring our troops home."

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, on Friday toured the Doña Ana Range complex at Fort Bliss, where many refu-

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gees will be housed, and later tweeted the U.S. "should rescue Afghans who've assisted the US military, but they should go to a neutral & safe third country."

"They should NOT come to US w/o a FULL security vetting," he said.

That followed a call Wednesday by Kentucky Rep. James Comer, the top Republican on the House Oversight and Reform committee, for the administration to brief lawmakers on their efforts to vet Afghan refugees and prevent terrorists from entering the country.

"In the chaotic situation left in the wake of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, we are particularly concerned that terrorists and others who wish to harm the United States may seek to infiltrate the country disguised as those who provided assistance to coalition forces in Afghanistan," he wrote in letters to the secretaries of state and homeland security.

Still others, including Republican governors and members of Congress, have taken a different stance, welcoming refugees to their states and working furiously to help those trying to flee. On Capitol Hill, the effort to help Afghan friends and family of constituents is the rare undertaking that is consuming legislative offices of members of both parties.

The U.S. has evacuated more than 100,000 people from Afghanistan since the airlift began Aug. 14, including more than 5,100 American citizens. While the administration's explicitly stated priority is to evacuate Americans, the numbers reflect the demographics of those trying to flee.

U.S. officials believe about 500 American citizens who want to leave Afghanistan remain in the country; others are believed to want to stay. And many of the Afghans, including those who served as American interpreters and fixers and in other support capacities, are desperate to escape, fearing they will be prime targets for retribution by the Taliban once the U.S. leaves.

But that hasn't stopped Republicans from accusing the Biden administration of failing to put Americans first.

"We're actually prioritizing Afghan refugees more than we're prioritizing our own citizens," said Republican J.D. Vance, who is running for Senate in Ohio and has made repeat television appearances blasting the administration's approach.

On Fox Business Network, he claimed, without evidence, that the U.S. has "no knowledge" of 90% of the people being evacuated and said some have shown up on wide-ranging terror databases.

"They put Americans last in every single way, but Americans pay for it all," echoed Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., who has shot to prominence with incendiary statements.

Trump and his former policy adviser Stephen Miller, along with conservative commentators like Tucker Carlson, have taken things even further, using the same anti-immigrant language that was the hallmark of Trump's 2015 speech announcing his candidacy for the Republican nomination.

"You can be sure the Taliban, who are now in complete control, didn't allow the best and brightest to board these evacuation flights," Trump said. "Instead, we can only imagine how many thousands of terrorists have been airlifted out of Afghanistan and into neighborhoods around the world."

Carlson has warned about Afghans invading America.

The rhetoric underscores the transformation of a party once led by neoconservatives who championed interventionist nation-building policies and invaded Afghanistan — followed by Iraq — nearly 20 years ago.

But not Republicans all are on board.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., whose office has been working around the clock to rescue the "countless" Afghans he says deserve evacuation, chastised those in his party invoking "terrorist" rhetoric.

"I would say that they need to do their homework," he said. "When you talk to the people that we've spoken with, when you look at their service record ... when you recognize that they sleep in the same tents, they carry arms together, they've been in live firefights, how dare anyone question whether or not they deserve to come to this country or to a safe third country?"

"We're not talking about just walking down the street and picking and choosing people," Tillis added. "We know these people. We know who their children are. We know what their service record was. And quite honestly, somebody taking that position, each and every time they do, is insulting a service member

who considers these people like brothers and sisters.”

Many of the Afghans seeking to come to the U.S. are doing so under the Special Immigrant Visa program designed specifically for individuals who worked with U.S. forces. Adam Bates, policy counsel at the International Refugee Assistance Project, said that, due to their work, those individuals were extensively vetted by U.S. authorities before applying to the program — and are again extensively vetted “by a wide array of federal agencies” before the visas are granted.

Troye, who has spent significant time on the ground in Afghanistan over the years, said Americans became extremely close to the Afghans with whom they served.

“These people became like family to many of us,” she said. “It’s really shameful to see some of these Republicans speaking in this way about people who really risked their lives to help us, who were really our allies on the ground.”

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Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

## **Board says RFK assassin Sirhan changed man; grants parole**

By JULIE WATSON and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — For 15 years, Robert F. Kennedy’s assassin was denied parole by a California parole board that maintained Sirhan Sirhan did not show adequate remorse or understand the enormity of his crime that rocked the nation and the world in 1968.

But on Friday, the two-person panel said he appeared to be a different man, even from his last hearing in 2016, and granted the 77-year-old prisoner parole. Two of RFK’s sons, going against several of their siblings’ wishes, said they also supported releasing him and prosecutors declined to argue he should be kept behind bars. But the governor ultimately will decide if he leaves prison.

The board found Sirhan no longer poses a threat to society, noting that he had enrolled in more than 20 programs including anger management classes, Tai Chi and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, even during the coronavirus pandemic.

“We think that you have grown,” Parole Board Commissioner Robert Barton said.

Douglas Kennedy was a toddler when his father was gunned down in 1968. He told a two-person board panel that he was moved to tears by Sirhan’s remorse and that Sirhan should be released if he’s not a threat to others.

“I’m overwhelmed just by being able to view Mr. Sirhan face to face,” he said. “I’ve lived my life both in fear of him and his name in one way or another. And I am grateful today to see him as a human being worthy of compassion and love.”

Six of Kennedy’s nine surviving children, however, said they were shocked by the vote. They urged Gov. Gavin Newsom, who is facing a recall election in California, to reverse the parole board’s decision and keep Sirhan behind bars.

“He took our father from our family and he took him from America,” the six siblings wrote in a statement late Friday. “We are in disbelief that this man would be recommended for release.

The statement was signed by Joseph P. Kennedy II, Courtney Kennedy, Kerry Kennedy, Christopher G. Kennedy, Maxwell T. Kennedy and Rory Kennedy.

But another sibling, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has spoken in favor of his release in the past and wrote in favor of paroling Sirhan. He said in the letter that he met him in prison and was moved by Sirhan, “who wept, clinching my hands, and asked for forgiveness.

“While nobody can speak definitively on behalf of my father, I firmly believe that based on his own consuming commitment to fairness and justice, that he would strongly encourage this board to release Mr. Sirhan because of Sirhan’s impressive record of rehabilitation,” he said in a letter submitted during the hearing to the board.

Sirhan, whose hair is white, smiled, thanked the board and gave a thumbs-up after the decision to grant parole was announced. It was a major victory in his 16th attempt at parole after he’s served 53 years. But



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it does not assure his release.

The ruling will be reviewed over the next 120 days by the board's staff. Then it will be sent to the governor, who will have 30 days to decide whether to grant it, reverse it or modify it. If Sirhan is freed, he must live in a transitional home for six months, enroll in an alcohol abuse program and get therapy.

Robert F. Kennedy was a U.S. senator from New York and the brother of President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1963. RFK was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination when he was gunned down at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles moments after delivering a victory speech in the pivotal California primary. Five others were wounded.

Sirhan, who insists he doesn't remember the shooting and had been drinking alcohol just beforehand, was convicted of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to death after his conviction, but that sentence was commuted to life when the California Supreme Court briefly outlawed capital punishment in 1972.

Some of Kennedy's children and others have called for a reinvestigation of the killing, believing there was a second shooter who got away.

While on Friday, Sirhan again said he didn't recall the killing, he made multiple attempts to show nonetheless he takes responsibility for the harm he caused.

"Sen. Kennedy was the hope of the world ... and I harmed all of them and it pains me to experience that, the knowledge for such a horrible deed, if I did in fact do that," said Sirhan, appearing on camera from a San Diego County prison at the virtual proceeding, wearing his blue prison uniform, a paper towel folded as a handkerchief peeking from his shirt pocket.

Barton said that was progress.

"We saw the improvement that you've made, and all of the other mitigating factors, and we did not find that your lack of taking complete responsibility" for the crime as proof of currently being dangerous to society, Barton said.

Because of laws passed in 2018, the board was required to take into account this time the fact that he had suffered childhood trauma from the conflict in the Middle East, committed the offense at a young age and is now an elderly prisoner.

The board found that despite the magnitude of the crime, he wasn't likely to reoffend and didn't pose an unreasonable threat to public safety.

"Notwithstanding its atrocity, its impact, not just on the families and the victims and the nation as a whole and perhaps the world as a whole — if you were sentenced to life without parole that would be a different matter, but you were sent to life with parole," Barton said.

Barton said the board's decision was not influenced by the fact that prosecutors did not participate or oppose Sirhan's release under a policy by Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón, a former police officer who took office last year after running on a reform platform. Gascón, who said he idolized the Kennedys and mourned RFK's assassination, believes the prosecutors' role ends at sentencing and they should not influence decisions to release prisoners.

"Obviously they opposed in the past and even if they had opposed it today, our decision would be the same," Barton said.

The Los Angeles Police Department, relatives of some of the victims and members of the public submitted letters opposing Sirhan's release.

The California District Attorneys Association denounced the prosecution's absence.

"This is one of the most notorious political assassinations in American history and the killer is being considered for release without benefit of a representative on behalf of the people of California. That is disgraceful," El Dorado County District Attorney Vern Pierson, the association's president, said.

Sirhan's lawyer, Angela Berry, had urged the board to base its decision on who Sirhan is today and not what he did more than 50 years ago.

Sirhan said he had learned to control his anger and was committed to living peacefully.

"You have my pledge. I will always look to safety and peace and non-violence," he told the panel.

Sirhan, a Christian Palestinian from Jordan, has acknowledged he was angry at Kennedy for his support

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of Israel. When asked about how he feels about the Middle East conflict today, Sirhan broke down crying and temporarily couldn't speak.

"Take a few deep breaths," said Barton, who noted the conflict had not gone away and still touched a nerve.

Sirhan said he doesn't follow what's going on in the region but thinks about the suffering of refugees.

"The misery that those people are experiencing. It's painful," Sirhan said.

If released, Sirhan could be deported to Jordan, and Barton said he was concerned he might become a "symbol or lightning rod to foment more violence."

Sirhan said he was too old to be involved in the Middle East conflict and would detach himself from it.

"The same argument can be said or made that I can be a peacemaker and a contributor to a friendly nonviolent way of resolving the issue," said Sirhan, who told the panel that he hoped to live with his blind brother in Pasadena, California.

Paul Schrade, a union leader and aide to RFK who was among five people wounded in the 1968 shooting, also spoke Friday in favor of Sirhan's release.

Melley reported from Los Angeles.

## Harris holds steady on Southeast Asia trip as crises loom

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — In Singapore, in between a foreign policy speech and a roundtable talk about supply chain issues, Vice President Kamala Harris stopped to smell the flowers.

Specifically, she checked out an orchid that the country named after her — a light fuschia hybrid named Papilionanda Kamala Harris — a diplomatic honor also bestowed on former President Barack Obama and then-Vice President Joe Biden during past visits to the country.

"Oh, this is extraordinary," she marveled as she took a brief tour of the lush Flower Field room of Singapore's iconic Gardens By the Bay on Tuesday.

It was a brief — and rare — moment of normalcy for Harris during a diplomatic trip chock full of extraordinary circumstances.

Harris' weeklong trip to Singapore and Vietnam was shadowed from start to finish by the crisis in Afghanistan. Questions about the messy U.S. withdrawal dominated her first few days in Singapore and the attack that killed 13 Americans outside the Kabul airport caused her to nix a planned visit to California on her way home.

In the middle, Harris delayed by a few hours her travel to Vietnam because of concern about potential health attacks against U.S. diplomats there.

And the trip itself played out against the backdrop of a global pandemic that kept Harris hemmed in by the carefully choreographed stagecraft of her diplomatic meetings with leaders and a smattering of roundtables and speeches.

But those very crises may in fact have contributed to what analysts say was the overall success of the trip.

"Buffeted by these concerns about things that were happening both in Hanoi and elsewhere, they held pretty steady," said Ted Osius, who served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam under Obama.

"They delivered key messages to our partners and showed both continuity and a future for the relationships, by the fact that they had steady nerves and they continued with the trip, even despite these challenges."

Amid the withdrawal from Afghanistan, one of Harris' top tasks for the trip was to reassure U.S. allies that America can be trusted to stand by its commitments. Osius said the Vietnamese now "know that we trust each other enough to be able to carry on, even in turbulent, unusual times."

Facing numerous questions about Afghanistan, Harris overall exhibited a more disciplined message than she did during her first foreign trip, to Guatemala and Mexico. There, she drew criticism from Democrats for warning migrants not to come to the U.S., and from Republicans for dismissing questions about her

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decision not to visit the U.S. southern border.

In Singapore, and again in Vietnam, Harris repeated administration talking points about the evacuation effort being the White House's "highest priority" and avoided getting bogged down in recriminations over what went wrong.

"There wasn't really anything to clean up, which obviously differentiates from that Guatemala and Mexico trip," said Democratic strategist Joel Payne.

Even so, Republicans took the opportunity to go after Harris — both a nod toward her possible political future, as the presumptive successor to Biden if he chooses not to run in 2024, and an attempt to take advantage of her generally divisive profile among U.S. voters.

Chris Martin, deputy executive director of GOP opposition research group America Rising, said on Twitter that "every assignment Kamala Harris has touched as VP has failed miserably," including her latest efforts to reassure U.S. allies.

But Payne said Harris had showed a more polished and focused approach on her latest trip.

"My sense is that the vice president's team has attempted to course correct a bit and simplify the message and simplify the task," he said.

On confronting China — the trickiest diplomatic issue for Harris during the trip — the vice president struck a balance in delivering a rebuke of what she called China's "bullying" in the South China Sea while also offering a more constructive vision for the U.S. relationship with Singapore and Vietnam.

While her visit offered up a number of new opportunities for cooperation between the U.S. and its Southeast Asian allies, it lacked one major touchstone of the typical diplomatic trip: engagement with local people.

When Biden visited Singapore as vice president, he stopped by a bustling hawker stall for a limeade. When Obama visited Vietnam, he was met with throngs of cheering Vietnamese after sharing a meal and a beer with Anthony Bourdain in a tiny noodle shop, and he beatboxed with Vietnamese youth.

With the coronavirus pandemic surging again across much of Southeast Asia, Harris and her entourage were largely confined to their hotel rooms. Upon arriving in both Singapore and Vietnam, the entire delegation received COVID-19 tests and had to quarantine in their hotel rooms until the results came through.

In Vietnam, a country with one of the lowest vaccination rates in the region and record high infections in recent weeks, the streets of Hanoi were eerily empty as Harris' motorcade sped to her events. Instead of a spontaneous moment on the streets of Vietnam, Harris held a small roundtable with LGBTQ and climate change activists.

"Just like we had to reinvent domestically what a political campaign looks like — official travel is now subject to that same upheaval," said Eric Schultz, who served as principal deputy press secretary for Obama.

"Building cultural relationships is person to person. When you take that out of the equation, it just becomes harder."

Gregory Poling, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that while the pandemic complicated Harris' trip, it also created opportunities to show the U.S. commitment to the region. Indeed, Harris deployed America's vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam, where she announced the delivery of an additional 1 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine and 77 freezers to help store doses.

"It limits the number of engagements, it limits your engagement with civil society and others, it makes it harder to travel outside the capital — but it also helps reinforce the message that they are really investing in relationships there," he said.

## Asian tourism sees ups, downs in 2nd year of pandemic

By The Associated Press undefined

From the Great Wall to the picturesque Kashmir valley, Asia's tourist destinations are looking to domestic visitors to get them through the COVID-19 pandemic's second year.

With international travel heavily restricted, foreign tourists can't enter many countries and locals can't



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get out. In the metropolis of Hong Kong, glamping and staycations have replaced trips abroad for at least some of its 7.4 million residents.

Across the Asia-Pacific region, international tourist arrivals were down 95% in the first five months of the year, compared to the same period before the pandemic in 2019, according to the U.N. World Tourism Organization.

New variants of the virus loom — a constant threat to any recovery in even domestic tourism. Warnings of a possible third wave in India worry Imraan Ali, whose houseboat on Kashmir's Dal Lake is his only source of income.

"Since we are expecting a good influx of tourists, we don't want that to be affected," he said.

## INDIA CAUTIOUS AS OUTBREAK RECEDES

Tourists are returning to the valleys and mountains in Indian-controlled Kashmir, as infections in the Himalayan region and nationwide come down after a deadly second wave earlier this year.

The "shikaras," or traditional Kashmiri houseboats, are back on the calm waters of Dal Lake as Indians travel at home. India is reporting about 30,000 new coronavirus cases a day, down from a peak of 400,000 in May but still enough for many countries to restrict travelers from India.

Nihaarika Rishabh said she and her husband were relieved to finally get away from their home in the city of Agra for their honeymoon, after their wedding was postponed during the second wave. The vacation in Kashmir has helped calm their nerves after months of the pandemic, she said.

Ali, the houseboat owner, is happy that the number of visitors has gone up. "We have been suffering from past two years," he said. "Our livelihood depends on tourism."

But mountainous areas like Kashmir have seen an uptick in infections as the number of visitors rises, fueling worries about a third wave.

## BANGKOK'S BUSTLE GOES QUIET

Erawan Shrine in the center of Bangkok once bustled with foreign tourists and locals making offerings day and night. Today, it is eerily quiet. Only a handful of people buy incense or flowers from the vendors who set up stalls outside.

"We are still here because we don't know what else to do," said one, Ruedewan Thapjul.

As Thailand battles a punishing COVID-19 surge with nearly 20,000 new cases every day, people who depend on tourism struggle in what was one of the most-visited cities in the world, with 20 million visitors in the year before the pandemic.

Suthipong Pheunphiphop, the president of the Thai Travel Agents Association, urged the government to commit to its plan to reopen the country to foreign tourists in October.

Currently, the streets are all but empty in Bangkok's Siam Square shopping district.

Passavee Kraidejudompaisarn, the third-generation owner of a popular noodle shop, wiped away tears as she talked about her fears of losing the family business.

Previously, the 60-year-old restaurant would be filled with locals and foreign tourists, bringing in about \$2,000 a day. Now, she said, she earns a little more than \$2 on some days.

## CHINESE STAY IN CHINA

Strict virus control measures have allowed China to return to relatively normal life. The number of tourists visiting Beijing in June and July tripled compared to the same period last year, while revenue quadrupled, according to Trip.com, China's largest online travel booking platform.

"I personally feel very safe," Olaya Ezuidazu, a Spanish national living in Beijing, said on a recent visit to the Great Wall.

But even China is not immune to the delta variant. Outbreaks in July and August prompted authorities to suspended flights and trains to affected cities. Parks and museums reduced the number of visitors to 60% of capacity, down from 75% previously.

Phil Ma felt the resulting dent on tourism at his café in a traditional "hutong" neighborhood, steps away from Tiananmen Square in central Beijing. "It is obvious during the three or four days from the weekend to today that the number of guests has decreased a lot," he said.

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The alley outside his café was quiet, in contrast to the line that formed for a cup of coffee during a major holiday in May.

## GLAMPING IN HONG KONG

The difficulty of traveling abroad has made glamping — or glamorous camping — popular in Hong Kong. Berina Tam and Vincy Lee went with We Camp, a campsite located in Yuen Long, a rural area in the north of Hong Kong.

“It’s actually a good opportunity for us to really, to try to explore Hong Kong a bit more,” Tam said.

Many glamping sites provide clean beds, showering facilities and barbecue sites for campers to grill kebabs and chicken wings. The typical charge is \$65 per person a night.

Bill Lau, the founder of Hong Kong travel platform Holimood, said that glamping offers an alternative for those who find camping too primitive.

“Families and couples need to find somewhere to go during weekends,” he said. “If we are trying to recreate the experience of traveling, it must be an overnight experience.”

Umar Meraj in Srinagar, India, Olivia Zhang in Beijing, Pattarachai Preechapanich in Bangkok and Katie Tam and Zen Soo in Hong Kong contributed.

## **RFK assassin moves closer to freedom with help of 2 Kennedys**

By JULIE WATSON and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — California’s parole board voted Friday to free Robert F. Kennedy’s assassin after two of RFK’s sons went against several of their siblings’ wishes and said they supported releasing him and prosecutors declined to argue he should be kept behind bars. But the governor ultimately will decide if Sirhan Sirhan leaves prison.

Douglas Kennedy was a toddler when his father was gunned down in 1968. He told a two-person board panel that he was moved to tears by Sirhan’s remorse and that the 77-year-old should be released if he’s not a threat to others.

“I’m overwhelmed just by being able to view Mr. Sirhan face to face,” he said. “I’ve lived my life both in fear of him and his name in one way or another. And I am grateful today to see him as a human being worthy of compassion and love.”

Six of Kennedy’s nine surviving children said they were shocked by the vote and urged Gov. Gavin Newsom to reverse the parole board’s decision and keep Sirhan behind bars.

“He took our father from our family and he took him from America,” the six siblings wrote in a statement late Friday. “We are in disbelief that this man would be recommended for release.

The statement was signed by Joseph P. Kennedy II, Courtney Kennedy, Kerry Kennedy, Christopher G. Kennedy, Maxwell T. Kennedy and Rory Kennedy.

But another sibling, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has spoken in favor of his release in the past and wrote in favor of paroling Sirhan. He said in the letter that he met him in prison and was moved by Sirhan, “who wept, clinching my hands, and asked for forgiveness.”

“While nobody can speak definitively on behalf of my father, I firmly believe that based on his own consuming commitment to fairness and justice, that he would strongly encourage this board to release Mr. Sirhan because of Sirhan’s impressive record of rehabilitation,” he said in a letter submitted during the hearing to the board.

Sirhan, whose hair is now white, smiled, thanked the board and gave a thumbs-up after the decision to grant parole was announced. It was a major victory in his 16th attempt at parole after he’s served 53 years. But it does not assure his release.

The ruling will be reviewed over the next 120 days by the board’s staff. Then it will be sent to the governor, who will have 30 days to decide whether to grant it, reverse it or modify it. If Sirhan is freed, he must live in a transitional home for six months, enroll in an alcohol abuse program and get therapy.

Robert F. Kennedy was a U.S. senator from New York and the brother of President John F. Kennedy, who

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was assassinated in 1963. RFK was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination when he was gunned down at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles moments after delivering a victory speech in the pivotal California primary. Five others were wounded.

Sirhan, who insists he doesn't remember the shooting and had been drinking alcohol just beforehand, was convicted of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to death after his conviction, but that sentence was commuted to life when the California Supreme Court briefly outlawed capital punishment in 1972.

At his last parole hearing in 2016, commissioners concluded after more than three hours of intense testimony that Sirhan did not show adequate remorse or understand the enormity of his crime.

On Friday, Sirhan again said he didn't recall the killing, but he made multiple attempts to show nonetheless he takes responsibility for the harm he caused.

"Sen. Kennedy was the hope of the world ... and I harmed all of them and it pains me to experience that, the knowledge for such a horrible deed, if I did in fact do that," said Sirhan, appearing on camera from a San Diego County prison at the virtual proceeding, wearing his blue prison uniform, a paper towel folded as a handkerchief peeking from his shirt pocket.

Parole Board Commissioner Robert Barton said Sirhan showed he was a different man from not only 1968 but 2016.

"We saw the improvement that you've made, and all of the other mitigating factors, and we did not find that your lack of taking complete responsibility" for the crime as proof of currently being dangerous to society, Barton said.

Barton said Sirhan had made a concerted effort to follow the board's suggestions from 2016. That included enrolling in more than 20 programs focused on self-help, controlling his anger and other emotions. Barton noted that Sirhan did so even during the coronavirus pandemic.

Because of laws passed in 2018, the board was required to take into account this time the fact that he had suffered childhood trauma from the conflict in the Middle East, committed the offense at a young age and is now an elderly prisoner.

The board found that despite the magnitude of the crime, he wasn't likely to reoffend and didn't pose an unreasonable threat to public safety.

"Notwithstanding its atrocity, its impact, not just on the families and the victims and the nation as a whole and perhaps the world as a whole — if you were sentenced to life without parole that would be a different matter, but you were sent to life with parole," Barton said.

Barton said the board's decision was not influenced by the fact that prosecutors did not participate or oppose Sirhan's release under a policy by Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón, a former police officer who took office last year after running on a reform platform. Gascón, who said he idolized the Kennedys and mourned RFK's assassination, believes the prosecutors' role ends at sentencing and they should not influence decisions to release prisoners.

"Obviously they opposed in the past and even if they had opposed it today, our decision would be the same," Barton said.

The Los Angeles Police Department, relatives of some of the victims and members of the public submitted letters opposing Sirhan's release.

The California District Attorneys Association denounced the prosecution's absence.

"This is one of the most notorious political assassinations in American history and the killer is being considered for release without benefit of a representative on behalf of the people of California. That is disgraceful," El Dorado County District Attorney Vern Pierson, the association's president said.

Sirhan's lawyer, Angela Berry, had urged the board to base its decision on who Sirhan is today and not what he did more than 50 years ago.

Sirhan said he had learned to control his anger and was committed to living peacefully.

"You have my pledge. I will always look to safety and peace and non-violence," he told the panel.

Sirhan, a Christian Palestinian from Jordan, has acknowledged he was angry at Kennedy for his support of Israel. When asked about how he feels about the Middle East conflict today, Sirhan broke down crying



and temporarily couldn't speak.

"Take a few deep breaths," said Barton, who noted the conflict had not gone away and still touched a nerve.

Sirhan said he doesn't follow what's going on in the region but thinks about the suffering of refugees.

"The misery that those people are experiencing. It's painful," Sirhan said.

If released, Sirhan could be deported to Jordan, and Barton said he was concerned he might become a "symbol or lightning rod to foment more violence."

Sirhan said he was too old to be involved in the Middle East conflict and would detach himself from it.

"The same argument can be said or made that I can be a peacemaker and a contributor to a friendly nonviolent way of resolving the issue," said Sirhan, who told the panel that he hoped to live with his blind brother in Pasadena, California.

Paul Schrade, a union leader and aide to RFK who was among five people wounded in the 1968 shooting, also spoke Friday in favor of Sirhan's release.

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Melley reported from Los Angeles.

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Corrects that decision undergoes 120 day review by staff not 90.

## Ida aims to hit Louisiana on Hurricane Katrina anniversary

By KEVIN MCGILL and JANET McCONNAUGHEY Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Hurricane Ida struck Cuba on Friday and threatened to slam into Louisiana with devastating force over the weekend, prompting evacuations in New Orleans and across the coastal region.

Ida intensified rapidly Friday from a tropical storm to a hurricane with top winds of 80 mph (128 kph) as it crossed western Cuba and entered the Gulf of Mexico. The National Hurricane Center predicted Ida would strengthen into an extremely dangerous Category 4 hurricane, with top winds of 140 mph (225 kph) before making landfall along the U.S. Gulf Coast late Sunday.

"This will be a life-altering storm for those who aren't prepared," National Weather Service meteorologist Benjamin Schott said during a Friday news conference with Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards.

The governor urged residents to quickly prepare, saying: "By nightfall tomorrow night, you need to be where you intend to be to ride out the storm."

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell ordered a mandatory evacuation for a small area of the city outside the levee system. But with the storm intensifying so much over a short time, she said it wasn't possible to do so for the entire city. That generally calls for using all lanes of some highways to leave the city.

"The city cannot order a mandatory evacuation because we don't have the time," Cantrell said.

City officials said residents need to be prepared for prolonged power outages, and asked elderly residents to consider evacuating. Collin Arnold, the city's emergency management director, said the city could be under high winds for about ten hours.

Other areas across the coastal region were under a mix of voluntary and mandatory evacuations. The storm is expected to make landfall on the exact date Hurricane Katrina devastated a large swath of the Gulf Coast exactly 16 years earlier. Capt. Ross Eichorn, a fishing guide on the coast about 70 miles (112 kilometers) southwest of New Orleans, said he fears warm Gulf waters will "make a monster" out of Ida.

"With a direct hit, ain't no telling what's going to be left — if anything," Eichorn said. He added: "Anybody that isn't concerned has got something wrong with them."

A hurricane warning was issued for most of the Louisiana coast from Intracoastal City to the mouth of the Pearl River. A tropical storm warning was extended to the Mississippi-Alabama line.

Officials decided against evacuating New Orleans hospitals. There's little room for their patients elsewhere, with hospitals from Texas to Florida already reeling from a spike in coronavirus patients, said Dr. Jennifer Avengo, the city's health director.

At the state's largest hospital system, Ochsner Health System, officials ordered 10 days worth of fuel,

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food, drugs and other supplies and have backup fuel contracts for its generators. One positive was that the number of COVID-19 patients had dropped from 988 to 836 over the past week — a 15% decline.

President Joe Biden approved a federal emergency declaration for Louisiana ahead of the storm. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said FEMA plans to send nearly 150 medical personnel and almost 50 ambulances to the Gulf Coast to assist strained hospitals.

Ida made its first landfall Friday afternoon on Cuba's southern Isle of Youth. The Cuban government issued a hurricane warning for its westernmost provinces, where forecasters said as much as 20 inches (50 centimeters) of rain could fall in places, possibly unleashing deadly flash floods and mudslides.

Ivonne Deulofeu, who lives in the western town of Vinales, said strong winds persisted for hours on Friday. "It shook us up hard. It was really frightening," Deulofeu said. "We had to nail the doors of the rooms... The plants, they're all gone."

Col. Noel Lozano of Cuban Civil Defense said over 10,000 people were evacuated in Pinar del Rio province, most to stay with relatives. There were no immediate reports of deaths.

Late Friday night, the storm was 105 miles (165 kilometers) west of Havana and traveling northwest at 15 mph (24 kph).

An even greater danger will then begin over the Gulf, where forecasts were aligned in predicting Ida will strengthen very quickly into a major hurricane before landfall in the Mississippi River delta late Sunday, the hurricane center said.

If that forecast holds true, Ida would hit 16 years to the day that Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a Category 3 storm with 125 mph (201 kph) winds near the riverside community of Buras, just down the Mississippi River from New Orleans.

Katrina is blamed for an estimated 1,800 deaths from the central Louisiana coast to around the Mississippi-Alabama state line. A massive storm surge scoured the shores and wiped houses off the map. In New Orleans, failures of federal levees led to catastrophic flooding. Water covered 80% of the city and many homes were swamped to the rooftops. Some victims drowned in their attics. The Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center became scenes of sweltering misery as tens of thousands were stranded without power or running water.

Memories of Katrina still haunt many who scrambled to prepare for Ida on Friday, lining up for groceries, gas and ice, as well as sandbags that the city was offering.

Traffic snarled at entrances to a New Orleans Costco, where dozens of cars were backed up at the gas pumps and shoppers wheeled out carts stacked with cases of bottled water and other essentials.

Retired police officer Wondell Smith, who worked on the police force when Katrina hit, said he and his family were planning to stay, but were also getting ready to head farther inland if the forecasts worsened. He loaded water, bread and sandwich meat into his SUV.

"I know what that looks like," Smith said, referring to the potential devastation. "This is my first time being home in 34 years of service," he added. "And I want to be prepared."

Saturday's preseason NFL game between the Arizona Cardinals and the Saints at the Superdome was first moved up seven hours to avoid the weather, and then canceled altogether.

The hurricane center predicted the peak storm surge could reach 10 feet to 15 feet (3 to 4.5 meters) along the Louisiana coast, with a possible surge of 7 to 11 feet (2.1 to 3.4 meters) in the New Orleans area. The storm's track put New Orleans on the eastern side — often called the dirty side — which generally sees much more significant effects than the western side.

"Being east of this storm's track is not ideal," said Arnold.

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This story has been updated to correct the name of the Louisiana governor. It is John Bel Edwards, not John Bell Edwards.

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Associated Press contributors include Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Jeff Martin in Marietta, Georgia; Darlene Superville in Washington; Seth Borenstein in Kensington, Maryland and Andrea Rodriguez

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in Havana, Cuba.

## American forces keep up airlift under high threat warnings

By SAYED ZIARMAL HASHEMI, LOLITA C. BALDOR, KATHY GANNON and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — American forces working under heightened security and threats of another attack pressed ahead in the closing days of the U.S.-led evacuation from Afghanistan after a devastating suicide bombing, and U.S. officials said they had killed a member of the extremist group that the United States believes responsible for it.

A U.S. drone strike early Saturday in eastern Afghanistan killed a member of the country's Islamic State affiliate, U.S. Central Command said. President Joe Biden has laid responsibility for Thursday's suicide bombing on that offshoot extremist group which is an enemy both to the West and to Afghanistan's Taliban and is known for especially lethal attacks.

The death toll in Thursday's suicide bombing rose to 169 Afghans, a number that could increase as authorities examine fragmented remains, and 13 U.S. service members.

U.S. Central Command said American officials believed the militant killed in Saturday's drone strike had been involved in planning strikes against the United States in Kabul, and that there were no other known casualties.

The U.S. retaliation comes amid a steady flow of grim warnings from the White House and the Pentagon that there could be more extremist attacks targeting U.S. forces ahead of President Joe Biden's fast-approaching deadline Tuesday to end the airlift and withdraw American personnel.

The next few days "will be our most dangerous period to date" in the evacuation, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, hours before the U.S. issued a security alert for four of the airport gates.

Thursday's bombing marked one of the most lethal attacks the country has seen. The U.S. said it was the deadliest day for American forces in Afghanistan since 2011.

As the call to prayer echoed Friday through Kabul along with the roar of departing planes, the anxious crowds thronging the airport in hope of escaping Taliban rule appeared as large as ever, despite the scenes of victims lying closely packed together in the aftermath of the bombing.

Around the world, newly arriving Afghan evacuees, many clutching babies and bare handfuls of belongings in plastic bags, stepped off evacuation flights in the United States, in Albania, in Belgium and beyond. In Kabul on Friday, Afghan families looked for loved ones among bodies, placed along a hospital sidewalk for identification, of bombing victims who died pleading for a seat on the U.S.-run airlifts.

Afghans, American citizens and other foreigners were all acutely aware the window was closing to get out via the airlift.

Jamshad went to the airport Friday with his wife and three small children. He clutched an invitation to a Western country he didn't want to identify.

"After the explosion I decided I would try. Because I am afraid now there will be more attacks, and I think now I have to leave," said Jamshad, who like many Afghans uses only one name.

The Pentagon said Friday that there was just one suicide bomber — at the airport gate — not two, as U.S. officials initially said. A U.S. official said that the bomber carried a heavier-than-usual load of about 25 pounds of explosives, loaded with shrapnel.

The U.S. official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss preliminary assessments of the attack. The officials who gave the Afghan death toll also spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

The Afghan victims ranged from a hard-working young journalist to an impoverished father, driven to the airport by hopes of a better life.

The American dead were 11 Marines, a Navy sailor and an Army soldier. Many had been tiny children when U.S. forces first entered Afghanistan in 2001.

One, Marine Lance Cpl. Kareem Mae'lee Grant Nikoui, sent a video to a family friend in the United States



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just hours before he was killed, showing himself smiling and greeting Afghan children.

"Want to take a video together, buddy?" Nikoui asked young boy, leaning in to be in the picture with him. "All right, we're heroes now, man."

British officials said two of the country's citizens and the child of another Briton were among those killed.

On the morning after the attack, the Taliban used a pickup truck full of fighters and three captured Humvees to set up a barrier 500 meters (1,600 feet) from the airport, holding the crowds farther back from the U.S. troops than before.

U.S. military officials said that some gates were closed and other security measures put in place. They said there were tighter restrictions at Taliban checkpoints and fewer people around the gates.

U.S. officials said evacuees with proper credentials still were being allowed through the gates. Inside, about 5,400 evacuees awaited flights.

U.S. commanders had briefed Biden Friday on developing plans to strike back at the Islamic State and make good on the president's vow to the attackers to "hunt you down and make you pay."

Biden pronounced the U.S. effort to evacuate Americans, Afghan allies and others most at risk from the Taliban a "worthy mission."

"And we will complete the mission," he said.

The Taliban have wrested back control of Afghanistan two decades after they were ousted in a U.S.-led invasion following the 9/11 attacks. Their return to power has terrified many Afghans, who have rushed to flee the country ahead of the American withdrawal.

More than 100,000 people have been safely evacuated through the Kabul airport, according to the U.S., but thousands more are struggling to leave.

The White House said Friday afternoon that U.S. military aircraft had flown out 2,100 evacuees in the previous 24 hours. Another 2,100 people left on other coalition flights.

The number was a fraction of the 12,700 people carried out by U.S. military aircraft during a brief period when the airlift reached maximum capacity.

France ended its own evacuation effort and pulled up stakes on a temporary French embassy at the airport, leaving Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. U.S. allies and others have ended or are ending their airlifts, in part to give the U.S. time to wrap up its own operations.

The Taliban have said they will allow Afghans to leave via commercial flights after the U.S. withdrawal, but it is unclear which airlines would return to an airport controlled by the militants.

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Gannon reported from Islamabad and Anna from Nairobi, Kenya. Darlene Superville in Washington and Rahim Faiez in Turkey and Elaine Ganley in Paris contributed along with other Associated Press writers around the world.

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

## US intelligence still divided on origins of coronavirus

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies remain divided on the origins of the coronavirus but believe China's leaders did not know about the virus before the start of the global pandemic, according to results released Friday of a review ordered by President Joe Biden.

According to an unclassified summary, four members of the U.S. intelligence community say with low confidence that the virus was initially transmitted from an animal to a human. A fifth intelligence agency believes with moderate confidence that the first human infection was linked to a lab. Analysts do not believe the virus was developed as a bioweapon and most agencies believe the virus was not genetically engineered.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in a statement Friday that China "continues to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information and blame other countries, including the United States." Reaching a conclusion about what caused the virus likely requires China's cooperation, the office

said.

The cause of the coronavirus remains an urgent public health and security concern worldwide. In the U.S., many conservatives have accused Chinese scientists of developing COVID-19 in a lab and allowing it to leak. State Department officials under former President Donald Trump published a fact sheet noting research into coronaviruses conducted at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, located in the Chinese city where the first major known outbreak occurred.

The scientific consensus remains that the virus most likely migrated from animals in what's known as a zoonotic transmission. So-called "spillover events" occur in nature, and there are at least two coronaviruses that evolved in bats and caused human epidemics, SARS1 and MERS.

In a statement, Biden said China had obstructed efforts to investigate the virus "from the beginning." "The world deserves answers, and I will not rest until we get them," he said. "Responsible nations do not shirk these kinds of responsibilities to the rest of the world."

China's embassy in Washington hit back with a lengthy statement saying the U.S. had "fabricated" the report and invoking mistaken American intelligence about weapons of mass destruction prior to the Iraq War.

"The report by the intelligence community is based on presumption of guilt on the part of China, and it is only for scapegoating China," the embassy said. "Such a practice will only disturb and sabotage international cooperation on origin-tracing and on fighting the pandemic, and has been widely opposed by the international community."

Biden in May ordered a 90-day review of what the White House said was an initial finding leading to "two likely scenarios": an animal-to-human transmission or a lab leak. The White House said then that two agencies in the 18-member intelligence community leaned toward the hypothesis of a transmission in nature and another agency leaned toward a lab leak.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Friday did not identify which agencies supported either hypothesis. But it noted some of the same hurdles facing the World Health Organization and scientists worldwide: a lack of clinical samples and data from the earliest cases of COVID-19.

In conducting the review, intelligence agencies consulted with allied nations and experts outside of government. An epidemiologist was brought into the National Intelligence Council, a group of senior experts that consults the head of the intelligence community.

## **Young dad-to-be was among 13 US troops killed in Afghanistan**

By AMY BETH HANSON, JANIE HAR and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

A young husband with a child on the way. Another man who always wanted to be in the military. A man who planned to become a sheriff's deputy when his deployment ended. Heartwrenching details began emerging Friday about some of the 13 U.S. troops killed in a horrific suicide bombing at Afghanistan's Kabul airport, which also claimed the lives of more than 160 Afghans.

Eleven Marines, one Navy sailor and one Army soldier were among the dead, while 18 other U.S. service members were wounded in Thursday's bombing, which was blamed on Afghanistan's offshoot of the Islamic State group. The U.S. said it was the most lethal day for American forces in Afghanistan since 2011. The White House said President Joe Biden will look for opportunities to honor the servicemembers who lost their lives, many of whom were men in their early 20s.

Here are the stories of some of the victims and the people who are mourning them:

RYLEE McCOLLUM, 20

Rylee McCollum, a Marine and native of Bondurant, Wyoming, was married and his wife is expecting a baby in three weeks, his sister, Cheyenne McCollum, said.

"He was so excited to be a dad, and he was going to be a great dad," McCollum said. She said her brother "was a Marine before he knew he was allowed to be a Marine ... He'd carry around his toy rifle and wear his sister's pink princess snow boots and he'd either be hunting or he was a Marine. Sometimes it would be with nothing on underneath, just a T-shirt."

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McCollum said her brother wanted to be a history teacher and a wrestling coach once he completed his service. Another sister, Roice McCollum, told the Casper Star Tribune that her brother was on his first deployment when the evacuation in Afghanistan began.

"We want to make sure that people know that these are the kids that are sacrificing themselves, and he's got a family who loves him and a wife who loves him and a baby that he'll never get to meet," Cheyenne McCollum said.

Regi Stone, the father of one of Rylee McCollum's friends, described McCollum as "a good kid," who was resilient, smart and courageous. Stone shared a note that his wife, Kim, sent to their son Eli Stone, who is also in the military and deployed elsewhere. In the note, Kim wrote that she remembered telling the friends to run the other way if they had to go in first and that both of them said, "If we die doing this, we die doing what we love."

KAREEM MAE'LEE GRANT NIKOUI, 20

Lance Corporal Kareem Mae'Lee Grant Nikoui, of Norco, California, sent videos to his family hours before he died, showing himself interacting with children in Afghanistan. In one of the clips, he asked a young boy to say hello.

"Want to take a video together buddy?" Nikoui said, leaning in to take a video of himself with the boy. "All right, we're heroes now, man."

Close family friend Paul Arreola said the videos show "the heart of this young man, the love he has."

"The family is just heartbroken," he said. Arreola described Nikoui as an "amazing young man" full of promise who always wanted to be a Marine and set out to achieve his goal. He is survived by his parents and three siblings.

"He loved this country and everything we stand for. It's just so hard to know that we've lost him," he said, crying.

Nikoui was also in the JROTC, and the Norco High School Air Force JROTC posted on Facebook that he was "one of our best Air Force JROTC cadets" and that "Kareem was set on being a Marine & always wanted to serve his country."

The city of Norco said Friday in a post on social media that Nikoui's name will be enshrined on a memorial wall in the city.

JARED SCHMITZ, 20

Marine Lance Corporal Jared Schmitz grew up in the St. Louis area and was among a group of Marines sent back to Afghanistan to assist with evacuation efforts, his father, Mark Schmitz, told KMOX Radio.

Mark Schmitz said his son always wanted to be a Marine. He said he learned of his son's death when the Marines came to his home in Wentzville, Missouri, at 2:40 a.m. Friday.

"This was something he always wanted to do, and I never seen a young man train as hard as he did to be the best soldier he could be," Schmitz said of his son. "His life meant so much more. I'm so incredibly devastated that I won't be able to see the man that he was very quickly growing into becoming."

TAYLOR HOOVER, 31

Staff Sgt. Taylor Hoover, of Utah, had been in the Marines for 11 years and was remembered as a hero who died serving others, his father Darin Hoover said.

"He is a hero. He gave his life protecting those that can't protect themselves, doing what he loved serving his country," said Darin Hoover, who lives in a Salt Lake City suburb.

He said he heard from Marines throughout the day Friday who said they are grateful they had his son as their sergeant.

"They look back on him and say that they've learned so much from him," Darin Hoover said. "One heck of a leader."

His father said his son was also a best friend to his two sisters and loved all his extended family. He had a girlfriend in California and was the kind of guy who "lit up a room" when he came in, his father said.

Nate Thompson of Murray, Utah, first met Hoover when they were 10 years old in Little League football. They stayed friends through high school, where Hoover played lineman. He was undersized for the posi-

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tion, but his heart and hard work more than made up for what he lacked in statute, Thompson said. As a friend, he was selfless and kind.

"If we had trouble with grades, trouble with family or trouble on the field, we always called Taylor. He's always level-headed, even if he's struggling himself," he said.

DEAGAN WILLIAM-TYELER PAGE, 23

Corporal Daegan William-Tyeler Page served in the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment based at Camp Pendleton, California, and planned to go to trade school and possibly become a lineman after his enlistment ended, his family said in a statement.

Page was raised in Red Oak, Iowa, and in the Omaha metro area and joined the Marines after graduating from Millard South High School. He is mourned by his girlfriend, parents, stepmom and stepdad, four siblings and grandparents, the family said in a statement released by a family friend. The statement said the family did not wish to speak to the media at this time.

"Daegan will always be remembered for his tough outer shell and giant heart," the statement said. "Our hearts are broken, but we are thankful for the friends and family who are surrounding us during this time. Our thoughts and prayers are also with the other Marine and Navy families whose loved ones died alongside Daegan."

RYAN KNAUSS, 23

Army Staff Sgt. Ryan Knauss was remembered as a motivated man who loved his country and was looking forward to coming back to the U.S. and eventually moving to Washington, D.C., family members told WATE-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Knauss' grandfather, Wayne Knauss, told the television station that the family received word of Knauss's death on Friday, and funeral services were being planned. Knauss said his grandson attended Gibbs High School and grew up in a Christian home.

"A motivated young man who loved his country," Wayne Knauss said. "He was a believer, so we will see him again in God's heaven."

Stepmother Linnae Knauss said Ryan planned to move to Washington after he returned to the U.S.

"He was a super-smart hilarious young man," she said.

HUNTER LOPEZ, 22

Hunter Lopez, whose parents work at the Riverside County Sheriff's Department in Southern California, was a sheriff's Explorer for three years before joining the Marine Corps in September 2017, Sheriff Chad Bianco said.

Bianco said Lopez planned to follow in his parents' footsteps and become a Riverside County Sheriff's Deputy after his deployment.

DAVID LEE ESPINOZA, 20

Lance Corporal David Lee Espinoza, a Marine from Laredo, Texas, joined the military after high school, and was being remembered as a hero by his mother.

"He was just brave enough to go do what he wanted and to help out people. That's who he was, he was just perfect," his mother, Elizabeth Holguin, told the Laredo Morning Times.

Espinoza's death was confirmed earlier by U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar. The congressman's press secretary, Dana Youngentob, said Pentagon representatives visited Cuellar's Washington office to inform him of Espinoza's death. Cuellar's office also received an official death notice from the Pentagon.

In a statement, Cuellar said Espinoza "embodied the values of America: grit, dedication, service, and valor. When he joined the military after high school, he did so with the intention of protecting our nation and demonstrating his selfless acts of service."

Cuellar concluded, "The brave never die. Mr. Espinoza is a hero."

Associated Press writers Terry Wallace in Dallas, Lindsay Whitehurst and Brady McCombs in Salt Lake City and Darlene Superville in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to fix Hunter Lopez's first name.



## More COVID-19 shots, studies offer hope for US schools

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR and JAY REEVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Officials offered new hope for the safety of U.S. schoolchildren threatened by COVID-19 on Friday as Gulf Coast hospitals already full of unvaccinated patients braced for the nightmare scenario of a major hurricane causing a wave of fractures, cuts and heart attacks without enough staff to treat the injured.

The Biden administration said half of U.S. adolescents ages 12-17 had gotten at least their first COVID-19 vaccine, and the inoculation rate among teens is growing faster than any other age group.

"We have now hit a major milestone," White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients told reporters at a briefing. "This is critical progress as millions of kids head back to school."

Meanwhile, new studies from California both provided more evidence that schools can open safely if they do the right things and highlighted the danger of failing to follow proper precautions.

A study of COVID-19 cases from the winter pandemic peak in Los Angeles County found that case rates among children and adolescents were about 3½ times lower than in the general community when schools followed federal guidance on mask wearing, physical distancing, testing and other virus measures, officials said.

Another study from Marin County, north of San Francisco, found that a single unvaccinated teacher who came back to school two days after showing symptoms and read to her class without wearing a mask led to 26 other infections in May, before the highly contagious delta variant ran wild.

"Most of the places where we are seeing surges and outbreaks are in places that are not implementing our current guidance," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who discussed the studies at a briefing.

More than 3,100 active coronavirus cases have been reported in Arkansas public schools among students and employees, according to newly released numbers, and most youths are enrolled in districts that require masks. The mandates emerged after a judge temporarily blocked a state law that banned mask mandates in Arkansas, which ranks fifth nationally for new virus cases per capita, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

On the northern Gulf Coast, where Ida was forecast to become a dangerous hurricane before it hits on Sunday, workers at Singing River Gulfport in Mississippi expect to have to raise flood gates to keep rising water out of the hospital that is full of COVID-19 patients, the vast majority of whom aren't vaccinated, said facilities director Randall Cobb.

Complicating matters, he said, was that the hospital is short-staffed because of the pandemic and also expects to get a flood of patients suffering from ailments that typically follow any hurricane: broken bones, heart attacks, breathing problems and lacerations.

"It's going to be bad. It's going to be really bad," Cobb said.

Located a few miles from the coast, the hospital has enough generator fuel, food and other supplies to operate on its own for at least 96 hours, he said, and it will help anyone who has a serious, life-threatening condition. But officials were trying to get the word out that people with less severe medical problems should go to special-needs storm shelters or contact emergency management.

"It's very stressful because it's too late if we have not thought of everything. Patients are counting on the medical care but also on the facility to be available," Cobb said.

In Louisiana, Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards said evacuation of hospitals in threatened areas — something that would normally be considered — is impractical with COVID-19 patients.

"That isn't possible. We don't have any place to bring those patients. Not in state, not out of state," Edwards said.

So, he said, state officials have worked with health systems to ensure that they are prepared.

About 1,100 people are dying daily of COVID-19 in the United States, the most since mid-March, according to Johns Hopkins University data. About 85,000 people were hospitalized with the illness nationwide

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early this week, CDC data shows, the highest total since the post-holiday surge in early February.

The surge is largely fueled by the highly contagious delta variant among people who are not vaccinated. In areas where vaccination rates are particularly low, doctors have pleaded with their communities to get inoculated to spare overburdened hospitals. In places including Alabama, federal teams have been brought into to assist exhausted workers and fill staffing gaps caused by COVID-19 infections and exposure.

In Idaho, one of the least vaccinated states, intensive care units are running out of space and one 330-bed hospital, Kootenai Health, converted classrooms into patient care space.

The largest classroom became a treatment room for as many as 21 coronavirus patients who don't need the kind of specialized monitoring provided by intensive care units. Other classrooms were turned into treatment areas where hospitalized COVID-19 patients can receive monoclonal antibody therapy in hopes of keeping them from needing a hospital bed.

Idaho also is calling on people with health care skills or a simple willingness to help to sign up for the state's Medical Reserve Corps. Retired health care workers can get temporary license renewals, and others can help with tasks such as contact tracing and data entry.

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Reeves reported from Newnan, Georgia. AP medical writer Mike Stobbe in New York and AP journalist Jill Bleed in Little Rock, Arkansas, contributed to this report.

## 'We can't do enough': Lawmakers flooded by evacuation pleas

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tissue holders sit atop the conference table where the congressman's aides field frantic requests from constituents desperate for help in getting friends and loved ones out of Afghanistan before it's too late.

The stories have poured in by the thousands with heartbreaking pleas not to be left behind.

The tissues are used for crying breaks, one of the aides explained.

"The hardest part is just the sense of helplessness," said Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif. "We're seeing all of this, you know, anxiety, and we can't do enough."

Across the county, the offices of members of Congress have become makeshift crisis centers, flooded with requests for help getting people onto one of the last flights leaving the Kabul airport before President Joe Biden's Tuesday deadline for the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces out of Afghanistan.

More than 109,000 people have been evacuated since the Taliban takeover Aug. 14, in one of the largest U.S. airlifts in history. The work could hardly be more urgent or dangerous, as Thursday's suicide bombing attack killing 13 U.S. service member and injuring 18 demonstrated. Some 169 Afghans were also killed and scores more wounded.

Biden said after the devastating attack that the U.S. would not be intimidated, "and our mission will go on." But he also acknowledged the limits of what can be done as the U.S. focuses on safe passage for Americans, while countless others remain, many fearful for their futures.

"Getting every single person out is — can't be guaranteed of anybody," Biden said.

In the race against time, the lawmakers are stepping up where the other branches of the U.S. government have maxed out. It's infuriating, emotional work, the rare undertaking that crosses party lines, Republicans and Democrats working around the clock to help the friends, families and loved ones of their constituents — and helping the U.S. keep its word.

In Northern Virginia, the office of Democratic Rep. Don Beyer reports that the number of constituent requests coming in — more than 100 a day — is what they would typically have in a full month. The area is home to many Afghans as well as military personnel and defense contractors, some with ties to the region. In the adjacent congressional district, the office of Democratic Rep. Gerry Connolly reports that staff has submitted the names of nearly 10,000 Americans and Afghan interpreters and others to the State Department for consideration.

Swalwell's district is home to a large Afghan diaspora community. The city of Fremont has a neighbor-

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hood called Little Kabul. But from coast to coast, and across the heartland, lawmakers around the country are also seeing huge spikes in requests for help.

Nebraska Republican Rep. Don Bacon said his office is working with more than 800 people seeking to get out of Afghanistan — a workload that grew in part because of the number of veterans working for him, including two retired colonels plus a Gold Star wife whose husband was killed in Afghanistan, who still have connections overseas. They are having some success, but more often than not, they are hearing from people who can't get through Taliban-controlled checkpoints, he said.

"When you're working 18 hours a day or so for a week and people are not getting through and you hear about people dying, yeah, it's emotional," said Bacon, who served in Iraq. "These guys are on the edge of their nerves."

Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said many lawmakers are forwarding cases his way. "I get texts every night, every hour, every half-hour," McCaul said.

The effort is personal for those members of Congress who served in the national security apparatus in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to joining Congress, Rep. Andy Kim, D-N.J., had provided strategic advice to Gen. David Petraeus, the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. He said his office has received more than 6,000 evacuation cases in just more than a week.

"This is about the expectation of what the American handshake means to those that were willing to put their lives at risk to help us and our service members and our diplomats on the ground," Kim said.

In North Carolina, which is home to Fort Bragg, Republican Sen. Thom Tillis has been working with veterans from the 82nd Airborne to help people he said they consider "brothers and sisters" in arms, having worked alongside the U.S. troops for years.

"They've seen their families grow up, they spent time on the battlefield, they saw people die there," Tillis said.

Tillis pushed back against those critics, particularly in his own Republican Party, who warn against welcoming the foreigners out of fears they could be terrorists themselves. "You probably ought to get to know them, maybe get to know their story and welcome them to this country," he said. "We owe them a debt of gratitude for saving American lives."

On Thursday, he said his office has a list of 1,000 people in Afghanistan he's trying to help evacuate — and he's just one senator out of 100.

"Focus on the math," he said. "That's one office, and it's growing every single day. ... It's fairly easy to see how the number gets up in the tens of thousands."

For all the horror stories lawmakers are hearing about people being turned away or having their papers ripped, they are getting word of some successes. Bacon said his team helped arrange for the rescue of an American family by helicopter, plus the evacuation of an Afghan general and his family.

"Our folks can know that, for the rest of their lives, they made a lifetime impact on a family," Bacon said. "They can cherish that until the day they die."

Swalwell beamed at the photo of one little smiling Afghan girl who made it out safely. "That's what keeps us going," he said.

"It's like one photo of joy for hundreds of stories that are painful and may not have a happy ending."

## 3 groups of students freed in Nigeria in 24-hour period

By CHINEDU ASADU and KRISTA LARSON Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Authorities in northern Nigeria announced three separate groups of kidnapped students were freed within a 24-hour period, prompting speculation late Friday that large ransoms had been paid to the gunmen blamed for a spate of recent abductions.

Among those now free are some of the youngest children ever taken hostage in Nigeria, a group of 90 pupils who had spent three months in captivity. Hours after those youngsters were brought to the Niger state capital, police in Zamfara state said that 15 older students also had been freed there.

Then late Friday, word came of a third hostage liberation in Kaduna state. Thirty-two more of the stu-

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dents taken from a Baptist high school in early July also had been freed, according to the Rev. Joseph Hayab, chairman of the Kaduna state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

The wave of releases comes after more than 1,000 students have been kidnapped since December, according to an AP tally. While earlier school abductions had been blamed on Islamic extremists in the northeast, authorities have only said that bandits are behind the latest kidnappings for ransom.

"The happiness can't be quantified," said Yahya Aliyu Babangida, 54, a teacher whose two children aged 7 and 17 were among those who had been kidnapped from the Salihu Tanko Islamic School in Tegina in late May.

Gunmen at first kidnapers even the preschoolers, only to leave them behind when they could not keep pace in the nearby forest. Some who spent months in captivity were just 4 years old, and authorities said Friday that one child had died during the ordeal. Several others were undergoing medical treatment after their release late Thursday.

"They are exposed to this harsh weather, no food, mosquitos everywhere," he said. "Some of them had never been outside the comfort of their homes."

News of the children's release was celebrated across Nigeria, where abductions have stepped up pressure on the government to do more to secure educational facilities in remote areas.

But questions remained Friday about how much ransom had been paid to secure the children's release, and if so whether that could in turn fuel further abductions by the unknown armed groups referred to locally as bandits.

Muhammad Musa Kawule, 42, acknowledged paying intermediaries in hopes of securing his 6-year-old daughter's freedom.

"I spent a lot of money but today, I'm happy," he told The Associated Press on Friday. He did not specify how much he had paid nor whether government officials had been involved.

The youngsters were later brought to the Niger state capital, Minna, where they underwent medical check-ups and met the governor. Video showed scores of children as young as kindergartners come out of white minibuses, the little girls wearing long blue hijabs known as chadors.

While Nigeria has seen scores of school abductions for ransom, the Niger state kidnappings left people aghast because the children were so young. The ramifications also could be long lasting as parents reconsider whether to send their children to school.

"This has affected the morale and confidence of the people and has even made parents think twice before they send their children to school," Niger state Gov. Abubakar Sani Bello said of the children's abduction. "We will do whatever it takes to bring (the kidnapers) to justice."

As the attacks have mounted across the north, there are also signs they are becoming more violent.

After one kidnapping at a university in Kaduna state earlier this year, gunmen demanded ransoms equivalent to hundreds of thousands of dollars. They killed five students to compel other students' parents to raise the money and later released 14.

Also Friday, Zamfara state police spokesman Mohammed Shehu said that 15 other students had been handed over to officials on Friday, 11 days after they were abducted from the College of Agriculture and Animal Science in Nigeria's troubled northwest.

It was not immediately clear how they were rescued, but the students are now being looked after by Zamfara state officials and will soon be reunited with their parents, authorities said.

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Larson reported from Dakar, Senegal. Associated Press journalists Ajayi Taiwo Oluwole in Minna, Nigeria and John Shiklam in Kaduna, Nigeria also contributed.

## Judge blocks Florida governor's order banning mask mandates

By TERRY SPENCER and CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Florida school districts can legally require their students to wear masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19, a judge ruled Friday, saying Gov. Ron DeSantis overstepped his au-



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thority when he issued an executive order banning such mandates.

Leon County Circuit Judge John C. Cooper agreed with a group of parents who claimed in a lawsuit that DeSantis' order is unconstitutional and cannot be enforced. The governor's order gave parents the sole right to decide if their child wears a mask at school.

Cooper said DeSantis' order "is without legal authority."

His decision came after a four-day virtual hearing, and after 10 Florida school boards voted to defy DeSantis and impose mask requirements with no parental opt-out. Districts that have done so include Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Tampa, Jacksonville, West Palm Beach and others. Cooper's ruling will not go into effect until it is put into writing, which the judge asked the parents' lawyers to complete by Monday.

Cooper said that while the governor and others have argued that a new Florida law gives parents the ultimate authority to oversee health issues for their children, it also exempts government actions that are needed to protect public health and are reasonable and limited in scope. He said a school district's decision to require student masking to prevent the spread of the virus falls within that exemption.

The law "doesn't ban mask mandates at all," Cooper said during a two-hour hearing that was conducted online because of the resurgent pandemic. "It doesn't require that a mask mandate must include a parental opt-out at all."

The judge also noted that two Florida Supreme Court decisions from 1914 and 1939 found that individual rights are limited by their impact on the rights of others. For example, he said, adults have the right to drink alcohol but not to drive drunk, because that endangers others. There is a right to free speech, but not to harass or threaten others or yell "fire" in a crowded theater, he said.

In that same vein, he said, school boards can reasonably argue that maskless students endanger the health of other students and teachers.

DeSantis has dismissed the recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that people wear masks, questioning its legitimacy and saying it is not applicable to Florida. But Cooper said the state's medical experts who testified during the trial that masking is ineffective in preventing COVID-19's spread are in a distinct minority among doctors and scientists. He also said that while DeSantis frequently states that a Brown University study concluded masks are ineffective, the study's authors wrote that no such conclusion should be drawn.

"I don't say that the governor has time enough to read a report that thick, but his advisers do ... and that statement is incorrect," Cooper said.

The governor's office said Friday that Cooper's decision wasn't based on the law and the state will appeal it.

"It's not surprising that Judge Cooper would rule against parents' rights and their ability to make the best educational and medical decisions for their family, but instead rule in favor of elected politicians," spokeswoman Taryn Fenske said in a statement. "This ruling was made with incoherent justifications, not based in science and facts — frankly not even remotely focused on the merits of the case presented."

Craig Whisenhunt, one of the attorneys representing the parents, called DeSantis' actions in the case "atrocious" and called him "a bully in the room that is beating up children."

"The path that he took showed evidence of some cowardice," he said. If DeSantis really believed the parental rights law barred districts from imposing mask mandates, he wouldn't have issued an executive order — he would have taken the districts to court and gotten a judge to block them, Whisenhunt said.

One of the parents who sued the state, Amy Nell of the Tampa area, said that when Cooper ruled, "I really felt heard for the first time in a while."

"Since the beginning of the school year it has felt like bizarro world. We are being told that science — what we think it is and everything we know about viruses — may be not true," said Nell, whose son is in elementary school.

The highly contagious delta variant led to an acceleration in cases around Florida and record high hospitalizations just as schools prepared to reopen classrooms this month. By mid-August, more than 21,000 new cases were being added per day, compared with about 8,500 a month earlier. Over the past week, new cases and hospitalizations have leveled off. There were 16,550 people hospitalized on Thursday, down from

a record of above 17,000 last week — but still almost nine times the 1,800 who were hospitalized in June.

The 10 districts that have defied DeSantis' order represent slightly more than half of the 2.8 million Florida public school students enrolled this year. The governor, a Republican who is eyeing a possible presidential run in 2024, had threatened to impose financial penalties on school boards, specifically threatening two districts in Democratic strongholds that voted for strict mask mandates. Democratic President Joe Biden said if that happened, federal money would be used to cover any costs.

The superintendent of one of the targeted districts, Carlee Simon of Alachua, said in a written statement that Cooper's ruling "is a validation of the right of locally-elected school boards to protect their students and communities during this crisis without fear of political or financial retribution."

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

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Anderson reported from Tampa, Florida.

## House panel seeks records from tech companies in riot probe

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the riot at the U.S. Capitol issued sweeping document requests on Friday to social media companies, expanding the scope of its investigation as it seeks to examine the events leading to the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The requests were issued to technology giants, including Google, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, and also to Reddit, Parler, Telegram, 4chan, 8kun and other platforms.

The committee asked 15 companies to provide copies of any reviews, studies, reports or analysis about misinformation related to the 2020 election, foreign influence in the election, efforts to stop the election certification and "domestic violent extremists" associated with efforts to overturn the 2020 election, including the attack on the Capitol.

"We have received the request and look forward to continuing to work with the committee," Facebook said in an emailed statement.

Google, which owns YouTube, also confirmed receipt of the letter and said it would work with Congress. "The events of January 6 were unprecedented and tragic, and Google and YouTube strongly condemn them. We're committed to protecting our platforms from abuse, including by rigorously enforcing our policies for content related to the events of January 6," the company said.

Twitter declined comment about the document request.

The requested documents are being sought in what is expected to be a 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.

Earlier this week, the committee sent out another request for documents from intelligence, law enforcement and other government agencies. The largest request so far was made to the National Archives for information on former President Donald Trump and his former team. Trump accused the committee of violating "long-standing legal principles of privilege."

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, wounded dozens of police officers and did more than \$1 million in damage.

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Associated Press writer Barbara Ortutay contributed to this story from San Francisco.

## Biden tells Israeli PM he'll try diplomacy first with Iran

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By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Friday that diplomacy was his first option, but he would consider other options if his effort to revive the Iran nuclear deal fails.

Biden made the comments as the two sat down for their first face-to-face meeting since Bennett was sworn-in as prime minister in June.

“We’re putting diplomacy first and seeing where that takes us,” Biden said during an Oval Office meeting that was delayed by the suicide bomb attack in Afghanistan. “But if diplomacy fails, we’re ready to turn to other options.”

Asked what other options Biden might be mulling, White House press secretary Jen Psaki declined to comment.

Bennett arrived at the White House aiming to dissuade Biden from returning to the Iran nuclear deal that was brokered during the Obama administration and later scrapped by President Donald Trump.

Since the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018, Tehran over time has abandoned 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.

Bennett said he came with his own strategy to thwart Iran’s nuclear ambitions that he would discuss in private with Biden. He expressed satisfaction that the two leaders were in sync on the notion that Iran should never be allowed to have a nuclear weapon.

“Iran is the world’s number one exporter of terror, instability, and human rights violations,” Bennett said. “And as we sit here right now the Iranians are spinning their centrifuges in Natanz and Fordo. And we got to stop it, and we both agree.”

The meeting, originally scheduled for Thursday, was postponed for one day as Biden focused his attention on dealing with the aftermath of a suicide bomb attack at the Kabul airport that killed 13 U.S. troops.

The two spoke by phone Thursday evening, with the Israeli leader offering Biden condolences. In their Oval Office meeting, Bennett again offered his condolences over the loss of U.S. service members.

Bennett made clear his opposition to an Iran deal, arguing that Tehran has already advanced in its uranium enrichment and that sanctions relief would give Iran more resources to support Israel’s enemies in the region.

“These very days illustrate what the world would look like if a radical Islamic regime acquired a nuclear weapon,” Bennett said. “That marriage would be a nuclear nightmare for the entire world.”

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 is his first to the U.S. as prime minister.

Bennett told his Cabinet before 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 to find a path to salvage the 2015 landmark pact negotiated by the Obama administration. But indirect talks between the U.S. and Iran have stalled and Washington continues to maintain crippling sanctions on the country as regional hostilities simmer.

Bennett’s Washington visit 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 ahead of the talks, said the administration sees the maximum pressure campaign employed by the Trump administration as having

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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 President Barack Obama. Biden, who noted Friday that he 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 and Bennett also have their differences. Bennett opposes the creation of a Palestinian state and supports expansion of settlements in the West Bank, which Biden opposes.

The two sides played down the Palestinian issue Friday in an apparent attempt to avoid any public friction at this early stage of their relationship.

Given the poor prospects for progress in diplomatic talks with the Palestinians, both men appeared to be more interested in shoring up the new Israeli government in their first in-person talks.

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Associated Press writer Josef Federman in Jerusalem contributed reporting.

## **NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week**

By ALI SWENSON and BEATRICE DUPUY Associated Press

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

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No, COVID-19 vaccine deaths do not outnumber virus deaths

CLAIM: Data shows that COVID-19 vaccines are more deadly than the virus itself.

THE FACTS: An article shared widely on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Telegram, misrepresents data from Scotland to falsely conclude that getting the COVID-19 vaccine is more dangerous than getting the virus. In fact, reports of death resulting from COVID-19 vaccination are rare while more than 4 million people worldwide have died from COVID-19. Yet the article claims "more people have died due to the Covid-19 vaccine in 8 months than people who have died of Covid-19 in 18 months." This bogus claim rests on U.K. data presented without proper context, according to an Associated Press analysis confirmed by medical experts. The article cites data from Scotland's national public health agency that shows that between Dec. 2020 and June 2021, 5,522 people died within 28 days of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. It compares that number to a report from the National Records of Scotland showing that between March 2020 and July 2021, 704 people who had no pre-existing conditions died of COVID-19 in Scotland. But using those figures alone leaves out key context. Public Health Scotland explains that though 5,522 people did die within 28 days of receiving a vaccine, that number includes "all recorded deaths due to any cause and does not refer to deaths caused by the vaccine itself." The agency adds that this tally of coincidental post-vaccine deaths is actually lower than the 8,718 deaths that would be expected based on average monthly death rates in Scotland. National Records of Scotland Communications Manager Ewan Mathieson told the AP that out of millions who have received COVID-19 vaccine doses in Scotland, a total of four people there have died from adverse effects of the shot. Reducing virus deaths in Scotland to the 704 people without pre-existing conditions is also misleading, because it excludes anyone who had any condition that preceded COVID-19 or was listed as a contributory factor in their death. In total in Scotland between March 2020 and August 2021, there have been more than 10,000 deaths involving COVID-19, Mathieson said. The article also points to reports made to the British government's Yellow Card scheme, a program for reporting adverse drug reactions. It claims that nearly 300,000 adverse reactions and 501 deaths reported through the program are proof that the vaccines are dangerous and can be deadly. That's not accurate, according to the U.K. government, which explains that any member of the public can submit suspected side effects so the Yellow Card reports should not be considered conclusive.



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"The nature of Yellow Card reporting means that reported events are not always proven side effects," the U.K.'s Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency explains on its website. "Some events may have happened anyway, regardless of vaccination. This is particularly the case when millions of people are vaccinated, and especially when most vaccines are being given to the most elderly people and people who have underlying illness." Sheena Cruickshank, a professor and immunologist at the University of Manchester, called the piece an "irresponsible article that is using data in an unethical way." In an email to the AP, Cruickshank wrote: "Current data clearly shows that unvaccinated people are much more at risk of catching the delta variant of COVID and being hospitalised or dying. The vaccines are proving highly effective against protecting against the worst effects of this condition."

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report.

Video clip of Ohio school board meeting spreads vaccine falsehoods

CLAIM: People who have been vaccinated are going to die within six months to five years; COVID-19 vaccines will sterilize children permanently; 80 percent of women who have been jabbed have miscarried in the first trimester; people who are vaccinated are banned from donating blood.

THE FACTS: A video clip of a speaker sharing several false claims about COVID-19 vaccines during a school board meeting in Ohio made the rounds on social media. Sean Brooks introduced himself at the Talawanda School District meeting on Aug. 16 as a doctor who has a Ph.D. According to his website, it is in education rather than science. No evidence can be found to back up several of the claims Brooks makes in the clip, including his prophecy that people who have been vaccinated will die within months or years due to the shot. Data from millions of people who have been vaccinated shows COVID-19 vaccines prevent deaths. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave full approval to Pfizer for its vaccine on Monday after reviewing six months of safety data. The FDA had previously granted Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson emergency use authorization for their COVID-19 vaccines based on safety data that tracked more than 70,000 people through clinical trials up to two months after they received shots. "The safety data now exists for a full year and in some cases 18 months," said Dr. Matthew Woodruff, an immunologist at Emory University. "We have seen over and over again no indications that the immune responses to these vaccines are functionally different to immune responses from other vaccines." Furthermore, medical professionals agree that COVID-19 vaccines do not affect fertility, do not cause sterilization and are safe for pregnant people. A Pfizer study found that just as many women who were given the vaccine became pregnant as those who received placebo shots. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is encouraging pregnant women to receive the vaccine, particularly since pregnant women are at elevated risk for severe disease if they contract coronavirus. Brooks' comment that 80 percent of women miscarried is not backed up by any evidence and is contradicted by available data. A CDC analysis found that 2,500 women who received a dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine before 20 weeks of pregnancy showed no increased risk of miscarriage. His claim that vaccinated people cannot donate blood is also false. Blood centers, including The American Red Cross, are accepting donations from people who have received the COVID-19 vaccines and are encouraging vaccinated individuals to give blood. The American Association of Blood Banks has said that the FDA's blood donation eligibility criteria includes people who have received vaccines authorized in the U.S. Brooks did not return a request for comment.

— Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

COVID-19 vaccines don't destroy T cells or weaken immune system

CLAIM: A study from the Francis Crick Institute in London found that Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine destroys a type of white blood cell called the T cell and weakens the immune system.

THE FACTS: The vaccine doesn't destroy T cells or weaken the immune system. On the contrary, it generates a strong T cell response and boosts immunity, according to experts. Articles spreading on social media this week misrepresent the Francis Crick Institute study, which looked at the ability of COVID-19 vaccines to produce neutralizing antibodies against viral variants and did not examine T cells. "Our work to date has not studied T cells at all," Francis Crick Institute researcher and study author Dr. David Bauer

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told the AP in an email. "All research published to date shows that the Pfizer (and other) vaccines generate a strong, positive, protective T-cell response against SARS-CoV-2." Outside experts confirmed that the COVID-19 vaccines don't destroy or damage T cells. "There's a lot of data that shows that the vaccines induce strong T cell responses that recognize the virus and probably lead to protection," said Dr. Joel Blankson, a professor of medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine who has personally studied T cell responses to COVID-19 vaccines. The claim that the vaccines weaken the immune system is also false, Bauer confirmed. Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others shows the vaccines boost the immune response. The mRNA vaccines work by training the immune system to recognize the spike protein on the surface of the virus to generate an immune response. The Francis Crick Institute study examined how antibodies generated by COVID-19 vaccines are able to neutralize new strains of the virus. Bauer and other experts confirm that getting the vaccine offers more protection against the delta variant than going without it.

— Ali Swenson

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Video shows airstrike in Gaza, not explosion in Kabul

CLAIM: Video shows the second explosion outside Afghanistan's Kabul airport on Thursday near Baron Hotel.

THE FACTS: As social media users began sharing photos and footage of Thursday's deadly attack at Kabul's airport, several old images and videos were shared as new. One video showing an airstrike tinting a night sky orange in Gaza, which has appeared repeatedly online since at least Aug. 21, circulated widely with false claims it showed Thursday's second explosion in Kabul. "#BREAKING : Second explosion hit Baron Hotel near #Kabul airport where Americans were rescued last week," one Twitter user wrote alongside the video. But the video shows an airstrike in Gaza, according to several news reports and social media posts with the video shared days before the Kabul attacks. The open source intelligence network Aurora Intel and news outlets including Al Jazeera shared the photo online on Aug. 21 with captions explaining it showed an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. A spokesperson for the Israeli military also shared the video on Aug. 21, writing in a caption in Arabic that it showed warplanes raiding sites belonging to the Hamas militant group. Thursday's bombing near the airport killed well over 100 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, Afghan and U.S. officials said. It was the deadliest day for American forces in Afghanistan since August 2011. The Pentagon said Friday that there was just one suicide bomber — at the airport gate — not two, as U.S. officials initially said.

— Ali Swenson

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## **Powell: Fed on track to slow aid for economy later this year**

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve will start dialing back its ultra-low-rate policies this year as long as hiring continues to improve, Chair Jerome Powell said Friday, signaling the beginning of the end of the Fed's extraordinary response to the pandemic recession.

In a speech given virtually to an annual gathering of central bankers and academics, Powell said the economy had improved significantly this year, with average hiring in the past three months reaching the highest level on record for any similar period before the pandemic. Fed officials are monitoring the rapid rise in infections from the delta variant, he said, but they expect healthy job gains to continue.

The Fed has been buying \$120 billion a month in mortgage and Treasury bonds to try to hold down longer-term loan rates to spur borrowing and spending. Powell's comments indicate the Fed will likely announce a reduction — or "tapering" — of those purchases sometime in the final three months of this year.

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Most economists expect the announcement in November, with tapering actually beginning in December.

Powell stressed that the Fed's tapering of its bond purchases does not signal that it plans anytime soon to start raising its benchmark short-term rate, which it's kept near zero since the pandemic tore through the economy in March 2020. Rate hikes won't likely begin until the Fed has finished winding down its bond purchases, which might not occur until mid-2022. Powell said the Fed would need to see much further economic improvement before it would begin raising its key rate, which influences many consumer and business loans.

"We have much ground to cover to reach maximum employment, and time will tell whether we have reached 2% inflation on a sustainable basis," Powell said, referring to the Fed's target inflation rate.

Inflation is much higher than 2% now, Powell acknowledged, but he underscored his view that the current price spike is temporary. He warned that history shows that raising rates too soon, in response to temporary price increases, can weaken hiring and hurt the unemployed.

Such comments bolstered the notion that the Fed is still a long way off from raising its benchmark short-term rate.

"If anything this was a calming speech," said Brian Bethune, an economist at Boston College. "There's nothing here in the short run that will stampede interest rates higher."

Over time, the end of the Fed's bond-buying could put upward pressure on borrowing costs for mortgages, credit cards, and business loans. As Powell spoke Friday, though, the yield on the 10-year Treasury note, which closely influences the 30-year mortgage rate, declined to 1.32% from 1.34% Thursday.

Stock investors, too, appeared to welcome Powell's message of a gradual withdrawal of the Fed's economic support and his view that surging inflation pressures will likely prove temporary. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose a sharp 230 points, or nearly 0.7%, several hours after the Fed chair spoke.

"Markets appreciate that there is a different test for raising rates than there is for tapering, and any communications on tapering don't have any direct effect on raising rates," said Steve Friedman, an economist at asset manager MacKay Shields and a former senior staffer at the New York Fed.

That marks a sharp contrast with 2013, when Ben Bernanke, then the Fed chair, triggered what came to be known as the "taper tantrum" by unexpectedly suggesting that the Fed would soon reduce an earlier round of bond buys — a remark that sent longer-term rates spiking. The jump in rates occurred partly because investors thought the beginning of a taper meant that rate hikes were close behind, which turned out not to be true.

On Friday, Powell said inflation has risen enough to meet the test of "substantial further progress" toward the Fed's goal of 2% annual inflation over time, which was necessary to begin tapering. There has also been "clear progress," he said, toward the Fed's goal of maximum employment. He spoke via webcast to the Jackson Hole Economic Symposium, which is being held virtually for a second straight year because of COVID-19.

But Powell suggested that while inflation has surged, causing difficulties for millions of Americans, the price acceleration should ease once the economy further normalizes from the pandemic and supply shortages abate.

If the Fed were to reduce its stimulus "in response to factors that turn out to be temporary," the Fed chair cautioned, "the ill-timed policy move unnecessarily slows hiring and other economic activity and pushes inflation lower than desired."

Powell also noted that while average wages have risen, they haven't increased enough to raise fears of a "wage-price spiral," as occurred during the ultra-high-inflation 1970s.

"Today," he said, "we see little evidence of wage increases that might threaten excessive inflation."

If anything, Powell said, the factors that helped keep inflation super-low for years before the pandemic — the growth of online retail, lower-cost goods from overseas, slowing population growth — could re-emerge as the pandemic fades.

Yet Powell's comments served to underscore what looks like a divide on the Fed's policymaking committee between himself, along with other officials such as Fed Governor Lael Brainard who favor patience in

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reversing the low-rate policies, and other policymakers who are pushing for a taper to begin soon so that a rate hike could quickly follow, if needed.

"Let's start the taper, and let's do it quickly," Raphael Bostic, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, said early Friday on CNBC before Powell's speech. Bostic said he expects the central bank to raise rates in late 2022 — earlier than the average among all Fed policymakers, who project the first rate hike in mid-2023.

Bostic and some of his fellow Fed regional bank presidents, including Jim Bullard of the St. Louis Fed, Robert Kaplan of the Dallas Fed and Eric Rosengren of the Boston Fed, say they worry that high inflation will persist longer than Powell appears to believe. Some of these Fed bank presidents report that business people they speak with say they're continuing to raise prices to offset their own higher costs for wages and parts.

A sharp jump in inflation has put the Fed's ultra-low-rate policies under growing scrutiny, both in Congress and among ordinary households that are paying more for food, gas, and hotel stays. Inflation, according to the Fed's preferred gauge, rose 3.6% in July compared with a year earlier, the biggest increase in three decades. The month-to-month increase, however, slowed from 0.5% to 0.3%.

Complicating the Fed's decision-making, the resurgence of the pandemic has confounded the Fed's expectations that the economy and job market would be on a clear path to improvement by this fall. The delta variant could slow spending in such areas as air travel, restaurant meals and entertainment.

AP Economics Writer Paul Wiseman contributed to this report.

## Alone in the sky, pilot and fiancée save 17 in Tenn. flood

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Nashville-based helicopter pilot Joel Boyers had just finished helping his fiancée earn her pilot's license on Saturday morning, and they were heading home to celebrate, when he received a frantic call from a woman in Pennsylvania. Her brother's home in Waverly, Tennessee, was underwater and he was trapped on a roof with his daughters. Could Boyers help?

"I thought, 'How would I feel if I told her I'm not even going to try?'" he said in a Thursday interview. "She just so happened to call the right person, because I'm the only person crazy enough to even try to do that."

The weather was terrible and Boyers had to contend with hills and high-voltage power lines on the way to Waverly, a small city about 60 miles (96 kilometers) west of Nashville. Just before reaching the town, he set down in a field to get his bearings and realized the internet was down, making it impossible to pinpoint the house he was looking for. He flew on anyway.

"As soon as I popped over the ridge, it was nothing but tan raging water below me," he said. "There were two houses that were on fire. There were cars in trees. There was tons of debris. Any way debris could get caught, it was. I knew no one was going to be able to swim in that."

A few people were out in boats, rescuing the stranded, and one person was helping with a jet ski, but Boyers was alone in the sky. He started flying up and down the flooded creek, grabbing anyone he could.

Boyers, who co-owns Helistar Aviation, said he ended up rescuing 17 people that day. He's proud of that, but said he's the one who should be thanking them. "I literally prayed just days before this that God would give me some meaning in my life, and then I end up getting this call," he said.

He has flown over disasters, including floods, before, but "the cops are usually there, and my hands are tied. This time there weren't any."

Saturday's flooding killed 20 people, taking out houses, roads, cellphone towers and telephone lines, with rainfall that more than tripled forecasts and shattered the state record for one-day rainfall. More than 270 homes were destroyed and 160 took major damage, according to the Humphreys County Emergency Management Agency.

To perform the rescues, Boyers had to maneuver around power lines, balance his skids on sloped roof-



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tops, and hover over floodwaters. It took all the skills learned over 16 years flying, including for a television news station, for documentaries and for country music stars.

"I don't want to lie," he said. "It was almost a little fun for me."

It was also a powerful experience to go through with his fiancée, Melody Among, who acted as his co-pilot, spotting power lines, giving him sips of water and even taking the controls at times. "Her and I will be bonded to those people for life," he said.

At one point, he spotted four people on the ledge of a roof of a farm supply store where he was able to set down one skid, making three different trips to pick them all up. One was a woman who said she had watched her husband get swept away and had become separated from her daughter, who was on the roof of a nearby gas station. Boyers touched down and rescued the daughter too.

The rescues of four of those people were caught on video by Jeani Rice-Cranford, who lives on a nearby hilltop and helped shelter the victims in her home afterward. "I've never seen anything like that," Rice-Cranford said. "Not in real life."

Rice-Cranford and others had been lined up along the roadside — helplessly watching and listening to the screams — for more than two hours when Boyers showed up. During the rescue "there was a gust of wind, and the helicopter kind of shifted," Rice-Cranford said. "We all just held our breath. We were just watching with our mouths open, hoping and praying that he would be able to get them."

That rescue stands out in Among's mind. They got the mother first, "then we got the daughter and they reunited on the ground," she said. "They were both hugging each other. It was very emotional."

At another point, they saw a house on a rise, surrounded by floodwaters but not yet engulfed. Boyers touched down, picking up two men, and saw a girl in the window who refused to come out. He flew out, dropped off one of the men and Among, and brought the other man back with him to hoist the girl into the helicopter. When he landed again, he was able to rescue the girl and a woman who was with her.

"I'm in a little hole with power lines all around. It takes enormous energy to take off vertically like that," he said. So he left the man briefly and then came back for him. "I just kept doing that over and over again until I was low on fuel."

All the time, he knew he really was not supposed to be doing any of this.

"Every landing was pretty dangerous," he said. He's already had a conversation with the Federal Aviation Administration about it.

"I know the FAA can take my license away if they see me flying like that," he said. He assured them that he did not charge anyone for the rescue, no one was hurt, the helicopter was not damaged, and there were no law enforcement helicopters in the area. After he left Waverly, he stopped at an airport in the nearby town of Dickson to refuel and heard that the state police and National Guard still had not flown in because of the bad weather.

Boyers said he heard from the woman who originally called him in her desperate search for a helicopter anywhere near Waverly. She said her family was safe, but he doesn't even know if he rescued them or someone else did.

Pulling people from the floodwaters isn't the scariest thing he's ever done, Boyers said. That would have to be flying through clouds on instruments only, with some of those instruments out of order.

"Literally, it just felt like I was working," he said. "Obviously I tabled the feeling wrenching in everyone's stomach because of the devastation."

## Taliban success in Afghanistan seen as boost for extremists

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A few days after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, a convoy of militants drove through the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria in cars bearing the group's white-and-black flags, honking horns and firing their guns in the air.

The celebrations by an al-Qaida affiliate in a remote corner of war-torn Syria were an expression of the triumph felt by radical Islamic groups from the Gaza Strip to Pakistan and West Africa who see America's

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violence-marred exit from Afghanistan an opportunity to reassert their presence.

For such groups, the chaotic U.S. departure following the collapse of security forces it had trained for two decades is a gift, underlining their message that Washington eventually abandons its allies, and that defeating powerful armies is possible with enough patience.

"The success of the Taliban opens the way for radical groups to step up their recruitment operations globally. It is much easier for them now, and there is more receptivity," said Hassan Abu Haniyeh, an expert on Islamic militants based in Amman, Jordan.

Despite the billions of dollars spent by the U.S. and NATO over nearly 20 years to build up Afghan security forces, the Taliban seized nearly all of Afghanistan in just over a week amid the U.S. troop pullout. The fundamentalist group swept into Kabul on Aug. 15 after the government collapsed and embattled President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

Since then, tens of thousands of people desperate to escape a country governed by the Taliban have been trying to flee or already have been evacuated in a mammoth Western airlift.

"The events unfolding in Afghanistan have given jihadi groups and U.S. adversaries reason to celebrate, and America's allies in the region reason to feel anxious," said Abu Haniyeh. "They now feel that America might drop them one day, same as it did the government of Ashraf Ghani."

There are concerns that Afghanistan will once again become a base for militants to plot against the West, much like the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that triggered the U.S. invasion.

"This is the story that is going to impact and influence jihadi fighters around the globe for the next decade, the same way as the victory over the Soviets in Afghanistan in the '80s inspired the jihadis around the world during the whole 1990s and even afterwards," said Elie Tenenbaum, director of security studies center at the French Institute of International Relations.

In a twist, the Taliban victory also boosted the fortunes of their rivals in Afghanistan — a local branch of the Islamic State network. On Thursday, the affiliate claimed responsibility for the suicide attack that killed scores of people outside Kabul's airport, including 13 U.S. service members.

The Taliban now must contend with an emboldened IS, which is challenging their rule with militants that are far more radical. The group's ranks have been bolstered after the Taliban freed prisoners during an advance through Afghanistan.

An editorial in the Islamic State group's newsletter last week derided the Taliban, accusing them of collaborating with the U.S.

"America actually did it. They finally raised a 'Mullah Bradley,'" the editorial said, using a name it has coined for the Taliban in an apparent reference to the U.S. fighting vehicle. The group also promised a new phase in its "blessed jihad" against the West.

Analysts say the Taliban's success and the U.S. withdrawal galvanizes and gives a motivational boost to America's adversaries and jihadi groups around the world.

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon's Shiite militant group Hezbollah, said in a speech Friday that what is unfolding in Afghanistan "is a portrayal of America's full defeat and the U.S. demise and failure in the region."

In northern Syria, a statement by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the al-Qaida affiliate there, said the Taliban victory proved no occupation can last forever. The leader of the radical Palestinian Islamic Hamas movement, which rules the Gaza Strip, congratulated the Taliban's leader on the "demise of the U.S. occupation."

In Pakistan, the leader of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Mohammad Azhar, used the group's publication to cheer the Taliban victory, saying it will inspire mujahedeen, or holy warriors, "the world over to continue their struggle for Islam." The group's fighters took credit for the 2019 attack in the disputed Kashmir region that killed 40 Indian soldiers and brought the nuclear-armed neighbors to the brink of war.

Amir Rana, executive director of the Islamabad-based Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, said the events in Afghanistan could inspire hard-line Sunni groups who are waging sectarian battles against Shiites. The anti-Shiite groups Lashkar-e-Janghvi and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan have championed the Taliban victory, raising fears they could restart their deadly activities.

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Heni Nsaibia, a senior Sahel researcher at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, said the Taliban takeover would be a motivational boost for extremists in West Africa, showing that patience and perseverance can pay off.

The biggest danger, according to the analysts, is in unstable countries with a weak central government and a history of insurgency, such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya.

There are echoes of 2014, when the Islamic State group sprang from the chaos of conflicts in Iraq and Syria, seized a giant stretch of territory straddling both countries, and declared a "caliphate" after U.S.-trained Iraqi forces collapsed. Terrorist attacks in Europe and beyond followed before IS was defeated in 2017, but attempts to regroup have been seen in the past two years, with new attacks in Iraq and Syria.

A report to the U.N. Security Council last week said the threat to international security from the Islamic State group is rising, pointing to an "alarming" expansion of its affiliates in Africa and its focus on a comeback in Syria and Iraq.

The report said IS and other terrorist groups have taken advantage of "the disruption, grievances and development setbacks" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abu Haniyeh, the analyst in Amman, said the perceived defeat of U.S. forces in Afghanistan by a radical group is reverberating among frustrated individuals around the world and will have widespread ramifications in the coming years.

"It gives hope for extremist groups the world over," he said.

Associated Press writers Kathy Gannon in Islamabad, Pakistan, Jeffrey Schaeffer in Paris and Sam Mednick in Toronto contributed.

## **EXPLAINER: What happens when an ICU reaches capacity?**

By BEN FINLEY and SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The latest surge in coronavirus cases is overwhelming many intensive care units, causing hospitals and states to run out of ICU beds in some locations.

Kentucky and Texas broke records this week for COVID-19 hospitalizations, joining a handful of other states that had already reached the same milestone in recent weeks. Arkansas said it ran out of ICU beds for COVID-19 patients for the first time since the pandemic began.

Nearly 80% of the country's ICU beds — or about 68,000 — were in use Thursday, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. And about 30 percent of those beds, or nearly 25,000, were filled by someone with COVID-19.

As states get hammered by the super-transmissible delta variant, the surge has raised questions about what it means for individual patients in places where there are no available beds. Here are some answers: WHAT IS AN ICU?

ICUs are designed to care for the most acutely ill people. They employ more staff, specialists and equipment to keep patients alive. Machines monitor breathing and heart rates. "Crash carts" are at the ready with defibrillators and intubation tubes if people have trouble breathing or their hearts stop.

Typical patients have just undergone extensive surgery. Some could have major trauma from a car accident. And, of course, some could be sick with COVID-19. Their lungs are damaged, and they need ventilators. Nurses look after them — but so do pulmonologists, respiratory therapists and infectious disease specialists, among others.

"It's not just having staff — it's having the right kind of specialists or the right kind of nurse to be able to care for that individual," said Nancy Foster, vice president of quality and patient safety policy at the American Hospital Association.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN ICU REACHES OR EXCEEDS CAPACITY?

A maxed-out ICU can become a staffing and logistical nightmare.

Nurses who might normally take care of one patient now must keep three or four people alive. Non-ICU staff are brought in to assist. Patients can back up in emergency rooms waiting for an ICU bed to open

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up. And hospitals are forced to creatively convert space into makeshift ICU units.

At Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Georgia, the crush of COVID-19 patients has led to the recruitment of scores of employees who don't normally work on patient floors. They included Scott Steiner, the health system's president and CEO.

On Sunday, Steiner helped turn COVID-19 patients on their stomachs so their ravaged lungs could possibly take in more oxygen. The maneuver can require six people, depending on a patient's weight.

"This is all hands on deck," Steiner said.

On some campuses, the surge has displaced beds reserved for procedures such as colonoscopies or carpal tunnel surgery, said Roberta Schwartz, executive vice president of the Houston Methodist hospital system, where coronavirus patients filled nearly half the ICU beds earlier this week. A post-operation recovery bay was turned into ICU space.

Schwartz likened an inundated ICU to a home that is overwhelmed with overnight guests, and the host is blowing up air mattresses to accommodate.

"It's not very comfortable but it works," she said. "And a blow-up mattress is better than a sleeping bag, which is better than a tent outside."

HOW DOES IT AFFECT PATIENTS?

Patients may have to linger in emergency rooms waiting for an ICU bed, and that spills over to other patients.

This week, some Texas hospital systems closed temporarily their off-site emergency rooms and sent staff to their hospitals overstretched by COVID-19.

Patients who arrive at hospital emergency rooms could wait several hours — and sometimes days — to get into an already overwhelmed ICU.

"We basically do ICU in the emergency room," said Schwartz of Houston Methodist. "You may hold down there for 45 minutes, and you may hold for three days."

"You're going to get great care if you can come to one of our facilities," Schwartz added. "But ideally you want to get people up to the appropriate unit as quickly as you can."

Another impact is on people who live in rural areas, where ICUs are scarce. Fewer than 3% of ICU beds nationwide are in small rural hospitals, according to the American Hospital Association.

Requests often come into larger hospitals' ICUs to take in transfers.

"We can't take many of those patients because we are at capacity," said Dr. Steppe Mette, CEO of the medical center at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. "All of our ICUs are full. And our emergency room is full of patients needing ICUs."

HOW DOES IT AFFECT STAFF?

They are increasingly burning out.

This week in the ICUs of South Florida's Memorial Healthcare System, staff were at one point caring for 107 COVID-19 patients who were the "sickest of the sick," said Dr. Aharon Sareli.

Many failed to respond to steroids or other treatments. They needed ventilators and were facing the failure of multiple organs. Many were expected to die.

"It's physically and emotionally extremely draining for the staff," Sareli said.

Hospitals are already experiencing a labor shortage of nurses and other medical staff. Some staff are leaving, and those who are staying are disgruntled and losing compassion.

"I think they're also a bit stunned that 18 months in we're still doing it, and it's worse than ever," said Steiner of Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Georgia. "Some are just mad because so many people are not vaccinated."

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Finley reported from Norfolk, Virginia.

## Brazil water survey heightens alarm over extreme drought

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press



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RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The Brazilian scientists were skeptical. They ran different models to check calculations, but all returned the same startling result.

The country with the most freshwater resources on the planet steadily lost 15% of its surface water since 1991. Gradual retreat in the Brazilian share of the Pantanal, the world's largest tropical wetland, left water covering just one-quarter the area it did 30 years ago.

And the data only went through 2020 -- before this year's drought that is Brazil's worst in nine decades.

"When we got the first results, we wondered if there was a problem in the equations," said Cassio Bernardino, a project manager for environmental group WWF-Brazil, which took part in the survey along with Brazilian universities and local partners like the Amazon Environmental Research Institute, plus international collaborators including Google and The Nature Conservancy. They used artificial intelligence to parse some 150,000 satellite images measuring the surface of lakes, rivers, marshes and all surface water across Brazil.

The figures checked out, and the MapBiomas data published this week has heightened an existing sense of alarm. The ongoing drought has already boosted energy costs and food prices, withered crops, rendered vast swaths of forest more susceptible to wildfire and prompted specialists to warn of possible electricity shortages. President Jair Bolsonaro on Thursday said hydroelectric dam reservoirs are "at the limit of the limit."

"The prospects are not good; we're losing natural capital, we're losing water that feeds industries, energy generation and agribusiness," Bernardino said. Brazil's "society as a whole is losing this very precious resource, and losing it at a frighteningly fast rate."

The study accompanying MapBiomas's data hasn't been published yet. Two outside experts consulted by The Associated Press who reviewed the survey's methodology said the approach appears robust, and its scale offers important insight into Brazilian water resources. They noted, however, use of artificial intelligence to analyze satellite images without on-the-ground verification could increase the margin of error.

Evaporation is a part of the natural cycle that can diminish water resources, particularly in areas with shallower supplies like the Pantanal wetlands, which sprawl across up to 80,000 square miles in three countries. It is a persistent problem in places like Lake Mead and Lake Powell in the Colorado River basin.

The MapBiomas study didn't establish the extent to which Brazil's retreating water resources resulted from natural causes. But experts have warned human activity is affecting global weather patterns, causing more frequent extreme events such as severe droughts and floods. The cutting and burning of forest, construction of large hydroelectric plants and dams or reservoirs for crop irrigation, all contribute to shifting natural patterns, said Mažeika Patricio Sulliván, an ecology professor at Ohio State University.

"We're altering the magnitude of those natural processes," said Sulliván, a wetlands expert who has studied water systems in the U.S., South America, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean. "This is not just happening in Brazil, it's happening all over the world."

Sulliván said the MapBiomas data was "eye-popping," though unsurprising; nearly 90% of South America's wetland area is estimated to have vanished since 1900, and nearly 40% in North America, he said. Wetlands are essential to many species of wildlife and key to retaining water to be gradually released into rivers, which prevents flooding.

In Brazil's Amazon rainforest, water that evaporates then travels on air currents to provide rainfall far afield. But some climate experts argue that the Amazon is headed for a "tipping point" in 10 to 15 years: if too much forest is destroyed, the Amazon would begin an irreversible process of degradation into tropical savannah.

There are more immediate sources of alarm, like possible power rationing this year. Hydroelectric reservoirs have been drained by a decade of lower-than-usual rainfall. Reservoirs in the Parana River basin, which powers the metropolis Sao Paulo and several states, have never before been so depleted, the grid operator said this month.

The Parana River runs from Brazil into Argentina and along its course are the iconic Iguazu Falls at the border of the nations; the majestic cascades were unrecognizable for a few days in June, having dwindled to a trickle. The Parana waterway and its aquifers supply fresh water to some 40 million people, and a

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livelihood for fishing communities and farmers.

Brazil's energy minister Bento Albuquerque on Aug. 25 called a press conference to deny the possibility of rationing, while at the same time calling on companies and people to reduce power consumption. Some analysts have speculated dismissiveness is politically motivated ahead of an election year.

"At the current rate, blackouts are likely to happen this year, especially during peak hours," said Nivalde de Castro, coordinator of the electricity sector studies group at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Brazil's declining water resources also risk exacerbating fires that people often set during the Southern Hemisphere's winter to clear pasture, which then rage out of control.

Last year, more than one-quarter of Brazil's Pantanal went up in flames. It was by far the worst annual devastation since authorities started keeping records in 2003.

The Pantanal has strong capacity to regenerate if given the opportunity to do so without repeated burning events. A surge of fires in the past week stirred concern among locals.

"Once again, the specter of fires is back," said Angelo Rabelo, president of a local environmental group that oversees a protected area of about 300,000 hectares. Last year, 90% of his land was damaged by blazes.

Researchers at the State University of Mato Grosso found parts of the Pantanal in 2019 had 13% more days without any precipitation compared to the 1960s. Jibing with the MapBiomass study, their findings also showed the marshes were losing surface water.

"The scenario is even worse this year: drier, and with less water," Rabelo said from Corumba, a municipality in Mato Grosso do Sul state.

For Rabelo and others, last year's fires were a wake-up call. He formed a full-time private fire brigade of seven people — the Pantanal's first. They are better trained and have so far been able to respond faster, before fires spiral out of control.

But fresh challenges lie ahead. In areas without roads, navigation on smaller rivers can become problematic due to low water levels, Rabelo said. That means firefighters could soon have trouble reaching some blazes and, even if they can, less water available to extinguish them.

"The integration of water loss and wildfires: that's a big issue that we need to start thinking more about," said Sullivan.

## Virtual schools saw little disruption, got equal virus aid

By COLLIN BINKLEY and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — While many schools scrambled to shift to online classes last year, the nation's virtual charter schools faced little disruption. For them, online learning was already the norm. Most have few physical classrooms, or none at all.

Yet when Congress sent \$190 billion in pandemic aid to schools, virtual charters received just as much as any other school because the same formula applied to all schools, with more money going to those in high-poverty areas, an Associated Press investigation found.

"It's scandalous that they're getting that much money," said Gordon Lafer, an economist at the University of Oregon and school board member in Eugene, Oregon. "There were all kinds of costs that were extraordinary because of COVID, but online schools didn't have any of them."

The infusion of federal relief has inflamed a decades-long debate about the role of the nation's 200-plus fully virtual charter schools, which are publicly funded schools that operate independently or under the umbrella of public school districts. They generally offer classes through online learning platforms provided by private companies.

Leaders of online schools say virtual charters offer a valuable option for students who don't do well in traditional classrooms. But critics say they drain money from other schools and often lead to poor outcomes for students.

Using data provided by state governments, The Associated Press tracked more than \$550 million that went to virtual charters across the country over three rounds of pandemic relief. The analysis, which cov-

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ered allocations to 76 virtual schools in 10 states, showed that some online charters received among the highest funding rates in their states, getting as much per student as some of the poorest districts.

The federal government has not released nationwide data on the money given to virtual charters. Some states, including Wisconsin and Texas, said allocations for online schools were managed by local districts and not tracked by the state.

Most of the pandemic aid was distributed using the same formula as Title I money, the largest federal funding source for public schools. But some states also used discretionary pools of federal money to send additional help to virtual charters, including in Idaho, Minnesota and Ohio.

Of the 76 virtual schools tracked by the AP, more than a third are operated by the industry's two largest companies, Stride Inc. and Connections Academy. Others are run by different for-profit companies, while some are run by nonprofits or state or local governments.

Officials at virtual schools say the money was needed to serve a wave of students who transferred from traditional schools during the pandemic. But leaders of some traditional schools wonder why any aid went to virtual charters that were mostly conducting business as usual and did not have to worry about social distancing or sanitizing.

In Philadelphia, the Esperanza Cyber Charter School received \$11,300 per student, the highest rate among virtual schools tracked by the AP. That's compared with \$12,300 in Harrisburg public schools, one of Pennsylvania's poorest districts, and \$7,500 in Pittsburgh schools.

Esperanza, operated by a local nonprofit, teaches about 800 students in Philadelphia's Latino neighborhoods, with more than 90% coming from poverty.

When the pandemic hit last year, Esperanza never halted classes. Teachers started working from home instead of at the school's single building, but little changed for the student experience, said Jon Marsh, the school's CEO.

Marsh said he sees both sides of the debate over federal relief. His school's transition to pandemic teaching was relatively smooth, he said, but there were some new costs. The federal funding helped purchase computers and monitors for teachers, for instance, and new software to help students who are learning English.

Still, Esperanza's funding was immense for its size. It received nearly \$9 million, more than the school spends in a typical year. And so far, it has spent less than half of that sum, leaving school officials wondering how to use the remaining \$5 million.

"I would love to have the ability to distribute this money to families in need, but you can't. That's not on the list," Marsh said.

Other states with online schools include Ohio, where virtual charters received \$101 million in federal funding, and Oklahoma, where they got \$82 million. Smaller amounts went to virtual schools in states including Arizona, California, Idaho and Michigan.

Pennsylvania, long a battleground in the cyber school debate, saw the largest sum, with \$235 million going to 11 virtual schools. Those allotments rankled leaders of some traditional schools who said the money was desperately needed in public districts.

"It just doesn't add up to me when you look at the intent of the legislation," said Chris Celmer, who until recently served as acting superintendent in Harrisburg, which used its money to buy computers for students and is now improving ventilation across the district's 12 building. "Those dollars could have been distributed across the other 500 school districts across the state of Pennsylvania."

Commonwealth Charter Academy, the largest virtual school in Pennsylvania, saw its enrollment double last school year, to nearly 20,000 students.

Commonwealth was awarded about \$4,000 per student, totaling more than \$60 million. Much of the early funding was used to hire new teachers and buy laptops for students. More recent funding will be used to help students who are behind in reading, said Timothy Eller, a school spokesperson.

"Cyber charter school students are not second-class students," Eller said. "Just because they attend a cyber charter doesn't mean they should receive less funding."

For the online schooling industry, the pandemic has delivered an unprecedented financial boost.

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In April 2020, as students flocked to online charters, the financial chief for Stride Inc. told investors that COVID-19 would bring "a lasting tailwind to online education." Virtual schools, some of which spend millions of dollars a year on advertising, promoted themselves as a better alternative to public schools that were struggling to offer online classes.

Stride's latest financial reports showed a 48% increase in revenue since last year, with most of it coming from contracts with schools. The company did not respond to a request seeking information about its schools' federal aid.

The cost of adding new students is typically covered by schools' state funding, Lafer said, and virtual schools are designed to scale up services at a low cost.

"As far as I can see, the money is 100% pure profit," said Lafer, who has researched online charter schools.

Recognizing that virtual charters have lower costs, some states routinely fund them at lower rates than traditional schools. Some states applied the same logic when they disbursed discretionary pools of pandemic aid.

In South Carolina, Republican Gov. Henry McMaster gave charter schools \$9 million to offset enrollment increases. But while traditional charters received \$220 per student, virtual schools were given \$116 per student. Separately, McMaster wanted to use \$32 million of the federal pandemic aid to provide scholarships for students to attend private schools, but the state Supreme Court blocked the plan.

Even some virtual charters are questioning whether they need their full allotments. At Agora Cyber Charter School, a Pennsylvania school affiliated with Stride, officials said they have no plans to use the full \$38 million the school was awarded. Agora officials are exploring whether it's possible to return unused money.

"We're trying to be very deliberate to make sure that any dollar we take from this is focused on servicing students," said Richard Jensen, the CEO. "That's the end game for me."

## US soldier loses 1 Afghan translator; fights to save another

By JULIE WATSON and ANDREA ROSA Associated Press

BREMEN, Germany (AP) — The two men risked their lives together nearly a decade ago trying to eliminate the Taliban, dodging bullets and forever bonding in a way that can only be forged in war.

Now the American soldier and his Afghan translator were together again in Germany shopping for a suit. Abdulhaq Sodais's future hinges on an asylum hearing in a German court after he was denied a U.S. visa, and U.S. Army Veteran Spencer Sullivan was there to help him prepare.

Together, they watched videos from Sodais' hometown: The crackle of gunfire, dead bodies being carted off as black smoke billowed. Once U.S. troops withdrew, the fragile government built over years by people like Sodais and Sullivan collapsed in just days.

"I couldn't stop crying," Sodais said. "My father said the Taliban were knocking on every single door in Herat looking for guys who worked for the coalition forces."

Sullivan already lost another translator, Sayed Masoud, who was killed by the Taliban while waiting for a U.S. visa. It's a scar Sullivan carries deeply, the realization that the U.S. government is capable of the one thing he never believed: betrayal.

Sullivan was determined not to let Sodais, who used smugglers to get to Europe, suffer the same fate. So he flew from Virginia to Germany to help Sodais pick out something to wear for his Sept. 6 asylum hearing.

In a world of hurt and uncertainty, buying a suit was the one thing Sullivan could control. It offered a small hope of making a difference.

A professional appearance just might convince a judge to help keep Sodais safe and uphold the sacred vow that America was unable to keep.

"I made a promise to him just as America made a promise to him to protect him and save his life," Sullivan said. "I mean how can you turn your back on that promise? I don't think the answer is more complicated than that. I think it's actually very simple."



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Sullivan is among scores of U.S. combat veterans working on their own to rescue the Afghans who served alongside them.

Their efforts started long before this month's chaotic rush to evacuate Afghans after the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan as U.S. forces withdraw from America's forever war.

Thousands of Afghans who aided US troops have spent years stuck in a backlogged and beleaguered U.S. Special Immigrant Visa program, while frantic messages of the Taliban hunting them down have been pinging the phones of the American soldiers they helped on the battlefield.

The program was meant to award Afghans for their support by giving them and their families a pathway to the United States. But it has fallen far short, with Congress failing to approve enough visas each year, while the former Trump administration added new security requirements and bureaucratic hurdles that turned the average wait time from a few months into nearly three years.

Others have been denied over what immigration attorneys say were minor or unjust discrepancies in their performance records. Many now fear that the time they were marked as late to work, unfairly or accidentally even, may cost them their escape, and possibly their life.

Sodais and Masoud stood out among the dozen interpreters who worked with the platoon Sullivan led in Afghanistan from 2012 to 2013.

Both interpreters went with his platoon on dozens of missions into villages controlled by the Taliban, taking on fire while unarmed.

In 2013, Masoud applied for a special immigrant visa after receiving death threats for his work. His application included a letter of recommendation from Sullivan who described him as "punctual and professional, an exemplary linguist and trustworthy friend."

"Granting him a special immigration visa is the least that can be done in order to express America's gratitude for his services," Sullivan wrote.

Two years later, Masoud's application was denied. The U.S. embassy said he had not worked for the U.S. government or its military. In fact, Masoud was hired by a U.S. firm that had a contract with the Department of Defense to provide linguistic services to troops in Afghanistan.

Masoud appealed and Sullivan wrote another letter to the Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy, Kabul, providing more details of his work, but he got no response.

Sullivan reached out to other veterans to see what he could do. He learned he could pay \$20,000 to get Masoud smuggled out, but he didn't want to support a criminal network. Instead, he hoped the U.S. government would come through on its end.

Meanwhile, Masoud's texts to Sullivan became more sporadic as the threats escalated, forcing him to move from house to house.

"He was becoming increasingly frantic and afraid," Sullivan said.

Sullivan got the last one in the summer of 2017.

"Hello sir. I am so sorry to reply you late. I got a problem," Masoud wrote, apologizing for not keeping in better touch with his friend.

"Hey Sayerd it's OK!" Sullivan texted back. "Are you safe?"

Sullivan never got a reply.

Weeks later, Masoud's brother answered an email Sullivan sent to Masoud's account: Masoud had been shot by the Taliban after returning home for a relative's funeral and was dead.

Sullivan was consumed by sadness and guilt. He felt partly responsible since he had posted Facebook pictures of them and wondered if he had put his friend at risk. He wondered, too, if he could have done more to protect him.

"I felt helpless," he said. "I didn't know what else I could have done. Maybe I should have spent the \$20,000 to pay seedy smugglers."

A year and 1/2 after his death, Sullivan got an email from the U.S. embassy in Kabul informing him that

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the Afghanistan Special Immigrant Visa Unit had received his recommendation letter for Masoud.

The official wanted to know if the letter was legitimate and if Sullivan would still recommend the applicant so they could begin the process. It included a photo of Masoud with his thick red hair and thin moustache.

Sullivan wrote back to the embassy to inform them that Masoud had been killed while waiting more than four years for his application to be processed.

After Masoud's death, Sullivan texted Sodais to tell him what had happened to his fellow translator. But he got no reply.

Like Masoud, Sodais also had applied for a special immigrant visa in 2013 and was denied. He applied again in 2015 and 2016. Sullivan sent the U.S. embassy in Kabul letters to support his case.

His last rejection came in 2017. After Sodais' uncle was beheaded, and his neighbor, who worked as a fuel truck driver for coalition forces, was gunned down by the Taliban while standing in his front doorway, Sodais, who taught himself English using library books because he admired America and believed in its mission, decided he had to find another way out.

His plan would be to go to Europe by land. His brother, who knew someone in a travel agency, helped him get a tourist visa to Iran, and his family knew an Afghan man living there who would end up connecting Sodais to the first of a long line of smugglers.

Sodais left with a backpack full of clothes, and \$100 worth of Iranian rials.

Along the way, he met other Afghans who worked for coalition forces also now turning to smugglers to find safe refuge.

Sodais was crammed into cars with refugees stacked on top of each on the floors. They hiked through the mountains in a snowstorm at night and dodged gunfire from Turkish border guards. He was beaten and abandoned by smugglers and jailed and beaten by police.

Meanwhile, his family back in Afghanistan was forced to move because of the Taliban's growing presence in the area, and urged him to get to safety. He decided to head to Germany since Turkey and Greece were deporting Afghans at the time. His family sold their small general store in Afghanistan to fund his journey.

In the end, it took him seven months and would cost his family \$15,000 to get to Germany. Once there, he applied for asylum but was lacking sufficient photos or documentation to support his claims and was immediately denied.

He called Sullivan, who he had not spoken to in more than a year.

"I was like 'oh my God, he's alive!'" Sullivan recounted, feeling overjoyed.

Four months later, Sullivan went to see him in Germany and offered to help his case.

Sullivan wrote a transcript for the German court. He sent him photos of his time with his platoon and wrote to the U.S. government to get his record, which showed his contract was terminated in 2013 due to "job abandonment."

Sodais says he overextended his 30-day leave after going home to deal with a back injury from the blast of an improvised explosive device during a mission.

He was rehired in 2014 by the U.S. military but his contract was administered by a civilian contractor who terminated it in 2016 due to poor job performance.

Sullivan contacted the civilian defense contractor who fired Sodais in 2016 to ask what happened since he had found his work exemplary, but she refused to help him or provide an explanation. The paperwork she signed stated only that he was being released due to "incompatible skill set with the unit's mission."

She also would not answer questions about whether she remembered Sodais or had a security concern when contacted by The Associated Press.

Sodais said she falsely accused him of checking his personal Facebook page on the job.

Sodais fell into a deep depression after two years of waiting for a decision by the German courts. The fear of being deported was overwhelming, and he suffered headaches, back aches and other ailments from injuries from the IED blast.

In March of 2020, he tried to end his life, overdosing on pain medication. He spent nearly two months

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in a psychiatric ward after being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

When he got out, he messaged Sullivan.

"I'm alive right now because of Spencer, because of him," Sodais said later.

Sullivan said he's just keeping the promise he made on the battlefield. He is helping Sodais write a book to shed light on the experience of Afghan refugees.

For now, Sodais is safe. On Aug. 11, Germany temporarily halted the deportation of all Afghans due to the upheaval but did not specify how long the order would last.

"Germany is filling our moral void," Sullivan said of the U.S. government's failure to help.

But Sodais worries his luck will run out once deportations resume.

"Really sometimes, it's really hard for me to fight against this life," he said on a Zoom call with Sullivan as he rattled off his fears over what's happening in Afghanistan, his guilt over not being able to save his family there, and his anxiety over whether he will ever have a future.

And how will he ever get to the United States, where he wants to live? he asks.

Sullivan interrupts, stopping his downward spiral, and reminds him to stay focused on the Sept. 6 asylum hearing.

"Step one is we keep you alive," he said. "We get you asylum in Germany and everything else will follow."

Sullivan had to stay focused, too. Sodais was the one U.S. ally he felt he could possibly save. Days later, he would get an email from Masoud's brother, who worked for a U.S. military base, pleading for help. He included photos of his mother and uncle who were recently killed.

Sullivan knew there was little he could do since they had never worked together.

At the suit store in Bremen, on Sullivan's second visit, Sodais exited the dressing room in a black suit.

"Nice! Do a spin," Sullivan joked, twirling his finger and patting his friend on back as they look in mirror.

"You're looking sharp."

Sodais chuckled.

It is a moment of lightness after talking about what they've been through and what's to come.

Before Sullivan leaves, Sodais breaks down, and Sullivan embraces him as he sobs.

"It's OK," Sullivan says. "You're going to make it."

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Watson reported from San Diego.

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This story corrects that he flew from Virginia not California to Germany.

## UN team: Unclear if Fukushima cleanup can finish by 2051

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Too little is known about melted fuel inside damaged reactors at the wrecked Fukushima nuclear power plant, even a decade after the disaster, to be able to tell if its decommissioning can be finished by 2051 as planned, a U.N. nuclear agency official said Friday.

"Honestly speaking, I don't know, and I don't know if anybody knows," said Christophe Xerri, head of an International Atomic Energy Agency team reviewing progress in the plant's cleanup.

He urged Japan to speed up studies of the reactors to achieve a better long-term understanding of the decommissioning process.

A massive earthquake and a tsunami in March 2011 destroyed cooling systems at the Fukushima plant in northeastern Japan, triggering meltdowns in three reactors in the worst nuclear disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl accident. Japanese government and utility officials say they hope to finish its decommissioning within 30 years, though some experts say that's overly optimistic, even if a full decommissioning is possible at all.

The biggest challenge is removing and managing highly radioactive fuel debris from the three damaged reactors, said Xerri, the director of IAEA's Division of Nuclear Fuel Cycle and Waste Technology.

"We need to gather more information on the fuel debris and more experience on the retrieval of the fuel

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debris to know if the plan can be completed as expected in the next 30 years," he told reporters.

The cleanup plan depends on how the melted fuel needs to be handled for long-term storage and management, he said.

The IAEA team's review, the fifth since the disaster, was mostly conducted online due to the coronavirus pandemic. Only Xerri and another team member visited the plant this week before compiling and submitting a report to Japan's government on Friday.

In the report, the team noted progress in a number of areas since its last review in 2018, including the removal of spent fuel from a storage pool at one of the damaged reactors, as well as a decision to start discharging massive amounts of treated but still radioactive water stored at the plant into the ocean in 2023.

Although there now is a better understanding of the melted fuel inside the reactors, details are still lacking and further research should be expedited, the report said. The team encouraged Japan to allocate sufficient resources to prepare for measures beyond the next decade through the end of the decommissioning.

Research and development of new technologies needed for the cleanup will take one or two decades, Xerri said, urging Japan to apply additional resources as early as possible.

The report advised Japan to prepare full plans not only for the cleanup of the melted reactors but also for the entire decommissioning, and a clearer end-state picture.

"It is important in any projects to have targets and to have objectives and to have a vision," Xerri said.

Government officials and the plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, have not provided a clear picture of how the plant will look when the cleanup ends.

In April, Japan announced it will start releasing into the sea large amounts of treated but still radioactive water that has accumulated at the plant since the accident. TEPCO on Wednesday announced a plan to release the water offshore via an underground tunnel after further treating it to reduce radioactive materials to allowable levels.

IAEA has agreed to help facilitate the decommissioning and cooperate in the monitoring and implementation of the water disposal. A first IAEA mission on the water disposal is expected to visit Japan in September.

## Fire at chemical factory kills 10 in southern Pakistan

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) — A massive fire broke out at a chemical factory in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi on Friday, killing at least 10 workers and injuring several others, police and a government spokesman said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the blaze in the congested Mehran Town neighborhood. TV footage showed firefighters dousing the flames, as ambulances continued transporting victims to a government hospital.

Murtaza Wahab, a spokesman for the provincial government, told reporters that the firefighters had almost extinguished the fire. He said officers had been asked to investigate what caused the fire. He said officers will also check whether the owner had installed fire extinguishing equipment.

Karachi is the capital of Sindh province, where many people have set up factories in residential areas in violation of building codes.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Aug. 28, the 240th day of 2021. There are 125 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 people listened as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

On this date:

In 1609, English sea explorer Henry Hudson and his ship, the Half Moon, reached present-day Delaware



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Bay.

In 1941, Japan's ambassador to the U.S., Kichisaburo Nomura, presented a note to President Franklin D. Roosevelt from Japan's prime minister, Prince Fumimaro Konoye, expressing a desire for improved relations.

In 1955, Emmett Till, a Black teen from Chicago, was abducted from his uncle's home in Money, Mississippi, by two white men after he had supposedly whistled at a white woman; he was found brutally slain three days later.

In 1964, two days of race-related rioting erupted in North Philadelphia over a false rumor that white police officers had beaten to death a pregnant Black woman.

In 1968, police and anti-war demonstrators clashed in the streets of Chicago as the Democratic National Convention nominated Hubert H. Humphrey for president.

In 1988, 70 people were killed when three Italian stunt planes collided during an air show at the U.S. Air Base in Ramstein (RAHM'-shtyn), West Germany.

In 1996, the troubled 15-year marriage of Britain's Prince Charles and Princess Diana officially ended with the issuing of a divorce decree.

In 2005, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin (NAY'-gin) ordered everyone in the city to evacuate after Hurricane Katrina grew to a monster storm.

In 2009, the Los Angeles County coroner's office announced that Michael Jackson's death was a homicide caused primarily by the powerful anesthetic propofol (PROH'-puh-fahl) and another sedative, lorazepam (lor-AZ'-uh-pam).

In 2013, a military jury sentenced Maj. Nidal Hasan to death for the 2009 shooting rampage at Fort Hood that claimed 13 lives. On the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial, President Barack Obama stood on the same steps as he challenged new generations to seize the cause of racial equality.

In 2017, floodwaters reached the rooflines of single-story homes as Hurricane Harvey poured rain on the Houston area for a fourth consecutive day; thousands of people had been rescued from the flooding.

In 2018, a white former police officer, Roy Oliver, was convicted of murder for fatally shooting a Black 15-year-old boy, Jordan Edwards, while firing into a car packed with teenagers in suburban Dallas; Oliver was sentenced the following day to 15 years in prison.

Ten years ago: A suicide bomber struck inside Baghdad's largest Sunni mosque, killing 29 people during prayers. California returned the Little League World Series title to the United States with a 2-1 victory over Hamamatsu City, Japan. Katy Perry won three MTV Video Music Awards, including video of the year for the inspirational clip "Firework."

Five years ago: Six scientists completed a yearlong Mars simulation in Hawaii, where they emerged after living in a dome in near isolation on a Mauna Loa mountain. Ryan Harlost led Endwell, New York, to the Little League World Series title, striking out eight and limiting South Korea to five hits in six innings in a 2-1 victory. Beyonce received eight honors at the MTV Video Music Awards in New York. Juan Gabriel, a superstar Mexican songwriter and singer who was an icon in the Latin music world, died at his home in California at age 66.

One year ago: Actor Chadwick Boseman, who played Black icons Jackie Robinson and James Brown as well as the regal Black Panther on screen, died at the age of 43 after a four-year battle with colon cancer. On Jackie Robinson Day across the major leagues, the Houston Astros and Oakland Athletics jointly walked off the field following a moment of silence, draping a Black Lives Matter T-shirt across home plate as they chose not to play. (Other major league clubs had joined teams in the NBA, WNBA and MLS earlier in the week in calling off games while protesting social injustice.) The University of Alabama reported that an additional 481 students had tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the total to more than 1,000 infections since students returned to campus for the fall. Nevada officials reported what may have been the first documented case of coronavirus reinfection in the United States. Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Shinzo Abe, said he was stepping down because a chronic illness had resurfaced. (Abe was succeeded by his right-hand man, Yoshihide Suga.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Sonny Shroyer is 86. Actor Marla Adams is 83. Actor Ken Jenkins is 81. Former

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Defense Secretary William S. Cohen is 81. Actor David Soul is 78. Former MLB manager and player Lou Piniella (pihn-EHL'-uh) is 78. Actor Barbara Bach is 75. Actor Debra Mooney is 74. Singer Wayne Osmond (The Osmonds) is 70. Actor Daniel Stern is 64. Olympic gold medal figure skater Scott Hamilton is 63. Actor John Allen Nelson is 62. Actor Emma Samms is 61. Actor Jennifer Coolidge is 60. Movie director David Fincher is 59. Actor Amanda Tapping is 56. Country singer Shania (shah-NY'-uh) Twain is 56. Actor Billy Boyd is 53. Actor Jack Black is 52. Actor Jason Priestley is 52. Actor Daniel Goddard (TV: "The Young and the Restless") is 50. Olympic gold medal swimmer Janet Evans is 50. Actor J. August Richards is 48. Rock singer-musician Max Collins (Eve 6) is 43. Actor Carly Pope is 41. Country singer Jake Owen is 40. Country singer LeAnn Rimes is 39. Actor Kelly Thiebaud is 39. Actor Alfonso Herrera is 38. Actor Sarah Roemer is 37. Actor Armie Hammer is 35. Rock singer Florence Welch (Florence and the Machine) is 35. Actor Shalita Grant is 33. Country-pop singer Cassadee Pope (TV: "The Voice") is 32. Actor Katie Findlay is 31. Actor/singer Samuel Larsen is 30. Actor Kyle Massey is 30. Actor Quvenzhane (kwuh-VEHN'-zhah-nay) Wallis is 18. Reality TV star Alana Thompson, AKA "Honey Boo Boo," is 16.